

Sports Commentary

Don't let the clubhouse door hit you, Dusty

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Enough is enough. It's time for Dusty Baker to leave Wrigleyville in his rear-view mirror.

It seems as if Baker keeps being given chances and keeps proving that he isn't a very competent manager. The Cubs' general manager Jim Hendry—who just signed a contract extension—needs to bite the bullet by eating the rest of Baker's 2006 salary to get him out of town—fast.

Hendry seems to let Baker get away with mistakes that usually get managers fired. It's as if 12 blunders aren't enough; Hendry will allow a "Baker's" dozen. Hendry's reluctance to make a move should send him packing as well, and club president Andy MacPhail's contract should be shredded for allowing all this to happen.



Cubs shortstop Ronny Cedeno reacts to a wild throw from first baseman Todd Walker. A lack of fundamentals has been a hallmark of Dusty Baker-managed teams. Photo courtesy of KRT Campus.

Where did it all go wrong? Why is the three-time NL Manager of the Year no longer even the best manager in the city? Perhaps he was never that good in the first place.

Mediocre managers can "lead" nine teams in 12 years to 86-plus-win seasons. However \$3.5-million-per-year (Baker's reported salary) managers should get to more than one World Series with those teams.

Baker seems completely to disregard fundamentals as a crucial factor to winning baseball games. He doesn't scold Jacque Jones for getting picked off, apparently doesn't teach his team to hit the cutoff man and clearly does not drill the team on bunting. Don't even get me started on handling pitchers or lefty-righty matchups. Under Baker, the Cubs have become perhaps the least patient team in baseball. In each of his three seasons as the Cubs' manager, Baker's teams have finished in the bottom three in the National League in walks, including dead last in 2005. In all fairness, part of the impatience is due to the poor playing habits of many of Hendry's acquisitions; however, Baker generally does not get the most out of those players.

This can be seen in the lack of wins per dollar spent. The Cubs won 79 games last season, despite spending more than \$87 million in payroll. At more than \$1.1 million a win, the Cubs spent the fourth-most money per victory last season in the National League. While one could fault Hendry for perhaps overpaying players, looking at the 2006 productivity of last year's players now with other teams shows that the choice of players was never the problem.

While Corey Patterson hit a paltry .215, had a 5.13:1 strikeout-to-walk ratio and was sent down to triple-A for the 2005 Cubs, he is flourishing under new coaching this year. Thus far in Baltimore, Patterson is hitting a solid .288. Even more impressive is that he has swiped an MLB-leading 28 bases, while being caught attempting to steal just once. This puts Patterson on pace to steal 81 bases this season, or as many as he stole in four seasons with the Cubs.

He didn't suddenly get fast. He was always fast. Patterson was the five-tool minor leaguer who suddenly barely had a screwdriver while playing with the Cubs. This year, he is on pace to have 11 more walks and 24 fewer strikeouts than a year ago. The only possible explanation? Coaching.

What about Nomar Garciaparra? Garciaparra performed 28 points below his .367 career on-base percentage during his two partial seasons with the Cubs. Perhaps he's just old and injured, thought many, including the Cubs' "brain trust." He certainly hasn't been "washed up" this year, though, with a .351 average, good for first in the National League.

I'm not saying that the Cubs' demise is all Baker's fault. The injuries to Kerry Wood, Mark Prior and Derrek Lee have contributed significantly to the abysmal start to the season, including a 7-22 May. Once again, the finger must be pointed at Hendry, as his inability to add depth to the Cubs' bench has hampered the team's recovery from the three big personnel losses.

Nevertheless, great managers prevail through turmoil, they don't founder in it. Witness the MASH unit that is the New York Yankees this year. Somehow, they have managed to stay within striking distance of American East-leading Boston. While Baker has not been dealt a straight flush, what manager is? Major League managers often don't have the convenience of an All-Star team free of injuries. If they did, they wouldn't be getting paid nine times more than the President of the United States.

Baker's stay in Chicago has not been terrible, but it surely has dragged on for too long. It's time for the Cubs to cut ties with Baker. If Hendry doesn't have the guts to do so, they both should do what Baker's team has been so hesitant to do for three-and-a-half seasons: walk.