February 29, 2016

- Daily Herald, Chicago Cubs pitcher Hammel embraced change during off-season
  http://www.dailyherald.com/article/20160228/sports/160228808/

- Daily Herald, Heyward wowing Chicago Cubs with ability, smarts
  http://www.dailyherald.com/article/20160227/sports/160228866/

- Daily Herald, In his first MLB at-bat, Heyward made Cubs pay
  http://www.dailyherald.com/article/20160227/sports/160228862/

- Cubs.com, Maddon-Bryant relationship continues to grow

- Cubs.com, Victorino able to hit from both sides again

- Cubs.com, Cubs prospect Villanueva breaks right fibula

- Cubs.com, Cubs say consistency key for Soler to succeed
  http://m.cubs.mlb.com/news/article/165610022/cubs-want-jorge-soler-to-be-focused-every-day

- Cubs.com, Broken windshield goes to Cubs' charity auction

- Cubs.com, Stacked Cubs in position to land arm

- Cubs.com, Brooks eager to play for Maddon, Cubs

- Cubs.com, Maddon says new sliding rule 'common sense'

- Cubs.com, Fowler opts back in to Cubs' quest for title run

- Cubs.com, Cubs sign Victorino to Minor League deal
• Cubs.com, **Arrieta in 'midseason form' despite extra innings**

• ESPNChicago.com, **Cubs' Joe Maddon doesn't have a playing-time problem**

• ESPNChicago.com, **Cubs Notes: Victorino to switch-hit, Sunday Funday, a bad injury**

• ESPNChicago.com, **Catcher Miguel Montero hoping for more consistency in Year 2 with Cubs**

• ESPNChicago.com, **Cubs Notes: Travis Wood, Kyle Hendricks to open Cactus League play**

• ESPNChicago.com, **Ben Zobrist on rule changes: Some 'are going to have change the way they slide'**
  [http://espn.go.com/blog/chicago/cubs/post/_/id/36613/ben-zobrist-on-rule-changes-some-are-going-to-have-change-the-way-they-slide](http://espn.go.com/blog/chicago/cubs/post/_/id/36613/ben-zobrist-on-rule-changes-some-are-going-to-have-change-the-way-they-slide)

• ESPNChicago.com, **New Cubs pitcher Aaron Brooks provides insurance at Triple-A**

• ESPNChicago.com, **It's about 'focus' for Cubs' Jorge Soler as he moves to left field**

• ESPNChicago.com, **Javier Baez to add another position to versatile game**

• ESPNChicago.com, **Dexter Fowler gets text from would-be teammate Adam Jones**

• CSNChicago.com, **Cubs lose minor-league infielder Christian Villanueva to broken leg**

• CSNChicago.com, **Cubs: Shane Victorino feels 'dynamic' in return to switch-hitting**

• CSNChicago.com, **Cubs: Who is Aaron Brooks?**

• CSNChicago.com, **Cubs adjust following MLB's new rules on 'Neighborhood Play'**

• CSNChicago.com, **Despite crowded outfield, Cubs think Soler can hit reset button in 2016**

• CSNChicago.com, **Shane Victorino joins Cubs with thoughts of a championship on his mind**
- CSNChicago.com, **Cubs add Shane Victorino to the outfield mix**

- Chicago Tribune, **Cubs nearly kept Chris Archer over Chris Carpenter: report**

- Chicago Tribune, **Cubs’ Jason Hammel sought help from pitching guru Tom House**

- Chicago Tribune, **Cubs’ Jason Hammel sought help from pitching guru Tom House**

- Chicago Tribune, **Cubs’ Ben Zobrist: ‘Sky is the limit’ for Addison Russell**

- Chicago Tribune, **Lingering shoulder injury sidelines Cubs’ Zac Rosscup**

- Chicago Tribune, **Joe Maddon’s 'Embrace the Target' theme hits bull's-eye in opening speech**

- Chicago Tribune, **Joe Maddon has work cut out keeping whole roster fresh and in best spots**

- Chicago Tribune, **Cubs’ Ben Zobrist and Ben Zobrist hope MLB clarifies new slide rules**

- Chicago Tribune, **All in the Twitter family with Cubs’, Bulls' Aaron Brooks**

- Chicago Tribune, **Cubs susceptible, if not doomed, to Curse of Expectation**

- Chicago Tribune, **Cubs hoping Jorge Soler’s complete game comes into focus this season**

- Chicago Tribune, **New Cub Shane Victorino will return to the scene of the crime**

- Chicago Tribune, **Cubs' Joe Maddon: Rest is best**
Chicago Tribune, **Dexter Fowler endures lengthy free agent experience**

Chicago Tribune, **Jake Arrieta gets revved up at drag racing track**

Chicago Tribune, **Shane Victorino can wear many hats for Cubs**

Chicago Sun-Times, **Is CF Albert Almora poised to become the Cubs’ next breakthrough prospect?**

Chicago Sun-Times, **Cubs OF Shane Victorino 'dynamic' again after return to switch-hitting**

Chicago Sun-Times, **Cubs’ Christian Villanueva breaks leg in practice**
http://chicago.suntimes.com/baseball/7/71/1359757/cubs-christian-villanueva-breaks-leg-practice

Chicago Sun-Times, **Cubs adjust to MLB rule changes to protect middle infielders**
http://chicago.suntimes.com/baseball/7/71/1358477/cubs-adjust-mlb-rule-changes-protect-middle-infielders

Chicago Sun-Times, **No more 'lazy' plays: Cubs' Jorge Soler plans to bring playoff focus to season**

Chicago Sun-Times, **Kris Bryant 'on to bigger and better things' since controversial demotion**
http://chicago.suntimes.com/baseball/7/71/1357253/grievance-pending-kris-bryant-bigger-better-things-since-controversial-demotion

Chicago Sun-Times, **Disputes continue between Orioles and Dexter Fowler over who said what and when**
http://chicago.suntimes.com/baseball/7/71/1355841/disputes-continue-orioles-dexter-fowler-said

Chicago Sun-Times, **Cubs sign OF Shane Victorino to a minor-league deal**

Chicago Sun-Times, **With Dexter Fowler's arrival, one less worry for Theo Epstein -- who's not done worrying**

--

**Daily Herald**
Chicago Cubs pitcher Hammel embraced change during off-season
By Bruce Miles

Cubs pitcher Jason Hammel changed just about everything this winter.

The most visible manifestation is a full beard.

"Just switch it up a little bit, kind of break up that monotony of getting stuck in that same routine," he said. "That was kind of the idea of everything this off-season, to see what else there was that I hadn't discovered yet."

The new look gets the approval of the standard-bearer for facial hair, Cubs ace Jake Arrieta.
"His beard's nice," Arrieta said. "I told him he needs to grow that out for some time now. It's good to see him with a full beard."

But seriously, Hammel knew he had a lot more to do this off-season than not shave.

So he took care of his insides to try to unlock the vexing problem of why his second halves have not measured up to his first halves the past couple of years.

Hammel took a more important page out of the book of Arrieta, a noted workout freak, when he changed everything from his diet to his fitness routine to his mental approach.

"I feel like I have actually arrived at this point a couple times in my career, where I had to do something more," he said at the Cubs' spring-training facility in Mesa, Arizona. "It's well documented that the second half over the last few years has been a struggle for me. So kind of re-evaluate the mechanics and try to figure out why I was faltering at the end of the year.

"Change up the diet, change up the workout routine to focus more on the legs and small mechanical adjustments so that using my legs, now that I'm stronger there, to try to carry me deeper into the season so at the end of the year, my arm will be there."

The numbers don't lie. Overall last season, Hammel went a respectable 10-7 with a 3.74 ERA and a WHIP of 1.16. However, the first half was far better than the second. Before the all-star break, Hammel was 5-4 with a 2.86 ERA and a sparkling WHIP of 0.95.

After the break it was a different story: 5-3 record with a 5.10 ERA and a WHIP of 1.49.

In 2014, he spent about half the season with the Cubs before being traded to Oakland. That year, he went 8-6 with a 3.01 ERA before the break and 2-5 with a 4.31 ERA after the All-Star game.

A hamstring injury slowed Hammel at midseason last year. He left his July 8 start against the Cardinals after 1 inning and did not start again until July 21.

He termed the injury "nagging," but he also talked with Arrieta about making changes to his fitness routine.

"I talked with him last year at the end of the year about some Pilates stuff," Hammel said. "I never got into it. It's something I'm going to try to get into this year.

"What I did this off-season was (go) to a couple different sources that didn't know me, just get an outside point of view, unbiased. Just take a look at me not knowing who I was. Just take a look at some video and really kind of get away from what the norm was. I felt like it gave me a little different perspective because it wasn't all just baseball. It changed my outlook in the way I went about my business.

"I want to be the best that I can be. I had to figure something out. I had to find a way to get better. As you get older, things don't come as easy. The body doesn't bound back as quick. You've got to be smart about life beyond baseball, too. I really changed the diet up a lot, and that was a big difference."

Both Hammel and manager Joe Maddon say their relationship is fine. Maddon put Hammel on a short leash at times last year, and the pitcher was not happy about being taken out of some starts early.

"Listen, Hammer and I go way back, also," said Maddon, who managed Hammel in Tampa Bay from 2006-08. "If you don't have arguments or discussions or disagreements, whatever you want to call them, with your group over the course of time, you're really not doing your job. You're not going to keep everybody 100 percent happy all the time."
"You have to make some decisions that are going to rub somebody the wrong way on occasion. In an altruistic situation, you're trying to do what's best for the group all the time. I want our guys to understand that, and I think they do.

"So no, Jason and I are good. I'm really eager to see him throw. Right now, this is as good of shape as I've probably seen him ever."

For his part, Hammel is looking to close the door on that chapter.

"It is what it is; we're all trying to win," he said. "You guys keep talking about it. I'd like to just squash that one. We were trying to win. Joe's job as the manager was to try to bring home the W. Obviously, you're fired up because you start a game. The starter's main job is to finish what he started. I just wasn't doing it. I've got to respect his decision there."

--

Daily Herald  
Heyward wowing Chicago Cubs with ability, smarts  
By Bruce Miles

Spring training had barely begun, and it seemed Jason Heyward already had won the "wow" factor in Cubs camp.

And it wasn't just for his physical baseball abilities, which are very impressive.

"Awesome," said first baseman Anthony Rizzo. "He's very advanced with everything. He sees everything. He watches everything. He pays attention to everything, which in my opinion is not easy to do.

"Baseball smart. He's five steps ahead of the game, anticipating this, anticipating moves off the bench -- 'Why would you throw that guy this pitch in this situation?' -- little things that are really hard to explain to an outsider."

In another word: wow.

That kind of talk in the sports world has been reserved for a select few. Wayne Gretzky in hockey and Lionel Messi in soccer come to mind as having a sixth sense. As great as Gretzky was and Messi is, neither man possessed Heyward's physical stature of 6-feet-5 and 245 pounds.

"What impresses me about him is that he's a complete baseball player," said Cubs manager Joe Maddon. "Again, I think people get hung up on batting average and all this other stuff a little bit too much, although I think he's going to hit for really high numbers in all the necessary areas as he moves it along.

"He's a really good outfielder. He throws really well. He runs great routes. He's communicative on defense. He's one of the best baserunners in the National League, actually maybe the best. Offensively, he has an eye at the plate. He knows how to look over a pitch. I think he's shown power in the past. You're going to see it again. The average is going to really climb."

For his six-year career -- five with the Braves and last year with the Cardinals -- Heyward has a batting line of .268/.353/.431 with 97 home runs and 352 RBI. With the Cardinals, he went .293/.359/.439 with 13 homers and 60 RBI. He enjoyed his biggest power production with the Braves in 2012, when he hit 27 homers, drove in 82 and had an OPS of .814.

In December, the Cubs made Heyward their signature off-season acquisition, awarding him an eight-year contract worth $184 million.

Heyward is aware of what his teammates and manager have been saying about him.
"I hope they're saying nice things, but I'm not asking them to say any of those," he said. "It's cool. It's awesome. We've competed against each other, some of these guys. Some of these guys, we've played together. They just love me as a person. That's what's cool.

"For me, how can I help my team win? That's the number I care about, the 'W' at the end of the year. I'm still trying to be a part of that team that wins the last game on the field. That's your goal every day throughout the year. Whatever number it takes to get that done, I look up at the end of the year and see what that looks like. You see guys have a career year and the team doesn't make the playoffs -- that's not remembered. You can say, 'Go put up some numbers,' but where is your team going to be at the end of the year? They just want to know if you went as far as you could as a group."

As far as his baseball smarts, Heyward said they developed early, and I asked him if they are learned or innate.

"I would say both," he said. "I was fortunate enough to be taught the game, kind of where everyone needs to be on the field. I'm left-handed so that puts me at four positions only, or five, if you're counting pitching. You just need to understand the game, where your shortstop needs to be, where your second baseman needs to be, where the catcher's looking to be. Before the pitch is made, where are you going to go with the ball if this happens?

"Those things, I was just fortunate enough to be taught at 7-8 years old. I feel like that's helped me grow into myself and into some of the ability I have. Experience at this level, obviously, is going to be the best teacher. You're not going to learn to play this game at this level other than doing so."

Heyward credits good parenting and a youth coach, Ricky Archer, whom he said helped him develop his baseball skills.

"He let us run out to any position, sometimes just to have fun," Heyward recalled. "He taught us that. He also taught us how to compete the right way, how to do cutoffs and relays, the position you need to have your hands in and your feet in and how to move to the ball. Things like that, I was able to learn early. And I love to practice. So I feel like it just stuck with me. It's always grown with me in essence."

Although Heyward has spent six years in the big leagues, he's only 26 years old. He's one day younger than Rizzo, who has been touted as one of the Cubs' "core" of young players.

Somehow, he appears much older, much more mature, than his age might suggest.

"My family did a great job," he said. "My parents were very supportive. I've got a great support system in that sense. Other than that, I've just been doing it for a little bit now."

The notion that Heyward is only 26 but seems older amuses his new manager.

"The biggest thing with this guy is don't forget he's 26 years of age," Maddon said. "That really baffles me sometimes. He's not 33, and he has this huge body of work. He's 26, and he's arrived at this level of baseball mental maturity, which I think is outstanding.

"Prior to acquiring him, I had a chance to talk to him on the phone, and we had a really good conversation. It revealed to me a lot of what I thought I was seeing, and it was -- a very thoughtful, intellectual kind of baseball player."

So what are Maddon's plans for handling Heyward?

"Set him free, man," he said. "Let him go. Have good conversations with him, understand what he's trying to do out there. Who would not want to work with an athlete like that? Oh my God. That is exactly what you're looking forward to working with. He's bright and he's engaging and he's fun. He's got all this stuff. He's been good for a lot of the guys in the clubhouse already."
Daily Herald
In his first MLB at-bat, Heyward made Cubs pay
By Bruce Miles

This winter, the Ricketts family agreed to sign the paychecks of outfielder Jason Heyward. That's despite what Heyward did to them in their first game as team owners.

On April 5, 2010, the Ricketts regular-season era began on Opening Day in Atlanta, and things looked mighty good for the family in the top of the first inning when Marlon Byrd hit a 3-run homer to stake starting pitcher Carlos Zambrano to a 3-0 lead.

It didn't last long.

The Braves scored 6 runs in the bottom of the first, with a kid named Jason Heyward breaking a 3-3 tie with a 3-run homer of his own. The at-bat was the first for Heyward in the major leagues.

In December, Heyward signed an eight-year, $184 million contract to play for the Cubs.

"It's just hard to do," he said of his debut homer. "Coming 6-7 years ago now, you realize how hard it was for all of that to happen after playing this game and having so many years of at-bats and competing against some of the best at what they do.

"It was something I'm going to remember for the rest of my life. It's a lot of fun. Ironically, here I am playing for this organization now, but everything happens for a reason. It kind of shows you how hard the game is and how much you appreciate the guys who go out there and get it done."

--

Cubs.com
Maddon-Bryant relationship continues to grow
By Carrie Muskat

MESA, Ariz. -- Last spring, Joe Maddon told Kris Bryant how good he could be, and the Cubs' third baseman won the National League Rookie of the Year Award. This spring, when they met for their annual pre-Spring Training talk, the discussion was more about their offseason adventures and Maddon's recreational vehicle.

Their relationship has grown, and that's vital to Bryant's -- and any young player's -- development.

When Bryant arrived in spring camp in 2015, there was an overload of hype surrounding the Minor League Player of the Year.

"I told him how good I thought he was going to be and what's ahead for him and the different things to work on," Maddon said of their chat one year ago.

Little did Maddon know how good. Bryant batted .275 with 26 home runs, 31 doubles, 99 RBIs, and won the NL Rookie of the Year Award. The only disappointing element was that Bryant didn't break with the Cubs despite leading the Major Leagues in spring home runs.

"I was confident he would respond well," Maddon said about their talks last year. "We had some good conversations, me and him, in the office -- very candid, frank, open, all of the above. I got a good feel from him. He was very self-confident. He was disappointed he was not starting with us but had the team goals in mind.

"He was straight up with me and looked me right in the eye balls [saying he belonged in big leagues] and I don't blame him," Maddon said. "When he got up here, he showed it was true."
He was 23, sitting down with a new manager, yet Bryant didn't mince words one year ago.

"I truly believed it," Bryant said Saturday about being ready for the big leagues. "I think it's important to have belief in yourself. If you don't believe you belong, you shouldn't be playing the game. There's so much to this game that will get you down. If I'm in here with the intent that you belong and you can compete with everybody, it only helps you and I think that really helped me last spring."

Bryant did appreciate Maddon's honesty last year.

"It's kind of weird when you come into big league camp and it's your first manager," Bryant said of their talks. "I knew what type of manager Joe Maddon was just seeing him and he was really cool. They were weird conversations at first, but establishing that honesty and being real with one another only helped us throughout the year. He recognized when I wasn't going well and he pulled me into his office last year. Those Spring Training conversations really helped propel our relationship."

So, when they met this year in Maddon's office, what was the topic?

"It was more talking about what happened in the offseason and what I did and he was telling me stories about his RV and it breaking down," said Bryant, laughing. "We're opening up with one another, which is good. This year, the conversations were a little different."

So, no focus on what he needs to do?

"Not much," Bryant said. "That's Joe for you. He has some crazy adventures. I told him what I worked on and stuff and I said the same things I always say, which is that I'm trying to get better in all areas and there's still a lot of room for improvement. I'm excited for that."

Maddon, who also picked up a postseason award, being named NL Manager of the Year after guiding the Cubs to a 97-win season, did talk to Bryant about improving his footwork at third, trying to reduce the number of strikeouts and being more efficient with runners on third and two outs. Bryant heard that, but he's already been working on those aspects of his game.

"The sky's the limit for him," Maddon said.

--

Cubs.com
Victorino able to hit from both sides again
By Carrie Muskat

MESa, Ariz. -- Shane Victorino never wanted to give up switch-hitting, but had to in 2014 because of his back. This spring, he's healthy and able to hit from both sides, which will definitely help the Cubs.

"To hear players talk about stopping being a switch-hitter, every single one I talk to, I say, 'If it wasn't for physical reasons, there's no other reason I would've given it up,'" Victorino said Sunday. "Some guys don't want to do it -- 'Oh, I'm not good from one side,' or 'I'm better from one side.'"

"In today's game, the numbers game that everybody plays and the matchups, it's not a benefit to get rid of switch-hitting," he said. "If you're a switch-hitter, I don't care if you hit [.150] on one side and you hit .400 on the other, do not give it up. The way today's game is, it's about matchups, it's about this, it's about that."

A natural right-hander, Victorino is a career .299 hitter against left-handed pitching and a .265 batter versus righties. He didn't start switch-hitting until he was 20, then stopped, and resumed it two years later at the encouragement of his Double-A hitting coach, Gene Richards, who told Victorino he needed something to distinguish himself from other outfielders.
Victorino stopped when it became too uncomfortable.

"It felt like a lot of times I didn't have strength on the left side and sometimes I had pain," he said.

He had back surgery in August 2014, and last year, started to test batting from the left side. But he did so in the batting cages, not in games.

"As a player, it's something I wish I never had to lose," Victorino said.

--

Cubs.com
Cubs prospect Villanueva breaks right fibula
By Carrie Muskat

MESA, Ariz. -- Cubs prospect Christian Villanueva broke his right fibula during drills Sunday, and will most likely be sidelined for a few months. He was expected to have surgery Monday.

"It was a ground ball -- I guess he hopped up to jump up in the air and you come back down and that's how it happened," manager Joe Maddon said of the Cubs' No. 26 prospect. "It's just crazy. It's really unfortunate. This kid came in, ready to go."

Villanueva, 24, began last season at Double-A Tennessee, but when Kris Bryant was promoted to the big leagues, Villanueva moved up to Triple-A Iowa. He batted .259 there, hitting 18 home runs and 23 doubles, then played for Obregon in the Mexican winter league, where he hit .322 with nine home runs and nine doubles.

"It's a tough break, literally, for him -- he's such a good kid," Maddon said.

• David Ross, Ben Zobrist, Addison Russell and Jorge Soler won the relay-throw drills Sunday, and each got a star plus some pocket money for their efforts.

"I was so impressed with our guys," Maddon said of the drill. "I'm watching 'Zo,' how well he was moving his feet, and Addison, the ball barely touched his glove. Those are the kind of things that during the course of the season make a huge difference."

Maddon said the drill also illustrates how the slightest bobble can slow things down, giving the baserunner the advantage.

• Some of the Cubs took batting practice and infield at Sloan Park on Sunday to get a feel for the home stadium. The Cubs' first home Cactus League game will be Friday against the Angels.

"It was purely to get the guys out there and give them a test drive," Maddon said.

• The Cubs placed reliever Zac Rosscup on the 60-day disabled list with left shoulder inflammation, although the 60-day clock does not start until Opening Day on April 3. Rosscup, 27, appeared in 33 games with the Cubs last season, posting a 4.39 ERA, but also had two stints on the disabled list last season because of shoulder inflammation.

• Quote of the day: "What helps take you to that next level is purely enjoying -- it's joy, the joy of participation. If you get a bunch of guys who are good, who want to be here, like being here, like each other, I don't know how many wins that's worth, but I know it's worth some wins. Beyond the X's and O's of this camp, a large part of our discussion is how do we make it fun and enjoyable and at the same time pertinent." -- Maddon, on how the Cubs like to come up with ways to keep Spring Training camp interesting

--
Cubs.com
Cubs say consistency key for Soler to succeed
By Carrie Muskat

MESA, Ariz. -- The Cubs are hoping that Jorge Soler can play every day the way he did in the postseason.

Soler, 24, batted .474 in seven playoff games last year, hitting three home runs. He is the first player in Major League history to reach base safely in his first nine career postseason plate appearances. The previous best by a Cubs player was seven in a row by Hack Wilson in the 1929 World Series.

Soler batted .265 and hit 10 home runs in 101 games during the regular season. What was the difference in the playoffs?

"There was a lot of focus, a lot of focus on the game at playoff time," he said. "I was focused on my at-bats, focused on defense."

The Cubs noticed that, too.

"My biggest thing with him is that he understands how to get ready to play every day," manager Joe Maddon said. "I'm not looking for great plays, I'm not looking for 30 homers, I'm not looking for him hitting .310. It's just a matter of getting a young player who will understand the Major Leagues on a daily basis, that his prep work is good, that's he's ready to play when asked to play. Those are the biggest things about 'Georgie' moving forward."

Kyle Schwarber led the Cubs with eight RBIs in nine postseason games, while Soler compiled the best average (.474) and slugging percentage (1.105).

"We need to get that playoff performance out of him on a more consistent basis," Maddon said. "For me, what I'm talking about, that's all prep work. It's a matter of teaching him how to get ready on a daily basis and we will. When we do that, you'll see more of that kind of performance on a consistent basis."

Soler got off to a slow start last year, batting .247 in April, and spent two stints on the disabled list, missing time because of a sprained left ankle and an oblique strain. He reported 10 pounds lighter, which the Cubs hope will help him stay healthy.

Projected to see more playing time in left field now that Jason Heyward will move to right to make room for Dexter Fowler in center, Soler says he's not worried about getting enough at-bats.

"When I get my opportunity, when I get my chance, I'll do my job and do the best I can to help the team," he said.

"He understands better," Maddon said of the prep work needed. "He's a young man, came from Cuba, culturally, language, all that stuff, he's a little bit lagging behind. Preston Gomez always told me, be patient with these kids. "It's our responsibility to give him better tools to work with, whether it's mentally or physically."

--

Cubs.com
Broken windshield goes to Cubs' charity auction
By Carrie Muskat

MESA, Ariz. -- Cubs slugger Kyle Schwarber accidentally broke the windshield of Peter Gesler's car with a batting practice home run, but the busted glass was saved and will be auctioned off this spring for a good cause.

Schwarber launched the home run over a screen in right field on Field 1 at the Cubs complex Feb. 17. Gesler was standing near home plate and watching the batting practice session when it happened.

"I heard it hit," Gesler said Saturday. "[The players] were laughing and applauding."
He didn't know it was his vehicle until he went to the parking lot. Gesler then posted a photo on his Instagram account.

Schwarber suggested on Twitter that Safelite might be able to repair the damages, and the company did. Safelite took care of Gesler's broken window, replacing his windshield in the Cubs' parking lot. Schwarber did autograph the broken windshield and added "Go Cubs" as well, to the delight of Gesler, 62, a Cubs season-ticket holder who lives in Denver.

The souvenir, which was to be put in a protective case, will be auctioned March 25 at a Cubs Wives event.

"It really belongs to the Cubs family," Gesler said as he watched the team practice. "We've been met with such generosity that we thought this was the right thing to do."

A longtime Cubs fan, he grew up in Deerfield, Ill. Kenny Hubbs was his first Cubs hero. Schwarber might be a close second.

"Thanks to Kyle, [the Cubs] have all done stuff they didn't need to do," Gesler said.

--

Cubs.com
Stacked Cubs in position to land arm
By Phil Rogers

Are they going to play a rover?

You wondered after the Cubs added Dexter Fowler and Shane Victorino to a roster that was already overflowing with position players.

Having signed free agents Jason Heyward and Ben Zobrist in the offseason, it will be tricky for manager Joe Maddon to get the 400-plus plate appearances that Kyle Schwarber, Jorge Soler and Javier Baez need to continue their development. The Cubs have a lot of other young hitters coming too, especially outfielders.

Including former Japanese batting champ Matt Murton and the versatile Zobrist, Kris Bryant and Baez, the Cubs have at least nine outfield options in the mix for the Opening Day roster. That doesn't include Matt Szczur, former Giant Juan Perez and prospects Billy McKinney, Albert Almora and John Andreoli, who will be pushing for consideration in Spring Training.

Theo Epstein and his lieutenants have spent the offseason exploring deals that would bring them a young, impact arm, preferably one under control for multiple seasons. They seem likely to make a deal at some point, most likely before the non-waiver Trade Deadline on Aug. 1. No team is better positioned to make a splash.

Here's a look at their likely targets:

1. Jose Fernandez, Marlins -- The best young pitcher in the game before Tommy John surgery, Fernandez is expected to reestablish himself this season. His value to his franchise depends on how competitive the team is around him. He's under control through 2018. The Cubs are likely to pounce if he becomes available.

2. Chris Archer, Rays -- This may be a pipe dream as the 27-year-old Archer signed an extension last April that runs through 2021, including options. He's the face of the franchise and one of the faces of the game. The Cubs probably shouldn't have traded him away in the first place. But the Cubs and Rays have had many talks since the end of the 2015 season and the Rays' need for young hitters makes the teams a good match.

3. Sonny Gray, A's -- An under-sized ace, Gray's value to the Athletics is high. He's under control through 2019, so it's no wonder that Billy Beane has said he won't be traded. But things change frequently, and Epstein and Beane have a history of making deals, including the one sending Chris Coghlan to Oakland earlier this week. Beane is all
about value. If the A's fall back in the AL West in the first half of the season, he might be tempted to deal him for a package of Major League-ready hitters.

4. Chris Sale, White Sox -- Like Archer, this is probably also a pipe dream. Sale is not only controlled through 2019, but White Sox fans would be mortified by the sight of Sale pitching in the World Series for the Cubs. The Sox are looking to compete after three consecutive losing seasons, but could consider extreme measures if the addition of Todd Frazier doesn't help them contend in 2016.

5. Julio Teheran, Braves -- He's 25 and clearly Atlanta's best pitcher, with Shelby Miller having been traded to the D-backs. He's signed to a contract that has him controlled through 2020. He fits well in the ongoing rebuilding effort but the Braves have as many good young arms as anyone in their organization. The move into a new stadium in 2017 will also give them the resources to sign free-agent arms, making it a little easier to deal Teheran. Soler has been a player of interest for the Braves.

6. Jake Odorizzi, Matt Moore, Drew Smyly and Alex Cobb, Rays -- Odorizzi, healthy and under control through 2019, is probably the most attractive of the pitchers who will be scouted heavily this spring. Cobb's likely return from Tommy John surgery at midseason and the emergence of lefty Blake Snell give the Rays pitching to trade. The Rays have aggressively pursued Baez.

7. Tyson Ross, Padres -- Eligible for free agency after 2017, he may be the most viable option on this list. His slider ranks along Archer's as the best in baseball. The Padres turned down dozens of offers for Ross since last July, but could become open for business after they host the All-Star Game in July.

8. Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco and Danny Salazar, Indians -- All three are under control through at least 2020, with Kluber, the 2014 AL Cy Young winner, carrying a contract that has an option for '21. The Indians have built around their rotation, but like the Rays, do match up well with the Cubs.

9. Jose Quintana, White Sox -- He's not Sale, but is highly valued by other teams, in part because his contract has five years of control, including an option for 2020. The presence of Sale and Rodon could make him expendable, especially if 2015 first-round pick Carson Fulmer arrives quickly. The White Sox need corner outfielders and would have to listen to an offer featuring multiple prospects.

10. Everyone else -- Never underestimate the Cubs' ability to identify under-the-radar arms who can turn into major additions. They did it when they got Jake Arrieta from the Orioles and could do it again, but the time seems right to hunt the biggest names in the game.

Cubs.com
Brooks eager to play for Maddon, Cubs
By Carrie Muskat

MESA, Ariz. -- There's Aaron Brooks, the former NFL quarterback who played for the Saints and the Raiders, and there's Aaron Brooks, currently a guard on the Chicago Bulls' NBA team. Don't confuse either of them with Aaron Brooks, a right-hander now with the Cubs. Some have gotten the three mixed up.

"I've talked to [the Bulls' Brooks] on Twitter before because everybody thinks I'm him," said the Cubs' Brooks, whose Twitter handle is @aaronbrooksCHC. "People keep tagging me. ... All they have to do is look at the profile picture and they'll know it's not me."

Can the Cubs' Brooks shoot as well as the Bulls' Brooks?

"I highly doubt it," he said.

That's OK because that's not why the Cubs traded Chris Coghlan to the Athletics for the 25-year-old right-hander. Brooks came up in the Royals' organization, but was dealt last year to the A's for Ben Zobrist, who is now his
teammate on the Cubs. In 13 games last season combined, Brooks was 3-4 with a 6.67 ERA, striking out 38 over 55 1/3 innings.

"Nothing against Oakland, they're doing great things over there, but I'm ready to come and help the team win and I'm glad it's the Cubs," Brooks said Saturday.

He's never been to Wrigley Field, but does know manager Joe Maddon.

"I grew up an Angels fan, and watched him over there with the Angels," said Brooks, who grew up in Montclair, Calif.

Just guessing that neither of the other Aaron Brooks would say that.

--

Cubs.com
Maddon says new sliding rule 'common sense'
By Carrie Muskat

MESA, Ariz. -- Cubs players and coaches got clarification of the "neighborhood play," and discussed the new rule governing slides on possible double plays with Joe Garagiola Jr., Major League Baseball senior vice president of standards and on-field operations, and supervisor of umpires Steve Palermo.

"There is no neighborhood any more," Cubs manager Joe Maddon said. "The 'hood's gone."

Under the new Rule 6.01(j), slides on potential double plays will require runners to make a bona fide attempt to reach and remain on the base. A runner will be specifically prohibited from changing his pathway to the base or utilizing a "roll block" for the purpose of initiating contact with the fielder. The play is reviewable.

"The defender has to be in touch with the base in order for it to be an out," Maddon said. "A lot of [the rule] is common sense.

"I want our guys to continue to play because I don’t see us as wanting to roll block or take somebody's leg out by kicking them above the knee, as opposed to below the knee when you’re trying to knock them to the ground," he said.

The two key elements that Maddon emphasized to the players are that they should slide in front of the bag as opposed to on it or beyond it, and the defenders, if faced with any throw that might be a little off, need to make sure they get at least one out.

• Travis Wood will start the Cubs' first Cactus League game Thursday against the Brewers at Maryvale, and be followed by Kyle Hendricks. Wood is projected for the Cubs' bullpen, but the team wants him to be stretched out this spring. Hendricks is penciled in as the fifth starter.

Maddon has yet to officially name the Opening Day starter.

--

Cubs.com
Fowler opts back in to Cubs' quest for title run
By Carrie Muskat

MESA, Ariz. -- Dexter Fowler didn't have a nameplate on his locker early Friday in the Cubs clubhouse, but he felt right at home. He also has a much better understanding of the business of baseball following his offseason.
Fowler rejoined the Cubs on Thursday, signing a one-year, $8 million contract with an option for 2017. Earlier in the week, there were reports that he had agreed to a three-year deal with the Orioles, but he said there was no verbal agreement with Baltimore.

Orioles officials said Fowler’s agent Casey Close insisted on an opt-out clause. Fowler denied that was part of their agenda.

"No, that wasn't the sticking point," Fowler said. "That's why it's weird. It's a little murky. That wasn't the sticking point at all."

Orioles executive vice president of baseball operations Dan Duquette offered a different opinion: "We made a very competitive offer. The issue was the opt-out. The Orioles have made it clear that that type of deal wouldn't really work for us. ... There was not an agreement to terms, because they kept insisting on an opt-out. I don't see, club ownership doesn't see, the value in that type of arrangement to the Orioles. If we are going to guarantee a contract, it should be a contract."

Close issued a statement late Thursday, saying he had never "witnessed such irresponsible behavior on so many fronts" by Baltimore’s front office. Fowler said he was in the process of picking out fixtures for the new house he's building in Las Vegas when he heard the reports about the deal with the Orioles.

"Casey's here for me," Fowler said of his agent. "He's here for the other players and, obviously, the process didn't go like it was supposed to. He was pretty irritated about it."

Fowler did talk to Adam Jones about possibly signing with the Orioles.

"I didn't tell him anything," Fowler said of his conversation with Jones. "He texted me [Thursday] and said, 'My bad. I jumped the gun.' I said, 'It would be awesome to play with you guys.' It would've been awesome to play with him."

Instead, Fowler is reunited with the Cubs, whom he helped reached the National League Championship Series last season.

"[Kris Bryant] was always asking me to come back," Fowler said of his offseason workouts with Bryant in Las Vegas. "He said, 'Hurry up, c'mon, come back here.' It's good to be back."

What did Fowler learn about free agency?

"There were ups and downs," Fowler said. "At the end of the day, you learn, and that's the most important thing. It was good to go through the process and see what's going on and talking to the union and talking to different owners and talking to players. They say the best medicine is experience."

What about that nameplate?

"[Clubhouse manager Tom Hellmann] said he was about to give away my number," Fowler said, laughing. "I said, 'You better not.'"

--

**Cubs.com**

Cubs sign Victorino to Minor League deal
By Carrie Muskat

MESA, Ariz. -- This offseason, Shane Victorino worked out with Dexter Fowler and Kris Bryant in Las Vegas. On Friday, the three were reunited as teammates after Victorino signed a Minor League deal with the Cubs.
"I'm just ready for an opportunity and hope to be part of something special," Victorino said. "I've been blessed in my career to be part of a couple special championships in special cities. I tell myself, being a fan of the game, when there's a 100-plus-year drought in championships, you always want to be the first. That's the goal."

Victorino, 35, has two World Series rings, winning with the Phillies in 2008 and with the Red Sox in '13. The Cubs, as most of their fans know, haven't won a World Series since 1908.

With Fowler's return and the addition of Jason Heyward, where will Victorino fit? Cubs manager Joe Maddon said he'll take advantage of Victorino's experience, use him off the bench and an occasional spot start. That's OK for Victorino.

"It's not about playing time, it's not about where things are, it's about winning," he said. "Obviously, for me, I have to win my job on the team, and from there be the best player I can be to help the Cubs win a championship."

Victorino played for the Red Sox and Angels last season, batting .230 in 71 games. He has played for the Padres, Phillies, Dodgers, Red Sox and Angels over 12 seasons.

Victorino does have an unusual memory of his playing days at Wrigley Field.

"The memory that sticks out to me is that beer being poured on my head back in the day at Wrigley as a visiting player," he said of an incident in August 2009. "You think about those kind of moments, and respectfully so. I understand the passion of Cubs fans. My brother was a childhood Cubs fan, and [Ryne] Sandberg was his favorite player, Andre Dawson.

"I'm used to seeing a Cubs logo since I was a child. To be able to put it on now, even with the situation the way it is, I'm excited for the opportunity in Spring Training."

Bryant did talk to Victorino about playing with the Cubs.

"[Victorino] won a couple World Series, and he said when he goes back to Philadelphia, everyone loves him there," Bryant said. "I think he wants to be part of a team that can do that again. We certainly have the right guys, and he's just another piece who is very important to us to make that run. He has that playoff experience and World Series experience, and it will help us young guys."

The deal is for $1 million plus $1 million in incentives if Victorino plays in the Majors, MLB Network's Jon Heyman reported.

--

Cubs.com
Arrieta in 'midseason form' despite extra innings
By Carrie Muskat

MESA, Ariz. -- National League Cy Young Award winner Jake Arrieta faced batters for the first time on Friday in live batting practice, and it was good.

"It was alive," Cubs manager Joe Maddon said.

The Cubs plan to ease Arrieta into games this spring after he threw a career-high 229 regular-season innings plus 19 2/3 playoff innings last year. The right-hander's previous high was 156 2/3 innings in 2014.

"Jake's throwing really well already," Maddon said. "It's like 'I'm going to pick up where I left off' kind of thing. Having said all that, we're still going to monitor it and not let it get out of hand. He's aware not to go too crazy too quickly. He was really good today."

Catcher Miguel Montero caught Arrieta. His assessment? Montero said Arrieta was in "midseason form."
Extra bases

• Javier Baez was in center with Dexter Fowler, Jorge Soler was in left field with new addition Shane Victorino, and Jason Heyward was in right during outfield drills on Friday. Soler and Kyle Schwarber will be getting more time in left field with the return of Fowler, who signed a one-year contract on Thursday.

"Right now, I don't worry about my playing time," Soler said Friday. "When I get my opportunity, when I get my chance, I'll do my job and do the best I can to help the team."

Baez, who has primarily played shortstop in the Minors and in the big leagues, got a taste of center during winter ball. He's projected as a backup everywhere for the Cubs and is ready to go.

"As a player, I know what I can do, and him as a manager and a coach, he knows what every player can do here," Baez said of Maddon. "I'm just trying to stay healthy and go hard all year."

"He's very comfortable actually anywhere," Maddon said of Baez, who also will back up Anthony Rizzo at first if needed.

Maddon is hoping that giving Baez so much to do on defense will help him relax offensively, which is the message the manager gave Baez during their one-on-one meeting.

"It makes a lot of sense," Baez said. "I'm just ready for the games to start to see how it's going to work."

• Soler isn't the only one whose playing time will be affected with Fowler's return, but there has been no grumbling in the clubhouse.

"Long faces are not permitted here," Maddon said. "The guy who attempts to be that guy [who complains] will get met rather quickly by some people telling him that we don't do that here. I've had conversations with the group and individuals who I thought needed to be spoken to about potential adjustments and what may occur."

Maddon said other players will handle anyone upset by the changes.

"I feel very strongly that we have that kind of element going on," Maddon said.

• Earlier this week, shortstop Addison Russell said it felt like a "match made in heaven" after his first time turning double plays with new second baseman Ben Zobrist.

"I'm glad he feels that way -- that's great," Zobrist said.

Maddon hinted that Zobrist has worked in the past with some shortstops who were more of a challenge.

"It's harder to work with certain guys, where [Russell] has been real easy," Zobrist said. "He makes it easy on me."

Quote of the day

"Not that I know of -- yet." -- Maddon, when asked if the Cubs would have another new outfielder on Saturday after the arrival of Fowler and Victorino on consecutive days.

--

ESPNChicago.com
Cubs' Joe Maddon doesn't have a playing-time problem
By Jesse Rogers
MESA, Ariz. -- Since the unexpected return of Dexter Fowler to the Chicago Cubs, I’ve been asked multiple questions about playing time. Who gets the bulk of it? Is Jorge Soler now a part-time player? And wasn’t Javier Baez supposed to get some at-bats in the outfield?

I think people are missing the point.

First off, if you wondered these things after Fowler’s return, you should have been asking those questions even before Chris Coghlan was traded and Fowler re-signed. The Cubs had four starting-caliber outfielders then, and they have four now, but for some reason Coghlan never got the same level of respect as Soler.

I understand that Soler is a great physical specimen and everyone assumed he was to be the everyday right fielder this year, but I don’t think it was that cut and dry. Coghlan’s OPS, a pretty all-encompassing stat, was .784 last season while Soler produced a .723 mark. And Coghlan was easily a better defender, save for Soler’s arm. And once again Soler missed time due to injury and struggled when the temperature fell below about 45 degrees, which seemed to happen often both early and late in the season. But Soler had those nine plate appearances in the National League Division Series, which seemed to define his year. He got on base nine times in a row using a keen eye and/or some wicked contact, giving hope to his 2016 season.

In any case, manager Joe Maddon had a playing-time problem before Fowler’s return, and he supposedly has one now -- it’s just moved positions as Jason Heyward is back in right and Soler is mixing in with Kyle Schwarber in left. Schwarber is another player who still has work to do on his game. There’s no reason to believe he won’t improve, but remember he went just 8-for-56 against lefties last year, with a .213 on-base percentage, and had those miscues in the field he’d like to eliminate. Of course those numbers should go the right way with more experience, but the Cubs are in a win-now mode, so why not have backups like Soler or Baez around? They would be starters on other teams. That’s pretty cool.

But there is a bigger issue at play and it involves Maddon’s overall managing philosophy: Less is more. We’ve seen how that manifests itself in less batting practice and later arrivals for games, but it’s also true for overall playing time. With a stacked roster, Maddon can rotate guys in and out. He would do this anyway, but now he’ll match up players such as Schwarber, Baez, Ben Zobrist, Miguel Montero and even Fowler and Addison Russell to get the most out of them. Some of them will play most of the time, but Maddon won’t hesitate to exploit a good matchup while getting rest for a regular. If he wants he can use some of his players as mega-platoon guys. As much as Schwarber might want more playing time, just think what his numbers might be against righties only? Or Soler against lefties only? Fowler had some bad moments against certain pitchers last year, so Maddon can even bring him in and out of the lineup more if he wants. It’s why when asked if Fowler is his leadoff man Maddon answered, “When he’s in there.” The Cubs manager has a luxury few in the league possess: deep, deep talent.

With crazier travel schedules than ever, combined with rules against the use of drugs including amphetamines and steroids, Maddon’s style is perfectly suited to dealing with an abundance of starting players. He’ll use them all to keep his team fresh. His ways come from years of experience, starting as a coach in the Angels organization.

“It always seemed as though we ran out of gas,” Maddon explained. “I saw guys fade by the end of the season.”

His realization that players need more rest -- even stars in a pennant race -- has evolved over time. He once thought the old ways were the right ways.

“We hit a lot,” he said. “I was the hitting coach and I thought that was the right way to do things, too.”

He has changed his beliefs, and it coincides with the changes in the game. He foreshadowed how he might manage this season last year in the second half, when Schwarber came up, Montero returned from a thumb injury, Starlin Castro got hot, Soler returned from injury and then Baez was recalled and became a contributor. He mixed and matched and the offense took off. He exploited the matchups that best suited his hitters, while getting rest for old and young alike.

“I don’t care what birth certificates say,” Maddon said. “I’m living it [the grind] myself. I believe in keeping the mind sharp. If the mind is sharp, the body will follow.”
Maddon will go on and on about the value of rest, so in his mind the questions about playing time are moot. First off, players are going to get injured, so like a football team with a great backup quarterback, the Cubs have guys who are ready to go. By the time spring is over, Baez will be proficient at every position, save pitcher and catcher. He’ll slide right in as a starter in the infield if someone goes down. In the meantime he’ll be getting some starts and entering plenty of games later for defense, anyway. They may not miss a beat with Baez. We already know the team has an extra outfielder in Soler or Schwarber or Fowler or whomever. And if everyone is healthy, Maddon can use his matchup machine like he did late last season, while reducing the workload.

“There’s all these factors involved and then all this stress,” Maddon said. “Whether it’s self-inflicted or something from the outside. However you process stress that makes you fatigued also.”

Make no mistake, Maddon’s ideology is different than the norm. Keeping players guessing their roles — and that includes relievers in the bullpen — has always been frowned upon. But somehow Maddon has turned it into a positive. The use of an entire roster also creates a camaraderie you can’t fake. How often did the team go nuts last year when 25th man Jonathan Herrera, or players like him, had a big moment in a game?

Maddon wants his players ready at all times for all things. He believes that’s what keeps them sharp, instead of adhering to the same routine every day. So how will Maddon use everyone? He’ll just do it. And it will be a killer for the opposition.

“Most of the time with teams you have a lot of that depth at Triple-A, but we have a lot of that depth with us all year,” Maddon said.

So back to the manager’s original thought on all this. One he and Cubs management have expressed so simply since putting together a powerhouse team.

“It’s a good problem to have,” Maddon said with a smile.

--

ESPNChicago.com
Cubs Notes: Victorino to switch-hit, Sunday Funday, a bad injury
By Jesse Rogers

MESA, Ariz. -- Chicago Cubs spring invite Shane Victorino will once again switch-hit as he attempts to make the team as a fifth outfielder.

Victorino, 35, gave up switch-hitting two years ago while dealing with back issues. He’s only batted from the right side the last two seasons, but he’s healthy and adamant about switch-hitting again.

“In today’s game, the numbers game everybody plays with matchups, it’s not a benefit to get rid of switch hitting,” Victorino explained from Cubs camp on Sunday.

Victorino has a career .730 OPS as a lefty versus right-handed pitching and a .859 OPS as a righty against left-handers. He thinks that kind of versatility -- combined with good health -- gives him a chance to make the Cubs.

“Two years removed from back surgery I’m very excited to be back switch-hitting, trying to be the dynamic player I once was,” he said.

Manager Joe Maddon is on board, as the two have discussed their dismay of players who have given up switch-hitting just because they were struggling from one side of the plate. Victorino is a big believer in the advantages of hitting from both sides and he believes it even helps him as an athlete.

“My body starts to sync up correctly,” Victorino said. “I’m doing things from both sides rotationally. I feel great.”
Sunday Funday: As is Maddon’s tendency, he lightened up the workload on Sunday as the Cubs held coach-pitch batting practice and infield drills at Sloan Park in advance of Cactus League play, which begins later in the week. Maddon wanted his team to get used to the infield and outfield there.

“Check the field, then you can report back to the groundskeeper,” Maddon said.

Before drills, the team held a couple of competitions, including a relay-throwing contest using seven sets of four players -- and one coaches team -- with the winning group taking home $500.

Each team lined up their four players about 90 feet from each other. The goal was to be the fastest team to throw a baseball from one player to the next and back again. The winning group consisted of catcher David Ross, infielders Ben Zobrist and Addison Russell, and outfielder Jorge Soler.

“They did it well,” Maddon said afterwards. “Also, it illustrated if there is the slightest bobble how much behind you were the next line that was doing it right.”

The dance contest held a few minutes earlier featured reliever Justin Grimm showing off his moves.

“His dance maneuvers were fabulous,” Maddon said. “We didn’t have the right music. He thinks he can do better.”

The Cubs manager puts a lot of thought into how to keep things loose and relaxed while still getting the necessary work in to prepare for the season. The lighter times aren’t things he just thinks of on the spur of the moment.

“A large part of our discussion is: How do we make it fun and enjoyable but at the same time pertinent?” Maddon explained. “The joy of participation matters.”

Maddon isn’t sure how much camaraderie matters, but he knows that it does.

“I don’t know how many wins it’s worth, but it’s worth some wins,” he said.

Villanueva injured: The Cubs lost some infield depth when minor-league third baseman Christian Villanueva broke his right fibula during infield drills on Sunday. Villanueva was reacting to a high hopper and came down awkwardly. Surgery is likely, according to Maddon.

ESPNChicago.com
Catcher Miguel Montero hoping for more consistency in Year 2 with Cubs
By Jesse Rogers

MESA, Ariz. -- Sometimes he’s forgotten in a loaded Chicago Cubs lineup, but catcher Miguel Montero is an integral part of the team if for no other reason than he’ll be tasked with backstopping a pitching staff favored to win the division. He won’t catch Jon Lester -- that’s David Ross’ job. But he will be catching a staff ranging from Cy Young winner Jake Arrieta to No. 5 starter Kyle Hendricks, making Montero’s job a big one. He’ll be counted on for defense first and foremost. What he brings with his bat will be gravy.

“Overall it was a good year defensively other than throwing errors,” Montero said from Cubs camp. “I’m not afraid of throwing errors. And there is a combination of your middle infielders helping you out.”

There were mixed reviews of Montero in Year 1 with the Cubs, as his pitch framing was among the best but there were other facets of his game behind the plate that left fans scratching their heads. He had a career-low caught-stealing-percentage (20 percent) to go along with 13 errors -- and some frustrating missed blocks on pitches in the dirt. He says he wants to show more consistency this time around, starting with his defense behind the plate.
“There are blocks I should have made, but there are pitches you can’t do anything about,” he said. “It wasn’t that bad. I looked at my blocking percentages from last year compared to years before, it was a plus for me. It was more than the league average.”

The most famous missed block came in Game 3 of the NLCS with Trevor Cahill on the mound and the lead run on third base for the New York Mets. Cahill threw five straight curveballs to rookie Michael Conforto with the last four hitting dirt in front of the plate. Conforto swung at pitch five, but the ball got by Montero allowing the go-ahead run to score.

“I have no regrets,” Montero said of calling the pitches. “He (Conforto) was missing them. It’s part of the game. You can’t block every single ball.”

And the throwing errors throughout the season were not all his fault. Starlin Castro isn’t known as a great defender around second base so he didn’t prevent as many miscues as he could have, while Jake Arrieta wasn’t all that much better at holding runners on than Jon Lester was. Still, base runners swiped 12 of 15 at third base off of Montero. That’s the most in his career while playing fewer games.

“It hurts but I’m not going to sweat it,” Montero said.

Montero is hoping for more consistency with playing time as well. He would like to face more left-handers after getting just 47 at-bats against them last year. He hit .234 but with a respectable .339 on-base percentage and three home runs.

“Take those 47 at-bats, eight were against Clayton Kershaw and Chris Sale,” Montero explained. “I would have hit .300 right there. ... It’s hard not to face lefties then you’re facing Chris Sale.

“I don’t care who I’m facing as long as I see them now and again. Of course I want to play against lefties.”

Montero also experienced some frustration at the beginning of 2015 as the Cubs were carrying three catcher-only players until mid-May, when Welington Castillo was traded. He wasn’t used to the uncertainty regarding playing time. Plus, Ross came in to be Lester’s personal catcher. It took some getting used to in terms of preparation for Montero. In the end, Year 2 for the Cubs catcher might be better simply because he knows what’s coming and how he might be used.

“I’ll have a better idea this time,” he said. “It was hard to understand because I didn’t know what was going on. I know what to expect a little bit more.”

--

ESPNChicago.com
Cubs Notes: Travis Wood, Kyle Hendricks to open Cactus League play
By Jesse Rogers

MESNA, Ariz. -- The Chicago Cubs' Opening Day starter is a mystery but only because manager Joe Maddon hasn’t made it official yet. He still needs to talk with Jake Arrieta, Jon Lester and the rest of the pitchers, but you can bet that Arrieta, the National League Cy Young Award winner, will be tapped for Game 1 in Anaheim soon enough.

In the meantime Maddon did commit to lefty Travis Wood as the Game 1 starter in the Cactus League next Thursday when the Cubs take on the Milwaukee Brewers. He’ll be followed in that game by Kyle Hendricks before giving way to the bullpen. The team will allow long relievers like Wood to start games in the spring in case they’re needed in the early portion of the season.

The team will map out the rest of next weekend for Cactus League games as pitchers complete bullpen sessions in the coming days. No word on when the Cubs' top starters will make their spring debuts. The Cubs have already stated they’ll back off some veterans after a nearly seven-month 2015 season.
Domestic violence seminar: Cubs players attended a domestic violence seminar before workouts on Saturday as the league has implemented new penalties for those who get into trouble.

“It’s just not the way to solve problems,” pitcher Jason Hammel said, echoing the league’s message. “If you know someone or it’s directly affecting you, don’t be afraid to speak up.”

All teams will hear the same message as the commissioner’s office faces several cases of domestic assaults involving players right now.

“Life is tough. Sometimes, better you deal with the stress by talking it out than doing something else,” Hammel said.

--

ESPNChicago.com
Ben Zobrist on rule changes: Some 'are going to have change the way they slide'
By Jesse Rogers

MESA, Ariz. -- Like all major league teams the Chicago Cubs are getting used to rule changes around second base which include the elimination of the "neighborhood play" as well specific guidelines for proper slides.

"It doesn't change my mindset as far turning the double play," second baseman Ben Zobrist said Saturday afternoon. "I usually stay on the base 99.9 percent of the time. As far as sliding for base runners I really think it's going to make a difference."

Manager Joe Maddon and his staff met with league officials on Saturday to go over the new rules and procedures. In the past, base runners were called out even when middle infielders weren't on second base at exactly the same time they caught the ball. Now they're required to be on the base and the play is reviewable as well. It wasn't in the past. Also, base runners have to slide properly and can't change directions to take out an infielder. No rolling slides.

"As a baserunner there is an element [now] to thinking about what we're doing which is very instinctual just to slide and because of that it's going to be a conscious effort to make sure you're sliding normal as opposed to trying different things," Zobrist explained. "Some players are going to have change the way they slide."

Maddon wants his team to remember two simple thoughts for both his base runners and infielders.

"Slide in front of the bag as opposed to on it or beyond it," he said it. "Our defenders, if you're faced with any kind of throw might be a little bit off, to make sure you get one out. The threat there is you try to turn two but the neighborhood [play] isn't there. They can review whether the he was on the base or not."

One thing Zobrist will work on with shortstop Addison Russell is the toss from second to short and vice versa. In the past it didn't have to be exactly on target as the neighborhood play would take care of the out but now the timing has to be exactly on between the two.

"You kind of have to wait and make sure the ball gets to you," Zobrist said. "It's something we'll discuss."

Maddon doesn't believe his players will have to change much with their slides. And all indications from the manager are former Cub Chris Coghlan's takeout of Pittsburgh Pirates shortstop Jung Ho Kang would still be legal under the new provisions. Kang was lost for the season after Coghlan broke up a double play attempt in a key game in September last season.

"I don't see us wanting to road block or taking someone's knee out," Maddon said.

--
ESPNChicago.com
New Cubs pitcher Aaron Brooks provides insurance at Triple-A
By Jesse Rogers

MESA, Ariz. -- New Chicago Cubs pitcher Aaron Brooks didn't have to go far to join his new team after being acquired from the Oakland Athletics for Chris Coghlan earlier this week.

The A's train in Mesa just as the Cubs do, so Brooks simply got off the highway “one exit earlier,” arriving at Sloan Park as an extra arm for the rotation, although he'll start the season at Triple-A Iowa.

“I want to compete and win and help any team that's willing to give me a chance,” Brooks said Saturday morning.

Brooks, 25, was drafted by the Kansas City Royals in the ninth round in 2011 before being traded to the Athletics for Ben Zobrist last season. Now he joins Zobrist on the Cubs.

“Now we’re teammates,” Brooks said. “It’s awesome.”

Brooks grew up an Angels fan, so he’s familiar with Joe Maddon, who was a longtime coach there. And he plans to prepare himself in case he’s called upon to start for the World Series favorites. Cubs President Theo Epstein indicated the team’s best fill-in starters, like Trevor Cahill, Clayton Richard or Travis Wood, all reside in their big league bullpen, so they would like to have someone ready at Triple-A who’s already stretched out just in case. Rookie Ryan Williams is a candidate for that role, along with holdovers Dallas Beeler and Eric Jokisch. Brooks has started 10 games in his career with mixed success, compiling an 8.38 ERA in 15 appearances overall.

“Staying up here is always about staying consistent and having that drive to win,” Brooks said.

One thing bound to create more confusion for Brooks coming to the Cubs is sharing the same name as Bulls guard Aaron Brooks. In fact, it already has.

“I've actually talked to him on twitter before,” Brooks explained. “Everybody thinks I’m him, they're tagging me and stuff ... All they have to do is look at the profile picture.”

--

ESPNChicago.com
It's about 'focus' for Cubs' Jorge Soler as he moves to left field
By Jesse Rogers

MESA, Ariz. -- First he admitted it to Chicago Cubs manager Joe Maddon and then he did the same with reporters: Jorge Soler knows he didn’t have the best of regular seasons in 2015, but he turned up the focus in the playoffs when he reached base in nine consecutive plate appearances. Now he wants to carry that success -- and focus -- to the entire 2016 season.

"Was a lot of focus on the game during the playoffs," Soler said through an interpreter Friday at Cubs camp. "During the season I got out of my mind [lost focus] when I had a failed at-bat. I got a little lazy defensively. During the playoffs I focused on my at-bats, on my defense. That helped my game."

Soler’s role on the team is to be determined after the trade of Chris Coghlan to Oakland on Thursday. Soler was never assured of a full-time starting job, but now he has to compete with up-and-coming second-year player Kyle Schwarber in a foreign position, left field. Soler was playing right field until the Cubs re-signed Dexter Fowler, pushing Jason Heyward to Soler’s position.

"This is my first time ever playing left field," Soler said. "I'll work hard every day."
After turning 24 on Thursday, the Cuba-born Soler is still learning a lot about his new home and baseball. He intimated he won't wear his infamous ski mask during the colder months of the season as his production plummeted last year along with the temperature. Maddon tried to explain his surge in the playoffs.

"There's this new season and now I get this fresh beginning," Maddon said. "I think he saw it as a fresh beginning, and with that we saw what he's capable of doing."

Soler's OPS went from .723 in the regular season to 1.705 in the playoffs. Now he has to continue on the path he set against the St. Louis Cardinals in the divisional round, when he did the most damage. When the NLCS came about, so did cold New York weather, and again Soler went into his shell.

"My biggest thing with him is he understands how to get ready to play every day," Maddon said. "I'm not looking for great plays. I'm not looking for 20 homers or hit .310. It's just a matter of getting a young player that understands the major leagues on a daily basis. That his prep work is good, that he's getting ready to play when asked to play."

There's even more competition now in the outfield after the Cubs signed Shane Victorino to a minor-league deal Friday. Nobody is thinking Soler is competing with Victorino for a roster spot, but the fact remains Soler needs to bring it during the regular season, just as he did in the playoffs, as the Cubs are in win-now mode. Soler will have to earn his playing time while staying healthy. Leg injuries have plagued him every year of his Cubs career.

"I lost 10 pounds," Soler said. "I want to lose a little more. I don't want to put too much weight on my legs."

It's a fresh start for Soler, who stands at 6 feet 4 and 215 pounds. He might simply be a platoon monster against left-handed pitching or he might force the issue with his incredible size and strength. If he's hitting monster home runs and throwing out guys on the basepaths, it will be hard to keep him out of the lineup. But if he's taking bad routes to the ball and bad swings at the plate, Soler will be relegated to platoon duty.

"There's theory and there's reality," Maddon said. "We're all about theory right now, but I do believe reality is going to be attached -- but we have to keep it together and focus on the day. Focus on the little things."

Soler says he's not worried about playing time, just getting better every day. It's a good attitude. Hopefully he keeps the same perspective when things don't go right.

"It's our responsibility to give him more tools to work with, whether it's mental or physical. He looks good, really good. How do you look bad?" Maddon said of arguably the most impressive athlete on the team.

ESPNChicago.com
Javier Baez to add another position to versatile game
By Jesse Rogers

MESA, Ariz. – As long as Javier Baez takes to the position this spring, he'll be the primary backup to first baseman Anthony Rizzo, according to manager Joe Maddon. It means Baez could be the primary backup for about five positions. First base it just the latest.

“I played two innings last year,” Baez said. “I don’t think it’s that hard. It’s not harder than shortstop.”

By the end of spring training the team hopes Baez can play every position on the field, save pitcher and catcher. He spent the winter learning the outfield and with the departure of Chris Coghlan via trade on Thursday, Baez will get more time at first.

“I don’t have a first baseman’s glove,” he said. “I borrowed Kris Bryant’s last year. If I need one, I’ll get one.”
Baez is the super sub in the same way Ben Zobrist used to perform that job for Maddon in Tampa Bay. Baez has already played first, second, shortstop and third base in the big leagues and is getting good reviews for his work in center field so far. And now when Rizzo gets a rare day off it might be Baez who takes over at first with Bryant backing him up.

“I’ll be ready for wherever,” Baez said. “I’m still young and I’m going to find out what I can do.”

---

ESPNChicago.com
Dexter Fowler gets text from would-be teammate Adam Jones
By Jesse Rogers

MESA, Ariz. -- Calling the free-agent process both “frustrating and fun,” Chicago Cubs outfielder Dexter Fowler reiterated on Friday that he never agreed to terms with the Baltimore Orioles before signing back with the Cubs.

His agent, Casey Close, put out an aggressive statement Thursday afternoon chastising both the Orioles front office and media members who reported Fowler had signed with the team. Even outfielder Adam Jones thought Fowler was going to be a teammate.

“He texted me yesterday,” Fowler explained. “He said ‘my bad I jumped the gun.’”

Fowler is focused on moving on after accepting less money from the Cubs than they originally extended him via the qualifying offer. Fowler agreed to a one-year deal for a guarantee of $13 million after turning down $15.8 million last November.

“My heart was telling me to come back here,” Fowler said of taking less money. “This is my family.”

---

CSNChicago.com
Cubs lose minor-league infielder Christian Villanueva to broken leg
By Tony Andracki

MESA, Ariz. - Cubs minor-leaguer Christian Villanueva broke his leg during Sunday's workout.

Villanueva jumped up for a high-chopper during infield drills and came down awkwardly on his right leg.

He was carted off the field and the Cubs reported after Sunday's workout that Villanueva had broken his fibula and may possibly need surgery.

The exact timetable is unknown, but Villanueva will need at least several months to recover.

"It's really unfortunate," Cubs manager Joe Maddon said. "This kid came in ready to go. Made a great impression on us at the end of last season. Very good infielder and he's starting to hit.

"Just a tough break - literally - for him. And he's such a good kid."

Villanueva, 24, came to the Cubs system along with Kyle Hendricks in the Ryan Dempster deal in July 2012.

Villanueva represents third base depth for the Cubs and is generally regarded as a talented defender.

Coming up through the minor-league system, Villanueva has been blocked by Kris Bryant and now with Bryant entrenched at third base in Chicago, Villanueva's future was open-ended before the injury.
However, the former No. 100 prospect in the game (Baseball America, 2012) put together a strong season at the plate last year, taking over at the hot corner in Triple-A Iowa after Bryant was promoted to the majors.

Villanueva hit 20 homers and drove in 95 runs in 2015, posting a .752 OPS.

"Last year, he came in and people were talking even more glowingly this year about the advances that he had made," Maddon said. "It's just unfortunate."

---

CSNChicago.com
Cubs: Shane Victorino feels 'dynamic' in return to switch-hitting
By Tony Andracki

MESA, Ariz. - As of right now, the Cubs still have a crowded outfield, but Shane Victorino has an ace up his sleeve to help him crack the roster.

Victorino broke into the big leagues as a switch-hitter over a decade ago, but a back injury forced him to return to his natural side of right-handed while with the Boston Red Sox in 2013.

Now, for the first time in almost three years, Victorino feels healthy enough to return to switch-hitting.

"The thing I've found from going back to it - my body's dynamic from both sides," Victorino said. "My body starts to sync up correctly. I'm doing things from both sides rotationally.

"My body feels great. ... Listen, a month from now, I don't know. But right now, physically, I feel great."

Victorino's back injury got so bad that he had to have surgery on it in August 2014. When he got back on the field last season, he still didn't feel strong enough to hit left-handed, so stuck with righty in games.

But as the 2015 season wore on, Victorino started feeling better and began working in his left-handed stroke in the batting cage and occasionally in batting practice.

He's been working out all winter from both sides of the plate and took batting practice from each side Sunday in Sloan Park.

Victorino said he's going to stick to switch-hitting barring any further injury. He knows it's a great tool to have at his disposal and manager Joe Maddon confirmed Sunday it would help the Cubs coming off the bench.

"It's definitely something that, as a player, I wish I never had to lose," Victorino said. "Unfortunately, injuries kinda took me away from it."

"I'm very excited to be back switch-hitting and trying to be the dynamic player I once was."

Victorino feels like working from both sides of the plate helps his swing across the board (i.e. his left-handed swing can help his right-handed mechanics and vice versa).

He picked up switch-hitting in the minor leagues at age 20, but struggled and stopped. The following season, while playing in the Los Angeles Dodgers system, a coach suggested Victorino pick up switch-hitting again to help set himself apart from other outfielders.

He found success with it and it stuck for the next 12 years before injury struck.

When he moved back to becoming just a right-handed hitter, Victorino found some success in 2013.
But the 35-year-old veteran felt like the league caught up with him after they were initially thrown for a loop seeing Victorino as strictly a right-hander.

"To see these players talk about getting rid of being a switch-hitter, every single one I've talked to, I say, 'If it wasn't for physical reasons, there's no other reason why I'd give it up,'" Victorino said. "Some of these guys don't want to do it because, 'Oh, I'm not good from one side' or, 'I'm better from one side.'"

"I'm like, in today's game, the numbers game that everybody plays and the matchups, it's not a benefit to get rid of switch-hitting.

"If you're a switch-hitter, I don't care if you hit .150 on one side and .400 on the other. Do not give it up."

---

CSNChicago.com
Cubs: Who is Aaron Brooks?
By Tony Andracki

MESA, Ariz. - Chicago now has two professional athletes named Aaron Brooks.

Lost in the craziness that was DexterDay at Cubs camp in Arizona was the fact the organization acquired a young pitcher in exchange for Chris Coghlan.

Between Dexter Fowler's arrival and Shane Victorino's signing, Brooks - who shares the same name as the Bulls' backup point guard - has flown under the radar with the Cubs after coming over from the Oakland A's.

"I'm ready to come and help a team win and I'm glad it's the Cubs," Brooks said.

Brooks is a 25-year-old right-hander who has pitched in 15 games (10 starts) in the big leagues in his career with a 3-5 record, 8.38 ERA and 1.759 WHIP over 58 innings.

In the minor leagues, Brooks is 43-32 with a 4.18 ERA and 1.28 WHIP while working primarily as a starter. In 2015, Brooks pitched 118.2 innings in Triple-A for the A's and Kansas City Royals affiliates and went 7-5 with a 3.56 ERA and 1.247 WHIP.

Amid all the Fowler commotion, Cubs president of baseball operations Theo Epstein pointed to Brooks as a guy who can provide some starting rotation depth in the minor leagues, since most of the Cubs' rotation depth is in the big league bullpen in guys like Adam Warren and Clayton Richard.

Brooks knows if he wants a shot in The Show, he has some work to do.

"Just stay consistent," he said. "I think staying up here is always about staying consistent and having that drive to win."

"It's a big difference from Triple-A and the minor leagues to here. Just getting the feel for things and getting comfortable."

Brooks admitted he doesn't yet know most of the guys in the Cubs clubhouse, but he shares a connection with a few, including Ben Zobrist and manager Joe Maddon.

Brooks was part of the package sent from the Royals to the A's last year for Ben Zobrist, the move that put the Royals over the top en route to their World Series championship.

Brooks also grew up an Angels fan and remembers when Maddon was the bench coach in Anaheim.

Now, he's sharing a clubhouse with both.
Despite having never been to Wrigley Field, the San Bernadino, Calif. native is already somewhat familiar with the Chicagoland area as he spent 2012 on the Kane County Cougars.

As for the Bulls' Aaron Brooks, the Cubs' version is already familiar with Derrick Rose's backup thanks to social media:

"I've talked to him on Twitter before," Brooks said inside the Cubs clubhouse Saturday morning, "just because everybody thinks that I'm him and they keep tagging me in stuff.

"All they gotta do is look at the profile picture."

--

CSNChicago.com
Cubs adjust following MLB's new rules on 'Neighborhood Play'
By Tony Andracki

MESA, Ariz. - Major League Baseball no longer has the "Neighborhood Play," so the Cubs - like every other team - will have to adjust.

The "Neighborhood Play" was essentially to help protect middle infielders trying to turn a double play, as umpires would allow a play to hold up if the player received the ball within the "neighborhood" of second base while avoiding a slide.

That is no longer the case now - players will have to possess the ball while touching the second-base bag. No more benefit of the doubt.

And the play is reviewable, so managers can challenge to determine if the defender was on the bag or not.

Saturday, the Cubs went over the rule change during the team workout, spelling out what infielders need to be aware of.

Joe Maddon doesn't see it as a major adjustment on the Cubs' part.

"I don't think it's gonna be big because I don't want them to do anything except to be aware of that one particular thing," Maddon said. "Do everything you've done to this point, but be aware of the throws off line at all to make sure you get that out at second base instead of just trying to complete a double play where we get nobody out."

As of right now, Ben Zobrist is projected to see the lion's share of the time at second base for the Cubs this season and he doesn't feel the rule change isn't a major deal for him.

"It doesn't really change what I do at second base as far as turning the double play," Zobrist said. "I feel like I pretty clearly stay on the base 99.9 percent of the time.

"Second basemen, it's easier to kind of move around the bag, stay on the bag when you're making the play. I think for shortstops, it's a little tougher because you really have to be conscious coming across the bag that you're at least tapping it with your toe."

Zobrist did admit there was a change that may need to take place in terms of Cubs infielders feeding each other at second base for a possible double play.

Zobrist said he and shortstop Addison Russell didn't get into it in detail, but they will have to be on the same page in terms of feeds and making sure they are timing things properly at the bag.

Maddon believes the biggest thing is just for infielders and baserunners to use common sense.
Because of the rule changes, Maddon's coaching staff did have to reiterate sliding fundamentals - ensuring Cubs baserunners slide in front of the bag, don't roll and don't kick anybody above the knee while sliding - all things Maddon has said he doesn't want his guys to do anyways, regardless of any rules.

The Cubs ran into something of a controversy late last season when Chris Coghlan slid into second base and broke the leg of Pirates shortstop Jung Ho Kang in the collision.

Maddon said the new rules "absolutely indicate it was a really good slide" by Coghlan.

As for the rule change in general, Maddon has a simple approach:

"Regardless of if you agree with it or not," he said, "if you think it's good or not or right or wrong - just go play.

"I talked to the guys and I want our guys to continue to play."

--

CSNChicago.com
Despite crowded outfield, Cubs think Soler can hit reset button in 2016
By Tony Andracki

MESA, Ariz. - Dexter Fowler's arrival shook up the Cubs outfield situation, but that doesn't necessarily mean Jorge Soler's value took a major hit.

With the arrival of Fowler and Shane Victorino (who signed Friday morning), it pushes free agent prize Jason Heyward to his Gold Glove position of right field, meaning Soler will move to left primarily, where he will have to compete with Kyle Schwarber for playing time.

But it's not as simple as looking at it as a platoon in left field. Schwarber will be catching some and he struggled against left-handed pitchers last year (.481 OPS in 61 plate appearances).

Then there's injuries to take into account. Fowler averaged only 128 games a season before playing 156 contests last year. Soler missed 61 games last season and had several injury issues in the minor leagues.

The Cubs believe Joe Maddon can make it all work and with respect to Soler, they feel confident they can unlock his untapped potential.

"There's a lot in there," Maddon said about Soler, who turned 24 Thursday. "A young guy last year who had high expectations, obviously. Didn't get off to the start he's looking for.

"And I don't think he really process the moment as well as he possibly could. I'm not blaming him. He's a young guy getting caught up in the moment. But it's our responsibility to give him more tools to work with, whether it's mentally or physically."

Maddon believes Soler understands what he needs to do now and the Cubs manager also feels another year under Soler's belt in the American culture and learning the language will help out.

Maddon thinks Soler put too much pressure on himself to meet lofty personal expectations last season and when the calendar flipped to the playoffs, the Cubs feel Soler treated it like a new season.

The results followed immediately, as Soler reached base the first nine times he came to the plate in the postseason and wound up hitting .474 with a 1.705 OPS, three doubles and three homers in seven games.

Soler admitted his focus was higher in the playoffs than it was during the regular season, when he struggled to find consistency, posting a .723 OPS in 404 plate appearances.
"We need to get that playoff performance out of him on a more consistent basis," Maddon said. "That's all prep work, I think. It's just a matter of teaching him how to get ready on a daily basis.

"And we will. When we do that, you're gonna see more of that kind of performance on a consistent basis."

For his part, Soler doesn't seem worried, standing at his locker Friday morning, smiling freely and talking about how excited he is that Fowler is back.

"Right now, I don't worry about my playing time," Soler said through an interpreter. "When I get my opportunity, I'll do my job and do what I can to help the team.

"I'm ready to go out there and do my work."

The Cubs had already talked to Soler about becoming more versatile and getting some reps in left field before the Fowler signing was made public.

Soler hasn't played left at all before in his career, but he is open to learning the new spot.

He also shed 10 pounds in the offseason in an effort to take pressure off his legs and reduce the risk of injury.

"I don't worry about the future," Soler said. "I just worked hard in the offseason to get my body in the best shape."

---

CSNChicago.com
Shane Victorino joins Cubs with thoughts of a championship on his mind
By Tony Andracki

MESA, Ariz. - Shane Victorino just got to Cubs camp Friday morning, but he's already pulling in the same direction as the rest of the organization.

Joe Maddon, Theo Epstein and the rest of the Cubs have all portrayed a unified message since arriving in spring training - World Series or bust in 2016.

That's no problem for Victorino who, at age 35, is placing a premium on winning over money or his role.

"I'm just grateful for the opportunity to be a part of something hopefully that's going to be special," he said. "I've been blessed in my career to be a part of a couple special championships in special cities.

"Being a fan of the game, when there's a 100-plus year championship drought, you always want to be the first. That's the goal.

"At the end of the day, it's not about playing time. It's not about where things are. It's about winning. For me, I gotta win my job on the team and from there, whatever role I am, I gotta be the best player I can be to help the Cubs win the championship."

Victorino has played 60 postseason games in his career, making it to three World Series. He won it all with the Philadelphia Phillies in 2008 (beating Joe Maddon's Tampa Bay Rays team) and with the Boston Red Sox in 2013 (alongside current Cubs Jon Lester, John Lackey and David Ross).

Victorino said he's always respected Maddon from afar, admiring the way the manager has gotten the most out of his teams.

He's excited to get the band back together with Lester, Lackey and Ross and Victorino also trains in the offseason with Kris Bryant in Las Vegas.
This year, Dexter Fowler - who just signed with the Cubs Thursday - joined Bryant and Victorino taking some swings in Vegas.

Victorino has been talking to the Cubs for a while before agreeing on the minor-league deal with the invite to big-league camp this spring. The Cubs currently have four outfielders - Fowler, Jorge Soler, Kyle Schwarber and Jason Heyward - in place, so Victorino wouldn't figure to get a ton of playing time if he were to make the team.

Victorino said he doesn't want to start the season in the minor leagues - "I don't know if I'm at that point in my career" - but admitted he's not sure how things are going to play out in the next five weeks.

Victorino has plenty of connections to the Cubs beyond the guys in the clubhouse, too. Back in 2009, he was part of that infamous moment when a Cubs fan dumped a beer of his head in the bleachers while Victorino was trying to catch a fly ball.

"I understand the passion of Cubs fans," Victorino said. "My brother was childhood Cubs fan; [Ryne] Sandberg was one of his favorite players. Andre Dawson, guys like that.

"I've seen the Cubs logo since I was a child. To be able to put it on now, even if the situation is the way it is, I'm very excited for the opportunity in spring training."

---

CSNChicago.com
Cubs add Shane Victorino to the outfield mix
By Tony Andracki

MESA, Ariz. - One day after signing Dexter Fowler, the Cubs also added Shane Victorino to the outfield mix.

Victorino is signed to a minor-league deal with an invite to big-league camp.

The 35-year-old Victorino is a two-time All-Star and four-time Gold Glove winner. He has spent the majority of his career in center field, but has moved to the corner spots in recent years.

Victorino hit .230 with a .601 OPS in 2015, playing 71 games with the Boston Red Sox and Los Angeles Angels.

He owns a lifetime .275/.340/.425 slash line with 231 stolen bases and 108 homers.

Victorino only hits right-handed now, abandoning his switch-hitting duties prior to last season.

---

Chicago Tribune
Cubs nearly kept Chris Archer over Chris Carpenter: report
By Mark Gonzales

The Chicago Cubs' rebuilding program might have ascended quicker had they kept pitching prospect Chris Archer.

According to a baseball column by Nick Cafardo in Sunday's editions of the Boston Globe, Rays executive Andrew Friedman preferred pitcher Chris Carpenter over Archer in a blockbuster deal that sent Matt Garza to the Cubs in January of 2011.

The column stated that Friedman, now the president of baseball operations with the Los Angeles Dodgers, was leaning toward Carpenter because the analytics indicated he was a better prospect than Archer.
But Friedman was swayed by chief scout Jeff McAvoy to take Archer, 27, who became a 2015 American League All-Star with the Rays and has a 3.33 ERA in 95 lifetime appearances (93 major league starts).

Coincidentally, Carpenter was dealt to the Boston Red Sox as compensation for Theo Epstein leaving to become President of the Cubs. Carpenter pitched in eight games for the Red Sox in 2012 and pitched last season for Triple-A Louisville.

---

**Chicago Tribune**
Cubs’ Jason Hammel sought help from pitching guru Tom House
By Mark Gonzales

Jason Hammel’s career reached a crossroads a few times, but he says he never sought a major overhaul until after he sputtered just as the Cubs made their ascent last year.

"It’s well-documented that over the second half the past few years, it's been a struggle for me," Hammel said.

In order to stabilize his presence in the Cubs rotation and alleviate the anxiety of manager Joe Maddon, not to mention squirmy fans, Hammel aimed high.

Hammel, 33, enlisted the help of former pitching coach Tom House, who helped prolong the career of Hall of Famer Nolan Ryan and helped transform Randy Johnson from a wild 6-foot-10 left-hander into a Hall of Famer thanks to sound mechanics.

House, 68, worked with Hammel at USC and detected a few flaws that have been corrected and could help Hammel become a more reliable and effective pitcher over a full season.

"He was an easy teach," said House, founder of the National Pitching Association. "He rediscovered things he did early in his career."

The most noticeable difference in Hammel’s delivery during spring bullpen sessions is a more pronounced hip rotation. That was implemented after Hammel underwent a series of tests and House analyzed video of his delivery.

"We don’t trust our eyes," said House, who employs three-dimensional analysis to indicate what specific parts of the body is doing.

House added that he has a video library of 732 major-league pitchers to compare timing, sequencing and mechanics.

"We try to find the correct way to throw the hardest the easiest," said House, who also works with top-flight NFL quarterbacks Tom Brady, Drew Brees and Carson Palmer.

House detected that groin and knee injuries, along with age, might have taken a toll on Hammel. Looking back, Hammel confirmed he tried to pitch through a groin injury in 2005 while pitching for Double-A Montgomery and then missed three weeks in 2010 because of another groin ailment.

"We knew his arm worked," said House, who put Hammel through some functional stretch testing.

Thanks to House and a visit to Massachusetts-based trainer Eric Cressey, the 6-foot-6 Hammel said he feels leaner and stronger. Cressey prescribed Hammel with some core and leg exercises that should enhance his strength and stamina.

"I wanted to make a difference and make sure I was putting it all out there," Hammel said.
A strong season will help the Cubs and Hammel, who is in the final year of a two-year, $20 million contract with a $10 million option for 2017 that vests if Hammel reaches certain thresholds.

"Not to say there's inner demons, but I had to figure something out and a way to get better," said Hammel, who has a lifetime 5.15 ERA in the second half. "As you get older, things don't come easy. The body doesn't bounce back quickly. And you've got to be smart about life beyond baseball too."

There might be a place for Hammel after his career ends, based on his work with youths who also were seeking advice from House.

"He can come back to work for us anytime," House said.

---

**Chicago Tribune**

**Cubs' Shane Victorino makes a healthy, happy switch**

By Mark Gonzales

Now that Shane Victorino's back is healthy enough for him to return to switch hitting, he shared some advice for batters who are more productive from one side.

Don't quit switch hitting.

"To see these players talk about getting rid of it and stop being a switch hitter, with every single one I've talked to, if it wasn't for physical reasons, there's no other reason why I'd give it up," said Victorino, who gave up hitting from the left side for two seasons because of bulging disks in his lower back that led to surgery in August of 2014.

"In today's game, the numbers game that everyone plays and the matchups, it's not a benefit to get rid of switch-hitting."

Victorino, 35, started hitting from the right side against right-handers with the Red Sox in 2013 and batted .300. But he said opposing right-handers started to find ways to solve him and he batted .241 from the right side against right-handers in 2014 and .211 last year.

"If you're a switch hitter, I don't care if you hit .150 on one side and .400 on the other, do not give it up."

Fun fundamentals: The Cubs' T-shirts-and-shorts workout Sunday was highlighted by spirited competition during a relay drill in which teams of four players threw about 90 feet apart, with the winning team of catcher David Ross, second baseman Ben Zobrist, shortstop Addison Russell and outfielder Jorge Soler splitting a $500 prize.

Maddon was impressed with the footwork of Zobrist and the ability of Russell to get rid of the ball quickly.

"The slightest bobble, and you get so far behind," manager Joe Maddon said. "And that's with the baserunner running."

Reliever Justin Grimm also displayed his dancing talents while circled by teammates.

"It was a cool day," Maddon said.

Extra innings: Third baseman Christian Villanueva is expected to sidelined for a few months after breaking his right fibula while leaping for a grounder. Villanueva, who is out of minor-league options, is expected to undergo surgery, Maddon said. ... The Cubs are expected to reach terms with all of their remaining unsigned players by Tuesday. ... Several of the Cubs' projected starters took infield and batting practice at Sloan Park to get acclimated to the park before their first home exhibition game Friday.
Chicago Tribune
Cubs third baseman Christian Villanueva breaks ankle
By Mark Gonzales

Chicago Cubs third baseman Christian Villanueva is expected to be sidelined for a few months after breaking his right fibula Sunday.

Villanueva, 24, suffered the injury while leaping for a grounder during a workout, manager Joe Maddon said.

Villanueva is out of minor league options and faced the prospect of being squeezed with Kris Bryant entrenched on the major league roster and Jeimer Candelario expected to start the 2015 season as the starting third baseman at Triple-A Iowa.

Villanueva batted .259 with 18 home runs and 88 RBIs at Iowa last season.

Villanueva is expected to undergo surgery, Maddon said.

"Our guys spoke highly of him," Maddon said. "People were talking more glowingly of the advances he made."

--

Chicago Tribune
Cubs' Ben Zobrist: 'Sky is the limit' for Addison Russell
By Mark Gonzales

Shortstop Addison Russell has made a favorable impression on veteran second baseman Ben Zobrist in a short time in the Chicago Cubs' spring training camp.

"He's got very, very extremely good quick hands and quick feet," said Zobrist, who has worked with Russell on double play work. "His transitions (from taking the ball out of his glove and throwing) are as quick as I've seen. His athleticism is out of this world.

"The sky is the limit for him."

The two players have connected immediately since the start of workouts. Zobrist, 34, signed a four-year, $56 million free agent contract with the Cubs, while Russell, 22, reached the majors last April but didn't become a full-time shortstop until Aug. 7 after playing second base.

Zobrist said Russell has the ability to extend plays because of his exceptional range.

"He's still very young and has a lot of work to do to perfect it, but he's got all the tools necessary to become a Gold Glove-caliber shortstop."

--

Chicago Tribune
Lingering shoulder injury sidelines Cubs' Zac Rosscup
By Mark Gonzales

Dexter Fowler's return to the Chicago Cubs overshadowed the fact that the competition for the final spot in the bullpen shrunk.

That's because left-hander Zac Rosscup was placed on the 60-day disabled list because of left shoulder inflammation, effective April 3.
Rosscup, who had a 4.39 ERA in 33 appearances with the Cubs in 2015, was placed on the 15-day disabled list on June 17 with the same ailment and didn’t rejoin the Cubs until September.

"It's been around a while," Rosscup said. "I dealt with it since last year. It was lingering. They want to make sure I have enough time to get rid of it so I’m 100 percent."

---

**Chicago Tribune**

Joe Maddon’s ‘Embrace the Target’ theme hits bull’s-eye in opening speech

By Mark Gonzales

When the 2008 Cubs first gathered at Fitch Park, manager Lou Piniella mentioned their role as favorites during his opening remarks of the spring.

"We won more games than anybody in the National League last year and we're going to have a target on our back," Piniella said. "So we have to be ready."

Manager Joe Maddon had the same basic message Wednesday when he addressed the Cubs at Sloan Park, unveiling his new slogan, "Embrace the Target."

But Maddon was using a tablet while delivering his speech and said a technological glitch temporarily disrupted his rhythm.

"My pencil wasn't working for my iPad Pro," he said. "I was in a state of technological panic and I couldn't get that done. I had to work off my main sheet, and eventually when I got into the 'Embrace the Target' area I felt more in the rhythm of what I wanted to say."

Managers have been giving opening remarks to their teams every spring for more than a century. Players tend to nod their heads in agreement, but who knows how many are really listening?

But Maddon's Cubs insist his speeches reverberate because they're not the run-of-the-mill stuff.

"They are monumentally different from other managers," starter Jake Arrieta said. "Not because other managers aren't great managers. It's just that Joe communicates to the players in a significantly different manner, and it really resonates throughout the entire team.

"He (expresses) his desires to be great as a team, and how he really regards relationships. It's really special to see how everybody gets on board so quickly with messages that he provides."

Anthony Rizzo, who already has played for four managers in his career, said Maddon's opening speeches make him think about common goals.

"They sink in because Joe is so personable, especially (after) having a year of a relationship with him now," he said. "Everything he says now most of us know has already been said. But everyone is excited."

Has Rizzo had any managers who had him drifting off during their opening remarks?

"No, they always fire you up," he said. "Dale (Sveum) was really good. I remember the things Dale and Rick (Renteria) both said and they both were really good. Same as Joe's remarks last year.

"But this is the time of the year you can say anything and everyone gets fired up. Every team has the same goal. We look forward to that challenge."

"Embrace the Target" is the latest slogan from Maddon, who likes to have a theme going into the season. In 2008 with the Rays, Maddon introduced his most famous slogan, "9=8," a cryptic message that meant nine players...
playing nine innings together would lead to the Rays being one of eight playoff teams in October. The '08 Rays made the postseason for the first time in franchise history before losing to the Phillies in the World Series.

"He does it every year," said new second baseman Ben Zobrist, who played for Maddon's Rays. "It's interesting. You usually go through these meetings and you're kind of like 'All right, ho-hum, we have to do the same things we've always done,' and we hear the same things.

"With him you know it's always going to be something original and different. And he kind of keeps it light and fun. You know it's going to be a new season, with a different group. He always wants to find a way to make it better than last year."

The Rays' "9=8" slogan was followed by "9>8" in 2009. Then came "What's Important Now" (WIN) in 2010 and "There is Another" in 2011. Their slogan in 2014, Maddon's final year with the Rays, was "Eat Last," taken from a book called "Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't."

In Maddon's first year with the Cubs, it was "Respect 90," referring to the need to go all-out on the basepaths.

Maddon said he can tell whether the players are paying close attention during his opening speech. This bunch, he said, was very attentive Wednesday.

"It's an unusual group where it's kind of an altruistic thread among them," Maddon said. "They really get it. They know it's about us. It's not about them. It's different, in all the best ways."

---

**Chicago Tribune**

Joe Maddon has work cut out keeping whole roster fresh and in best spots
By Mark Gonzales

There's one chore Kris Bryant is glad he doesn't have to face for the Cubs.

"I'm glad I'm not the manager," he said, smiling.

That's because the National League Rookie of the Year, a third baseman by trade who played center field in his sixth major-league game, is curious to see how manager Joe Maddon juggles his sudden glut of outfielders to compile the best lineup daily while keeping players sharp.

Maddon's task was complicated late last week when the Cubs signed free-agent outfielders Dexter Fowler and Shane Victorino.

The Cubs' versatility will encourage Maddon, who used 119 lineups last season, to come closer to the 140 he averaged in his final four seasons with the Rays.

Maddon likes mix of left- and right-handed hitters and is blessed that Fowler and second baseman Ben Zobrist are switch-hitters.

But Fowler, who led off 149 games last season, will be hard-pressed to match that total after batting .228 against left-handers in 2015 — especially because Victorino is a career .299 hitter against left-handers with a .369 on-base percentage and has extensive experience batting in the first two spots.

Fowler says he knows everyone will get a chance to play.

"The most important thing is winning," he said. "Whatever matchup Joe puts in there, I think everybody is ready. ... Nobody is here for themselves. When you win games, everyone is happy."
Victorino hasn’t been a regular the last two seasons and could fulfill a bench role because Maddon values his experience for pinch running, pinch hitting and defense.

In a perfect setting, the infield of first baseman Anthony Rizzo, Zobrist, shortstop Addison Russell and Bryant stays relatively stable.

Zobrist, 34, played only 126 games last season because of left knee surgery and said recently the chance to play second primarily was a factor in his decision to sign with the Cubs.

The Cubs tried to acquire Zobrist last season because of his contact skills and .355 lifetime on-base percentage. But when he needs a rest, free-swinging Javier Baez — arguably the team’s best defensive infielder — is available.

In that case, Maddon could use Jason Heyward, Kyle Schwarber, Bryant or even Rizzo in the second spot if Fowler or Victorino bats leadoff.

With Chris Coghlan traded to the A's just before Fowler was signed, Baez moves up as the primary backup to Rizzo even though he has only one inning of experience at first and doesn’t own a first baseman’s mitt yet.

"I’m ready for it," said Baez, who will continue to audition in center field behind Fowler and Victorino.

The Cubs still believe Schwarber can develop into a dependable catcher, and there's talk of him handling Kyle Hendricks this season. That would pave the way for Jorge Soler, who never has played left field, to receive starts there.

Schwarber’s development creates a challenge behind the plate if the Cubs are facing a tough left-hander because he batted only .143 against lefties last season.

David Ross already is locked in as Jon Lester’s personal catcher, and Maddon hasn’t committed to having Schwarber catch Hendricks exclusively because he wants to keep left-handed hitting Miguel Montero sharp.

Maddon has plenty of options for his lineup across the board. For instance, Heyward is 2-for-11 with four strikeouts lifetime against Zack Greinke, whom the Cubs may face on April 9 or 10 in Arizona.

If he sits, Maddon could tinker with using Zobrist and Rizzo batting 1-2.

"The getting-hot theory doesn't apply to everybody all the time, especially now with the depth at our disposal," Maddon said, referring to the possibility of sitting someone after a good game.

The exhibition season will allow Maddon to fiddle with various lineups to see what combinations work best, and he emphasizes every player will be kept in the loop as to what his plans are.

"Any time you tell a major-league player in advance what the status may be. even though they don't agree with you, they can deal with it," Maddon said.

"But if you hide that information or are disingenuous, that's when you get in trouble."
Specifically, they wondered what happens when a baserunner sliding into second base changes direction depending on the speed of the hit ball or if a throw to second causes a middle infielder to move suddenly to make the catch.

"Some guys will have to change a lot about the way they slide," Zobrist said Saturday, a few hours after MLB officials Joe Garagiola Jr. and Steve Palermo explained the rules to Maddon and his staff. "It has to be a real slide, but the tricky part is the change of direction.

The new rules stipulate "potential double plays will require runners to make a bona fide attempt to reach and remain on the base."

That means runners must slide directly into the bag and not on top of it. Moreover, if they attempt a rolling block they will be called out for obstruction.

"I hope they don't take away the ability of a runner to make an adjustment to take out a middle infielder based on where he's going to be at the end of the play, based on how hard the ball was hit to the left side of the infield," Maddon said.

Maddon and Zobrist have no issue with MLB enforcing the rule that all middle infielders must tag the base, thus eliminating the "neighborhood" play in which middle fielders have a foot in the vicinity but never touch second base before throwing to first in an attempt to complete a double play.

Cubs second baseman Ben Zobrist gives his thoughts on the league's slide rules on double plays.

"I feel like I clearly stay on the base 99.9 percent," Zobrist said.

Potential roll block and neighborhood plays now are subject to instant replay.

"The 'hood is gone," Maddon said.

Extra innings: Maddon admits he's trying to adjust his message and methods to contour the makeup of his roster.

"I haven't had this many veteran players this accomplished at one time," Maddon said. "I'm trying to understand what I need to do to benefit these guys the most." ... Travis Wood and Kyle Hendricks will pitch in the Cubs' exhibition opener Thursday against the Brewers in Phoenix. ... The Cubs haven't announced their starting pitcher for the April 4 season opener against the Angels, but it is expected to be Jake Arrieta. ... Maddon was thrilled to be in a dinner group Friday that included Hall of Fame pitcher Sandy Koufax.

--

**Chicago Tribune**

All in the Twitter family with Cubs', Bulls' Aaron Brooks

By Mark Gonzales

If pitcher Aaron Brooks joins the Chicago Cubs at some point in the 2016 season, he's aware of whatever confusion awaits him.

But Brooks, who was acquired Thursday from the Oakland Athletics for outfielder Chris Coghlan, already has communicated with the Bulls' Aaron Brooks.

"I've (written to) him on Twitter before," said the Cubs' Brooks, who stands 6-foot-4 and grew up in Southern California. "Just because everyone thinks I'm him. They keep tagging me."

The Bulls' Brooks, 31, is a six-foot guard grew up in Seattle and starred at the University of Oregon.

The Cubs' Brooks added that people also confuse him with retired NFL quarterback Aaron Brooks, 39, who grew up in Virginia.
"I get a bunch of tags on Twitter from people," Brooks said. "All they have to do is look at the profile picture. It's not me."

When asked if he could shoot a basketball as well as the Bulls' guard, the Cubs' pitcher replied, "I highly doubt it."

--

Chicago Tribune
Cubs susceptible, if not doomed, to Curse of Expectation
By Bernie Lincicome

Wonder where the Cubs should wear the target. Under the logo on their chest? On a sleeve? On their back? Maybe on the seat of the pants where they are used to being kicked.

It is a different world now for baseball's favorite house pets, those harmless and inevitably accommodating darlings. Purr, purr, nice cubby.

Oddly, the earliest and loudest shot comes from a cartoon candidate for president, not that Donald Trump's pouty little caution to the Ricketts family had anything to do with baseball, but then so often the Cubs have little to do with baseball.

No longer. Not now. By every account that matters, this is the Year of the Cub, and the designation is spoken or written without irony or lament. So fixed is the notion that the Cubs are the best team in baseball that the only calculation left is to figure out why they are not.

So, consider this Trump business just a foul ball to left field, down there where ... well, no need to bring up old curses. Except it is impossible to consider the Cubs without curses, like witches without warts or thumbs without nails.

This one is the Curse of Expectation, a whole new kettle of fret. Where in other places conviction comes with flags and crowns, pennants and proof, the Cubs have wandered onto unfamiliar ground.

Not to diss The Plan. This is how it was supposed to go, after all, and faster than expected. A four-game fold to better Mets pitching just might have been a stunned collision with the unfamiliar — one century at a time, after all — but there is no turning back now.

Out where money speaks louder than words, at sports books and betting parlors, the Cubs are the favorites, not playoff favorites, not pennant favorites, World Series favorites. This is the team that finished third in its division. This is like finding a dinner jacket in the underwear drawer, a Rolls in the woodshed, a tiara in the toy box, and on and on like that. You get the idea. This is not the way we know it to be.

The Cubs got to 97 victories not by luck nor by disguising themselves as burglars sneaking in through the servants' door. They earned their success and the applause that came eagerly and widely.

Still, there was a sense of astonishment, a bit of waiting for Cub history to do its usual mischief. There was no great gratification in beating the Cubs, no need to bother about flukes.

Now to come into a season amid the racket of presumption, with strangers shouting encouragement, opponents primed to undo the promise and followers with fingers finally uncrossed, this may take some getting used to.

Pitching? The Cubs had it and now it is better. Two top starters are now three. Second base is by choice rather by trial. The outfield is better anchored, the manager is still a mixture of charm and wisdom and the team is a combination of the young and the willing, free of any lasting stain of failure.

I will not be the one who holds the giant watering can over the approaching parade. Let someone else be nagged by what we know, that competence is a fickle companion, that to say something is so is not the same as it being so.
Of the six playoff Cubs teams (excluding last year’s) since the last Cub pennant, only one repeated, that ill-fated ’08 bunch. The ’84, ’89 and ’98 teams followed with losing seasons.

Though the teams of ’07 and ’08 were patched together for short success and not built for the long game like this one, the last time the Cubs won 97 games they fell off to 83 the next season and followed that with five straight losing seasons.

The shelf life of glory is longer for those to whom it comes so seldom. The Cubs are not the Yankees or the Red Sox, teams on whom demands weigh perpetually. They are not the Cardinals, or the rejuvenated Royals, not a team of long tradition or ordinary expectation. They are still the Cubs and any loud heartbeat always will be taken for thunder.

---

**Chicago Tribune**

Cubs hoping Jorge Soler’s complete game comes into focus this season

By Mark Gonzales

After waiting patiently for his development as a right fielder, the Cubs are moving Jorge Soler primarily to left field as their championship expectations accelerate.

"This is the first time ever for me to play left field, and I'm working hard to get better every day," Soler said Friday before performing drills there Friday in the wake of Dexter Fowler’s return.

Adjusting is becoming a way of life this spring for the Cubs and Soler, 24, whose injuries and defensive flaws often have overshadowed his tremendous power and strong throwing arm.

If he concentrates as well as he did in the 2015 postseason, Soler could provide the Cubs with more consistency — and comfort.

"I had a lot of focus during the playoffs," said Soler, who batted .474 (9-for-19) with three home runs, five RBIs and a .600 on-base percentage. "During the season I got out of my mind when I failed (at the plate). I got lazy defensively. But during the playoffs I was focused on my at-bats and defense."

Manager Joe Maddon likes the way Soler committed himself in the offseason. He thinks better preparation, as demonstrated in the 6-foot-4 losing 10 pounds over the winter, could signal a turning point.

"I'm not looking for great plays," Maddon said. "I'm not looking for 30 homers. I'm not looking for .310. It's just a matter of getting a young player to understand the major leagues on a daily basis, that his prep work is good, that he's ready to play when asked to play. Those are the biggest things about Jorge moving forward. I want to take care of those ancillary things.

"You saw what he did in the playoffs. He was very motivated. We need to get that playoff performance out of him on a more consistent basis."

Soler isn’t worried about playing left field for the first time, as he practiced there Friday with newcomer Shane Victorino.

"The opportunities are going to be out there," Soler said.

But the number of at-bats could depend on his health and consistency. Soler missed five weeks because of an ankle sprain and nearly another month with a left oblique strain.

Soler struck out 121 times in 366 at-bats and went 23 consecutive games without a home run until he ripped a solo shot off the White Sox’s David Robertson on Aug. 16.
"There's a lot in there," Maddon said. "He's a young guy with high expectations who didn't get off to the good start we were looking for. I don't think he processed the moment as well as he possibly could.

"I'm not blaming him. He's just a young guy getting caught up in the moment. It's our responsibility to give him more tools to work with, whether it's mental or physical.

"I'm really anticipating him more (like the postseason), as opposed to (his) chasing pitches in (midseason) when his game wasn't as crispy (before he) got back to it."

--

Chicago Tribune
New Cub Shane Victorino will return to the scene of the crime
By Mark Gonzales

The Cubs' signing of Shane Victorino on Friday brings back memories of the crazy search for a fan who poured a beer on Victorino at Wrigley Field.

It happened on Aug. 12, 2009, during Jeff Samardzija’s first major league start. In the fifth inning of the Phillies 12-5 win, a fan in the left-center bleachers tossed a cup of beer on Victorino’s head as the outfielder went to the wall to catch a fly ball.

When Cubs’ security was questioning a fan who was taunting Victorino, the actual culprit, who was sitting three seats away, escaped. The Cubs brought the wrong man down to the interrogation room and grilled him, and eventually figured out he didn’t throw the beer.

That began an all-out search in Chicago for the beer-tosser, whose face was everywhere. The Cubs released a photograph of a WGN-TV video of the culprit in hopes that someone would identify him. The Tribune posted a graphic of the fans in the seats during the incident.

It was such a big deal that even Mayor Richard M. Daley chastised the unknown fan, saying: “Everybody enjoys sports, but you have to be very careful about how you interact with professional ballplayers. That ballplayer could’ve gotten seriously hurt.”

With the search continuing, Cubs president Crane Kenney went to the Phillies clubhouse the next day to apologize to Victorino on behalf of the organization.

“You have to be held accountable for stuff like that,” Victorino said after talking to Kenney. “You know what? The guy just might have thought it was fun. It is what it is. He didn’t accost me in any way. He didn't hurt me in any way. It was part of the ballgame.”

Around 5 p.m. that day, a 21-year-old Bartlett man named Johnny Macchione turned himself in to police and was charged with two misdemeanors, for battery and illegal conduct within a sports facility.

“Chicago Cubs, I'm sorry I disgraced you,” Macchione said as he left Belmont Area police headquarters. He later told the Tribune it was “an impulsive move” that was stupid on his part.

“There’s no excuse for it,” he said.

Victorino told us that day he didn’t hold any grudge against Cubs fans.

“No, I love playing here,” he said. “I love the atmosphere. I love the way they go about the game.”

Seven years later, Victorino is finally a Cub.
Manager Joe Maddon doesn’t care how young a player might be or how many days off the Chicago Cubs will have early in the season.

Maddon emphasizes rest and canceling batting practice often during the latter stages of the regular season to preserve rest for his players. This policy could come in handy as the Cubs try to distribute ample playing time for their outfielders.

Maddon said he learned a valuable lesson as a coach with the Angels in the 1990s.

"It always seemed as though that we ran out of gas, even before I got there," Maddon said. "I always heard if you look at the Angels teams, every time they got to September, they’d run out of gas.

"And so then I get there. One of the things we did was hit a lot, and we’d hit on Sunday mornings for an hour, with four groups of 15 minutes.

"In retrospect, I’d see guys fade by the end of the season. I was the hitting coach, and I was in the middle of all that. I thought that was the right way to do things, too."

Maddon believes that players don’t necessarily need to hit in the middle months if they’ve taken thousands of swings with their muscle memory settled in.

"I believe in keeping the mind sharp," Maddon said. "When the mind is sharp, the body is going to follow. And thus, I like less actual physical work."

Maddon believes a 162-game season is long enough, coupled with plane rides, different game times, day games after night games and unpredictable nutritional habits.

"There's only one way to do it," Maddon said of the need for rest. "I don't care what birth certificates say."

Dexter Fowler found himself Friday at a new locker location and almost without his jersey number 24.

"I just walked in and Otis (home clubhouse manager Tom Hellmann) put me over here," Fowler said Friday morning, one day after stunning many observers by re-signing with the Chicago Cubs. "He said he was about to give away my number. I said you better not have done that."

Fowler compared the tedious free agent process to being in "corporate America" with numerous meetings with prospective teams, owners and agent Casey Close.

But Fowler stressed he did not tell the Baltimore Orioles or All-Star center fielder that he was signing with them.

“'I didn’t tell (Jones) anything,' Fowler said. 'He texted me yesterday and said, 'my bad. I jumped the gun.'
"We did hang out this off-season. I said it would be awesome to play with him. He came to my wedding."

Fowler returned to the Cubs without any guarantees that he would receive the same playing time as 2015, when he played in 156 games.

"We knew there were four everyday outfielders, and we’ll get a chance to play," Fowler said. "The most important thing is winning with whatever matchup Joe (Maddon) puts in there, I think everybody is ready.

"We understand. We’re here for each other. Nobody is here for themselves. When you win games, everyone is happy."

Fowler wanted to return to the Cubs, especially after getting a taste of success with advancing to the National League Championship Series.

He'll also return to Wrigley Field with a new spacious clubhouse.

"I like to be surprised," Fowler smiled. "Obviously, I like to surprise."

--

**Chicago Tribune**
Jake Arrieta gets revved up at drag racing track
By Mark Gonzales

Chicago Cubs ace Jake Arrieta is known for his 96 mph fastball that helped him win the 2015 National League Cy Young Award.

But after throwing batting practice Friday, Arrieta got an up-close experience at what car racing speed feels like.

Arrieta watched Top Fuel drag racing at Wild Horse Pass Motorsports Park in Chandler.

It turns out that Arrieta is a neighbor of Top Fuel drag racer Tony Schumacher, and the drivers made a convincing impression on Arrieta as he stood on the starting line as the dragsters took off.

"It's like getting hit in the chest by a gorilla," Arrieta said during an NHRA interview.

--

**Chicago Tribune**
Shane Victorino can wear many hats for Cubs
By Mark Gonzales

Shane Victorino was happy Friday to join a crowded Cubs outfield.

"You can't put a value on being a winner and winning a championship," said Victorino, who agreed to a minor-league contract.

Victorino won World Series titles with the Phillies in 2008 and the Red Sox in 2013 and knows the Cubs haven't won a Series since 1908.

"To win it as a Cubbie, obviously the smile on my face says it all," Victorino said.

Victorino, 35, is a lifetime .275 hitter who batted .230 in 71 games in 2015 with the Red Sox and Angels. Manager Joe Maddon likes that Victorino can contribute off the bench as a pinch hitter, pinch runner and as a defensive replacement.
"He also has won a championship," Maddon said. "That matters."

Victorino worked out this winter in Las Vegas with Dexter Fowler at Kris Bryant's batting cage.

False start: Fowler stressed that he never told friend and outfielder Adam Jones that he was joining the Orioles.

"He texted me (Thursday) and said, 'My bad. I jumped the gun,'" Fowler said. "We did hang out this offseason. I said it would be awesome to play with him. He came to my wedding."

Jones told the Baltimore Sun that he was "very surprised" to walk into the clubhouse Thursday and find out that Fowler had re-signed with the Cubs, especially because a conversation Jones had had with Fowler earlier in the week gave him every impression he was joining the Orioles.

"We've moved on, he has moved on," Jones told the Sun before Friday's workout in Sarasota, Fla.

It was widely reported Tuesday evening — and confirmed to the Sun by a high-level team source — that Fowler had agreed to a three-year, $33 million deal with the Orioles pending a physical.

Instead, Fowler made a surprise appearance at Cubs camp Thursday morning to announce he had signed a one-year, $8 million deal to return to the Cubs. The deal, which includes a $9 million second-year mutual option and a $5 million buyout, will guarantee him $13 million.

"I could cry about it but it's not going to do anything for us," Jones said. "He's happy where he's at. His family is happy in Chicago, so good for him."

Safe at second: Joe Torre, chief baseball officer for Major League Baseball, is scheduled to meet Saturday with Maddon and his staff to discuss rules changes that a new interpretation for baserunners getting called out for obstruction.

"I normally get out of the way anyway," said shortstop Addison Russell, who was eager to hear the interpretation. "With me now being on the shortstop side, I can see that guy from halfway to second. So depending on how fast the guy is or who he is, if he comes in, I base it off that and the speed of the guy who hit the ball. I'm pretty interested to see how that rule works."

Extra innings: Jake Arrieta looked impressive while throwing live batting practice. "It was alive," Maddon said. ...

Reliever Justin Grimm said his right calf felt fine after getting struck by a batted ball during BP.

--

Chicago Sun-Times
Is CF Albert Almora poised to become the Cubs' next breakthrough prospect?
By Gordon Wittenmyer

MESA, Ariz. – Albert Almora doesn’t have to tell anyone how big a spring this is for him, or how big a season it could be for earning a place in the middle the Cubs’ impressive young core of hitters.

He said it all one night after last season when he was lying in bed, checking emails, exchanging texts, reading and sending tweets, looking at Instagram posts and suddenly realizing how late it was getting.

“What am I doing?” he said to himself. “I’ve got to wake up at 5 to work out. This is my career.

“I’ve got to put my priorities in check.”

He deleted all the social media apps off his phone. “Everything,” he said.
Another reason he doesn’t have to tell anyone how different this year looks to him is because everyone else saw it as soon as he arrived in Mesa. He came to camp looking stronger and flashing more confidence — the first thing anyone in camp says they noticed when his name comes up.

“He’s just really been getting after it,” farm director Jaron Madison said. “He’s in a really good place mentally, feels really good. I think it’s going to be a big spring training for him this year.”

The season could be even bigger.

Almora already is one of the top two defensive outfielders in the Cubs’ organization (some would debate whether three-time Gold Glove winner Jason Heyward is better).

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” said first base prospect Dan Vogelbach, Almora’s teammate much of the past three seasons. “When the ball’s hit you know it’s going to be caught.”

Nobody’s blocking Almora’s potential ascent to center field for the Cubs — with Dexter Fowler on a one-year deal and neither Jorge Soler nor Kyle Schwarber close to being a threat to handle center.

If Almora were to put himself in position to win the big-league center field job next season, it would be especially huge for a playoff-caliber team in need of another big glove in its outfield and in need of its next wave of young, impact guys to arrive from the system before last year’s rookies start hitting big arbitration paydays.

“I’m just going out there and just trying to be me,” Almora said, “and whatever happens, happens.”

It’s clearly a different Almora that will be going out there this time around, more mature entering his fourth full professional season at least, maybe more focused.

That 5 a.m. wakeup call he talked about was a daily ritual this winter, kicking off mornings spent working out at the University of Miami with a trainer and big-leaguers Yonder Alonso and Manny Machado — Machado a childhood friend from their old neighborhood in the area.

“They really pushed me,” Almora said.

But the refocus for Almora actually began last year at Class AA Tennessee. After a second slow start in as many seasons, Almora credits his manager Buddy Bailey and a brief visit by Cubs catcher Miguel Montero on a rehab assignment for helping him regroup for one of the strongest finishes in the Cubs’ system last year.

“Pretty much what I told him was just, ‘Take your head out of your ass and go play,’ ” said Montero, who also told Almora that regardless of his talent, better players than him have failed because of attitude. “ ‘You either play hard and come ready to play every day or you’re going to be stuck here for a long time.’

“That was pretty much it.”

Almora started hitting almost as soon as Montero headed back to Chicago — including a .352 August that earned him Cubs’ Minor League Player of the Month.

“I just decided, ‘Hey, listen, it’s time to go. I’ve got to prove that I’m a good baseball player,’ ” Almora said. “And I really don’t have to prove it. You think [to yourself], ‘I’ve always been that guy; just do it.’

“I took that emotion on the field and tried to take it out on the pitcher every time.”

If it sometimes seems (to him or anyone else) like it’s taking him a long time to get here — no thanks to the perception-warping sprints to the majors for Kris Bryant and Kyle Schwarber — consider that this would be Almora’s first full year in pro ball if he’d taken the college paths of those 2013 and 2014 first-rounders.
“We have to remember he’s still 21 years old. He’s still understanding what it takes to be successful at the higher levels,” Madison said. “I think he started to buy into it towards the end of last year.

“He really took control of his career this year.

If that continues into AAA this year, the timing could fit well for both the Cubs and the first player drafted by the Cubs under Theo Epstein’s regime – No. 6 overall in 2012.

“This is awesome, seeing a bunch of buddies up here,” Almora said, looking around the clubhouse. “It’s something to work for. This is awesome to be a part of this.

“I was fortunate to be here from the beginning, when Theo got here in the beginning of 2012. And just to see how everything is unveiling right now it’s unbelievable.

“So I’m really excited.”

--

Chicago Sun-Times
Cubs OF Shane Victorino 'dynamic' again after return to switch-hitting
By Gordon Wittenmyer

MESA, Ariz. – The Shane Victorino in Cubs camp on a minor-league deal may not be as high a Flyin’ Hawaiian as he was in his 20’s and early ‘30s.

But the Cubs may yet benefit from at least one major element of the more “dynamic” former Victorino that the outfielder says he has recaptured in recent months.

After he was forced to stop switch-hitting during the 2013 season when back pain made left-handed hitting ineffective, Victorino’s surgically repaired back is healthy again, and he’s switch-hitting again this year.

“I’m very excited to go back to something that I wish I never got rid of,” said Victorino, 35, who started the process by quietly stealing time in the batting cages toward the end of last season with the Angels, then taking the process into the winter.

“The thing that I found out going back to it is my body’s back to being dynamic from both sides,” said Victorino, a four-time Gold Glove winner whose bench role could grow significantly with production from both sides of the plate.

“That’s good for him and for us,” said Maddon, who stretches more versatility out of more players than almost any other manager in the game.

Victorino is a career .268 hitter (.329 on-base percentage) hitting from his off side against right-handers. But even some with initial success in 2013 hitting right-handed against surprised right-handers, his right-on-right split since abandoning the left side was just .242 (.309 OBP) in 376 plate appearances.

Victorino, who didn’t start hitting from the left side until his early 20s, emphasizes it’s something he never would have stopped if not for injury. And he shakes his head at those who quit switch-hitting for any other reason.

“In today’s game and the numbers game that everybody plays, and the matchups, it’s not a benefit to get rid of switch-hitting,” he said. “If you’re a switch-hitter, I don’t care if you hit a buck-50 on one side and you hit .400 on the other, do not give it up, because of the way today’s game is. It’s about matchups. It’s about numbers.”

--
Cubs’ Christian Villanueva breaks leg in practice
By Gordon Wittenmyer

MESA, Ariz. – Christian Villanueva, an important part of the Cubs’ third base depth, broke his right fibula during infield practice Sunday, and the expectation is he’ll need surgery.

Villanueva, one of the better defensive third basemen in the system, was hurt when he landed wrong after leaping for a high chopper.

“It’s just crazy,” manager Joe Maddon said. “He’s going to be out for an extended period of time. It’s just really unfortunate. This kid came in ready to go. He made a great impression on us at the end of last season – a very good infielder and he was starting to hit.”

Villanueva, 24, who opened the season at AA Tennessee because Kris Bryant opened in Iowa, moved up when Bryant was promoted. He hit .257 with 20 home runs combined.

“Our guys spoke really highly of him last year, but they were talking even more glowingly this year about the advances he had made,” Maddon said. “It’s just unfortunate.”

Villanueva was acquired with pitcher Kyle Hendricks at the 2012 trade deadline from the Texas Rangers for Ryan Dempster.

--

Cubs adjust to MLB rule changes to protect middle infielders
By Gordon Wittenmyer

MESA, Ariz. – Add an emphasis on footwork around second base to this year’s spring training infield fundamentals.

Major league officials stopped in Mesa on Saturday to talk to the Cubs field staff as part of tour of camps to explain the tweak to rules regarding takeout slides on the bases and the elimination of the “neighborhood” play by fielders turning double plays.

The changes are the result of Chase Utley hard, late slide that broke Mets shortstop Ruben Tejada’s leg in last year’s playoffs.

Utley was ruled safe after preventing the throw to first, and the Dodgers scored a run on the play. That “roll block” slide is now illegal, and Utley would have been out under the new rules.

Runners are now in violation if they alter their paths to try to take out infielders, kick an infielder above the knee or slide on top of the bag or without intent to reach the bag and stay there.

Cubs manager Joe Maddon said that shouldn’t be a big deal to his team. “I don’t want our guys doing that anyhow,” he said.

For example, Chris Coghlan’s slide in Pittsburgh that injured Pirates shortstop Jung Ho Kang in September is considered legal under the new rules, underscoring what MLB executive Joe Torre said in October when he called it a clean play. In that case, Kang put himself in harm’s way on the play.

Infielders figure to have the bigger adjustment because the “neighborhood play” – when the relay man on a double play doesn’t actually touch the base on a routine turn – no longer is an out.
And it’s subject to review. Even with replay challenges in effect the last two seasons, neighborhood plays were allowed to stand as outs unless the throw was determined to be the factor keeping the infielder from touching the base.

Maddon’s message to his fielders: “Do everything you’ve done to this point, but be aware that if the throw’s off line at all to make sure you get the out at second base and not just try to complete the double play where we get nobody out.”

One complaint that has arisen over the emphasis on touching second is the potential added injury danger that could create for an infielder. Mets manager Terry Collins, naturally, is among those concerned about that.

“So is [the change] counter-intuitive?” Maddon said. “I don’t think it is the way it was explained.

“I think common sense shall prevail.”

--

Chicago Sun-Times

No more 'lazy' plays: Cubs' Jorge Soler plans to bring playoff focus to season
By Gordon Wittenmyer

MESA, Ariz. – Jorge Soler didn’t exactly say he coasted during his up-and-down regular season as a rookie last year.

But unless something was lost in the English part of the translation from coach Franklin Font, the Cubs’ outfielder admitted a missing level to his game – a level he decided to eventually bring to the playoffs.

“There was a lot of focus in the games in the playoffs,” Soler said through Font. “During the season I got out of my mind when I failed [at the plate], and I got a little lazy defensively. During the playoffs I had more focus on my at-bats, more focus on my defense.”

A slow start in the cold of April and two stretches on the disabled list (ankle, oblique) contributed to a .262, strikeout-loaded regular season with relatively little power.

But against the Cardinals in the National League Division Series, he reached base in nine consecutive plate appearances (including five walks and two homers), and then went 5-for-12 (.417) with a homer and two doubles against the Mets in the NLCS.

“We need to get that playoff performance out of him on a more consistent basis,” said manager Joe Maddon, who blamed Soler’s focus lapses during the season on his youth, inexperience and a frustration over his slow start.

“I don’t think he processed the moment as well as he possibly could,” Maddon said. “I think he saw [the playoffs] as a fresh beginning, and with that we saw what he’s capable of doing.”

If Soler, the incumbent right fielder, thought he had a lot to process before the last few days, the challenge just got bigger with the return of center fielder Dexter Fowler to the Cubs and the shift back to right field for most games for Gold Glove newcomer Jason Heyward.

Maddon said he’s working through playing-time scenarios for an outfield mix that grew again Friday with the signing of Shane Victorino for a potential spot-starting, pinch-hitting, and mostly late-inning defensive role.

For now, the right-handed hitting Soler and lefty hitting Kyle Schwarber look primarily like platoon left fielders.

Maddon also said he expects to determine a lot of the plan as spring training plays out, watching how the young players handle different assignments.

What he needs to see from Soler specifically?
“My biggest thing with him is just that he understands how to get ready to play every day,” Maddon said. “I’m not looking for great plays. I’m not looking for 30 homers. I’m not looking for .310. It’s just a matter of getting the young player to understand the major leagues on a daily basis, that his prep work is good, that he’s ready to play when asked to play.”

“Right now I don’t worry about my playing time. I’ll do what I can to help the team,” said Soler, whose primary focus is, well, focus.

Soler, who turned 24 Thursday, said he lost about 10 pounds through his winter workouts and hopes to lose “a little more.” He’s not very familiar with left field, he said, but plans to “work hard to get better every day.”

And focus.

“I’m really anticipating seeing more of the side that you saw at the end of the year [in the playoffs],” Maddon said, “as opposed to when he was chasing pitches more in the middle part of the year the game wasn’t as crispy.”

Note: Left-hander Travis Wood and right-hander Kyle Hendricks are the first two scheduled pitchers for the Cubs in their spring opener Thursday against the Brewers. The frontline guys in the rotation are scheduled toward the back end of the spring rotation to build their workloads more gradually – with Jake Arrieta in particular monitored closely this spring because a career-high workload last season.

--

Chicago Sun-Times
Kris Bryant ‘on to bigger and better things’ since controversial demotion
By Gordon Wittenmyer

Eleven months ago, Kris Bryant went from the best player in any spring training camp in baseball to the worst emotional place of his spring in the span of one early-morning meeting with Cubs officials.

Teammate Anthony Rizzo quietly consoled him with a simple thought: “Fast-forward a year, and everything you’re going through, which is the biggest thing in your life right now, is not going to mean a thing to you anymore.”

Yeah. Whatever.

But then the fast-forward thing happened. And almost as soon as Rizzo and Bryant got together for the first time in Mesa this spring, Rizzo said to him: “See what I mean?”

Bryant, now the reigning National League Rookie of the Year in the heart of the Cubs’ batting order, is at the other end of the spring training universe this year.

“It’s hard to even put thought into it now, just because it’s so far away, so far in the past,” he said. “I figured this year in spring training I would get asked questions about it, but for me I’ve moved on to bigger and better things.”

Of course, it wasn’t that easy, not for at least for a few days after the morning meeting, when he was cut from big-league camp despite the best offensive spring training in the majors in at least a decade.

Bryant, the No. 1 prospect in baseball entering camp last year, was told he had a chance to win a big-league job if he performed well enough, even though it seemed obvious from the beginning that he would open in the minors to delay the start of his service-time clock, thereby delaying free agency by a year.

For that to happen, he needed to spend 12 days in the minors. He was called up on the 13th day of the season.

It was the top story in baseball for multiple news cycles, especially as Bryant’s agent, Scott Boras, spoke out.
It was such a conspicuous case of the kind of service-time manipulation that's common in the game that the players' union issued a rare statement decrying the move, and then filed a grievance, which remains unresolved as the union and owners head into a collective bargaining season.

Manager Joe Maddon has had more pleasant meetings with players than the one 11 months ago with Bryant.

“He was straight up with me,” Maddon said, “looked me right in the eyeballs, and he was very self-confident.”

And Bryant told the manager the team was wrong. That he deserved the job.

“And I don’t blame him,” Maddon said. “And then when he got up here he showed that that was true.”

Bryant batted cleanup his first day in the majors. The third baseman started a game in center field six days later. He made the All-Star team. He hit home runs off Clayton Kershaw, Jacob deGrom and the left-field video board (on the way to 26 total). And he was the unanimous Rookie of the Year choice in one of the deepest rookie-class years in history.

“I was interested to see [how he would respond to the demotion],” Maddon said. “I was also confident that he would respond well.”

Maybe it was Rizzo’s advice. Or an angry passion that came out of that morning meeting 11 months ago. Or, as Bryant suggested, something he learned over three years at the University of San Diego.

Either way, “I just looked at it like I did everything I could,” he said of regrouping emotionally. “I got over it pretty quick.”

He homered in his first minor-league spring game after getting sent down. He raged through his seven games at AAA – taking a rainout day along the way to shoot a commercial for an energy drink company depicting Chicago's anticipation of his arrival.

“It's about learning to forget the past and live in the present and not really worry about the future,” he said. “I honestly can say that I did that. And I think I'd grade myself an A-plus in that area.”

That perspective, that attitude is something the Cubs say is almost as valuable to the team as his hitting ability.

“All the media attention he got from it and the way he handled it was incredible,” Rizzo said of what Bryant’s spring last year. “He could have easily spoken out on his own behalf, but he let other people do it for him.

“There's still coming back and rebounding, that's not easy. But he does a really good job of controlling himself and his emotions.”

Bryant is “grounded and cocky at the same time,” Rizzo said. “Kris is a superstar. And he has zero ego.”

Bryant downplays how much has changed from one end of the spring training spectrum to the other since last year.

His biggest task of this spring is continuing to work on an adjustment he made with hitting coach John Mallee last year to reduce his uppercut to keep his bat on the zone longer – and to sort through the boxes of gear that keep piling up at his locker now that he’s the All-Star, Rookie of the Year big shot.

“It's just the circumstances are a little different this year,” Bryant said. “But I came in last year with a purpose, and this year I’m coming in with the same purpose.

“You've got to earn everything, especially in this game.”
**Chicago Sun-Times**

Disputes continue between Orioles and Dexter Fowler over who said what and when  
By Gordon Wittenmyer

MESA, Ariz. – The dispute over what really happened between Dexter Fowler and the Baltimore Orioles this week continued into Friday.

Fowler, who re-signed with the Cubs on a one-year deal Thursday despite earlier reports he’d signed with the Orioles, said Baltimore outfielder Adam Jones texted him to resolve one part of this week’s confusion, but Fowler refuted Oriole GM Dan Duquette’s account Thursday of why Fowler rejected the O’s.

“We made a very competitive offer,” Duquette told media in Florida Thursday. “There was not an agreement to terms because they kept insisting on an opt-out [clause].

“The Orioles have made it clear that that type of deal wouldn’t work for us. Based on that it sounds to me like he wanted to return to Chicago.”

Said Fowler on Friday morning: “No, it wasn’t a sticking point. That’s why it’s weird. It’s a little murky. But that wasn’t the sticking point at all.”

Fowler said he chose the Cubs’ $13 million deal over the O’s latest three-year offer because “this is where my heart is” and for the chance to finish some unfinished business with the Cubs.

Part of the confusion was created by Jones, who on Wednesday spoke to reporters about having talked with Fowler, saying Fowler was “excited” to sign and that “he should be on his way here now.”

Fowler said he didn’t tell Jones during their conversations — and certainly didn’t tell the Orioles front office — that he’d accepted any of their offers.

Late Thursday, Baltimore media continued to cite sources — presumably from the team — saying Fowler had agreed to a three-year, $33 million deal and had been expected to take a physical for the team Thursday.

Fowler said Jones texted him after the Cubs deal went down.

“He said, ‘My bad. I jumped the gun,’ “ Fowler said.

The bigger dispute involved the Orioles’ part in the premature reports.

Fowler’s agent, Casey Close, issued a blistering statement Thursday, criticizing the “irresponsible behavior” of the Orioles and “complicit” media.

“Casey’s here for me,” Fowler said when asked about the statement. “And obviously the process didn’t go like it was supposed to. He was pretty irritated about it.”

--

**Chicago Sun-Times**

Cubs sign OF Shane Victorino to a minor-league deal  
By Gordon Wittenmyer

MESA, Ariz. – Another day, another outfielder for the Cubs.

One day after bringing back center fielder Dexter Fowler on a one-year deal, the Cubs on Friday added four-time Gold Glove outfielder Shane Victorino on a minor-league deal.
Victorino, 35, earns $1 million if he makes the big-league club (plus another possible $1 million in bonuses).

The addition further addresses an offseason priority of shoring up a porous outfield alignment, with Victorino likely to get used regularly as a late-inning defensive replacement.

He said he’s healthy again after being limited by injuries in recent seasons after spending last year splitting time between the Red Sox and Angels and batting .230 with a .308 on-base percentage in 71 games.

“I’m just grateful for the opportunity to come in and be a part of something hopefully that’s special,” said Victorino, who might best known at Wrigley for the beer that was thrown on him as he was catching a fly ball during an August game in 2009. “I’ve been blessed in my career to be part of a couple special championships in special cities. I always tell myself, being a fan of the game, when there’s a 100-plus-year drought for a championship, you always want to be the first to be a part of it.

“At the end of the day it’s not about playing time, it’s not about where things are. It’s about winning.”

The “Flyin’ Hawaiian” was the starting center fielder for the Phillies’ 2008 World Series champion. He was the right fielder for the Boston Red Sox’ 2013 champion.

Manager Joe Maddon he’s been working on how all his suddenly increased outfield options will translate into playing patterns for a group expected to consist of a top four of Jason Heyward (mostly right), Fowler (mostly center), Jorge Soler (sharing left) and Kyle Schwarber (sharing left). Victorino and infield-outfield backup Javy Baez are the early favorites to be part of a six-man mix.

“We’ll play spring training out and give guys opportunities in a bunch of different spots and see what we’ve got,” Maddon said. “We kind of worked it on a piece of paper, primarily talking about Soler, Schwarber, Dexter and Jason and the number of at-bats they could possibly generate and number of games played with this crowded outfield.”

Victorino hit during the off-season with new teammates Kris Bryant and Fowler near his home in Las Vegas. Nobody had to teach him about his new home.

“I know what it’s like,” he said. “The memory that sticks out to me is the beer being poured on my head back in the day [in 2009] at Wrigley as a visiting player. I understand the passion of Cubs fans and what it is.”

--

Chicago Sun-Times

With Dexter Fowler’s arrival, one less worry for Theo Epstein -- who’s not done worrying

By Rick Morrissey

Theo Epstein’s title is president of baseball operations for the Cubs, though it might as well be director of fretting or president of what if?

Whether it’s his job or his personality, he worries about anything that moves, which is why his backup plans have backup plans. His occupation is preoccupations.

But he has one less worry now, thanks to Dexter Fowler’s arrival.

Last week, before the centerfielder shocked the baseball world by re-signing with the Cubs, Epstein was talking about the issues that give him pause about this year’s team. The first one he brought up was Jason Heyward’s move to centerfield after a six-year career spent mostly in right field. All that territory to cover for such a large man. The possibility of more wear and tear. Perhaps a greater chance of injury.
“We have some vulnerabilities, or at least some open questions, some potential issues,” Epstein said at the time. “Our outfield defense will be interesting because we’re asking Jason Heyward to play a position that’s largely new to him. He’s played centerfield, but he hasn’t played it on a daily basis for a whole season. He’s 250 pounds. You don’t see a lot of guys that size playing that position every day, although we think he’s an elite defender who can adjust well out there.”

But with Fowler’s signature on a contract, Heyward goes back to a place he never left, and the issues of fatigue and injury are lessened. And now Epstein doesn’t have to worry about Heyward and left fielder Kyle Schwarber colliding in the outfield, though the world will be deprived of the possibility of a spectacular two-truck crash.

So all is peaceful in Theo’s world? No. You see a team that’s loaded with talent. He sees potential for trouble, no matter how faint.

Good news: The Cubs have pitchers in the bullpen who can start, if necessary – Adam Warren, Trevor Cahill, Travis Wood and Clayton Richard. Bad news: If there’s an injury in the rotation, those relievers won’t be stretched out enough to start right away, and the Cubs will have to go to Triple-A for starters. Really bad news: Right now, there aren’t any great options at the minor-league level.

Sleep well, Theo.