

# Brenly says big upside with Cubs

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A lot has changed for former San Francisco Giants catcher Bob Brenly since his first broadcasting stint with the Chicago Cubs on WGN Radio in 1990-91.

Brenly, who retired as a player in 1989, went on to a successful managerial stint in Arizona — including leading the team to the 2001 World Series title.

He also developed into one of the nation's most respected baseball commentators before signing on to succeed Steve Stone as the Cubs' television analyst for 2005.

Brenly, who was the keynote speaker Friday for the Iowa Cubs' Fan Fest First Pitch Luncheon at the Polk County Convention Center in Des Moines, said his earlier time in Chicago ranks as two of his favorite years in the game. The team went a combined 154-168 in those two seasons, continuing a long tradition of mostly losing baseball at Wrigley Field.

So speaking about his return to Chicago on Friday, Brenly noted a lot has changed for the Cubs, too.

"Even back in the 1990s, the Cubs were still the loveable losers," Brenly said. "But that has changed. The fans have high expectations, the players have high expectations and the organization has high expectations.

"And they aren't content for Wrigley Field to be a fun place to play for opponents. They want it to be a miserable place to play."

Perhaps the one downside to those high expectations was the Cubs' disappointing 2004 season, which followed a 2003 season in which they came within five outs of the World Series. Despite winning 89 games — one more than the year before -and posting back-to-back winning seasons for the first time since 1967-72, many fans came away disappointed. The players seemed to feel the pressure, too, as they tried to deflect and counterattack media criticism.

Booing the Cubs, once unheard of at Wrigley Field, became more frequent. Right fielder Sammy Sosa, once the only thing for fans to cheer about, heard them as well. And after he skipped out on the team in the season finale at Wrigley Field, fans and management had had enough and the longtime slugger was put on the trading block.

"I was real disappointed in them last year," said Grace Hoad, 82, of Humboldt. "But I'm for them again and I think they'll do well. They have to stay well. That's the biggest thing. And they have to work together."

Brenly, who rode the arms of dual aces Randy Johnson and Curt Schilling to the 2001 title, likes the Cubs' chances in 2005 in part because they also have an electric starting staff headed by Mark Prior, Kerry Wood and Carlos Zambrano.

"We all know that's where winning baseball starts," Brenly said. "You have to have strong starting pitching. With

the three guys at the top of the Cubs' rotation, you have to like your chances winning ballgames those three days."

But what about when the starters falter or wear down, turning the game over to a Cubs bullpen that had trouble closing the deal in 2004 on its way to a 19-30 record in one-run games?

"We need a closer," said Craig Kelso, 55, of Des Moines. "They haven't addressed the bullpen."

Kelso, like many Cubs fans, would also like to see Sosa go. And he thinks the Orioles, mentioned as a possible suitor for Sosa, are a good fit.

"They should trade with Baltimore for (Jerry Hairston) and (closer Jorge Julio) and get rid of Sosa," Kelso said.

The Cubs have had trouble moving Sosa because of his remaining salary of around \$40 million. Other than Sosa, Cubs management and fans seem content with the rest of the starting lineup, which is set except for left field, vacated when Moises Alou was let go after hitting 39 home runs and driving in 106 runs last season.

The talk has been that the Cubs might platoon Todd Hollandsworth and Jason Dubois, who hit 31 home runs and drove in 98 in 386 at-bats at triple-A Iowa last season, in left. Dubois has shown promise, even hitting a home run for Chicago on the final day of the 2004 season, but the Cubs could still make a move to acquire a more proven outfielder -such as free agent and former Chicago White Sox star Magglio Ordonez.

As for the concerns in the bullpen, the Cubs have many arms to choose from behind LaTroy Hawkins, a former Minnesota Twins standout set-up man who did well in that role before struggling as a closer in Chicago last season, and additional closer candidates Ryan Dempster and Kyle Farnsworth.

Lefty Mike Remlinger will also be back. Remaining candidates include former Iowa Cubs lefty Will Ohman, Todd Wellemeyer, Jon Leicester, Sergio Mitre, Michael Wuertz and newcomer Stephen Randolph, another lefty who played for Brenly in Arizona.

"I think there is a huge upside to the players the Cubs have coming back," said Brenly, downplaying the losses of Alou and starter Matt Clement. "I prefer to wait until spring training and see how everything fits together.

And when Opening Day rolls around, everyone may look at this ball club and say 'Gee, we're better than we were last year.' And I think that is going to be the case."