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NBC Sports Chicago
Where do Cubs go from here with Addison Russell and Javier Baez?
By Patrick Mooney

A scout from a potential playoff opponent asked the question while covering the Cubs in late September: Why is Addison Russell still playing shortstop over Javier Baez?

An ego thing, to make sure they didn’t lose Russell near the end of a difficult year from a personal/professional standpoint, knowing they’d need his clutch hitting in October? A timing issue, because Russell hadn’t played second base in two years and would need to relearn the angles on double plays? Maybe manager Joe Maddon’s stubborn belief in his player evaluations?

If the Cubs don’t have a Starlin Castro-level shortstop controversy, they will have some interesting discussions in an offseason where at least five of Maddon’s coaches have either been fired or taken jobs elsewhere and team president Theo Epstein has already signaled that he will probably have to deal major-league talent to fix the rotation and/or bullpen.

Trading either middle infielder sounds extreme when there are durability/off-the-field concerns with Russell and unfinished aspects to Baez’s game and both come with early-20s, 20-plus-homer potential.

What about flipping Russell back to second base and making Baez the shortstop?

“I’d be lying if I said those conversations don’t come up from time to time, either just informally in the locker room or strategically behind the scenes,” Epstein said. “There’s not one person in the organization who’s pounding the table to make the switch, or at least who will voice that opinion.”

Epstein laughed at that line during his end-of-season Wrigley Field news conference, and it was interesting that he didn’t completely dismiss the question after three straight trips to the National League Championship Series.

“We encourage open dissent, so I would assume no one’s pounding the table for it,” Epstein said. “But there’s also no one in the organization who isn’t sort of like thrilled when Javy is at shortstop and intrigued by what he could do on an everyday basis.”
The American League scout noticed the issues Russell had on plays to his right, struggling at times to accurately throw the ball to first base and beyond the cut of the infield grass. The metrics still love Russell, who got credited with 15 defensive runs saved — the second-most among all big-league shortstops — even while playing only 808-plus innings this season.

Baez has the more traditional, powerful arm for a shortstop. He proved he could handle the position, getting in rhythm while playing 30 straight games there — and 40 out of 41 — as Russell dealt with a strained right foot/plantar fasciitis problem that lasted from early August through the middle of September.

A Cubs team built around depth and versatility could lose an All-Star shortstop for that long and still comfortably win the NL Central race, which is another compelling reason to keep this World Series core together.

Baez (23 homers, .796 OPS) also appeared to be making great strides at the plate, though he would look lost during an 0-for-20 start to the playoffs, which shows how quickly these snapshots can change.

But Maddon’s big idea — that Russell played the steady, boring, chrome-free defense the manager loved while Baez still needed to work on making the routine plays routinely — didn’t really pass the eye test anymore.

The way the Los Angeles Dodgers dominated the Cubs in all phases during the NLCS — and knowing how much heavy lifting Epstein’s front office will have to do this winter — means everything should be looked at with a fresh set of eyes.

“Addie’s a special player, too,” Epstein said. “If you look at his defensive rankings compared to the other shortstops out there, he’s a special defensive shortstop in his own right. So the current thinking — Joe’s strong belief — is that we’re better with Addie at short and Javy at second when they’re both on the field. And that we’re typically better when they’re both on the field.

“So unless someone does stand up and not only pound the table — but make a really convincing case — that’s the way it’s going to be. But we don’t believe in anything hard and fast around here. And we’ll continue to evaluate it, continue to have those fun discussions about it, and we’ll see where it leads going forward.”

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Chicago Tribune
Cubs Q&A: Offseason trade talk, keeping Jake Arrieta and Wade Davis, coaching changes and more
By Mark Gonzales

Mark Gonzales answers your Cubs questions about the possibility of re-signing Jake Arrieta and trading Addison Russell and the ramifications of the coaching changes.

I know the Cubs don’t want to give Jake Arrieta a long-term contract, at his age. But his performance has still been excellent, even if he’ll never attain his 2015 level again. So why not overreach a bit: Sign Arrieta and keep someone like Kyle Schwarber, instead of letting Arrieta go and trading Schwarber to replace Arrieta? — Gary Katz, Long Grove

Among the factors that Arrieta’ supporters will point to are his low mileage for a 31-year-old pitcher (1,161 innings), his 2-0 record in the 2016 World Series and the fact he allowed only one earned run in 10 2/3 innings this postseason. He would have been close to reaching the 200-inning mark this season had he not suffered the hamstring injury in early September. Jon Lester received a six-year contract despite throwing more innings entering the 2015 season at 31.

I think the Cubs will make a sincere effort to sign Arrieta, although the length of contract will be a stumbling block and steer him to another team. Four years sounds tempting, but “lots of money” can be interpreted many ways.
As for Schwarber, I believe his offensive improvement in the second half bodes well for his future, as the Cubs try to make up with a team willing to surrender a starting pitcher under team control for several seasons. Schwarber does have a strong arm and I would like to see him work more behind the plate in 2018 if he stays with the Cubs.

There will be many trade considerations this winter. Ian Happ can switch-hit and play multiple positions, but he hardly played in the postseason. Albert Almora Jr. showed enough improvement to get a shot at more playing time at the top of the batting order. I believe Addison Russell and Javier Baez are too valuable to trade at this point.

Regardless of whether Arrieta returns or not, the Cubs need younger, club-controllable starting pitching more than you think. So dealing Schwarber, Happ or even one of the middle infielders wouldn’t be shocking.

I’d like to see the Cubs try to move Russell for a quality pitcher and hang on to Schwarber. I think Baez is a better shortstop than Russell, which he proved when he played there every day. Russell still tends to make bad throws to first as he did in the final game of the season. Russell has had some clutch hits, but his overall average and home run power does not match Baez. Moving Baez to short would open second for Ben Zobrist and Happ. One also must ask whether the plantar fasciitis which Russell suffered might not be a future problem as well. On the other hand, Schwarber has much more of an upside. I think he will continue to improve as he gets more at-bats. — Victor Prange; Burlington Wisc.

Baez’s 26-game errorless streak at shortstop during Russell’s placement on the disabled list was arguably the most impressive statistic of the Cubs’ season, considering his transition from second base and the difficulty of plays he was asked to perform. The shortstop debate is a great one, but I don’t see the Cubs changing their preference for Russell now. I think Baez has done an exceptional job of reducing errors on routine plays to the point where management should feel comfortable about using him at shortstop if they decide to trade Russell.

The ceiling remains high for Russell and he can attain his 21-home run, 95-RBI marks in 2016 with a higher batting average and fewer strikeouts. Trading Russell would garner a top-notch prospect, but the Cubs’ infield depth would be stretched on a long-term basis if Zobrist gets hurt.

Do you think it’s possible Ozzie Guillen replaces Dave Martinez? — Andrew Piazza, Illinois State

Joe Maddon was impressed that Gullen was waiting outside the visitors’ clubhouse to congratulate him after the Rays beat the White Sox in the 2008 American League Division Series.

But I don’t see Ozzie as the Cubs’ bench coach.

Do the recent moves take away any potential excuses for Maddon or did he and the brain trust have consensus on letting Chris Bosio and John Mallee go? It looks like they gave Maddon his guys (how Theo Epstein chose his words), but that also might be removing some of his cover if things go poorly in one of the coming seasons. — Vinay Sury

I think it’s safe to say that 10 days into the offseason have been just as interesting as the postseason. I thought there was a decent chance that at least one change would be made until the final three weeks of the regular season when everything seemed to be corrected. The latter thought was thought to be fortified by Maddon’s comments on Oct. 18 that he envisioned the entire coaching staff returning.

Maddon made coaching changes during his tenure with the Rays, so this isn’t new territory. As for those changes, the comment about a different voice is an interesting message since I believe Bosio did the best he could with a pitching staff that had some lingering fatigue from last season and a mercurial bullpen.

I was a little surprised by the change in hitting coaches, since the relentless phrase “launch angle” didn’t seem to bother many throughout the season. But Maddon was right about the need for “situational” improvement, and the failure to hit elevated fastballs in the Dodgers’ series loomed large. In my opinion, Brian Butterfield is the best in the game at what he does — coach third base and handle the infielders. I’ve been familiar with his work since 2000 with the Diamondbacks.
As for the alleged “awkward” timing of the question about the status of the coaching staff, pull up a chair. I asked the question and couched it to Maddon by saying I’ve asked this question in previous seasons prior to games in which the Cubs faced elimination. And Mike Mulligan of the Score asked Bosio the same question earlier in the day — so my sense is that another reporter would have asked the question about the status of the coaching staff for 2018 if I hadn’t.

And after Maddon answered my question, Jim Hickey’s name was mentioned to the manager by another reporter.

In contrast, Epstein was asked about the status of Dale Sveum with about 12 days left in the 2013 season and Epstein praised Sveum for providing a “calming effect” but said he was in the midst of evaluations with the entire baseball department and declined to give his manager a vote of confidence.

The days leading up to the end of the season were unsettling for everyone involved, but Epstein spent 30 minutes explaining his reasons for firing Sveum a day after the season ended.

What are the chances Sammy Sosa ever gets welcomed back to Wrigley? What is the current front office doing to address that relationship? — Matt B.

I think Sosa has to explain a few things to current ownership in order to be welcomed back. I don’t anticipate that happening soon.

The Cubs have a philosophy of not overpaying for older starting pitchers and not shelling out too much for similarly aged bullpen pitchers. With this philosophy, do you think the Cubs would make an actual attempt to bring back Wade Davis? And, if not, would they look internally or externally for closer options? — Patrick Hill

I think the Cubs will make a sincere effort to re-sign Davis, although it will come down to years rather than dollars. It was topsy-turvy year for free agent closers, from Kenley Jansen’s dominance to Mark Melancon’s injury to Aroldis Chapman’s struggles and shoulder injury.

Davis is 32, so it might behoove him to get as much security as possible. From the comments made by the fellow relievers, I got the sense he really liked pitching for the Cubs. And Hickey, the Cubs’ new pitching coach, liked working with him with the Rays.

I would think the Cubs would look externally if Davis departs. Maddon succeeded in using multiple closers during parts of his tenure with the Rays. I can see a scenario where the Cubs acquire a veteran with closing experience to share the duties with a current reliever in the same way Jason Motte aided Hector Rondon in the middle of the 2015 season.

I’m not saying that Rondon will be in the closer mix, as I sense that he might be non-tendered unless the Cubs can’t add relief help by the tender date.

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Chicago Tribune
Prospects Adbert Alzolay, Jake Stinnett, David Bote named to Arizona Fall League's Stars Game
By Mark Gonzales

The Chicago Cubs will be well-represented Saturday night in the Arizona Fall League’s 12th annual Fall Stars Game at Salt River Fields in Scottsdale, Ariz.

Pitchers Adbert Azolay and Jake Stinnett and second baseman David Bote were selected to play for the East Division roster. Scouting and farm directors from every major league team, along with input from AFL director Steve Cobb and his personnel staff selected the players that showcases the top prospects from the AFL’s East and West division teams.
Stinnett, a second-round pick in the 2014 draft, has made an impressive transition from starting to relieving. Stinnett posted a 1.19 ERA in 14 games at three levels last summer, striking out 27 in 22 2/3 innings while limiting opponents to a .195 batting average.

With Mesa, Stinnett has pitched in only four games but has struck out 10 in 7 1/3 innings.

Alzolay, 22, has an 0.90 ERA in five appearances while striking out 11 in 10 innings, and Bote is batting .391 with four homers for Mesa.