



Press Clips

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FROM THE OC REGISTER**Angels' Blake Parker seeks to show his breakthrough '17 was no fluke**

By Jeff Fletcher

TEMPE, Ariz. — After a breakthrough season in which he ascended to the Angels closer role and a winter in which he got his first seven-figure salary, Blake Parker has had to find new motivation.

Leery of “losing that edge of trying to prove something every day,” Parker said this spring his goal is to show that he wasn’t a one-year wonder.

“What happened last year is in the past,” he said. “I’m trying to go out and prove that I’m the same guy and can do it more than one year. I can sustain that throughout the whole season and hopefully a few more seasons.”

Major leaguers are all familiar with this concept: It’s easier to get to the majors than to stay.

Parker, a 32-year-old who enjoyed his first full season in the big leagues last year, isn’t really at risk of losing his job with a bad spring. He does, however, feel the need to maintain the new level he reached last year.

After failing to find a foothold in the majors through 11 professional seasons and three organizations, Parker forced his way on to the Angels opening day roster by striking out his last 17 batters of the spring.

In the season, he had a 2.54 ERA in 71 games. He struck out 86 in 67 1/3 innings, allowing only 40 hits. He found himself working in higher leverage situations throughout the year, finishing the season as Manager Mike Scioscia’s preferred choice for the ninth inning.

Over the winter, as a first-time arbitration-eligible player, he signed for \$1.8 million.

Now, he’s heading into spring as one of the top closer candidates, although Scioscia has been noncommittal. His bullpen also includes Cam Bedrosian and Jim Johnson, who each have varying degrees of closing experience.

Parker, as you’d expect, said he’s ready for anything.

“If it’s me, great, if it’s not me, then I’m just going to try to get outs,” he said. “I know I’ve said it a lot. It’s kind of cliché to say, but I just want to be a guy the team and Scioscia can rely on. Whether it’s the first guy out (of the bullpen) or the last guy out, I just want to go out and do my job.”

So far this spring, Parker has improved as he’s pitched. Parker gave up three runs in his first game and one in his second. His last two outings have been scoreless, including striking out two of the three batters he faced on Friday.

“Just trying to get back to where I was last year,” Parker said. “Obviously now that guys have seen me, I’m making adjustments. Just sharpening up my pitches.”

Another adjustment this year for Parker will be his living arrangements. Last year he spent the season living in an RV, which he figured was perfect if he had to bounce between the majors and minors. This year, with he and his wife having a new baby, Parker will have more traditional housing.

The RV, he concedes, was a part of the underdog story he fashioned last year, and he doesn’t want to lose that.

“I try to stay humble,” he said. “If I have to bring the RV back, I might. It might be a midseason change.”

Justin Upton homers to lift Angels to victory over Rangers

By Jeff Fletcher

THE GAME: The Angels beat the Texas Rangers, 4-3, on Sunday in Tempe, snapping a six-game losing streak. Justin Upton’s second homer of the spring, a three-run blast, put the Angels ahead in the sixth.

PITCHING REPORT: Right-hander JC Ramirez became the first Angels pitcher this spring to get into the fifth inning. Ramirez got one out in the fifth, allowing just one run on a Nomar Mazara homer. He struck out six. Despite the strikeouts, Ramirez said he’s going to try to pitch to contact more this year, in order to get deeper in games. “My goal is to go at least six innings with less pitches,” Ramirez said. “You don’t get a lot of that if you strike out a lot of people.” ... Right-hander Keynan Middleton finished the fifth and started the sixth. This weekend the Angels have started having their relievers work in multiple innings. Middleton was charged with a run in the sixth... Left-hander Jose Alvarez pitched two scoreless innings. He has not allowed a run in six innings.

HITTING REPORT: Shohei Ohtani singled against Bartolo Colon, his first hit since his first game as a hitter, on Feb. 26. He struck out and grounded out in his other two at-bats. Ohtani is now 2 for 14 this spring. Ohtani said he has been tinkering with his stance: “I am trying to still find the right timing, the right approach,” he said through his interpreter. “I am changing things up every at-bat.” ... Kole Calhoun poked a single into left field when the Rangers were playing an extreme shift against him... Luis Valbuena bunted for a hit against the shift. He has attempted that at least three times this spring, reaching base twice. “He’s just trying to take what they’re going to give him,” Manager Mike Scioscia said. “This is the time to get it fine tuned.” ... The Angels’ first inning was produced by two Rangers errors and aggressive baserunning. Ian Kinsler, who reached on a dropped fly ball, was running from first on a pitch when Mike Trout hit a grounder to shortstop. Kinsler went to third as soon as shortstop Jurickson Profar threw the ball, and then he scored when first baseman Joey Gallo made an errant throw back to third... Trout was hit in the helmet by a pitch in the sixth inning, but he was fine, Scioscia said. He was scheduled to leave the game after that plate appearances already.

DEFENSE REPORT: First baseman Albert Pujols made a nice stop of a hard ground ball. The Angels are planning for Pujols to play first base regularly this year, after two years in which injuries limited him almost exclusively to DH... Zack Cozart made a lunging grab of a ball to his right. Cozart is a natural shortstop, but he's learning to play third now. He was at shortstop because of Andrelton Simmons' injury... Martin Maldonado remained in the game at catcher for seven innings.

Shohei Ohtani scheduled to start for Angels on Friday against Rockies

By Jeff Fletcher

TEMPE, Ariz. — The Angels are planning to have Shohei Ohtani start his next game on the mound on Friday, at home against the Colorado Rockies, Manager Mike Scioscia said Sunday morning. It will be the stiffest test to date for Ohtani, who has faced mostly minor leaguers in his three previous starts.

Ohtani, who was in the lineup as the designated hitter on Sunday, is scheduled to DH again on Monday and in the Angels intrasquad game on Tuesday, an off day in their Cactus League schedule.

Infield shuffle

With Andrelton Simmons still day to day because of a strained left shoulder, Zack Cozart got the start on Sunday at shortstop, which is his natural position.

Cozart, who is moving to third this spring, has also begun doing some work at second, and Scioscia said they plan to get him into a game at second sometime this spring.

Simmons got back on the field to throw on Sunday, but he won't pick up a bat until Wednesday, at the earliest, Scioscia said. Scioscia said he still expects Simmons to be ready by opening day.

Also

Infielder Nolan Fontana has been out with right shoulder inflammation for more than a week, but the Angels are hoping he can resume throwing in the next couple days...

Marte (groin tightness) and Chris Young (strained calf) have both resumed hitting and could get some at-bats in Tuesday's intrasquad game. Fontana may also hit in that game...

The Angels sent outfielder Michael Hermosillo and pitchers Branden Pinder, Adam Hofacket, Eduardo Paredes and Jake Jewell to minor league camp on Sunday.

FROM THE LOS ANGELES TIMES**Upton's three-run homer in the sixth lifts Angels over Rangers**

By Jeff Miller

AT THE PLATE: Ian Kinsler's hustle and daring resulted in the game's first run. Advancing to second on a Mike Trout groundout to short, Kinsler just kept going and made it to third. He scored as the play continued when Texas first baseman Joey Gallo threw the ball away. Justin Upton decided the game with a three-run homer in the sixth, giving the Angels the lead. Upton has two homers, eight RBIs and is hitting .333. Shohei Ohtani had a single in three at-bats.

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ON THE MOUND: Starter JC Ramirez was impressive, striking out six, walking none and giving up one hit — a solo homer to Nomar Mazara — in 4 1/3 innings. He became the first Angels pitcher to work into the fifth inning. Keynan Middleton pitched 1 2/3 innings as the Angels continue to extend the pitch range of some of their relievers. He gave up one run. Left-hander Jose Alvarez also came back out for a second inning and eventually retired six Rangers while surrendering one run.

Angels' Luis Valbuena ready for more bat flips in 2018

By JEFF MILLER

He tried to bunt for a hit but was thrown out on a hustle play by the pitcher.

Still, Luis Valbuena went down swinging, taking a final jab at Oakland's Kendall Graveman.

"I told him, 'Man, this is spring training. Come on,'" Valbuena explained of their recent on-field exchange. "We were laughing about it."

That's Valbuena, the Angels' leader in smiles and antics, a guy who plays with personality and flair, who famously flips his bat because, he has explained, he simply can't help himself.

On Sunday against Texas, he bunted successfully for a hit, taking advantage of the way the Rangers were defending him. As he crossed first, Valbuena twisted around and pointed dramatically toward his dugout.

"I like to be a happy guy," he said. "I like to enjoy the game. It's my work, but it's a game, you know? That's why you see me smiling all the time. I'm trying to go 120 percent."

Valbuena will start the season as a backup at first and third, most of his time in the field expected to come when Albert Pujols is the designated hitter.

He can be an offensive weapon: Valbuena hit 17 home runs after July 1 last season, the same number as Mike Trout. He finished with 22 homers, third among the Angels and more than, among others around the majors, Justin Turner, Evan Longoria and Ryan Braun.

"I was just looking for good pitches and trying to be aggressive," Valbuena said. "I felt good because I was playing more and getting more comfortable at the plate."

The sudden souvenir distribution was not a fluke. In 2015, playing for Houston, Valbuena had 19 home runs by June 24. However, Valbuena didn't hit another until August. He finished with a career-high 25.

Very little about Valbuena's offense is steady. Only once in 10 seasons has he finished the year hitting better than .250.

In 2017, 567 players had a higher batting average than Valbuena's .199. That group included Madison Bumgarner, Zack Greinke and Noah Syndergaard, who, unlike Valbuena, also contribute to their teams by pitching.

Even former Angels right-hander Ervin Santana was two for 10 last season.

None of which will alter Valbuena's aggressive approach at the plate or gregarious approach everywhere else.

"I'm not the kind of guy who's going to be mad or anything like that," he said. "I'm going to be happy around all my teammates, around everybody."

Ohtani snaps slump

After 10 straight hitless at-bats, Shohei Ohtani singled off Bartolo Colon on Sunday in the second inning of a 4-3 win over Texas. He later struck out and grounded out, leaving him two for 14 this spring.

"I'm still trying to find the right timing in my approach," Ohtani said through an interpreter when asked about tweaking his stance. "I'm changing things up in every at-bat. That's probably why you saw the difference."

As the designated hitter, Ohtani batted eighth. He's expected to DH again Monday.

Another topic of discussion was the music that accompanied Ohtani's plate appearances against the Rangers. The public-address system blared "Fashion Monster" by Japanese pop star Kyary Pamyu Pamyu.

"That's not my real, actual walk-up song," he said. "The guys in the clubhouse were just kind of teasing, playing around with me."

Ohtani's next pitching appearance is set for 1:10 p.m. Friday at Tempe Diablo Stadium against Colorado.

Cozart back at short

With Andrelton Simmons out with a strained left shoulder, Zack Cozart moved back to his natural position of shortstop Sunday.

Cozart, a National League All-Star at short last season, agreed to shift to third in December when the Angels signed him.

Manager Mike Scioscia said Cozart would be an option to spell Simmons during the regular season. He also said Cozart has been working out at second base and that he'd play there in a game before spring training is over.

The Angels are trying to bolster the versatility of their roster in part because on the days Ohtani pitches, their bench will be shorter.

Simmons rejoined his teammates on the field Sunday and did some running and throwing. He's expected to hit this week and be ready for the start of the season.

Short hops

The Angels will play an intrasquad scrimmage Tuesday so Tyler Skaggs and Nick Tropeano can pitch. Ohtani, Chris Young (calf), Jefry Marte (groin) and Nolan Fontana (shoulder) also are expected to play. ... The Angels optioned outfielder Michael Herмосillo and pitcher Eduardo Paredes to triple-A Salt Lake and pitcher Jake Jewell to double-A Mobile. They also reassigned pitchers Adam Hofacket and Branden Pinder to minor league camp.

FROM ANGELS.COM

Trout fine after being struck in helmet

By Maria Guardado

TEMPE, Ariz. -- The Angels suffered another injury scare on Sunday, as star center fielder Mike Trout was hit on the helmet by a pitch from reliever Erik Goeddel in the sixth inning of a 4-3 win over the Rangers at Tempe Diablo Stadium.

Trout seemed to be OK, immediately putting his helmet back on and jogging to first base before being lifted for a pinch-runner. The Angels did not call for a trainer to examine him before he left the game.

Angels manager Mike Scioscia said Trout is fine and was making his final plate appearance for the day. Trout finished 0-for-2 and is now 4-for-19 (.211) this spring.

Angels prank Ohtani with his walk-up music

Japanese star singles in first at-bat as DH against Rangers

By Maria Guardado

TEMPE, Ariz. -- Even Shohei Ohtani isn't immune from a bit of rookie hazing.

The Angels trolled the two-way phenom by blasting "Fashion Monster" by Japanese pop star Kyary Pamyu Pamyu every time he walked up for an at-bat in their 4-3 win over the Rangers on Sunday at Tempe Diablo Stadium.

"That's not my actual walk-up song," Ohtani said via translator Ippei Mizuhara. "The guys in the clubhouse were just kind of teasing, playing around with me. It's a long story."

The origin of the prank is unclear, and manager Mike Scioscia feigned ignorance when asked if the song had been of his choosing.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Scioscia said coyly.

Making his sixth Cactus League appearance as a hitter, Ohtani served as the DH and batted eighth on Sunday. He went 1-for-3, with a single to right field off veteran Bartolo Colon in the second inning, a three-pitch strikeout against Tayler Scott in the fifth and a groundout to first base in the sixth.

"My timing was a little bit off once again," said Ohtani, who is now 2-for-14 this spring. "But it's just another learning experience."

Ohtani is scheduled to make his next start on the mound on Friday in a Cactus League game against the Rockies. Ohtani's previous two starts had come in "B" games against Minor League competition.

Scioscia said Ohtani will DH again on Monday and Tuesday, when the Angels will play an intrasquad game on their scheduled off-day.

Camp battle

Right-hander JC Ramirez appears to be solidifying his hold on a rotation spot after allowing one run over 4 1/3 innings against the Rangers on Sunday. Ramirez surrendered just a solo home run to Nomar Mazara while walking none and striking out six. He's given up four runs over 9 2/3 innings (3.72 ERA) in three Cactus League starts.

"I thought JC was great," Scioscia said. "Mixed all his pitches up. Good slider and curveball to go along with a really live fastball today. Outside of the one breaking ball Mazara hit, it was a heck of an outing."

Ramirez threw 64 pitches, with first-pitch strikes against 11 of the 15 batters he faced, and he became the first Angels starter to pitch into the fifth inning. Ramirez said he's trying to pitch more to contact and become more efficient this season.

"I tried to be like a contact pitcher," Ramirez said. "I want to get more innings with less pitches. That's my goal, to try to throw strikes, to get them out. I think it worked for me. If you remember in the past, I was kind of a wild pitcher and now my focus is to throw strikes."

Ramirez's health had been a question mark, as he underwent stem-cell therapy to treat a partially torn ulnar collateral in his right elbow last summer. But he said he feels normal and has shown no ill effects

from the injury so far. He likely has an edge over Parker Bridwell and Nick Tropeano in the rotation battle.

"I'm always confident in myself," Ramirez said. "In my mind, I'm trying to be the No. 1. Around me, I see a lot of guys, but for me, it's just me there. I take the mound for me, it's my game. It's my time, just JC."

Injury updates

Shortstop Andrelton Simmons (left shoulder strain) resumed throwing on Sunday, though he is not expected to pick up a bat until after Tuesday's off-day. Outfielder Chris Young (right calf strain) and infielder Jefry Marte (right groin tightness) have started taking batting practice and they could get some at-bats in Tuesday's intrasquad game. Infielder Nolan Fontana (right shoulder inflammation) has not played since Feb. 27, but the Angels hope he'll be able to resume throwing in the next couple days. Fontana could also hit on Tuesday.

Sunday's moves

The Angels optioned outfielder Michael Herмосillo and right-hander Eduardo Paredes to Triple-A Salt Lake and optioned Jake Jewell to Double-A Mobile. Relievers Adam Hofacket and Branden Pinder were also reassigned to Minor League camp following Sunday's game.

Up next

Watch live on MLB.TV as right-hander Garrett Richards will make his fourth Cactus League start at 1:10 p.m. PT on Monday as the Angels take on the Reds at Tempe Diablo Stadium. Richards has looked sharp this spring, allowing two runs over nine innings while walking two and striking out 12.

Cozart quite the versatile player with Angels

Veteran shortstop making transition to third base for '18

By Maria Guardado

TEMPE, Ariz. -- With Andrelton Simmons nursing a strained shoulder, Zack Cozart made his first start of the spring at shortstop for the Angels in Sunday's 4-3 win over the Rangers at Tempe Diablo Stadium.

It was familiar territory for Cozart, who exclusively played shortstop for his first seven years in the Majors, but he is now transitioning to third base after signing a three-year, \$38 million contract in the offseason. After making an error in the first inning, Cozart made a nice diving play to rob Robinson Chirinos of a hit in the fifth.

The Angels expect Simmons to be ready for Opening Day, so Cozart's return to shortstop will likely be brief. His priority this spring is still to become more comfortable at third base, a position he had never

played professionally before joining the Angels. Cozart, who has now started seven Cactus League games at third, said he feels the transition has been going well so far.

"It's been pretty close to what I expected," Cozart said. "I knew that the whole positioning aspect of everything was going to be tough at the beginning ... There's a learning curve, but I feel more and more every day I'm getting comfortable. The ball is slowing down for me, the throw to first seems easier. I'm getting there."

Cozart is projected to log most of his starts at third base this season, but he will also be the backup middle infielder and has begun taking ground balls at second base. Angels manager Mike Scioscia said Cozart will see some game action at second before the end of spring.

"I guess I'm playing everywhere," Cozart said. "Not outfield yet, hopefully."

Cozart's versatility will be key for the Angels, who are expected to carry 13 pitchers on their Opening Day roster and will thus be limited to a three-man bench. Catcher Rene Rivera and outfielder Chris Young are projected to fill two of the reserve slots, but the final bench job remains open.

Given Cozart's inexperience at second base -- he hasn't played there since 2009 in the low Minors -- the Angels could fill out their bench with another infielder who can handle second, such as Kaleb Cowart, Colin Walsh, Jose Miguel Fernandez or Nolan Fontana, who is currently sidelined with right shoulder inflammation. Cowart and Fontana are on the 40-man roster, while Walsh and Fernandez are in camp as non-roster invitees.

FROM USA TODAY

MLB's brutal winter is all but over. Here are the biggest winners and losers

By Bob Nightengale

There were no ceremonies to see if a varmint sees his shadow, and snow storms are still pummeling the Northeast, but mercifully, baseball's interminable winter is over.

One hundred thirty-days after the Houston Astros were last seen jumping into one another's arms and even proposing to girlfriends, we can finally celebrate the end of the coldest baseball winter on record.

Oh sure, there are still a few stranded free agents left on the market, led by closer Greg Holland, starter Alex Cobb and infielder Neil Walker, but after the Philadelphia Phillies' signing of Jake Arrieta, the last big chess piece is off the board.

Just 2 ½ weeks remain before baseball's Opening Day, but only now can we actually judge the off-season, providing the biggest winners and losers of this bizarre winter.

The torn, frayed, and soiled envelopes, please:

Best winter, player

Giancarlo Stanton, New York Yankees: Stanton is the only man in baseball who actually gets to play where he wanted, and received every penny he felt that he deserves, transferring from Major League Baseball's swamplands to baseball's most iconic franchise.

The Miami Marlins threatened Stanton during the winter that if he didn't accept a deal to the San Francisco Giants or St. Louis Cardinals, he'd be stuck in Miami for the rest of his career.

Stanton called their bluff.

He wound up with the powerful Yankees less than a week later, and yes, still gets the remaining \$295 million of his salary - and an opt-out clause after 2019, if so inclined.

Worst winter, player

Mike Moustakas, Kansas City Royals: Moustakas produced the finest season of his career last season, hitting a franchise-record 38 homers for the Kansas City Royals, believing free agency would land him a five-year contract worth about \$95 million.

The entire winter passed, and his phone never rang with a single contract offer.

He wound up back in Kansas City last weekend on a paltry one-year, \$6.5 million deal - barely one-third of reliever Tommy Hunter's guarantee with the Philadelphia Phillies.

He actually had to take a \$2.2 million pay cut just to play baseball again this year.

It was the easily ugliest outcome of the winter.

Best winter, team

Philadelphia Phillies: What do you know, a baseball team actually spent money this winter?

The Phillies, perhaps perturbed by five consecutive losing seasons and the notion of the Eagles' grip on the market only growing firmer, dropped \$169 million on the free-agent market. They signed first baseman Carlos Santana to a three-year, \$60 million contract in December, shored up their bullpen by signing Pat Neshek and Hunter, and then jumped on Arrieta's fallen market with a three-year, \$75 million deal.

Finally, a team that shrugged at the loss of draft picks, forfeiting their second round and third round picks, and pronouncing that their rebuild is over.

And they did it without the risk of being stuck with a long, unwieldy contract. In fact, Arrieta and Santana's contracts will expire in what would be just the second year of a megadeal for one (or more) of the many superstar players hitting the market next winter.

They're not quite ready for contention, but a year from now when Bryce Harper leaves the Washington Nationals, the NL East will be wide open.

Worst winter, team

Miami Marlins: Remember when South Florida wildly celebrated the departure of owner Jeffrey Loria and the arrival of Yankees icon Derek Jeter?

The honeymoon was over by last call at the Clevelander.

Sure, it was time for the Marlins to face reality and rebuild, but it still was stunning to see the swiftness of the wrecking ball to this franchise.

The entire star-studded outfield is gone in Stanton, Marcell Ozuna and Christian Yelich. So is their batting and stolen base champion in Dee Gordon. Oh, and if you need a veteran infielder in Martin Prado or a reliever in Brad Ziegler, all it takes is a phone call.

Jeter is not Loria, but twice-bitten fans in South Florida can be forgiven if it takes them a minute to believe in this regime.

Best winter, executive

Billy Eppler, Los Angeles Angels GM: Eppler, taking shrewd advantage of the strange market, spent conservatively without surrendering a draft pick while still staying under the luxury tax, lured the only player everyone in baseball wanted (Shohei Ohtani), retained a marquee slugger (Justin Upton), signed a third baseman who was an All-Star shortstop (Zack Cozart) and traded for a four-time All-Star second baseman (Ian Kinsler).

Just like that, the Angels have their best team since the arrival of Mike Trout.

They're not going to challenge the powerful Houston Astros in the AL West, but are finally legitimate wild-card contenders.

Worst winter, executive

Tony Clark: The executive director of the Major League Baseball Players Association was widely ridiculed by players and agents for the flaws in the collective bargaining agreement. They're infuriated that Clark and the union's executive team didn't see what was coming with the luxury tax threshold turning into a salary cap, and teams surrendering before the season even starts.

The union has three years to retrench before their next trip to the negotiating table, but the fallout from the past two collective bargaining agreements will cast a pall on their membership until then.

No agent was hit harder than Scott Boras, who represented 15 free agents, and tumbled from his mountaintop.

Why, outside Eric Hosmer's eight-year, \$144 million contract with the San Diego Padres, there wasn't a single signing that Boras will include on his glossy dossier recruiting players.

J.D. Martinez (five years, \$110 million) got virtually half of the \$200 million he was seeking. Arrieta fell \$100 million short of expectations. Moustakas was at least \$80 million light of projections. And Holland, the National League's saves leader, still is unemployed.

Champions of restraint

New York Yankees: They have threatened to get under the luxury tax for the last couple of decades, and actually mean it this time.

They acquired Stanton and picked up \$265 million of his remaining \$295 million contract, and stopped spending. They brought back CC Sabathia on a one-year, \$10 million contract, but didn't sign anyone else for their thin starting rotation. They had two holes at second base and third base, and did nothing more than acquire Brandon Drury from the Arizona Diamondbacks.

Who would ever have thought we'd see the day 25 teams would spend more money in free agency this winter than the Yankees?

Candor champion, player

Kenley Jansen, Los Angeles Dodgers: "Maybe we have to go on strike, to be honest with you," Jansen blurted out at the Dodgers' Fan Fest, and continued to double down during spring training. "I'm going to have to have that talk to the union, and we'll see how it goes from there."

Candor champion, executive

Seattle Mariners GM Jerry Dipoto: Dipoto was speaking from his heart, but perhaps not his head, not realizing the ramifications when he became the first club executive to agree with the union that the system is grossly flawed.

"You could argue you're going to compete with more clubs to get the first pick in the draft," Dipoto said, "than you would to win the World Series."

It was the quote the union is using to wallpaper its office, much to Commissioner Rod Manfred's chagrin, and it's safe to say Dipoto may never address that topic again.

Welcome to the 2018 season.

It finally has arrived.

FROM DALLAS NEWS**Why Rangers would still gladly still take underwhelming Shohei Ohtani and circus that comes with him**

By Kevin Sherrington

TEMPE - On the other side of Diablo Stadium, in a parallel universe, baseball's biggest circus is at full calliope. The designated hitter is batting eighth, which is weird enough, except he's also probably the last starter in a six-man rotation, which is revolutionary.

The Angels have made these accommodations for the singular Shohei Ohtani because they won the lottery.

Of course, the Rangers, the team in another universe, would have gladly signed up for the same.

Bartolo Colon has seen plenty in his two decades shuttling around the game, and even he doesn't get it.

"He looks like he's going to be a good hitter," Colon said when asked what he thought of Ohtani, who singled off him in the second on a fastball down and in that caught too much of the plate.

"But it's up to them to make the decision whether he's going to pitch and play."

No, no, Bartolo, that decision has already been made. Ready or not, Ohtani will pitch and play, or this grand experiment will look like a big, fat bust.

Going into Sunday's game, Ohtani's spring hadn't exactly inspired confidence in the coronation that preceded him. At the plate, he was 1 for 11 with three walks and four strikeouts. As Yahoo's Jeff Passan noted after consulting eight scouts at a game last week, the numbers weren't as concerning as the mechanics. Their consensus was that he needs about 500 at bats in the minors, at minimum, to work out the kinks that come with a 6-foot-4 working model.

Meanwhile, on the mound, where he's considered to have the most potential, Ohtani has been curiously short. Friday, against the Tijuana Toros, a Mexican League team, he gave up six runs in three innings, including a bomb by a 33-year-old journeyman. Ohtani's fastball, clocked at 99 in Japan, never exceeded 95. ESPN's Keith Law judged his slider an "absolute wipeout pitch" but was less impressed with the rest of the repertoire.

"This is not the Shohei Ohtani we were promised," Law concluded.

Now, I know what you're thinking: Given the modest price and the Rangers' prospects, they'd have taken even a mini-me version of the Japanese Babe Ruth. No question about it. If they had to make concessions to fit Ohtani's larger-than-life profile, so what? They're contemplating some version of a six-man rotation themselves.

And if hitting means disturbing Shin-Soo Choo's routine two or three times a week, the union shouldn't expect any complaints.

The Rangers could have better afforded the Ohtani circus. From the looks of things out here in the desert, there's not much on the line this season. Even if Jon Daniels had managed to out-recruit the Angels, he wasn't going to spend on Yu Darvish, Jake Arrieta, Alex Cobb or Lance Lynn. Even if Ohtani had been as good as Darvish in his first big league spring, with 12 hits and 21 strikeouts in 15 innings, the Rangers would still be short in the rotation.

The Angels, on the other hand, should be the Astros' primary challengers in the West. They simply need pitching, as usual.

If Ohtani somehow suddenly lives up to the hype, he'll be what they need at the top of the rotation. As is, he still has a long way to go, and three weeks isn't enough to cover it all.

Certainly possible that the Angels could send him to Salt Lake City, where he could disrupt their plans there instead. He's not on the 40-man roster. No question, it would be best for his development at 23.

But this isn't your average superstar prospect, either. Who knows how he'd take a minor league assignment? If he didn't consider himself ready, he'd have waited to come over when he could have commanded more money.

Speaking of which, just last week, Clayton Kershaw, who flew from Dallas to California in December on his anniversary just to help recruit Ohtani to the Dodgers, called his efforts "a gigantic waste of time." Ohtani, Kershaw concluded, had already made up his mind. He wanted to be a designated hitter, not an outfielder, meaning his field of seven candidates was actually down to the Angels, Mariners or Rangers.

As you probably know by now, the Rangers and Ohtani go way back. They also had the most to offer financially, at least initially.

But, in something of a surprise, the Angels won. Now they've got to figure out what to do with him.

Already they've hustled poor old Albert Pujols from his comfortable spot on the bench to play first base so Ohtani could DH. The good news is, the rest of the Angels seem to be taking it well. They teased him about his walk-up music, which sounded like the theme from a Japanese cartoon.

Besides his hit off Colon on Sunday, Ohtani struck out against Tayler Scott and grounded out against Erik Goeddel.

Of his three at bats Sunday, making him 2 for 14 for the spring, Ohtani said his "timing was a little off once again. Just another learning experience.

"I'm still trying to find my right timing, right approach. Changing things up every at bat."

For instance, on a 1-2 pitch from Scott, Ohtani flailed wildly at a two-seam sinking fastball off the outside corner. If it's any consolation, Scott was sympathetic to his plight.

"It is very tough," he said of dual duty. "It's going to take a special one to do it."

And even if it's been nothing special so far, the Rangers would sure take it.

FROM THE COMEBACK

Whose mammoth home run Saturday was cooler, Giancarlo Stanton or Mike Trout?

Both Stanton and Trout launched highly impressive Spring Training bombs.

By Alex Putterman

From an analytical perspective, Spring Training is mostly meaningless. The games don't count for the standings, half the players won't sniff a Major-League roster, and players are more interested in honing their mechanics than with producing results.

But you know what Spring Training *is* good for? Dingers.

On Saturday, Mike Trout and Giancarlo Stanton (the two *most important players in baseball*), both whacked the type of home runs that make you stop and stare, then rewind the video clip and watch again. The type of home runs you don't see every day, at any time of year. The type of home runs that require us to evaluate with scientific precision which one was cooler. Let's meet the candidates.

Candidate One: Giancarlo Stanton off Matt Harvey

Candidate Two: Mike Trout off Joan Gregorio

The case for Stanton

Has anyone this century shown as much opposite-field power as Giancarlo Stanton? Miguel Cabrera and Alex Rodriguez come to mind, but even they couldn't drive the ball the other way like Stanton. Saturday's home run was a towering bomb to left-center that cleared the wall easily. If you hadn't seen the swing and only watched the trajectory, you'd have thought it came from a powerful left-handed slugger, not a righty in the opposite batter's box.

Unlike Trout's blast, Stanton's came off a Major-League pitcher. Matt Harvey may no longer be an All-Star, but at least you have heard of him.

Finally, bonus points to Stanton for this herculean shot counting as his first (unofficial) home run as a Yankee.

The Case for Trout

Did you see that ball fly? Did you? He hit it over the damn batter's eye. To dead centerfield. Who does that?

On pure distance, Trout wins easy. The centerfield fence was 420 feet from home plate, and the Angels outfielder cleared it *easily*. We can't even tell how far the ball soared because it disappeared out of sight and apparently out of the stadium. For all we know, it still hasn't landed.

Stanton's home run was impressive, but Trout's was gargantuan.

And the winner is...

You can't make us choose. After all, this is Spring Training, when winners and losers don't matter and we're all just in it for the sun and the charm. Stanton and Trout's home runs were each impressive in their own way, and rather than take away from one, we shall celebrate both.

Hooray, baseball.

FROM THE ATHLETIC

Bowden: Spring-training performances to believe – and disbelieve

By Jim Bowden

For the most part, spring-training performances are quite simply irrelevant, except for getting the players in shape and game-ready for the regular season. It has been proven repeatedly that there is very little correlation between either individual players or team spring-training statistics and the regular-season performances that will follow.

The main reason for this is that hitters are facing pitchers who are working on specific pitches, mechanics and fastball command with the main goal of getting their arms in shape and ready for opening day. Many of the pitchers whom they face, especially early in spring training, won't even make the major-league team. Conversely, pitchers are facing hitters who are getting their timing down, working on mechanics and, for the most part, only playing in partial games until late in spring training.

However, if you really dig into the matchups, you can see signs that a player's performance can be translated into the regular season. For example, if you watch a hitter do damage to a 95-mph fastball in on his hands and then later hit the nasty slider down and away for a hit the opposite way, then it's a reasonably safe bet he'll be able to repeat that when the season starts. On the other hand, if a hitter has belted four home runs all on 86 mph fastballs down the middle, then it's safe to say he won't be getting that type of pitch when the bell rings, and those performances should be ignored. If a pitcher is getting lit up because he doesn't yet have his fastball command but the velocity and movement are there, then the stats should again be ignored until the command arrives.

Another factor is that players who played winter ball will always be way ahead of everyone else. They should always have an early spring-training performance advantage.

There are rookies who are having great springs, like Ronald Acuna of the Atlanta Braves, who looks more than major-league ready hitting some really good pitches. Another top hitting prospect, Kyle Tucker of the Houston Astros, has already hit four homers. But three of those have been on mediocre fastballs over the middle of the plate. Acuna and Tucker are going to be stars. Both are tearing up spring training statistically. But I believe Acuna's performance means he's major-league ready, while Tucker could use more minor-league seasoning, based on the pitches that the two of them have been hitting.

The Indians' Jason Kipnis has already hit six home runs. Though that doesn't mean he's going to hit 30 in the regular season, it does mean he's completely healthy and the Indians can expect him to be the 20-home run second baseman he has been for most of his career. Mac Williamson of the Giants is hitting .379 with three home runs and 12 runs batted in and is proving once again that he can hit minor-league pitching. Wait until later in the spring; his numbers will come right back to the mean when he starts facing major-league pitching more regularly.

Here are some other players and teams that you should believe or disbelieve based on their early spring-training performances:

BELIEVE THE PERFORMANCE

Ryan McMahon, 1B, Colorado Rockies

Manager Bud Black told me this offseason that he likes the fact that McMahon can play multiple positions, including first, second and third base, and thinks McMahon might fit in initially as a utility player. GM Jeff Bridich told me that Ian Desmond would prepare to play both first base and left field while the club was still trying to pursue free-agent first baseman Mark Reynolds, among other first basemen. However, McMahon, 23, has had such a good spring training that it looks like he could be their long-term answer at first. Last year, McMahon started the year at Double-A, where he slashed .326/.390/.536. At Triple-A, he slashed .374/.411/.612 with 14 home runs in only 314 plate appearances. The Rockies called him to the major leagues last September, and he went just 3-for-19 in 17 games.

This spring, McMahon is off to a fast start, slashing .359/.375/.538 with one home run and is making solid, hard contact against some really good pitches. He has made a believer out of me, and I think he'll be a rookie of the year candidate.

Matt Kemp, LF, Los Angeles Dodgers

The Dodgers acquired Kemp this offseason from the Braves in exchange for Charlie Culberson, Adrián González, Scott Kazmir, Brandon McCarthy and cash. The main purpose of the deal for the Dodgers was to stay under the luxury-tax threshold and clear valuable roster spots for their prospects. As soon as they acquired Kemp they started shopping him, but found no takers. However, Kemp showed up in camp 40 pounds lighter than last year, completely revamping his body. He's been getting on base 40

percent of the time while hitting three home runs. Kemp, 33, is still capable of hitting 25 home runs. He's a below-average defender in left field and faces stiff competition from Andrew Toles, Joc Pederson, Enrique Hernández and even Alex Verdugo. However, even if Kemp doesn't win the everyday job, he certainly looks like he has a renewed attitude and body. The Dodgers might find an American League club willing to trade for him before opening day.

Garrett Richards, RHP, Los Angeles Angels

Richards has been plagued with injuries throughout his career with the Angels, including a tear of his ulnar collateral ligament and nerve irritation caused by a blood clot. He chose not to have Tommy John surgery in May 2016, opting for stem-cell injections in hopes of regenerating the ligament in his elbow. So far, it appears to be the right decision. Richards is throwing 96-99 mph and looks like he has the same stuff from his prime in 2014-15, when he went 28-16 with a FIP of 3.10. However, he pitched only 62 innings combined over the last two years. That means the Angels must be careful with his workload. The Halos plan to use a six-man rotation and will have pitch counts and limits on all of their pitchers. This spring, Richards has shown that his fastball and breaking ball are working as well as ever. If he stays healthy, he could be the key to the Angels' chances at a wild card, and a candidate for comeback player of the year.

DISBELIEVE THE PERFORMANCE

Greg Bird, 1B, New York Yankees

Bird, 25, is having a horrible spring, slashing .095/.269/.095 with no extra base hits in 21 at-bats. *His bat looks slow. He doesn't appear to have a strong base at the plate. He looks like a player who should start the year in the minor leagues.*

Stop it. It's spring training, and it's a nine-game sample. So he's off to a slow start. Who cares?

Bird made his major-league debut in 2015 and made the most of it, getting on base at a .343 clip while hitting 11 home runs in 178 plate appearances. However, Bird never made it to a 2016 spring-training game. He had surgery to repair a torn labrum in his right shoulder, which finished his season. Last year, Bird was a phenom in spring training. He slashed .451/.566/1.098 with eight home runs and 15 runs batted in. Because of the strong performance, he was named the Yankees' 3-hole hitter for Opening Day. However, Bird played in only 48 regular-season games because of a right-ankle injury and hit only .190 but with nine home runs. He reappeared in the postseason and made a statement by belting an additional three homers in the ALDS and ALCS combined.

Bird is finally healthy, which is what's really important for him and the Yankees this spring. His slow start to spring training is just that. I expect him to get it going over the next couple of weeks and be ready for his first full season in the majors, where I think he'll become the 25-30 home run power hitter we've all been waiting for.

Brandon Nimmo, OF, New York Mets

Nimmo is off to fast start this spring, going 10-for-29 with eight runs scored, two home runs and six runs batted in. That has some Mets fans excited that he might finally live up to being drafted with their first-round pick, 13th overall, in the 2011 June Free-Agent Amateur Draft. There is no doubt that Nimmo has a sweet swing, which he has displayed this spring. However, Nimmo still doesn't have enough power or speed to be an everyday player in the major leagues. His best fit is as a fourth or fifth outfielder who can play all three positions. However well he performs or doesn't in spring training won't change his short- or long-term role with the Mets.

Miami Marlins

The Marlins are off to a great start this spring with the second-best record among NL teams at 10-5, behind only the Chicago Cubs. Some of their biggest offseason acquisitions are off to hot starts. Lewis Brinson, acquired in the Christian Yelich trade, is slashing .393/.433/.679. Sandy Alcantara has a 1.13 ERA through eight innings. The Marlins are playing fundamentally sound baseball. That's a reflection of manager Don Mattingly, who has embraced the rebuilding program. However, let's be clear: The Marlins will lose 100 games this year and are strong favorites to finish with the worst record in baseball. If and when that happens, remember the Marlins will get the first overall pick in the June 2019 draft. I'm glad they're off to a respectable start, but it will be short-lived. Enjoy it while you can.