You expected this from Marquis and Rothschild? Liar!

by Mike Nadel

CHICAGO - Obviously, all Jason Marquis needed was an out-of-whack contract that would put crazy pressure on him, the uniform number of a disgraced ex-icon and a spot in a rotation overseen by one of Chicago's most-criticized coaches.

"Cubs Stud Jason Marquis" ... yep, all of us should have seen that coming.

Just because he was arguably the National League's worst starter in 2006 and just because his career had been mediocrity personified (even though he had worked with pitching masterminds Dave Duncan and Leo Mazzone), how could we have doubted Marquis would be a candidate to start the 2007 All-Star Game once he got to work with Larry Rothschild?

I love many, many things about sports, but what I love most is this kind of story. I love it when underdogs win, when the invincible turn out to be vincible and when athletes who have no business excelling do just that. I especially love it when so-called experts are wrong, even when I'm one of them.

Marquis was studly again Wednesday in a brilliant 1-0 victory over Pittsburgh, pitching no-hit ball for 5 1/3 innings and finishing with a three-hitter for the Cubs' first complete game this season. Consistently getting ahead of hitters with his low-90s fastball and elusive breaking pitches, the only offensive support he needed was Alfonso Soriano's home run on Tom Gorzelanny's second pitch of the night.

Marquis' marquee performance couldn't have been more timely for manager Lou Piniella, who had used every pitcher other than Three-Finger Brown and Orval Overall in Tuesday's 15-inning loss to the Pirates.

"We needed it; our bullpen was really spent," Piniella said. "You could tell he had good stuff. He finished it, and he finished it in convincing fashion. His stuff wasn't going down."

But his ERA was. Again.

After posting a 6.02 mark last year and faltering so badly down the stretch that St. Louis dropped him from its postseason roster, Marquis is 5-1 with a 1.70 ERA for his new team.

This must be beyond stunning to most Cardinals fans. At the time, who could blame them for laughing their red-capped heads off whenever they thought about Cubs GM Jim Hendry lavishing $21 million of Tribune Co.'s lame-duck dough on a guy with a 56-52 career record and 4.55 ERA? Then, when Marquis opted to take Sammy Sosa's No. 21 out of mothballs, the pending train wreck seemed complete.

Instead, while Marquis has led a superb Cubs rotation, the pitching-poor Cardinals are stinking up the NL Central.

The only Cub authoring a more surprising story than Marquis has been Rothschild, who was blamed for failing to guide last year's group of disabled-list regulars, Double-A kids and disheveled has-beens to greatness. (Wouldn't Duncan have won the World Series with Jae Kuk Ryu, Les Walrond and Glendon Rusch?)

Additionally, Rothschild was blamed when his pitchers imploded during the 2004 collapse. (Why didn't he make Greg Maddux do better?) He has been blamed for the arm woes of Kerry Wood and Mark Prior. (How could he have thought a few drops of Super Glue would last an entire season?) If memory serves, he also has been blamed for global warming, high gas prices and the Worldcom fiasco.

Well, look at Larry Rothschild now.

Marquis and Ted Lilly, the other big-money acquisition with the similarly unimpressive career record, have been outstanding - and neither has been the team's top starter. That distinction belongs to young lefty Rich Hill, who has blossomed under Rothschild's tutelage. Even with alleged ace Carlos Zambrano struggling some, the Cubs' 3.35 ERA ranks among baseball's best.

"Winning starts with starting pitching, and ours has kept us in just about every game," said Piniella, who made Rothschild the lone holdover from Dusty Baker's staff. "We've got four guys who know how to pitch and their styles complement each other very well. You've got to give Larry a lot of credit."

Marquis did: "He's really helped me fine-tune my delivery. He found some flaws I was searching for all last year."

That's right, folks: Larry Rothschild succeeded where Dave Duncan failed. This time, anyway.

Of course, Duncan won the World Series last season. And although the Cubs are showing some positive

signs - above-average bullpen work and an offense that's coming around to go with the fine starting rotation - they are only 16-15. A championship for Cubbieland remains a longer shot than Danny DeVito riding the winner in the Preakness Stakes.

Then again, stranger things have happened in the sports world we love.

Don't believe me? Just take another look at the record of Cubs Stud Jason Marquis.

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