

Sweeney excited about Cubs and new baby

Written by Jim Ecker

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Ryan Sweeney is a proud new father with a new two-year contract with the Chicago Cubs and a chance to jump-start his injury plagued baseball career.

Myer Joseph Sweeney was born five weeks ago on Jan. 2, arriving three weeks earlier than expected for Ryan and his wife Tasha.

"I haven't been getting much sleep. It's brutal," Sweeney said happily Thursday. "It worked out, because I'll get to spend some time with him before I leave."

Sweeney, a Cedar Rapids native, has a new home with his family in Naperville, Ill., just a short drive from Wrigley Field. He'll leave for spring training in Arizona next Thursday and open camp with the Cubs Feb. 19.

Sweeney, who turns 29 on Feb. 20, has spent parts of eight years in the Major Leagues as an outfielder with the Chicago White Sox, Oakland A's, Boston Red Sox and Cubs, but this is the first time he's had a multi-year contract.

Last year, he was cut in spring training by the Red Sox and signed with the Cubs. This year, he's got a spot with the Cubs and peace of mind with a guaranteed deal.

"For sure," he said. "Being where I was last year at this point and now this year at this point, it's like a different spectrum."

"Last year, I was fighting for a job. Obviously, I'm going to go into spring training and act like I'm fighting for a job, but I have a little more security for the next few years, knowing that I'm hopefully going to be in Chicago and being able to stay there for a long time."

Sweeney got a two-year deal worth \$3.5 million, with a club option for a third year in 2016. He

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played well for the Cubs last season, but fractured a rib in late June when he collided with the outfield wall in Seattle and missed an extended period of time.

Sweeney appeared in only 70 games last season, continuing a trend that's seen him play in just 82, 108, 63 and 70 games the past four years with Oakland, Boston and the Cubs due to an assortment of injuries and ailments.

Like any ballplayer, he'd love to see what he could produce in a full season.

"Obviously my goal is to try and play every single game," he said. "I know that's probably not going to happen with all the guys that we have ... I don't put too much pressure on myself, but just try to get better than the previous year."

Sweeney, a .278 career hitter, took batting lessons from Hall of Famer Rod Carew during the offseason last year and it helped him hit with more power with the Cubs, knocking six balls out of the park in 70 games.

"He really helped me out a lot last year," said Sweeney. "I'm trying to build this year on what I learned last year from him."

Sweeney thinks Wrigley Field is a good park for him.

"I love hitting there," he said. "The wind doesn't blow out as much as people say it does. There's definitely times when you get homers from the wind, but there's definitely times where it takes it away."

"I feel I can drive the ball out of the ballpark there to any part of the field and it's good to have that confidence going up to the plate, knowing you can do that."

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Sweeney said he's healthy and ready to play ball.

"Other than the broken rib last year, which was a freak injury, I was perfectly fine," he said. "This offseason everything has been great. I'm healthy and ready to go."

Sweeney suffered through a tough year with the Boston Red Sox in 2012. He went to spring training with them last season but did not make the 25-man roster for 2013, then watched from afar as the Red Sox won the World Series.

"I wish I could have been a part of it, but I think from a personal standpoint, as far as my career, it was better in the long run being able to play for the Cubs," he said.

Sweeney said he's been treated well in Chicago by fans, the team and the media.

"Everybody has been awesome," he said. "Even the people in my new neighborhood in Chicago where I live. I didn't want to say too much, but they already knew before I moved in. It's been great."

He's hoping for a healthy and productive season in the Windy City.

"Hopefully this year is going to be a big year and hopefully I'll sign a couple more two-year contracts after this one," he said.

Sweeney is an honorary co-chairman of the Prospect Meadows Ball Fields project in Marion and appeared at a press conference Thursday at Veterans Memorial Stadium to help promote the \$9.4 million facility, which is scheduled to open in 2016.