**Chicago Cubs Spring Training 5 to Watch**

When it comes to spring training, anything can happen. Jake Fox with the Orioles in 2011 made the 40-man roster and absolutely imploded in the regular season after an impressive spring training. Other guys like Kris Bryant in 2015, Michael Wacha in 2013, and Michael A. Taylor for the Nationals in 2016 had success with their teams after spring training. I don’t usually watch too heavily on the pitchers at spring training, but there are a few pitchers on the Cubs that really need to show out to show the executives what they can do. Ben Brown and Luke Little, both guys who had time in the MLB last season have a more amplified rotation and bullpen to try to break into. Cade Horton is in that list as well. Here are a few names that I think we should keep an eye on during the 2025 Spring Training.

5. **Brandon Hughes** – If you looked at the non-roster invitees to spring training, you’d probably know Brad Keller from his time with the Royals and Trevor Richards from his time around the league. Brandon Hughes probably would have flown under your radar, even despite his recency being on the Cubs. Hughes is trying to get a second stint with the Cubs after a dull last two seasons. When I say dull, I mean, pretty bad. Between 2023 and 2024 Hughes allowed batters to hit .295 off of him with an OPS of .972. 40% of batted balls were considered hard hit balls. He also accumulated a negative win probability, meaning your team was more likely to lose than win when he took the mound. Okay, that’s all the bad stuff. Let’s get to the good. In his first season with the Cubs, Hughes was stellar. He allowed a .200 batting average with only a .684 OPS. He also struck batters out close to 28.5% of the time compared to the 25% the past two seasons. The biggest difference? WHIP. In 2022, his WHIP was 1.092, and the past two seasons it was an astronomical 1.7. His 1.92 WHIP in 2024 was one of the worst. In 2024 had he pitched with the Cubs, he would have been the 5th worst pitcher in front of Daniel Palencia, Julian Merryweather, Shawn Armstrong, and Richard Lovelady. However, in 2022, he was the fifth best pitcher in terms of WHIP on the Cubs that season. If he can give that type of performance, he could be a huge fit for the bullpen. With the way that the Cubs move the bullpen at the trade deadline, if he can find a stride again with the Cubs, we might have a strong trade piece in him. I’m hoping he can find his way back. He can do this by keeping WHIP down and getting his strikeout rate back up. Easier said than done.

4. **Moisés Ballesteros** – The Cubs have two catchers on the 40-man roster, Miguel Amaya and Carson Kelly. My problem with this duo is that they can’t hit. Both players have hit below .230 in their careers, which as catchers isn’t surprising, but Kelly had a negative defensive WAR in two of the last three seasons. Amaya had a better defensive WAR than offensively. Here’s where my issue gets a little more serious. Kelly in his 10-year career has only had two seasons with an OPS+ over 100. Miguel Amaya hasn’t had one in two seasons. While Amaya has decreased his strikeout percentage last season, his walk rate and barrel rate also decreased. Kelly decreased his strikeout percentage last season, but his walk rate also dropped. His home run rate increased by a percentage, but in the Windy City, I have a feeling that’s going to drop as well.

Here's where Moisés Ballesteros comes into play. Ballesteros has gotten better each of his minor league seasons. In 2024 he hit .289 in 124 games. I get that it’s the minor leagues, but that’s significantly better than the average of our two catchers on the roster. His OPS is also 200 points higher than both of our current catchers. Ballesteros participated in the minor league home run derby which speaks to the amount of pop in his bat as a catcher. I don’t know, if Ballesteros has a good spring training, we might see him in the major leagues before mid-season. I’d love to see it.

3. **Alexander Canario** – I like Canario. In 42 at-bats at the major league level he’s hitting.286 with an OPS of .857. He’s got the ability to make a splash in the big leagues. The problem for Canario is where? He’s behind Pete Crow-Armstrong in center field, he’s now behind Kyle Tucker in right, and a cornerstone in left with Ian Happ. With younger guys like Owen Caissie, Kevin Alcantara, and even James Triantos pushing at the door to get playing time at the MLB level, Canario’s time to heat up is now. If he can’t, he could find himself on the trade block at the deadline, or just in the minor leagues. I haven’t forgotten that he was once a top 7 prospect in 2020, and he has the ability to play at a high level, he just needs to prove it consistently. With Cody Bellinger moving on, and Canario getting reps at first base, I think it’s a great testament to his willingness to do whatever it takes to play and that the Cubs want him on the field. Willingness doesn’t mean anything unless there’s results though.

2. **Jon Berti/Vidal Brujan** – While I understand this isn’t a huge deal, it’s honestly one of the biggest stories on the Chicago Cubs roster. This battle will determine a lot of opportunities moving forward. Every team needs a utility player on their team and Jon Berti is that guy for the Cubs. He can play the middle infield and the hot corner, both of which are question marks going into the season. With Nico Hoerner recovering from surgery, despite the good news about his recovery, we don’t know exactly how long Hoerner will be out for. Berti will be taking the majority of his starts at second base, with maybe Matt Shaw or Gage Workman at third base? Will Berti be playing third with Vidal Brujan at second base? Jon Berti will determine where he’s at with the way that he plays. Defensively I have the most trust in Berti and with the bat as well. Berti has hit over .270 the past two seasons and was impressive in Miami in 2023. Berti isn’t going to give you much power, and he doesn’t walk a lot. He’s a very similar player in batting to Nico Hoerner. The defense isn’t as good. The other thing to mention here is that while Brujan hasn’t lived up to his hype, in 2020 he was a top 3 prospect in the Rays farm system. In fact he ranked higher than Nico Hoerner AND Tarik Skubal. If Brujan can catch fire in spring training, he may find opportunities if Berti lacks in spring training. Imagine this though… both players have stellar spring trainings, and both end up taking starting roles on Opening Day. One starts at second and one starts at third. This battle is going to shake things up.

1. **Matt Shaw** – Everyone knew this was coming. Losing to the Red Sox in the Alex Bregman pursuit points all eyes on Matt Shaw. What can he do at the hot corner or at third base? What will happen to Nico Hoerner if Shaw is successful? Well, instead of focusing on that, let’s focus on getting Matt Shaw to the big leagues. We have a plethora of playable players like Vidal Brujan, Jon Berti, and of course Nico Hoerner. Can Matt Shaw hit himself into the Opening Day lineup? I think he can. He has the youth on his side, he can hit for power, and he walks quite a bit. His OPS was .867 in 2024, much higher than Brujan and Berti even if it was in the minors. He isn’t the best fielder, but he’s manageable. I like him better at second base than at third, but he can learn to play the hot corner. He can play anywhere in the infield, and is the 19th top prospect in all of MLB. If Matt Shaw can show his power and can hit for average, I don’t see him not being on the roster for Opening Day. I also really like the fact that he played college ball in Maryland. He’s used to hitting in the cold during the beginning months of the season. It might not be thought about often, but Wrigley isn’t a pleasant place to hit at in the first 2 months of the season and the last two months of the season. I think he has the ability to be successful there.

No matter what, the Cubs roster this season is better than last season. If these guys show up and show out in spring training, it could make for a fun and successful season!