

MLB Winter Meetings

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Chicago Cubs

Manager Craig Counsell

Press Conference



2025 BASEBALL WINTER MEETINGS ORLANDO

Coverage Presented By

CohnReznick 

Q. A lot of discussion about Matt Shaw at third base been going on and Jed and going up and back, especially yesterday. How do you view Shaw's year and how do you project him? Can he be a multi-position player, a very good player, or do you just look at him as a third baseman?

CRAIG COUNSELL: I think Matt had a very, very good rookie season, and the reason you say that is he made improvements. As the season went on he got better. We had a better offensive player in the second half, we got a very good offensive player in the second half.

I think we'd agree defensively he surprised everybody and made enormous progress as the season went on to the point of plus-, borderline plus-plus third baseman by the end of the season. Those are all good things.

Matt is going to play a big part on this team no question he'll have a big role and a big place on this team.

Q. Can it be in multiple positions or --

CRAIG COUNSELL: The season, every season brings out its new thing. We were very injury-free last year, from a position-player group. And that created a lot of continuity with guys playing the same position.

A new season can change that, and guys that can play more than one position, in some years, Nico played shortstop one year. He played second base. If a guy can play more than one position and you need it, great. It's another option.

Q. Now that you've had some time to reflect on the season and the way the postseason went, just what are you taking away from that and kind of carrying over into the next year.

CRAIG COUNSELL: Look we had a good regular season. I'll say it again, 92 wins is a lot of wins. It's hard to win 92 games in a season. That's a good season.

The playoffs are a completely different animal, and it's a short series. Things have got to go right. It's players have to do special things, gotta catch some breaks, have to be healthy at those times. And enough of those things didn't go right and we couldn't advance further unfortunately.

You're going to seek ways to make yourself better. I think at this point you're trying to make yourself better for the regular season because that's what -- we have 162 of those games in front of us.

And I think you try to get in the playoffs absolutely, but winning the division gives you that little extra advantage. That's obviously still a goal and still creates an advantage.

Q. With the roster, what do you feel like "looking better" looks like for this team going into next year?

CRAIG COUNSELL: From a position-player standpoint, the loss right now is Tucker, obviously. The rest of the group is back and likely with us. We did have young players that did contribute in a big way. I thought Moises in September played like -- he gave us the offensive production of Tucker essentially in the month of September.

Between him and Owen, who was unfortunately hurt for most of that month, those are two important players as we sit right now. There's not much to think about there. There's obviously bench pieces that are going to be important because we were so healthy last year. That's another thing we have to think about.

Got a lot of work completing our bullpen obviously. And you're never going to be satisfied with what you have from a pitching perspective. You're always protecting your depth and protecting the injuries because the injuries are just always a little more significant in that area.

Q. Would you like to see the addition of a veteran bat to replace Tucker's production? Or are you confident that the kids can step up, if not equal that production, maybe come close?

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CRAIG COUNSELL: Yeah, I think you're just trying to fortify the roster as a whole. So different -- you can do it and think about it in different ways. But I mean I think more depth from the position-player standpoint and production like would be helpful, absolutely. I think we were extremely healthy more depth is important.

Q. With Moises, how were you thinking about balancing the need for continued development at the catching position versus his Major League-ready bat?

CRAIG COUNSELL: I think he's at the point where if he can help the Major League team, he's going to be in the Major Leagues. There's not an every day catching job in the Major Leagues for him. But as constructed right now, we've got room for at-bats, and I think -- I would prioritize the Major Leagues right now. But that can change with roster stuff.

Q. When you look at guys like Moises and Owen, (indiscernible) last year Shaw was giving the long way to develop in the majors the year before, Pete doing the same thing?

CRAIG COUNSELL: Every young player is. You have to be.

Q. But on a contending team they'll have exceptions.

CRAIG COUNSELL: But every young player is a contending team, too. Young players get, they have to get chances. They have to get chances. And the game, look around the league. I think that's one thing that you have to give your young players opportunities. Your team is better for giving your young players opportunities.

Q. How much (indiscernible) guys in the room who just went through that with this group?

CRAIG COUNSELL: I'm not sure that it helps them. I think it's a tough league, and even the veteran players can struggle. It's a tough league.

But I think you see in giving -- the opportunities the young player is getting, they're the guys that are going to improve as the season goes and turn into better players and then turn into very important players on your club. So you have to be patient with those opportunities and create those. And you have to create the opportunities for players like that, players of that caliber.

Q. With Shota coming back, what does it mean knowing you have him in the rotation again next year? And just from your perspective, obviously how the season handed ended for him and how disappointed

he was after Game 5 to not get that opportunity, and how do you view that part?

CRAIG COUNSELL: I'm really excited about Shota. I think he is in a really good place. I think sometimes not achieving what we want or not getting the opportunities we want or not performing how we want is the best teacher for us. And it's the best motivator for us.

And I think Shota is going to take his lessons from last year and be better for them. So I'm very optimistic about what we're going to get from Shota.

Q. Do you think from the outside he looks like he's far from the pitcher he was, but it's probably not the case?

CRAIG COUNSELL: I agree with that a thousand percent. I think Shota got off track last year. There's no question about it. He got off track. But maybe one of the reasons we were collectively unable to help him get back on track is that it was so close that it was hard to see.

And I think sometimes just to step back and you're out of competition and a little perspective helps you get back to that place -- and a challenge, frankly, right? And the challenge of the struggles helps you have a little clarity on getting back to your best self and maybe even a better self even.

So someone who, the diligence and the intelligence that he approaches pitching and problems around pitching, I think he's going to come back from this with a lot of success.

Q. Whether Tucker continues or not, we saw all the things that he brought to the table in the first half. But the way he insulates himself personally, is that difficult? Was that difficult for you and the staff to be able to try to help him, not that he was distant as a person, but insulated as a player?

CRAIG COUNSELL: No, I think we are all individuals and we all have had success in our own way. And I think it's up to coaches, I think, frankly to meet the players in those places and help them with ways they've had success, obviously suggest different ways to have success and new ways and other paths.

But that's absolutely part of it. And from a coaching standpoint, you love dealing with the different personalities. That's what makes it so much fun in unlocking all different sorts. Kyle has had a recipe for success that is very effective and will continue to be.

Q. What's your stance on Owen with Team Canada? Could be a good thing (indiscernible) for them,



different philosophy?

CRAIG COUNSELL: We've got a bunch of players that are, I think, in the consideration mode right now for the WBC. I think in general the WBC is a great experience for a lot of guys. And for some, I would recommend against it. But for most, I think it's a great experience.

Q. Last spring's earlier schedule, with you guys opening in Japan kind of mirroring a little bit how early spring is -- does it make you feel more comfortable?

CRAIG COUNSELL: No. No. (Laughter).

Q. Shota, looking back on it, how did things get off track, or what are the things -- because up until September, it was sort of --

CRAIG COUNSELL: I think sometimes, I think the injury got him off track. And sometimes I think we had a period of some results covered up some things, but I think they were there. And then they kind of showed themselves.

Q. A little more on that, what was that, if you could tell us, that exit interview like considering how it ended with him skipping --

CRAIG COUNSELL: I think just that. I think Shota is looking forward to how am I getting better. And that's why you're optimistic too. It's look what's next, what's next? I think that's Shota's mindset -- how am I going to get better? How do I put myself in a place that I should be?

I think he feels like he has something to prove, and that's a great mindset for an athlete to be in.

Q. We talked a lot about Wrigley Field ad nauseam being a home-field advantage or disadvantage, or block it out of your mind, just go play your game. But in reality, has the game at Wrigley changed for these players over the two years you've been there? Have you had to be more positive as a manager and coaching staff to not feel like it was a stigma to the offense?

CRAIG COUNSELL: I don't think it's changed over the two years. Sometimes I think just when you acknowledge that something is there, it's just that's acceptance and that makes you perform through it. And I think we did a good job acknowledging circumstances last year and collectively acknowledging.

Sometimes it's an offense thing, and sometimes it's a pitching thing. Colin Rea had a number of starts where the wind is just -- he had two starts, the wind was howling out.

And you know your job in those starts is just get a number of outs. Somehow get me deep enough into the game where we can put the game together for today and the next couple of days. That's your job. You're going to give up six runs, but you got 15 outs.

So I think as a team and as a group, it's conditions aren't always fair and they create stat lines that aren't maybe deserved or earned or whatever, they just happen. But the name of the game is to win. And I think our guys accepted that and that's why we played really well at home.

Q. You mentioned --

CRAIG COUNSELL: Or one of the reasons.

Q. You mentioned Ballesteros not having an opportunity to catch a lot. If the opportunity did pop up, if he was forced into action, how comfortable are you with that?

CRAIG COUNSELL: Yeah, then he'll catch. Yeah. Simple as that. I think he's absolutely going to catch games.

Q. Do you feel like he's made real progress there and you're comfortable with him as a semi-regular catcher?

CRAIG COUNSELL: Yeah, he's got to be better than the other two guys. But yeah, I'm comfortable with that.

Q. (Indiscernible) in the meantime? How do you look at usage for him? I know it's early?

CRAIG COUNSELL: I think he's going to pitch leverage innings. We've got -- it's a bit of an empty -- some empty spots down there. Right now it's a bit hard to tell you how the bullpen is going to work, truthfully.

Q. As far as (indiscernible), those internal guys for that group, I know the bullpen (indiscernible) complete, but the guys you saw the last two years --

CRAIG COUNSELL: The bullpen, we've talked about it earlier this week, what we thought about our bullpen going into the season and maybe just reread it, maybe what we thought, we were wrong. We were pretty wrong on it.

We ended up pitching pretty well. But I think at the start of the season, it maybe wasn't the guys we expected to do it. It just shows -- I think it's, get a bunch of good arms and kind of see what happens and have enough abilities to pivot when you have to during the season.

And so I think part of that, absolutely, this year will be -- Porter had a rough season. It's Porter Hodge season

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bouncing back. That's going to be important.

Q. (Indiscernible), do you see him (indiscernible)? And last year I think he improved a lot. So what do you see changing defensively and offensively?

CRAIG COUNSELL: I think Seiya had a really good season. I think he finished it with excellent -- it's funny, Seiya really struggled in August and the first half of September, really struggled. And then maybe the second half of September and through the playoffs was absolutely excellent, excellent.

I'm very happy for Seiya, how he performed in the playoffs. He was a very dangerous hitter, and I think showed what he can really do and the impact he can have.

And I think defensively, I think he played very well this season. He had less chances and did spend the bulk of the first half of the season in the DH spot. But the second half of the season, with Kyle's injury, he played significant innings in the outfield and did a really good job.

Q. With Pete, when we talked to him after he won his Gold Glove, he said he was still digesting the totality of the season. What are you hoping he takes away from this past year? And what do you envision a realistic evolution for him this offseason into next year?

CRAIG COUNSELL: Well, I think it's a season that you would kind of expect from Pete. That's Pete. It's like we saw some incredible things. We saw some stretches where he was an out at the plate. I think his defense was incredibly consistent and brilliant throughout the season.

And I think really the goal is to just -- it's just to keep improving. How the season plays out, I don't know how it's going to play out. I don't know if it's going to be a streaky season or a consistent season. But just to improve and to never be satisfied with kind of where you're at and always seek yourself going to the next level.

That's what I'd want from Pete. And as long as that quest never burns out and you keep that alive, he's going to get to better places and great places.

Q. Can you put into words what Nico Hoerner's value is beyond defense and what he brings at the plate, his intangible qualities to this team?

CRAIG COUNSELL: Everybody has their own intangible qualities. Nico is great at some really things that -- I think other people think they're good at and they're not as good at it. I'm not talking about just players. I'm just talking about people.

Like when you say, like, show up every day and like complete every rep, that is -- every rep is completed perfectly. That's who Nico is. And that seems like, well, that's easy, everybody can do that. I do that. Well, you don't do it. But so I would put Nico at the top of the list for how he does that.

And in a sport like baseball, with so many games and so many moments, it shows up a lot. And I think it's a great trait to have, and it's what made Nico a very good baseball player.

Q. You said at the top, your job right now is to get better for the regular season. Is there any part of the postseason that kind of informs your conversations with Jed on the offseason? Or is it really as simple as regular season now and maybe at the trade deadline then you're kind of flipping that?

CRAIG COUNSELL: I mean, look, I think you're probably asking about pitching there to me. You can always say there's never enough pitching. That's why you make those cliché -- that's why I gave the cliché answer.

But, yeah, I think if you look at what happened to us in the playoffs, if we would have had to keep going, I think, is where it would have got daunting. I don't think it was daunting for the first two series. I don't think it necessarily affected us for the first two series.

If we had to keep going and Cade was scheduled to come back and start pitching, but it would have been difficult, yeah.

So I think, yeah, but some of that is like you've just got to have enough guys. And the time of the season and the injuries and things like that, they add up as the season goes.

Q. If everyone's healthy, (indiscernible) last year, then you're looking a lot better.

CRAIG COUNSELL: Yeah, but that's what you're always guarded against. And I think you see teams like Atlanta who had significant starting pitching injuries and what it can do to a season. And you think about that. Absolutely.

Q. In that context, what is it like knowing Justin Steele will be coming back and knowing a guy with that track record?

CRAIG COUNSELL: Yeah, I think that's an important part of the season. But it's also something for us to just consider, is that the starting pitching injuries, it's significant



-- they can be very significant, and there's very few position player injuries that keep you out for the season. And it happens more on the starting pitcher side. But getting a player back of that caliber is important, absolutely. It is important.

Q. Is it the same --

CRAIG COUNSELL: Nothing's changed. It's not going to be Opening day. And after that, I think -- I really don't want to speculate until we get to Spring Training and see where he's at. I think we'll know in Spring Training kind of a target area of dates there. But it's not going to be Opening Day. But I think it will be the first half of the season, yeah.

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