



# GAME Face

How Jon Lester helped build a winning culture at Wrigley Field.

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When Jon Lester made his first start for the Cubs in April 2015, renovations to the bleachers were still ongoing. As part of the project that brought left- and right-field video boards to Wrigley Field, the seats above the ivy-covered walls were closed to fans. During that time, a large tarp featuring pictures of Ernie Banks covered the space where the new seats would eventually be.

Lester was the exciting, big-ticket addition, signed the previous December to help usher in a new era of Cubs baseball. His team was a hodgepodge of young players with fantastic upside, but the kids were also coming off an 89-loss season in 2014. The group's promise was alluring, but the proverbial tarp was still on, and there was work to be done.

That was the beginning of Lester's six-year, \$155 million contract; the 2020 season marks the potential end. The Cubs have a team option on Lester for 2021, but whatever happens, in the time he has been in Chicago, the Cubs have already ended a 108-year-old curse and made postseason appearances in four straight seasons. That's rarified air for any team, and it was unprecedented for the Cubs.

In the process, the now-36-year-old hurler has helped change the culture of the organization, a change he believes will be long lasting. His fingerprints are all over this team — in both measurable and intangible ways. The numbers are there, and so is his impact on the overall environment.

"I came here to win a World Series, and we did that. So your expectations change from, OK we got that one to now we need to do it again," Lester said. "I think my expectations have been matched, and any time you can match those and then add new expectations, it's always a good thing."

A part of that culture shift meant the standard "just one before I die" refrain became something entirely different. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Oscar Wilde wrote that two of the greatest tragedies in life are not getting what you want and getting everything you want. He said the latter was worse. Like fans in Boston after

the Red Sox ended their World Series drought in 2004, the Cubs faithful didn't settle into a sleepy state of post-championship contentment. Expectations changed.

Lester helped make that happen, and he continues to set new standards for Cubs baseball.

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## SETTING THE STANDARD

When Lester made a rare relief appearance in Game 7 of the 2016 World Series, he inherited the unfinished work of starter Kyle Hendricks. With two outs in the fifth inning and one runner on base, manager Joe Maddon decided it was time to turn to his ace, despite previously stated plans to bring Lester in only at the start of a clean inning.

The big lefty immediately gave up a single and a wild pitch that allowed two runs to score, trimming the Cubs lead to 5-3. But after that, he was unflappable, holding the Cleveland Indians to just three other baserunners before handing the ball over to ArodisChapman in the eighth inning. From there, a game-tying home run, a rain delay, a curse broken, a culture changed.

"The standard is set that it's World Series or bust," Hendricks said. "It really started with him and that mindset that he brought over when we first signed him."

In the process of luring Lester to Chicago, team

president Theo Epstein and general manager Jed Hoyer told him they thought he was one of the missing pieces who could help them transition to a winning culture on the North Side. Through shrewd drafts, trades and free-agent sign-

ings, they already had a cadre of talented

up-and-comers in hand, but they needed a veteran. They needed a winner. They needed someone to show the young bucks the way.

"Those conversations were what made me believe in coming



JONATHAN DANIEL/GETTY





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here," Lester said. "Just being in Chicago, obviously, I like the city and stuff, but any time you add Wrigley Field with a 108-year curse and expectations and stud prospects coming up, it makes your decision a little bit easier."

A big part of the pitch to Lester in the early winter of 2014 was that Ja-

son Heyward — at the time, being traded from his hometown Atlanta Braves to the St. Louis Cardinals — would be playing in the Cubs outfield come 2016 when he reached free agency. They called their shot on signing him, and that helped woo Lester. Heyward, having spent the last four seasons playing alongside Lester, has come to appreciate the pitcher's impact.

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## SIGN OF THE TIMES

Since 2015, Jon Lester has been a model of consistency for the Cubs. He's also a creature of habit on the mound. But that doesn't mean he can't adapt to a changing game — and changing stuff.

"I've become more confident in things that I wasn't confident in at a younger age. I have to use everything now. I have to be able to command both sides of the plate, and up and down in areas that normally weren't my strengths. You have to. You get older. I don't have those fast-twitch muscles that I once had. You've got to constantly change and keep the hitters guessing."

According to Fangraphs, Lester has used his fastball 52 percent of the time during his career and thrown it at an average of 92.1 mph. In 2019, his fastball usage was down to 38.4 percent, and the pitch clocked in at 90.3 mph. To offset that, he used his cutter and change-up much more. His cutter usage rose from a career average of 24.4 percent to 34.5 percent, while his change went from 8 percent to 11.7 percent.

ately think world champion," Heyward said. "You get battle-tested, game-face, consistency. ... He wants the ball in the biggest moments, and, to me, there's a lot to be said about that."

Lester has been the steady presence at the front end of the rotation since his 2015 debut with the club. Coming into 2020, he had made four Opening Day starts, in 2015, 2017, 2018 and last year. He pitched more than 200 innings in his first two seasons in Chicago, and he has made at least 30 starts every season in a Cubs uniform. He's also a two-time All Star with the Cubs (2016, 2018) and finished second in NL Cy Young voting in 2016.

Those kinds of numbers don't happen by accident. "[He's] a proven winner, a World Series winner, all these things," Hendricks said. "To see the work he puts in still after having 10-plus years, he comes in the weight room, and what he does, it shows guys. It showed young guys that this is what it takes to reach the top."





## SHOWING THE WAY

Lester's doggedness and consistency is reflected in the young core that has played around him since 2015. Hendricks, who made his rookie debut the season before Lester arrived, said watching and learning from Lester has helped him develop increased self-confidence and an ability to block distractions and outside noise. Being a professional athlete in Chicago comes with a great deal of pressure, and nowhere is that more evident than at Wrigley Field, both before and after the World Series.

Having played in Boston through two title runs and pitched in the American League Wild Card Game with Oakland the fall before signing with the Cubs, Lester came to Chicago already inured to that kind of pressure.

"I try to really take a lot of that from him," Hendricks said. "It's tough to get that feeling, but the

more conversations you have with him, you feel that intensity and that will to win. It bleeds over to everybody."

Willson Contreras came up as a rookie the year the Cubs won the World Series. Through the years since, he too has felt Lester's influence.

"Every time [a] new pitcher comes to the clubhouse, I think the first thing they do is follow Jon Lester, follow his routine," Contreras said. "That's somebody that every pitcher should look up to. ... His presence on the team is always great for us."

That means watching how he works out, how he prepares and how hard he pushes himself. Lester's work ethic and demeanor carry over to the other pitchers and position players even if he isn't always vocal about it.

"I've always been a big believer in leading by example, not necessarily by voice," Lester said. "I'm not a very talkative person when it comes to stuff like that."

While his advice to teammates may not be loud, it still resonates.

"The little conversations he has with everyone, he'll pass on little nuggets of information from experiences he's been through,"

Hendricks said. "You can learn so much from this guy. If he wouldn't have been around, there wouldn't have been the same direction or focus, not even close to what there has been. That was really the start of all the good things that have happened."

Lester is the kind of guy his teammates want to play behind. Seeing the way he grinds makes them do it too because they don't want to let him down. If Lester is going to be that locked in on every pitch, the least they



## FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES

One big difference in the 2020 Cubs is the man at the helm. After a stellar five-year run, Joe Maddon was replaced by former Cubs catcher and two-time World Series champion David Ross. This could easily have presented a challenge for Jon Lester, as the two are longtime friends and former teammates.

Ross spent years as Lester's personal catcher and had still caught more of Lester's innings (578.2) than any other backstop entering this season. But Lester said he had no problem accepting his old friend as his new boss. In fact, he thought Ross was the perfect man for the job.

"He's the polar opposite of Joe," Lester said. "It's just a completely different voice. Joe's laid back and lets the players do their thing. Ross, he's more high-energy and wants to be a part of what the players are doing. That's not saying that Joe wasn't a part of what we were doing. That's just two different styles, and I think they're both going to be very successful."

can do is show the same focus.

"It's also a calming presence," Heyward said. "It's one that you want to be behind this guy, you want to be ready, you want to be present. You want to be ready from the first pitch to the last pitch of that game to go out there and get that win for him."

## CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

In a lot of ways, the 2020 Cubs entered the season in a similar place as the 2015 team. Many of the right pieces are there, but the unfinished business of winning another World Series is also there. The team isn't at the end of a full rebuild like it was six seasons ago, but they have a new manager and bench staff and myriad changes at the organizational level. Plus, last season was the first time since 2014 the Cubs didn't reach the playoffs.

Lester knows what it's like to have to wait several years between





championships, a period that can feel like an eternity to both players and fans. His Red Sox teams took home the trophy in 2007 and 2013. Winning is hard in baseball — so much has to go right over 162 games — and doing so consistently is a rare accomplishment. The success the Cubs have had during Lester's tenure is uncommon. Still, he is optimistic about what lies ahead.

"I think we are in a good place,"

Lester said. "I like where everybody's at. I like our new additions on the coaching staff. I love our additions for our bullpen."

Whether 2020 is Lester's final season in a Cubs uniform or not, his legacy as one of the best free-agent signings in Chicago sports history is cemented. He ushered in the golden era of Cubs baseball, finishing the business of a rebuilding team looking to finally end the longest championship drought in American professional sports history. On the way, Lester helped change the culture of Cubs baseball

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so that winning one World Series didn't mean settling comfortably back into being baseball's lovable losers again.

"I don't think the worth of what he's done, especially from Day 1 that he's showed up, has really been quantified," Hendricks said. "I don't know if you can. The team was so young at that point. We didn't know what direction to go. We didn't know what winning really looked like."

"To set that level, set that bar for everybody, it really can't be qualified. ... If he wouldn't have been around, there wouldn't have been the same direction or focus, not even close to what there has been. That was really the start of all the good things that have happened. He is the guy that started it all."

But Jon Lester is far from finished.

