

Inbox: Breaking down the Indians' offseason

By Anthony Castrovince MLB.com @castrovince

Last week's Indians Inbox was my first in eight years. This week's is my last for the foreseeable future. After filling in for the departed (as in, new job, not dead) Jordan Bastian, I'm sliding back into a life of national baseball puns and punditry for MLB.com.

But I still love talking Tribe. I'll do it on my Twitter feed. I'll do it in my columns and features. I'll do it on the Morning Lineup Podcast I record thrice-weekly with friend and colleague Richard Justice. I'll do it on the Indians podcast I record with the team beat writer. I'll do it in my regular segments on MLB Network. I'll do it on the Cleveland radio waves as a Tribe insider for WKNR.

(As Bob Feller routinely used to tell us in the Indians' press box, "If you don't promote yourself, who will?")

The powers that be are still nailing down Bastian's permanent replacement. In the meantime, MLB.com's Mandy Bell will have your Indians coverage at next week's Winter Meetings and beyond. She's a good reporter and a good person, and I know you'll all give her a warm welcome.

For now, in the wake of the Yan Gomes trade and Danny Salazar's new contract, an Inbox is in order.

@Imeehan3

I like Gomes, but think we've seen his best season(s), so I am ok moving him...all about what comes next regarding roster....long way to go. Larry, next time please provide your unorthodox rationality, patience and practicality in the form of a question.

I'm a Gomes fan. Watching his evolution from, as Indians president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti put it, "an unheralded Triple-A corner-utility player to an All-Star-caliber Major League catcher" has been one of the more impressive maturations I've seen in my time around this team. And "Indians trade All-Star catcher for prospects" is not a fun look for a supposed contender.

But let's make a few salient points here:

- As I wrote in this space last week, moving Gomes was an obvious way to make a little room in a tight budget, and what the Indians do with that room will be an important factor in how we judge the trade. The return wasn't overwhelming, but it's not as if Cleveland turned down offers of All-Star outfielders from other clubs. The Tribe got what it could get in a market stocked with catchers, and Antonetti's trade record (including the trade to acquire Gomes) speaks for itself.
- In 2018, Gomes had his best offensive season since '14. Roberto Perez had the ninth-lowest OPS this century by a catcher with at least 200 plate appearances. But let's not forget that as recently as the second half of 2017, Perez had begun to take over the regular catching duties from Gomes because their offensive performances weren't much different and Perez graded out better defensively (in framing runs, blocking runs and fielding runs above average). In the three-season sample from 2015-17, Perez more than doubled Gomes' Baseball Reference-calculated Wins Above Replacement mark (2.7 to 1.3), despite playing in 70 fewer games.
- Gomes' age (31), injury history and offensive track record make him a regression candidate. As of this writing, Steamer projects him to play just 72 games for the Nationals, with a 1.2 WAR and 86 weighted runs created plus. Steamer projects Perez to be worth 1.6 WAR and a 79 wRC+ in 113 games for the Indians, who also have Eric Haase coming off a solid year at Triple-A Columbus.
- No one asked, but even after the Gomes trade, I'm more concerned about Cleveland's outfield than the catching spot. And I'm more concerned about the bullpen than the outfield.
- The bottom line is that values can fluctuate quickly in baseball, especially at a position as physically and mentally demanding as catcher. Anybody here remember Jonathan Lucroy?

@MattB_WOF

How likely do you think a Carlos Carrasco extension is? Would it be more of a rework or multi-year extension?

Talks can always hit a snag, of course, but I think there's a decent chance of it getting done, in which case you could yank Carrasco out of the trade discussion. If the deal happens, it would be an extension beyond the current club control through 2020.

@StephenTipton

Is it fair to say at this point that the @Indians see everyone besides Jose and Lindor as tradeable?

This year's off season rumor mill has been whiplash inducing, particularly because there wasn't much warning that the whole team was on the block.

On winter breaks during college, I worked in the layaway department at the Eastlake, Ohio, Walmart (a lovely place). My job was to retrieve boxes of items from the storage trailers when people paid off their bills. Occasionally (read: frequently) the boxes had been lost, and I'd have to go through the store and shop for all the missing items. This, friends, is how I gained unexpected experience buying underwear for strangers.

In our jobs, we do what must be done, is what I'm saying.

After two years of franchise-record payrolls netted the Indians nothing more than four playoff home games and a declining attendance total, Antonetti and GM Mike Chernoff have been forced to take a hard look at a maturing roster loaded with in-house raises. Given the budget constraints, it would be malpractice not to explore the trade values of the more expensive veterans. And the two areas where the Tribe had a combination of workable depth and a player (or players) with actual trade value were catching and starting pitching.

Gomes might represent the extent of the "sell-off," or the Indians could still move a starter. Rest assured that if Cleveland does actually move a starter, it's not going to be solely for salary relief and mid-grade prospects like the Gomes trade. It would be for tangible help at the Major League level right now. But that value is very hard to align in the trade market.

Jason Leonard
@jasonleonard305

Do you think if the Indians trade Kluber (Lindor? Ramirez?) they could net 3 or 4 more fourth outfielder types? I'm concerned they don't have enough depth in that area, and trading more of their all stars is definitely the way to fix it.

I, too, enjoy employing the comedic device of conveying scorn by saying the opposite of what you clearly mean. I just wish we had a word for it.

@216burner

Feel like I'm the only one of my friends/family that is defending the tribe. How do I tell everyone I know that they're all idiots? Announcing it loudly at Thanksgiving dinner would have been ideal. But because it's too late for that, I would wait until New Year's Eve and after everybody has had a few alcoholic beverages.

@DreamingBasebl

Love the trade. What do you think the odds are we see either Johnson or Rodriguez contribute to the Major League Club in 2019?

#Indiansinbox

Both Daniel Johnson and Jefry Rodriguez are a possibility for 2019. Rodriguez is a stronger possibility, given that he's already pitched in the bigs and will be immediately vying for a bullpen role (and bullpen jobs open up all the time). But I don't have to tell you there is opportunity in the Indians' outfield. Johnson needs to tighten up his strike-zone awareness before he's a serious candidate for the call.

David Diamond

@dpdiamond13

What's the front office's logic/reasoning for dumping a \$7M contract (Gomes) but picking up \$4.5M contract for Salazar who has continued injuries? This isn't a Brantley situation. Gomes was a formidable day-to-day leader. Is it as simple as getting as much value as possible now?

Salazar sometimes grabs his elbow and shoulder just from looking at a baseball. But in the vast majority of Major League markets, a \$4.5 million investment on a pitcher with Salazar's raw stuff is a layup. For the Indians this winter, it was more laborious. In the end, they did the right thing. There is too strong a possibility of Salazar providing at least \$4.5 million of value to them (or maybe to another team in a trade) in 2019.

Mitchell Beaudreau

@Fatherbeatrice

I've heard of trades with the Dodgers involving Puig, which makes absolutely no sense since he has one year left. Do you think it should be Bellinger or no deal with the Dodgers? Only way I'd like a trade with Kluber or Bauer is if Bellinger is included.

Right, Cody Bellinger makes more way sense than Yasiel Puig, who will make eight figures in his final arbitration round. And MLB Pipeline's No. 32 overall prospect, Alex Verdugo, whose advanced bat is due for his shot in the bigs, makes way more sense than either of them.

proud2BfromCLE

@proud2BfromCLE

Would the Gomes trade have made more sense, or been easier for fans to swallow, had we not traded our top prospect (Mejia -Catcher) 5 months ago?

Well, sure. But then you guys wouldn't have Brad Hand and would be freaking out about the possibility of Neil Ramirez being the 2019 closer.

For high-end relief help with multiple years of control in the midseason market, Francisco Mejia was the cost of doing business. (And for the record, evaluator opinions about the likelihood of him remaining behind the plate in his big league career are mixed.)

Brandon Peery

@bwpeery

Any hope of dumping Kipnis' \$14.5 million? Where does he fit in 2019? Seems like Tito is finally ready to give Yandy a shot a 3rd and move Ramirez to 2nd. Kip seems to be the odd man out again.

Gomes did a fantastic job reasserting the value of his contract in 2018. Kipnis did not. I think the only way you move Kipnis is by taking on a good amount of his contract (thereby defeating the purpose of moving him), trading him for a similarly bad contract or attaching him to a more valuable trade asset (i.e. Kluber or Bauer).

If the season began today, Kipnis would be in left field. And the field would be wet.

@KingSalmon38

Oh hi, Anthony! All these trade rumors are tearing me apart! But this Carrasco extension rumor is intriguing. I think Cookie getting an extension along with Kluber's extra year means Bauer has been the odd man out all along. What do you think?

I think I missed these references to "The Room" in the Inbox.

If a Carrasco extension gets done, that leaves Kluber and Bauer as the key trade candidates. Kluber has the better resume, but he'll be 33 with a rising price tag and declining velocity, so it's not sacrilege to suggest that Bauer might provide more surplus value than Kluber in '19 (as Bauer himself can tell you). Of course, analytically minded clubs know this, and that affects offers. But at this moment in time, I think there are better arguments for moving Kluber than Bauer because of the age and surplus value equation mentioned above.

That said, the extra year of club control of Kluber is an undeniably important element in all of this.

@world_dictator

Doesn't seem like you're happy to be (temporarily) back on the Indians beat. Are we not good enough for you?

Contrary to the assumption of this amateur psychologist, it has been a blast to briefly be back on the beat and interacting with you all these last few weeks. We made beautiful Inboxes together, and nobody can take that away from us.

Are Cleveland Indians' pitchers in good hands with catchers Roberto Perez and Eric Haase after trade of Yan Gomes?

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com phoynes@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio – Roberto Perez likely found out Friday night that Yan Gomes had been traded to Washington. It was a deal that made him the No. 1 catcher for the Indians.

On Saturday, Perez celebrated by going 2-for-4 with a homer and four RBI for Licey in the Dominican Republic. On Sunday, he was scheduled to leave the Dominican and return home after hitting .333 (23-for-69) with one homer and 11 RBI in winter ball.

Perez and Gomes shared the catcher's job for parts of the last five seasons. Now that he's finally the starter is he ready for the job?

Chris Antonetti, Indians president of baseball operations, says yes.

"We did trade from an area of depth here," said Antonetti on Friday in announcing the Gomes trade. "For a while you've heard us say we feel we have two regular catchers within the organization at the major league level. Now Roberto will have the opportunity to step in and be the regular guy. He's done that for us over the course of the past few seasons when Yan's been hurt.

"He's demonstrated the ability to lead our pitching staff. He's caught some of the most meaningful games that we've played over the last five or six years. . .including that run in the 2016 postseason."

Perez has never played more than 73 games in a season for the Indians. Some around baseball feel he could get exposed offensively if he plays too much. That brings the conversation to Eric Haase, who at the moment is Perez's backup.

Haase, 26 on Dec. 18, has played nine games in the big leagues. In 2017 and 2018, he hit 27 and 20 homers, respectively, at Class AA Akron and Class AAA Columbus.

If Perez slumps offensively or gets hurt – catching is a dangerous position – are the Indians ready to put the pitching staff in Haase's hands? People inside the organization believe in Haase. Some baseball people on the outside say he just may win the job with his bat if Perez can't improve on his .168 average from last season. Others question the talent of Tribe's catching tandem as a whole and say an upgrade is needed.

Antonetti indicated that the Indians could add depth to the catcher's position later in the offseason.

Should the Indians trade a starting pitcher such as Corey Kluber, Trevor Bauer or Carlos Carrasco, they could add a catcher that way.

There are several veteran catchers on the free agent market as well, but the Indians aren't going to be shopping in the Yasmani Grandal and Martin Maldonado aisle. On Friday, however, catchers Caleb Joseph, Chris Herrmann and James McCann became free agents when they weren't offered contracts for 2019. Come January perhaps some of them will still be looking for work.

The Tribe's best catching prospect, Francisco Mejia, is playing for the Padres after being traded in July for closer Brad Hand and right-hander Adam Cimber. In the Tribe's top 30 prospects, as ranked by mlb.com, the only catcher listed, besides Haase, is Noah Naylor, their first-round pick in June. Naylor made his professional debut last season for the Arizona Rookie League Indians and is a long way from the big leagues.

The Indians received outfielder Daniel Johnson, right-hander Jefry Rodriguez and a player to be named for Gomes. Scouts project Johnson to be a fourth outfielder on a big-league club. Picture Greg Allen, but he hits only from the left side. Rodriguez could make the club out of spring training as a middle reliever.

As for those thinking the player to be named might be a repeat of Michael Brantley, well, don't get your hopes up. When the Indians traded CC Sabathia – they apparently have trouble hanging on to Cy Young winners – in 2008 to Milwaukee, Brantley was the player to be named. Among the four players the Indians received in the deal, Matt LaPorta was supposed to be the headliner, but it was Brantley who saved the trade.

Antonetti said the Indians should receive the player to be named before the start of the regular season. There is no indication he will be the kind of prize that Brantley was.

Johnson, 23, was a fifth-round pick of the Nationals in 2016. This year he hit .269 (101-for-376) with seven homers and 35 RBI at Class AA Harrisburg and the Class A Gulf Coast League.

A scout who has seen Johnson the last two winters in the Arizona Fall League – where he hit .217 in 2017 and .145 this fall – says he has above average speed and is an aggressive hitter with good bat speed. But he has a contact problem and is overmatched by good pitching. He has a strong throwing arm and is probably 1 1/2 to 2 years away from the big leagues.

Rodriguez, 25, went 3-3 with a 5.71 ERA in 14 games, including eight starts, for the Nationals last season in his first trip to the big leagues. He struck out 39 and walked 37 – a ratio that will not make manager Terry Francona smile – in 52 innings.

The 6-6, 232-pound Rodriguez made 19 starts at Class AAA Syracuse and Harrisburg and went 7-5 with a 3.40 ERA. He had 102 strikeouts and 43 walks in 100 2/3 innings.

The three pitches Rodriguez throws the most, according to fangraphs.com, are a four-seam fastball, sinker and curveball. His fastball averages 95.7 mph and can touch 99. The sinker averages 95.4 mph, while his curveball averages 81.1 mph.

Rodriguez is probably best suited for the bullpen because of his lack of control. In May of 2017 he was suspended for 80 games for testing positive for a banned substance while playing in the minors for Washington.

Mets may not be a fit, but Cleveland Indians still talking to teams about Corey Kluber, Trevor Bauer, Carlos Carrasco
By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com | Posted December 04, 2018 at 01:22 PM | Updated December 04, 2018 at 10:17 PM

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Indians starting pitchers Corey Kluber, Trevor Bauer and Carlos Carrasco have been rumored to be traded to a variety of teams since the Tribe was eliminated from the postseason in October.

Over the weekend, a rumor popped that the Mets and Indians were talking about a Kluber deal. As Chris Antonetti, Indians president of baseball operations, has said many times this offseason, "We're fortunate to have a lot of talented players on our roster that other teams like. That leads to a lot of conversations."

On the surface the Mets' rumor makes sense because Mickey Callaway, Kluber's old pitching coach in Cleveland, is managing the Mets. But other observers think the Indians and Mets would have a hard time agreeing on a deal for a couple of reasons.

* The Mets just traded prospects Jarrod Polanco and Justin Dunn to Seattle as part of a blockbuster deal that brought Robinson Cano and Edwin Diaz to New York. The Indians don't want an all-prospect return for Kluber, but Polanco and Dunn would probably have gotten their attention.

Polanco, a center fielder who has been compared to a young Grady Sizemore, was the Mets' No.1 pick in 2018. Dunn, a right-hander, was the Mets' No. 1 pick in 2016.

* There's a chance that the Indians would try to include Jason Kipnis (\$14.7 million for 2019) or Edwin Encarnacion (\$20 million for 2019) in a deal involving Kluber or one of their other starters. Since the Mets don't need a DH and they just traded for Cano to play second base that may not be the best fit.

* Then again, there is a school of thought that says the Indians want to get the most out of a trade for one of their starting pitchers and would not muddy the waters by adding Kipnis or Encarnacion.

While the Indians' talks with the Mets may have hit a rut, the conversations GM Mike Chernoff and Antonetti are having with other teams continue. In fact, while a deal is not believed to be close, the momentum toward one continues to build.

Perhaps it will take place in Las Vegas, the site of this year's winter meetings which begin Sunday.

Here are some of the teams that the Indians are believed to be talking to regarding Kluber, Bauer or Carrasco. There are reports that the Indians are talking about a contract extension with Carrasco, which would probably take him off the market if it happens.

How about the Dodgers?

The Dodgers are blessed with a long list of starting pitchers. They don't really need another one, but who wouldn't want to pair Clayton Kershaw with Kluber, Bauer or Carrasco?

The Indians could fill a lot of holes if they could make a deal with Los Angeles. The Dodgers not only have an excess of starting pitchers, but outfielders and catchers as well.

What if the Indians were able to swing a deal similar to the one the Pirates made with Tampa Bay for right-hander Chris Archer in July?

The Rays sent Archer to Pittsburgh for first baseman Austin Meadows, and right-handers Tyler Glasnow and Shane Bieber.

Meadows, the Pirates' No. 1 pick in 2013, combined to hit .287 (51-for-178) with six homers and 17 RBI for the Pirates and Rays last season. Bieber was Pittsburgh's No.1 pick in 2017, while the 6-8 Glasnow struck out 136 batters in 111 2/3 innings for the Rays and Pirates.

Would the Indians settle for an outfielder such as Alex Verdugo or versatile Chris Taylor, a catching prospect such as Keibert Ruiz or Will Smith and a starting pitcher prospect for Kluber?

We'll have to wait and see.

How about the Braves?

The Braves won the NL East with 90 wins last season. They were a year or two ahead of schedule, but that doesn't mean they're not ready to take control of the division.

If they could acquire an established starter such as Kluber or Bauer to lead an already solid rotation that would help the cause. It's been reported that GM Alex Anthopoulos has free agent lefty Dallas Keuchel high on his wish list. So maybe the Tribe can offer a better deal.

The Indians need help in the outfield and bullpen, but could also use a pitcher to replace the one they trade. Atlanta is loaded with pitching prospects. Their top five prospects, according to mlb.com, are pitchers.

Center fielder Ender Inciarte, 28, is a Gold Glove center fielder. He's signed through 2021 for just over \$22 million, which may defeat the idea of trading Kluber's \$17.5 million salary for 2019 to give the Tribe some payroll flexibility. But he would certainly help the outfield.

The Braves, however, are about pitching. Their top prospects include pitchers Mike Soroka, Kyle Wright, Ian Anderson, Touki Toussaint, Kolby Allard and Luiz Gohara. Soroka, Wright, Anderson, Allard and Toussaint are first-round picks. Toussaint, Soroka and Wright made their big-league debuts last season.

How about the Phillies?

The Phillies just finished a trade with Seattle in which they received shortstop Jean Segura and relievers Juan Nicasio and James Pazos for former Indians first baseman Carlos Santana and shortstop J.P. Crawford.

Philadelphia has a solid rotation -- Aaron Nola finished third in the NL Cy Young race -- but it's looking to improve. They've met with Patrick Corbin, the top free agent pitcher on the market, but couldn't keep him from agreeing to a six-year \$140 million deal with Washington on Tuesday.

With Corbin off the board, the Indians would seem to be a good match. The Phillies have young pitchers in Zach Eflin, Adonis Medina and JoJo Romero. They also have interesting young position players in outfielder Nick Williams and catcher Jorge Alfaro.

How about the Yankees?

The Yankees continue to look for starting pitching. They re-signed free agent CC Sabathia and acquired another left-hander in James Paxton from Seattle, but GM Brian Cashman would like to add at least one more starter.

They're were in play for Corbin, the left-hander who grew up a Yankee fan went with the Nationals. Cashman could still try to re-sign lefty J.A. Happ, but he's also talked to the Tribe about Kluber, Bauer and Carrasco.

The Yankees won 100 games last season as the AL wild card and have a deep farm system. Yes, they've lost relievers Zach Britton and David Robertson to free agency, but would they entertain a deal which included reliever Chad Green for one of the Tribe's starters? Green is under control through for four more years so that could be a difficult get, but the Indians have a bullpen with a lot of holes.

New York's top prospects include outfielder Estevan Florial, right-handers Jonathan Loaisiga, Albert Abreu and Domingo Acevedo and catcher Anthony Seigler.

What about the Cardinals?

It seems the Cardinals are mostly looking for offense and bullpen help. They have been linked to Arizona's Paul Goldschmidt and free agent Bryce Harper.

That would not make them a great match for the Indians, but their two veteran starters last year -- Carlos Martinez and Michael Wacha -- spent a good deal of the season on the disabled list. Kluber has pitched 200-plus innings for the last five seasons, while Bauer has pitched 175-plus innings for the last four years.

The Cardinals have young starters in Jack Flaherty and John Gant that should interest the Indians. Right fielder/first baseman Jose Martinez, the son of former Indians player Carlos Martinez, has power and could help fill an outfield spot for the Tribe.

It would be difficult to see the Cardinals part with hard-throwing reliever Jordan Hicks, but they have some interesting arms in Dakota Hudson, John Brebbia and Daniel Ponce de Leon. Catching prospect Andrew Knizner swung the bat well last season in the minors.

The Indians traded starting catcher Yan Gomes to Washington on Friday and there have been rumblings that Roberto Perez and Eric Haase may need some help behind the plate.

How about the Astros?

The Astros are in a good spot. In the last two years they've won 101 and 103 games in the regular season and a World Series.

But they lost two starters, Keuchel and Charlie Morton, to free agency, while Lance McCullers is on the disabled list following Tommy John surgery on his right elbow. They could use a catcher after Brian McCann and Martin Maldonado turned free agent and Chris Hermann was non-tendered.

Houston's top two prospects are outfielder Kyle Tucker and right-hander Forrest Whitley. It doesn't sound like they are willing to part with them, which would make a deal with the Indians hard to do.

Hard-throwing Josh James -- 133 strikeouts in 92 2/3 innings at Class AAA Fresno -- would be a nice fit, but the Astros have him penciled in to take one of the empty spots in the rotation.

Yan Gomes trade doesn't help Indians' 2019 title chances, but more important moves await

KEVIN KLEPS

The Indians traded Yan Gomes heading into a season in which the catcher's salary increases from \$4.5 million to \$7 million.

On its own, the Indians' trade of catcher Yan Gomes to the Washington Nationals isn't going to help their 2019 World Series hopes.

That's a problem for a club that's in win-now mode, with three consecutive postseason appearances under its belt and Francisco Lindor's arbitration clock ticking.

But the move, as we've come to expect with the Tribe, is a calculated one in which a player was dealt as he started to become a bit expensive, and as his value was its highest in years.

Gomes will make \$7 million in 2019, and the Nationals have 2020 and '21 club options for \$9 million and \$11 million, respectively. Each option has a \$1 million buyout, which means Washington, at minimum, will pay the 31-year-old \$8 million.

Gomes was an All-Star for the first time in 2018, when he had an fWAR of 2.2 and a bWAR of 2.6. But he struggled for much of the previous three seasons, during which he averaged 91 games played. In two of the three years — 2015 and '16 — he had a combined fWAR and bWAR of 0, which means he was a replacement-level player.

When he was right, Gomes was much better than that, of course, but the Indians obviously believe the combination of the money saved in 2019 and the prospects they received in return (headlined by outfielder Daniel Johnson and pitcher Jefry Rodriguez) exceeded the short-term risk. And there unquestionably is some risk, since the Indians are left with Roberto Perez — a career .205 hitter with below-level replacement numbers in 2018 — and Eric Haase at catcher. Haase has 16 career at-bats in the big leagues, though he hit a combined 47 homers in Double- and Triple-A the last two seasons.

Johnson, who spent 2018 in Double-A, likely is at least a year away. The right-handed Rodriguez, meanwhile, could add some power to the Indians' rotation or bullpen, but control problems are a concern. He had almost as many walks (37) as strikeouts (39) in 52 innings as a rookie in 2018, and he's averaged 4.1 walks per nine innings in the minors.

Thus, the Indians still have gaping holes in their outfield and bullpen, and they just weakened their catching situation.

That seems bad.

Before you panic and start with the "Dolan cheap" rhetoric on social media (granted, plenty of you already have), keep in mind that baseball's Hot Stove has yet to really get going and the Indians' very capable front office has plenty of time to improve the team prior to the season — and has a history of making deadline moves that further bolster the roster.

What the Indians do with the \$7 million they save from the Gomes deal will be key. The same goes for how they decide to shake up their starting rotation, since it seems clear that the Tribe intends to boost some of its shortcomings by dealing from a position of strength.

And should they deal Corey Kluber or Trevor Bauer, depending on the return, they likely would be saving more cash, since Cy Young incentives have bumped Kluber's 2019 salary to \$17 million and Bauer seems likely to get to at least \$11 million in arbitration.

The Indians currently have 13 players on the books for a combined \$92.475 million. That's before Lindor gets to eight figures in his first year of arbitration, and before Bauer's salary is decided. On the same day the Indians dealt Gomes, they, somewhat surprisingly, agreed to a \$4.5 million deal with Danny Salazar, who hasn't appeared in a game since 2017.

It's obvious the front office believes the club as it was constructed wasn't good enough to knock off the likes of the Boston Red Sox or Houston Astros. The Indians also, as president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti said after the Gomes trade, are "focused on trying to build a team that's capable of winning another American League Central Division title in 2019 but is also positioned for success beyond that."

The Indians, because of the imbalance between MLB's bigger and smaller markets, always have to think a couple years out. Quality young players, with lower salaries and years of control, are critical. It's why Gomes was dealt now, not after the 2014 season, when he was a 27-year-old Silver Slugger who was due \$1 million the following year.

But the Indians' championship window extends as long as they have Lindor and Jose Ramirez, which means the Gomes trade has to be the start of something bigger.

There's a lot more to come this offseason.

There has to be.

Q&A: New Indians outfielder Jordan Luplow on opportunity in Cleveland and a family member's legendary catch

By Zack Meisel 2h ago 1

CLEVELAND — There's an old tale of a man who went soaring into the visitors bullpen at Fenway Park one nondescript afternoon in June 1963.

The man, a late-game defensive replacement in right field, snagged a fly ball destined for the other side of the fence. Instead of a three-run homer, though, Dick Williams made a loud out. The right fielder wound up on the other side of the wall, ball in glove.

That man? Al Luplow, outfielder for the Cleveland Indians from 1961-65.

His cousin's grandson? Jordan Luplow, outfielder for the Cleveland Indians since Nov. 14.

OK, so this isn't some story of a player following in his father's footsteps — Jordan and Al never met, and Al passed away last December. But Jordan has heard quite a bit about Al's conquests on the diamond.

The catch at Fenway — “the greatest catch never seen,” as it has been described to Jordan — is the one Jordan has heard most often. When former Indians outfielder Austin Jackson tumbled over the fence while completing an acrobatic grab in Boston in 2017, fans and readers mentioned it in the same breath as Al's heroics from that afternoon 54 years earlier.

Al wrapped up his big-league career with the Pirates in 1967. Jordan, 25, shifted from that organization to his new one last month in a five-player trade.

Jordan was the Pirates' Minor League Player of the Year in 2017, when he posted a .302/.381/.527 slash line with 23 home runs between Class AA Altoona and Class AAA Indianapolis. Last season, he logged an .829 OPS with Indianapolis. He hasn't yet excelled at the major-league level, though he has tallied only 190 trips to the plate in the past two years.

Perhaps he'll find his footing with the Indians. The uncertainty in the Indians' outfield could grant him an opportunity next season.

The Athletic recently caught up with Luplow as he reached the finish line of an offseason vacation to Australia and Hawaii.

What were you doing when you learned you had been traded?

I had just gotten done working out with my roommate right now, Joe Musgrove. He was driving and I took the phone call and during the phone call, I'm like, “Dude, I just got traded.” He had been traded twice already, so it was a good place to be, I guess, with another ballplayer who's been traded, been through it. We're the same age. So he was able to talk me through it and tell me, “Hey, this is a good thing. This is going to be good for you. There's opportunity.” He settled my nerves, because I was feeling all sorts of emotions. It was good that he was there with me.

Given that it was your first time going through something like that, I'd imagine a lot of things were flooding your mind: happiness, sadness, excitement, nervousness, wanting to check Cleveland's roster, wanting to know all the players involved in the deal.

Right, definitely. But I'm really excited. I think it's going to be a good opportunity for me. I think getting around a new organization and learning the way they go about (things) is going to help me grow as a player. Hopefully it'll allow me to stick in the big leagues and be around some veteran guys on the field.

Was the trade a shock, given your minor-league success and lack of big-league playing time?

Oh, absolutely. Getting traded is one of those things that you always hear about, but never expect yourself to deal with. But in reality, it's part of the game. I just have to roll with the punches, and I honestly think this is going to be a better fit for me. I know a couple guys on the Indians and I'm really excited. They've been to the postseason the past few years. I got to play there last year and it was electric out there. The stadium is really nice. I'm excited.

Who do you know with the Indians?

I've played against those guys from short-season on. Greg Allen, we played summer ball together and we're actually working out together right now down in San Diego. So I'm most familiar with him. And a couple other guys, I've played with. Eric Haase. I don't really know too many guys. I've played against them. I don't know them on a personal level. But I'm excited to get to know these guys, because playing against them the past few years, it's always been a dogfight and they seem like a lot of hard-nosed grinders. Have you had a chance to talk with Terry Francona?

I have, yeah. He gave me a call after the trade and we exchanged some words and he welcomed me to the club and is excited to get going.

Was the message from the club that there will be an opportunity to seize playing time in the outfield?

Yeah, I think there's going to be an opportunity to win a job there. Ultimately, if you can play at that level, they're going to find a spot for you. Someone's going to find you and give you an opportunity. There are always people watching, (which is why) I got traded over to the Indians. If you can play baseball, you're going to find a place to play and I think there's some opportunity here.

Trevor Bauer wears No. 47, the number you wore with the Pirates. Is a new number on your horizon?

Yeah. I wasn't super stoked about 47. That was something they gave me. We'll see what happens. I'm not too picky. We'll see what happens.

Did family members want to mention Al once you were traded to Cleveland?

Yeah, it's funny, every time I go play on the East Coast, there are always a couple fans who come up and ask me if I'm related to Al. And I get to tell them a story and they share their story, so it's pretty cool. It is a weird little thing that he played for the Indians and then ended with the Pirates and I'm kind of doing the reverse order. There have been a couple people who have mentioned it. I think it's pretty cool. Maybe some of the Indians fans can share their stories about Al with me.

When you were growing up, did you hear about his career much?

It was here and there. As I got older, in college and then finally in pro ball, I started noticing it a lot more and realizing how impressive it is that he was in the big leagues and got to play for a while. It was more later in my career when I noticed it, but it's always cool having family members who have made it.

You never met?

No, we didn't. He passed away (Dec. 28, 2017). I never got to meet him. I want to say he's actually my third cousin. He was my grandpa's cousin. That makes him my third cousin, I believe. I think I've done the math a couple times, but I've gotten it confused. (They actually would seem to be first cousins twice removed, though this is, admittedly, a confusing task to complete.) I didn't get to meet him; I've just heard stories about him.

Was one of those stories his famous catch at Fenway?

Yeah. I've heard that one a bunch of times. One of the greatest catches never seen, people have told me. When Torii Hunter did it with the Tigers in that playoff game (in 2013), that's when it really started buzzing and people started telling me about that. I thought that was pretty cool.

Rosenthal: Dodgers in position to think big on trades; the Bumgarner dilemma; inside Mets-Mariners deal; more notes

By Ken Rosenthal 7h ago 1

A simple glance at the Dodgers' depth chart offers insight into how the two-time defending National League champions can trade from strength:

Starting pitchers

Clayton Kershaw
Walker Buehler
Rich Hill
Hyun-Jin Ryu
Alex Wood
Kenta Maeda
Ross Stripling
Julio Urías
Caleb Ferguson
Dennis Santana
Outfielders

Cody Bellinger (when Max Muncy is at first)

Yasiel Puig
Joc Pederson
Matt Kemp
Alex Verdugo
Andrew Toles
Too many players. Not enough spots.

The Dodgers cannot ask established starting pitchers to open the season in the bullpen. Nor can they ask Verdugo to begin another season in the minors when he already has produced an .842 OPS in 874 plate appearances at Triple A.

Trades not only are likely, but also necessary. Three arbitration-eligible players are virtually certain to be discussed – Puig, who is projected to earn \$11.3 million in his final season before free agency, according to [MLBTradeRumors.com](#); Wood, who is projected to earn \$9 million; and Pederson, who is projected to earn \$4.3 million. But the Dodgers are in position to trade younger, more affordable players, too.

The team needs a catcher to pair with Austin Barnes, whom club officials still like even though his OPS in a part-time role dropped from .895 in 2017 to .619 last season. The Dodgers' preference – as they develop two of the game's top catching prospects, Keibert Ruiz and Will Smith – is a part-timer who would be under short-term control, according to major-league sources.

Yan Gomes, who went from the Indians to the Nationals, fit neither description – he was an All-Star last season and is under club control through 2021. The Dodgers, though, gladly would make an exception for the biggest catching prize on the trade market, Marlins All-Star J.T. Realmuto. For two years of Realmuto, Los Angeles could start a package with Ruiz or Smith, and add more.

Elsewhere, Dodgers president of baseball operations Andrew Friedman will do what he always does – seek elite talent, even if it's an area of surplus.

The Dodgers do not need to upgrade their starting pitching – their starters last season struck out 25.7 percent of their batters faced, the highest single-season rate of any NL rotation in the past decade, and also led the NL in walk rate, WHIP and opponents' OPS.

Still, just for the sake of discussion, what if the Dodgers could package Verdugo, one of their young catchers and a pitching prospect for the Indians' Corey Kluber or Trevor Bauer? The teams could debate the particulars, but such a trade would make the Dodgers' rotation even better while enabling the Indians to address multiple needs.

The outfield presents similar opportunity. The awarding of a \$350 million contract to free agent Bryce Harper certainly would be out of character for Friedman (and frankly, any executive). But what if the Dodgers could land Harper on a short-term, high-dollar deal – say, four years, \$150 million – with opt-outs after years one and two?

Such a contract would be problematic from a luxury-tax perspective, and the Los Angeles Times reported last month that the Dodgers plan to stay under the threshold for at least the next four seasons, according to a document prepared for potential investors. A self-imposed cap, however, would rightly infuriate fans, particularly at a time when money is flowing into the sport from a variety of outside sources. Teams in 2018 received a one-time payment of \$50 million from baseball's sale of BAMTECH to Disney, and also will benefit from new national television, streaming, and gaming contracts.

The Dodgers maneuvered below the threshold last season, reducing their penalty rate to the minimum 20 percent for every dollar they spend above in '19. In addition, a number of the team's bigger contracts will expire after this season, further improving the club's financial standing.

From the depth of their major-league roster to the strength of their farm system to the flexibility of their payroll, the Dodgers are in position to think big this winter.

The Giants' dilemma on Bumgarner

As Eno Sarris recently pointed out, left-hander Madison Bumgarner's trade value is down due to his declining movement, velocity and command.

The Giants, though, still might be motivated to move Bumgarner sooner rather than later. A trade partner might give more for Bumgarner this winter than at the non-waiver deadline, knowing it would maintain the ability to make the pitcher a qualifying offer when he becomes a free agent at the end of the season.

A player traded during the season cannot receive a qualifying offer, eliminating any chance of his new team getting a compensatory draft pick. A seller's leverage increases in July when no free-agent alternatives are available, but the Giants would gain that benefit only if Bumgarner returned to form.

Bumgarner, 29, might not merit a QO if his decline continued, but at the moment the possibility still exists for a team seeking to acquire him. The return for one year of a diminished Bumgarner still might not be what the Giants and their fans would want for such an accomplished pitcher. But at least the team would avoid the risk of Bumgarner's market completely collapsing.

The questions remain: Are the Giants willing to absorb the public-relations hit they would suffer if they traded Bumgarner without giving him a chance to bounce back and restore his value? Would they allow new president of baseball operations Farhan Zaidi to make such a move for prospects who might not be highly regarded, but he perceived as worthy gambles?

A big positive for Mets: keeping McNeil

One rival executive who likes the Mariners' return in the Robinson Canó-Edwin Diaz blockbuster said it would have been even better if the M's had landed Mets second baseman Jeff McNeil, who in the exec's opinion could have been another Mitch Haniger-like steal for Seattle.

McNeil, 26, had an impressive debut with the Mets last season, producing an .852 OPS in 248 plate appearances. His offensive profile would appear difficult to sustain – he swung at 56 percent of the pitches he saw, nearly 10 percent above the league average, and his walk rate was low even in the minors. But the executive believes McNeil possesses “freaky” contact skills that will enable him to be an everyday second baseman on a championship club.

“It's not that he's hacking,” the executive said. “When he makes a decision to swing, it's a plus.”

The exec's praise for McNeil again raises the question of why the Mets felt it necessary to acquire Canó, even if their willingness to take on \$63 million of his remaining \$120 million helped them access Diaz.

The addition of Canó likely will push McNeil, who also bats left-handed, into a super-utility role, improving the Mets' depth. McNeil plays mostly second and third, but in the minors he also appeared in a handful of games at first and in the outfield.

Inside the Mets' perspective...

As I wrote on Friday, it will be years before we can accurately assess the Mets-Mariners blockbuster, even though I didn't particularly agree with the Mets' logic in making the deal.

But an alternate view, from the Mets' viewpoint, is that they will not give up as much as some perceive in parting with outfielder Jarred Kelenic, right-hander Justin Dunn, right-hander Gerson Bautista, outfielder Jay Bruce and reliever Anthony Swarzak for Diaz and Canó.

While Kelenic, the sixth overall pick in the 2018 draft, might haunt the Mets, he is probably three years away from the majors. Some in the industry view Dunn as nothing special, a back-end starter or reliever. Bautista is a big arm who might never throw enough strikes to succeed, and the Mets wanted to escape the contracts of Bruce and Swarzak.

... and the Mariners'

Shortly after learning of the Mariners' return for Canó and Diaz and their acquisition of catcher Omar Narváez from the White Sox for reliever Álex Colomé, a rival executive texted with some general thoughts on the M's.

"Worth noting that they are getting a lot of young major-league talent or near-ready major-league talent back in most of their deals (NYM trade aside).

"Even the Colomé deal, they got a 27-year-old catcher coming off of a .794 OPS season and has a major-league career line of .274/.366/.379 . . . that's pretty good!"

Narváez, however, is considered below-average defensively, strictly a backup. Some of the other players the Mariners acquired – outfielder Mallex Smith in the Mike Zunino deal, lefty Justus Sheffield and righty Erik Swanson in the James Paxton trade – stand to make a bigger impact. And the M's are expected to add at least one more, shortstop J.P. Crawford, in a pending move that will send shortstop Jean Segura to the Phillies.

"I actually think this run of transactions deserves some extra praise because they are timing up a lot of young pieces and giving them a chance to grow together, unlike getting returns that are spread all over a system and aren't synched up," the executive said. "That's not easy (to do)."

Others in the industry are not as impressed by the Mariners' overhaul, but another executive added, "I think they feel like by 2021 they can be really good. Lots of money will be off the books by then. And they'll have higher draft picks the next few years."

Canó, Markakis and the impact of PEDs

Under terms of the trade, the Mets will pay Canó a net amount of more than \$12 million annually over the next five seasons. If he were a free agent, he might have received even more per year over a shorter term, helping his appeal to New York.

Which brings us to outfielder Nick Markakis, a current free agent who broke into the majors one year after Canó and has shown comparable durability and consistency if not as much as offensive prowess.

Since 2006, Markakis leads the majors with 2,001 games played, while Canó is second at 1,946. Markakis' career OPS, when adjusted for park and league factors, is 10 percent above the league, while Canó's is 27 percent above.

Markakis at 35 might be less valuable than Canó is at 36, but there is a major difference between the two. Canó's 80-game suspension for violating baseball's drug policy last season casts doubt about his entire career, while Markakis has been an outspoken critic of those who use performance-enhancing drugs.

In a 2013 interview with The Athletic's Dan Connolly, then with The (Baltimore) Sun, Markakis advocated for a five-year suspension for a first-time offender and said he would even support a lifetime ban.

"These guys that are doing performance-enhancing drugs are taking away from a lot of other people that are doing it the right way," Markakis said. "They are taking opportunities away and they are basically stealing. Stealing money away from owners because they are basically purchasing damaged goods.

"It's not a good situation all around. And all of us that have done it the right way, we are going to suffer and have to answer questions about this for a while now. I think that puts us in a bad situation that we don't deserve to be in."

Markakis has been rewarded handsomely for his outstanding career, earning a total of \$110.2 million, according to baseball-reference.com. Still, it would not be unreasonable for him to wonder how different things might have been if he had used PEDs. Cano already has earned \$177.87 million, with another \$120 million to come.

Around the horn

Information according to major-league sources:

*Before hiring Zaidi, Pirates general manager Neal Huntington was one of the executives the Giants strongly considered to be their president of baseball operations.

Huntington would have had the inside track on the job if he had chosen to pursue it, but ultimately declined to push for the opportunity. Family and geography were factors, but his desire to complete unfinished business with the Pirates carried greater weight.

Huntington, the Pirates' GM since September 2007, is under contract through '21. The Pirates have gone three straight years without reaching the postseason after three straight appearances from '13 to '15.

*It's no secret the Phillies' front office is familiar with free agent Manny Machado – president of baseball operations Andy MacPhail, general manager Matt Klentak, assistant GM Ned Rice all were with the Orioles during Machado's early years in the Baltimore organization.

Klentak also has a past connection to Mariners shortstop Jean Segura, whom the Phillies are on the verge of acquiring. The two were together briefly with the Angels after Klentak joined that club, becoming Jerry Dipoto's assistant GM following the 2011 season.

Segura at that time was a prospect, and the Angels traded him to the Brewers in a package for Zack Greinke the next July. Dipoto, after later moving to the Mariners, acquired Segura from the D-Backs in November 2016, then signed him to a five-year, \$70 million extension in June 2017.

The Phillies still will try to sign Machado to play third if they complete their deal for Segura to play short, according to NBCSPHilly.com.

*Free-agent left-hander Dallas Keuchel certainly would be a good fit for Cincinnati's Great American Ballpark, which generally is one of the leading home-run parks in the majors when comparing the rate of stats at home to the rate on the road.

Keuchel's 59.6 percent groundball rate over his seven seasons ranks first in the majors among pitchers with a minimum of 1,000 innings. But the Reds, perhaps fearing Keuchel will prefer a contender and/or want a contract beyond their comfort level, continue to show interest a number of other starting pitchers in both trade and free agency, including free-agent lefty, J.A. Happ.