

# Welcome to Theo-Fest 2012

## An Usher's Point of View of the 2012 Cubs Convention

**Published: Jan. 22nd, 2012**

“Hope springs eternal” is an overused expression in sports. But nothing more adequately describes the mood at the Cubs Convention, an annual gathering of Cubs legends, players, coaches, and fans.

The Cubs Convention just wrapped up its 27th installment this past Sunday. As an employee of the Cubs and life long fan, this was the second year I was able to soak in the 72-hour marathon of all things Cubs. But this Convention had a different feel to it than ones before it; it seemed as if the fans, players, and front office executives were finally all on the same page.

To most sports fans, this would seem to be the only logical way of thinking. But any Cubs fan understands that 103 years of futility doesn't just “happen”. One reason behind generations of dismay was the lack of a singular plan amongst the Cub's brass. You don't simply throw money blindly at big name free agents and expect success, which was exactly the route former GM Jim Hendry decided to take. Does the name Milton Bradley ring a bell? How about Nomar Garciaparra or Kosuke Fukudome? I think I've made my point.

Maybe teams like the Red Sox can follow this plan in the short term, but it would be practical for them because of the one step their organizations took that the Cubs have never taken: rebuilding from within. Hmmm, such a novel concept, isn't it? It certainly seemed that way for the Cubs, who have never been fully committed to stock-piling young talent with high ceilings. That is, until 2012.

Enter Theo Epstein, the mastermind behind the Red Sox team that broke their own 86 year curse in 2004, and then for kicks won it all again in 2007. Both teams had one aspect in common: home-grown talent. Having worn out his welcome in Boston, Cubs owner Tom Ricketts jumped all over the opportunity to sign Theo and reunite him with his former front office mates Jed Hoyer and Jason McLeod. All three are dedicated to breaking an even more infamous curse in exactly the same manner as they broke the first.

The fans finally got a first hand look at the master plan in action on Day 1. A series of transactions left the Cubs with a more... unique roster than fans are used to seeing. Less “star-power”, more guys that make you say “who?” when you hear their names, and an oddly confident sense that the latter will transform into the former over time.

The Grand Ballroom was packed during the Opening Ceremonies, and the familiar voice of Pat Hughes introduced Cubs legends such as Ernie Banks, Fergie Jenkins, and Billy Williams. The amount of talent on the balcony stirred up emotional memories and adoration. Every fan was reminded why they should be proud to be a Cubs fan.

After the new front office and coaching staff members were introduced to long and loud applause, the time came to introduce the fans to their future. Literally.

Names like Anthony Rizzo and Brett Jackson took place of names like Carlos Zambrano and Aramis Ramirez that fans were so accustomed to hearing. The applause could be heard just as loud for the young guns as it could be for the veterans, showing that the fans were in full support of Epstein's blueprint for success. Theo and new coach Dale Sveum were amongst those who threw out the ceremonial "first pitches", and the festivities officially began.

The fans went to smaller breakout sessions that went on for the rest of Day 1. I was lucky enough to see Theo Epstein, Jed Hoyer, Dale Sveum, and many others have an extended Q&A with local reporters that aired on WGN AM 720. The amount of times Epstein's answers were interrupted by loud ovations reminded me of a State of the Union Address. He said everything with a calm confidence that spilled over to the fans. They truly believed every word and his ability to "do", not just talk about doing. What stood out to me the most was Theo's response to a question about what the future holds, "Baseball, like life, has its ups and downs. Anything worth fighting for doesn't come easy... When we do succeed, it will be even better because we've experienced the struggle and the journey." It was comforting to finally hear someone with power have a goal as well as a grip on reality.

Day 2 is always the most interactive day of the Convention. From the young to the old, there is always something to do. A huge market for memorabilia and apparel is packed from open to close. Small breakout sessions on the topics like scouting and Cubs legends took place all morning. Hitting and pitching clinics by pros were held for the kids while parents could get face to face with their childhood heroes at one of the 5 autograph stages that ran the entire day.

But the older fans weren't the only ones who were able to get up close and personal with their idols. Younger fans who relate with the current Cubs got their chance to meet their favorite players, which is an experience every young fan should have. The memories made from that experience is what the Convention is all about and will last a lifetime.

Case in point, on Saturday I met a young girl who was about 12 years old. She was waiting for Alfonso Soriano for 6 1/2 hours in the same spot. She spoke with me about how much she loves him and wants to name her kids after him. I walked up to the stage with her at 4:30PM to finally meet him and she started to cry out of sheer joy. Alfonso signed a picture, a ball and a bat for her and took 3 pictures with her. That was probably the most exciting moment of her life, and to be a part of that was heartwarming. Despite all of the angst for Soriano that many fans have for him, the sheer emotion of the situation took over. For that moment, everything was at ease. The best part was Alfonso's reaction; he loved every second of it. I can remember having experiences like that at Wrigley Field when I was young which laid the foundation for my lifelong relationship with the Cubs. The Convention is like a factory for those experiences.

Day 3 was pretty subdued as usual. The crowd was much smaller for the last few players who were signing that day. But Sunday capped what was most likely the most promising Convention ever. The unwavering confidence of new team president Theo Epstein and the total support of the rebuilding process by the fans made the Convention feel like Ground Zero for an incredible journey ahead. That, mixed with the classic Cubs nostalgia and the undying support for the “Lovable Losers”, made for one of the most enjoyable weekends of my life.

Hopefully you join me next year, maybe Theo will have some hardware to show off... Well, maybe NEXT next year. But hey, Theo said it himself, the journey matters just as much as the end goal.

Enjoy the journey.