

With the Bulls a bust, baseball season beckons

When the Bulls' season ended last year after game six against the Detroit Pistons, I predicted the past off-season would be critically important for General Manager John Paxson. I was anxious to see what Paxson was going to do with free agency, the draft and trades. Unfortunately, despite all the rumors about Kobe, nothing significant transpired. Sure, new players were brought in through free agency and the draft, but the core of the team was still pretty much the same with the same questions being asked. Who is the go-to guy? Who can score in the low post? Who is the team leader?

After an opening night loss in overtime to the New Jersey Nets, I predicted a 39-win season and a first-round playoff elimination for the Bulls. I said at the time that it wouldn't even surprise me if the team didn't make the playoffs. But as pessimistic as I was about the Bulls' chances, I certainly never imagined that the team would freefall like it has. With 13 games to go in the season, the Bulls have only 27 wins. They won't even sniff the 39-win total that I predicted. This team hasn't even won three games in a row all year, so let's not even entertain the idea of them going 12-and-1 in the final 13. And the playoffs? Forget about it.

As a member of the media, the season has been both wonderful and awful to cover. Each day, as a new story would come out of the Berto Center, I would say to myself, "OK, they have hit rock bottom." Then something else would happen later that week or even the next day that would sink the organization to a new low.

We've seen a pathetic lack of effort at home games, head coach Scott Skiles being fired on Christmas Eve, players suspending other players, players not showing up for practice or arriving late for games, rookies yelling at interim coach Jim Boylan and veterans questioning his authority. Worse yet, while some new players seem to be more concerned with having fun than winning, the core of this team — Kirk Hinrich, Luol Deng and Ben Gordon — have done nothing to right the ship, the bow of which is now completely underwater.

What an unbelievable mess! And it doesn't look as though things will be getting better anytime soon. I hope Paxson doesn't have any family vacations planned this summer because he's going to need every minute of every day to fix

ONE on ONE

with **Matt Abbatacola**
of *WSCR 670 AM*
The Score



the mess he created. If he doesn't get it right, he can plan as many family vacations in 2009 as he wants because his calendar will be wide open.

Lou's Fave Five

Grab Lou Piniella's cell phone and you may find the top five friends in his calling circle are Carlos Zambrano, Ted Lilly, Rich Hill, Ryan Dempster and Jason Marquis. Is that last name a little surprising? Not really. While Jon Lieber will start the season in the bullpen, he likely won't stay there long. Marquis is being shopped around by General Manager Jim Hendry. It's a smart move to have Marquis, who has pitched pretty well in spring training, in the rotation. How can you sell the idea of Marquis as a starter to another team if he can't even crack your own rotation? The value of a dependable starter is much higher than a disgruntled relief pitcher.

Even the most casual of baseball fans knows that championships are won with pitching and defense. So when evaluating the Cubs' starting rotation, you have to ask, "Is this the starting rotation of a championship caliber team?" I don't think so.

Zambrano has not won 20 games in a season. He very well could this year. He certainly has the ability to do so. What he hasn't shown for an entire season yet is the mental ability to be the ace of this staff and keep his emotions in check during pressure situations. Zambrano himself said earlier this spring training, "I just have to pitch with more intelligence, and knowing the situation, knowing what's going on in the game." That sounds to me like a guy who hasn't put the physical and mental parts of his game together yet. If the Cubs want to win it all, Carlos must get his act together for a full season.

Lilly is a career .500 pitcher who had one of those career years in 2007. Can he repeat or even out-perform his

2007 numbers? He will have to if the Cubs are to win a World Series.

Hill was 11-and-8 last year in his first full season as a major league starter. While not an exceptional talent, he will develop into a No. 2 or No. 3 starter in a big league rotation. But it will not happen this year. Hill has the potential but will have more growing pains this year as a starter.

Lieber, as we learned, will start the season in the bullpen until Marquis is traded. He will be a nice fifth starter for the team and his veteran leadership is an added bonus. He was the last Cubs pitcher to earn 20 wins in a season, but those days are long gone for Lieber. The Cubs will be lucky to get 25 starts and a .500 record from him this year.

Dempster is right where he's always wanted to be. Last June, when there was talk that he would be moving back into the rotation, he couldn't have been more excited. Let's get real though. He hasn't started a game since 2003. If he wins 12 games, it will be a great year. I don't believe he will though. Ten wins sounds more like it.

Now put all of that together. Does it spell World Series Championship caliber rotation to you?

What's the rush with Fields?

I know that Josh Fields is the future of the White Sox at third base, or so I'm being told all the time by fans and the White Sox organization. Unfortunately, the future isn't today or this season.

It's almost as if most Sox fans would be angry to have Joe Crede as the opening day third baseman. In reality, the Sox are a better team this year with a healthy Crede in the line-up as much as possible. If Fields plays this year in Triple A and some games with the big league club, what's the harm going to be? None!

If Crede gives the team anything close to what he's capable of giving, he will be a great asset while also raising his future trade value. So let's not rush to kick Crede to the curb. If you believe having Fields in the everyday line-up is the final piece to a White Sox World Series Championship for the 2008 season, then you, my friend, are blinded by your loyalty and love for your White Sox.

Trust me, I know all about that as a longtime Cubs fan.



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Chicago Sports Schedules*

*APRIL 2008

BLACKHAWKS (Hockey) Home games only

DATE	OPPONENT	TIME (PM)
April 2	Detroit	7:30
April 4	Nashville	7:30

STEEL (Hockey) Home games only

DATE	OPPONENT	TIME (PM)
April 4	Ohio Junior	7:30
April 5	Green Bay	7:30

WOLVES (Hockey) Home games only

DATE	OPPONENT	TIME (PM)
April 6	Quad City	3:00
April 12	Rockford	7:00
April 13	Peoria	3:00

BULLS (Basketball) Home games only

DATE	OPPONENT	TIME (PM)
April 1	Boston	7:30
April 5	Washington	7:30
April 11	Cleveland	6:00
April 13	Orlando	6:00
April 16	Toronto	7:30

SLAUGHTER (Arena football) Home games only

DATE	OPPONENT	TIME (PM)
April 4	Miami Valley	7:30
April 19	Milwaukee	7:30

RUSH (Arena football) Home games only

DATE	OPPONENT	TIME (PM)
April 20	Grand Rapids	2:00
May 19	Los Angeles	7:00

SHAMROX (Lacrosse) Home games only

DATE	OPPONENT	TIME (PM)
April 5	Philadelphia	7:00
April 26	Minnesota	7:00

CUBS (Baseball) Home games only

DATE	OPPONENT	TIME (PM)
April 2	Milwaukee	1:20
April 3	Milwaukee	1:20
April 4	Houston	1:20
April 5	Houston	12:05
April 6	Houston	1:20
April 15	Cincinnati	7:05
April 16	Cincinnati	7:05
April 17	Cincinnati	1:20
April 18	Pittsburgh	1:20

WHITE SOX (Baseball) Home games only

DATE	OPPONENT	TIME (PM)
April 7	Minnesota	3:05
April 9	Minnesota	7:11
April 10	Minnesota	7:11
April 11	Detroit	7:11
April 12	Detroit	12:05
April 13	Detroit	1:05
April 14	Oakland	7:11
April 15	Oakland	1:05
April 22	New York Yankees	7:11
April 23	New York Yankees	7:11

COUGARS (Baseball) Home games only

DATE	OPPONENT	TIME (PM)
April 7	Burlington	3:00
April 8	Burlington	Noon
April 9	Burlington	6:00
April 10	Burlington	Noon
April 14	South Bend	6:00
April 15	South Bend	Noon
April 16	South Bend	Noon
April 25	Dayton	6:30
April 26	Dayton	5:00
April 27	Dayton	1:00
April 28	Fort Wayne	6:00
April 29	Fort Wayne	Noon
April 30	Fort Wayne	Noon