

# Sox championship puts pressure on Cubs

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With the Bears being eliminated from the NFL playoffs, and the Bulls and Blackhawks underachieving, I can now turn my complete attention to the Cubs. Spring training is right around the corner, and the Cubs first exhibition game is Mar. 2. Personally, I can't wait to see the Cubs take the field.

More than any other season, the Cubs are pressured to win. After the White Sox won the World Series last year, the heat is on the Cubs to win their own championship. The Cubs haven't won a Series title since 1908, and I really hope their drought doesn't reach the century mark.

The "wait 'till next year" attitude doesn't work for Cubs fans anymore. Fans don't want to go to Wrigley Field for a social event; fans want to see a winning team. The majority of the Cubs fan base isn't even old enough to appreciate the Cubs last World Series appearance in 1945.

I was so disappointed last year when the Cubs couldn't even finish with a .500 record. The 79-83 record that the Cubs posted in 2005 doesn't work for me. Derrek Lee had an MVP-caliber season, but few other players were reliable. Kerry Wood, Mark Prior, Aramis Ramirez, and Nomar Garciaparra spent 296 days combined on the disabled list.

I am already looking forward to a better season. At the very least, I want to see the Cubs in the playoffs. Cubs GM Jim Hendry was not satisfied with last year's results and has worked improve the team through free agency and trades.

In a trade with the Florida Marlins, the Cubs received Juan Pierre in exchange for minor leaguers. Pierre is a speedy centerfielder who will anchor the Cubs lineup in 2006. Pierre will be a key component of the 2006 team, because he gives the Cubs a pure leadoff hitter and will be a threat to steal bases, something the Cubs struggled at in 2005.

Other newcomers expected to make a difference are relief pitchers Bobby Howry and Scott Eyre, outfielder Jacque Jones, utility player John Mabry. Eyre and Howry are upgrades to a shaky bullpen and they will serve as better set-up men for closer Ryan Dempster. The addition of Jones makes the Cubs lineup more versatile, instead of a lineup filled with home run hitters. Mabry will be valuable off the bench, as a pinch hitter, and in the field where he can play four different positions.

The additions will help, but the Cubs will need more if they have any type of playoff aspirations. The Cubs need a starting rotation that is healthy during the entire season, in order to compete with the best of the National League. Like the White Sox rotation that carried the team to the World Series, Carlos Zambrano, Mark Prior, Greg Maddux, Glendon Rusch, and Jerome Williams, need to stay away from injuries and have solid seasons for the Cubs to make it to the playoffs. Manager Dusty Baker and pitching coach Larry Rothschild need to use a pitch count and not overwork their pitchers, so they will be ready during the stretch.

Another concern I have is with rookies Ronny Cedeno and Matt Murton. The two rookies are scheduled to start at shortstop and left field, respectively. Cedeno and Murton have shown promise, but they will have to be able to hold their own for an entire season. This season, the Cubs will need them to play consistently and be able to meet the expectations that the organization has set for them.

Even with all the question marks, I still believe the Cubs have a chance to be better than expected. The Cubs still have Lee, Ramirez, and Zambrano. Every year at this time, Cubs fans enter with optimism and question marks regarding their team. This year, I hope the question marks will be answered and the Cubs will be on the top of the baseball world in 2006.

