

BASEBALL

Rookie challenge

The White Sox believe new manager OZZIE GUILLEN's enthusiasm means more than his lack of experience. Now it's up to him to prove it. BY CHRIS DE LUCA

Looking for White Sox manager Ozzie Guillen? Here's a tip: Don't waste time stopping by the manager's office. Try the batting cage, where he often is found firing pitches to a handful of players or putting on a hitting show of his own. Maybe he's sprawled in an overstuffed recliner in the clubhouse, one leg flopped over the arm, chewing on candy and watching TV with his catcher. Maybe he is in the dining room, sitting down at a full table, cracking open a beer. But the manager's office? It's nice, just not Guillen's style.

"In spring training, I was in the coaches' room every road trip," Guillen says. "I don't like to sit by myself in the office to feel like I'm the boss, like I'm the man. I want to be around my players, to get a chance to know each of them."

There are times when Guillen, 40, looks more player than manager. If you play for the White Sox, there is no dodging Guillen—he will find you. Maybe he wants to tell a joke or recount a colorful story from his playing days as an All-Star shortstop. Or he might want to chew you out for not stealing a base. Perhaps all three.

He got this job in November without a lick of managerial experience and only three years of service as a major league coach. He got this job not because of his resume but because of a raw enthusiasm that never seems to quit. He got this job because the White Sox were looking for a change after six seasons under Jerry Manuel, who managed with a stoic, at-times-distant style.

A change is what they got in the excitable Guillen.

He was an in-your-face player who retired in 2000 and hooked on as a coach with the Marlins, for whom his responsibilities ranged from coaching third base to cracking wise in the dugout. The X's and O's were left to the managers, first Jeff Torborg, then Jack McKeon.

Now, six months after he was content in his job as third base coach for the World Series champions, Guillen finds himself a rookie manager facing a difficult challenge: Can a motivation-first manager with no experience running a game cut it in the big leagues?

The man who hired him, White Sox general manager Kenny Williams, has little doubt. "This ain't that hard," Williams says. "The hardest part is getting the most out of the players we have on the field."

Motivating a veteran team such as the White Sox can be difficult even for an experienced manager. Nearly a month into the season, however, the White Sox are playing with a spark often missing last year. "He's got some pretty sizable veterans who have been around for a while," says an American League executive. "Handling those guys is always tough."

The Sox figured Guillen would have a safety net of knowledge on the bench in Joe Nosssek, who had been the team's bench coach for 13 seasons. Nosssek, however, retired at the end of spring training for health reasons. Quiet and inexperienced Harold Baines was tapped as the new bench coach. Guillen seemed to be left on his own to guide a club with a loaded lineup, a decent rotation and expectations of big things in the relatively balanced A.L. Central. The strategic button-pushing doesn't seem to worry him.

"The X's and O's, that's easy," he says. "It's easy because when a manager makes a call to the bullpen, he is either a genius or he is terrible. If your bullpen does the job, you are a good manager. If they don't, that's one of the questions that comes up: 'Why did you bring this guy in?' If you are not prepared to deal with that, you are going to have trouble."

He may lack experience as a manager, but Guillen has been preparing for his chance. During a stint with the Braves late in his playing career, he often cornered



The White Sox are banking on Guillen (left) having the same type of success that Pena enjoyed in 2003 with the Royals.

Bobby Cox and asked him to explain his moves. With the Sox, Guillen consults regularly with a staff that includes many coaches with years of experience in the organization—Baines, pitching coach Don Cooper, hitting coach Greg Walker, first base coach Rafael Santana, third base coach Joey Cora and bullpen coach Art Kusnyer. During games, other than occasionally leaning on Cooper for advice, Guillen mostly operates on his instincts.

The hardest part of the job? “When I take my starting pitcher out, I walk out there with the worst feeling because I don’t want to do it,” he says. “Or when I have to send somebody down or release them.”

It didn’t take long for Guillen to find out how tricky handling a bullpen can be. On opening day, the Sox had a 4-run lead entering the ninth inning in Kansas City. After reliever Cliff Politte walked the first two batters in the ninth, Guillen brought in Billy Koch, who failed as the club’s closer last year but has been endorsed for the job by Guillen from the first day of spring training. It appeared to be Koch’s game to finish. He immediately yielded an RBI double to Benito

Santiago but, with lefthander Damaso Marte warming up in the bullpen, Koch struck out lefthanded-hitting Aaron Guiel.

Royals manager Tony Pena then called on lefthanded-hitting Matt Stairs, and Guillen countered by summoning Marte, a move that surprised Koch. Pena then subbed Stairs for righthanded-hitting Mendy Lopez, who promptly smacked a 3-run homer that tied the game. Two batters later, Marte yielded a 2-run homer to Carlos Beltran that turned Guillen’s first game into a 9-7 loss. It looked as though Guillen had blown it by losing faith in his closer one day into the season.

He patiently answered every second-guessing question for the next two days. Critics in Chicago dogged him for pulling the trigger too early on Koch. This balancing act of handling his two late relievers looms as Guillen’s biggest challenge because neither Koch nor Marte has consistently proved to be the lone closer. “When I pull the trigger, I have to make sure I hit it right in the eyeballs,” Guillen says. “If not, I’ll be wrong. I know I will be second-guessed by somebody. That’s part of my job.”

Looking back, does he have any regrets on the opening day moves?

“None,” Guillen says. “I brought the guys I was supposed to bring, and it didn’t work out the right way. I would do exactly the same thing. The matchups were right. If I let Stairs hit a home run, then it would be: ‘You’re crazy for not bringing in Marte.’ I’ll tell you what, nobody was feeling more sick than my players because they let me down.”

As a player, Guillen could bust chops with the best of them—all in the name of playing the game the right way. One of his favorite targets was White Sox DH Frank Thomas. At the news conference to announce Guillen’s hiring, Guillen called out Thomas by saying he is “going to play my way,” and everyone was left wondering how the two would coexist. So far, no fireworks. “He really is the same guy,” Thomas says of Guillen, who was his White Sox teammate for much of the 1990s. “The

Guillen smiles and jokes around, but he’s not afraid to get in a player’s face. It’s a style that served him well as a teammate. But it’s also a style that others insist won’t work with today’s players.

only difference is he is more caring of his players. Before, he didn’t have to worry about players. Now as the manager, he has to worry about 25 different players. And he has done a good job at that.”

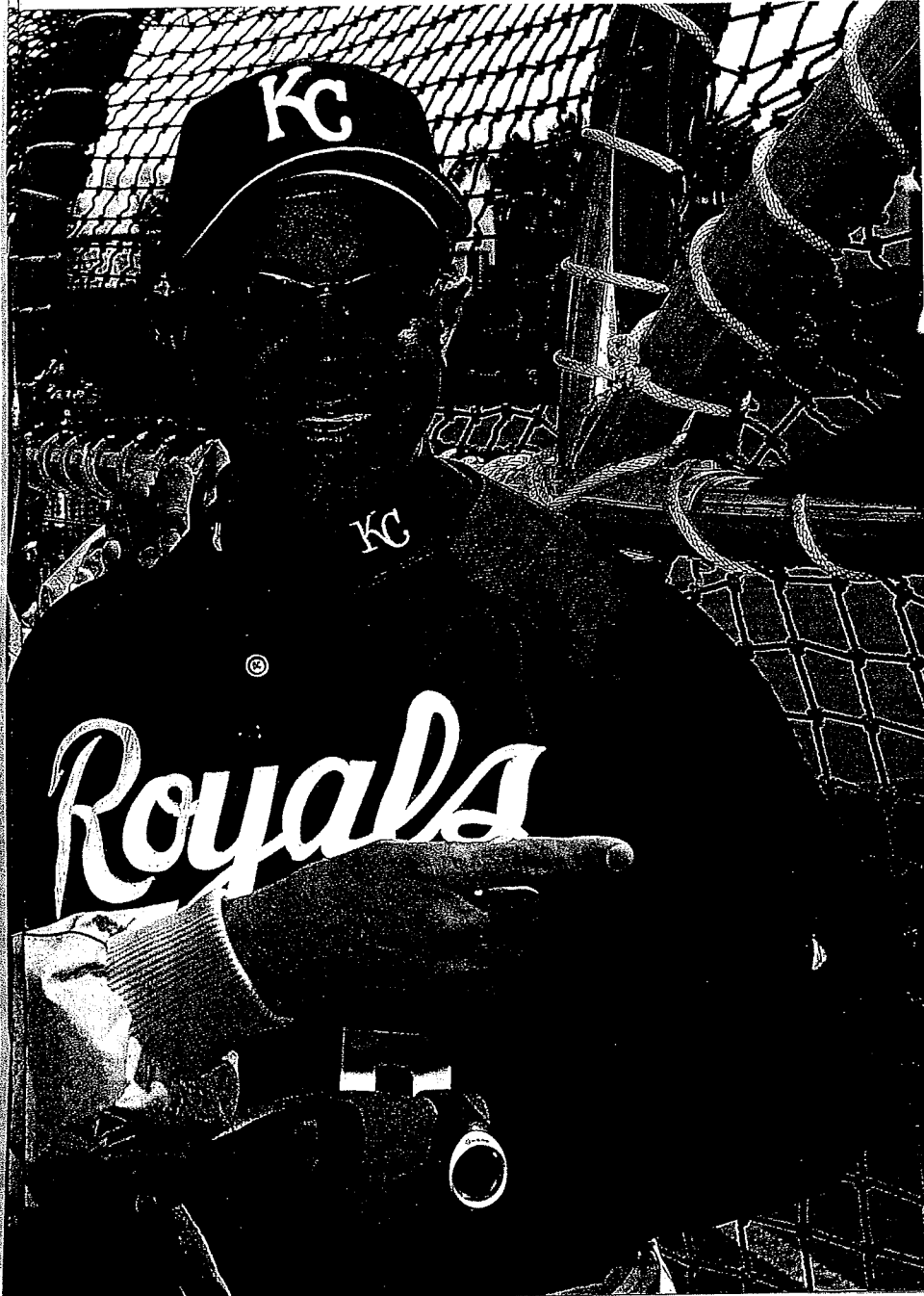
Guillen acknowledges he has to take some of the bite off his comments. “You mature a lot,” he says. “The difference from when I was a player to now being the boss, I am the one who is going to

take the heat. Before, Frank was a teammate. As a teammate, I could always back it up by getting the base hit to win the game. As a manager, you have to respect your players a little bit more. You have to be careful what you say, and how you say it.”

Williams, a teammate of Guillen’s from 1986-88, says Guillen’s ability to ride players was a positive and negative in the hiring process.

“Before I interviewed him, that was the greatest concern I had. Had he matured enough?” Williams says. “I still very much believe in the straight-between-the-eyes approach, but there are also times where a little sensitivity is in order. Has he matured enough? Within the first few minutes that we sat down in the interview process, he answered that.”

Most of Chicago figured Williams was set to hire Cito Gaston, a two-time winner of the World Series with the Blue Jays, and were shocked when the flashy Guillen got the job. “I don’t think there was anybody out there more perfect for our situation, and that’s the key, *our situation*,” Williams says.



ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

ROOKIE CHALLENGE

1. WHO IS THE WHITE SOX NEW MANAGER?

2. WHY DOESN'T GUILLEN LIKE TO SIT IN HIS OFFICE BY HIMSELF?

3. WHO HIRES GUILLEN TO COACH THE WHITE SOX?

4. WHAT DID WILLIAMS SAY WAS THE HARDEST PART ABOUT COACHING BASEBALL?

5. WHAT DOES GUILLEN SAY IS THE HARDEST PART OF HIS JOB?

6. WHAT HAPPENED TO GUILLEN ON HIS FIRST REGULAR SEASON GAME WITH THE WHITE SOX?

7. WHO DID MOST OF CHICAGO THINK WILLIAMS WAS GOING TO HIRE INSTEAD OF GUILLEN?

8. TRUE OR FALSE PENA IS ONE OF THE BEST COACHES THE CHICAGO WHITE SOX HAVE EVER HAD.

9. HOW OLD IS THE WHITE SOX NEW MANAGER?

10. TRUE OR FALSE GUILLEN WAS A TEAMMATE OF FRANK THOMAS AND NOW HE IS HIS BOSS.