



Press Clips

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FROM ANGELS.COM**Key FAQs for Angels this offseason**

By Maria Guardado

ANAHEIM -- An intriguing offseason awaits the Angels, who, in addition to finding a new manager, will also be tasked with building a competitive team that will set them up to contend in 2019. While the bulk of the retooling will have to wait until after the playoffs, here's an offseason primer that addresses frequently asked questions about the deadlines and processes that will guide the Angels' roster construction this winter.

Who are the Angels' impending free agents?

Garrett Richards, Jim Johnson, Chris Young, Blake Wood, Eric Young Jr. and Junichi Tazawa.

Who is eligible for arbitration?

Matt Shoemaker, JC Ramirez, Tyler Skaggs, Andrew Heaney, Jose Alvarez, Cam Bedrosian, Blake Parker, Nick Tropeano and Odrisamer Despaigne. **Jefry Marte** is also likely to qualify for Super Two status, making him eligible for an extra year of arbitration. Those players must be tendered contracts by Nov. 30.

Who is a potential non-tender candidate?

Despaigne, who logged an 8.20 ERA over 18 2/3 innings after being acquired from the Marlins in August, is one, as is Marte, who batted .216 with a .644 OPS over 90 games this season. Ramirez could also fall into this bucket, as he is set to earn a raise from his \$1.9 million salary in 2018 and will be unavailable for the early part of next season as he rehabs from Tommy John surgery.

Who needs to be added to the 40-man roster this winter to be protected from the Rule 5 Draft?

The most notable Angels prospects who will need to be shielded from the Rule 5 Draft are left-hander Jose Suarez (No. 8, **per MLB Pipeline**), infielder **Luis Rengifo** (No. 10), outfielder Jared Walsh, right-hander Luis Pena (No. 18), infielder Leonardo Rivas (No. 15) and right-hander Joe Gatto (No. 28).

Roberto Baldoquin, a 24-year-old infielder who has struggled in the Minors since the Angels signed him out of Cuba for nearly \$15 million in 2014, will also be eligible for the Rule 5 Draft if he is not added to the 40-man roster. Joining him on that list are right-hander Adam Hofacket, left-hander Conor Lillis-White, infielder Hutton Moyer and outfielder Brendon Sanger. The deadline for the Angels to set their 40-man roster is Nov. 20.

What kind of help do the Angels need, and will they be active in free agency?

General manager Billy Eppler has already identified reliable pitching as the club's most pressing need this offseason, so expect the Angels to canvass the free-agent market for starting and relief options. They will also be open to an upgrade at catcher and bolstering their depth at first base.

Who might they target?

The class of free-agent starting pitchers this winter will be headlined by **Patrick Corbin, Dallas Keuchel, Charlie Morton** and **J.A. Happ**. The market will also be flush with relievers, including **Zach**

Britton, Jeurys Familia, Kelvin Herrera, Greg Holland, Shawn Kelley, Craig Kimbrel, Andrew Miller and Adam Ottavino.

Yasmani Grandal, Wilson Ramos, Jonathan Lucroy and former Angel **Martin Maldonado** are among the catchers who will be available in free agency. The market for first basemen is a little thin, though **Matt Adams** and **Lucas Duda** -- left-handed bats who could be paired with the right-handed-hitting **Albert Pujols** -- will be potential options.

FROM LA TIMES

Rob Manfred Q&A: Baseball commissioner discusses tanking, attendance decline and 2020 All-Star game at Dodger Stadium

By Bill Shaikin

The Boston Red Sox are one of the marquee attractions in the major leagues, with a passionate fan base that extends far beyond New England. For the folks charged with marketing and televising baseball, it is a good thing that the Red Sox made the playoffs.

For the guy charged with running the major leagues, it probably is a better thing that the Oakland Athletics made the playoffs.

The Red Sox opened the season with the highest payroll in the majors. The A's opened the season with the lowest, and they were one of four times cited in a grievance filed last February by the Major League Baseball Players Assn. The teams that make the most money share millions with their less fortunate brethren and, according to the collective bargaining agreement, each beneficiary must direct those millions toward "an effort to improve its performance on the field."

After a severe chill had hit the free-agent market, the union wondered what evidence might exist to show that the A's, Miami Marlins, Pittsburgh Pirates and Tampa Bay Rays were living up to that agreement. The Pirates, for instance, had not signed even one free agent to a major league contract.

The A's won 97 games, more than any team in the National League. The Rays won 90. The Pirates posted a winning record. The Marlins were awful, but they were not one of the three teams that lost 100 games.

The grievance remains unresolved. However, of the teams that opened the season among the top 10 in payroll, more teams missed the playoffs than made them, and two – the San Francisco Giants and Toronto Blue Jays – appear poised to cut back on spending and join the wave of teams that turn to young players and scale back competitive ambitions for a year or two.

That seemed like a good place for Bill Shaikin, the Times' national baseball writer, to start a conversation with commissioner Rob Manfred. This transcript is lightly edited, with Times clarifications in italic.

Q: There was a lot of talk over the winter about tanking, whether you want to use that term or not. The season has played out. For the first time in 16 years, three teams lost 100 games. Three teams won 100. Do you believe there are reforms you need to propose to incentivize winning?

A: First of all, I think the vast majority of the conversation about – I'll use your word – tanking was driven by people who either had an agenda, or who don't understand the fundamental trends that have emerged in the game in terms of the way you put rosters together and how you maintain your competitiveness over time. I think of the four clubs that attracted the most commentary over the winter. One is going to the playoffs. Two were in the hunt well into August. It just goes to show that predictions as to who is going to win, in this changing environment, have not turned out to be that good.

I am not concerned that there is a lack of a desire to win. I am absolutely convinced all of the organizations in Major League Baseball want to win. It is a question of what strategy they have adopted, and what time frame they are looking at, in order to put themselves in a realistic position to win.

Q: Are these the four clubs against whom the Major League Baseball Players Assn. filed a grievance?

A: Yes.

Q: You said some people might not understand what is going on in the game and some have an agenda. What do you mean by an agenda?

A: The MLBPA filed a grievance. They clearly have an agenda. And, by not understanding, what I'm saying is this: If you look at productivity broken down by age in our industry, it has moved down, significantly, the last 10 years. Younger people are providing more of the gross productivity in the industry. When you appreciate that fundamental fact, it is not surprising that people would be interested in getting younger players on the field, to take advantage of that higher productivity.

Q: Attendance this season fell to its lowest level since 2003. Do you believe teams playing not to win in a given year – even if it is a competitive strategy – plays into that attendance decline?

A: There are going to be teams that are in the hunt and teams that are not in the hunt every single year. I think the net effect on attendance depends on whether it's big markets that are in the hunt or smaller markets that are in the hunt. So I don't see wins and losses as a huge driving factor.

Q: So how do you explain the 4% drop in attendance this season?

A: I think what happened to us this year is pretty straightforward. We know that a point, a point and a half, of that is related to the fact that Miami is reporting its attendance more accurately, which I applaud. Telling the truth is always a good thing. Secondly, we were down almost 10% in April. We had record cancellations. You never get the same attendance for a rescheduled game. But, even worse, we played 35 games in April where it was less than 40 degrees at game time. We played two last year. I think these factors explain a lot of the downturn.

Having said that, it's important to remember we're still drawing nearly 70 million people a year. It's an astounding number, in and of itself. And all live entertainment – not just sports – faces a challenge in terms of getting people to come, because there are so many more alternatives that are available to

people. The younger generation is a little different in terms of what it wants to see. We need to work hard to make sure we're putting the best entertainment product we can on the field.

Q: From day one of your tenure, you have talked about broadening the sport's appeal to youth and getting more kids playing baseball. What has been successful on that score, and what do you still need to do to attract a younger audience?

A: I think the PLAY initiative has been tremendously successful for us. *[The initiative includes a series of programs and reached over 750,000 children last year, according to the league.]*

Over the last three years, we are the fastest-growing sport in terms of youth participation. That includes lacrosse, soccer, hockey, all the sports people talk about. *[Baseball gained 1.7 million new participants from 2011-16, the most of any team sport, according to the Sports and Fitness Industry Assn.]*

We are still the No. 1 participation sport among young people under the age of 12. That's a great base to work from. We're going to continue to work in that space. *[That combines baseball and softball, according to the SFIA. That is a fair representation, the SFIA said, because participation totals for sports like basketball and soccer include boys and girls.]*

And we've made some great strides in terms of diversity. The No. 2 participation sport among African-Americans is now baseball. And you're seeing that in our draft, where 20% of our first-rounders over the last six years were African Americans. That's a great number for us. *[In its most recent data, the SFIA said, the baseball participation rate among African Americans was higher than the football participation rate.]*

Q: You mentioned that people concerned about tanking might not understand how the game has changed in terms of valuing younger players. Since there have been so many skirmishes on that front over the last several years – alleged service time manipulation to delay a player's arbitration and free agency, the effect of qualifying offers on a player's free agency, the chill in last winter's free-agent market, the devaluation of saves, and now the use of "openers" that could devalue starting pitchers – why continue to deal with these issues individually? Wouldn't it make sense, given how the game has changed in regard to analytics, to sit down with the union and consider building a new player compensation system from scratch?

A: Collective bargaining agreements have terms. Usually what happens is, a trend develops during the term of an agreement that one party or the other has an issue with, and it gets addressed the next time around. I think our clubs, in general, are comfortable operating within the collective bargaining agreement we have now.

But, because I am a labor relations person at heart, I have gone to [union executive director] Tony Clark, and I have told him that I am prepared to sit down and talk about whatever you have on your agenda, at whatever point in time you are prepared to sit down and have those conversations. I've told him that does not mean I'm necessarily prepared to alter the terms of the current agreement. But, when you're talking about an agenda like you laid out there, starting early and having the conversations tomorrow is not necessarily a bad thing. And I have made that offer to Tony.

Q: The underlying issue is that the current system is set up where, if you can work your way through the minor leagues, and through three years in the major leagues without recourse to salary arbitration, and three more years in the majors under arbitration, then free agency is your chance to strike it rich. If that path is going to change, should the compensation system change accordingly?

A: The union has been wedded to the seniority-based compensation system that we have since the day I arrived in baseball in 1987. At various times over that history, we have suggested various alternative economic frameworks, some that were designed to compress payrolls in terms of having a minimum and a maximum. We made proposals in 1990 that were explicitly designed to link pay and performance more closely. They have wanted the seniority-based system. Over time, we have adjusted, and learned to live with it.

If in fact they want to do something different, it really is incumbent upon them to come forward and tell us what it is that they are thinking about. That is why I made the invitation to Tony that I did.

Q: When we talk how to make baseball more popular, we always hear this from fans: I'd just like to be able to watch the game I want to see, wherever I live, if I pay for television or streaming. Baseball's blackout rules prevent fans from seeing games. Can you foresee a day when fans that want to pay to see a game will not be turned away because of where they live, and what has to happen to get there?

A: First, and most important, we want to make our games as available to fans as we possibly can. We want them everywhere. Number two, we have made great strides in that regard, with products like mlb.tv and [the] At Bat [app] that make games available on all platforms. That's why we did the Facebook experiment. Some people liked it. Some people didn't. But it is an example of us trying to find every conceivable platform we can to make games available.

The blackout rules are a really important aspect of our economic system, and of the local television rights of each individual club. A lot of the clubs have granted rights to regional sports networks, in contracts that give those RSNs exclusive control over the local broadcast territory. Those contracts serve as a limitation on our ability to deal with the blackout issue. It doesn't mean that we're not going to continue to try to make games more available, but we do need to make those games available against the backdrop of the contractual commitments that have been made by the clubs. It's really that simple.

[The league encourages RSNs to make streaming available to network subscribers within local broadcast territories. The Dodgers' SportsNet LA broadcasts are not available in the Los Angeles market because Spectrum has chosen not to stream them, not because of an MLB blackout rule.]

Q: When you became commissioner, I asked if the best available markets for expansion might be outside the United States and you said, "I think that is probably right." Now that you have played additional exhibition games in Montreal and regular-season games in Mexico, what have you learned that might make you more or less confident in that assessment?

A: I think the results of our play in Montreal during the exhibitions, and in Mexico for exhibitions and the regular season games, confirm the fact that, outside the United States and close enough to the United States are markets that are very interested in having major league baseball. That level of interest, I think, is a huge positive for the sport. That remains a viable alternative for us to explore once we get past the stadium issues in Tampa and Oakland.

Q: Speaking of Oakland: In California, we generally do not publicly finance stadiums any more. The A's are interested in securing their financing by developing the land around the Oakland Coliseum and using the revenue to build a new ballpark, either on that site or at the Howard Terminal waterfront site. The Angels would have financed an Angel Stadium renovation by developing some of the land around the stadium, at no cost to the city of Anaheim, but the city rejected the idea because the land would not be sold to the Angels at fair market value. Do you believe this is a reasonable way to solve the stadium financing dilemma in California?

A: Major league baseball stadiums have been tremendous drivers of development. It started in Baltimore. It continued through Coors Field in Denver, and the best example recently is what has gone on and continues to go on in Washington, in an area that the city had tried to develop for years.

Our stadiums are civic assets. I know economists argue about football stadiums and basketball arenas, but with 81 home dates, I think the evidence is pretty clear that baseball stadiums drive development. We understand that the availability of governmental financing is much more limited today. I do believe that one way clubs that can make up that gap in what has traditionally been available, in terms of funding, is with development opportunities.

I think the SunTrust development in Atlanta is a great example of a development around a ballpark that is supportive of the massive investment that has to be made in order to build a state-of-the-art baseball facility.

I want to be clear about the Oakland situation. The A's made a \$137-million offer to buy the Coliseum site. They're not looking for free land. *[That is the value of the city and county debt on the complex, not an appraised land value.]*

Q: Many economists would say, at least in a downtown area, development is going to happen one way or the other. Why should a city subsidize a ballpark?

A: I think, if you look at the areas around stadiums, "one way or the other" is a bad bet. In the cities I just mentioned, development was just not ongoing. Maybe someday, in 2050, it would have happened. I think it's really hard to argue with the fact that those stadiums certainly moved the development process along.

Q: What does it mean for the league that Billie Jean King now is part of the Dodgers' ownership group?

A: From day one, Mark Walter, Todd [Boehly] and Peter [Guber] -- the principal owners -- have been intent on having diversity in their ownership group. I think this is another step along that road. In terms of the institution of major league baseball, it is a huge positive. To have someone who is a legend in another sport as part of an ownership group in baseball, there is nothing but positive about that.

Q: For years, even before you became commissioner, the Dodgers have talked about wanting to bring the All-Star Game back to Dodger Stadium for the first time since 1980. What made the pitch successful this time, when you awarded the 2020 game to the Dodgers?

A: L.A. is a very big city. There's a lot going on. It is more challenging in a city like that to get the facilities and the hotels lined up in a way that works for an All-Star Game, because there are so many alternative things going on. They were proactive in terms of getting those facilities lined up for us. They overcame some hurdles that I thought might delay or impede getting the game there by working closely with the mayor, who was tremendously supportive. They just made a great bid.

Look, for us, being in L.A. is a tremendous opportunity to market the game. There's the crossover with all the entertainment groups that are there, all the stars. I am really looking forward to a great event in 2020.

FROM BASEBALL AMERICA

2018 MLB Rookie Of The Year: Shohei Ohtani

By Kyle Glaser

Billy Eppler still remembers when he first saw Shohei Ohtani on a baseball field. The Angels' general manager couldn't forget it if he tried.

The year was 2013, Ohtani's rookie season in Nippon Professional Baseball. Eppler was a Yankees assistant general manager on a trip to scout players across Japan, namely Rakuten righthander Masahiro Tanaka.

Eppler's charge was to focus on priority targets eligible to come to the United States in the near future. Ohtani, just 18 years old, was too young to be one of them.

But every time Eppler beared down on another player, Ohtani kept popping up, swerving into Eppler's field of vision and demanding his attention. An executive in title but scout at heart, Eppler couldn't help but look again and again at the tall, gangly teenager playing both ways as both a hitter and pitcher.

"It was a very explosive-looking athlete, kind of had everything you wanted," Eppler recalled. "If you have a scouting background you really enjoy watching tools. To see those types of tools on both sides of the inning come from the same person was unique. That's the best way to put it. It was something you hadn't seen before."

Eppler was hardly alone in that assessment, which was reinforced to him in follow-up trips to Japan in 2014 and 2015. Dozens of other evaluators across baseball felt the same way, setting the stage for a highly anticipated move to MLB.

When the move finally came this season, Ohtani showed the wider baseball world that he was, indeed, unlike anything they'd seen before.

Ohtani, 24, delivered a nearly unprecedented season as a rookie with the Angels, simultaneously excelling as both a hitter and pitcher and shattering all notions about what is possible in today's game. Even considering Ohtani was limited to 10 starts and just over a half-season's worth of plate

appearances due to injury and the demands of juggling both roles, his performance stands out as historic.

Ohtani hit .285 with a .925 OPS and 22 home runs in 367 plate appearances (a 34-homer pace), numbers in line with Paul Goldschmidt's.

He delivered a 3.31 ERA, 11.0 strikeouts per nine innings and a 1.16 WHIP on the mound, numbers in line with Luis Severino's.

Ohtani joined Babe Ruth in 1919 as the only players in major league history to hit 15 home runs and pitch 50 innings in a season. He became the first player with 15 home runs and 50 pitching strikeouts in a season, something not even Ruth accomplished.

For living up to impossible expectations and starring as both a pitcher and hitter at the highest level of baseball in the world, Ohtani is the 2018 Baseball America Rookie of the Year.

"I didn't really know what to expect here, so I didn't really set any expectations for myself," Ohtani said through translator Ippei Mizuhara before the Angels' final series of the season in Anaheim. "But once I got here, I feel like I got the level of competition early, even though there were some struggles."

Ah yes, those struggles. For a brief moment, it looked like the hype was too good to be true.

Ohtani entered spring training with the eyes of the baseball world watching him, and he promptly struck out 10 times in 32 at-bats in the Cactus League while getting pummeled on the mound, even in minor league "B" games. It got so bad opposing evaluators questioned if he'd be best served starting in the minors. Hitting and pitching at the same time in Japan was one thing, but this was the major leagues, and a century of history said it could not be done.

Eppler and the Angels, however, never wavered.

"There was a lot of confidence, and I think a lot of our mindset, perhaps it has something to do with the scouting background, was trust the tools," Eppler said. "Guys that I had been around in baseball that helped developed me, the Bill Liveseys and the Gene Michaels, it was 'trust the tools, trust the tools,' and the tools were out of this world. And the performance at, again, the level that is closest to the majors leagues as you can get (NPB) was out of this world. So all signs were pointing toward you letting this guy get an opportunity to go do what he does."

Once the games actually began to count, it took Ohtani all of one week to silence his skeptics.

In his first career start, Ohtani beat the Athletics with six strong innings, touching 99.6 mph. He followed by hitting a home run in each of his next three games, including a 400-foot shot to the opposite field off Corey Kluber. And then he delivered his coup de grace, taking a perfect game into the seventh inning against the A's in his first home start and finishing with seven scoreless frames, one hit allowed and 12 strikeouts.

It was a definitive statement, one that put the questions to rest. Yes, it was possible to excel as a pitcher and a hitter at the same time in the major leagues today.

And yes, Ohtani was the man to do it.

“I have no satisfaction showing (people) up or anything like that because looking at my numbers during spring training, I can’t really blame them for saying those type of things,” Ohtani said. “Maybe I really was not major league-ready at that time. But that time was really important to me now that I look back at it. Without those struggles, maybe I wouldn’t have had success this year. I tried to take positive stuff out of it.”

Ohtani’s feats continued throughout the season.

There was the 11 strikeouts in 6.1 innings against the Twins. There was the nine strikeouts in 7.2 dominant innings against the Mariners. There was the run of five consecutive starts allowing two earned runs or less, the 15 home runs of at least 410 feet and, oh by the way, 10 stolen bases.

As long as his body allowed him, Ohtani impacted the game both ways unlike anything seen in almost a century.

“He was as advertised, if not more,” Athletics manager Bob Melvin said. “I was a little bit skeptical. You saw the pitching end of it, we saw early on how dominant he can be, and anybody who throws 100 miles an hour with a plus split and good breaking stuff is going to have success and he did, and I think we were the team that saw it the most.

“But I didn’t know he was going to be this good a hitter. You look at the numbers and you say ‘Yeah, this is a true two-way guy who’s fast and has got some power, but would both ends of it translate here?’ And it absolutely has. He’s a force at the plate. He’s a unique athlete for this game and probably better than we expected.”

But there is a caveat. Ohtani’s body didn’t allow him to do it for long.

Ohtani had a partial tear in his right ulnar collateral ligament when he signed with the Angels and further damaged it during the season, limiting him to 51.2 innings. He had Tommy John surgery after the season and will be unable to pitch all of 2019, though the plan is for him to continue to hit through the season as the Angels’ designated hitter.

The Angels were prepared for this eventuality. They did everything in their power to prevent it, collecting physical and medical data from Ohtani every single day and making decisions to play him or not based on that info, as well as feedback from Ohtani himself.

But Ohtani’s UCL still tore despite that level of care and vigilance, and Eppler even admits it wasn’t entirely unforeseen.

“One of the questions I asked Shohei very, very early in the process, I asked him ‘When was the first time you touched 97 miles an hour?’ and he said ‘16 or 17,’” Eppler said. “And I said OK, it kind of fits the bill. It’s been eight years of throwing at an extreme velocity, and that’s kind of normal, it’s not irregular, for a ligament to start getting compromised after that many years of throwing that hard. ... The elbow did not go because of a singular event. The elbow went because of the totality of the work over those eight years of him being able to throw over or touch 97 miles an hour.”

The question now becomes whether Ohtani can physically handle pitching and hitting at the same time over a full major league season.

Ohtani has not pitched 150 innings in a season since 2015 in Japan. By the time he returns to the mound in 2020, it will be five years since he handled a major league-level pitching workload.

Even Ruth, the standard-bearer for two-way excellence, eventually settled on one. After hitting 20 home runs for the first time in 1919 as a 24-year-old—the same age Ohtani is now—Ruth pitched only five more games the rest of his career. (Although Ruth also did not have the DH available to him).

Eppler is definitive: As soon as Ohtani's elbow is healed, he will return to the mound as a starter while continuing to hit in the middle of the Angels lineup.

"I want him out there doing both disciplines because that's what he's trained for," Eppler said. "I know that's a goal of his and I think now that people have seen it, I think it's a goal of everybody to continue to see him do that.

"It's hard to say an exact workload. There's been models in what he's done in Japan, I think those are pretty good thumbprints to look at it. Sometimes that can end in 130-150 innings on the mound and somewhere between 280-350 plate appearances. It really varies. But he's impactful on both sides and we want to try to maximize his ability to impact the game and be out there as much as possible."

Ohtani, for his part, is just focusing on the near future.

"I got the injury so in that case it wasn't a fully satisfying season," Ohtani said.

"Since I got hurt and am going to be not pitching next year, my initial plans or goals have kind of changed. As a pitcher, my focus is to go through the rehab and try to make it back in 2020 as an even better pitcher than I was in the past. As a hitter, I just want to concentrate next year on trying to play full time and obviously try to make the postseason and win the World Series. That's my biggest goal."

There is understandable skepticism Ohtani can hold long-term up over such a dual workload. Then again, there was understandable skepticism that anyone could excel as both a starting pitcher and hitter in Major League Baseball today for any extended capacity, and Ohtani did so in spectacular fashion.

With an exhilarating rookie season, Ohtani lived up to all the hype. He pitched like an ace and hit like an All-Star, and reset the standard for what is, in fact, achievable in the game today.

FROM YAHOO! SPORTS**Yahoo Sports 2018 All-MLB Team: Mookie Betts, Mike Trout lead way**

By Jeff Passan

Two outfielders, two starting pitchers and two relief pitchers were unanimous choices on the Yahoo Sports 2018 All-MLB Team, garnering first-team votes on 60 ballots filled out by players, general managers, front-office officials, scouts, analysts, writers, broadcasters and other major league personnel surveyed.

Because Major League Baseball's only position-by-position recognition takes place halfway through the season at the All-Star Game, Yahoo last year put together its inaugural All-MLB Team. Adding 15 voters this season did not stop Boston Red Sox outfielder Mookie Betts, Los Angeles Angels outfielder Mike Trout, New York Mets starter Jacob deGrom, Washington Nationals starter Max Scherzer, Seattle Mariners closer Edwin Díaz and Oakland A's closer Blake Treinen from polling perfectly.

Four other players were named on all 60 ballots with a mixture of first- and second-team votes: Milwaukee Brewers outfielder Christian Yelich, Red Sox designated hitter J.D. Martinez, Houston Astros starter Justin Verlander and Tampa Bay Rays starter Blake Snell. Also named 60 times was Brewers reliever Josh Hader, though on a technicality. One respondent left him off altogether, while another put Hader on both the first- and second-team ballots despite instructions to include a player only once. Perhaps he thought Hader's season was so good it warranted being named twice.

Balloting hiccup aside, the 60 players recognized – 20 each on the first, second and third teams – were a mixture of new and old. Five players repeated from the inaugural first team: Trout, Scherzer, Red Sox closer Craig Kimbrel, Cleveland Indians shortstop Francisco Lindor and Indians third baseman José Ramírez, who made it as a utilityman in 2017. In all, 22 players from last season's team returned this year.

Four teams tied with five players apiece on the 2018 version: the Astros, Indians, Los Angeles Dodgers and New York Yankees. The latter two did not place a player on the first team. The Red Sox, Indians and Brewers were the only organizations with multiple first-teamers. It certainly beat the fortunes of the Baltimore Orioles, Chicago White Sox, Toronto Blue Jays and Minnesota Twins. Not only were they the only four franchises not to place a player on any of the three teams, none of their players even received a single vote.

In total, voters cast valid ballots for 136 players. Fifty-four of them were pitchers, and two were in rather reversed roles thanks to the Tampa Bay Rays' novel approach to pitching. Ryan Yarbrough, a starting pitcher by trade who worked out of the bullpen for long stretches when the Rays began using a relief pitcher to start a game, received six votes as a reliever, including one on the first team. One vote was cast for the Rays' Ryne Stanek— who hasn't thrown more than two innings in an appearance this season — as a starter after he opened 29 games.

Neither cracked the threshold to make the final groups. Only the elite of the elite do. Introducing the 2018 All-MLB Team:

2018 YAHOO SPORTS AII-MLB FIRST TEAM

C: J.T. Realmuto, Miami Marlins
1B: Freddie Freeman, Atlanta Braves
2B: Javier Báez, Chicago Cubs
SS: Francisco Lindor, Cleveland Indians
3B: José Ramírez, Cleveland Indians
***OF:** Mookie Betts, Boston Red Sox
***OF:** Mike Trout, Los Angeles Angels
OF: Christian Yelich, Milwaukee Brewers
DH: J.D. Martinez, Boston Red Sox
UT: Matt Carpenter, St. Louis Cardinals
***SP:** Jacob deGrom, New York Mets
***SP:** Max Scherzer, Washington Nationals
SP: Justin Verlander, Houston Astros
SP: Blake Snell, Tampa Bay Rays
SP: Aaron Nola, Philadelphia Phillies
***RP:** Edwin Díaz, Seattle Mariners
***RP:** Blake Treinen, Oakland A's
RP: Josh Hader, Milwaukee Brewers
RP: Adam Ottavino, Colorado Rockies
RP: Craig Kimbrel, Boston Red Sox
**Unanimous selections*

SECOND TEAM

C: Yasmani Grandal, Los Angeles Dodgers
1B: Paul Goldschmidt, Arizona Diamondbacks
2B: Jose Altuve, Houston Astros
SS: Manny Machado, Los Angeles Dodgers
3B: Alex Bregman, Houston Astros
OF: Lorenzo Cain, Milwaukee Brewers
OF: Mitch Haniger, Seattle Mariners
OF: Ronald Acuña Jr., Atlanta Braves
DH: Khris Davis, Oakland A's
UT: Ben Zobrist, Chicago Cubs
SP: Trevor Bauer, Cleveland Indians
SP: Gerrit Cole, Houston Astros
SP: Corey Kluber, Cleveland Indians
SP: Chris Sale, Boston Red Sox
SP: Kyle Freeland, Colorado Rockies
RP: José Leclerc, Texas Rangers
RP: Dellin Betances, New York Yankees
RP: Jeremy Jeffress, Milwaukee Brewers
RP: Aroldis Chapman, New York Yankees
RP: Will Smith, San Francisco Giants

THIRD TEAM

C: Wilson Ramos, Philadelphia Phillies
1B: Max Muncy, Los Angeles Dodgers
2B: Scooter Gennett, Cincinnati Reds
SS: Andrelton Simmons, Los Angeles Angels
3B: Matt Chapman, Oakland A's
OF: Aaron Judge, New York Yankees
OF: Aaron Hicks, New York Yankees
OF: Bryce Harper, Washington Nationals
DH: Nelson Cruz, Seattle Mariners
UT: Whit Merrifield, Kansas City Royals
SP: Patrick Corbin, Arizona Diamondbacks
SP: Luis Severino, New York Yankees
SP: Miles Mikolas, St. Louis Cardinals
SP: Clayton Kershaw, Los Angeles Dodgers
SP: Mike Clevinger, Cleveland Indians
RP: Felipe Vázquez, Pittsburgh Pirates
RP: Ryan Pressly, Houston Astros
RP: Craig Stammen, San Diego Padres
RP: Sean Doolittle, Washington Nationals
RP: Kenley Jansen, Los Angeles Dodgers

FROM MLB.COM

These were MiLB's biggest surprise performers

By Jim Callis

Every self-respecting baseball writer has to announce his postseason predictions. While it may be boring, I see the Astros beating the Dodgers in a repeat of the 2017 World Series after those clubs knock off the Red Sox and the Brewers in the Championship Series.

How did I do with **my preseason picks**? I correctly identified three of the six division winners and seven of the 10 playoff participants (missing on the Angels, D-backs and Nationals while selling the Athletics, Braves and Rockies short). I picked Houston to beat Los Angeles in the World Series back in March too, so I'm nothing if not consistent.

I'll give you two, a pitcher and a position player. Astros right-hander Josh James had done little to distinguish himself in his first four professional seasons, then easily led the Minors in strikeout rate (13.5 per nine innings) before fanning 38 in 21 2/3 innings in Houston. Rays first baseman Nate Lowe was better known as Josh Lowe's big brother and totaled just 11 homers in his first two pro seasons before going deep 27 times this year and batting .330/.416/.568 while zooming from high Class A to Triple-A.

Because Kopech (White Sox) and Espinoza (Padres) are recovering from Tommy John surgery and Greene (Reds) is dealing with elbow woes, rather than any of them having shoulder issues, I'm optimistic

they can reclaim their impressive stuff. The track record with elbow reconstructions is much more positive compared to shoulder surgeries.

Kopech's prospect status gets dinged a bit because he'll miss 2019 and has to come back from Tommy John surgery, but his pure stuff was as good as any Minor Leaguer's before he got hurt. Greene will avoid surgery for now, has the most effortless triple-digit fastball ever and is still just 19. Espinoza hasn't pitched in a game since 2016, but he's still just 20 and has an electric arm with the potential for three plus pitches.

Oregon State catcher Adley Rutschman and Colleyville (Texas) Heritage High shortstop Bobby Witt Jr. are the leading college and prep prospects eight months from the 2019 Draft. A lot can and will change in that time, however. Just look at a year ago, when Florida right-hander Brady Singer and Santiago High (Corona, Calif.) Brice Turang were in the same position Rutschman and Witt are now, yet went 18th and 21st overall in the 2018 Draft.

The player most likely to push his way into consideration for one of the top two picks in 2019 is Blessed Trinity Catholic High (Roswell, Ga.) shortstop CJ Abrams. He has game-changing speed, hitting ability along with power potential, plus the ability to play quality defense at shortstop or center field. He's similar to Twins shortstop Royce Lewis, the No. 1 overall pick in the 2017 Draft.

Three more names to watch, one from each of the other college/high school and hitter/pitcher demographics: California first baseman Andrew Vaughn, Duke left-hander Graeme Stinson and Georgia Premier Academy (Statesboro, Ga.) right-hander Daniel Espino.

Most first-rounders have star potential or they wouldn't be first-rounders, and it's too early to call anyone a bust after one full season. But I like this question and I'm going to answer based on which 2017 first-rounders have seen their stock rise and fall the most.

Outfielder Jo Adell did go No. 10 overall to the Angels, but a lot of teams still questioned his hitting ability because he swung and missed a lot on the high school showcase circuit. He erased those concerns by batting .290/.355/.543 with 20 homers and 15 steals this year while reaching Double-A at age 19. Adell might have the best all-around tools in the Minors and conceivably could rank as the top prospect in baseball next season.

On the other end of the spectrum is another outfielder who came with worries about his bat: Jeren Kendall, who went 23th overall to the Dodgers. I loved Kendall's all-around tools and thought he should have been an easy top-10 choice, but swing-and-miss and signability issues caused him to drop. Scouts increasingly question whether he'll make enough contact after he fanned in 32 percent of his plate appearances this year while batting .215/.300/.356 with 12 homers and 37 steals at the Class A Advanced level.

FROM BLEACHER REPORT**Best Landing Spots for Top MLB Free Agents***

By Joel Reuter

With 22 fanbases already focused on the upcoming offseason, we'll continue to sprinkle some free-agency content in among our postseason coverage.

Last week, we took a look at some dark-horse suitors for the top players set to become available this offseason.

The focus there was to identify some outside-the-box landing spots.

This time around, we're taking a more traditional approach and looking at the single best landing spot for all of the marquee names that will hit the open market once the World Series concludes.

Free-agency prognostication is always a fluid process, with things shifting as more rumors surface, but for now, this should serve as a preliminary primer for the 2018-19 free-agent market.

Corner Infielders**3B Mike Moustakas: Los Angeles Angels**

The Angels looked like a good landing spot for Mike Moustakas last offseason before he settled for re-signing with the Kansas City Royals on a one-year, \$6.5 million deal.

The right-handed-heavy lineup was sorely lacking in production from the left side, and a year later, that's still the case after lefties batted a paltry .220/.286/.397 in 2018.

While Zack Cozart was signed to play third base last offseason, he's currently recovering from surgery to repair a torn labrum in his shoulder. He could easily shift over to second base once he returns or even fill a super-utility role.

There is still the matter of a \$15 million mutual option in Moustakas' current contract, but chances are he'll be hitting the open market for a second straight winter.

Starting Pitchers**Dallas Keuchel: Los Angeles Angels**

There's a good chance the Astros will bring back Dallas Keuchel or Charlie Morton, but re-signing both could be tricky.

Keuchel is an obvious Plan B for both the Dodgers and Yankees if the above predictions don't come to fruition.

However, as far as an ideal landing spot, the Angels look like an excellent fit.

The 30-year-old would immediately become the ace of the staff, and he's always pitched well at Angel Stadium, going 8-1 with a 3.26 ERA and 1.11 WHIP in 12 starts.

If the Angels hope to finally return to the postseason, upgrading the starting rotation is a must.

**Article cut to only include Angels-related material.*

1 Make-or-Break Offseason Decision Each MLB Team Faces*

By Joel Reuter

The MLB offseason has already begun for two-thirds of the league, so it's time to look ahead at some of the biggest storylines set to unfold this winter.

There will be plenty to come about potential free-agent landing spots or speculation on blockbuster deals.

For this article, we're going to take a more broad view by honing in on the one critical decision each team is facing this offseason.

Whether it's exploring an extension with a young star, deciding what to do with a key free agent or shopping a marquee player in an effort to maximize his value, these decisions come in all shapes and sizes.

Every front office is facing at least one that could significantly change the complexion of the team.

AL West

Houston Astros: The free agency of Dallas Keuchel and Charlie Morton

While Cy Young candidates Justin Verlander and Gerrit Cole will both be back next season, the Astros stand to lose two other key members of the rotation in Dallas Keuchel and Charlie Morton.

With their window to contend wide-open and money to spend, what they do to address the starting rotation will be one of the more compelling storylines of the offseason.

Assuming Lance McCullers Jr. is also locked into a spot on the staff next year, they could turn things over to youngsters Josh James and Framber Valdez to round out the staff until top prospect Forrest Whitley is ready.

They could also conceivably make a run at Clayton Kershaw if he opts out and tests the market. Or they could just bring back Keuchel and Morton and stick with the status quo. We shall see.

Los Angeles Angels: Who will be the next manager?

Before the Angels decide how to best bolster the roster around superstar Mike Trout, they need to decide on a new manager.

Mike Scioscia announced earlier this week that he was stepping down from the post he's held for the past 19 seasons, and Angels general manager Billy Eppler already has an idea of what he's looking for in the team's next manager.

"What we're looking for in that next manager is connectivity with the players," Eppler told reporters. "We're looking for somebody who can think with a probability-based mindset. We're going to look for someone who is eager to grow and evolve. Someone that can develop a culture that will put the welfare of the team above any singular person. Those are the criteria that we're going to look for in our next manager."

Former Oakland third baseman and current Angels special assistant Eric Chavez is the early favorite, according to Bob Nightengale of *USA Today*.

Oakland Athletics: Next year's starting rotation

The A's squeezed all they could out of Edwin Jackson, Trevor Cahill and Brett Anderson this season, but counting on anyone from that group to be part of the 2019 rotation is risky.

Sean Manaea is expected to miss the bulk of 2019 recovering from shoulder surgery, and Kendall Graveman will be recovering from Tommy John surgery.

So at this point, deadline pickup Mike Fiers and right-hander Daniel Mengden look like the only safe bets to fill a rotation spot next year.

Frankie Montas and Chris Bassitt are notable in-house options, while prospects A.J. Puk and Jesus Luzardo could also be ready to make an impact. But getting at least a few outside additions seems like a must.

Seattle Mariners: The free agency of Nelson Cruz

To say that Nelson Cruz made good on the four-year, \$57 million deal he recently wrapped up with the Mariners would be a massive understatement.

Over the life of that contract, Cruz posted a 148 OPS+ while averaging 41 home runs, 104 RBI and 4.2 WAR.

Both player and team have expressed interest in a reunion, according to Bob Dutton of KLAY 1180 AM, but it's up for debate whether bringing him back would be a wise move.

At this point in his career, shifting 35-year-old Robinson Cano into the everyday designated hitter role might be the best way to maximize the five years and \$120 million left on his contract. Bringing back Cruz would effectively block such a move.

It also stands to reason that pitching should be the team's top priority, so letting Cruz walk and reallocating that money toward the pitching staff might be the best course of action.

Texas Rangers: Who will be traded?

It's hard to envision a scenario in which the Rangers are contenders in 2019.

That makes them obvious candidates to sell off some veteran pieces in the name of rebuilding this offseason, but who will be dangled?

A bounce-back season from Rougned Odor coupled with his team-friendly contract could make him a player of interest. Young sluggers Nomar Mazara and Joey Gallo both have value if the front office is really looking to blow things up. Controllable reliever Jose Leclerc is probably the most likely player to be moved.

Just how aggressively they decide to sell will give an idea of what the next several years are going to look like in Arlington.

**Article cut to only include AL West-related material.*