

Lindor stars at jubilant Tribe Fest in Cleveland

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- While walking through the main hall at Tribe Fest on Saturday, Francisco Lindor retrieved a handful of red and blue bean bags from the ground. The Indians shortstop then handed one to an unsuspecting fan and insisted he stop to take on Lindor in an impromptu game of cornhole.

There was one condition.

"If you miss," Lindor told the boy, "you have to do push-ups."

The young fan stopped, peered at his target and then sent one of the red bags flying wide of the large wooden box. He then dropped to the ground and began doing push-ups, while Lindor bent over in laughter. It was a fun exchange in the middle of the packed hall, which was a hive of activity from morning until evening at the Huntington Convention Center downtown.

In recent winters, the annual event moved from the bowels of Progressive Field to local hotels, where fans experienced cramped interactive spaces. This year was much different. The spacious environment at the convention center allowed for more activities, and the attendance was up nearly 40 percent from last offseason's gathering.

The Indians had 26 players on hand, along with manager Terry Francona, a few of his coaches, and members of the front office. First baseman Yonder Alonso, who signed a two-year contract with Cleveland this offseason, was thrilled to have the chance to not only get to know his teammates better, but interact with Tribe fans ahead of Spring Training.

"It's very important," Alonso said. "I think I've gotten my feet wet getting to know all the guys, getting to know the staff. And then obviously with the fans, being able to be here at fan fest and they can see me, and I can see them, and just realize how excited this city is for the team and they can see how excited I am to be here."

The highlight of Tribe Fest's morning session -- limited to season-ticket holders -- was the announcement that Lindor is on the cover of R.B.I. Baseball 18, which will be released in March. Lindor took to the main stage for the official unveiling of the cover, which shows him finishing a swing in an Indians uniform.

In a lengthy question-and-answer session with Lindor ahead of the announcement, Indians radio voice Tom Hamilton noted that Lindor rarely seems to have a bad day.

"That's just me," Lindor said. "I'm a happy kid and I enjoy life."

Francisco Lindor, after seeing the R.B.I. Baseball 18 cover: "I love it. They make me look good in that picture. So, thank you, R.B.I. You made me look a lot better."

The rest of the day included more on-stage Q&A's and interactive games with fans. There were multiple booths set up around the hall to give kids a chance to take a swing or see how hard they could throw a ball. There were video game stations, photo opportunities with the Indians' American League championship trophies, autograph sessions and a craftsman carving a bat live in front of fans.

Thanks to the larger venue, the Indians also constructed a small field, where Indians players invited kids to join them for a pick-up game. Josh Tomlin, Yan Gomes, Jason Kipnis and Alonso were among the Tribe players who took the diamond and threw pitches to young fans.

"My mom signed me up for it right when we came over," said Adelayde Ruth, an 8-year-old from Avon Lake, Ohio. "I was nervous, but then I realized that it wasn't scary. They were nice."

Landon St. Clair -- a 10-year-old from Columbus, Ohio -- hit on the field and got Kipnis to sign his hat and a baseball. St. Clair also expressed optimism about the season ahead.

"I'm really excited," he said, "because I think we have a really good chance for the playoffs this year."

That is definitely the goal for the Indians, who won 102 games last season and are aiming for a third consecutive AL Central crown this year. Cleveland lost a handful of players in free agency this winter (Carlos Santana, Bryan Shaw, Jay Bruce and Joe Smith), but spent the past two days expressing optimism that the team in place is still very capable of contending for a championship.

"It's a new team and a new year," Indians pitcher Trevor Bauer said. "You've got to develop chemistry and cohesiveness, but we all feel very confident that we'll end up back in a position that we'll have a chance to go out and win a World Series."

The players also enjoyed hearing from fans at Tribe Fest who shared that confidence.

"We appreciate everyone that does come out," Bauer said. "It's good to connect with fans and try to build excitement for the season on both ends -- the fans' side, the players' side -- send the message that the season's coming back around and we want to do it together."

Lindor excited about landing on R.B.I. 18 cover

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- Francisco Lindor leaned over to examine the large poster that had just been unveiled to his left at Tribe Fest on Saturday. When Tom Hamilton, the radio voice of the Indians, asked the young shortstop what he thought of the new cover for R.B.I. Baseball 18, Lindor cracked a smile.

"I love it. I love it," Lindor said amid cheers from his audience at the Huntington Convention Center. "They made me look good in that picture. So, thank you R.B.I. for making me look a lot better."

Lindor was announced as the new cover athlete for R.B.I. Baseball's latest installment at the Indians' annual fan fest, and the selection was more than fitting. Over the past three seasons, Cleveland's dynamic shortstop has quickly established himself not only as one of the faces of Major League Baseball, but as an ambassador for the game.

• R.B.I. Baseball 18

When the idea of playing baseball for a living began to take hold of Lindor's childhood dreams, he did not simply want to reach the Majors. The shortstop is not shy about saying he always envisioned himself becoming one of the best players in the game, as well as an inspiration to kids.

Being on the R.B.I. 18 cover is another way for Lindor to keep extending his reach in the game.

"It's unreal. It's a dream. It's a blessing," Lindor said on Saturday. "I'm blessed to be playing this game -- and to have things like that [cover], that's a plus. I thank the Lord for everything, and I thank the Indians organization and everybody that made this possible."

Lindor follows in the footsteps of past R.B.I. Baseball cover selections Corey Seager (2017), Mookie Betts ('16) and Anthony Rizzo ('15). The classic video game, which was relaunched by Major League Baseball in conjunction with the MLB Players' Association in '14, will be available this March for PlayStation 4, the Xbox One family of devices, Nintendo Switch, iPhone, iPad and Android-supported phones and tablets.

While Lindor said he would "take on anybody" who challenged him in R.B.I. Baseball 18, the shortstop admitted to having taken some losses on the video-game front lately back home.

"My nephew beats me all the time, so I definitely have got to get better," Lindor said with a laugh. "The first game I beat him, and I beat all my friends. It was like a group of four. Then, I don't know what happened. I went on a losing streak. I haven't won a game since. It's fun. I love whenever you can play against somebody and see what they've got. Competition, wherever it is, it's always cool."

Both on and off the field, Lindor has earned a reputation for his infectious enthusiasm. During Players' Weekend last August, for example, the Indians' shortstop went as far as wearing the nickname, "Mr. Smile," on the back of his jersey. Lindor describes himself as a big kid, and that has been on full display over his three seasons with the Tribe. After dynamic defensive plays or big hits, that smile quickly surfaces.

Behind the scenes, Lindor has strived since his rookie year to get involved in as much as possible -- especially if working with aspiring ballplayers is involved. He has participated in MLB Network's Play Ball series, started a charity program called, "Lindor's Smile Squad," to host children and adult athletes with disabilities at select home games, and has donated his time on numerous occasions to Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities (RBI) programs, not only in Cleveland, but around the country.

All of that said, Lindor's off-field achievements alone did not clinch his place on the R.B.I. cover.

Lindor has developed into one of baseball's brightest young stars and one of the top shortstops in the game. The switch-hitter was the runner-up for the American League Rookie of the Year Award in 2015, an All-Star in '16 and '17, picked up both Gold and Platinum Glove Awards in '16 and added a Silver Slugger to his trophy case in '17. Two years ago, Lindor also helped lead the Indians to the World Series.

Cleveland won its second straight American League Central crown last season, as it racked up 102 victories and set an AL record with a 22-game winning streak. Along the way, Lindor set career highs in home runs (33), doubles (44), RBIs (89), slugging percentage (.505) and OPS (.842) in 159 games. He set the single-season club records for homers by a middle infielder and extra-base hits (81) for a shortstop. For his work, Lindor finished fifth in voting for the AL Most Valuable Player Award (two spots behind teammate Jose Ramirez).

Lindor said he is excited to see what 2018 has in store for the Tribe.

"We all know we can win it," Lindor said. "We all know we've got what it takes. We've been there. We just haven't closed it. I'm looking forward to it. I'm looking forward to being with my new teammates and my old teammates, and everybody throughout the whole season."

"It's so much fun going from Day 1 in Spring Training all the way to the last day of the season. A lot of things happen. Whether it's good things, bad things, a lot of things happen. A lot of good moments. A lot of time for me to smile, so I love it."

Indians focus on additions, not subtractions

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- Pessimism is not in Francisco Lindor's genetic makeup. On a cloudy day, the Indians shortstop would probably flash his signature smile and point out that it is not raining. If there is a positive to be found, it will not escape Lindor's attention for long.

So, it came as no surprise Friday when Lindor looked confused after a question about all the Indians have lost this offseason. Coming off an early postseason exit, Cleveland had Carlos Santana, Bryan Shaw, Jay Bruce and Joe Smith depart via free agency. That has many wondering whether the reigning American League Central champions have taken a step backward for 2018.

"Backwards?" Lindor repeated, making sure he heard correctly. "No, I don't think so. We have the right group of guys."

From the interview room, where Tribe manager Terry Francona held court with local reporters, to the clubhouse, where the bulk of Cleveland's active roster was on hand on the eve of Tribe Fest, that was the message. Francona has said that his team plans on returning "with a vengeance," and his players echoed that sentiment from every corner of the locker room.

The players repeatedly pointed to the fact that the team -- most of which is returning -- won an AL-high 102 games last season. Francona added that the Indians have actually led the AL in victories over the past five seasons, combined (454). Trevor Bauer mentioned that last season's pitching staff put up all-time great numbers. (The 31.7 WAR, per Fangraphs, was the highest single-season mark in baseball history.)

"You can focus on what we've lost all you want," Bauer said. "But, no one seems to be focusing on what we're bringing back, which is the best pitching staff in the big leagues last year."

The rotation will again be led by ace Corey Kluber -- the reigning AL Cy Young Award winner -- along with Carlos Carrasco and Bauer. This spring, Danny Salazar, Mike Clevinger and Josh Tomlin will compete for the last two spots. In the bullpen, closer Cody Allen and relief ace Andrew Miller will again anchor a relief corps that led the Majors in ERA (2.89) in '17.

Lindor and Jose Ramirez -- a pair of Most Valuable Player candidates last year -- figure to be the focal point of an offense that ranked second in OPS (.788) and third in runs scored (818) in the AL last year. Ramirez smirked when asked, via translator Anna Bolton, what his message would be to worried Tribe fans.

"I'd tell the fans that they need to trust us, and trust those of us who are here," Ramirez said. "We're the ones who are important for them now, and we're going to keep on giving our very best and we're going to come out every day to win, for ourselves, but also for the fans, because they're so important."

There is no denying that last season's ending came with a painful sting that still lingers.

The Indians held a 2-0 advantage in the AL Division Series against the Yankees, who then won three straight to send the Tribe into an early winter. That came one year after the Indians had a 3-1 lead in the World Series against the Cubs, who won it all in a classic Game 7 at Progressive Field. That is six straight close-out losses over the past two years, and now some key pieces have left the building.

Santana was a fixture in the Indians' lineup for the past seven years, and netted a three-year, \$60 million pact with the Phillies this offseason. Shaw, who was Francona's main setup man for the past five seasons, signed a multi-year contract with the Rockies. Bruce and Smith went to the Mets and Astros, respectively.

Cleveland's main answers for the losses to date have been to pick up the \$12 million team option for left fielder Michael Brantley (limited to 101 games in the past two years, combined, due to injuries) and signing first baseman Yonder Alonso to a two-year, \$16 million deal that includes a third-year option. Last year, Alonso had 28 homers and an .866 OPS in a career year that the Indians are counting on being a sign of more to come, rather than a one-year fluke.

Alonso, for his part, wants to help push the Indians over the postseason hump.

"I had a choice to make," Alonso said. "That choice was relatively simple for me -- that's just being in a winning environment, on a winning team. ... [I've] never been to a postseason, never even had a winning season. For me, the doors have opened and, obviously, I can help out."

Winning the World Series remains the goal, and no one in the Tribe's clubhouse feels like the window of opportunity has closed.

"As long as we have good players like we do in this locker room, the window is always going to be open," Jason Kipnis said. "There may be some moving pieces or mixing and matching some lineups, but when the core of the group that's as talented as it is here, you're going to have the window open."

5 keys that will be vital to Tribe's success

By Anthony Castrovince MLB.com @castrovince

CLEVELAND -- Because noise can influence narratives, the Tribe's media relations staff handed one-page printouts to all reporters attending manager Terry Francona's news conference on Friday, which preceded this weekend's Tribe Fest activities.

There in bold print were the selling points to serve as reminders -- for any observers distracted by the noise of a Giancarlo Stanton trade here or a Gerrit Cole swap there -- that the Indians, who have won more games than any American League club over the past five seasons, are still a pretty good ballclub.

"This has been a good run of baseball," Francona said, "and I don't see it going anywhere."

That's an important message to convey in an offseason where more of the local focus has been on what the Indians have lost than what they have. Gone are the formerly underrated and now well-compensated likes of Carlos Santana and Bryan Shaw and 2017 in-season trade acquisitions Jay Bruce and Joe Smith. Beyond the signing of Yonder Alonso to replace Santana at first base, the Indians will count on internal depth and budget-conscious additions to replace the impact of those players, and that, understandably, makes fans anxious at a time when this team needs to maximize its window to end the game's longest active championship drought.

Though the stakes have seemingly been raised in the AL by this offseason's work, there's still a lot to like in Cleveland. Here are five keys -- beyond the obvious likes of Francisco Lindor, Corey Kluber, Jose Ramirez, Edwin Encarnacion, Andrew Miller, etc. -- for the Indians to maintain pace with baseball's elite and win a World Series crown 70 years in the making.

1. A healthy pitching staff

Well, duh. Show me a team that doesn't need this to contend. But for the Indians, it's a particularly pertinent topic.

Who used the fewest starters in baseball last season? The Indians, with seven. Who had the highest percentage of innings pitched by their starters? Cleveland, at 66 percent. Who lost a guy in free agency who averaged 72 relief innings a season over the past five years? The Indians, with Shaw's departure to Colorado. Whose World Series contention hopes would seemingly revolve in some measure around a reigning Cy Young Award winner who battled a back issue last year? The Tribe, with Kluber.

You get the idea. It can be hard in this game to maintain the level of reliability the Indians received from a pitching staff that, per FanGraphs, had the highest total Wins Above Replacement mark (31.7) in history last season. Some regression would appear inevitable. But the Indians have to reign in that regression. They're still on the hunt for right-handed relief help to help ease the burden on Cody Allen and Miller (whose pending free agencies put all the more onus on 2018).

2. A winnable division

The Indians are in a moment in which three division opponents (White Sox, Tigers and Royals) are in some stage of rebuild. That leaves the Twins as the team most likely to give the Indians a run for their money. And while there's no doubt in the industry that the Twins still have money to spend on pitching in the weeks leading up to Opening Day, the Tribe, as it stands, is projected by FanGraphs to win the Central by 12 games.

Lord knows the projections have been wrong before, but Cleveland appears to have the easiest road to October of any clear contender in baseball.

3. Yonder and Yandy

The Indians signed Alonso to a two-year deal on the strength of a fly-ball rate that jumped from a career mark of 34.3 percent to a sudden '17 spike to 43.2 percent. The league made some adjustment to Alonso in the second half (.254/.354/.420) last season, but Cleveland is hoping the swing changes he made in Oakland can stick and stabilize.

They're hoping for similar changes for Yandy Diaz, who is, as one Tribe fan tweeted me, "the strongest man to never hit an MLB homer."

Diaz's biceps are so large that they ought to each count toward a roster spot, and his average exit velocity of 91.5 mph last season was, according to Statcast™, the seventh-highest in the game among those with at least 100 batted balls, just behind Stanton's 91.9 mark. The problem is that Diaz's average launch angle was nonexistent, which is why he was the master of the scorching ground ball to second base. If Diaz can take a page from the Alonso book, he's a breakout candidate.

4. Jason Kipnis ... one way or another

Kipnis would have been a free agent this offseason had he not signed an extension with the Indians prior to 2014. What once looked to be good value for the club deteriorated with Kipnis' injury-plagued season a year ago, in which he (temporarily, at least) lost his position at second base.

The Indians have tried to trade Kipnis, to no avail. If they are able to move Kipnis and the entirety of his contract, that's \$13.67 million off the 2018 books that the team can use to upgrade the outfield and bullpen in what is still a crowded free-agent market, and employ their preferred defensive alignment with Ramirez at second. But if they can't move Kip, he at least rates as a bounceback candidate amid all the talk about his statistical regression.

"The best responses," Kipnis said Friday, "are between the lines."

5. Pleasant surprises

The Indians' outfield is dominated by left-handed bats coming off injury-plagued seasons (Michael Brantley, Bradley Zimmer, Lonnie Chisenhall), with the only right-handedness exception being Brandon Guyer, who -- yep, you guessed it -- is coming off an injury. As much as Lorenzo Cain would be the perfect free-agent fit here, that's just not expected to happen on Cleveland's budget. And so attention turns to non-roster invitee (and right-handed hitter) Melvin Upton Jr. (remember him?), who the Indians think could be a surprise contributor in the vein of what Austin Jackson brought to the ballclub last year.

"It wouldn't shock me if he comes in and hits the ground running," Francona said.

Be it Upton or Diaz or top prospect Francisco Mejia (a catcher who could wind up helping at third base) or somebody or something I've failed to mention here, a title run would likely require impact from unexpected sources. But ain't that always the case?

Kipnis itching to return to second base

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- Jason Kipnis has not been explicitly informed that he will open the season as the second baseman for the Indians. Manager Terry Francona described that as the probable scenario on Friday, but still stopped short of committing to that plan with Opening Day still more than two months away.

"More than likely, he plays second," Francona said. "The winter isn't over yet. The way we're aligned, it certainly looks like that's the right thing to do. He's preparing for that."

Earlier this offseason, Kipnis' name found its way into trade rumors, and one report went as far to say he was nearly dealt to the Mets. Those rumblings petered out in the weeks following the Winter Meetings in early December, making it more and more likely that Kipnis -- a veteran of seven seasons with Cleveland -- will be with the Tribe come Spring Training.

Kipnis, who ended last season in the outfield, is scheduled to earn \$13.7 million this year and is owed \$14.7 million in '19, with a \$16.5 million team option (or \$2.5 million buyout) for '20. For an Indians club with little financial wiggle room, he understands that moving his contract could potentially help the team address some roster issues.

Kipnis reiterated on Friday, though, that he does not want to go anywhere else.

"They know I love playing here and want to stay here," said Kipnis, who was limited to 90 games last season due to health issues. "But I understand the business side of it. Stuff like that is usually out of the player's control, and our job is only to take care of what we can take care of. So I just worry about getting ready for the season."

If left fielder Michael Brantley (recovering from right ankle surgery) is ready for Opening Day, the logical alignment would be to have Kipnis at second and Jose Ramirez slide back to third base. If Brantley's comeback lingers into the regular season, there is still a chance that Kipnis could fill in as a left fielder temporarily.

"I'm excited to play wherever they need me," Kipnis said. "I'm still waiting for the green light to say that it's second base. I know it came out [in reports] a little bit, but I still have to talk to them. I'll wait for them to tell me more."

Bauer not worried about contract

Right-hander Trevor Bauer is the lone arbitration-eligible player who remains unsigned by the Indians. Bauer's representatives reportedly submitted a salary of \$6.525 million, while Cleveland has offered \$5.3 million. Bauer noted that his arbitration hearing, if necessary, is scheduled for Feb. 8. The Indians can still reach an agreement with the pitcher at any point leading up to the hearing.

"That doesn't change anything," Bauer said of his contract situation. "Ultimately, I'm a professional. I come here to do my job and be the best player I can be, and the best teammate I can be, and contribute to winning a World Series. So regardless of the outcome of the contract negotiations, it's not going to change how I do my job."

Worth noting

- Francona said that Indians prospect Francisco Mejia, who was ranked this week as the No. 1 catching prospect in baseball by MLB Pipeline, will likely stay behind the plate for most of the spring. The manager said he and the front office will be discussing that in more detail soon. During the Arizona Fall League, Cleveland had Mejia try his hand at third base.
- Francona noted that Brantley is "doing terrific" in his rehab from October ankle surgery. Said Francona: "He'll be dying to start the season on time, as he always does. That will be our biggest challenge -- to make sure we get him back and keep him back and not let Opening Day be an arbitrary deadline."
- Yandy Diaz is currently in Arizona rehabbing from a groin injury sustained during winter ball. Francona said that Diaz -- once fully healthy -- will likely focus solely on third base during Spring Training.
- Francona said the team's front office may still have some transactions coming. Said the manager: "I wouldn't be surprised if we end up with somebody else. If we don't, go play. I like our team a lot."

Power puts Bradley among top 1B prospects

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- The old adage in baseball is that power is something that develops over time. Bobby Bradley has had it since he broke into the professional ranks with the Indians.

Bradley's power displays have made him one of Cleveland's most intriguing prospects since he was drafted by the organization four years ago. Evaluators also see the potential in Bradley, who was ranked No. 6 on MLB Pipeline's updated rankings of the top 10 first-base prospects.

This spring, Bradley will get to showcase his skills for Indians manager Terry Francona and his coaching staff as a non-roster invitee to big league camp in Goodyear, Ariz. That will mark Bradley's first extended taste of the Major League environment -- aside from a dozen Cactus League games over the past three years. It will give Bradley a chance to be around veteran first basemen like Yonder Alonso and Edwin Encarnacion before returning to the Minors.

Bradley is the third Indians prospect to make the cut for MLB Pipeline's Top 10 positional lists, which are being updated ahead of the Jan. 27 unveiling of the preseason Top 100 prospects rankings. On Thursday, Francisco Mejia was named the No. 1 catching prospect in baseball. Earlier in the week, Triston McKenzie was named the No. 9 right-handed pitching prospect.

That trio represents a part of the future for an Indians club that will be looking for ways to extend its current window of success. The big league club has a solid young foundation with the likes of Francisco Lindor, Jose Ramirez and Bradley Zimmer, among others, and a crop of prospects who will be knocking on the door soon.

Last season, Bradley, 21, turned in a .251/.331/.465 slash line in 131 games for Double-A Akron, hitting 23 home runs and 25 doubles with 89 RBIs. That came after the left-handed-swinging first baseman belted 29 homers with 102 RBIs in the previous season with Class A Advanced Lynchburg.

Bradley -- selected in the third round of the 2014 Draft -- has posted a .261/.352/.499 slash line (.851 OPS) over four seasons in the Indians' system. He has averaged one home run per 20.2 plate appearances, and has shown improvement with his plate discipline. Bradley's strikeout rate dropped to 22.9 percent in 2017 from 29.7 percent in '16 and 31.6 percent in '15.

This winter, the Indians lost Carlos Santana in free agency and brought in Alonso to take over at first base with a two-year contract that includes a team (or vesting) option for 2020. In all likelihood, Bradley will advance to Triple-A Columbus this season, with an eye on breaking into the Majors within the next two years. If he continues on his current trajectory, there is a chance that Bradley might find his home at first in Cleveland when Alonso's contract expires.

“I want to get back to it. I want to get back to playing October baseball.”

by Jordan Bastian

During Saturday's Tribe Fest, Indians shortstop Francisco took part in a lengthy Q&A with Tom Hamilton, the team's radio voice. Lindor spoke about his approach, his brief Karate experience in Japan this winter, last season's big moments, last season's tough finish, getting to play in Puerto Rico this season and being the featured athlete on R.B.I. Baseball 18. Here are Lindor's comments...

On his approach to playing:

Lindor: "Literally, I just go up to the plate with a mind-set and approach, and whatever happens after that happens. Every offseason, I work as hard as I can to become the best player I can be to help my team, but then throughout the season, a lot of the coaches, the coaching staff, my teammates, they help me a lot. Whatever happens through the season, as long as I'm prepared, I'm fine with what happens."

On the 22-game winning streak, and his clutch RBI double in the ninth inning of win No. 22:

Lindor: "Definitely, I was aware of what was happening. Everyone was in the clubhouse talking about it—the media, not the players. The media was talking about it. Fans were talking about it. Going into that last at-bat, like I said, all I was thinking was, 'Put the ball in play. Whatever happens, it happens.' I hit it off the wall, I got to second and I celebrated way too much. I thought I was going to pass out. I got light-headed for a second. And then it was just fun. You play the game for moments like that, for the experience, for the joy of winning and it's just fun seeing how everybody, all the fans, were involved and the players on the top step in the dugout. It was a cool moment. But, it's sad that we didn't make it to the World Series."

On his grand slam in Game 2 of the ALDS:

Lindor: "It was fun. There were a lot of cool moments this past season that I take home and I embrace them and I look back at it. Hitting the ball, I remember hitting the ball and I kind of blew on it. I was like, 'Please stay fair, please stay fair.' As soon as it hit the foul pole, I remember looking at Sandy [Alomr Jr. at first base] and just celebrating with Sandy. And then looking back to the dugout and seeing everyone going crazy, seeing the fans and then looking up in the stands and seeing my family screaming. That was something special."

On his Karate photos and videos from Japan:

Lindor: "I went to Japan this offseason in Tokyo and I took some karate lessons, so be careful. You don't know what I can do now. No, I had an hour-and-a-half session of karate. It was special going to a different culture and learning from what they do and learning their sport. That's an art. Learning their art. It was cool. I thought I was going to face someone and with what I learned in an hour, I thought I was going to put someone down and it was the complete opposite. They put me down real quick. I didn't even last 10 seconds."

On whether he's focused on something specific this offseason:

Lindor: "Not really. I continue to work on the basics: Fielding, running techniques, hitting. The first couple weeks of the offseason, when I start hitting, I break down my swing and try to start from zero and then I just go up from there. I don't want to change too much, but I definitely want to make adjustments. You can improve every year. You can get better. You can learn from what you did throughout the season, learn from all the mistakes and you go from there. But, like I said, I did everything. Hitting, fielding, running, mind-set and endurance."

On always having a smile on his face and showing emotion on the field:

Lindor: "We have a good time just like everybody else. Some guys show it a little bit more than others. Some don't. I show mine. That's the way I was raised and that's the way I've played the game my whole entire life. I smile a lot. I show my emotions. I try not to throw anything on the ground when I get mad, when I get frustrated. My first year, I remember I got called up, and I dove a couple times and I hit the ground when I messed up the ground ball with my right hand. And [Jason Kipnis], one of the times I dove, he came next to me and was like, 'If you break your wrist, we're going to fight.' I said, 'OK, I won't do it no more. I'm done.' So, I haven't hit the ground like that anymore. It might happen once in a while, but I like to show emotions. I'm human and that's the way I was raised. That's the way I will always do it. However, I respect the game. I'm not trying to show anybody up. That's just me. I'm a happy kid and I enjoy life."

On whether Sandy Alomar Jr. was an idol of Lindor's when he was a kid growing up in Puerto Rico:

Lindor: [laughing] Yeah, yeah. Sandy, and his brother. His brother is one of the reasons I wear №12. Roberto Alomar, he's an idol to me. Sandy, he was a catcher, so I didn't pay much attention to him."

[Sandy throws an empty water bottle at Lindor from off stage]

Lindor: [laughing] "No, no, being Puerto Rican, you definitely want to be like them. But, nah."

[Sandy throws a mini basketball at Lindor from off stage]

Lindor: "He's throwing stuff!"

On playing in Puerto Rico in April:

Lindor: "Extremely special. The last time I played in Puerto Rico I was 13 or 14 years old. I can't wait to go back, to go back and play in front of my family, in front of the Puerto Rican crowd and in front of all the Indians fans out there. It's going to be extremely special. I can't wait. I might shed a tear or two—it's that special to me going back to my homeland and playing in front of the people that can't really travel and they can't see us play out here. As well, with what they're going through right now in Puerto Rico. It's getting a lot better. I want to tell you, it's getting a lot better. They've come a long way, but there's still some rough times out there, but it's a lot better since Day 1. And I just can't wait to go back and be in front of them and hear the drums and see my teammates listening to all the music I play in the clubhouse. It'll be in the stands that day."

On the Indians' current roster:

Lindor: "It's definitely an extremely special group. We're a family, we all get a long. And at the end of the day, if we win, we're going to win together. If we lose, we lose together. When I mess up, I take responsibility for it, and that's how everybody on the team is. When they mess up, they say, 'I'm sorry, guys. Pick me up.' That's what I love about the Indians. That's what I love about the city of Cleveland. Everybody's kind of like that. Everybody takes full accountability for their mistakes. That's what it's all about in life. When you mess up, you accept it and you keep moving forward."

After the R.B.I Baseball 18 cover is unveiled...

Lindor: "I love it. I love it. They made me look good in that picture. So, thank you R.B.I. for making me look a lot better."

On being picked to be on the cover:

Lindor: "It's special. It is definitely something special. It's something I'll definitely frame in my house. I'll have it framed up. Words can't describe how happy I am, how blessed I am. I want to thank the Lord for everything that he has done for me and for the fans. I play the game for the fans. There I am. I'm rocking the Indians [uniform]."

Lindor: "The chance of winning. Winning. We all know we can win it. We all know we've got what it takes. We've been there. We just haven't closed it. I'm looking forward to it. I'm looking forward to being with my new teammates and my old teammates, and everybody throughout the whole season. It's so much fun going from Day 1 in Spring Training all the way to the last day off the season. A lot of things happen. Whether it's good things, bad things, a lot of things happen. A lot of good moments. A lot of time for me to smile, so I love it."

On manager Terry Francona saying the team is going to come back "with a vengeance" this year:

Lindor: "Definitely. From my personal experience, I was a little bit embarrassed. Yeah, we had a good season, but you get to that point and you can't close it. It's sad. I felt like I didn't play long enough. Something was missing. Something was missing and I want to get back to it. I want to get back to playing October baseball, early November and going back to my house and saying, 'Yes, we did it.'"

Terry Francona, Cleveland Indians pitchers weigh in on MLB pace of play proposal, pitch clock

By Joe Noga, cleveland.com jnoga@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- It's a fight nobody in baseball wants to have, but it appears unavoidable at this point.

Major League Baseball's proposal to implement a 20-second pitch clock and restrict the number of mound visits in order to shrink game times below the three hour mark has stirred up a strong response from veteran players and coaches and those associated with the game.

It's also set the stage for potential unpleasanties between players union head Tony Clark and commissioner Rob Manfred when the two meet later this week. Despite the MLB Players Association pushing back on the proposal last week, Manfred's office is prepared to move forward with changes, even without union approval.

Cleveland reliever Andrew Miller, who serves as an elected representative in the MLBPA, said he hopes the two sides can avoid an ugly conflict as teams get ready to head to spring training next month.

"MLB thinks they have a way to speed up games and it's really important to them," Miller said in an interview with ESPN last week. "They've made it abundantly clear. We just don't necessarily love the way they're doing it."

Game times dipped by six minutes in 2015 when the league put timers in ballparks to reduce the down time between innings, and forced hitters to remain in the batter's box between pitches (with several exceptions). In 2016, game times again reached three hours and jumped to 3:05 in 2017.

Minor league stadiums have used pitch clocks since 2015. Under Manfred's proposal, big league pitchers would have 20 seconds between tosses. Umpires would issue warnings to pitchers or hitters for a first violation and subsequent violations would result in a ball or strike being added to the count.

The proposal also makes visits to the pitcher's mound by any infielder or teammate count toward the total of two visits per inning that requires a pitcher's removal from the game, and would limit the number of such visits to six per game.

While players and managers recognize that pace of play is an issue for the game, they contend that changes to the replay system, or buckling down on the time between innings are remedies that could be explored without forcing the use of a pitch clock.

Indians manager Terry Francona said Friday he does not have a problem with MLB's effort to reduce game times. Francona understands that there are plenty of hurdles between making a proposal and implementing changes.

"It's not as easy as just saying, 'This makes sense. Let's do that,'" Francona said.

But Francona believes there are other, less intrusive ways MLB can cut some of the dead time between innings and he believes the players would adjust. For instance, between innings, telling a pitcher he has a set amount of time to warm up, and however many warmup pitches he can throw in that time is what he gets.

"If you're out there and want to throw 10 pitches, go ahead," Francona said. "If you're out there and have time for one, we're starting at 2:15. I think you would cut out about a half a minute each inning, which really adds up."

Integrating technology does change the game, Francona said, and sometimes old-school methods are the only way to keep things in balance.

"When you have people who are smart, sitting up there watching every pitch on TV, you're going to have everybody's signs," he said. "We don't want them to have them. So, a lot of times the catcher has to go out there and make a quick trip to the mound. That's probably going to be the one that sets off more people than the other stuff."

But Francona believes young players, and veterans alike will adjust if the changes are forced into the game.

"I think it's all personal how guys go about it and how they've always gone about it," Francona said.

Mike Clevinger worked in the minor leagues with a pitch clock, and thinks there are only a few players around the league who really go over the line of taking too long.

Clevinger voiced his support for eliminating some of the gamesmanship that comes into play when teams send catchers or other infielders out to the mound instead of a pitching coach in order to delay while a reliever gets warmed up.

"I'd like to see that," Clevinger said. "It's a loophole in the system that I'm glad they're changing. Teams use that to their advantage, they'll run the shortstop out to get someone hot all the time, versus someone just stopping to take a breath in the moment."

Indians starter Josh Tomlin is known as a pitcher who has always worked quickly on the mound. Tomlin said he understands why MLB is focusing on the pace of play issue, but it's tough to tell a pitcher he has to perform at the highest level in a finite window of time.

"In the grand scheme of things, you're trying to execute to get an out," Tomlin said. "There's so much emphasis on those big moments, to say you have a certain amount of time on it, I'd

Jason Kipnis will carry a chip on his shoulder back to second base (or wherever Indians need him in 2018)

By Joe Noga, [cleveland.com jnoga@cleveland.com](mailto:jnoga@cleveland.com)

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The plan right now is for Jason Kipnis to return to second base in 2018 for the Cleveland Indians, according to manager Terry Francona.

And while nothing is set in stone, one thing is certain: Wherever Kipnis plays this season, he will be out to prove himself.

"I think we're at our best when I'm contributing," Kipnis said. "I think when I'm healthy, there's no one better (at second). I plan to prove that."

Francona was asked Friday about Kipnis' future, and said that although "winter is not over yet," things are lining up for the two-time All-Star's return to the infield.

"More than likely he plays second," Francona said. "The way we're aligned it certainly looks like that's the right thing to do. He's preparing for that."

Terry Francona on what it takes to win a World Series

Kipnis, who played in just 90 regular-season games last year between three trips to the disabled list, is set to make \$13.7 million this season and \$14.7 million in 2019 with a \$16.5 million team option for 2020. The Indians can buy out the final year for \$2.5 million.

Kipnis' struggles to stay on the field in 2017 led to some pushback from fans who were quick to write him off as Jose Ramirez performed well in his place.

He was the subject of widespread trade rumors during the Major League Baseball winter meetings in December, and Francona intimated that part of the reason Kipnis' position is not yet solidified is that more moves could still be made. There's also the possibility that Michael Brantley will not be ready for opening day, and Kipnis could again be needed in the outfield.

But Kipnis said he's turned the turmoil into a positive, using the often odious online comments as motivation in his offseason preparation.

"The people who are posting on Twitter aren't exactly the opinions that really matter to me," he said. "But it's better to be on the side that I have to prove myself. It puts a chip on the shoulder, which is where I play my best."

Kipnis said he "got after it" with his offseason training, with the online criticisms adding fuel to his fire.

"It helps reading some people telling you that you are done and all that stuff, or that you're on the wrong side of 30, and it's over," he said. "It's up to the player to say 'Hey, if this is what you want, this is the way you want to go, then put in the work.' So I've had a really good offseason."

The 30-year-old said he's learned from rehabbing after past injuries that he needs to stay flexible and make sure his spine is in alignment to take pressure off his back and hamstrings. He also worked on making his shoulder stronger for throwing.

"It's about working on all the weaknesses I do have and then emphasizing that and then building on the strengths that are already there," he said.

Kipnis said there's nothing he can do about the trade rumors, and that in the business of baseball, players get traded all the time. But he insisted Cleveland's front office knows he loves playing here and wants to stay here.

"I have no reason to think otherwise," Kipnis said. "I think that's the only attitude I can go in with that'll serve me the best is to just get ready to play for the Cleveland Indians. That's what I want to do and that's what I plan on doing until anyone tells me otherwise."

Indians' Jason Kipnis searching for healthier, bounce-back season in 2018, most likely at second base

By Ryan Lewis

CLEVELAND: Jason Kipnis once again sounds as if he has something to prove.

Kipnis essentially struggled through a lost 2017. He opened the season on the disabled list with right shoulder inflammation. He returned in late May but never got going offensively, starting his season just 5-for-31 and hitting .232 with a .693 OPS in the first half.

It was a sharp decline in production from his career norms. And it was particularly noticeable considering he had just put together two of the best offensive seasons of his career in 2015 and 2016, when he earned an All-Star selection and posted an OPS of .811 or better both years.

He then hit the disabled list again in July with a right hamstring strain, an injury he aggravated in August. By the time he returned to the lineup in September, he barely had enough time for an on-the-fly tryout in center field heading into the postseason.

He finished 2017 with only 90 games played and an 0.7 fWAR. In 2015 and 2016, he posted seasons of 4.9 and 4.8 fWAR, respectively — the third-highest total among qualified second basemen in that time period. It makes the Indians' 102-win season and 22-game winning streak slightly more impressive, that much of it came without Kipnis' usual contributions.

About to turn 31 in April, Kipnis has continued to revamp his workout routines to put more of an emphasis on flexibility instead of straight weight training in an effort to ensure he doesn't run into similar problems.

"It was to rehabilitate my legs and hamstrings and get those healthy, it was just to get everything where I want it to be to have a bounce-back season and contribute the way I know I can," Kipnis said. "It helps reading some people telling you that you are done and all that stuff, that you're on the wrong side of 30, and it's over. But you hear that three years ago and then two years ago, so it's up to the player to say, 'Hey, if this is what you want, this is the way you want to go, then put in the work.' So I've had a really good offseason."

Kipnis also grinded through a rough season in 2014, when he tried to play through an oblique injury but had poor results. He said that was around the time he became too stiff as a result of his workouts, and it showed.

"You learn and you grow," Kipnis said. "You learn what's important and what's not important when you're training. I don't need to be maxing out on a bench press. I don't need to be doing stuff that'll get me stiff, stuff that'll kind of prevent me from being the best player that I can. It's not just getting stronger, it's also getting more flexible. It's also aligning my spine a little right so that my back and hamstrings aren't kind of being yanked on."

Kipnis' spot not only in the lineup but also potentially on the roster was put into at least some question this offseason. The Indians liked their defensive alignment with Jose Ramirez at second base and Yandy Diaz and Giovanny Ursula at third base. That pushed Kipnis to center field at the end of September, but that was a temporary fix and only due to center fielder Bradley Zimmer being on the disabled list.

With Zimmer healthy, there were a couple different scenarios for where Kipnis might play in 2018, though the signing of first baseman Yonder Alonso — which in turn means Michael Brantley, when healthy, will stay in left field — made that picture much clearer.

Indians manager Terry Francona has said that nothing has been set in stone, and there are several variables that could change things during spring training. For example, if Brantley isn't ready by Opening Day, some things could be shifted around, including Kipnis playing some left field. But, in all likelihood, the plan is for Kipnis to again return to second base, pushing Ramirez back to third.

"More than likely he plays second," Francona said. "The winter isn't over yet. The way we're aligned, it certainly looks like that's the right thing to do. He's preparing for that. Jose will shoot over to third. Whether we have Brantley right at Opening Day or maybe a little later, he goes to left. And we stay in our alignment."

Kipnis is still looking to talk with Francona and president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti to nail down a plan.

"You know, I tried to show last year, I'll play wherever they want," Kipnis said. "Second base is what I've become used to. It feels good to have [Francona] say that or be a part of the lineup or be part of this thing going forward. Personally, I think we're at our best when I'm contributing. But if I'm not contributing, who am I to say that I'm the best option? I think when I'm healthy, I think there's no one better there. I plan to prove that."

Combine the positional questions from this winter with Kipnis' salary (he's owed a base salary of \$13.5 million in 2018, \$14.5 million in 2019 and has a club option for 2020 valued at \$16.5 million with a \$2.5 million buyout) and he became a natural trade candidate for a club needing to allocate its resources in the best possible way.

One report indicated that the Indians nearly had a deal in place with the New York Mets, but it was shot down at the last minute, most likely by ownership in New York.

"There's nothing I can do about it," Kipnis said of the rumors. "That's part of the business. Guys get traded all the time. They know I love playing here and want to stay here, but I understand the business side of it. Stuff like that is usually out of the player's control and our job is only to take care of what we can take care of, so I just worry about getting ready for the season."

Akron Beacon Journal LOADED: 01.21.2018

Cleveland Indians manager Terry Francona has me ready for season -- Terry Pluto

By Terry Pluto

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Listening to Terry Francona, I was ready for baseball season.

Part of it was seeing the Cleveland Indians manager looking and sounding healthy. Francona had a cardiac ablation procedure last July 7 at Cleveland Clinic. He had been dealing with an irregular heartbeat for a while.

The 58-year-old Francona missed two games in June because of the heart issue. When he entered Cleveland Clinic on July 5, it was his third trip to the hospital in five weeks. He was hospitalized four days for the procedure and was back managing the Indians on July 14.

I have a friend who had the same procedure. He said it took at least six months until he had his usual energy level back. That's where a rested Francona seems to be right now.

"I was pretty tired by the end of the year," Francona admitted. "I feel good. I have the fire to come back and it's good."

At Wednesday's Greater Cleveland Sports Award banquet, Francona said, "I can guarantee we're coming back with a vengeance."

When he talked to the media Friday, Francona laughed about that. "I was on a roll."

Hopefully, there was some truth to the Wednesday's statement.

The Indians won an American League-best 102 games and were up 2-0 on the Yankees in the best-of-five American League Division Series. Then they lost the next three. A wonderful regular season featuring a record-breaking 22-game winning streak came to a stunning stop.

"We thought we had a chance to (win a World Series) last year," said Francona. "Uncharacteristically, we played some bad baseball and it cost us."

NEXT YEAR IS HERE

Francona would obviously prefer the Tribe to have been able to keep free agents Carlos Santana, Jay Bruce, Joe Smith and Bryan Shaw. But he remains bullish about the 2018 season.

"I don't think anybody should be pessimistic right now," he said. "My goodness, we have the best record in the American League in the last five years. This has been a good run of baseball, and I don't see it going anywhere."

The Indians' .562 winning percentage since 2013 is indeed the league's best. In the last two seasons, the Indians have a 196-127 record.

Francona loves pitching and his team had the lowest ERA (3.30) in all of baseball. He talked about going to Goodyear for spring training with seven starters: Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco, Trevor Bauer, Josh Tomlin, Danny Salazar, Mike Clevinger and Ryan Merritt.

Merritt is out of minor league options and is expected to make the team in some capacity.

Francona thinks it's possible the Indians could make another addition (besides first baseman Yonder Alonso) to the roster.

"But even if we don't, we'll go and play," he said. "I like our team a lot."

THE TRIBE CULTURE

Most of the time when I write about a team wanting to develop a "winning culture," I do it while rolling my eyes. Yet the Indians have that. They don't need to talk about it. They live it.

It certainly isn't all Francona. The front office of president Chris Antonetti, general manager Mike Chernoff along with the shrewd drafting by Brad Grant helped revive baseball at Progressive Field. But it's Francona who frosts that cake and makes it look and taste even better than it did coming out of the oven.

Baseball people and national baseball writers admire the Indians for their stability.

The Dolan family ownership is given more respect in baseball circles than it receives at home. That's because baseball people admire the patience of ownership. That steady hand is part of what attracted Francona to the Tribe when he was hired in 2013.

It adds up to a team that has consistently overachieved during the Francona Era.

WINNING IT ALL?

Under Francona, the Indians have had five consecutive winning seasons and three trips to the playoffs. All that's left is winning a World Series. Francona has done it twice in Boston.

Can it happen here?

"You have to be really good to start with," he said. "Then you have to be fortunate, or call it luck. But you have to be good enough to take advantage of that. The more you get to the playoffs, you keep giving yourself a chance."

Francona won the World Series with Boston in 2004 and 2007. "But our best team was in 2008," he said, remembering a team which lost in the American League Championship Series.

The 2017 Tribe was more talented than the 2016 model. "But we caught fire (in 2016) at the right time and swept through some really good teams," said Francona.

Then they lost to the Chicago Cubs in Game 7 of the World Series.

"You give yourself enough chances, you can break through," he said. "It's not easy to do ... a lot of good teams out there. But we are one of those teams. And we should look at our glass as being half full."

Terry's Talkin' Tribe, Jay Bruce -- Pluto

Terry's Talkin' Tribe, Jay Bruce --

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 01.21.2018

10 questions Cleveland Indians manager Terry Francona answered about the Tribe's offseason

By Joe Noga,

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Indians manager Terry Francona chatted with reporters at Progressive Field on Friday ahead of this weekend's TribeFest fan festival.

Francona discussed a variety of topics, including the health and playing status of several players, the roles for the coaching staff and where some of the team's new additions will fit in.

Here's a few quotes from Francona taken from his interview session with the local media.

On Michael Brantley's recovery from ankle surgery

Francona said by all accounts outfielder Brantley is doing well after offseason ankle surgery.

"He'll be dying to start the season on time as he always does," Francona said. "That will be our biggest challenge to make sure we get him back and keep him back and not let opening day be an arbitrary deadline."

The Indians picked up a team option for \$12 million on Brantley's contract in November.

Yonder Alonso's role at first base

Francona confirmed that Alonso will play the majority of innings at first base as he replaces departed free agent Carlos Santana.

"Certainly Edwin (Encarnacion) goes over there, but we'll try to balance that out a little so we can keep both bats in the lineup," Francona said. "We might give him a day off against a Chris Sale-type lefty where maybe he gets 10-12 days off a year against the tougher lefties. Other than that, he'll play."

Losing pitching coach Mickey Callaway

Francona admitted the Indians will miss Callaway, now the manager of the New York Mets. Callaway had spent five seasons building Cleveland's pitching staff into one of the best in baseball.

Enter Carl Willis, a familiar face for Tribe fans, who served as pitching coach in Cleveland from 2003-09 and as an advisor briefly in 2015. "I think his personality will fit in seamlessly with the guys," said Francona, who was quick to point out that Willis alone shouldn't be viewed as Callaway's replacement.

Scott Atchison, who takes over as bullpen coach, and Brian Sweeney, who will serve as an assistant, are part of the restructured hierarchy.

"Rather than try to put a band aid on something, we sat back and really tried to dig deep and maybe not just replace Mickey with one person," Francona said. "We have three guys who will handle the pitching, and I'm really happy the way we did it. I think we're actually going to be stronger because of the three guys together."

A healthy Bradley Zimmer could answer a lot of questions

Francona said the Indians missed Zimmer's defense down the stretch. The rookie center fielder had plateaued at the plate before fracturing a bone in his hand on a slide into first base against Baltimore on Sept. 11. He missed the remainder of the season.

"He gave us such a help defensively, speed-wise and he held his own at the plate," Francona said of Zimmer. "Defensively, he made us a different team. Having him back healthy will be really nice. We'll get a chance to see if he's ready to advance to playing every day."

Don't count Tyler Naquin out

Naquin went from starting Game 6 of the 2016 World Series to being the outfield's forgotten man last season. But Francona refuses to count the 26 year old out.

"His whole career is right in front of him," Francona said. "It happens to a lot of players where you come up and have a brief amount of success and then you hit some struggles. That doesn't mean that he's out of sight, out of mind. Nobody's giving up on him for a minute."

Francona recharged his batteries

The Tribe's 58-year-old manager admitted that by the time the 2017 season ended, he needed to get away for a bit. A health scare in July resulted in a cardiac ablation procedure, and cost Francona the chance to manage in the All-Star Game. But a few weeks of relaxing in Tucson appear to have hit the reset button for Tito, who said his competitive spirit is alive and well.

"I have the fire to come back and get started. Which is good, because I don't think you could have that and not feel healthy," he said. "That clock rolls around and you start to see the players and it's go time. I'm looking forward to it."

The Indians haven't yet decided on where Francisco Mejia will play

Mejia, the No. 1 catching prospect for 2018 according to MLB Pipeline's Jim Callis, spent some time in the Arizona Fall League learning to play third base. Francona said the Indians have not yet made a decision on where he will play, speculated that he would remain a catcher.

"It'd be a little premature for me to say that because I just honestly don't know the answer," Francona said.

Cleveland might not be totally done making roster moves

One sentiment that Francona repeated several times during the session was that "winter is not over by any means," and that there are a lot of players out there available on the market.

Francona called this free agent season the slowest he's ever seen, but left open the possibility that Cleveland could add a player.

"I think (the front office) guys have been making calls every day," he said. "I wouldn't be surprised if we end up with somebody else. If we don't, we'll go play. I like our team a lot."

Melvin Upton is an intriguing figure

The Indians signed Melvin Upton Jr. to a minor-league deal in December with a big league spring training invite, and Francona sounded more than a little bit intrigued by the idea of seeing Upton in camp.

"It wouldn't shock me if he comes in and hits the ground running," Francona said. "He's in a really good place. We got a chance to visit with him before we signed him. I would say it's one of the highlights of the winter for me. It just wouldn't surprise me if he comes in and makes a really good impression."

Terry Francona reacts to Yonder Alonso taking jersey #17 from him

From 17 to 77

Francona will wear jersey No. 77 for the 2018 season, giving up the No. 17 he wore previously to newcomer Yonder Alonso.

Francona said that at the end of last season, Mejia had wanted the number, but might have been afraid to ask. When the Indians acquired veteran first baseman Alonso last month, No. 17 went to him.

Francona appeared pretty indifferent about the switch, noting that the transition centered mainly on typography.

"I could care less what number I am," he said. "But since I went from 17 to 77 I can just put the little thing on my shower shoes and my underwear and stuff and I'm good to go."

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 01.21.2018

TribeFest 2018: 'Pessimistic fans' hard to find at Cleveland Indians annual gathering

By Joe Noga,

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Those "pessimistic fans" who lurk in the online shadows and comment with impunity on Twitter were nowhere to be found Saturday at TribeFest 2018 inside the Huntington Convention Center of Cleveland.

Inside, the 2018 Cleveland Indians season outlook was as sunny as a spring training afternoon in Goodyear, Arizona.

Thousands of Tribe fans poured into the event, greeting 26 Indians players and coaches throughout the day while seeking autographs, posing for photos and playing interactive games. Response to the sixth-annual gathering's new expanded venue was overwhelmingly positive, as fans took to social media to share the experience of meeting their favorite players.

Jennifer White of Avon brought her daughter, Ana, 9, in the hopes of getting a photo with Francisco Lindor.

"He made her whole year just with that one picture," White said. "She'll cherish it long after the summer is over."

While an ongoing narrative surrounding the Tribe's offseason is that the organization has struggled with free agent departures and a tepid trade market, fans on Saturday remained positive about the upcoming season.

Tyler Davis of Chagrin Falls insisted that the Tribe's cupboard is hardly bare.

"We're bringing back five All-Stars from last year, and the best starting pitching rotation in baseball," he said. "Other teams are going to have to score runs, too, you know."

Manager Terry Francona appeared shocked that any fans would be pessimistic about the team's chances at winning a World Series in 2018, noting that the Tribe has the best record in the American League over the last five seasons.

"This has been a good, good run of baseball and I don't see that going anywhere," Francona said.

As far as losing Carlos Santana, Jay Bruce and Bryan Shaw, Francona admits they will be missed, but said there are players who nobody has on the radar that will step in and contribute.

Francona said he was barely asked about Tyler Olson in spring training last season, but by the end of 2017, the rookie reliever had thrown 20 consecutive scoreless innings.

"It happens every year and it will happen again," Francona said. "Some of the guys you just don't quite know who they are yet. But they'll rise to the occasion. They'll get an opportunity and they'll run with it."

Jason Kipnis said fans who are only looking at the players the Indians have lost are not seeing the whole picture. He thinks once opening day rolls around, they'll get behind the Tribe's lineup.

"It wasn't one person who won 102 games and it wasn't one person who put us on a 22-game winning streak," Kipnis said. "It was a group effort and this group is still capable of everything we want to accomplish."

Lindor balked at the idea that the Indians have taken a step backward. He said adding an All-Star bat like Yonder Alonso and bringing back seven starting pitchers who won games year has him filled with optimism.

"It's not about what you had, it's about what you have in front of you and what you can do with it," Lindor said. "We're going to miss the guys that left. We respect them. We love them. But, at the end of the day, we've got a job to do and we're trying to win."

Jose Ramirez implored fans to trust the players and coaches who are still here.

"We're going to keep giving our very best and we're going to come out every day to win, for ourselves and also for our fans, because they're so important," Ramirez said. "So trust in us, we're going to do our best for you all."

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 01.21.2018

Somehow, after a 102-win season, the Indians are underdogs again

Zack Meisel 3 hours ago

When the levees broke and reporters spilled into the Indians' clubhouse Friday afternoon, the silent scene was reminiscent of the last media invasion three months earlier.

Greg Allen stood near his locker in the far corner of the room. A handful of players came and went, from Mike Clevinger to Nick Goody to Bradley Zimmer. Danny Salazar, Erik Gonzalez and Jose Ramirez gripped the controls on the "Mario Kart" arcade setup, as Ryan Merritt watched. Aside from occasional low-volume chatter, the only sounds came from Ramirez's Yoshi character slipping on a banana peel.

It almost seemed as though nothing had changed since that muggy October evening, even though the navy labels bearing the names Santana, Bruce, Smith and Shaw had been removed. That's the way the Indians want to approach this new season: Little has changed. They lost a few guys, sure, but the core remains intact. The supporting cast remains sufficient. The youth remains primed to blossom.

At least, that's how they see it. They understand the way fans' brains are wired, but they contend that pessimism isn't warranted, that window-closing dialogue is premature, that rival transactions aren't worrisome.

"They're looking too shortsighted," Jason Kipnis said of those who insist the Indians have taken a step back.

Outsiders stripped the Indians of any chance at postseason prosperity in 2016 after injuries to Carlos Carrasco and Salazar. The club responded with an implausible run that ran dry in the 10th inning of Game 7 of the World Series.

When the Indians limped out of the gate last year, some wondered whether the previous fall was a mirage. The club responded with a torrid second half, capped by a 22-game blitz on the record books.

They finally claimed the role of favorites, only to peter out in the ALDS against the Yankees. That letdown, coupled with the offseason departures, has birthed the notion that the Astros and Yankees now stand alone atop the American League totem pole.

So, the team that tallied 102 wins last season has once again been relegated to the role of underdog. The players don't care about the assignment, though they're quick to dispute it.

"You can focus on what we've lost all you want," Trevor Bauer said, "but nobody seems to be focusing on what we're bringing back."

And thus begins, nine months before a World Series champion is determined, the Indians' rendition of the "nobody believed in us" battle cry.

"Every team that wins is like, 'Well, nobody believed in us,' " Terry Francona said. "That's the silliest thing I've ever heard. But if that's what guys use, good for them. That's OK. We have an obligation as a team to take whatever we can and use it to propel us to be as good as we can be. If that's what it takes, good."

In this instance, it's not so much a rallying effort as it is a plea to examine the state of the roster. Bauer has a point, after all.

Rock-solid rotation with a WAR total 23 percent higher than MLB's second-best team? Check.

Position-player pool built around a pair of young, All-Star switch-hitters who now possess plenty of power at the plate? Check.

A lethal, durable relief tandem? Check.

The roster isn't flawless. Questions swirl around Kipnis and Michael Brantley, the pricey old guard in the clubhouse. The front office hasn't yet presented an answer to replacing Bryan Shaw and Joe Smith.

But the Indians are quick to hush any talk of a title being unobtainable.

"When the core of the group is as talented as it is here, you're going to have the window open," Kipnis said.

Each of the past two years, the Indians have made midseason tweaks to enhance the roster for the final stretch. In 2016, the club added Andrew Miller and Brandon Guyer. Last season, Smith and Jay Bruce joined the pennant push.

There's no reason to think the front office can't swing another deal or two this summer once the team's deficiencies are more apparent. And, of course, players tend to surprise.

"Last year in spring training, I don't know how many people asked me about Tyler Olson," Francona said. "By the end of the year, he's got 20 scoreless innings. It happens every year and it will happen again."

"Some of the guys, you just don't quite know who they are yet. But they'll rise to the occasion. They'll get an opportunity and they'll run with it. And that gets exciting."

The Indians will report to spring training in a few weeks and, as storylines develop and certain players emerge from the pack, we'll revise our expectations. The Indians figure to be the titans of the AL Central, and that's all they can control until October.

So, until then, they aren't concerned.

"I don't think there's any need to panic," Bauer said. "The focus should be on what we're bringing back and the talent we still have here. Not the pieces we've lost."

Ohio Insider: Indians again looking to non-roster invitees for major-league impact

The Athletic Staff Jan 19, 2018

It happens every year.

No, not Michael Martinez receiving a non-roster invite to Indians spring training, though he will begin his fourth camp with the club next month.

Every team recruits a host of players to their spring complex for a six-week tryout. There are veterans seeking to latch on for one final ride. There are younger players at a crossroads, desperate to turn heads and re-establish optimism or validate bygone potential. There are minor

leaguers who deserve a closer look from the big-league evaluators. There are castoffs and warm bodies present to make life easier on the coaches tasked with navigating the complex labyrinth of spring training playing time schedules.

Each year, the Indians sift through the pile and pinpoint a couple of players who emerge as integral parts of the major-league roster. An unheralded reliever or veteran outfielder makes a convincing statement during the spring, merits a spot on the Opening Day roster and makes the team's low-risk investment more than worthwhile.

Consider some examples of non-roster invitees in recent years who made valuable contributions to the club during the season.

2013: Scott Kazmir, Jason Giambi

2014: Scott Atchison, Nyjer Morgan

2015: Jeff Manship

2016: Joba Chamberlain

2017: Austin Jackson

Now, no team should dismiss the wintery wheeling and dealing in favor of digging for diamonds in the rough to fill out a roster. Not every invitee has prospered once awarded some big-league responsibility. Daniel Robertson, Rich Hill, Tom Gorzelanny, Ross Detwiler, Shaun Marcum, Elliot Johnson, Brett Hayes, Bruce Chen, Marlon Byrd and Jerry Sands all came and went in recent years. For various reasons, including injury, lack of performance or roster decisions, they didn't stick. Even Morgan and Chamberlain were dispatched during the season.

The Indians do seem to be banking on a couple of non-roster hits this year. Terry Francona has already praised Melvin Upton, telling reporters this week that he wouldn't be surprised if the veteran outfielder stood out during camp. Upton, limited by injuries to 12 games with the Giants' Triple-A affiliate last season, can earn a base salary of \$1.5 million if he makes the major-league roster. He's a leading candidate to replace Jackson, who came to camp last spring with a balky knee and ended the year with an .869 OPS. Francona stressed on multiple occasions last season that Jackson was a savior for an outfield hampered by injuries to Michael Brantley, Lonnie Chisenhall, Bradley Zimmer, Brandon Guyer and Abraham Almonte.

The other sensible spot for a non-roster invitee to make noise would be in the bullpen. Cody Allen, Andrew Miller, Dan Otero, Zach McAllister, Nick Goody and Tyler Olson are assured relief roles, but that could leave at least one vacancy, depending on what the team does with its six starting pitchers.

The Indians have invited six non-roster relievers to camp thus far: Jeff Beliveau, Livalberto Bonilla, Evan Marshall, Alexi Ogando, Neil Ramirez and Robert Zarate. That group could certainly expand over the next few weeks.

Other non-roster invitees include infielder Drew Maggi and outfielder Brandon Barnes. The Indians have also invited minor leaguers Richie Shaffer, Bobby Bradley, Nellie Rodriguez, Cole Sulser, Josh Martin, Cameron Hill and Louis Head to camp.

MLB free-agency freeze presents buying opportunity with spring thaw

By Travis Sawchik 4 hours ago

Before arriving to write and report for The Athletic and FanGraphs last year, I covered the Pittsburgh Pirates for the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review. In March 2016 I was covering Pirates spring training in Bradenton, Florida, when the club announced a curious signing: They had agreed to a free-agent deal with David Freese.

Freese was on the wrong side of 30 but hardly ancient at 33. He was a former World Series MVP and All-Star who was coming off a 2.1-WAR season, producing a .257/.323/.420 slash line as a perfectly capable starting third baseman for the Los Angeles Angels the previous season. Given his pedigree and performance, Freese was the type of player teams would have valued for the vast majority of the free-agency era. But there Freese was in February 2016 watching MLB Network from his living room, seeing images of players reporting to sun-splashed Arizona and Florida camps while he waited for a call from his St. Louis-area home. He kept waiting. The game seemed to be moving on from him.

After asking for a multiyear contract with an annual average value greater than \$10 million in November, Freese settled for a one-year, \$3 million deal with the Pirates in early March.

"It was a tough situation to handle," Freese said to reporters. "The waiting, it challenges your heart. Sitting around while guys are out playing ... seeing games, seeing guys in the field, it makes you appreciate the game a lot more."

And those emotions, that anxiety, often drops asking prices.

This offseason, the lack of free-agent transactions has become regular news. The vast majority of top free agents remain unsigned, including 29 of FanGraphs' top-50 free agents as of Jan. 19. While some suspect collusion is at play, the more likely scenario is that a perfect storm exists as large-payroll teams try to avoid a more punitive luxury tax in the new CBA, which has created something of a soft salary cap, clubs are also holding cash in reserve until next year's historic free-agent class, and then there is the larger, continuing trend in which teams have increasingly devalued free agency.

As one major league executive told me: "It's not if you will lose on free agency, it's how much you will lose."

Teams are well aware of the losing bet that is free agency. In the second decade of the 21st century, reason and logic largely have replaced emotion in decision-making by front offices. Every GM is familiar with aging curves.

Consider that from 2001-03, age 30 and older pitchers and position players accounted for 41.8 percent of WAR production, 238,866 plate appearances and 49,162 innings pitched, according to an analysis by The Athletic.

And in the three most recent seasons, from 2015-17, age 30 and older production accounted for 30.6 percent of WAR, 204,138 plate appearances and 44,163 innings pitched.

That's a 15.7 percent decline in plate appearances and a 10.7 percent decrease in innings for the age 30-plus demographic of player.

Part of the decline might be tied to performance-enhancing drug testing that began in 2004, but another aspect is that teams prefer to replace veteran production with younger, cheaper production whenever and wherever they can. Hundreds of age 30-plus seasons — free-agent paydays — have been lost in the past decade.

Not only are older players losing jobs, but they also are having to wait longer for the ones they obtain.

In reporting for FanGraphs this winter, I found February free-agent signings have increased three consecutive years and are on pace to perhaps set a record this coming month. The February signings increased to 65 last year, nearly double the 2014 number (38).

As The Athletic's Peter Gammons noted when speaking with a major-league executive, February has become the new January: What it means is more and more players like Freese have to wait. And some middle-class, over-30 tier of players never get called at all. Hundreds of age-30-plus seasons have disappeared, meaning hundreds of free-agency seasons have evaporated.

This devaluation of free agency could have significant ramifications in the next collective bargaining negotiations as players might have to concern themselves with fighting to protect the value of free agency and their share of baseball revenues. There is an argument to be made that the economic and service-time models of the game are broken. But changing the nature of free agency will be difficult. In the meantime, this trend could benefit certain teams that are willing to take advantage of it.

In this environment, it's possible that mid- to lower-payroll clubs can become more involved in free agency now that free agency has become undervalued. While the superstars will almost always join large-market, coastal-based teams, there is more opportunity to find value in free agency for teams like the Indians.

Consider the signing of Edwin Encarnacion last winter.

At FanGraphs, the top-50 free agents are attached with crowdsourced contract predictions. Last season, Encarnacion ranked as the No. 4 overall free agent. The crowd predicted Encarnacion would sign a four-year, \$90.4 million contract. MLBTradeRumors.com predicted a four-year, \$92 million deal for the former Blue Jays slugger. Few predicted he would land with the Indians.

But a market never really developed for Encarnacion in part due to concerns about how bat-only players age. What happened? In late December, Encarnacion signed a three-year deal, guaranteeing him \$60 million that includes a club option. It was a 25 percent discount in years, and a 33 percent discount in predicted dollars.

Max Rieper of Royals Review found from 2013-17, free agents who signed before Jan. 1 received guaranteed dollars 4 percent below FanGraphs' crowdsourced estimates. Those who signed after the New Year? They signed for 25.3 percent less than the crowdsource averages.

The longer free agents wait, the more their anxiety increases. It makes sense that as spring training camps open, players feel pressure to strike a deal. Clubs are perhaps not only devaluing free agency but also learning they can wait out players and drive down costs.

By waiting, teams of all payroll sizes can drive down costs.

Yonder Alonso is another example of the increasing opportunity found in free agency. While the Indians did not wait until after the New Year to sign Alonso — he signed in late December — they still signed a player who slashed .266/.365/.501 with 28 home runs last year to a two-year, \$16 million contract below the FanGraphs' crowd prediction (two years, \$20 million) and MLBTradeRumors' two-year, \$22 million forecast. With a win above replacement estimated to be worth \$9 million, that seems like a value for a player coming off a 2.4-win season.

The Indians' leadership has said most of their payroll flexibility this offseason has been expended by exercising the club option on Michael Brantley and signing Alonso, but there is likely to be a surprising number of unsigned players in February and even into March.

"We had a certain amount of flexibility headed into the offseason that we had to use judiciously," said Indians president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti after signing Alonso. "This represents the vast bulk of that flexibility, because, the cost of retaining the nucleus of our team is about \$25 (million) to \$30 million based on escalating contracts and players going through the arbitration process."

The Indians seem unlikely to make another significant splash but there could be value remaining. For instance, only four free-agent outfielders have signed to date, deals totaling \$52 million. There will be a number of unemployed outfielders come February and even into March.

By waiting, a greater supply of free agents will be available, thus, teams have the opportunity to find great value late in the offseason and after spring training camps begin. No player wants to be where Freese was two springs ago, but more and more are likely to be in that position.

In August 2016, five months after signing with the Pirates, Freese signed a two-year extension with the club at a time when he was batting .276 with a .792 OPS. Did Freese think about testing the market and trying to procure a better contract as he enjoyed an even better season than the year prior?

“Potentially,” Freese said. “I also could be sitting at home until the middle of March next year.”

And as clubs learn how to wait out free agents, it presents problems for the players and MLBPA, but it also allows for opportunity for clubs of all budget sizes.

After a slow offseason, Indians don't see reason for pessimism ahead of 2018 season

By Ryan Lewis

Terry Francona dropped the line of the winter this week.

The Indians manager guaranteed that once spring training begins next month, the Indians will come back “with a vengeance” in the wake of a disappointing, early exit from the 2017 postseason.

It's a line that sort of goes without saying, but it certainly fired up some Indians fans on social media ahead of Saturday's TribeFest at the Huntington Convention Center of Cleveland. On Friday, though, Francona mostly laughed it off.

“I just got on a roll the other night,” Francona said. “I was tired. I thought everybody was ready to go. Whatever it takes, whether guys use that for — I don't care what they use. You hear it all the time. Every team that wins is like, ‘Well, nobody believed in us.’ That's the silliest thing I've ever heard.”

“But if that's what guys use, good for them. That's OK. We have an obligation as a team to take whatever we can and use it to propel us to be as good as we can be.”

The Indians turned in a 102-win season that included the second-longest winning streak in baseball history. That regular season followed their oh-so-close loss in extra innings of Game 7 of the 2016 World Series to the Chicago Cubs. The momentum was there, and the expectations were World Series Or Bust.

Thus, the disappointing, early exit from the American League Division Series to the New York Yankees last October was enough to leave a bitter taste. With many players in town for TribeFest and the start of spring training creeping closer, the Indians are welcoming a chance to find the mouthwash and start anew.

“To get so close in '16 and to watch it go away, to lose, you look back on it as a successful season, a lot of great memories from it, but you still have that hunger and that taste in your mouth of getting back there to try to win,” Josh Tomlin said. “Obviously, that's everybody's goal to start spring training. A handful of teams can't say they're in a position to win a World Series, and we're very fortunate to be in that position.”

“We enjoy the expectations — it means we're doing our job. A lot of teams maybe might not like the expectations or the weight on their shoulders, but this team relishes that and enjoys that.”

To this point, the Indians haven't made the kind of headline-stealing moves other contenders in the American League have, like the Yankees trading for Giancarlo Stanton or the Houston Astros dealing for Gerrit Cole.

If there is pessimism from any Indians fans at TribeFest this weekend, those in the clubhouse don't feel it.

“They're looking too short-sighted and they'll realize as soon as Opening Day comes around, the lineup we're putting out, ‘Oh, yeah, we've won a lot of games with these people,’ ” Jason Kipnis said. “It wasn't one person who won 102 games. It wasn't one person who won the 22-game winning streak. It was a group effort there, and this group is still capable of everything we want to accomplish.”

According to Trevor Bauer, the mistake being made is that too much focus is on the players who left Cleveland in free agency this winter — Carlos Santana, Jay Bruce, Bryan Shaw and Joe Smith — instead of on those who are returning.

“You can focus on what we've lost all you want, but nobody seems to be focusing on what we're bringing back, which is the best pitching staffs in the big leagues last year on the starting side — one of the best starting staffs of all time, actually, if you look at WAR and stuff like that,” Bauer said. “Largely the same offense. Hopefully, guys are healthy this year. We had a lot of injuries last year that people don't talk about. Kip was banged up quite a bit, [Michael] Brantley was banged up quite a bit. When you're banged up like that, it's hard to have the offensive season you're capable of.”

Jose Ramirez added a message for fans clamoring for some type of a major move.

“I'd tell the fans that they need to trust us, and trust those of us who are here,” Ramirez said. “We're going to keep on giving our very best and we're going to come out every day to win, for ourselves and also for our fans, because they're so important. They're the ones out there supporting us every single day. So trust in us — we're going to do our best for you all.”

Akron Beacon Journal LOADED: 01.20.2018

Indians' Andrew Miller hopes to avoid 'big fight' over pace-of-play plans

Jerry Crasnick

Cleveland Indians reliever Andrew Miller, a prominent voice in the Major League Baseball Players Association, said he hopes that MLB's plan to introduce a pitch clock in 2018 doesn't lead to a "big fight or some sort of ugly showdown," even though players are overwhelmingly opposed to the idea.

Miller -- who serves as one of four elected association representatives, along with Washington's Daniel Murphy, Arizona's Paul Goldschmidt and the New York Mets' Matt Harvey -- has been heavily involved in pace-of-game talks, which hit a wall Thursday when players rejected the owners' latest proposal. Barring a sudden change of course, MLB will unilaterally implement a 20-second clock and a limit on mound visits this season without consent from the union.

"As players, across the board, we agree that we want games to be quicker so it doesn't have an effect on viewership," Miller told ESPN on Friday from Cleveland, where he is attending a team event. "We get it. We're in the entertainment business, and if we're not putting the best product out there, we're at fault and we need to make an adjustment. I think we all accept that we can be better with pace of play and make the game more appealing to viewers.

"We're all for that. We're just not necessarily for the changes MLB wants to make to get to that end goal. A lot of guys don't like the clock, and I don't disagree, personally. My take is, that's one of the things about the sport that makes us so appealing and so unique -- that we don't have a clock ticking.

"Different players had different issues, and ultimately this wasn't something we supported. But if MLB does implement, our job is to try and go out there and make it work. This is not something we want to turn into a big fight or some sort of ugly showdown about us trying to make a point. MLB thinks they have a way to speed up games. It's really important to them. They've made it abundantly clear. We just don't necessarily love the way they're doing it."

In 2015, MLB placed timers at ballparks to minimize down time between innings and introduced a rule requiring hitters to keep one foot in the batter's box, barring several exceptions. The changes had a positive impact in 2015, reducing the average game time by six minutes. But MLB games returned to three hours in length in 2016 and spiked to a record 3:05.11 in 2017.

Over the past year, MLB has made several proposals that were less draconian than the one on the verge of being implemented. One proposal called for the use of an 18-second pitch clock, but only with the bases empty. Another called for a 20-second pitch clock with runners on base to kick in for 2019, only if the average game time remained above three hours this year. The two sides appeared to be making progress, according to one source, until things drifted apart this week.

Union executive director Tony Clark and assistant general counsel Matt Nussbaum rejected MLB's latest proposal in a phone call to deputy commissioner Dan Halem on Thursday. Although Clark and commissioner Rob Manfred are scheduled to meet next week, sources said the sides remain far apart on the issue and are not optimistic they will reach an agreement through further talks.

Although players acknowledge that pace of play is an issue, they have argued that games can be shortened through revisions in instant replay, stricter monitoring of the down time between innings and other remedies that don't require a clock. The two sides even discussed the possibility of bringing back bullpen carts in their negotiations, but that initiative didn't gain much traction.

Evan Longoria, acquired by the San Francisco Giants in a trade from Tampa Bay last month, said he has no interest in turning from his new third base spot at AT&T Park to watch a pitcher make way to the mound by cart from the bullpen behind his base.

"Let the guy run out," Longoria said Friday.

"We want to keep the game looking the same because we enjoy playing it the way that it's played. I think that on the flip side Major League Baseball is trying to find that common ground where you don't really affect the viewership and the fan base but you also find a way to move the game along. It's a tough spot."

Baseball introduced a pitch clock in the minor leagues in 2015. The clock being proposed by the commissioner's office would allow for 20 seconds between offerings for big leaguers -- or two fewer seconds than the average of 22 seconds between pitches in 2017.

Miller said that big leaguers who have pitched with the clock in the minors have expressed a range of sentiments.

"We have guys who are members of our union who have played through the minor league changes, so we absolutely weighed that," Miller said. "There were plenty of anecdotes of it not working. Ultimately, it's going to be a challenge for the umpires, as well. You don't want to shave eight seconds off an inning that leads to 45 seconds of arguing.

"In the minor leagues, there were stories of more veteran guys who had more confidence in maybe abusing the pitch clock by not getting on the dirt, or stepping off or picking off, when it was kind of a blatant way of working around the clock and making a point. I imagine if there's an instance where balls or strikes are added to an at-bat, it will lead to quite a bit of dialogue between players and umpires and slow things down. We just don't know."

Under MLB's proposal, an umpire would issue a warning to a pitcher or batter for a first violation each game, and subsequent violations by the same player would result in a ball being called against a pitcher and a strike against a batter.

"Hopefully, as players, we do a really good job of handling that situation," Miller said. "One of the positives is, the numbers aren't that tight. I think that's something we can accomplish -- to get in the batter's box in 30 seconds and get a pitch off in 20 seconds."

The impasse in pace-of-game talks comes amid a slow offseason that has created some tension as dozens of free agents remain unsigned. Miller said he hopes the two sides can work through their differences on pace of game once spring training begins.

"Hopefully it will be a PR battle at the beginning and it doesn't turn into something ugly," Miller said. "I can't imagine a better experience for fans than what we've seen the last two years in the World Series. We have young superstar talents. I think our game is in a great place. I hope this isn't something that pulls us in the wrong direction. It's just a matter of fine-tuning things."

SPORTS Indians have high hopes for 2018

Shaun Bennett ByShaun BennettPublished on Jan. 21, 2018 | Updated 1:00 a. m.

CLEVELAND — A disappointing finish to last year and a largely unproductive offseason thus far hasn't diminished the Indians' optimism heading into 2018.

They still think they're one of the best teams in the American League, whether the rest of the baseball world, including their own fans, share the same view or not.

"I don't think anyone should be pessimistic right now," manager Terry Francona said prior to Saturday's sixth annual Tribe Fest event at the Cleveland Convention Center. "My goodness. We have the best record in the American League the last five years. This has been a good run of baseball and I don't see that going anywhere. The more you get to the playoffs, you're giving yourself a chance."

"Last year we were really disappointed. We thought we had a chance to get to the end. We didn't. We uncharacteristically played not very good baseball and it cost us. It's different every year. If you give yourself enough chances, maybe we can break through. I think we're one of those teams, as we go into the year, we should have our glass half-full. We should feel good about things."

After posting the AL's best record with 102 wins, Cleveland hit the postseason last year as a favorite to return to the World Series. But upon taking the first two games of the Division Series, they were eliminated by the Yankees in front of their home fans in Game 5.

The offseason brought more losses, with longtime first baseman Carlos Santana and workhorse relief pitcher Bryan Shaw leaving via free agency. The Indians also saw the departure of rentals Jay Bruce and Joe Smith, who signed with other clubs.

Meanwhile, the majority of the AL heavyweights, including defending World Series champion Houston and New York, have improved this offseason. The only player of note that Cleveland has added is first baseman Yonder Alonso.

The lack of activity has been a major point of contention for Indians fans.

"You can focus on what we lost all you want," starting pitcher Trevor Bauer said. "But no one seems to be focusing on what we're bringing back, which is the best pitching staff in the big leagues last year."

Bauer has a point. Even with the offseason departures, Cleveland's cupboard is far from bare, with a top-notch rotation and bullpen that accompanies a lineup full of All-Stars.

"We have the right group of guys," shortstop Francisco Lindor said. "The guys that we lost, yes, they're definitely going to be missed, but at the end of the day, it's not about what you have, but what you have in front of you and what you're going to do with it."

"We're going to miss the guys that left. We respect them, we love them, but at the end of the day, we've got a job to do and we're going to try to win."

"(Pessimistic fans are) looking too short-sighted and they'll realize as soon as Opening Day comes around," Jason Kipnis said, "the lineup we're putting out, 'Oh, yeah, we've won a lot of games with these people.' It wasn't one person who won 102 games."

Plus, there's still time for Indians fans to get their wish. Cleveland has reportedly been in discussions with Baltimore regarding elite third baseman Manny Machado and there are plenty of other options still available on the free-agent market.

"The winter's not over by any means," Francona said. "There's a lot of players, and this is the slowest I've ever seen free agency. There's a lot of players out there, whether it's roster, non-roster, I think the (front office) will be making calls every day. I wouldn't be surprised if we ended up with somebody else. If we don't, go play. I like our team a lot."

Whether they've added enough muscle to contend with the likes of the Astros and the Yankees — among others — in the postseason, the Indians are clear favorites to repeat as champions in a perceived weak Central Division.

They will almost certainly return to the postseason, where they will have another opportunity to bring their fans the franchise's first World Series title since 1948.

"We're trying to win it for the fans, we're trying to win it for the city," Lindor said. "They deserve a championship-caliber team and we have it. We just have to close it, we haven't been able to close it."

Ingraham: Thome was one Hall of a draft pick

Best Indians draft pick ever?

No contest.

In the 13th round of the 1989 June Draft, with the 333rd overall pick of the draft, right after the Expos selected James Martin and just before the Astros took Glen Reyes, the Indians selected an unknown shortstop from Illinois Central Junior College:

Jim Thome.

On Wednesday, that former shortstop, who went on to wallop a whopping 612 major league home runs, will be voted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

As an Indian.

Although he played for six teams in his unblemished 22-year, 2,543-game,

10,313-plate appearance major league career, including 17 games with the Dodgers and 28 with the Orioles — when did THAT happen? — Thome will be remembered most, and enshrined forever as an Indian.

No player in Indians history has hit more home runs, drawn more walks or summed up a devastating postseason loss more colorfully than the slugging wordsmith, who after the 99-win 1996 Indians were so rudely bounced from the playoffs by the upstart 88-win Orioles, in four games in the Division Series, bravely stood before the cameras and notepads and delivered a postmortem for the ages:

"We can still walk out of here with our chests held high."

The 13th round of the draft is not typically where baseball grows Hall of Famers, much less Hall of Famers who go barreling into Cooperstown by almost universal acclaim in their first year on the ballot.

But here comes Thome, whose overwhelming resume and pristine reputation made checking his box on this year's Hall of Fame ballot a welcome no-brainer for voters weary of having to sort through the rogues, scamps and scoundrels populating the darker corners of the ballot, like mushrooms in the outfield.

Voting for Thome was like voting for baseball itself.

It was the right thing to do, and it felt good doing it.

So almost everybody did.

Unlike Hall of Fame-worthy Kenny Lofton, who was inexplicably ignored by voters — he was removed from the ballot after one year for failing to garner the 5 percent of votes required to remain on the ballot (Lofton got 3.2 percent) — Thome, in his first year on the ballot, is getting overwhelming support.

Players need 75 percent for induction, and unofficial Hall of Fame vote tracking sites have Thome's vote total around 90 percent. If that holds, Thome could rival Bob Feller for the highest percentage of votes by an Indians player in the Hall of Fame.

In his induction year of 1962, Feller received 93.8 percent of the vote.

As a further point of reference, in 1937, the second Hall of Fame induction class, the top three vote getters were all Indians: Napoleon Lajoie, with 83.6 percent of the votes, Tris Speaker (82.1) and Cy Young (76.1). There's also Bob Lemon (78.6 in 1976) and Lou Boudreau (77.3 in 1970).

The all-time leader in this category is Ken Griffey Jr., who was inducted last year after getting 99.3 percent of the votes.

Thome, like Griffey, made it through the steroid era with his reputation intact, no small feat for a home run hitter in that chemically-enhanced epoch, characterized by grotesque bodies and grotesque home run totals that forever distorted the record books.

Thome's 612 home runs rank eighth on baseball's all-time list, but on the non-steroid-tainted list, Thome ranks sixth, behind Hank Aaron, Babe Ruth, Willie Mays, Griffey and Albert Pujols.

Thome's first career home run came on Oct. 4, 1991, off Steve Farr at Yankee Stadium. His last home run came on Sept. 26, 2012, at Oriole Park at Camden Yards, off Toronto's Carlos Villanueva.

In between he hit a franchise record 337 home runs for the Indians and 275 for the five other teams for whom he played. According to Baseball-Reference's salary tracker, in his 22-year career Thome made \$142.7 million.

More impressive still: he was the same person in 1991, when he was making the major league minimum as a 20-year-old rookie, as he was in 2008, when his career-high salary was \$15.6 million.

He was an ego-less, gentleman slugger who played by the rules, respected the game and everyone in it.

Following the 2002 season, he left Cleveland, signing a six-year \$85 million contract with the Phillies. The Indians had offered five years and \$62 million. He was hammered by an Indians fan base still nursing open wounds from the free-agent departures of Albert Belle in 1996 and Manny Ramirez in 2000.

It tore up Thome to the point that he invited the Indians' three traveling beat writers to his home, individually, on separate nights, to explain his decision.

A decade later he returned to Cleveland, where his statue now stands.

He was an old-school throwback, and personified everything that is good and right about baseball.

Later this year he can walk into Cooperstown with his chest held high.

Indians manager Terry Francona optimistic despite free agency losses

By Jeff Schudel, The News-Herald & The Morning Journal

First baseman Carlos Santana — gone.

Outfielder Jay Bruce — gone.

Relief pitchers Bryan Shaw and Joe Smith — gone and gone.

The Indians are dealing with those four free agency defections and the sting of being eliminated by the Yankees in the ALDS last October as they count down the days to the start of spring training Feb. 14 in Goodyear, Az.

But you know what? The way Manager Terry Francona sees it, he still has one of the best teams in the American League and he can't wait to get going.

"We've lost some key guys," Francona admitted Jan. 19 during a news conference at Progressive Field as a prelude to TribeFest on Jan. 20 at the Convention Center. "Replacing Bryan in the bullpen will be a chore. It will probably take more than one guy to do what he did. I have no doubt we have guys that will step up. I have no idea who they are yet. It happens every year.

"I don't think anybody should be pessimistic right now. This has been a good run of baseball. I don't see that going anywhere. We have a good team in place, a team we feel good about."

The TribeFest runs from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. for season ticket holders and 1:30 to 7:30 p.m. for the general public.

Francona pointed to signing first baseman Yonder Alonso to replace Santana at first as an important addition. Center fielder Bradley Zimmer is back from a broken hand. He said he doesn't know where the players will be added, but he expects the Indians to bolster the roster with more free agents before spring training begins to help the Indians make another run at the World Series.

"A lot of players are out there, whether roster or non-roster," Francona said. "I think the guys (Indians president Chris Antonetti) are making calls every day. I wouldn't be surprised if we end up with somebody else. If we don't — go play. I like our team a lot.

"It's different every year. But if you give yourself enough chances, maybe we can break through. It's not easy. There are a lot of good teams out there. But I think we're one of those teams that as we go into the year, we should have our glass half-full. We should feel good about things."

The Indians have the best record in the American League since Francona became the Tribe's manager in 2013. Their record of 454-354 is 23 games better than that of the Red Sox (432-378) over the same span.

Francona had positive news about left fielder Michael Brantley, who is rehabbing from ankle surgery.

"By all accounts, he's doing terrific," Francona said. "He'll be dying to start the season on time, as he always does. That will probably be our biggest challenge, to make sure we get him back and keep him back and not let opening day be an arbitrary deadline."

Francona said Jason Kipnis will play second base and Jose Ramirez third. There was speculation Kipnis might start in the outfield with Ramirez and second and Yandy Diaz or Giovanny Urshela at third.

Indians catcher Roberto Perez proud to be a role model in his native Puerto Rico | Jeff Schudel

By Jeff Schudel, The News-Herald & The Morning Journal

POSTED: 01/20/18, 5:25 PM EST | UPDATED: 8 HRS AGO # COMMENTS

Unlike Charles Barkley, Indians catcher Roberto Perez is proud and happy to be considered a role model.

Barkley, the brash former NBA star and a 2006 inductee in the Pro Basketball Hall of Fame, in 1993 famously said, "I'm not a role model. Just because I can dunk a basketball doesn't mean I should raise your kids."

Perez doesn't look at it that way. He believes his job involves more than putting on his Indians uniform, catching and hitting.

Perez was born in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, and still calls that city home in the offseason, even though he can afford to live just about anywhere in the free world.

Perez was at the Greater Cleveland Sports Awards dinner Jan. 20 at the Renaissance Cleveland Hotel to accept the Pro Athlete of the Year Award for Indians pitcher Corey Kluber. He recalled as a youth looking up to Ivan "Pudge" Rodriguez and Sandy Alomar, Jr., two native Puerto Ricans who were All-Star catchers. Perez wanted to be like Rodriguez and Alomar.

Now young boys in Puerto Rico want to be just like Roberto Perez.

"I always said I wanted to be a major league catcher," Perez said. "I wanted to be like Pudge. He had a great arm and he could hit. That was my dream.

"When I go out to the field, I try to give 100 percent and not take it for granted and show the little kids that I'm from a humble area and that I'm here and everything is possible. That's the message I want to give out."

Perez has two sons, Roberto and Liam. His job as a role model starts with them and carries on to other youngsters he can influence.

"All that really matters is being a good person," Perez said. "You can be a great baseball player or a great athlete. But if you're a bad person — that can't be happening.

"Where I'm from, I struggled when I was a kid. Every time I'm home (in Mayaguez) and I see a little kid, I try to help him out. My mom raised me. She was both my mama and my dad. We went through a lot. I don't want kids going through what I went through."

Perez's teammates say he would be an ideal role model for not only young people, but also fathers because of his devotion to his wife and sons. Francisco Lindor, the Tribe shortstop, said when Perez isn't talking about baseball, he's talking about his family. Pitcher Josh Tomlin agreed.

"He's a good one," Tomlin said. "He takes great pride in being from Puerto Rico and coming over here and being a big-league catcher. Other major-league catchers have been from there.

"To be able to show those kids over there they can achieve what they want to achieve by playing baseball brings light to the whole country of Puerto Rico and what you can achieve through hard work and dedication. Roberto's overcome adversity. He's a good one for kids to look up to, no doubt about it."

Perez has been in the Indians organization since 2008, when he was selected in the 33rd round of the draft.

Efficiency is the goal for Cashman, Epstein and Friedman

Buster Olney ESPN Senior Writer

When Yankees general manager Brian Cashman has an idea for a trade, one of his staffers related the other day, he will wait days before raising the concept with the other team. In the interim, he and his staff will deliberate over all sides of the would-be proposal, assessing and reassessing, like geologists turning and studying each millimeter of a rock.

Only after he is wholly educated on value involved will he make the call, fully armed to discuss what he wants out of the deal, and prepared to anticipate what the other guy might want. After two decades of running the Yankees, Cashman tends to not be reflexive or reactive, if he ever was. His many years of experience -- the failures and the successes -- have made him better. The same is said of two of his big-market peers, the Cubs' Theo Epstein and the Dodgers' Andrew Friedman.

Many factors have contributed to the stagnant winter market, from the impact of the luxury-tax threshold to the growing trend of teams opting to be really bad rather than merely mediocre (i.e., tanking). Another is that three of the teams with greatest resources -- the Dodgers, Cubs and Yankees -- are run by baseball operations executives devoted to efficiency.

This trio of big-spending teams might be among the clubs least likely to make impulse buys along the lines of the Angels' 10-year signing of Albert Pujols -- a contract put together by owner Arte Moreno in about 48 hours -- or in the way George Steinbrenner used to negotiate with players he liked. Working independently from his front office to sign David Wells and Gary Sheffield, he impetuously scribbled out terms on napkins, because he could.

The players and their union would benefit from some recklessly aggressive spenders right now, especially at the top of baseball's food chain. But that is not how Epstein, Friedman and Cashman operate.

"They've each had a ton of success," said one of their peers on management side. "The tools they use are even sharper. They try to analyze and quantify, and they look at things like aging trends. And then there's the discipline that's required."

Yes, fans get excited, media members criticize and cajole, and owners can push and nudge based on feedback they're getting from friends. Friedman, Cashman and Epstein have constructed mute buttons on that sort of stuff, the peer said, and tend to ignore it.

Consider the Dodgers' situation with Zack Greinke, the executive said. In the fall of 2015, Greinke reached free agency after a Cy Young-caliber season, and the Dodgers offered a five-year deal, for a contract in the range of \$150 million. He turned it down, and then waited. And the Dodgers waited. And waited.

When Friedman was with the Tampa Bay Rays, he was forced by circumstances to not even consider players as expensive as Greinke. He had to work from the other side of the offseason menu, those areas where you had to identify the most appropriate investments.

"Andrew placed a specific value on what he was comfortable with in those [Greinke] negotiations," an executive recalled. "He was not going to go beyond that."

With Greinke unsigned and hanging in the market, the Diamondbacks swooped in and quickly worked out a six-year, \$206.5 million deal -- another classic example of an impetuous contract negotiated at the ownership level. In the days after the move went down, the Dodgers and Friedman absorbed a lot of negative reviews for allowing a great pitcher to get away (including from this writer), in spite of the franchise's spending power. Greinke is about to enter Year 3 of the contract and, the evaluator said, it's apparent that Friedman absolutely made the right call not to compete with the D-backs' offer.

Long-term contracts on veteran free agents, the evaluator said, "are -- at best -- a 50-50 outcome for the teams. They can be really harmful, and having the [financial] flexibility is really important as you're trying to put together a roster."

The Yankees were ripped for trading Justin Wilson to the Tigers for a couple of prospects, and one of those was Chad Green, now regarded as one of the game's better relievers.

Evaluators also referenced how Epstein, Friedman and Cashman have all placed a high priority on building good farm systems, to create a steady stream of young talent that reduces or even eliminates desperation in the pursuit of a trade or free agent. Yes, the Dodgers probably could have made an aggressive push to get Giancarlo Stanton, to plant him in the middle of their lineup, but they were concerned about his performance at the back end of his 10-year, \$295 million deal -- what he'd be in 2025, 2026 or 2027. The Dodgers already have the 22-year-old Cody Bellinger and the 23-year-old Corey Seager to anchor their lineup. The Cubs had similar concerns about Stanton's contract, and their lineup is filled with young players they've drafted and developed or traded for, from Anthony Rizzo to Kris Bryant to Willson Contreras.

Because the Yankees have access to the DH, they weren't as concerned about having a landing spot for Stanton later in his baseball life. "And they didn't have to give up any of their elite prospects to get him," one GM said. "They waited until the price tag was shaved down to \$243 million, instead of \$300 million. It sounds strange, but it became a value deal for them -- and they still have their prospects."

Not every deal works out. When Epstein was with the Red Sox, he would joke about his own failed attempts to find a long-term shortstop solution for Boston. Two years into Jason Heyward's eight-year, \$184 million deal, that appears to be a mistake because his strong defensive play has not fully offset his offensive struggles. Cashman advised the Yankees' owners to let Alex Rodriguez go in the fall of 2007, rather than give him the 10-year, \$275 million contract, but Cashman pushed for the signing of outfielder Jacoby Ellsbury, who is now dead weight on the New York roster with three years remaining on his deal. It's possible that in playing his hand conservatively, Friedman may have passed on players who could've been difference-makers for the Dodgers, a team so close to winning its first title since 1988. Everybody who runs a team long enough will make deals -- or not -- that will work against them; that's the nature of competition.

But Friedman, Cashman and Epstein work carefully to improve. When Epstein assumed control of the Cubs, an internal conversation started with this premise: They wanted to be the best at everything. In talent acquisition and development, of course, but also in helping players make their families more comfortable, in helping them transition from level to level more smoothly. The Cubs aimed to be the best in nutrition, in designing and constructing a new clubhouse, in their medical practices.

Part of the conventional wisdom about the market slowdown this winter is that the Yankees and Dodgers are preparing for a gaudy free-agent splurge later this year, after Bryce Harper and Manny Machado hit the open market. By working to get under the luxury tax threshold this winter, the Dodgers and Yankees could reduce their exposure to penalties if they sign the most expensive players next winter.

But if you're assuming that Friedman or Cashman will shove their respective teams into deals of \$300 million-plus with a Harper or a Machado, then you haven't been paying attention, rival officials say. "Those guys are not wired that way," said an NL evaluator. "They've been burned on some of those kinds of deals. I don't see them doing that again."

"Do we really know who the best players in baseball are going to be in five years? [Mike] Trout, maybe Machado. But there's a lot we don't know, which is why those deals carry a lot of risk."

The Cubs probably could use Arrieta in 2018, but they don't appear to be interested in signing the right-hander if it means giving him a monster six-year contract; they have instead focused on less expensive options, like Tyler Chatwood (who signed a three-year, \$38 million deal) and Alex Cobb (who remains unsigned).

So much of what is happening in the market now is about risk management, and even executives who could probably assume more risk than just about anybody else -- Epstein, Friedman, Cashman -- continue to diligently devote themselves to making a proper assessment, backed by ownership groups that trust them.

Baseball's current labor issues

Fourteen months after the negotiations on the most recent collective bargaining agreement, the working relationship between the Major League Baseball Players Association and Major League Baseball might be at its worst since the labor stoppage of 1994-95. The latest evidence: The two sides have had almost no formal negotiations about the forthcoming pace-of-play rules. In lieu of progress, MLB will unilaterally implement its own regulations before the start of spring training, including a pitch clock of 20 seconds and some limitations on mound visits.

Under Michael Weiner, the former union chief who passed away in 2013, the players' association and Major League Baseball developed a collaborative relationship through which there has been labor peace and prosperity. The value of the teams has never been higher, and the average wage for players has never been higher.

But in the last round of CBA negotiations, many agents believe, the union lost enormous financial ground, through decisions that have seemingly manifested the past two winters, in the depression of the free-agent market.

Some of the same agents who last year predicted the current problems now privately believe that the union will continue to entrench on issues like pace of play in order to register unhappiness over the stagnancy in the free-agent market. If that theory is accurate, the strategy makes no sense. That would be like a pitcher giving up a home run and allowing anger over that result to spill over into the next at-bat.

It would be a lot more productive to handle the current struggles the way the players do in their everyday work as batters and pitchers. The union and its members should ask hard and necessary questions about past performance; they should be wholly accountable about the choices and learn, and make necessary adjustments for future talks, rather than diving into a bunker and creating rumblings about a possible work stoppage in the next round of labor talks (something that's already been raised with young players this winter).

The idea that the market slowdown is due to collusion, some longtime agents believe, is laughable. That comes off as an excuse to them.

"I don't think for one instant that this is collusion," one agent said. "[The union] negotiated the terms of this CBA, and it's up to us [the agents] to adjust and give the best possible advice to our clients based on the market."

Weiner and Rob Manfred navigated through one negotiation after another because they understood the serious damage that would be inflicted on both sides if there was a strike or a lockout.

They talked constantly and fought through their disagreements proactively and productively, and everybody has benefitted.

That relationship probably cannot be replicated, but moving forward, it should be a model of what the union and MLB can strive for together. Anything less is just passive-aggressive waste.

Nick Cafardo / SUNDAY BASEBALL NOTES Scott Boras likely won't flinch any time soon, and his clients know it

By Nick Cafardo Globe Staff January 20, 2018

All of baseball seems to be waiting for Scott Boras to get his top clients signed. J.D. Martinez, Eric Hosmer, Mike Moustakas, Jake Arrieta, Greg Holland, Carlos Gonzalez, et al are waiting as the slowest free agent period in baseball history rolls on.

Boras's "under team control" client, Gerrit Cole, may impact the American League race since he was traded from Pittsburgh to Houston for prospects. As Boras points out, "Houston just added Cole to the World Series fire."

Boras is of the opinion that the Red Sox need Martinez, and the feeling is likely mutual. Martinez hit a major league-best .364 last season with a 1.023 slugging percentage against pitches that were at least 95 miles per hour. Cole had an average velocity of 96.4 in 2017, second among starters to the Yankees' Luis Severino (97.5). The Red Sox hit .215 against the Astros' most significant starters last season and now they've added a flamethrower in Cole.

While teams don't often publicly react to what their competition is doing, the Red Sox can't ignore that they've likely fallen further behind the Yankees and Astros. The man who holds the key to their recovery is Boras, and he's not advising Martinez to sign the five-year deal Boston has offered at about \$20 million per year (as reported by ESPN), or the five-year deal, \$125 million deal reported by the Boston Herald.

Boras seems befuddled by the lack of movement in free agency, just as teams are befuddled by Boras's slow pace in negotiations.

Boras is always prepared when it comes to selling his clients. He recently conducted in-depth studies to add context to the analytics that teams study in free agency.

"This is where we get into mass analytics vs. compartmental analytics," Boras said. "Study the qualifiers, boys. Study the players who are really good."

His point is that elite free agents 30 or older are still in demand.

He studied World Series teams dating to 2006 and found that the average age of the top players hasn't changed. Many of the teams had average ages of 29 to 30. Even the 2015 Royals, perceived to be a young team, had pitchers who averaged 30 years and positional players who averaged 29.

"With all of this analytic labeling, or whatever it is, the distribution of 25-and-under and 31-and-above is exactly the same as it was 10 years ago," Boras said. "The barrage of analytics has not changed anything about the elite core demands of the major leagues. The distribution is exactly the same.

"The demand for starting pitchers has gone through the roof. We had 34 starters who were 25 years old and below in 2008. Now we only have 21 [starters who have made at least 25 starts]. We're training these kids to throw hard when they're young. They get drafted, and guess what happens? They're getting hurt. They're not durable."

When Boras studied relievers, he found the average age is going up. He's basing it on pitchers who made 90 percent of their appearances out of the bullpen and threw at least 50 innings.

He also made a strong point about the study he conducted on players who signed contracts of at least six years. Hint: that's obviously what Martinez is seeking.

"The average WAR of that group is almost 4," Boras said. "When you do three- or four-year contracts, the average WAR rating is 1.4. It's almost double or triple the value when you sign a player for a six-year-plus contract. And your return on investment? When I did [Alex Rodriguez's] first contract, his WAR for that contract was 7.0. I kept hearing, 'Oh my God, he's making \$25 million a year!' Well, he's producing at a rate of \$63 million a year. Great players getting long-term contracts is one of the healthiest things teams can do. What does it do? It keeps a lid on their value and you're getting a return on investment that's extraordinary."

So when does Boras expect this offseason's logjam to break up? He's not saying, because he's not sure.

Boras points out that a player doesn't start to play significant innings in a spring training game until March 10-15. In other words, Boras likely won't flinch any time soon, and he's conveyed that to his clients.

"If you view yourself as a contending World Series team you now have a Goliath to shoot after (Houston), and if you don't show your fan base that you're dramatically improving your team to compete with that team then the fans will not consider you a World Series contender. They won't take you seriously," he said. "The ability to pay is there. This is an industry that's gone from \$7 billion to \$12 billion in the last 10 years. These teams recently received a \$50 million payment [from the sale of BAMTech to Disney]. The revenues are there to compete and add to your teams."

Apropos of nothing

1. Kudos to Sean McAdam of the Boston Sports Journal for doing a tremendous job as fill-in emcee at the Boston Baseball Writers' dinner last Thursday. McAdam was called into action after Channel 5's Mike Lynch called in sick with the flu. We wish Mike a speedy recovery.
2. When you watch the highlight video of Jackie Bradley Jr.'s greatest catches from 2017, you realize what an incredible outfielder he is. How has he not won a Gold Glove?
3. The Giants aren't afraid of players 30 and older. In the last few weeks they traded for Evan Longoria (32) and Andrew McCutchen (31). The Giants have had problems snaring free agents, which is strange considering they're always willing to offer fair market price and they play in such a beautiful city and beautiful ballpark.
4. The Pawtucket Red Sox stadium situation seems to be coming to a head as the Rhode Island Senate approved a stadium financial plan, which now has to get approval from the legislature. Meanwhile, Worcester is trying to beat Pawtucket to the punch after a long meeting last Thursday with PawSox owner Larry Lucchino. Worcester really wants the PawSox and is trying to take advantage of the resistance and backlash against the PawSox ownership group by Rhode Island officials and taxpayers.
5. Red Sox manager Alex Cora said he got favorable reviews for his scheduling of spring training for the Astros last season, and he hopes he can strike a good balance between allowing rest and getting quality work done in camp this year. Astros catcher Brian McCann, who was entering his first season with Houston after 12 with the Braves and Yankees, was pleased with the amount of rest he was able to get last spring while also feeling ready for the season.
6. Love what Twins executive vice president Derek Falvey has done in bringing back some former Twins players as special assistants, including Justin Morneau and 79-year-old Jim Kaat. Kaat is one of the most knowledgeable pitching gurus in the game and should be invaluable to the Twins' staff in spring training.
7. Nationals president of baseball operations Mike Rizzo always comes up with good deals and free agent signings. He did it again with the recent signing of Howie Kendrick, who can still hit and really helps the Nationals' depth. Kendrick might have been a good get for the Red Sox, who need a fill-in second baseman for Dustin Pedroia while he recovers from major knee surgery.
8. Pretty amazing that Red Sox president Sam Kennedy (as he revealed at the Boston Baseball Writers' dinner) was once an intern under Brian Cashman in New York.
9. Given the trend with young, inexperienced managers, are the likes of Terry Francona, Buck Showalter, Bruce Bochy, Bob Melvin, and others about to become extinct?
10. Absolutely a shame that the new Marlins ownership (Derek Jeter included) dismantled a team that had so many outstanding pieces. "All they needed to do was add a couple of quality starting pitchers and they would have been contenders," said one National League executive. "It

made no sense what they did. There's so much money in the game now." You wonder if the Marlins would have been better off with the Tagg Romney/Tom Glavine ownership group, which seemed to have its finances in order.

Updates on nine

1. Daisuke Matsuzaka, RHP, free agent — The former Red Sox pitcher is hoping to continue his career in Japan. The Chunichi Dragons held a tryout for Matsuzaka last Thursday. Matsuzaka, 37, pitched one game for the Fukuoka SoftBank Hawks last year and then had shoulder surgery. Matsuzaka went 56-43 with a 4.45 ERA in 158 MLB games. He last pitched in the majors for the Mets in 2014, posting a 3.89 ERA in nine appearances.
2. Rob Manfred, commissioner — Manfred is expected to implement a 20-second pitch clock for the 2018 season despite the objections of the Players' Association. Manfred has the right to implement changes for the good of the game without the approval of the union. Good idea? Manfred has been trying to find ways to improve pace of play, and this seems like the easiest solution at the moment. A pitcher would be charged a ball if he exceeds 20 seconds between deliveries. Baseball needs to better enforce the rule that states batters must stay in the box. It was emphasized two years ago, but much less enforced last season.
3. Yu Darvish, RHP, free agent — Right now, the Yankees do not appear to be in the Darvish hunt. GM Brian Cashman acknowledged the team would have to shed a major contract (read: Jacoby Ellsbury) in order to fit in Darvish and remain under the luxury tax. "I'm very happy with our rotation right now and I don't think we need to do something unless it makes sense for us," Cashman said. The Twins, Rangers, and Cubs seem to have a better chance of landing Darvish at this juncture.
4. Christian Yelich, CF, Marlins — Yelich has expressed a desire to move on from a Marlins lineup that will offer him no protection. The Diamondbacks could be emerging as a favorite in trade talks.
5. Matt Murton, special assistant, Cubs — Murton, 36, had a nice career after being a first-round pick of the Red Sox in 2003. He was part of the four-team deal involving Nomar Garciaparra, landing with the Cubs. Murton realized that his career wasn't going to take off so he opted to play in Japan, where he became a big star and made some money. He set Nippon Professional Baseball's season hit record (214) in his 2010 debut with the Hanshin Tigers.
6. Lorenzo Cain, OF, free agent — Cain could still be in the Giants' plans to play center field (with Andrew McCutchen in right), if his price is right.
7. Brian Johnson, LHP, Red Sox — The Red Sox have received some interest in Johnson, who is out of options. Barring an injury in the rotation, the Sox will have to carry him on the 25-man roster as a reliever or place him on waivers and hope he's not claimed so they can outright him to Pawtucket. Is this someone the Red Sox want to lose? Johnson pitched the team's only complete-game shutout last season.
8. Eric Hosmer, 1B, free agent — If the Royals are able to re-sign him, they'll begin to entertain more seriously some of the inquiries they've received for lefty Danny Duffy, closer Kelvin Herrera, and righty Jason Hammel. The Royals appear to be in the running for Hosmer, along with San Diego and a possible mystery team (St. Louis?).
9. Adrian Gonzalez, 1B, Mets — Bobby Valentine told the New York Post that Gonzalez could be too "opinionated and outspoken" when he was with the Red Sox in 2012, and Gonzalez didn't disagree. "I think Bobby was in the right there," Gonzalez said last Thursday, after his deal with the Mets was finalized. "I think going into the 2012 season, I heard a lot of people telling me I had to be more of a vocal leader and do things that were out of [character] for me. I feel like I went into that season trying to make myself into something that I'm not used to doing. And I do agree with Bobby. I had a lot of opinions that year, but I don't think it is who I am." Here's an interesting number for Mets fans: In the last four seasons, Gonzalez was on first base 31 times when a double was hit, and he scored just three times.

Extra innings

From the Bill Chuck files — "In Andrew McCutchen's nine seasons with the Pirates he played 1,346 games and hit .291 with 203 HRs and an .866 OPS. In Roberto Clemente's first 10 seasons with the Pirates he played 1,368 games and hit .307 with 104 HRs and a .787 OPS." . . . Also, "The pitcher who allowed the most runs on homers last season was Rick Porcello, who allowed 59 runs on 38 homers, 25 of which were solo homers." . . . Happy birthday, Chase d'Arnaud (31), Keith Shepherd (50), Chris Hammond (52), and Mike Smithson (63).

Boston Globe LOADED: 01.21.2018

John Harper / Pace of play impasse may signal larger issue brewing between players union, MLB

JOHN HARPER/NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

The implementation of a pitch clock hardly seems worth getting into a big fight about, yet the MLB Players Association has dug in its heels on the matter, perhaps forcing commissioner Rob Manfred to unilaterally impose his pace-of-play initiatives for the coming season.

It's silly because a 20-second pitch clock is a logical start toward speeding up the action, which most everyone agrees would be a good thing, yet it's not likely to have any sort of dramatic effect on the way major league games are played.

Ideally it simply creates a mindset for both pitcher and hitter to cut out some of lag time between pitches. Instead of hitters stepping out of the box between every pitch, even wandering around, they stay ready, while pitchers get the ball back from the catcher, look for the new sign, and go.

It's really not that hard, and all you have to do is Watch video from 20, 30, 40 years ago for proof major-league baseball was once played that way, without all the down time between pitches that can make some games feel interminable these days.

The fight over putting a clock on the pitchers is more than just putting a clock on the pitchers.

So why are the players taking a stand, rejecting Manfred's proposal even while knowing he plans to use his power to enforce some version of it?

People in baseball I talked to on Friday painted a picture of a bigger issue being the heart of the matter. In short, there is a strain in relations between players and management/owners that some fear could lead to at least the threat of a work stoppage when the current collective bargaining agreement expires in 2021.

"You'd like to think we could never go back to 1994," a person sympathetic to the players' side said Friday, referring to the infamous strike that resulted in the cancellation of the World Series that year.

"But players aren't happy with the fallout from the last (CBA) negotiations, and they have real concerns about free agency and why guys aren't getting paid right now. If this is the way things are going to be, I could see them pushing hard for changes in the next negotiations and things might get a little nasty, which we haven't seen in a long time."

Yes, the '94 strike left such a bad aftertaste on both sides that owners and players have been careful to put the best interests of baseball ahead of all else to ensure labor peace since then.

However, there was a feeling around the sport that the players gave up too much in the CBA agreed to in December of 2016, largely revolving around the luxury-tax threshold and its inherent financial penalties that have created something of a de facto salary cap for big-market teams like the Yankees, Dodgers, Red Sox, Giants, etc.

Meanwhile, the trend of tanking in the sport, which helped the Cubs and Astros build championship teams, albeit at the expense of years of losing, has given other teams reason not to spend on free agents as they make rebuilding the priority.

The result is teams at both the top and bottom of the sport sitting out free agency this winter, at least to some degree, as the majority of top free agents remain unsigned.

"If this continues players are going to fight for some type of salary floor that would force teams to spend to a certain level," another person close to the situation said. "Tanking eventually paid off for Houston but they went a few years of losing 100 games with payrolls of about \$25 million.

"Players have a right to try and force teams to play at a more competitive level even when they're in a rebuild."

In other words, if teams in this analytically-savvy era of baseball are getting smarter about paying for free agents, in particular limiting the length of mega-contracts, players are going to want some type of guarantee that every team has to spend to a minimum payroll level, say, \$100 million.

The bottom line, for the moment, is this stance on pace-of-play initiatives may simply be a warning shot fired by the players indicating they're not going to play nice at the negotiating table next time.

For years now the sport has been healthy financially overall enough that both sides knew it would be idiotic to let self-interest get in the way of deals at the bargaining table. And that remains the case, as evidenced to some extent by the \$50 million each franchise is receiving this year from the sale of MLB's advanced-media arm.

But that could change dramatically if the players become further convinced they're not getting their fair share of the riches.

So never mind the pace-of-play stuff so much. Players will get used to a pitch clock, even if there are bugs to work out.

How this free-agency freeze thaws out over the next few weeks will say a lot more about whether there will be continued labor peace in the years to come.

SPEED ZONE

Ok, so I'm for the pitch clock, but if MLB wants to get serious about reducing the dead time in games, it has to do something about replay.

There's no going back now. For all of its faults, I believe replay is worth keeping in order to correct the obvious missed calls by umpires that can change the outcome of games.

But only if MLB is willing to speed up the process.

It really shouldn't be that hard, either. Start by forcing managers to declare immediately if they want to challenge a play.

No more waiting on the top step for a signal from the video guy; again, replay was created to save teams from egregious calls, so if a manager should have a strong enough feeling about such calls to commit immediately to a replay.

From there MLB needs to clean up the process. Technology is such that umpires shouldn't have to walk off the field and put headsets on, since they're not making the call anyway.

The crew chief should be equipped with a tiny transmitter that would allow him to communicate at any time with the umps at the Chelsea replay center. And, finally, if those viewing the various replays can't make a definitive decision within a minute, then time should be up and the call stands.

Those changes would eliminate significant dead time and at least make replay bearable.