

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Robert a great Sox 'get,' but more kids need to come with him

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White Sox fans need to step back and take a deep breath.

Their rebuild kicked into a higher gear with the \$26 million signing of Cuban star outfielder Luis Robert. Meanwhile, the clock ticks toward the eventual promotion of fellow Cuban mega-prospect Yoan Moncada.

The future, though, of consistent contendership, if not an outright World Series title, cannot rush backward from whatever date fate has in store for the Sox. Fans who are filling out their eventual October lineups ought to cool down and realize the buildup will be a long process, full of potholes, never linear.

Neither Moncada nor Robert, or both together, are saviors. No young player should be tagged with that expectation. In reality, nothing significant will happen in the rebuild until not only Moncada and Robert prove they're big-league-ready, but they are also joined by a wave of position-player prospects coming up to bid for Sox jobs.

Multiple young players coming up, and succeeding, together is the way the "Piranha" Minnesota Twins percolated to frustrate the Sox in the early 2000s. For all their reputation on pitching, the 1990s Atlanta Braves always had at least a couple of kids coming up to freshen the lineup. And, most recently, the Cubs championship was triggered by a wave of kids arriving in a two- to three-year period. Anthony Rizzo and Kris Bryant could not have done it all by themselves.

The Sox still need continued success in the draft. With Robert's arrival into the organization, they have basically shot their bolt in mega-international signings.



Luis Robert (left) and Sox general manager Rick Hahn show off his No. 1 uniform at Robert's introductory press conference. Photo by Ron Vesely/Chicago White Sox.

Sox GM Rick Hahn said of the Sox off-season, home-stretch pursuit of Robert that it was time “to enter the penalty phase in investing in one single prospect” instead of spread-ing money over multiple signings in corralling Robert. “Marco (Paddy, international scouting chief) was willing to personally suffer the penalties.” The Sox would sacrifice potential future signings with the Robert deal.

The move puts an even greater premium on Hahn scoring good prospects in projected near-future deals for the likes of Jose Quintana, Melky Cabrera, David Robertson, Todd Frazier and even the revived Avisail Garcia. Robert’s signing bridges the gap between the Chris Sale and Adam Eaton trades that began the rebuild in the off-season and whatever prospect haul Hahn can import in the next year. He simply cannot rush the trading process nor under-sell veterans just to get warm bodies in return.



Just like Hahn cannot rush Robert, whose cut body measured at 6-foot-2, 210 pounds gives off a five-tool sheen. But he is still just 19. Al Kaline and Robin Yount as teen-age wonderkids come around only once a generation.

As Luis Robert and Rick Hahn marked the former's signing with the Sox, a photo of Minnie Minoso (left) graced the proceedings. The Sox's history of Cuban players dating back to Minoso in 1951 played a factor in Robert's signing. Photo by Ron Vesely/Chicago White Sox.

Hahn described Robert as a “dynamic, potential impact talent...having the potential to be an impact center fielder for the long term. A special combination of power and speed. He’s one of the top outfield prospects in the game.”

Still, fans cannot automatically expect a top-rated Cuban player to live up to all his advance billings. The Sox went through the same process six years ago with Dayan Viciedo. The drumbeat was steady to promote Viciedo without an obvious outfield opening in 2011. Then, after the burly Viciedo got off to a good start, he settled into a numbing mediocrity that booked only a short big-league career.

Remember how Jorge Soler was considered part of the Cubs’ “Core Four” a few years ago? Soler peaked on the North Side as a player with tremendous power, but holes in his swing and defensive questions. He’s now trying to get it back together with the Kansas City Royals.

Of course, Robert has a good Cuban role model, on and off the field, in avowed mentor Jose Abreu. He will not fail for lack of trying or dedication.

“A baseball player who likes to play the game hard,” was Robert’s self-description through interpreter Billy Russo. “I like to win. On the field, I like to fight.”

The Sox did everything right in scouting and wooing Robert.

“I feel comfortable with this team and the people I met with,” he said.

The Sox’s proud history as a pioneering team employing Cubans also factored into Robert’s decision. An image of Minnie Minoso was displayed at his introductory press conference at Guaranteed Rate Field. Any Cuban player knows the story of Minoso, the first black Latin player in the majors with Cleveland in 1949 who became a star with the Sox the moment he was traded to Chicago two years later.



Jose Abreu (left) and Yoan Moncada both contributed greetings as fellow Cubans in the Sox recruiting video for Luis Robert.

A comprehensive video had Abreu and Moncada doing sales pitches as his countrymen. But the

highlight of these visual images was manager Rick Renteria’s “talking straight to me,” Robert said. Renteria’s positive personality, bi-lingual talents and ability to relate to young players was the big attraction in his hiring by Hahn.

The Sox have scouted both ability and character in Robert since he was a young teenager. But the maturation process must continue for a few years to come. Major League Baseball is the greatest game of failure that has even been invented.

The onus will shift to Robert. But not everything as he rises – if he rises, to be blunt -- will be in his control. He cannot win a championship even if his every listed potential is fulfilled. No player exists on an island. Robert will need both quality and quantity coming up before, with and after him.

The Sox’s future is increasingly bright. But it’s still just a future. Enjoy the journey, Sox fans, but never get ahead of yourselves.