



Press Clips

(March 5, 2018)

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FROM THE OC REGISTER**Andrew Bailey begins the next chapter of his baseball career in Angels' video room**

By J.P. HOORNSTRA

TEMPE, Ariz. — There are two sets of Angels uniforms. One is the polyester-and-stirruped variety that comes with a number on the back, the kind worn by players and coaches. Everyone else gets a red company polo to pair with jeans or slacks of their choosing.

On the second day of his new job, Andrew Bailey went with the blue jeans.

Bailey, 33, spent most of last year unsuccessfully trying to surmount an injury to his right (pitching) shoulder. He made four appearances out of the Angels' bullpen – three in April, one in August, with a lot of rehab work in between. After the last game, a scoreless one-inning appearance in Washington D.C., Bailey could see the end coming.

"I worked so hard to get back, and just different parts of the body aren't working the way they used to," Bailey said Sunday. "That's part of it. I was very fortunate to play so long and have the career I did. I think at that point I was like, 'I need to do some thinking.' And this offseason just kind of put the icing on the cake with not being able to physically get ready."

Bailey said he neither pursued nor received any offers to pitch in 2018. Instead, he accepted an offer from Angels general manager Billy Eppler to become the team's video replay coordinator.

Bailey will spend the better part of three hours a day, 162 days of the year, inside the Angels' video room scanning for potential challenges. In between, he'll help with advance scouting and other information-gathering duties.

It's not a typical job for someone who last appeared on a major league mound months ago, who reported a seven-figure athlete's salary on his most recent tax form. While lacking glamour, the challenge sounded invigorating to Bailey, who has a degree in finance from Wagner College.

Bailey felt encouraged after speaking with former teammate Scott Atchison, the Cleveland Indians' bullpen coach. Before Atchison was promoted to his current post, he spent two years as the Indians' advance coach and staff assistant – a job similar to Bailey's – after retiring as a pitcher in 2015.

"I sought out his advice and talked to some people in the game I respect, and are well-respected," Bailey said. "This opportunity doesn't come often. It's something I didn't want to pass up for sure."

LIKE GRANDFATHER, LIKE GRANDSON

Nolan Fontana is a relatively new name to Angels fans. The 26-year-old infielder debuted last May and got into 12 games, his first MLB experience. This is his second year in the Angels' major-league camp. He will most likely begin the season at Triple-A Salt Lake.

Including his time in the Houston Astros organization, Fontana has now taken part in four big-league camps. On Saturday, he chuckled at the idea that he's a "grizzled veteran," though his major-league camp experience even predates his time as an Astro.

Fontana's maternal grandfather is the former major league pitcher Lew Burdette. From 1953-63, Burdette won 179 games and helped the Milwaukee Braves win the 1957 World Series. Fontana said that when was growing up in Florida, Burdette had free rein in the Braves' spring camp.

"When we were in Orlando for spring training, he would walk me into Bobby Cox's office, talk to him," Fontana recalled. "Chipper Jones, Andruw Jones, Marcus Giles, Mike Hampton, (Tom) Glavine, (John) Smoltz, (Greg) Maddux – all those guys, got to meet 'em all. It was pretty cool not just to hear from him but show me when he goes into a clubhouse."

Burdette died in 2007. Fontana was 15 at the time, and his interest in baseball was catalyzed by his grandfather.

"He taught me a lot about the game, but even more so about life," Fontana said. "He was awesome. Funny man. Hysterical man."

OHTANI UPDATE

Shohei Ohtani's next appearance as a pitcher will be Friday, Manager Mike Scioscia said.

The Angels have an exhibition "B" game that day against the Toros de Tijuana, the defending Mexican League champions, at Tempe Diablo Stadium. They will also play a Cactus League game against the Chicago Cubs in Mesa. Scioscia said that it hasn't been determined which game Ohtani will start.

Ohtani's next bullpen session will be Wednesday. He will be the designated hitter Monday in the Angels' game against the Cincinnati Reds.

ALSO

Jefry Marte will be held out of game action "for the next couple days" after his groin tightened up in the first inning of Saturday's game against the Seattle Mariners. "It doesn't look like it's anything that would linger," Scioscia said.

Jabari Blash, Justin Upton homer as Angels edge Rockies

By J.P. HOORNSTRA

THE GAME: Jabari Blash and Justin Upton hit home runs as the Angels beat the Colorado Rockies 7-6 on Sunday afternoon in front of an announced crowd of 7,243 at Tempe Diablo Stadium.

PITCHING REPORT: Right-hander Matt Shoemaker allowed three runs over 2-1/3 innings in his second Cactus League start. ... Shoemaker allowed back-to-back home runs to a pair of Rockies prospects, Brendan

Rogers and Garrett Hampson, in the second inning. ... Rogers' home run, a two-run shot, came immediately after a wild pitch. ... Prospect Jaime Barria threw two innings, allowing no hits, one run, and striking out three. ... Left-hander Jose Alvarez threw a scoreless inning.

HITTING REPORT: Mike Trout, hitless in eight Cactus League plate appearances, was credited with an RBI and scored a run in the third inning. Trout hit a routine ground ball that Rockies shortstop Garrett Hampson couldn't handle, allowing Chris Carter (2 for 2, double) to score from third base. ... The next batter, Justin Upton, drove in Trout with a double. ... Upton (2 for 3) hit his first Cactus League home run against Scott Oberg in the fifth inning, a two-run shot. ... A bases-clearing triple by Rene Rivera scored two runs in the sixth inning, giving the Angels a 6-5 lead. ... Jabari Blash extended the lead to 7-5 with a solo home run to left field in the seventh inning.

DEFENSE REPORT: With Nolan Arenado on third base and David Dahl on first, the Rockies scored on a double-steal attempt in the second inning. Catcher Rene Rivera threw to second base to catch Dahl in a rundown. Dahl stayed in no-man's land long enough to Arenado to score without a slide. ... Andrelton Simmons and Ian Kinsler turned a double play in the first inning on an Ian Desmond grounder.

UP NEXT: Angels LHP Andrew Heaney is scheduled to start against the Cincinnati Reds (RHP Sal Romano) on Monday at noon (Fox Sports West; 830-AM) in Goodyear, Ariz.

FROM THE LOS ANGELES TIMES

Andrelton Simmons looks to build on last year's offense

By JEFF MILLER

He impressed teammates, opponents and even the sportswriters who put him among the top 10 in American League most-valuable-player voting.

Still, after all that, after another season of defensive excellence wrapped this time around a summer of offensive splendor, Andrelton Simmons had one more person left to impress.

"I must have done something right," the Angels shortstop said. "I was telling my wife over the winter, 'See, I told you I do stuff right.' "

Simmons did a lot of stuff right in 2017, his MVP candidacy gaining momentum as the season stretched longer, his name still among the favorites deep into September, even while the Angels faded. Eventually, the award went to second baseman Jose Altuve, the Houston Astros claiming most everything that mattered in the deciding weeks of last season.

Simmons, though, still ended up eighth in the voting, an impressive showing considering the Angels had a losing record and that teammate Mike Trout annually monopolizes all MVP talk related to the team. Trout was fourth last season, and finishing on the same list as the center fielder is never a bad place to be.

"I'm not sure exactly how the voting works, but most valuable player?" Simmons said. "That's a pretty special honor. To finish among guys you admire, that's really cool."

Long recognized for his defense, Simmons emerged from his own deep shadow, one slashing cut at a time.

He set career highs for hits, doubles, runs batted in, slugging percentage and on-base-plus-slugging percentage. He walked more than before and stole more bases, becoming a threat when swinging, taking and running.

"He isn't a Trout or anything like that with his offensive numbers," new Angels second baseman Ian Kinsler said. "But if you look at everything he does and does so well, he should be in that conversation." Simmons was one of the reasons the Angels did the almost incomprehensible. They remained in playoff contention far longer than common sense would have dictated, particularly as an injured Trout missed all of June and half of July.

One of the brightest highlights for Simmons came in late August, on a night when the Angels were honoring Vladimir Guerrero, a man who built his Hall of Fame career on swings that greatly altered games.

Down 6-1 to Houston, the Angels came all the way back on the eventual World Series winners, claiming the lead and ultimately a 7-6 win on a three-run, eighth-inning home run by Simmons.

"There were stretches where I was like, 'OK, put me out there with the game on the line,' " Simmons said. "You always want to be that guy. But there are times where you *know* you're going to come through. 'Just get me up there and we're winning.' "

In that game, Simmons batted fifth in a lineup that at times genuinely labored, the Angels finishing 22nd in baseball in runs.

Sunday, in an exhibition game against Colorado at Tempe Diablo Stadium, he batted seventh and, if things follow the plan the Angels envision this season, Simmons might rarely emerge from the bottom third of the order.

Manager Mike Scioscia never has hesitated shuffling his hitters, Simmons, for one, batting in each of the top seven positions at times in 2017.

But with the offseason additions of Kinsler and Zack Cozart, Simmons and his newly celebrated offensive abilities appear destined for a place not normally held for MVP candidates.

"The lineup becomes extremely deep," Kinsler said. "There's really no weak spots, no breaks. Anytime you can turn a lineup over quickly with some runs scoring at the bottom, it's beneficial.

"If we can get Trout as many at-bats as we can, get [Albert] Pujols and Justin [Upton] up there as often as possible, it's very dangerous. We have some good complementary pieces to the middle of that order."

All this and Simmons remains just one rabbit short of being a magician with his glove. He just led baseball in defensive runs saved and defensive WAR, capping the year with his third career Gold Glove.

A genuine softy who wants to one day give back to the kids in his native Curacao — "That's what fills my heart" — Simmons is no less sweet while patrolling shortstop.

Already in drills, Kinsler has seen the potential that exists between the two. The potential for the routine and the dramatic.

"The stuff that he does is practical," Kinsler said. "He's not doing it for show. He's just extremely blessed. He has the ability to do things with his body that most people can't."

It's not surprising that run prevention would come so naturally to Simmons. The idea was ingrained in him in as a kid. See, growing up, he also pitched, his fastball reaching the mid-90s.

After Atlanta took him in the second round of the 2010 draft, the Braves told Simmons they wanted him to keep pitching. The two sides finally agreed that he could play shortstop as well.

"I'm sure everyone still sees me more as a defensive guy," Simmons said. "I think I'm still a defensive guy with something to prove. Not everybody can be Mike Trout, right? But we can all move toward that level."

Simmons moved toward that level last season. And he has the 10-top list to prove it.

Angels reliever Jim Johnson hopes to turn things around

By JEFF MILLER

Things did not go well for him in Oakland.

Things really did not go well for him in Los Angeles.

In baseball, you get three strikes, and Jim Johnson hopes he can turn this 0-2 count into a happy ending.

"Third time in California's a charm, right?" the reliever said. "I guess we'll see."

The Angels acquired Johnson, a former All-Star closer, from Atlanta in November. He secured a late victory even before he was issued his new red jersey. In the deal, the Angels also received \$1.21 million in international bonus pool money, cash the team then used as part of its successful courting of Shohei Ohtani barely a week later.

In that sense, Johnson's tenure with the Angels already has produced one very positive result, regardless of what else he provides this season.

Locally, Johnson is probably best remembered for what he couldn't do for the Dodgers, specifically get the ninth inning to Kenley Jansen.

At the nonwaiver trade deadline in 2015, the right-hander joined the Dodgers as part of a 13-player deal, to become a primary setup man.

"It just never synched up," Johnson, 34, said. "I was still throwing the ball hard. I don't know why that was."

He gave up runs in each of his first four Dodgers appearances, including eight in a particularly brutal 13-6 loss at Pittsburgh.

In 23 games, Johnson went 0-3 with a 10.13 ERA and a 2.04 WHIP.

"When you're traded to a team during a season that's trying to make a run, you know, it's human nature to put that extra pressure on yourself," Johnson said. "It's, 'Hey, I gotta help these guys out,' rather than just getting in that flow."

Those Dodgers eventually made the playoffs, losing in the National League division series to the New York Mets. Johnson, though, didn't pitch after September and was finally released.

"It's a hard thing to explain to someone who hasn't been in that situation," he said. "You're brought in to do a job and you're trying your best and it's just not working out."

The season before, Johnson spent four months with the A's, struggling so badly -- 7.14 ERA in 38 games - that he was released in August.

Around those low points, he saved 51 and 50 games in back-to-back seasons with Baltimore, and had 20 saves and a 3.06 ERA with the Braves in 2016.

As an Angel, he is part of a spring training bullpen that has not yet begun to sort itself out; this team quite possibly entering a season in which it could use multiple relievers to close games.

"Hopefully, I can be a stabilizing force here," Johnson said. "They have the lineup, the defense up the middle ... there are a lot of positives for me."

Bailey reports to camp in new role

Andrew Bailey's playing career ended officially last week. His new career began this weekend. "Having an impact on the game directly is going to be fun," the former reliever said. "Having this opportunity, I'm very lucky."

Bailey, 33, reported to camp as the Angels' new instant replay coordinator/coaching assistant.

He appeared in 265 games over parts of eight seasons but was forced to retire because of persistent shoulder problems.

Bailey pitched in 16 games for the Angels the past two seasons, his final appearance coming in August. He attempted to train over the winter but eventually had to accept his fate.

"Just different parts of the body aren't working like they used to," Bailey said. "It's part of it. I was very fortunate to play so long and have the career that I did."

Ohtani to start as designated hitter

Ohtani is scheduled to start as the Angels' designated hitter Monday when they travel to Goodyear to face Cincinnati. Manager Mike Scioscia said he'll hit in another game or two this week.

Ohtani's next appearance as a pitcher is set for Friday, either in a "B" game in Tempe, against the Tijuana Toros, a team from the Mexican League, or during the Angels' regular Cactus League game against the Chicago Cubs at Sloan Park in Mesa.

Marte to miss a couple of days

Jefry Marte is expected to miss a couple of days as a precaution after feeling tightness in his groin Saturday. ... David Eckstein, an Angel from 2001-04, is the latest guest instructor.

Justin Upton gets his first spring homer and Angels beat Rockies 7-6

By JEFF MILLER

The Angels beat Colorado 7-6 on Sunday at Tempe Diablo Stadium. The Angels are 5-5 in Cactus League play.

AT THE PLATE: Justin Upton had a two-run homer (his first of the spring) and an RBI double as the Angels came back from trailing at one point 5-0. Backup catcher Rene Rivera had a two-run triple. Jabari Blash also had his first home run. Chris Carter had two hits and scored two runs.

ON THE MOUND: Matt Shoemaker started and pitched 2 1/3 innings before being lifted. He gave up three runs and four hits. In the second inning, Shoemaker surrendered back-to-back homers to Brendan Rodgers and Garrett Hampson. Lefty reliever Ian Krol's rough spring continued when he gave up two runs and two hits while retiring two Rockies. If Krol opens the season in the minors, he can opt out of his contract and become a free agent on May 1. Jose Alvarez, who was the Angels' lone left-hander in the bullpen in 2017, followed Krol with a 1-2-3 inning. Jaime Barria pitched two scoreless innings, striking out three of the seven batters he faced. The right-hander is considered one of the organization's top prospects.

EXTRA BASES: For just the third game this spring, manager Mike Scioscia started most of his regulars. ... Starting catcher Martin Maldonado didn't play after appearing Saturday night in the Angels' game in Peoria.

UP NEXT: Angels vs. Cincinnati at 12:05 p.m. Monday at Goodyear Ballpark. TV: FS West; Radio: 830.

FROM THE ATHLETIC

Moura: Ohtani is getting more comfortable, both on the mound and in America

By Pedro Moura

PHOENIX — The fans were not there, and the nine men wearing Milwaukee uniforms Shohei Ohtani faced on Friday morning at Maryvale Baseball Park have registered about two seasons' worth of major-league plate appearances between them. He's 23, and a third of the Brewers B-team lineup he saw is younger than him.

But the manner in which Ohtani expelled those Brewers cannot be dismissed by mere inexperience. In his second start this spring, Ohtani struck out eight of 12 men, forcing many of them to look foolish. He spun sliders and chucked curveballs and swirled splitters, 52 pitches in all, his longest and most dominant start on American soil.

"I feel like I made a step forward since my last outing," he said through interpreter Ipppei Mizuhara. "I am more satisfied with this outing."

In that first game, against a better Brewers lineup, Ohtani did not demonstrate consistent command of his pitches. He surrendered several hard-hit drives. This time, he noted, he steadied himself on the strike zone. Some breaking balls were wild, but he typically threw a strike when he sought to, walking no one. He allowed only one line drive, off a first-pitch fastball, to top prospect Keston Hiura.

The three other hits the Brewers registered in Ohtani's 2 2/3 innings were on the ground, one a comebacker that he misdirected. His fastball most often clocked in at 93 mph. It reached as high as 96, similar to his first start. It still appeared flat, but he established it enough to buttress the rest of his repertoire.

"His curveball was good, don't get me wrong," catcher René Rivera said. "His splitter was good. But when you have those two pitches working, you can play with the other two, also. So that's we did."

Rivera described an occurrence he saw frequently: Right-handed hitters jumped back thinking one of Ohtani's sliders was beelining toward them, then grew frustrated when the pitch juttet back toward the plate for a called strike.

"He looked nasty today," Rivera said.

In between innings, Ohtani threw a ball against a bullpen wall to keep his arm warm. This was not a normal game, with more media members than fans in attendance, and the section behind home plate mostly occupied by Angels and Brewers executives. The Angels chose this setting to keep his pitch count in check, and they took advantage, rolling his second inning with two outs because he had already thrown 19 pitches.

His next start is more likely to come in a real Cactus League game. It will probably be on the road, again. Until then, he'll serve as the Angels' designated hitter a couple times, as soon as Sunday.

Ohtani said he has adjusted to the American style of spring training. The first week or so, he allowed, was a struggle. The days here are shorter, but there are far fewer days. He said he is now loving the daily practice, enjoying the frequent communication with teammates. He said he has even grown

comfortable living alone in his three-bedroom apartment, which he described as “kind of lonely” two weeks ago.

“Recently, it’s starting to feel like home now,” Ohtani said. “A little bit.”

Notes

Fox Sports West will no longer broadcast the Angels’ home games in Spanish this season, a club spokesperson confirmed. Instead, the network will use a simulcast of the AM-1330 radio broadcast. For the last seven seasons, the club had employed Amaury Pi-Gonzalez and José Mota as the Spanish-language play-by-play broadcaster and analyst for most home games. Mota continues to work as a pre- and post-game analyst in English on Fox Sports West. Fox Sports West officials did not reply to messages seeking comment. Disney purchased Fox Sports Regional Networks in December. Not many major-league teams regularly air full Spanish TV broadcasts.

FROM ANGELS.COM

Bailey retires, joins Angels' coaching staff

Right-handed reliever transitions to instant-replay coordinator

By Maria Guardado

TEMPE, Ariz. -- Andrew Bailey is back at Angels camp, but for the first time in his career, he's preparing for the season as a member of a Major League coaching staff, not a pitching staff.

After spending eight seasons as a right-handed reliever for the A's, Red Sox, Yankees, Phillies and Angels, Bailey announced his retirement last week and revealed that he'd be staying in Anaheim as the club's instant-replay coordinator and coaching assistant. He reported to Tempe on Saturday for his first day of work as a non-player and received a "crash course" on what his new role will entail this year.

"It's definitely weird," Bailey said Sunday. "I was fortunate to be able to play the game for a long time. Coming here is a little different, but it's nice to get that excitement again. It's just in a different form. I'm here to help the guys and do whatever I can do. I'm looking forward to a great season and starting a new chapter in my life, personally."

Among Bailey's responsibilities will be assisting with the Angels' replay systems during the regular season and helping to prepare advance scouting reports.

"Learning a new system and actually working with computers will be different," Bailey said. "But in terms of knowing the game, I feel like I have a good grasp on that."

A sixth-round Draft pick out of Wagner College in 2006, Bailey debuted with the A's in 2009 and quickly ascended into the closer role, earning an All-Star nod and Rookie of the Year honors after posting a 1.84 ERA with 26 saves over 83 1/3 innings. He spent two more years in Oakland before he was traded to the Red Sox, but his tenure in Boston was beset by injuries. In 2013, he underwent shoulder surgery to repair a torn capsule and damage in his labrum and rotator cuff.

The injury cost him two years, but Bailey made a brief return to the Majors in 2015 with the Yankees, where he met Billy Eppler, who is now the Angels' general manager. Eppler signed Bailey to a Minor League deal after the Phillies released him in 2016, and the veteran reliever earned a callup with the Angels that September, recording a 2.38 ERA in 11 1/3 innings.

The effective showing led the Angels to re-sign Bailey on a one-year, \$1 million deal, but his shoulder flared up again and landed him on the disabled list just one week into the 2017 season. Bailey spent four months rehabbing before returning to pitch a scoreless inning against the Nationals on Aug. 15. It proved to be the final Major League outing of his career, as he was subsequently shut down again with shoulder trouble.

"I worked so hard to get back, just different parts of the body aren't working the way they used to," Bailey said. "I think at that point, I was like, 'I need to do some thinking.' This offseason just kind of put the icing on the cake with just not being able to physically get ready."

After Eppler caught wind that Bailey was contemplating retirement, he called to offer him an opportunity to stay in baseball.

"I've known Andrew for a lot of years," Eppler said. "He's got a deep understanding of this game. A lot of baseball intellect, as well as just the character and the open-mindedness you're looking to put inside your culture. It was a very easy thought for me to have. It's something I knew in years past, that at some point we'd be working together on the non-playing side."

Bailey made only four appearances for the Angels last year, but he expects to log a full 162-game slate in 2018, watching the action from the video room along with catching and information coach Steve Soliz and senior Major League video coordinator Diego Lopez.

"It'll be fun traveling with the team, just in a different capacity," Bailey said. "But like I said, I'll still have my hand in the game. I'm very lucky."

Barria shows improvement in second outing

Angels right-hander throws two hitless innings of relief vs. Rockies

By Maria Guardado

TEMPE, Ariz. -- Jaime Barria enjoyed a sharp ascent through the Angels' farm system in 2017, rising from Class A Advanced Inland Empire to Triple-A Salt Lake and cementing his reputation as one of the most promising pitching prospects in the organization.

The Angels got a glimpse at Barria's potential on Sunday after the 21-year-old right-hander fired two hitless innings in the club's 7-6 win over the Rockies at Tempe Diablo Stadium.

Barria walked one and struck out three, including Ian Desmond and Nolan Arenado in the fifth inning, in his second outing of the spring for the Angels. It was an improvement from his Cactus League debut against the Padres on Feb. 26, when he gave up three runs on five hits over 1 2/3 innings and was charged with the loss.

"For a kid coming into his first camp, he's growing with every bullpen and keeps growing with every outing," manager Mike Scioscia said. "This was definitely his best outing so far. He's got a lot of talent, and I think our goal is to get him ready for the season. Hopefully he'll be on our depth chart at some point."

Shoemaker's day

Angels right-hander Matt Shoemaker gave up three runs on four hits -- including back-to-back home runs to Brendan Rodgers and Garrett Hampson in the second inning -- in 2 1/3 innings in his second start of the spring.

"Matt looked good," Scioscia said. "Outside of a couple counts that got away from him, I thought he changed speeds well. He really didn't have his split going, but he threw some good sliders and spotted his fastball well."

Up, up and away

Justin Upton collected his first home run of the spring on Sunday, hammering a two-run shot off Scott Oberg in the fifth inning. Upton, who added an RBI double in the third, is 3-for-7 with four RBIs in three games this spring.

The Ohtani brief

Shohei Ohtani took batting practice on Sunday and is slated to return to the Angels' lineup as the designated hitter on Monday against the Reds at Goodyear. Ohtani has batted in two Cactus League games, going 1-for-4 with two walks and an RBI.

Ohtani is scheduled to throw a bullpen session Wednesday before making his third start on the mound Friday. The Angels are still deciding whether to have Ohtani pitch in their Cactus League game against the Cubs in Mesa or in the club's "B" game against a Mexican League club at Tempe Diablo Stadium.

Camp battles

Jose Alvarez's chances of securing a spot in the Angels' bullpen looked pretty good over the winter, given his standing as the only left-handed reliever on the club's 40-man roster, but he's bolstered his case even further by pitching three scoreless innings to start the spring. He entered Sunday's game in the fourth inning and promptly retired all three batters he faced, striking out Rodgers swinging and inducing lineouts from Hampson and Mike Tauchman.

Ian Krol, who is in camp on a Minor League deal, could still challenge Alvarez for the left-handed spot, but he allowed two runs over two-thirds of an inning on Sunday and now has an 8.10 ERA over 3 1/3 innings in four Cactus League appearances this year.

Injury updates

Jefry Marte, who exited Saturday night's game with right groin tightness, will likely be kept out of action for the next couple days as a precautionary measure.

"It doesn't look like it's anything that would linger," Scioscia said. "But we want to make sure we err on the side of caution right now."

A corner infielder, Marte's playing time with the Angels appears quite limited this season given the presence of Zack Cozart at third base and Luis Valbuena and Albert Pujols at first, though Marte is a potential candidate for a bench job. The 26-year-old spent most of the 2017 season at Triple-A Salt Lake and batted just .173 with a .576 OPS in 45 games with the Angels.

Up next

Left-hander Andrew Heaney will make his second start of the spring on Monday, when the Angels head to Goodyear to face the Reds. Heaney pitched two scoreless innings in his Cactus League debut against the Indians on Feb. 28. First pitch is scheduled for 12:05 p.m. PT, and the game can be viewed on MLB.TV.

Maldonado aims to stay strong at plate in '18

Angels catcher experienced second-half slump last season

By Maria Guardado

TEMPE, Ariz. -- No player caught more games in the Majors last year than Martin Maldonado.

In his first full season as a starter, Maldonado appeared in 137 games behind the plate for the Angels, far surpassing his previous career high of 79. While his elite defense proved key for the Angels and netted him his first career Gold Glove Award in 2017, Maldonado admits that the increased workload took its toll on his offensive production as the season wore on. He posted a .539 OPS in the second half, down from .725 in the first half.

"I failed in the physical preparation during the season," Maldonado said in Spanish on Saturday. "It's something that I thought was going to be easier than what I experienced. But this year we're working hard to create a plan during the season that will keep me at the same level for the whole year."

Maldonado said he's spoken with head strength and conditioning coach Lee Flocchi about ways to adjust his in-season gym routine to prevent a similar offensive dropoff in 2018.

"I think the type of work I did in the gym during the season wasn't right for keeping me at the level I needed to be at physically," said Maldonado, who launched his first home run of the spring off Mariners right-hander Rob Whalen on Saturday night.

The addition of Rene Rivera could also help keep Maldonado fresher this season. Signed to a one-year, \$2.8 million contract in January, Rivera is expected to serve as Maldonado's backup, giving the Angels a defensively savvy veteran to help shoulder the catching workload.

"I think with Rene, there's no doubt that with his experience we can work him in to keep Martin a little fresher offensively," manager Mike Scioscia said. "But it still comes down to the defensive component that a catcher brings, and Martin had an unbelievable year last year. So I'm not going to arbitrarily say he won't catch as much. But I think there can be an opportunity maybe to give him those days off, which might help him on the offensive side. Defensively, he showed he was definitely capable to catch as many games as he did."

A longtime backup to All-Star Jonathan Lucroy in Milwaukee, Maldonado didn't get his first opportunity to start until the Angels acquired him in an offseason trade last winter. The 31-year-old quickly impressed the Angels with his defensive acumen, including his cannon-like throwing arm, pitch-framing skills and work with the club's pitching staff.

"He's engaged in the game," left-hander Tyler Skaggs said. "He's one of those guys where you can tell that he's going with you pitch by pitch. He wants to execute the pitch, number one. Number two, I don't even have to shake because he knows exactly what I want to throw. That just comes with relationship, that comes with being in tune with the pitcher and what he's got going that night."

Maldonado's talent was validated in November, when he won his first Gold Glove Award and unseated the Royals' Salvador Perez, who had won the award in four consecutive seasons in the American League.

"It was one of my goals at the beginning of the year," Maldonado said. "It was something that I wanted. I wanted to win it, just like I wanted to win the opportunity to play every day and show what I could do. It was something that I had been waiting for for many years."

Barria fires two scoreless in win

By Chad Thornburg

Fernando Tatis Jr., MLB Pipeline's No. 8 overall prospect, was an offensive catalyst for a split-squad Padres team against the White Sox on Sunday. Tatis turned in a 4-for-4 performance with a double and five RBIs.

"It's felt great, man," Tatis said. "I've been working hard, been working every day with my hitting coach [Mark McGwire]. It's paying off right now. They've been telling me to stay more consistent, be a little more quiet with my swing, staying through the ball. Same swing, just more control."

The 19-year-old shortstop, who is ranked as the Padres' No. 1 prospect, is competing in Major League camp for the first time this spring, before likely beginning the year with Class A Advanced Lake Elsinore or Double-A San Antonio. His looming arrival in the big leagues prompted the Padres to acquire Freddy Galvis this offseason as a one-year stopgap with Tatis potentially debuting in 2019.

Another Padres farmhand, left-hander Eric Lauer (San Diego's No. 13 prospect), also impressed by pitching two perfect frames with three strikeouts vs. Chicago.

Below is a look at how the rest of the game's biggest prospects performed on Sunday:

- Rockies top prospect Brendan Rodgers (No. 14 overall) clubbed a two-run homer in Colorado's game against the Angels. Rodgers, the third overall Draft selection by the Rockies in 2015, hit .336 with 18 home runs between Class A Advanced Lancaster and Double-A Hartford last season.
- A's No. 3 prospect (No. 66 overall) Franklin Barreto batted leadoff and homered in the club's matchup against the Padres. Barreto drove in two runs with his long ball in the third inning. The 22-year-old infielder made his Major League debut in 2017 and is expected to begin the 2018 season at Triple-A Nashville.
- Mariners' No. 16 prospect Mike Ford helped propel the Mariners to victory against the Rangers, driving in the go-ahead runs with a pinch-hit homer. With his three-run blast, Ford, who hit a career-high 20 homers last season, gave Seattle the lead in the sixth inning of its 10-7 victory.

The organization's No. 17 prospect, outfielder Ian Miller, also contributed to the victory, driving in three runs with a two-RBI single and a sacrifice fly. Miller was the Mariners' Minor League Hitter of the Year last year, splitting his time between Double-A Arkansas and Triple-A Tacoma and is competing for the club's fourth outfielder job this spring.

- Giants No. 3 prospect Steven Duggar homered in his only at-bat against the Dodgers, driving a fly ball to right-center field vs. Los Angeles starter Kenta Maeda. The rookie center fielder has also been getting some extra instruction from veteran Pablo Sandoval while in camp.

"He's young, but he's smart," Sandoval said. "He likes to do the things that will make him better."

- The Cardinals' 4-1 win over the Astros on Sunday was sparked by two of the club's up-and-coming prospects -- outfielder Harrison Bader (No. 5) and third baseman Yairo Munoz (No. 12). Both players went 2-for-4, while Bader drove in a run and Munoz hit a double.
- Angels No. 7 prospect Jaime Barria earned the win for his club with two scoreless innings against the Rockies. Barria struck out three batters and walked one without allowing a hit in the appearance, his

second of the spring. The 21-year-old righty is making a push to join the Angels in the big leagues in 2018.

- Mets No. 24 prospect P.J. Conlon wrapped up New York's game against the Nationals by pitching the final three innings, allowing just one hit and a walk with two strikeouts. Conlon posted a 3.38 ERA through 28 games (22 starts) with Double-A Binghamton last season.

FROM MLB.COM

The most unlikely World Series runs in MLB history and the teams that could match them in 2018

By Chris Landers

Each spring, we think we have a solid idea of the Major League landscape -- which teams are contending and which are rebuilding. And then the season rolls around, and we're reminded of just how little we know: The light-hitting Royals win the 2015 World Series; the Twins go from 102 losses to the 2017 AL Wild Card Game.

As long as baseball remains wonderfully weird, there will always be teams that buck their preseason predictions. So, while everyone's 0-0 and hope springs eternal, let's look at the most improbable Cinderella stories in baseball history -- and a few teams that could write their own in 2018.

The 1969 Mets

The Amazins were entering their eighth year of existence, and the previous seven had not been kind: New York had lost fewer than 100 games just twice, held the record for most losses in a season and had never finished better than ninth in the National League. There wasn't much reason to think that would change in 1969. There were no notable offseason additions, and the team stumbled to an 18-23 record out of the gate.

And then, out of nowhere, New York caught fire, going 82-39 the rest of the way and lapping the Cubs in the NL East -- with some help from a well-placed black cat. From there, they swept the Braves in the first-ever NLCS and topped the O's in the World Series.

What made those Miracle Mets so good? Credit the kids: A pitching staff featuring Tom Seaver, Jerry Koosman, Gary Gentry and Nolan Ryan -- all age 26 or younger -- posted the third-lowest ERA in baseball, carrying a largely punchless offense.

The 2018 Version: Phillies

Like those 1960s Mets, the Phillies struggled last year, finishing last in the NL East at 66-96. Also like those Mets, inexperience had a lot to do with it: Philadelphia was the youngest team in the Majors, with not a single everyday player in his 30s.

Aaron Nola might not be the next Seaver, but he and Jerad Eickhoff could be in store for big years, and Vince Velasquez isn't too far removed from putting together historically awesome starts. Oh, and the team added Pat Neshek and Tommy Hunter to the bullpen this winter -- and is reportedly interested in Jake Arrieta, Lance Lynn and Alex Cobb:

@jonmorosi

Sources: #Phillies have entertained possibility of signing *two* of the remaining free agent starters. While not likely to occur, the situation is financially plausible. At present, Philly has lowest payroll commitment of any @MLB team for 2018. @MLBNetwork

The 1987 Twins

Only two Twins starters -- AL Cy Young candidate Frank Viola and Bert Blyleven -- boasted an ERA of 4 or lower. The team's closer, Jeff Reardon, gave up 14 homers in 80 innings and blew 10 saves. In short, pitching was not their calling card. So how did they shock the baseball world and win the '87 World Series? Dingers. Lots and lots of dingers.

Seven different Minnesota regulars finished with double-digit homers -- a rarity in the pitching-friendly '80s -- and the Twins finished with the fifth-highest slugging percentage in baseball. Then, when they found themselves facing elimination in Game 6 against the Cardinals, they rallied with a pair of home runs. First from Don Baylor ...

... and then from Kent Hrbek:

The 2018 Version: Athletics

The A's quietly had one of the most fearsome lineups in baseball in 2017, smacking 234 dingers -- fourth-most in the Majors, just seven back of the league-leading Yankees. The homers came from all directions: Khris "Khrush" Davis led the pack with 43, Ryon Healy hit 25 and Matt Olson was arguably the best player in baseball in the month of September.

Of course, there's a reason Oakland finished 75-87 -- the pitching wasn't quite there. But what it lacks in track record, the rotation makes up for in upside: Every member of the Athletics' projected 2018 rotation is 27 or younger, and if Sean Manaea, Jharel Cotton or Daniel Mengden's mustache make the leap, Oakland could be right in the mix.

The 2002 Angels

The Halos had experienced the postseason just three times in 41 years of existence, and none since 1986. Things had become so dire that even Hollywood was sending in divine intervention. The Angels wouldn't get a boost from any actual angels in 2002, but they did get something far better:

Angels

In a lot of ways, the '02 Angels were the precursor to those magical Royals teams of 2014 and 2015: Despite a homer-happy offensive environment, Mike Scioscia's club emphasized small-ball -- they struck out just 805 times that year, more than 100 times fewer than the next-closest club.

Garret Anderson, Troy Glaus and Darin Erstad led a balanced, seasoned lineup, Troy Percival anchored one of the best bullpens in baseball and Los Angeles finished 99-63 to nab the AL Wild Card spot. After dispatching the Yankees and Twins to reach the World Series, the team found itself trailing the Giants, 5-0, at home in Game 6. They needed a hero. They needed a Rally Monkey:

Monkey

Scott Spiezio's three-run homer capped a six-run rally, and the Angels won Game 7 the following night.

The 2018 Version: Giants

Looking for another veteran, contact-oriented team with a deep lineup and good pitching in a cavernous ballpark? The bottom fell out for San Francisco last year, but its 64-98 record was as much the result of injuries and tough luck as it was a reflection of its talent.

The trio of Madison Bumgarner, Johnny Cueto and Jeff Samardzija still has the potential to be awfully good atop the rotation. Evan Longoria plugs the hole at third base. The outfield has gone from relying on Jarrett Parker, Gorkys Hernandez and Denard Span to relying on Andrew McCutchen and the underrated Austin Jackson.

The Giants may not be flashy, but they should be competent all around, and their veterans aren't as old as you may think -- it's not crazy to think that they have some quality seasons left.

Who are MLB's top power-speed threats?

Statcast shows which hitters stand out in both power and speed entering 2018

By Chris Landers

When we think of power hitters, players like Aaron Judge and Giancarlo Stanton are the first ones who come to mind. When we think of speedsters, it's players like Billy Hamilton or Byron Buxton. But what about the players who can do both?

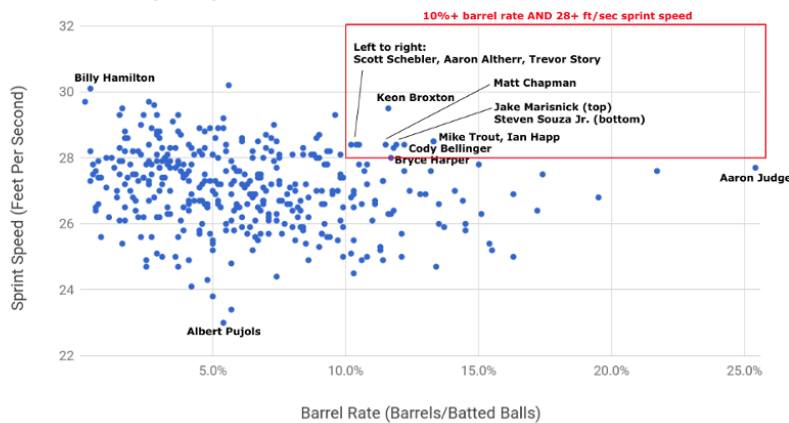
With a new season about to begin, Statcast™ can help identify the most dangerous power-speed combinations in the Major Leagues, using two categories specifically: Barrels and Sprint Speed. Barrels are the most dangerous type of contact, batted balls with optimal combinations of exit velocity and launch angle. Sprint Speed measures a player's speed in feet per second during his fastest one-second window on the basepaths. MLB average sprint speed is 27 ft/sec; 30 ft/sec or higher is elite.

Judge and Stanton led the Majors in barrels in 2017, with Judge crushing 86 and Stanton 76. Buxton and Hamilton led in average maximum-effort sprint speed, at 30.2 ft/sec and 30.1 ft/sec, respectively. But we want players who ranked highly in both categories, not just one.

For sprint speed, 28 ft/sec is a good threshold -- it's a full foot-per-second faster than the Major League average. With barrels, we can look at hitters both by total and rate (i.e. what percent of a player's batted balls are barrels?). As a total, 40 barrels is a good baseline -- only 38 hitters reached that mark in 2017. On a rate basis, a barrel-per-batted ball rate of 10 percent or higher is strong -- only 62 of the 383 hitters with at least 100 batted balls in 2017 are in that group.

Very few players hit the benchmarks in both categories. Only 11 Major Leaguers enter 2018 coming off a season with a barrel rate of at least 10 percent and an average sprint speed of at least 28 ft/sec. Only eight had at least 40 total barrels and a sprint speed of 28-plus ft/sec. Here they are.

Barrel Rate vs. Sprint Speed, 2017



Players with 10%+ barrel/batted ball rate and 28+ ft/sec sprint speed, 2017

Min. 100 batted balls and 10 max-effort runs

Mike Trout: 13.3% barrel rate, 28.5 ft/sec sprint speed

Trout is of course widely considered baseball's best player, so it's no surprise that he's on this list. He's averaged 33 home runs and 27 stolen bases over his six full seasons in the Majors; he had 33 homers and 22 steals in 2017. The Statcast™ data is right in line with his counting stats.

Ian Happ: 13.3% barrel rate, 28.5 ft/sec sprint speed

Happ was a highly touted prospect for the Cubs, and he flashed his talent in his debut season. The 23-year-old hit 24 homers, and his speed helped give him the defensive flexibility to handle all three outfield positions as well as second and third base.

Cody Bellinger: 12.2% barrel rate, 28.4 ft/sec sprint speed

Bellinger burst onto the scene with a National League rookie record 39 home runs, but he was more than just a power-hitting first baseman for the pennant-winning Dodgers. The 22-year-old has the speed to play an impressive defensive outfield -- he was worth three Outs Above Average, per Statcast™ -- and he chipped in 10 stolen bases, too.

Jake Marisnick: 11.9% barrel rate, 28.4 ft/sec sprint speed

Marisnick had a breakout year as a key reserve for the Astros in 2017, and Statcast™ suggests it was no fluke. The center fielder retooled his swing to drive the ball in the air more, he hit a career-high 16 homers and he was worth five Outs Above Average defensively.

Steven Souza Jr.: 11.8% barrel rate, 28.3 ft/sec sprint speed

Souza had a career year in 2017, mashing a career-high 30 homers, stealing a career-high 16 bases and playing an excellent right field. Souza's nine Outs Above Average tied him for 11th-best among all Major League outfielders. He could be a key contributor for a D-backs team seeking back-to-back playoff appearances.

Bryce Harper: 11.7% barrel rate, 28.0 ft/sec sprint speed

One of the faces of baseball and one of the game's generational talents of course belongs on this list. Before a knee injury knocked him out for most of the stretch run, he had returned to MVP-level form. Harper can do it all on the field.

Keon Broxton: 11.6% barrel rate, 29.5 ft/sec sprint speed

Broxton has his flaws as a hitter -- he struck out 175 times in 463 plate appearances in 2017 -- but the tools are undeniably there. He joined the 20-20 club with 20 home runs and 21 stolen bases and had superb range in center field, with his nine OAA tying him with Souza.

Matt Chapman: 11.5% barrel rate, 28.4 ft/sec sprint speed

The A's have an exciting young team loaded with talent, and they could have their third baseman of the future in Chapman. The 24-year-old has some work to do, but he hit 14 homers as a rookie, and even though his speed didn't always show up in the box score (zero steals), Statcast™ shows it was there.

Trevor Story: 10.5% barrel rate, 28.4 ft/sec sprint speed

Story had some growing pains in his sophomore season in 2017, leading the NL with 191 strikeouts, but he still hit 24 home runs for the Rockies, and he plays a fine shortstop. He had 11 Defensive Runs Saved last year, fourth-best at his position, which is a premium one.

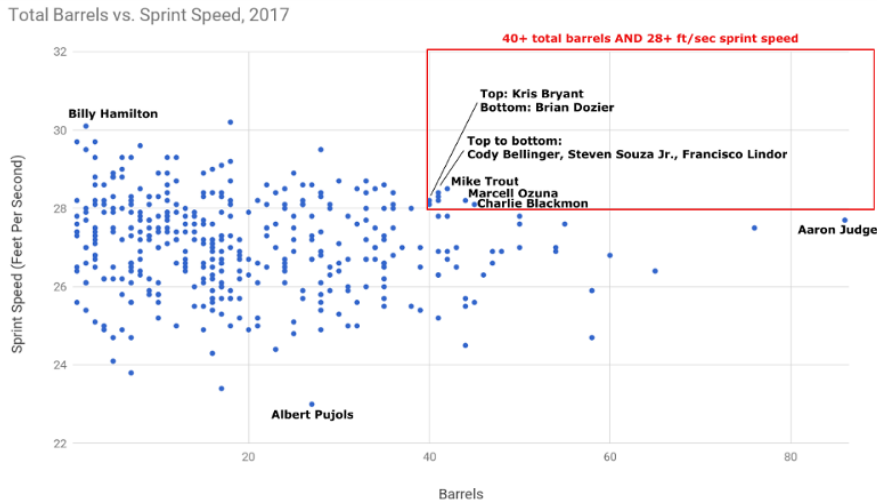
Aaron Altherr: 10.4% barrel rate, 28.4 ft/sec sprint speed

You might have overlooked Altherr's 2017, but he had a breakout season at the plate, which included 19 homers. If Altherr could harness the speed Statcast™ shows he has -- he wasn't great running the bases or in the outfield defensively -- the 27-year-old might be able to get even better in 2018.

Scott Schebler: 10.2% barrel rate, 28.4 ft/sec sprint speed

Schebler had a breakout of his own last season, his first as a big league regular. He mashed 30 homers, and even though he didn't really steal bases, advanced metrics graded him positively as a baserunner.

He was also worth two Outs Above Average as a right fielder in what was a surprisingly strong Reds outfield all around, even on top of Billy Hamilton.



That brings us to volume: Players who were among MLB's total barrel leaders as well as ranking highly in sprint speed. A few of these eight names are repeats from the first list, but there are also some new ones -- and they're some of the biggest names in baseball.

Players with 40+ total barrels and 28+ ft/sec sprint speed, 2017

Min. 100 batted balls and 10 max-effort runs

Trout: 42 barrels, 28.5 ft/sec sprint speed

Bellinger: 41 barrels, 28.4 ft/sec sprint speed

Souza: 41 barrels, 28.3 ft/sec sprint speed

Charlie Blackmon: 45 barrels, 28.1 ft/sec sprint speed

Blackmon just had maybe one of the best seasons ever for a leadoff hitter, and it was his power-speed combo that made him a perfect catalyst for the Rockies' lineup. He hit 37 homers and 14 triples, stole 14 bases, drove in 104 runs and scored 137 himself.

Marcell Ozuna: 44 barrels, 28.2 ft/sec sprint speed

Ozuna finally put it all together for an entire season. The talented 27-year-old crushed 37 homers with 124 RBIs, and he was solid in the outfield. He's not a basestealer, but he has the power and speed to be an impact player all around in St. Louis.

Francisco Lindor: 41 barrels, 28.2 ft/sec sprint speed

The Indians' smiling shortstop is one of the game's ascending young superstars. The 24-year-old hit 33 home runs (more than doubling his career high) and stole 15 bases in 2017, and he's extremely valuable as one of the game's best defenders at shortstop.

Kris Bryant: 40 barrels, 28.2 ft/sec sprint speed

The 2016 NL MVP put up awfully similar numbers in 2017. Bryant is exceptionally talented and exceptionally versatile. He helps anchor one of the best lineups in baseball and has the defensive range to play both an above-average third base and outfield.

Brian Dozier: 40 barrels, 28.1 ft/sec sprint speed

Dozier provides rare power for a second baseman -- he hit 34 homers in 2017, a year after hitting 42 -- and he has plenty of speed to go with it. In fact, Dozier has averaged 29 homers and 16 steals over his five full Major League seasons, reaching double digits in both categories every year. He also played Gold Glove defense at second in 2017.

Overreactions from first week of spring games

Hyperbole and panic abound in early days of camp

By Anthony Castrovince

We've had our first full week's worth of Grapefruit and Cactus League action. Starting pitchers are going just two or three innings and position players are taking two or three at-bats before the guys with the jersey numbers in the 70s and 80s take over.

What are we to take from these exhibition events?

Sweeping, clear-cut conclusions about the 2018 season, of course!

Here are some early spring overreactions that have developed, with some thoughts on whether they are justified or not (mostly not).

"Noah Syndergaard is throwing too hard!"

Thor's 2018 debut generated a ton of Twitter buzz because he hit triple-digits on the radar gun 11 times in two innings -- and then did a shirtless media session, just because. He toned things down considerably Saturday in his second start, so perhaps Mets fans can come off the ledge now (until the next problem in Panic City).

But because Syndergaard suffered a lat injury in 2017 -- after spending the previous winter eating bowls of venison in an effort to throw harder -- it was only natural for people to freak out a bit about him overdoing it on the spring stage. No starter throws quite like Syndergaard, whose slider is faster than the average fastball and whose changeup would qualify as a fastball for no small number of pitchers. This differentiation is both awe- and fear-inspiring.

Now, some evaluators will tell you that there is a free-and-easy means by which Syndergaard generates his extreme velocity. The counter, though, is that we know that 101-102 mph is his career max release speed, so anything at or approaching that reading would indicate max effort.

Oh, also, he pitches for the Mets, for whom the DL often reads like a roster. So it was good to see Syndergaard dial it back Saturday. He even wore a shirt for the interview this time!

Pretty much any assessment of Shohei Ohtani

The sheer number of reporters dispatched to Tempe to cover Ohtani's every inning, at-bat and utterance means we are bound to be barraged with analysis of his every inning, at-bat and utterance. Already, we had a Los Angeles Times headline -- "Uh-Ohtani: Angels' Shohei Ohtani doesn't impress in Spring Training debut" -- that got points for punmanship, but little else.

In recent days, the dispatches were breathless about Ohtani carving up dudes on the back fields of the Brewers' complex, where he struck out eight of the 12 batters he faced in a "B" game. There was also a lot of love given to his early Cactus League plate appearances, specifically the plate discipline he displayed. Angels manager Mike Scioscia has already indicated Ohtani might DH more than we initially thought this season.

Alas, the only true (and obvious) takeaway in all of this is that the season is going to tell us if Ohtani can really survive as both a pitcher and a hitter. Knowing the sheer amount of physical preparation the game's elite starters put into their between-starts schedule, count me among the generally dubious that Ohtani can do both with real -- and successful -- regularity for a full season. But of course, I'd love to see him try.

And yes, I'm eating up all the Ohtani coverage as much as anybody. Especially if it contains a good pun.

"Miguel Andujar is this year's Aaron Judge!"

Actually, it was Greg Bird who did the most Grapefruit League damage for the Yanks last spring (eight homers, seven doubles, 1.654 OPS), and we know that didn't amount to much in a 2017 altered by injury. But Judge did have a strong spring that won him the right-field job and led him to an American League Rookie of the Year run for the ages and a runner-up in the AL MVP voting.

Obviously, it's way, way too early to prescribe such a rousing rookie turn for the 23-year-old Andujar, but there is opportunity in the Yanks' infield, and Andujar is so far doing his best to seize it. In his first 19 Grapefruit at-bats, he homered four times and doubled twice, already leading some to wonder if New York's trade for would-be third baseman Brandon Drury was even necessary.

Of course, Drury can slide over to second to give Gleyber Torres more Minor League seasoning should the Yankees decide to put Andujar into their Opening Day lineup. But we're still a long way from the difficult-decision stage of the spring. One factor to keep in mind is that scouts don't give Andujar great grades for his range and footwork at the hot corner. (Because of his arm strength, some scouts think he should eventually shift to right field.) So Drury rates as the more dependable defensive option. The

safest bet might still be Drury at third, Tyler Wade at second and Andujar and Torres getting more seasoning in Triple-A.

Anyway, let's watch the rest of his exhibition effort before we anoint Andujar the Yanks' next Chosen One. After all, there is this ...

@mike_petriello

A very fun game is to name the four pitchers Miguel Andujar has homered off of this spring.

2 have never appeared in the bigs.

1 did last year, but was terrible (ERA over 6)

1 did last year, but for all of 2.3 IP, his first since 2014.

"Ian Happ needs to be in the Cubs' lineup every day!"

The Cubs fielded their fair share of phone calls about Happ this offseason, because a guy who rates as a depth piece on the North Side would make for an everyday addition to a lot of other lineups. The Cubs might not have a clear path to everyday at-bats for Happ, who had a 114 OPS+ across 413 plate appearances in 115 games in his rookie year in '17, but they were wise to keep this versatile player with pop.

Three homers in 13 Cactus League at-bats (with a 1.582 OPS) might understandably have some Cubs fans dreaming up a bigger role for Happ than what is currently projected for him. Right now, Happ basically rates as a backup in all three outfield spots and the third-stringer at second base, behind Javier Baez and Ben Zobrist. His playing time would be compromised all the more if the slimmed-down Kyle Schwarber has the bounceback season he's vying for, or if Albert Almora Jr. has the 2018 breakout so many are prescribing for him.

But we saw last year how injuries (in that case, to Zobrist and Jason Heyward) and opportunities can evolve over the course of 162, to the point where Happ accrued a pretty decent number of at-bats after his mid-May promotion. The Cubs are starved enough for a true leadoff presence that it's not hard to see Happ getting his just due in '18, perhaps ultimately at the expense of Heyward.

"Jason Kipnis is back!"

The Indians made some attempts to trade second baseman Kipnis after his injury-marred and unproductive 2017 because:

A. They have financial incentive to get out from the north of \$30 million owed to him between now and 2020, and

B. They feel their best defensive alignment is with Jose Ramirez at second base.

So it's been interesting to see Kipnis raking in the Cactus League after those trade discussions went nowhere. Rather than continue the late-season experiment that put Kipnis in the outfield, the Indians are rolling into 2018 with him as their regular at second (and Ramirez at third). And rather than playing with a shoulder issue, as he did a year ago, Kipnis is playing with a chip on his shoulder. It's going pretty well so far (.636 average, 2.364 OPS in 11 at-bats).

Any obits written for Kip in 2017 were premature (he had a respectable .275/.343/.469 slash in 2016), as are any proclamations that he's returning to his All-Star self here in 2018. But this might be the most motivated player in Tribe camp, and even league-average output in 2018 would be big improvement for an Indians team that got next to nothing offensively from third basemen and second basemen not named Ramirez last year.

"The Astros should sign a fill-in for Yuli Gurriel!"

The higher the stakes, the bigger the reaction to injury news. The Astros are trying to avoid the hangover effect in 2018 and repeat as World Series champs, but they've been dealt one of the more significant injury blows in the early portion of the spring schedule with Gurriel's broken hamate bone -- an injury that typically can cost a player four to eight weeks.

Gurriel's injury came just as the first-base free-agent market finally started moving. That led to some speculation among media and fans that perhaps the Astros ought to sign somebody from the remaining group, which at the time of Gurriel's injury, still included Lucas Duda, Adam Lind and Mike Napoli, and still includes Mark Reynolds and others.

But this is the exact sort of scenario the Astros built their flexible roster to survive. Before Gurriel got hurt, the plan was to give him some time this spring at the other infield spots to leave open the possibility for more inflexible first baseman/DH A.J. Reed to earn at-bats at the big league level. Now, Gurriel's injury provides a path to playing time for Reed, Tyler White and J.D. Davis, and Marwin Gonzalez is of course an option there as well (because he's an option pretty much everywhere).

The Astros have enough lineup depth and balance to give whichever of the unproven guys is swinging the hottest bat a shot in what is a short-term situation, though the surgical effects on Gurriel's power once he returns will merit monitoring. Perhaps by then, Reed, White or Davis will have established trade value to other teams and proved a deep club to be even deeper.

FROM THE DENVER GAZETTE

Woody Paige: All eyes on Shohei Ohtani at spring training

Tempe, Ariz. - Oh!tani?

Is he greatest two-way Major League player in 100 years, an All-Star pitcher, a Designated Hitter with a .325 average and 100 RBIs, the best U.S. import from Japan since instant noodles and karaoke,

Pokemon, a circus sideshow act or baseball's most alluring attendance attraction this season? Tim Tebow?

Maybe all?

Shohei Ohtani has come to America.

During the Angels-Rockies exhibition on Sunday, a rather sizable group of knot-hole lookie-loos assembled at an outfield corner of Tempe Diablo Stadium and peered through a chain-link fence at the action.

"What you watching?" I asked.

"Oh, Ohtani," a young man in an Angels jersey replied.

"He's not playing," I said.

"Maybe he'll pinch-hit," said his companion, who was wearing a Nippon-Ham Fighters jersey.

"Nope, day off."

"He might walk by."

"There are Angels in the outfield, but no Ohtani. Albert Pujols just batted, and Mike Trout's in the game. Couple of future Hall of Famers.

"We don't care about them. Ohtani is The Man."

Oh, well.

The "Japanese Babe Ruth" pitched in a "B," or junior varsity, game on Friday on a back lot at the Brewers' spring training camp in Maryvale, Ariz., Friday. He worked 2 2/3 innings against fellows who had an assortment of 70s and 80s on their backs (because they'll be playing for the Colorado Springs Sky Sox and the Biloxi Shuckers).

Ohtani struck out eight of 12 batters he confronted.

It was his second occasion on a mound of some location this spring. In Ohtani's first appearance as a Major League pitcher, he faced seven batters and allowed two hits (one home run), two walks and two runs (one earned) – and struck out two.

Not an auspicious start.

In his debut as a DH, Shohei reached base all three at-bats, walking after a 0-2 count, drawing another walk and getting a single to drive in Eric Young Jr. from second.

Ohtani then went 0-3 against the Rox last week. Perhaps the Angels didn't want Ohtani to go up against Jon Gray on Sunday afternoon.

Young Mr. Ohtani has been placed on a regimented schedule by the Angels. When the regular season begins, the 23-year-old right-handed pitcher, left-handed hitter will be in the club's novel six-man rotation (copied from the Nippon Professional Baseball league) and following the strategy when he played with the Fighters. Ohtani hit .322 and .332 the past two seasons. Over his five-year career, Ohtani compiled a 42-15 mark (2.69 earned-run average) as a starting pitcher.

He will pitch twice a week and DH two or three games, according to Mike Scioscia, the former catcher who has been a manager for 19 seasons. He's witnessed it all in baseball . . . except for this.

"When the season opens up, we'll obviously look very closely at it," Scioscia was quoted as saying in a story written by Jack MacGruder for MLB.com. "There is a lot of effort a pitcher has to put into pitching, and obviously it might erode some of the opportunities he has to hit. But we're going to be flexible with everything we do. If it comes down to where he is pitching in a day, and he's not going to hit the day before, so be it. If it comes down where he is pitching in a day, and he's not going to hit the day before, so be it. If a day after, he is not available to pinch-hit, so be it."

Got that?

Meanwhile, Ohtani certainly is enjoying the experience – and has shown stretches of proficiency, power and potential in his brief time as The Show's Shohei.

The general belief is that Ohtani will be more talented throwing than hitting. But, then, he's rookie in this country.

The last guy to do both successfully for more than a short stint was The Babe.

He came to the majors as a pitcher who could hit some. From 1915-1917 Ruth won 18, 23 and 24 games. He also hit .315, .272 and .325.

But a century ago, 1918, when Ruth also was 23, he was spending more time in the outfield than on the mound. He won 13 games and batted .300. By 1920 Babe was purely a hitter -- .376 with 54 homers and 95 RBIs.

Who knows what Shohei Ohtani will do as a pitcher or a hitter, or both?

So be it. Oh, yes!

FROM THE USA TODAY

As Shohei Ohtani attempts to make history, a hand from Albert Pujols would help

Bob Nightengale, USA TODAY Sports

TEMPE, Ariz. - It hasn't been done in 99 years, and the Los Angeles Angels still are trying to figure out how this will actually work.

Shohei Ohtani, attempting a task last successfully completed by Babe Ruth, is vying to to be a starting pitcher every sixth day and in the lineup as a designated hitter most of the others.

He did it in Japan, and now is seeing if he can possibly pull it off in the big leagues.

Yet, to make this work, trying to juggle his pitching routine with his batting practice regiment, there's an X factor involved.

He's the future Hall of Famer across the clubhouse.

When he was Ohtani's age at 23, he hit .359 with 43 homers, 124 RBI and led the league with 212 hits, 51 doubles and 137 runs.

His name is Albert Pujols, who's now 38.

You see, if Ohtani is going to be the Angels' DH on the days he doesn't pitch, he needs Pujols to play first base.

And Pujols, the Angels' primary DH the last two years, played just six games at first base in 2017, and just 28 the year before.

"I don't know what's going on," Pujols tells USA TODAY Sports. "Nobody has told me anything about it. I really don't know what the whole plan is.

"I just know that I'm here. And my job is to put the uniform on and play. We'll see what they want me to do."

While no one may have laid out the specifics to Pujols, likely because the Angels themselves aren't quite sure how this will all work, he realizes change is needed to accommodate Ohtani.

Pujols is going to have play first base at least three or four times a week, perhaps as many as 100 games at first for the first time since 2014. The Angels can't afford to have him be an exclusive DH.

"I get myself ready every year to play first base," Pujols says, "so I don't know why everybody is making such a big deal about it. People are making it out like I have to learn how to play that position. It's silly.

"First base is like riding a bike. You don't have to ride it every day. You can go 20 years without riding it, and first time you might get on it might feel weird, but it comes back."

Pujols, a two-time Gold Glove winner at first base while with the St. Louis Cardinals, craves a return to the position. For the first time in four years, he had a healthy off-season where he could work out, instead of rehab from surgeries. He showed up to the Angels' spring training camp 15 to 17 pounds lighter, and no longer looks as if he's in pain every time he takes a step, battling plantar fascia and knee problems.

"I just couldn't train the way I wanted to the last few years, coming off surgery," Pujols says. "Now, there's no limit. Obviously, cutting off some weight helped a lot, too."

Says Angels starter Garrett Richards: "He looks like he shed years off his life. He finally had a full off-season and it shows. He looks so good in the box, too."

Pujols led the Angels with 101 RBI last season, but posted career lows in batting average (.241) and on base plus slugging (.647). It was a remarkable decline for a man with a career .305 batting average and .947 OPS. He believes that playing the field again will reinvigorate his offensive skills.

"I missed first base, man," Pujols said, "I tell you that. When I'm out there, I'm much more in the game. I don't have to think about my at-bats. I can play defense and separate that from the offense. I'll be able to enjoy it more.

"I feel like I could still go out there one or two more years and do that, maybe even for my whole contract, who knows."

Pujols, in Year 7 of his 10-year, \$240 million contract, hit his 600th homer last year, with more milestones ahead. He's 32 hits shy of becoming the 32nd player in history to reach 3,000, which triggers a \$3 million bonus in his contract. He's 82 RBI shy of becoming only the fourth player to reach 2,000, and with 614 homers, still has a shot of joining Barry Bonds, Hank Aaron and Babe Ruth in the 700-homer club.

Why, by the end of the season, he and Aaron may be the only players in history to have 3,000 hits, 2,000 RBI and at least 600 homers.

"I think getting 3,000 hits would mean the most as far as individual numbers," Pujols says, "but 2,000 RBI is pretty close. That's pretty special.

"There was somebody who wrote an article last year that said RBI doesn't mean anything. I was like, "Are you freaking kidding me?" It doesn't make sense. If you don't drive in runs, you don't win games.

"It's not seeing who has the highest WAR or exit velocity. You have to drive in runs and score runs. That's how you win games."

The Angels figure to be winning a whole lot of games this year, believing they'll be serious contenders with hopes of winning their first playoff game in nine years. They've got the finest defensive team in baseball, a loaded offense with the acquisitions of Zack Cozart and Ian Kinsler, the best player in the game in Mike Trout, a healthy pitching staff, and, yes, Ohtani.

The Angels plan to use a six-man rotation with Ohtani, but the number of games he'll also DH will depend on Pujols. If Pujols says healthy and can play first base with no problems, Ohtani might find himself at DH more than anyone envisioned.

"When the season opens up, we'll look very closely at it," Angels manager Mike Scioscia says. "There is a lot of effort a pitcher has to put into pitching, and obviously it might erode some of the opportunities he has to hit. If it comes down to where he is pitching in a day, and he is not going to hit the day before, so be it. If a day after, he is not available, so be it.

“But I think we need to be flexible as we go through this to work this out.”

It’s not just Ohtani’s response to the workload that will dictate his playing time at DH, but also how Pujols reacts being back at first base.

“He can play first base enough for us to have some flexibility in our lineups,” Scioscia says, “and give us more options on any day.”

Maybe, even that long-awaited deep run into October, too, that Pujols has desperately missed since leaving the Cardinals.

“There’s no need for me to put pressure on myself, or anyone to do that,” said Pujols, who plans to make a conscious effort to draw more walks after walking a career-low 37 times last year. “If we just stay healthy, and have the year we can, we’re going to do some great things.

“This year could be really special.”

Call it a two-for-one.

FROM BLEACHER REPORT

Top Prospects Who Are MLB’s Future 100 MPH Flamethrowers

By Jacob Shafer

Velocity isn't everything. Control and off-speed pitches matter. When it comes to dominating at the MLB level, however, a triple-digit heater helps.

Who are the next radar-gun-singeing studs primed to blow the proverbial doors off opposing hitters?

Let's take a look at a half-dozen top-rated prospects who fit the bill based on pedigree and potential while closing our eyes and dreaming about their crackling fastballs.

Sixto Sanchez, RHP, Philadelphia Phillies

Age: 19

MLB.com Prospect Rank: 26

ETA: 2019

An unheralded international signee out of the Dominican Republic in 2015, Sixto Sanchez has dominated in 174.2 minor league innings spread over three seasons and now ranks as the No. 11 pitching prospect in the game.

The 19-year-old sports a 2.47 ERA and has solid sinking action on a fastball that has been clocked in excess of 100 mph.

He needs to refine his changeup and breaking ball, but both have the makings of plus offerings. Once his repertoire is in place, the athletic Sanchez could be a force for the rebuilding Philadelphia Phillies.

He's been compared favorably to Pedro Martinez, which is about all you need to know.

"It was like he was a clone," a National League scout said of the Sanchez-Pedro comp, per Bleacher Report's Danny Knobler. "Physically, he looks like him. He has the same style of pitching, the same delivery. And for a young guy, I loved his poise and presence. For me, he is Pedro Martinez."

Hunter Greene, RHP, Cincinnati Reds

Age: 18

MLB.com Prospect Rank: 21

ETA: 2020

A unique talent with the skills to stick as a hitter or pitcher, Hunter Greene is on pace to impact the Cincinnati Reds starting rotation—and possibly their lineup—in the next few seasons.

The 18-year-old is in the initial stages of his learning curve, but as the second overall selection in the 2017 draft, he could rise quickly through the Reds system.

So far, it seems Cincinnati values his live arm above his bat. Word of both assets has spread to the highest level.

"He's like a mythical legend already, Hunter Greene," Toronto Blue Jays pitcher Marcus Stroman said in July 2017, per B/R's Joon Lee. "People are already whispering about him: Did you see that guy throw 105 AND hit the ball 700 feet?"

Alex Reyes, RHP, St. Louis Cardinals

Age: 23

MLB.com Prospect Rank: 17

ETA: 2018

Alex Reyes posted a 1.57 ERA with 52 strikeouts in 46 innings for the St. Louis Cardinals in 2016 while touching 100 mph with his fastball. Tommy John surgery ruptured his timeline, but he's back on track.

Reyes threw a bullpen session to minor leaguers Wednesday, per Joe Trezza of MLB.com, a positive step on his road to recovery.

"The guy can be a superstar in this league," Cardinals veteran Adam Wainwright said, per the Associated Press (h/t FoxSports.com). "I think he has humongous talent and will be one of the best pitchers in the game."

The Cards could use Reyes out of the bullpen or starting rotation. Assuming he suffers no setbacks, he'll be a key piece for St. Louis in 2018 and beyond.

Walker Buehler, RHP, Los Angeles Dodgers

Age: 23

MLB.com Prospect Rank: 12

ETA: 2018

A first-round pick (24th overall) by the Los Angeles Dodgers in the 2015 amateur draft, Walker Buehler posted a 3.35 ERA with 125 strikeouts in 88.2 innings while rising from High-A to Double-A to Triple-A in 2017.

He made his MLB debut in September and hit 100 mph. In 9.1 big league innings, he averaged 98.2 mph with his heater, tied for seventh-best in the game.

Last season was his first full year back after undergoing Tommy John surgery. The Dodgers will be cautious with his development. They should also be excited about the possibility of making him the Robin to Clayton Kershaw's Batman, maybe as soon as late 2018.

"I have a new ligament," Buehler said, per Andy McCullough of the Los Angeles Times. "I have a new arm. I have new kind of arsenal. It's a different world now."

Michael Kopech, RHP, Chicago White Sox

Age: 21

MLB.com Prospect Rank: 10

ETA: 2018

Michael Kopech wants to be a pitcher, not a thrower.

"I can throw a first-pitch strike with my fastball nine times out of 10, but the secondary stuff is what I'm really focusing on," the 21-year-old said in camp, per Chris Kuc of the Chicago Tribune.

Fair enough. It's a wise strategy for a kid who could soon front the Chicago White Sox rotation. At the same time, his fastball is a thing to behold.

As Bleacher Report's Scott Miller noted in a profile last March, Kopech once hit 110 mph during a throwing drill.

He won't attain that velocity on an MLB mound, but he managed 101 mph in his spring debut, per Daryl Van Schouwen of the Chicago Sun-Times. Needless to say, the radar guns will be cocked when the ChiSox call him up.

Shohei Ohtani, RHP, Los Angeles Angels

Age: 23

MLB.com Prospect Rank: 1

ETA: 2018

Shohei Ohtani didn't reach triple digits in his Cactus League debut with the Los Angeles Angels. In fact, his breaking balls drew the biggest reaction.

Maybe we're cheating by calling him a prospect after five seasons of pro ball in Japan, though he's technically the top prospect in the game, according to MLB.com.

Here's what we know: The 23-year-old Japanese star is capable of attaining the century mark with his fastball.

He threw the fastest pitch in the history of Nippon Professional Baseball, clocked at 101.9 mph, per MLB.com's Chris Landers.

Can he repeat the feat stateside, while also crushing home runs as the Halos designated hitter? Stay tuned.

MLB Power Rankings at the Start of March*

*Cut to only include Angels and top 10

By Joel Reuter

Spring training action is in full swing and Opening Day is less than a month away as the calendar turns over to March.

It's been an interesting MLB offseason, to say the least, with a handful of landscape-altering trades and an abnormally slow-moving free-agent market that has effectively dragged down the price of veteran talent across the league.

And even with the preseason in full swing, guys like Jake Arrieta, Mike Moustakas, Lance Lynn, Alex Cobb, Jonathan Lucroy and Greg Holland are still available in free agency.

This seems like as good a time as any for an updated version of our MLB power rankings, which were last updated on Feb. 12.

There's still time for things to change between now and March 29, but this should serve as a good baseline for where all 30 clubs stack up for the upcoming season.

10-6

10. Los Angeles Angels

Shohei Ohtani will be the focus of spring training for the Angels, and a lot has also been made about the additions of Ian Kinsler and Zack Cozart to fill significant holes at second and third base, respectively.

While those are all huge additions, the health of the starting rotation plays an equally large factor in the team climbing inside the top 10 in our preseason rankings.

Andrew Heaney (five starts), Garrett Richards (six), Matt Shoemaker (14) and Tyler Skaggs (16) all missed significant time last season, and having those arms back at full strength could wind make a bigger impact than any outside addition.

9. St. Louis Cardinals

Trading for Marcell Ozuna gives the Cardinals a legitimate 30-homer threat to anchor the middle of the lineup—something they have not had since Albert Pujols left town after the 2011 season.

The biggest question will be whether the additions of Luke Gregerson, Bud Norris and Dominic Leone are enough to improve a bullpen that was shaky at times last season.

That said, a full season of Luke Weaver in the rotation, the addition of Miles Mikolas from Japan's Nippon Professional Baseball league and the return of Alex Reyes give the team an abundance of talented arms. The pitching staff as a whole has significant upside.

8. Arizona Diamondbacks

After their win total jumped from 69 to 93 last season, the Diamondbacks will enter the 2018 season with legitimate expectations.

The starting rotation of Zack Greinke, Robbie Ray, Taijuan Walker, Zack Godley and Patrick Corbin returns intact and should once again be among the best in baseball. Meanwhile, the bullpen swapped out Fernando Rodney for Brad Boxberger and Japanese standout Yoshihisa Hirano, and it should be improved.

Losing rental slugger J.D. Martinez hurts, but trading for Steven Souza and signing Alex Avila should be enough to keep the offense among the most productive in all of baseball.

7. Boston Red Sox

The Red Sox finally came to terms with Martinez, signing him to a five-year, \$110 million deal that includes opt-outs prior to each of the final three seasons.

That moves them into the upper echelon of MLB teams, as a lack of power was arguably the biggest issue surrounding the 93-win team last year.

There are still questions about the starting rotation, though, and they'll need a healthy season from David Price, a bounce-back campaign from Rick Porcello and a similar performance from Drew Pomeranz to keep pace with the rival New York Yankees in the AL East.

6. Cleveland Indians

Replacing Carlos Santana and Bryan Shaw with Yonder Alonso and non-roster invitee Matt Belisle looks like an obvious downgrade to the Indians roster.

That roster is still absolutely stacked, though.

The starting rotation is six-deep with impact starters, as Mike Clevinger (12-6, 3.11 ERA, 137 K, 121.2 IP) could start the season in the bullpen or in Triple-A. That depth will serve them well over a 162-game season.

There's still plenty of offensive firepower even without Santana, and the bullpen won't miss a beat if Nick Goody (56 G, 2.80 ERA, 11.9 K/9) builds off a strong 2017 season and steps into more of a high-leverage role.

5-1

5. New York Yankees

After reaching the ALCS in what was expected to be a retooling season, the Yankees continued to push up their timetable by swinging a blockbuster deal to acquire Giancarlo Stanton.

Pairing the reigning NL MVP with Aaron Judge, Gary Sanchez and the rest of what was the second-highest scoring offense in baseball last season could result in an offensive juggernaut.

Meanwhile, they'll have a full season of Sonny Gray in a talented starting rotation, backed by arguably the best relief corps in baseball.

The Red Sox closed the gap by signing J.D. Martinez, but the AL East looks like the Yankees' division to lose.

4. Washington Nationals

The Nationals are all-in on the 2018 season with Bryce Harper, Daniel Murphy and Gio Gonzalez all set to reach free agency.

The return of Adam Eaton will add another dimension to the offense, and full seasons of Ryan Madson, Brandon Kintzler and Sean Doolittle should make the bullpen a strength.

The No. 5 starter's spot is still a question mark since Joe Ross is expected to miss the entire 2018 season recovering from Tommy John surgery, but that's the only hole on a loaded roster.

3. Los Angeles Dodgers

The Dodgers have won five straight NL West titles and they finally reached the World Series last season for the first time since 1988.

All that's left is to hoist the trophy.

It's been a quiet offseason after they spent big to bring back Kenley Jansen, Justin Turner and Rich Hill last winter, though they did add Scott Alexander and Tom Koehler to replace Brandon Morrow and Tony Watson in the bullpen.

After taking home back-to-back NL Rookie of the Year awards with Corey Seager and Cody Bellinger, it will be interesting to see what kind of impact top prospects Walker Buehler and Alex Verdugo will make.

2. Chicago Cubs

The Cubs have done everything necessary to again be the team to beat in the National League.

Yu Darvish and Tyler Chatwood were signed to replace Jake Arrieta and John Lackey, while a leaky bullpen was addressed with the additions of Brandon Morrow and Steve Cishek.

Meanwhile, the versatility of players like Kris Bryant, Ben Zobrist and Ian Happ will once again allow manager Joe Maddon to be fluid with his lineup—a group that led the majors in runs scored after the All-Star break last season.

The Dodgers and Nationals are legitimate title contenders, but all eyes are on the Cubs in the NL after the Darvish signing.

1. Houston Astros

How impressive is the Astros' starting pitching depth?

Brad Peacock (21 GS, 13-2, 3.00 ERA, 161 K, 132.0 IP) and Collin McHugh (12 GS, 5-2, 3.55 ERA, 62 K, 63.1 IP) will likely be pitching out of the bullpen. The team has Justin Verlander available on Opening Day, and newcomer Gerrit Cole is set to join Dallas Keuchel, Charlie Morton and Lance McCullers Jr. on the starting staff.

Then there's the offense, which led the majors in batting average (.282), OPS (.823) and runs scored (896) and returns all the major players.

The bullpen was the biggest question mark when the offseason began, and the additions of Hector Rondon and Joe Smith in free agency, along with Peacock and McHugh moving into new roles, could make that a strength as well.

It's a tough road ahead, but the Astros have the goods to repeat.

FROM SB NATION

Jose Ramirez vs. Mike Trout: An unfair comparison

The Tribe's resident Five Tool Player is put up against the best in the biz.

By Merritt Rohlfing

We all love Mike Trout. He's amazing. When a player simply does things better than anyone living, it's hard to not simply marvel at it, even if he brutalizes your team. But he's unfair - he sets the bar so high that mere mortals always fall short when held up against him. He's everything a baseball player should be, a perfect Five Tool Player. The Indians don't have a Mike Trout. they've got some good position players, guys like Jose Ramirez who are pretty tooled up in their own right. Considering his own all-around ability, it would be right to call Ramirez a five-tool player. After his mega-breakout, how does Ramirez stack up?

Defense

The prototypical five tool guy is a center fielder. It's the player we create in MLB The Show probably half the time. he's the coolest guy, and covers the most ground, the king of any defense. Any great team will have at least a serviceable one out there. Trout has demonstrated excellence in the past in center field, though at negative 3.5 defensive runs in 2017 he was quite sub-par. Not just for him, in general. He rated a negative 4 on Statcast's Outs Above Average stat. Not only that, with a Sprint Speed 28.5 meters per second according to Baseball Savant, he rated as about the 21st fastest center fielder in baseball. Speed is a big part of being a center fielder, less-so for an infielder, so the 28.3 m/s Ramirez matters a bit less, at least here. To compare though, at least UZR exists, and at -7.3 runs by UZR/150, Trout rated poorly. At third Ramirez was a +7.6 per 150 games, and a negative 0.1 at second. Between that and the fact he so quickly flipped to second without a hiccup, I'm giving this part to RAMIREZ. I expected this though.

Speed/baserunning

We touched on it a bit ago, but by raw sprint speed Trout was faster than Ramirez was in 2017. That's a definite nail in the coffin for Ramirez. Then there's the stolen base numbers - 22 for Trout in only 114 games, only caught four times, while Ramirez had 17 swipes in 38 more games and was caught one more time, as well. Looking good for Trout. Is there anything in Ramirez's favor here? Spoiler, no. There isn't. Trout took the extra base more - 58 percent of total opportunities compared to 46 for Ramirez. Trout made three outs on the basepaths this year, Ramirez twelve. Trout even scored nearly as many times from second on a base hit as Ramirez did - 11 times to Ramirez's 13 - and again, played 38 fewer games. Yeah. TROUT wins this one. Man, he is good.

Throwing

This is a hard one to judge. Assist totals obviously favor Ramirez, since he makes plays on the infield. Even if Baseball Savant made it available, using their Arm Strength metric from Statcast is tough too, since you don't really need the same kind of power to get a guy running to first after fielding a grounder at second. But Ramirez was a great third baseman too, often flashing an excellent arm on tough plays. Considering the body contortions you have to get into when barehanding or going back on a ball and the fact he can still get some good speed on it, there's something there. But we have no real metrics, and they play different positions. A part of me wants to give it to Ramirez, but Trout is the one who has to throw it 250 or 300 feet. Though the one knock on his ability has always been that his arm isn't amazing, merely solid. I call it a TIE.

Hit for average

Ramirez hit .318 in 2017, Trout .306. Done deal, right? No. Batting average is too flawed, and anyone who judges Trout in particular by it is doing him a serious disservice. The real, modern tool here in the "Five Tool Player" would have to be, in one case, on-base percentage. In that Trout blows Ramirez out of the water. Just in 2017, he beat the Indians infielder .442 to .374. His walk rate is 18.5 percent, compared to Ramirez's 8.1 (which itself was an improvement from 2016). Trout even keeps defenses more honest, pulling the ball just 40.2 percent of the time compared to Ramirez's 46.3 percent. Ramirez did hit .329 as a left-hander, and Trout didn't record a single hit left-handed. So that's something. A technicality perhaps, but as irritating Internet pedants say, technically correct is the best kind of correct. We all knew where this was going from the outset, didn't we? TROUT is a good hitter. Yet another dazzling discovery.

Hit for power

Traditionally this meant extra-base hits and more specifically home runs. In one small way, Ramirez did do something Trout has never done. His 91 extra-base hits in 2017 is eleven more than Trout has ever hit in a season. With an extra-base hit in 14.1 percent of plate appearances, he tops Trout there too. So things are looking good. But power is, at its base, how hard you hit the ball, right? More than that, extra-base hits come from fly balls and line drives, hit real hard. Let's see who did better at those things in 2017:

Ramirez vs. Trout, power production

Player	FB%	LD%	GB%	Exit Velo(mph)	FB Velo(mph)	LD Velo(mph)	GB%(mph)	
Mike Trout		44.9	18.4	36.7	88.8	94.9	93.9	84.1
Jose Ramirez		39.7	21.4	38.9	88.4	90.3	93.9	85.3

The line drive thing is a little amazing. This also tells the story of why Ramirez hit so many doubles - hard, hard hit liners at a very good rate. But Trout has him beat not only in basic hit speed, but the kinds that get you more bases and, by extension, runs. Plus, quite simply he hit more home runs than Ramirez in way less games. He's amazing. He's powerful. TROUT wins this one going away.

Conclusion

Jose Ramirez is very good. Mike Trout is otherworldly.

We all knew how this was going to shake out. Trout is the best around for a reason. As marvelous as Ramirez was in 2017, seeing what true superhuman ability looks like in comparison puts both men in perspective. Ramirez is still very good among normal players. Maybe it is unkind to place him, or any player, up against Trout, but considering how close they seem to be (absent the walk numbers, wow) and the fact that Ramirez is still growing into the player he will become, it makes the future a bit exciting. He had such an incredible year and we all loved it. He's probably never going to reach the level of Trout. Nobody on the Indians right now is. Excellence can't just be one man though, can it? Besides, Ramirez does have the extra-base thing. Checkmate, fish man.

FROM BASEBALL ESSENTIAL.COM

Shohei Ohtani's Second Spring Training Start Breakdown

By Brent Maguire

Shohei Ohtani made his second Spring Training start on the mound on Friday, this time coming in a "B" game against the Milwaukee Brewers. Rather than throw in the Angels MLB game, Ohtani made a start against the Brewers minor leaguers in a controlled environment where the Angels could closely monitor right-handed pitcher.

Courtesy of NPB News via YouTube, Ohtani's full 52-pitch performance is available for the public to see. The results, scouting-wise and numbers-wise, were incredible. In 2 2/3 innings, Ohtani recorded all eight of his outs via the strikeout, walked no batters and allowed two runs on four hits. For the second straight outing, Ohtani worked exclusively from the stretch.

Ohtani landed 67.3 percent of his pitches for strikes and generated 10 swing-and-misses, four via his fastball, five from his slider and one from his split-finger fastball. Two of the four hits against Ohtani were softly hit, with one bouncing just over the mound and the other squeaking past the third baseman for a double. The one well-squared up baseball came from Keston Hiura, Baseball America's 47th best prospect, who roped an Ohtani fastball to the left-center field gap.

Ohtani leaned heavily on his fastball, using that pitch 53.85 percent of the time while throwing 64.29 percent of those pitches for strikes. Ohtani was extremely comfortable moving his fastball around, generally staying in the lower quadrant of the strike zone but willing to throw high heat to generate whiffs. The pitch sat comfortably in the 92-97 mph range and had serious late action.

Ohtani's favorite secondary pitch was his slider, which he utilized 32.7 percent of the time and had outstanding success with. He landed 14 of 17 sliders for strikes, generated three of his strikeouts from the pitch and had no problem throwing it to both left-handed hitters and right-handed hitters. The pitch sat in the 76-81 mph range, while Ohtani showed a preternatural ability to change speeds on it and throw it exactly where he wanted it.

Ohtani's split-finger fastball, which is considered by many to be his second-best pitch, was only used four times in the game. One of those pitches led to a strikeout while the other three missed the zone by a good margin. The lack of split-fingers didn't appear to be due to distrust of the pitch but rather due to Ohtani's game-plan of heavy fastball and slider usage.

Ohtani's curveball, which has been utilized as a change-of-pace pitch in the past, was only used three times but the pitch had big success. Ohtani froze two batters with the pitch, leading to strikeouts against one left-handed batter and one right-handed batter. The pitch sat in the 70-71 mph range, with Ohtani showing an impressive feel for spinning the pitch.

The 23-year-old Ohtani showcased why there has been so much hype about his arrival to MLB. Ohtani shows an uncanny ability to get the maximum amount out of every pitch while also being able to command his stuff. Using an extreme drop-and-drive technique, Ohtani generates lots of energy from his lower half and his elite arm strength finishes off his explosive delivery. His elite athleticism plays a big role in Ohtani being able to throw four high-quality pitches and stay around the zone.

While it was just a Spring Training start against a "B" team, Ohtani flashed two plus-plus pitches (fastball and slider) while he flashed plus on his split-finger fastball and curveball. He comfortably threw strikes with three of his four pitches, commanded all four quadrants of the zone and made everything look relatively easy in the process. It's early in the process for Shohei Ohtani but he is showing all of the ingredients to be a frontline MLB starter.

FROM LARRY BROWN SPORTS

Russell Westbrook impressed Mike Trout with game-sealing three-pointer

By Darryn Albert

Real recognizes real, especially when it comes to a fellow league MVP.

Oklahoma City Thunder star Russell Westbrook went nuts in a 124-116 win over the Phoenix Suns on Friday, finishing with 43 points, 14 rebounds, and eight assists. Included in that was a clutch triple in the final minute that put the Thunder up for good. Westbrook's shot also impressed Mike Trout, who is in town for spring training in Tempe, Ariz. and was in attendance at the game along with teammate Garrett Richards. The Los Angeles Angels star was seen on the TV broadcast nodding his head in approval at the cold-blooded three.

The 43 points were Westbrook's second-highest scoring total of the season, so he definitely put in a show for his fellow superstar. The Brodie probably has reason to feel confident for the rest of the year too since Trout has proven to be something of a good luck charm with his presence lately.