

RAISING EXPECTATIONS

Tom Ricketts continues to set a new standard for success on the North Side.

BY GARY COHEN

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Let's take a quick look at how things around Wrigleyville have changed since 2009, when the Ricketts family took ownership of the Cubs.

Then: Despite coming off back-to-back division titles in 2007-08, the Cubs' veteran-laden roster had been constructed using outdated front-office philosophies and was on the decline by 2009. Even the middling success of the early-aughts couldn't change the fact that the postseason had been foreign territory for most of the last century.

Now: The Cubs are one of the legitimate blue bloods of the sport. They have played over-.500 ball for five consecutive seasons, have become postseason regulars and are still just a few years removed from banishing franchise demons by finally capturing that elusive World Series title.

Then: Wrigley Field was a grand old ballpark with some serious problems. The player facilities were the worst in baseball, there were literally nets to protect fans from falling concrete, and the bathrooms ... don't get me started on the bathrooms.

Now: Wrigley Field is a grand old ballpark complete with modern amenities. It looks better than ever and offers best-in-class player facilities for training and rehabilitation. Plus, the concourses are more spacious and provide a wider variety of services.

Then: The area around Wrigley Field was lovely, but the space immediately surrounding the ballpark had a concrete, industrial feel that didn't match the beauty and character of the neighborhood.

Now: The area around Wrigley Field is a gameday mecca, complete with dining options, a hotel and an outdoor plaza with year-round entertainment programming.

Put simply, the first decade of Ricketts family ownership has been a resounding success for the Cubs and their fans. That, of course, doesn't mean Tom Ricketts is satisfied. "We won one World Series; now



we've got to win more," Ricketts said. "The park is in really good shape, but it will never be finished because it's an old building, and every year there will be something else to fix. I'm really proud of the stuff we've done on the community side, both for the neighbors who live right around Wrigley and then for the entire city. I think we have made substantial progress on all those goals, but we have more to do." This February, we sat down with the Cubs chairman in Mesa, Arizona, to talk about his goals for the next decade of ownership, the realities of major-league budgets and the state of the organization after a decade at the helm.

Cubs Yearbook: Your family has owned the Cubs for a while now. Do you still get the same charge out of it as you did when you first started?

Tom Ricketts: Yes. It's a passion. Those things don't go away. It's fun. I love coming here on the first day of spring training. The energy is great, and it just feels good.

CY: What's the biggest difference in the game since your family purchased the Cubs?

TR: I think a big shift, at least from my perspective in the game, is how much time is spent on the business of baseball now. People spend so much time talking about the collective bargaining agreement and how much players make. The players' salaries have gone up pretty substantially in 10 years, the payrolls have gone up in 10 years, and I just think it has become a bigger part of how people talk about the game.

CY: When you arrived, your family set out three goals. You've essentially accomplished them all at this point. Wrigley is restored, you've won the World Series, and you have a good relationship in the community. What does the next decade look like for the Cubs' ownership group?

TR: The first thing is to be consistent on the winning side. It was never our goal to just win one World Series and move on. We want to be like the teams that seem to always be in the mix. As much as we don't like the Cardinals as our archenemy, you have to respect the fact that they put out winning seasons year after year after year. We have to be one of those teams and be consistent and get our chance every year to make the playoffs. Once in the playoffs, anything can happen. On the ballpark, I think it really is about maintaining it and trying not to let what happened to Wrigley before happen again. We have to really have a thorough maintenance plan and schedule and keep it up and keep investing as it goes, so you don't end up with the kind of mess that we inherited.

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That also goes into what's happening just outside — make sure that we're doing with Gallagher Way what we can to make the gameday better and just keep improving the fan experience. Then, on the community side, we think we might be looking for some bigger community investments at some point here in the near future. Something a little more substantial that we can really put our stamp on, but it's not there yet.

CY: The first eight years of your ownership were all about building and becoming a winner. Fans couldn't have been happier, but people get used to winning quickly. Do you feel like the dynamic has changed between your family and the fan base, or is that just a natural evolution?

TR: I think it's pretty natural. People have pretty high standards for the team, and you want them to have high standards. You really want people to expect success,

and when they don't get success, they're disappointed. I think there was a period of time when Cubs fans were happy with any little hints of success, and now that's changed. People want to win, and we want to win, too.

CY: After years of construction, the 1060 Project is now in the rearview mirror. How does it feel to finally have the major work on Wrigley Field completed?

TR: It feels great, and I give credit to all the people who put all the time in to do all the work, all the planning, all the execution, because it really had to come together. Literally, if you took our strategic plan from 2010 and read it, it happened. It happened on the field and off the field. It's just a great tribute to all the people that did all the planning and all the work.

CY: Obviously, you had a plan going into the restoration, but was there any way to really know what you were getting into?

TR: Well, I think you really can't know what you're getting into when you're repairing a 100-year-old ballpark. A lot of the work we did was work we didn't expect to do just because no one had ever looked at it. You take out a wall, and you find a piece of steel that's been compromised. Or you dig up the cement, and you find a footing for a steel pillar that isn't up to code anymore. So there were lots of surprises. There was no way to tell 100 percent, but ultimately it was just a matter of we were going to do what we had to do to get it right. Measure twice, cut once.

CY: Is it a measure of pride for you that Wrigley Field is still standing when some of the other great ballparks — Yankee Stadium, for example — have fallen victim to the wrecking ball?

TR: It's a matter of pride that it's still standing. It's a matter of pride that it's still the ballpark your great grandfather would recognize. And it's a matter of pride that it looks on the outside as good as it ever

did, which we put it back to, like, 1935. It's authentic, and it's new at the same time.

CY: Pulling that stone off the walls at Clark and Addison was the right move.

TR: Oh, my God. It was hideous. Wrigley Field looked like an old parking garage in the winter. Now it's beautiful, and we'll keep it that way.

CY: Another major plan came to fruition with the launch of the Marquee Sports Network. Why is this something you wanted for the organization?

TR: There are a lot of reasons why this is right for the organization. First of all, and most of all, it's really right for the fans. We're going to have one channel that will be focused on the Cubs. We'll be able to do our own programming. We'll be able to put on all of our spring training games. We'll be able to bring in all of our own announcers. Basically, it's what Cubs fans should want in their sports network.

Secondly, it's great for the ballclub. Ultimately, this does give us a little bit more financial flexibility down the line, and it will be something that will help us. Like I've said before, if you want to run with the big dogs, you've got to play that game. If you want to be the Dodgers or the Yankees or the Red Sox, you have to do what is ultimately the best answer for the team financially, as well. I think this is a great thing for the fans and will be a great legacy for us.

CY: Many people were expecting Marquee would immediately translate into more money for the team and that the Cubs would be major players for the Gerrit Coles of the world. Is that an oversimplified view of big-league finances?

TR: As oversimplified as it can get. There are a couple of things. First of all, it will be a while before we really know the full financial impacts, and they're still at risk. This year, because we're getting a late start, it may not be something we can count on in 2020 — and, depending on what happens, maybe not in 2021. We just know over the long run, it



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should be the right answer. Secondly, the way the league salary structure incentives are set up with the competitive balance tax, it's not optimal or logical or even possible to just spend as freely as people wish they could. It's going to be a help, but it comes down to getting the right people on the field and drafting and developing players.

CY: *Even if you have more money coming in, those penalties still kick in if you're over the competitive balance tax.*

TR: I think what people don't understand about the competitive balance tax is it's not just a financial penalty. It is a substantial financial penalty, but it's not just a financial penalty. You can lose draft picks and draft position. On top of that, the money you pay in gets redistributed to the other teams, so that's like a gift for the other teams. It's a lot more complicated than people know.

CY: *A big story of the offseason was the lack of additions to the major-league roster. Do you feel like the changes that were made behind the scenes, from a front-office and organizational standpoint, can make a difference on the field this year?*

TR: We are investing in the future of the team in ways that aren't always obvious to fans. We brought in new personnel

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and restructured the baseball organization to have a focus on development. The paradigm has shifted a lot in baseball from "you get what you get when you draft a player" to "the player is still raw material when they come in, and you can improve them, and the right kind of training will make them better players." We're toward the front end of that. We're not 100 percent on the cutting edge. Some other teams have been further ahead of us, but that's a big focus. Fans just don't get to see it. Ultimately, I don't know how many times you can say it and how many times it can be ignored, but success is about player development. It's about drafting the right guys, bringing them in the organization and getting them to their maximum potential in the shortest period of time. Free agents are an admission of defeat — meaning you didn't develop your own player — and they're a very expensive admission of defeat that limits your flexibility in the future to bring in another one. Your worst dollars are spent on free agents, so you want to make sure you put those dollars to work as best you can. But, ultimately, it comes down to which team is developing players for themselves. That's the team that's likely to win.

CY: *How do you assess where the organization as a whole stands heading into 2020?*

TR: At the major-league level, we have a known entity. We have veteran players who have won big games, and they know how to play the game. The exciting factor this year is they're going to be led by a guy who has the communication skills, the passion, the energy, and this overall leadership that our players will really respond to. I'm expecting big things out of our major-league club because I just think we have the talent and the leadership.

The whole organization has been getting healthier, as well. As you've seen, we've gotten a few more players in the top 100 prospects. Our player development, while maybe we didn't draft as well as we'd like to for the last seven or eight years, we're starting to really develop more players. You see some of those guys coming in here, people that we're pretty excited about for the future. That ultimately will determine if we're going to be competitive in five years, not who we sign.

CY: *Joe Maddon was one of the most successful managers in Cubs history. Why is David Ross the right person and pick up the mantle?*

TR: Joe obviously was a great manager for us and had a really good run here. Everyone would agree it was time for a change. The nice part about bringing in Rossy is it is a change. It really is a different type of energy. After five years of one type of strategy or one type of philosophy, I think the players are going to respond to a new philosophy. That's why I'm so optimistic about 2020.

What defines David Ross is competitiveness and a passion for the game that it can be hard to see from a fan perspective when he's just the backup catcher. When everyone sees him out in front of this team, they're going to understand what his real story is. The guy is a winner, and there's an edge there.

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