

GRANDPA'S LAST STAND

David Ross may be a backup catcher, but he means way more than that to his Cubs teammates. As the veteran stalwart prepares to head off into the sunset, we look back at his career and toward his future to find out what makes him such an indispensable part of the squad.

BY GARY COHEN

The temperature at Fenway Park was a brisk 55 degrees on this mid-October night, but starting

pitcher Jon Lester's hat was sodden with sweat, even though he had faced just four Tigers hitters in the first inning. The notoriously high-strung hurler—edgy as ever—was desperately trying to get his Boston club off to a clean start in Game 1 of the 2013 American League Championship Series.

After striking out Austin Jackson and Torii Hunter, the left-hander quickly ceded line-drive singles to Miguel Cabrera and Prince Fielder to put his team in a two-out jam. As Victor Martinez, coming off a .450 average in the ALDS versus Oakland, strode to the plate, Boston catcher David Ross made a cautionary mound visit.

"He walks out to the mound, and he's like, 'Hey, man, you all

right?'" Lester recalled. "I said something stupid, and he goes, 'All right, well, you got one of the best hitters on the planet up, so good luck with that.' And he turned around and walked back."

♥♥ He knows how to push my buttons without crossing that line, and I think that's a big thing in this game. As soon as you cross that line, you see a lot of guys shut down. Regardless of who you are or how tough you think you are, you cross that line, and you cross that line. It's a matter of 'OK, now me and you need to handle this, as opposed to me worrying about getting the hitter out.'"

— JON LESTER

Oddly, that was exactly the push Lester needed to slow his motor and calm himself down. He quickly worked Martinez into a 1-2 hole and then ran the count full before inducing a groundout to shortstop Stephen Drew to kill the threat.

"That's the type of stuff he says to me on the mound," Lester said. "The stuff only he can get away with saying."

CULT OF PERSONALITY

Major-league rosters are always fascinating to break down. If you take a winning squad and really deconstruct how it was assembled

and measure how the pieces fit (or don't fit) together, no two teams function the same way. When fans look at a playoff-bound club and try to ascertain why it has been successful, the backup catcher is usually nowhere

on the radar—an afterthought to help fill out the roster and perhaps add a little comic relief.

So why, when pressed about who the leader is on this team, do Cubs players unanimously anoint the 39-year-old veteran backstop Ross?

In 15 big-league seasons, the graybeard has played more than 100 games only once. He has posted a career .229/.316/.422 slash line and a 9.8 overall WAR. According to Baseball Reference, the players most similar to him include the likes of Ozzie Virgil, Kelly Stinnett and Jim Pagliaroni.

Yet, everyone from Lester to Theo Epstein to Anthony Rizzo to Jake Arrieta will tell you Ross is invaluable to the Cubs, the driving force that keeps the team running.

"I don't think it's so much the position as it is the personality," said Lester, now in his second year on the North Side and in his fifth year with Ross. "I like to go to Johnny Gomes and Mike Napoli, guys like that. When you're signing a guy, it's more about the full package as opposed to just what he's going to do on the field. ... When you're able to have a guy like him, as far as his clubhouse presence and what he brings to, not only the young guys but the old guys, I think it just adds value to what he does on the field."

During the winter, Ross announced that the 2016 season would be his last as a professional baseball player. In the final year of his career, he has enjoyed a resurgence, posting a 1.5 WAR and a 111 OPS+ (100 is league average) through the beginning of August.

"There is a little bit of freedom knowing that whether I'm good or bad, I'm going home now or as soon as the team thinks I need to go home," Ross said. "I'll go out there and give it all I've got, and if my knee blows, or my back goes out, or I get hit in the hand with a foul ball, or I break my leg, my career is over. So I try to take none of that for granted, and it actually gives you a freedom just to leave it all out there."

But Ross' on-field numbers are almost irrelevant. Sure, it would be nice for all parties if he hit .300 with 25 home runs this year. Still, even if he were to hit .176 with one homer like he did in 2015, he's not going anywhere.

Joe Maddon will be the first to tell you no manager can do his job



STEPHEN GREEN

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without guys in the clubhouse who reinforce the message and keep the players on track. For the Cubs, Ross almost acts like an ancillary coach. He's not afraid to lay down the law, but he does it with such a deft touch and a unique understanding of clubhouse psychology, players never feel threatened or off balance. And his focus is always—always—on winning and playing the game the right way.

"Rossy is a huge part of the fabric of the team," said Epstein, the Cubs president of baseball operations. "He's one of the leaders who keeps everyone accountable and focused on all the different ingredients that go into winning. ... It's pretty unique that it's an intentional thing for him. He's really conscious of the different things that contribute to a winning atmosphere, and he tries to cultivate them. All different types of personalities respond to him."

And that's the magic of David Ross. Pushing 40 and old enough to be many of the young Cubs' (particularly young) father, he not only relates to the grizzled Lester and Lackey set, but he's also tight with the kiddie corps. Kris Bryant and Rizzo famously dubbed him Grandpa Rossy and set up an Instagram account (@grandparossy_3) to chronicle his final



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year in the game as a player. Ross has also trained for the last two years with Rizzo and strength coach Tim Buss in a morning exercise group they call the Breakfast Club.

"He'd kind of like our manager," Bryant said. "He's fun, first off. But at the same time, he can be really serious. He pushes you. He gets the best out of you. On days when you're kind of feeling a little lethargic, he figures ways to pick you up. He says certain things to get you back, snap you back into focusing. He just has all the qualities. That's kind of how I look at him—as a coach to me, almost. But at the same time, he's just an unbelievable teammate. He's an unbelievable friend. I can't say enough good things about him."

Perhaps the best example of the way Ross is valued around the game is the fact that in 15 years of major-league baseball—all of those spent as a backup—Ross has never once gone to camp without a guaranteed contract.

FIELD GENERAL

Ross routinely refers to himself as the worst player on the Cubs. When he looks back at his long career, it's hard for him to fathom what he's accomplished and some of the plaudits that have recently been flung his way by teammates and coaches. As he says, players like David Ortiz and Derek Jeter get retirement tours; not backup catchers.

"I never really thought I'd get a day in the big leagues, much less the 15-year career," Ross said. "Looking back, I just

wanted to play baseball, I enjoyed playing baseball, and doing well at the level I was at. Each year, I got moved up, and it was just neat to me as long as I was playing baseball."

But don't let Ross fool you. Though he constantly downplays his achievements in the game, there is a reason the Cubs signed him to a two-year deal prior to the 2015 season, and it wasn't all about his personality. The man has been in the trenches for 15 years, which makes him the perfect standard-bearer on a team populated with 20-somethings.

Ross was selected by the Dodgers in the seventh round of the 1998 draft after playing at the University of Florida and Auburn. Since making his debut with the Dodgers in 2002, he's pretty much done it all.

Until he hit his mid-30s, by which time his reputation as a clubhouse exemplar was etched in stone, he was consistently an above-average offensive and defensive performer, regularly posting an above 100 OPS+, calling a good game behind the plate and minimizing the running

game. In 2009 with Atlanta, he paced the NL, gunning down 48 percent of potential base stealers, compared to a 29 percent league average. In 2006 with Cincinnati, he hit 21 home runs in 90 games.

He's also been to the postseason six times with five different teams, reaching the pinnacle of the sport when he captured a World Series title with Lester, John Lackey and the 2013 Red Sox. Though he has spent his career as a role player, he has consistently been on the field at key moments and has been a favorite receiver for big-time players. Over the last several years, Ross has essentially been the personal catcher for Lester, who was integral in convincing him to sign in Chicago.

"Unfortunately, I've been stuck with him for a while," Lester joked. "Not by choice, just because we ended up working well together. Forced into it. He knows how to push my buttons without crossing that line, and I think that's a big thing in this game. As soon as you cross that line, you see a lot of guys shut down. Regardless of who you are or how tough you think you are, you cross that line, and you cross that line. It's a matter of 'OK, now me and you need to handle this, as opposed to me worrying about getting the hitter out.' He knows how to push my buttons and get me going, and get me going in the right ways."

LEARNING TO LEAD

Despite his sterling reputation, Ross has very much lived the peripatetic life of a backup catcher, bouncing around to seven different teams and playing under a who's who list of modern major-league managers—everyone from Jim Tracy to Dusty Baker to Bruce Bochy to Terry Francona to Bobby Cox to John Farrell to Maddon.

"Some people would like to have been with one organization their entire career, but, for me, I wouldn't change a thing because I've learned so much from so many different people," Ross said. "I've seen so many different managers, the way winning is done, losing, what losing looks like, what you would change, what you would do differently if you had the chance. I think that's the uniqueness about my career is wearing so many different hats for so many different organizations. It's been a blessing because I've got to learn a ton from other people who have affected me, and I wouldn't change that for the world."

Ross said the light really came on for him while playing for Cox in Atlanta from 2009-12. The legendary Braves skipper had a reputation as a players' manager who knew how to win, supported his troops, always stayed positive and kept the lines of communication open.

Ross' tutorial, however, started well before he came to Atlanta.

When he was still a young player with the Dodgers, he learned at the feet of longtime big leaguer Robin Ventura (now the White Sox manager) and sparkplug Dave Roberts (currently the Dodgers manager), among others. They set the example of how to be a good teammate, how to prepare, how to have fun and how to stay focused even when you're out of the lineup—ultimately, how to be a professional.

"It's weird these guys are managers now, but true, true great human beings on and off the field that showed me just by watching them and by example the right way to do things and how you should go about your business," Ross said. "I really lean on both those guys a lot, looking back, in how I still try to treat others. They treated me with a lot of respect as a young guy. They treated me the same as they did everybody else."

In some ways, it almost seems Ross' entire career has been an apprenticeship in how to be a major-league manager. For his part, Ross isn't sure what he's going to do after he hangs up his spikes. He currently lives in Tallahassee, Florida, with his wife, Hyla, and his three kids, Landri, 9, Cole, 7, and Harper, 1.

Starting this winter, he wants to do the simple things other

people take for granted—drive his kids to school in the morning, spend a summer vacation on the beach with his family, maybe even take a ski trip (something he could never do as a major leaguer for fear of a knee injury).

But if you ask his Cubs coaches and teammates, Ross' second career is abundantly clear.

"He will be [a manager]," Maddon said. "He's got great leadership qualities. I think it starts with that—his ability to relate to a wide range of people, tremendous energy and enthusiasm. He's very bright. He understands the game. He's been a catcher, which I think also matters or helps a lot. He's got all those different qualities. If you put 'manager' and put down a bunch of little boxes to check off, requirements, I think he's got it all. He can talk to the press. He's got a sense of humor. He's got everything going on for him."

Every single player we talked to in the clubhouse repeated this sentiment. Though they all agreed he could have great success in broadcasting as well, they said it would be a shame to take Ross out of the dugout. As it turns out, he has many of the same qualities that make Maddon such a great manager. He's easygoing and funny, but also direct, honest (even in the face of bad news) and deathly serious about winning. He has the unique ability to relate to everyone in the clubhouse, regardless of nationality or age, and he understands that each piece of a major-league team is important. When he arrives

at the ballpark every day, he makes a point to stop by and say hello to everyone—players, trainers, coaches, even the media.

"The doors are going to be open for him, whether he wants to stay in the game, or if he wants to do TV or commentary. He'd be good at any of that," Arrieta said. "He's got an eye for things in this game that not many people have, and he's got a way of relaying information in a very unique way. He calls it like he sees it. He's honest, and that's what you need."



STEPHEN GREEN

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— THEO EPSTEIN

BUCKET LIST

David Ross has been able to check a few items off his baseball bucket list this season with the Cubs. On April 22 in Cincinnati, Ross was behind the plate to catch Jake Arrieta's second career no-hitter, the first for the veteran catcher. Following the game, Arrieta made sure the story was as much about Ross as it was about his historic gem.

"That was a special moment we were able to share together—obviously, along with the rest of this organization," Arrieta said. "To have something else that he can kind of check off his bucket list before he gets done playing was something pretty cool to be able to do."

On May 27 at Wrigley Field, Ross connected on a three-run blast off Phillies starter Adam Morgan for his 100th career home run. For his efforts, he received a standing ovation and a curtain call from the Wrigley Field faithful.



Early in the season, Ross was noncommittal about what his post-playing days would entail. But as he gets closer to the finish line, he's starting to understand how difficult it would be to leave the game behind. While former catchers like Brad Ausmus and Mike Matheny moved directly from the field to major-league managerial roles, the typically self-effacing Ross knows he still has a lot to learn.

"I think people take managing for granted," Ross said. "It's harder than it looks, right? It's easy as outsiders and even as players sometimes to second-guess or criticize the manager, where there's a lot that goes into the decision-making. So I want to learn more about managing and more about the front office and see what my true calling or role is."

"I do believe that I have learned so many lessons. I've been around great people in this game, managers and players and people who have made me who I am, that I do have something to give back to this game. I don't know what it is. But I feel like it would be in some way, shape or form almost a regret of mine if I didn't continue to pass that along in some form or fashion."

TAKING IT ALL IN

The clock is winding down fast for Ross, and he's doing his best not to miss a thing. He has spent most of his career trying to hang on, prove

his worth and make his teams better. That hasn't left much time for fun off the field. This year, he's making a point to take it all in. And, as he joked, he's got the best seat in the house.

Chicago was always his favorite city to play in on the road, and the fans have embraced him more than he ever expected since he joined the team. One of his favorite things this year has been just watching the crowd at Wrigley Field and how they support their Cubbies. He makes sure to notice the collective gasp when Aroldis Chapman hits 103 mph on the stadium gun; the roar after a Bryant bomb; and the euphoria of the crowd as they sing "Go Cubs Go" after a win.

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— DAVID ROSS

"I've always been so focused on baseball," Ross said. "I'd sleep in, or I get up and go to breakfast, go back and take a nap, and that's about all I'd get out of the hotel room on the road. This year, I've kind of made a vow to myself to get out and do the touristy things."

Already this season, he's been on a helicopter ride over Manhattan, visited the Gateway Arch in St. Louis, and gone out for cheesesteaks and run the Rocky steps in Philadelphia. Closer to home, he's also visited the Willis Tower, gone on a Chicago boat ride and toured the inside of the iconic Wrigley Field scoreboard.

Even with all the fun he's been having, Ross' main focus—as it has always been—is on winning and helping

to bring out the best in his teammates, whether he's in the lineup or not. From the dugout, players say he's got some of the best chatter in baseball. Before games, he's been known to run around the circular Cubs clubhouse, screaming and exhorting players to give everything they have on the field.

In the end, there's only one thing Ross really wants as a retirement gift—another World Series ring. And his teammates absolutely hope to send him out on that note. It would be the perfect end to an amazing career.

"It's hard to put [what that would mean] into words," Ross said. "Everyone thinks it's because it's Chicago and the Cubs and, yeah, that's huge. It's the ultimate sports championship right now. The Chicago Cubs and the World Series, right? But when you get to be around the group of people that are running this organization—the owner, the coaches, the players—it's just that much more special."

"It would mean everything to me because it is my last year, and I'm going to love these guys and keep in touch with these guys the rest of my life if they'll let me. But to have that bond that you get when you win a World Series, that's never going to go away. ... I want to be connected to this city for the rest of my life."

There are few Cubs fans who would argue with that. ●