

TOP-DOWN APPROACH

Fans were predicting big on-the-field changes last offseason. They got them, but it wasn't where they expected.

BY JARED WYLLYS



STEPHEN GREEN

Cubs fans entered the 2019-20 offseason expecting major changes. The team was coming off a lackluster 2019 campaign, in which they won 84 games and missed the playoffs for the first time since 2014. Then, team president Theo Epstein stoked the fires at the November general managers meetings in Arizona when he said there were “no untouchables” on the roster.

“When things evolved to a place we’re not as proud of, there’s accountability for all of us,” he said at the time. “That means a lot of change and difficult decisions and trying to move forward and create something new. Change is not always easy, but it’s necessary.”

While the 2020 team came into the season looking very similar to the 2019 group, plenty of change did take place last offseason. It just wasn’t where people were expecting. The most noticeable alteration was at the top: After five years and one World Series title with Joe Maddon at the helm, the Cubs announced former catcher David Ross as their new skipper in November.

But he’s far from the only new face at the organizational level. While there wasn’t much roster turnover, many of the behind-

the-scenes personnel are different from last year.

At the major-league level, Ross is supported by five new people, from the coaches in the dugout with him to a new senior director of data and development. This much change is at least partially the product of a disappointing 2019 season and of a free-agent budget that has shrunk from past years. With the new hires, the plan is to get the Cubs back into the postseason with largely the same roster as the team featured a season ago.

The new faces on Ross’ coaching staff are Andy Green as bench coach, Craig Driver as first base and catching coach, Chris Young as bullpen coach and Mike Napoli as quality assurance coach. The Cubs have also made Kyle Evans their new senior director of data and development.

IN THE CLUBHOUSE

Green comes to the Cubs after most recently serving almost four seasons as the Padres’ manager, from 2016-19. Before that, the Lexington, Kentucky, native was a third base coach for the Diamondbacks in 2015, and he played for the Diamondbacks and Mets from 2006-09. The seasoned Green could prove an invaluable resource for Ross, who — despite his years in the clubhouse, behind the mic and in the front office — had never managed a big-league game heading into the season.

“[Green is] probably the biggest help for me in directing my thoughts, getting things organized, getting prepared,” said Ross at the Cubs Convention. “This guy has been through the season, the National League, knows the details of what it takes to lead. He’s a phenomenal human being.

“Being inexperienced, I was looking for somebody with a lot of experience. Andy Green checked a lot of boxes in the areas that I lack.”

Coming off four years with a rebuilding squad in San Diego, Green relishes the chance to be part of a winner in Chicago. But his ties to the organization run deeper than that.

“I used to drive up to Wrigley from Lexington, Kentucky when I was a kid,” Green said. “I thought there would be nothing cooler

FAST RISER

Though she grew up in Los Angeles County as a diehard Dodgers fan, Rachel Folden’s ties to the Cubs run deep. The 32-year-old first female coach in Cubs history shares a common memory with a lot of people who grew up in the team’s television heyday.

“They were always on TV,” Folden said. “WGN made it kind of cool to be a Cubs fan.”

Now, that rooting interest has come full circle. Last November, the Cubs hired Folden to serve two roles: as the lead hitting lab tech and as the fourth coach on the Arizona Rookie League staff. Both jobs are based in Mesa, Arizona, which gives Folden the ability to assess hitters as they come to the hitting lab at the Cubs’ spring training facility and to be at the field as the Arizona League affiliate plays its season starting in June.

“I work with a certain group of players throughout the whole year, which I’m really excited about because that’s what I’ve been doing my whole career,” Folden said.

Folden joining the Cubs organization is linked to her working with Justin Stone at Elite Baseball. The Cubs hired Stone, a biokinetics-based hitting instructor, in 2018, and he became director of hitting last October.

“We were actually driving up to University of Michigan together, and he had just gotten the job as the director of hitting,” Folden said. “He said, ‘I want to work with you. I’m going to recommend you for an interview.’”

But it was Folden’s hitting prowess, established in a very successful college and professional career, that won her the job. By the time the Cubs called, she had been running her own business, Folden Fastpitch, for several years, but working in professional baseball was always the goal. The trailblazer represents another step forward for the Cubs in the increasingly data- and tech-driven baseball world.

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Driver and Young both come from the Phillies organization, where Driver was the bullpen catcher for two years. Before that, the Washington state native was



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a coach at Yale University. Young spent the 2018 season as the Phils' assistant pitching coach and last year as the head pitching coach. He was a scout for the Astros and Padres before going to Philadelphia. As a player, he pitched in the minor leagues for the Rockies, Pirates and Marlins from 2002-07.

"Probably the best interview I

had was Chris Young, our new bullpen coach," Ross said. "He blew me away on the phone, just in his humility and the areas where he felt like he could improve. He had been with a new, first-time manager. ... He had seen some of the ups and downs, and we talked through that. [It was] very valuable."

Napoli is in his first year as a major-league coach after a lengthy professional career. He played 12 seasons as a catcher and first baseman, mostly with the Angels and Rangers. He and Ross were teammates when the

I've ever been around."

Evans moved to the coaching staff after almost a decade in the Cubs organization, where he was most recently the senior director of player personnel. Baseball has become increasingly data-driven over the past decade, and Evans' new position allows him to be in uniform at times and interact with the players more directly. He will also be a key part of the decision-making team in all transactions, both in free agency and trades. Before coming to the Cubs, Evans pitched in the Indians minor-league system from 2000-05.

Changes like this are a shift from the Cubs' approach of past offseasons when they made big splashes in free agency.

"Every club, every winner has a certain landscape, certain parameters that they have to operate under," Epstein said in January. "There are going to be times where we can be really aggressive and we have a ton of flexibility and every player is a possibility for us. We knew this wasn't going to be one of those offseasons."

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— DAVID ROSS

Red Sox won the World Series in 2013. He also played in the 2011 World Series with the Rangers and again in 2016 against the Cubs when he was with Cleveland.

"We can't talk about 2016 too much around him. He gets his feelings hurt," Ross joked at the Cubs Convention. "I like catching. I like pitching. It's where my heart and my head go. He's a guy who's been to three World Series. He's caught. He's played first base. When some adversity hit, he's come through. He's protected David Ortiz in the lineup. One of the best base runners



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— ANDY GREEN

Regardless of the lack of change to the major-league roster, the players in uniform believe there's enough talent in the mix to remain contenders and trust the direction the front office took last winter was the right one.

"You have to have confidence in what the front office is doing," Albert Almora said. "If they're doing the moves that they're doing or not, you have to have trust in them. They trust the players that we have, and we just have to prove them right."

Even in a third-place finish last season, the Cubs still played above-.500 baseball. And the ma-

jority of the current starters were on the team that won the World Series in 2016.

"We have to trust whoever is in the lineup, whoever is in the dugout," Javy Báez said. "This is a team that should be in the playoffs every year with the team that we have and the talent that we have."

BEHIND THE SCENES

The Cubs also made changes at the developmental level this past offseason in an effort to improve their chances of being a postseason contender in the years to come.

Notably, they hired Casey Jacobson, a 29-year-old employee of Driveline Baseball, the pitching thinktank in the Pacific Northwest, to be their new coordinator of pitching development. The Cubs have struggled to produce homegrown pitching talent for years, so a change at this level was necessary.

Jacobson pitched for St. Mary's College in Minnesota and Augustana University in South Dakota before spending a season in the independent Pecos League. He has been an instructor at Driveline and a coach at Augustana and Macalester College in Minnesota since ending his playing career.

Kyle Boddy, the founder of Driveline, was hired by the Cincinnati Reds in October 2019, so Jacobson's hire could be seen as a Cubs analog to that move. Driveline is well known in Major League Baseball circles for having a significant impact on how modern pitchers train, prepare and ultimately perform.



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— THEO EPSTEIN

The Cubs, who have had to rely heavily on pitchers brought in via trade and free agency to build their staff over the last five or six seasons, added Jacobson in the hopes that he can help them develop more pitching from within.

Another notable hire last winter was hitting coach Rachel Folden, who is the organization’s lead hit-

ting lab tech and a coach with the Cubs’ Rookie League affiliate in Mesa, Arizona. Folden is a perfect fit in the data-driven baseball era. In 2010, she founded a biomechanics-focused instruction camp called Folden Fastpitch in Merrillville, Indiana, that works with both softball and baseball players. She graduated from Marshall University, where she was inducted into their Hall of Fame last year, and played several seasons as a professional in National Pro Fastpitch, most of them with the Chicago Bandits.

The 2020 season is one of major transition for the Cubs. The plan is that by focusing on these changes at the organizational level, they can draw the most out of the players who are already on the roster.

“I look at the talent we have on paper and I talk to our players, and I get excited about what a good team we can be,” Epstein said. “There’s a significant amount

of upside with this group. We’re not going to whistle past the graveyard. We’re going to carry more risk into this year than we want to. More risk this year than we traditionally have had in the past, and it’s our job to operate around that.

“We don’t have the depth you would like to have and at a couple of positions. There are guys with real upside, but guys that if things don’t go our way, we could have some real holes out there. That’s on us and something that we’re going to have to try and continue to plan for moving forward.”

Of course, the Cubs are still loaded with some of the game’s best talent. This is a group that has already accomplished a lot and has its eye on more postseason wins.

“What we have here is still the top tier of a lot of baseball teams,” Kyle Schwarber said. “You look at a lot of peoples’ track records, and you see what they’ve done in this game, see what we’re still capable of, I would take this team any day.”

That’s exactly what the Cubs front office is counting on.

