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- Chicago Tribune, **Infielder Javier Baez comfortable in brief offseason stint in center**
<http://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/baseball/cubs/ct-javier-baez-center-field-spt-0121-20160120-story.html>
- Chicago Sun-Times, **Cubs showed their greedy side by asking city to close Clark and Addison on game days**
<http://chicago.suntimes.com/sports/7/71/1265150/cubs-showed-greedy-side-asking-city-close-clark-addison-game-days>
- Cubs.com, **Dynamic duo: Zobrist, Maddon reunite**
<http://m.cubs.mlb.com/news/article/162381472/ben-zobrist-happy-to-reunite-with-joe-maddon>
- Cubs.com, **Pearl Jam to play at Wrigley on Aug. 20, 22**
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CSNChicago.com

Cubs prospect Willson Contreras could be next core player to hit Wrigley

By Patrick Mooney

Willson Contreras isn't riding the tidal wave of hype that followed Kris Bryant, Addison Russell, Jorge Soler and Kyle Schwarber.

But the Cubs still see Contreras as their potential catcher of the future, possibly the next core player to crash onto the stage at Wrigley Field as they ramp up their rebuild.

Miguel Montero is guaranteed \$28 million across the next two seasons, David Ross is ready to begin his retirement tour and the Cubs haven't definitively answered the question about Schwarber's long-term future at catcher.

Contreras is ticketed for Triple-A Iowa this year, not quite ready for the demands of catching at the big-league level and handling a veteran pitching staff and the intricate game-planning system that helped the Cubs become

contenders. But his time is coming after winning the Southern League batting title last year and turning into what one team official called an untouchable prospect.

“He’s an incredibly talented, athletic catcher who can really throw, can really block and his receiving is much improved,” team president Theo Epstein said. “He projects to be a frontline catcher in the big leagues for a long time. We’re excited about his development.”

The Cubs didn’t add Contreras to the 40-man roster last winter, leaving him exposed in the Rule 5 draft. Originally signed as an infielder out of Venezuela in 2009, he hadn’t played above the A-ball level at that point.

Contreras went out and hit .333 with eight homers, 75 RBIs and an .891 OPS in 126 games at Double-A Tennessee, finishing the year as the organization’s No. 2 prospect on Baseball America’s top-10 list.

“He could have got taken by anybody (else),” said Jason McLeod, the senior vice president of scouting and player development. “A big transformation for him was playing in Venezuela (last winter and seeing): ‘This is how I need to be.’

“He’s always been a wonderful kid — passionate, big smile, hard worker. But there was more of a maturity level to him. He’s always going to play with passion — that’s just the way he is — but there was a different confidence that came with the maturity from Day 1 in spring training. And he carried that throughout the whole year.”

Contreras, who will turn 24 in May, comes out of the Latin American pipeline the Cubs built during the Jim Hendry administration. Pound for pound, Contreras (6-foot-1, 175 pounds) is said to be one of the strongest players in the entire organization and a more advanced catching prospect than Welington Castillo.

Castillo showed flashes of potential but never quite put it together on the North Side. The Cubs didn’t have much leverage after adding Montero and Ross last winter and sold low on Castillo in a midseason trade with the Seattle Mariners, acquiring a reliever who’s already out of the organization (Yoervis Medina). Castillo got flipped again two weeks later and put up 17 homers and 50 RBIs in 80 games with the Arizona Diamondbacks.

After guaranteeing more than \$275 million to free agents this offseason — and with some uncertainty surrounding their next TV deal and how that impacts the overall financial picture — the Cubs need more breakthrough players like Contreras.

On some level, organizational rankings reflect how much time a front office spends on lobbying those media outlets, but Epstein genuinely believes the Cubs still have a top-tier farm system, even without big names like Bryant, Russell, Soler and Schwarber.

“We’re probably going to end up in that fifth-through-seventh range,” Epstein said. “When you consider the prospects that we’ve graduated, most of our farm system is playing third base for the Cubs, shortstop for the Cubs, right field for the Cubs, left field for the Cubs.

“That’s where those guys went. They didn’t like fall down the rankings because they’re not very good. They’re up in the big leagues. I think we still have a really good farm system.”

The Cubs are holding scouting meetings this week in Chicago, preparing for a draft where they won’t have a first-round selection after that spending spree in free agency and not expecting another top-five pick anytime soon.

“Now that we’re transitioning into this winning mode at the big-league level,” Epstein said, “we will not abandon the pursuit of elite young talent. It’s fundamental to what we do. We’re going to have to have a constant stream of young talent coming up through our system into Wrigley.

“We’re already looking five years ahead, six years ahead (at) what our lineup’s going to look like, different areas of need in the organization.

“We will not abandon young players. That’s what we’re all about.”

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CSNChicago.com

Report: Cubs sign Munenori Kawasaki to minor league deal

By Staff

Could a fan favorite from Toronto end up on the North Side this spring?

According to a Wednesday-night report from Fox Sports' Jon Morosi, the Cubs signed former Blue Jays infielder Munenori Kawasaki to a minor league deal.

Kawasaki, a Japanese native, appeared in 201 games over the past three seasons with the Blue Jays. Last season, he made only 34 plate appearances, but he made 289 and 274 plate appearances in 2013 and 2014, respectively.

In three seasons in Toronto, he posted a .242/.326/.301 slash line with 64 runs scored, 43 RBIs and 58 walks compared to 96 strikeouts.

He also earned the adoration of Blue Jays fans with his outgoing personality.

He earned a bit of baseball fame with this postgame interview/celebration following his walk-off double to send the Blue Jays to a win over the Orioles in May 2013.

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Chicago Tribune

Offseason task at hand: Kyle Schwarber busy working on all facets of game

By Mark Gonzales

After hitting well enough to earn a significant role in the Cubs' lineup last summer, Kyle Schwarber is playing catch-up this winter.

Polishing his defensive skills in left field and behind the plate are priorities for Schwarber, who currently is working out in Tampa, Fla., to address those issues as well as curing his struggles against left-handed pitchers.

"There's no blueprint," Schwarber said of his role in 2016. "Whatever it is, I'll accept the role."

The Cubs plan to start Schwarber in left field, where he played respectably until Games 3 and 4 of the National League Championship Series. But his long-term focus is on catching, with David Ross likely retiring after this season and Miguel Montero's contract expiring in 2017.

Team officials marveled this weekend at the Cubs Convention over the progress of catcher Willson Contreras, who is scheduled to start this season at Triple-A Iowa.

But enough improvement behind the plate and in the batter's box could give the Cubs maximum value primarily because Schwarber is a left-handed power hitter.

The Cubs hope Schwarber, who batted .143 with 27 strikeouts in 56 at-bats against left-handers, eventually can make the same improvements that Anthony Rizzo did in becoming one of the best left-handed hitters against lefty pitching after batting only .189 in 2013 (.294 in 2015).

"He's going to hit lefties eventually," general manager Jed Hoyer said. "We have to be willing to give him the at-bats to do that."

An opposing scout who watched Schwarber during the second half concurred with Hoyer's assessment, adding that he merely needs to show better judgment in identifying breaking pitches.

The Cubs have insurance in left field with versatile Chris Coghlan, but the hope is Schwarber's defense will improve as it did before the NLCS mishaps.

Schwarber said he has been concentrating on getting a more explosive first step and has incorporated yoga into his workouts to improve his flexibility.

Coach Dave Martinez was impressed last week when Schwarber sought out newly-acquired three-time Gold Glove recipient Jason Heyward for tips on playing the outfield.

"He knows he has a lot of work to do," Martinez said. "He's willing to put in the time."

The biggest long-term challenge, however, remains Schwarber's improvement behind the plate. After Montero returned from a thumb injury Aug. 7, Schwarber caught only 28 innings.

Coach Mike Borzello was dispatched to Tampa earlier this month to make sure Schwarber is up to speed behind the plate when the Cubs' pitchers and catchers conduct their first spring workout on Feb. 20.

"Sometimes a lot of improvements happen in an off-season just by what they've learned over the past season," Borzello said. "I was pleasantly surprised where he is at this point."

"He said at this time last year, 'I didn't know anything about this position. I just played it in college but I didn't know any of the nuances that came with being a catcher.' It is funny in one year that how far — not only on the physical side but the mental side — he has come."

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Chicago Tribune

Infielder Javier Baez comfortable in brief offseason stint in center

By Mark Gonzales

Javier Baez's comfort level in center field improved as more fly balls were hit in his direction last month.

That bodes well for Baez's stock as well as manager Joe Maddon's list of options in 2016.

Maddon's premium on versatility was evident from last April when he played third baseman Kris Bryant in center field less than a week after he made his major-league debut.

Baez, whose infield defense has impressed Maddon, passed a test last month when he played well in four games in center field for Santurce in the Puerto Rican League.

"I thought it was going to be hard for me," said Baez, who threw out a runner trying to stretch a single into a double in his second game Dec. 23 against Caguas. "But after the first game, everything went well. I feel comfortable."

Although Jason Heyward is projected as the Cubs' starting center fielder, it wouldn't be strange for him to move to right in late-inning situations if Baez can continue his improvement in center and hit with enough efficiency.

Baez, 23, who made a smooth transition from shortstop to second base in the second half of 2014, felt even more comfortable after making seven putouts in center against Mayaguez on Dec. 27.

Doug Dascenzo, the organization's minor-league outfielder and baserunning coordinator who played five seasons for the Cubs, worked with Baez in Puerto Rico. Coach Dave Martinez was encouraged with the reports he received on Baez.

"I just want to work on his footwork with balls hit over his head, moving to his left and right," Martinez said. "He's going to be OK. He's a good athlete."

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Chicago Sun-Times

Cubs showed their greedy side by asking city to close Clark and Addison on game days

By Rick Morrissey

The Cubs are so full of themselves you'd need a wheelbarrow to carry their self-importance.

Their latest attempt at world domination involved asking the City of Chicago to close Clark and Addison streets on game days because of heightened security concerns.

If you're a cynic like me, "heightened security concerns" is code for "a desire to establish a 100-foot perimeter around Wrigley Field to lure more people to drink Cubs-approved beverages and buy Cubs-approved items at Cubs-run establishments."

The city said no to the request, citing the congestion problems that closing the two main thoroughfares would cause. It's already a nightmare on game days with Clark and Addison open.

Now, I suppose it's possible the Cubs really are concerned that Wrigley is vulnerable to some sort of terrorist attack, but nothing in their recent history suggests that they do anything without money as their main motivation. The fact that they reportedly made the same request to close down the streets three years ago also suggests this has nothing to do with better security, as Cubs president of business operations Crane Kenney insisted it did during the recent Cubs Convention.

Either Kenney's job description includes saying things that nobody else in the organization wants to say or he's genetically wired to say silly things.

I was on the Cubs' side as they fought the rooftop owners, who were basically pirating someone else's product. And I've always said that people who move into Wrigleyville shouldn't be surprised that it's loud, difficult and vomity (new word!) on game days.

But now the Cubs seem hell bent on alienating residents. They have moved beyond trying to pretend that they want to be good neighbors to all-out not caring about them.

I get it: This is what big businesses do. They want to expand their footprint, and they don't care who they grind under their heel. The Cubs' business side is under big pressure to catch up with the baseball side, which had a breakout season in 2015 and is hoping for bigger things in 2016.

But in doing so, the Cubs have come across as greedy and pushy. Certainly not someone you'd want living down the street from you.

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Cubs.com

Dynamic duo: Zobrist, Maddon reunite

By Carrie Muskat

CHICAGO -- Growing up in Eureka, Ill., Ben Zobrist was a Cardinals fan, and Ozzie Smith was his favorite player. His father, Tom, who is still the pastor at Liberty Bible Church in the downstate Illinois town, is well aware that a large part of his congregation is loyal to the Cards. Will Tom change the tone of his sermons now that Ben plays for the Cubs?

"I have to walk a fine line there," Tom Zobrist said, chuckling.

"There's a few converts down there besides us," said Ben's mother, Cindi.

The Zobrists were in Chicago this past weekend, all wearing new No. 18 jerseys, to see the 34-year-old Ben take part in his first Cubs Convention after signing a four-year, \$56 million contract in December. He's happy about playing at Wrigley Field -- but even more excited about being reunited with manager Joe Maddon. The two have grown up together; Zobrist's first year in the Major Leagues in 2006 also was Maddon's first as Tampa Bay's big league manager.

"He took a liking to me because he saw my work ethic and saw that I'm just a baseball player -- there's not much flash to me," Zobrist said of Maddon, who gave the super utility player the nickname "Zorilla."

"I'm a manager's player, in a way, because he can use me in a lot of different ways and I'm willing to do that," Zobrist said. "It's really worked well both ways. I've been blessed by the way he's used me, and I know that he, as a manager, appreciated how I played for him. He knows the kind of person I am. He's a good evaluator anyways, both of baseball ability and also character. I've always appreciated his belief in me."

Zobrist did not appear in more than 62 games in any of his first three seasons in Tampa Bay, but he definitely helped get the team to the World Series in 2008, batting .321 in September. In '09, Zobrist found his groove. He batted .297, played every position except pitcher and catcher, was an All-Star and finished eighth in the American League Most Valuable Player Award voting.

Not bad for someone who, at 14 years old, was 5 feet tall, weighed 98 pounds and never thought he had a chance at playing in the big leagues. Zobrist was seriously considering Bible college before enrolling at Olivet Nazarene University, where he played baseball and got noticed.

Zobrist gives Maddon a lot of credit for his success.

"I wouldn't have even created this [super utility] position for myself," Zobrist said. "[Maddon] saw it as a viable position, and he said, 'You can do this.'"

Zobrist did sometimes wonder what the "crazy professor" was doing.

"Even though he's unpredictable to a certain degree as a manager, I know about that, and I'm OK with that," Zobrist said. "I've seen the genius work. I've seen the ability to take a situation, have no fear and him make that decision, and everybody's like, 'Why did you make that decision?' And it works out. I believe in him as a manager. I know he knows what he's doing even in the crazy times when we're wondering why he's making a certain call."

Cubs fans saw that first-hand last year, as Kris Bryant was shifted from third to the outfield, catching prospect Kyle Schwarber found himself starting in left and the starting pitcher batted eighth. The plan is for Zobrist to primarily man second base for the Cubs this season, but he's smart enough to know that Maddon will call upon his versatility whenever the need arises.

"Joe has a way of putting you in a situation where you might not be comfortable at first, and he's not afraid to put you in that situation even though you might feel like, 'I don't know if I want to do that,'" Zobrist said. "But later on when you see the benefit to yourself and your team, you understand his leadership ability. [The Cubs] saw it last year. He proved himself as a manager last year to everybody."

Maddon did just that, leading the young Cubs to a 97-win season and their first trip to the postseason since 2008. Zobrist joins newcomers John Lackey and Jason Heyward this year with the mission of helping the Cubs take that next step.

"My job as a veteran guy, knowing him, is to help them get over that hump -- get past that Championship Series, get back to the World Series where we were in 2008, and this time win it," Zobrist said. "That's my goal for him as I think about what I want to help Joe do."

The reunion almost didn't happen. The Cubs told Zobrist they couldn't sign him until they made another move. They'd discussed dealing Starlin Castro to the Yankees at the Trade Deadline, but those discussions weren't revived until the first day of the Winter Meetings. Both the Castro trade and Zobrist signing were announced within minutes of each other.

"We didn't even know the trade was happening until [the Cubs] called and said, 'We're not going to do this trade unless we're going to get you,'" Zobrist said. "We knew they wanted me here. I wanted to be here. It was just a matter of, 'Now that all the pieces are going to fit, now we can do this.' The timing had to be perfect, and it was. Probably within two days I was going to sign elsewhere."

Zobrist remembers the first time he saw Wrigley Field, arriving on the team bus with the Rays for an Interleague series in 2014.

"I said, 'This is the way baseball is supposed to be,'" Zobrist said. "I'm so excited to try to win a championship here."

His parents could see how excited he was.

"One of the first things he said was, 'I love this place,' after the first game there," Tom said. "He's said a couple times, 'I can't believe I get to play there.'"

"He loves the history," Cindi said. "He's always been an old-school kind of guy."

There will be plenty of family support at Wrigley this summer. Ben's parents plan on making the 2 1/2-hour drive from Eureka often. Zobrist's wife, Julianna, an accomplished musician with a new album "Shatterproof" due this year, is from Iowa City. Hopefully, she'll sing the national anthem before a game. Ben's parents are excited about seeing their grandkids.

What about when the Cubs play the Cardinals? The town of Eureka has its diehard supporters. Tom isn't sure whether he'll give Ben's team a plug during his sermons.

"We haven't experienced that yet," Tom said, smiling.

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Cubs.com

Pearl Jam to play at Wrigley on Aug. 20, 22

By Carrie Muskat

CHICAGO -- Devoted Cubs fan Eddie Vedder and Pearl Jam will play two concerts at Wrigley Field, Aug. 20 and Aug. 22, and pitcher Jason Hammel has already asked for those days off.

The Cubs are scheduled to be in Denver on Aug. 20 and in San Diego on Aug. 22. But Hammel posted on Twitter that he felt a rock version of blue flu.

Hammel was joking, of course. At least, he could have been. We'll have to wait and see when the right-hander's turn comes up in the rotation in August.

Pearl Jam also performed at Wrigley Field in July 2013, and Ernie Banks made it a special night when he took the stage with Vedder to sing his Cubs tribute song, "All the Way."

Vedder joined the Cubs last October during their playoff run, and he was in the clubhouse in Pittsburgh when they beat the Pirates in the National League Wild Card Game.

Ticket information about the concerts is not yet available.

Wrigley Field will be rocking in 2016. James Taylor will perform on June 30, Billy Joel will return on Aug. 26 (he sang there last August) and Luke Bryan will perform on Aug. 27.

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