



Long, hard slog through Cubs system preps Porter for big job in Houston

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
Posted Tuesday, September 17th, 2013*

If any of his Houston Astros players are down over losing more than 100 games for the third straight year, their manager will tell them tough times won't last.

And if any of the farmhands he encounters via September callup or in spring training feels he's not advancing as far and as fast as he'd like, that same manager will say, I hear you, I've been there, but all's not lost by any means.

While exercising firm, progressive leadership, Bo Porter can also put himself in the place of practically every player he encounters in the Astros organization. He wouldn't even be in the position as the manager supervising a complete rebuilding process if he wasn't the sum of his experiences in a long, hard slog through the Cubs farm system from 1994 to 1999.

Porter was a 40th-round draft choice who finally fought his way for a cup of coffee with the Cubs, but he never really had a true shot to stick as a big-league regular. No matter. His destiny was different.

"Whether or not he would have played more, (through) a different set of circumstances, is neither here nor there," said Dan Radison, the Astros' assistant hitting coach who was Cubs' first-base coach in Porter's brief stay in 1999. "He was still going to wind up here (as a manager) no matter what. This is inevitable. His playing career was (full of) circumstances. Was he going to manage in the big leagues? That was going to happen no matter what."

If any one of his players need a jolt of fortitude, they came to the right man. Porter may have graduated on time as a student-athlete at the University of Iowa with a bachelor's in communications studies, but he surely possesses a PhD in fortitude in a playing career that took him in a different direction than he first projected.

"I'm a firm believer that tough times don't last; tough people do," Porter said. "A lot of people think that circumstances or situations dictate who it is you're supposed to be or who you should be. I'm a firm believer that when you find yourself going through adver-



After his long slog through the Cubs farm system as a player, Bo Porter can handle the rebuilding process of the Houston Astros. Photo credit Keith Allison. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/keithallison/>



A stint as a Marlins coach was part of the preparation process for managing in the majors for Bo Porter (right). Photo courtesy of the University of Iowa.

pitcher-slugger from Texas also picked on top. Ozzie Timmons. Robin Jennings. Pedro Valdes. Brant Brown, a sweet hitter and slick-fielding first baseman blocked by Mark Grace, and shifted to the outfield and a strange fate awaiting him in the September sky above Milwaukee's County Stadium.

All were ahead of Porter in the system and in the front-office's evaluations. By the time Porter reached Double-A in 1998, the Cubs drafted would-be superstar center fielder Corey Patterson third in the country. He was squeezed from every direction.

Porter was barely on the radar, anyway. A stellar defensive back at Iowa, Newark (N.J.) product Porter was the Hawkeyes' captain and MVP in 1994. He also was a center fielder who turned some scouts' heads. Ed Ford persuaded then-Cubs scouting director Al Goldis to pick Porter way down in the draft in 1993. The low pick was for good reason – word was Porter could be headed to the NFL.

“He hadn't really decided whether he'd pursue the NFL or MLB,” said Astros third-base coach Dave Trembley, who managed Porter at three stops in the Cubs system. “In fact he had an agreement with the Cubs and Jim Hendry in Daytona in 1995 to possibly pursue the NFL.

sity or faced with adverse situations, it actually makes you take a look in the mirror and really figure out who you are.

“I think we're all a combination of all our experiences along with the experiences of the people we've had the pleasure of spending time around. One of the beauties of minor-league baseball and the way the game is set up is after the draft takes place and everybody enters the minor leagues, it becomes about production and who's going to advance.

“None of that (bonus money) matters. The only place where that matters is how much rope a guy is going to get or how much opportunity. Everybody is going to get some level of opportunity.”

Maligned as it was, and would be for years to come up to the present, the Cubs farm system spewed forth outfielders in the 1990s as if the position was going out of style.

Platoon of outfielders ahead of Porter

There was Doug Glanville, the Ivy League product drafted No. 1. Brooks Kieschnick, a

“I took him to a tryout with the Dolphins. When he got done with the tryout, he asked me, ‘What do you think?’ I asked him ‘What do you want to do?’ He said, ‘I want to play both.’ I asked him what do you really want? He was a Brian Jordan-type player. I told him you can both, but if you pursue both, it will take you longer to go to the big leagues. I told him the truth, he trusted me and he made it.”

Divided loyalties between sports cost prospects time. And Porter wasn’t the only two-sport outfielder in the Cubs system. Hendry drafted former Georgia quarterback and wannabe-Dallas Cowboy Quincy Carter in 1996.

Porter started at low-A Peoria in 1994, squeezing in a partial season of baseball before another year in the defensive backfield in Iowa City. He’d go on to struggle at the plate for his first three years, not rising beyond Class-A. In fact, he was already 24 – very old for the low minors – when he was demoted to low-A Rockford of the Midwest League in 1996.

Finally, the hitting light clicked for Porter in 1997 with 17 homers and a .307 average at Daytona. He was given a short taste of Double-A at Orlando, then stayed at that level when the Cubs affiliate moved to West Tennessee. He blossomed with the Diamond Jaxx in 1998, leading the Southern League in steals with 50 and triples in 11. That performance still did not earn him a promotion to the Cubs’ 40-man roster.

“He was relentless working,” Trembley said. “I think that’s the key to anyone achieving success. They persevere. I had everyone one of those guys (the parade of outfielders). If you rated guys by tools, Bo was at the top. If you rated guys where they were presently, they were ahead of Bo at the present time.

“In ‘94, I had Doug (Glanville). I told Doug I didn’t know if he had a long-term future with the Cubs, because there were so many people ahead of him, but he would play in the big leagues for a long time.”

Natural leadership surfaced in minors

More important things than sheer numbers were transpiring with Porter and his relationship to his teammates. Hayden Fry’s mentoring and his on-field leadership in football began to also translate to a first among equals with Porter’s minor-league teams.

“He’s very competitive, very organized,” Trembley said. “Attention to detail is probably Bo’s strength. It’s very uncommon (for a minor-league player). Most guys in the minors, their focus is on themselves. It’s not on the team, not looking at the big picture. I thought Bo Porter is relentless in what he wanted and how we going to go about achieving it.

“He makes you feel at ease. People are attracted to him. He’s a leader. He has leadership skills. He leads by example. I thought on our club in ’95 that won the Florida



Dave Trembley, who managed Porter in the Cubs farm system, is now one of his Astros coaches. Photo credit Keith Allison. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/keithallison/>

State League championship, he was *the* man on that club. We had some pretty good players on that club – Kevin Orie and Jose Molina, who both got to the majors. As he progressed through his minor-league career, it was pretty evident he was going to stay in the game a long time, after he was through playing.”

Porter merely was being himself.

“I’m one of those guys where I care about my teammates and I’m more concerned about things being done right,” he said. “I’m a vocal person. If there’s something on my mind, I’m not afraid to share it. I’m a firm believer that leaders are more concerned about being right; losers are more concerned about being liked.

“It was never done from a standpoint of me trying to tell someone what to do. It was more a caring place of we’re trying to win. If you’re trying to win, then you were open to the discussion. If you’re not trying to win, then we will find out from the discussion this guy doesn’t want to win.”

As his three-time manager, Trembley imprinted his own style on Porter in rounding out the mature baseball personality.

“There are so many life lessons (Trembley) was able to teach me,” Porter said. “He was basically a person that I admired because of his level of preparation, his commitment to the game, his respect for the game. He taught me all those things and showed me why they were important.

“This is what professionalism is all about. For that I thank him. It’s one of those relationships that started out as a manager-player relationship and it became a relationship that went beyond the ballpark and the field. I think we’ll always have that special relationship.”



Bo Porter was a top defensive back under Hayden Fry at Iowa, earning Hawkeye team MVP honors in his senior year. Photo courtesy of the University of Iowa.

If Porter had a chance to envelop himself in bitterness, it was during the 1999 season, when he seemed ready for the majors. First, he was blocked by Sammy Sosa in right and Henry Rodriguez in left. Ex-Sox Lance (One Dog) Johnson was in center. Porter got a brief callup in May, then headed back down to Triple-A Iowa, where over 111 games he slugged 27 homers, drove in 64 runs, batted .292 with a .396 on-base percentage. Porter also drew 65 walks in 491 plate appearances. But outfielder Roosevelt

Brown, an import from the Braves organization, had the slightly better year statistically and got the call before Porter.

Porter recorded just 26 Cubs at-bats, getting five hits, in 1999. He also picked the wrong year to feed off any positive vibes. All were negative on a Cubs team that played similarly to the 2013 Sox. Jim Riggleman's sad-sackers went 24-64 from mid-June to early September, going from nine above .500 to 29 below.

Wrong time, wrong team

Radison knew about the Porter's tools. The right atmosphere for evaluating them at the big-league level was in some other season.

"That was not a legitimate chance for him," Radison said. "When I was there, nobody ever said to Bo Porter, 'Hey, look, go in there and see what you could do.' It seemed like so many guys were coming and going."

As a desperate front office swept out Riggleman, Radison, other field personnel and a slew of players, Porter was caught up in the cyclone of change. He was let go via the Rule 5 draft and ended up in the Oakland organization in 2000. He moved on to Texas in 2001 and finally finished up in the Braves' farm system. The prospect had become a suspect and then a has-been.

But that's not how Porter viewed his career path.

"I don't look back," he said. "I believe God has me exactly where it is supposed to be. I believe all the experiences and all the different paths in which He sent my life down, He sent me down those paths to prepare for me for what it is the world he has for me.

"I don't question any of my decisions. I believe everything that happens is the way it's supposed to happen."

Porter's destiny was to draw a paycheck as a leader. Only a year after his last minor-league at-bat, he was hired as a Florida Marlins' Class-A hitting coach in 2005. In 2006, he made his managerial debut at Class-A Jamestown of the New York-Penn League. Then, in succession, he served on the coaching staffs of the Marlins, Diamondbacks and Nationals before being named Astros manager on Sept. 27, 2012 under the new Jim Crane ownership.

Old home week on coaching staff

Interestingly, Porter has a slew of old Cubs and Chicago-area connections on his coaching staff. In addition to Trembley and Radison, he retained two-time ex-Cub (1990 and 1997) Dave Clark as first-base coach. Old Marlins coaching colleague John Mallee, a popular off-season hitting coach around his Schererville, Ind., home is now hitting coach.

Porter has an open door of opportunity for Astros kids in building back the franchise.

"I tell all our young guys this: When we go to spring training, it was the land of opportunity," he said. "You will never go to a major-league spring training and have as much

opportunity to be in the major leagues as we have on our team this year. Yes, my experience coming up in the minor leagues in the Cubs organization, with all of those prospects and all of those outfielders, I (felt) had just as good of a chance as everybody else. I just have to take advantage of the opportunity.”

Riggleman will be proud of his '99 callup in another way. Now Triple-A manager in the Reds' system, Riggleman is a longtime firm believer managers should be among the biggest publicists for their teams. That means being accessible and forthcoming to the media, as the conduit to the fans.

Porter fortunately is a kindred soul to Riggleman.

“The No. 1 job as manager is do everything you can to get your players to play to your potential,” he said. “That’s the daily job you have.

“From an organizational standpoint, I believe the manager has to be front and center. We’re in front of the media every day. We are basically the voice of the organization from a daily standpoint. That’s why I think it’s so important the owner, the GM, the front office and the manager work together as a cohesive unit to send out the organizational philosophy and what it is to be a Houston Astro each and every day. We do that as the Astros.

“You’re talking to your current fans, you’re talking to your future fans, you’re talking to your players, you’re talking to your organization, you’re talking to Major League Baseball. It’s a full-time job.”

Porter never glided about the Wrigley Field outfield as a big contributor. But in his diverted journey, he learned the right values and now has the right job to practice what he preaches.