

Stars sans fanfare: 2018 All-Underrated Team

By Anthony Castrovine MLB.com @castrovine

"Underrated" is one of those words we toss out in our sports dialogue with no real idea what it means. Our interpretation of what or who is or is not underrated is all relative to the specifics of our circumstances -- what we read, what we watch, what we experience. I can guarantee you there were people who walked by Mike Trout at the Super Bowl the other night and didn't know who the heck he was, and so I could argue that Trout is underrated.

But every year, when I fill out my All-Underrated Team for the season ahead, I like to lay out clear guidelines as to the type of players I'm looking for:

1. At least two years of service time
2. No All-Stars
3. No finalists (top three in the voting) for major awards (MVP, Cy Young, Rookie of the Year)
4. No nine-figure contracts

That whittles the list of candidates down to a precious few (and as you'll see, I'm guilty of fudging one of those rules with one guy on this year's list), but it keeps this exercise from becoming overly subjective. Or maybe my qualifications are overrated. I don't know.

Anyway, here's this year's team.

Catcher: Mike Zunino, Mariners

J.T. Realmuto held this spot last year, and he arguably still belongs. But he's a reasonably high-profile trade candidate at the moment, and we're going to look for new blood in several spots on this roster.

There was a time in the not-too-distant past where Zunino looked like a prospect bust. Actually, just last May, he was optioned off Seattle's big league roster for a spell to get some intensive work on his swing mechanics. But the M's had seen real flashes from Zunino's bat late in 2016, and they saw real changes in his final 100 games in '17 (.921 OPS, 25 homers, 20 doubles), and when the offense adds to the defensive value Zunino presents behind the dish, you have a potential cornerstone player -- even if it took a lot of patience to get to this point.

First base: Justin Bour, Marlins

Carlos Santana was on this list a year ago and still technically qualifies, but considering he has the second-largest contract given to a free agent this offseason (three years, \$60 million with the Phillies), let's shine a spotlight on one of the few productive players the Marlins haven't traded.

Between platoons and injuries, the 29-year-old Bour hasn't played more than 129 games in a season (he played 108 last year), but in 2017, he proved he can produce against lefties (.253/.327/.483), which bodes well for his usage moving forward. Over the last three years, his Weighted Runs Created Plus (wRC+) mark of 123 (or 23 percent better than league average) is better than that of Eric Hosmer (120). And though his performance got drowned out by that of Aaron Judge, Bour was an animal in the Home Run Derby last year, hitting dingers and eating doughnuts.

Second base: Cesar Hernandez, Phillies

It's easy to miss solid players on rebuilding ballclubs, and if Hernandez's name has been bandied about by the casual fan at all the last year or so, it's typically been as a trade candidate. But the list of second basemen who have compiled higher FanGraphs-calculated Wins Above Replacement marks than Hernandez (7.6) over the last two seasons is a short one: Jose Altuve (14.3), Brian Dozier (10.8), Daniel Murphy (9.9), Robinson Cano (9.2) and Ian Kinsler (8.1).

Hernandez's second-half surge in 2016 looked a little fluky, but his final '16 and '17 numbers were virtually identical as his improved walk rate stabilized.

Shortstop: Jean Segura, Mariners

Didi Gregorius held this spot last year and still qualifies after his 25-homer campaign. But we're spreading the love around. I'm admittedly guilty of breaking one of my rules set above with this one, because Segura was an All-Star in 2013. But look, that was five years ago (I had to look it up to remember it), and at a time when there are so many incredibly young shortstops to celebrate across MLB, it's easy for the 27-year-old Segura -- who brings a nice blend of speed, defense and batting average -- to get lost in the shuffle. His 120 wRC+ mark over the last two seasons is bested by just two qualified shortstops -- Carlos Correa (135) and Corey Seager (120). So don't sell him... short.

Third base: Anthony Rendon, Nationals

Rendon finished sixth in the National League MVP Award voting last year, but he had a good argument to land higher. To date, his notoriety revolves around two superlative offensive seasons (2014 and '17) and one especially outlandish game (six hits, three homers and 10 RBIs last April 30). If the improved plate discipline he demonstrated in '17 is his new norm, he's not long for this list. But the defensive value Rendon provides even in those stretches where he's not sizzling at the dish make him one of the Nats' most valuable players.

Heck, look at how the understated Rendon stacks up with Bryce Harper in the two WAR calculations (FanGraphs and Baseball Reference) over the last four years:

Harper: 17.2 (2014-17 bWAR); 19.1 (2014-17 fWAR)

Rendon: 17.0 (2014-17 bWAR); 19.0 (2014-17 fWAR)

Left field: Adam Eaton, Nationals

Eaton was on this list a year ago as a means of pointing out why the huge prospect haul the Nationals gave up for him might not be totally crazy. He then stormed out the gate with a .393 on-base percentage in his first three weeks as a Nat ... and then blew out his left knee on the basepaths. Because it's deceptively easy to forget what an igniter and game-changing defender the Nats are getting back with Eaton's pending return to duty, I'm keeping him on the list. That's right: Eaton's repeatin'!

Center field: Tommy Pham, Cardinals

This feels like cheating, because Pham's big league success so far is limited to a small sample. But it also feels like cheating because Pham's 2017 numbers were so outlandish (he had a .306/.411/.520 slash in 530 plate appearances) that he's quickly veering into properly rated terrain.

Ah, whatever. Let's split the difference and put the Phamster on here. He earned it by fighting his way back into the Cards' plans (he's shifting full time to center to accommodate Marcell Ozuna) after injuries and a degenerative eye disease threatened to derail his promise and potential. He's turning 30, but he's seemingly just getting started -- and I, for one, am a big fan of Pham.

Right field: Steven Souza Jr., Rays

The Angels' Kole Calhoun occupied this spot on this list a year ago before taking a big step back offensively. Now a bounceback candidate, Calhoun might still belong here, but let's march on over to Souza (that pun goes out to all you military band fans) on the heels of his 2017 improvement in which he posted the most games played (148) and best OPS (.810) and OPS+ (121) marks of his career. Again, I generally prefer a little longer track record before committing to the "underrated" label, but this particular position was light on clear candidates for the list, and there's a lot to like about Souza's athleticism, speed and power.

Besides, Souza won me over by jokingly calling out the otherwise excellent Tampa Bay Times Rays beat reporter Marc Topkin for not putting Edgar Martinez on his Hall of Fame ballot.

Designated hitter: Khris Davis, A's

Since becoming a big league regular in 2014, the man they call "Khrush" has averaged a home run every 15.03 at-bats -- the seventh-best rate among qualified hitters in that span (and slightly better than that of this year's prominent power-hitting free agent, J.D. Martinez). Shorten the sample to just the last two seasons, and Davis' rate of a homer ever 13.2 at-bats is bested only by some guy named Giancarlo Stanton (11.7).

Davis strikes out a lot (a common problem in today's game), and the A's are making him more of a DH than an outfielder for a reason. But his pure power has allowed him to put up an OPS+ 26 percent better than league average over the last three years, and the home run rate not only survived a 2016 move from Milwaukee to Oakland, but actually improved.

Starting pitcher: Carlos Carrasco, Indians

To be clear, Carrasco did finish fourth in the American League Cy Young Award voting this past season, but that was not some one-year blip of brilliance. Over the last three years, this is where he ranks among all qualified Major League starters in the following categories:

ERA: 18th (3.41)

Fielding Independent Pitching (FIP): 10th (3.18)

Expected FIP (xFIP): 5th (3.06)

FanGraphs WAR: 10th (12.8)

Walks and Hits per Inning Pitched (WHIP): 10th (1.10)

Strikeout rate minus walk rate: 7th (22.1)

Carrasco's xFIP is virtually identical to teammate and two-time AL Cy Young Award winner Corey Kluber in that span. Coming off his first 200-inning season, Carrasco belongs on the short list of the game's best starting arms.

Relief pitcher: Addison Reed, Twins

Reed all about it: In the three-year span beginning with 2015, FanGraphs has Reed worth 4.5 WAR and Wade Davis worth 4.3 WAR. Davis got a three-year, \$52 million contract from the Rockies this offseason (that's the highest average annual value ever for a closer), while Reed got a two-year, \$16.75 million deal from the Twins.

Reed has been a target in two of the last three summer trade periods for a reason. He can deliver high-quality, high-leverage relief in any inning asked, and it wouldn't be a shock if he succeeds fellow Twins signee Fernando Rodney in the ninth inning at some point this season. He doesn't blow people away, but he doesn't walk them, either. Reed has a 5.96 strikeout-to-walk ratio and 0.996 WHIP over the last two seasons, good enough to close things out for my All-Underrated squad.

Indians enter '18 with Series-or-bust mentality

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- There is only one goal in the collective minds of the Indians as Spring Training arrives this year. From the front-office boardrooms to the manager's office and down to the clubhouse, the sole focus throughout the organization is bringing a World Series triumph to Cleveland.

The Indians had a powerhouse team in 2017 -- one that won 102 games and set an American League record with a 22-game winning streak -- but was upset by the Yankees in the AL Division Series. One year earlier, the Tribe reached the Fall Classic, only to lose in seven games to the Cubs. If any team was going to embrace a sense of unfinished business, it's this club from Cleveland.

"To get so close in '16 and to watch it go away, to lose," Indians pitcher Josh Tomlin said. "You look back on it as a successful season, a lot of great memories from it, but you still have that hunger and that taste in your mouth of getting back there to try to win. Obviously that's everybody's goal to start Spring Training."

Tomlin is among the players inside Cleveland's clubhouse who remain from the 2012 team that lost 94 games and paved the way for Terry Francona to come aboard as manager. In the five seasons since Francona brought his scooter to Progressive Field, the Indians have led the AL with 454 victories. Cleveland has been to the playoffs three times in that span and is coming off consecutive division crowns.

Given the state of the AL Central, the Indians head into the 2018 season as the favorites to win the division once again. The projections and predictions favor the Tribe largely due to the strength of the pitching staff, which returns with nearly the same cast that set a handful of single-season records last season. Two-time AL Cy Young Award winner Corey Kluber continues to lead the rotation, which remains intact from last summer.

There will be changes in 2018, though.

This offseason, the Indians bid adieu to longtime first baseman Carlos Santana and setup man Bryan Shaw, who signed free-agent pacts with the Phillies and Rockies, respectively. Joe Smith and Jay Bruce -- key in-season trade acquisitions last season -- also left via free agency. All four players filled critical roles at points throughout last year's memorable run to the postseason.

Francona, however, is quick to note how much of the roster remains unchanged.

"We've had very little movement on our team," said the manager. "You're going to lose guys. You can't keep everybody. We can't be the team that signs guys to their second or third contract. We need to be that team that gets guys for years one through eight, maybe give them that second contract."

Cleveland's notable moves this offseason were to pick up the team options for left fielder Michael Brantley (\$12 million) and Tomlin (\$3 million), and signing first baseman Yonder Alonso to a two-year, \$16 million pact. With the other internal raises, the team's payroll projects to reach a new all-time high for the franchise, surpassing \$130 million. That includes little in the way of external additions, though.

The Indians are trusting that the roster in place -- most of which generated the 2017 success -- can once again lead the team to the October stage.

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

This spring, Cleveland will have a competition for the back of the rotation, which includes Tomlin, Danny Salazar, Mike Clevinger and Ryan Merritt as candidates for two spots. There will be a wide-open race for a spot in the bullpen and a handful of players vying for a bench job. The Indians will also seek some clarity for the outfield, especially if Brantley (right ankle surgery) will not be ready for Opening Day.

No matter how those roster battles shake out, the team believes it has the pieces to contend for a World Series title.

"A handful of teams can say they're in a position to win a World Series," Tomlin said. "We're very fortunate to be in that position. We enjoy the expectations. It means we're doing our job. A lot of teams maybe might not like the expectations or the weight on their shoulders, but this team relishes that and enjoys that."

Yandy Diaz's launch-angle predicament

By Matt Kelly MLB.com @mattkellyMLB

To get a sense of why Indians rookie Yandy Diaz was one of the more puzzling hitters of 2017, consider the following two Statcast™ leaderboards.

The first is baseball's top five hitters in hard-hit rate, or balls hit with exit velocities of 95 mph or harder. Among the 387 Major Leaguers who produced at least 100 batted balls, these five were the most consistent at making hard contact.

Highest rate of hard-hit balls, 2017 (min. 100 balls in play)

1. Aaron Judge: 53.5 percent
2. Diaz: 50.8 percent
- 3-T. Alex Avila: 50.8 percent
- 3-T. Khris Davis: 50.8 percent
5. Joey Gallo: 49.8 percent

Judge, Gallo and Davis posted three of the Majors' five biggest home run totals. They should be at the top of this list. The D-backs just signed Avila after he quietly put up his best season in half a decade. But right behind the mighty Judge atop this list is Diaz, and one look at his imposing figure explains a lot. The man looks built to mash.

So the puzzling part with Diaz comes when one ranks the 313 Major Leaguers who produced at least 50 hard-hit balls by their weighted on-base average, or wOBA -- a statistic that's very similar to OBP, except that it gives hitters increasingly more credit for doubles, triples and homers -- on that hard contact:

Lowest wOBA produced on hard-hit contact, 2017 (min. 50)

313. Diaz: .448

312. Austin Romine: .469

311. J.J. Hardy: .471

310. Miguel Rojas: .482

309. Elias Diaz: .489

Recently, we examined how A's rookie Matt Olson maximized his hard contact by lifting it into the air. Olson ranked eighth on that hard-hit rate list, not far behind Diaz, but the difference in their results (.651 slugging percentage for Olson in 59 games, .327 for Diaz in 49 games) reflects the state of the game in 2018: Take to the air or risk being left behind.

Among those 313 hitters who produced 50-plus hard-hit balls, no one averaged a lower launch angle than Diaz at 2.2 degrees. That's the rough equivalent of hitting a ball straight into the ground, and Diaz paced MLB by "topping" 40.3 percent of his hard-hit balls, too. For context, MLB hitters as a unit produced a .372 wOBA on hard-hit balls with launch angles of five degrees or lower, as opposed to an .896 wOBA on hard contact hit anywhere higher. Only four of Diaz's 62 hard-hit balls were barrels, or those with struck with the ideal combinations of exit velocity and launch angle that typically lead to extra-base hits.

The proliferation of defensive shifts means grounders are swallowed up more now than ever, no matter how hard they're hit. Twenty-four of the 34 outs Diaz made on hard-hit balls came on the ground, including 14 on balls he hit over 100 mph. In fact, Diaz's .487 average on balls hit 100-plus mph ranked among the Majors' 10 lowest marks, and well below the league's .654 average. On Sept. 3, Diaz smoked this pitch from Tigers pitcher Chad Bell with a 105.2-mph exit velocity but ended up creating a pair of outs when he topped the ball into a double play.

Diaz's ground-ball profile is already well known in Cleveland, where there was plenty of excitement when he won the Tribe's third base job after a strong Spring Training. But Diaz slugged just .219 through early May and was sent down to Triple-A to recalibrate. Upon his arrival in Columbus, Diaz's instructions were not to overhaul his swing, but merely refine it.

"It was, 'Look, we like your approach,'" Indians assistant hitting coach Matt Quatraro said when Diaz returned to the team last August. "You're hitting balls hard the other way. You've got a great eye. You just happen to be catching them deep or you're not swinging at the pitches that you can drive. So don't change anything."

It's easy to understand why the Indians wouldn't want Diaz to try a swing transformation mid-season, and rate statistics did improve when he returned to Cleveland's lineup. Diaz hit .304 and compiled a .407 on-base percentage over 31 games in August and September, but he also slugged just .402 and failed to homer even once. A player with Diaz's physique, along with the raw exit velocity he recorded, should be more than a slap hitter. Statcast™ metrics show Diaz actually averaged a lower launch angle on his hard contact upon his return. Diaz hit slightly better in his return from Triple-A, but his hard contact remained stuck on the ground.

"There is plane to [Diaz's] swing," Indians hitting coach Ty Van Burkleo said last April. "It's just he catches the ball very deep and he has the ability to accelerate to the ball very deep, which allows for low trajectory, high velocity balls off the bat."

Letting the ball travel deep and hitting the other way is a strategy that's worked for many hitters over the years, but it may also be sapping Diaz of some potential power. A good chunk of his hard contact was hit the other way and on the ground, while we just saw Olson -- with nearly the same hard-hit rate -- make the most of his contact by pulling the ball and lifting it for line drives and fly balls.

Diaz's eye might already be more advanced than Olson, as he recorded a much lower whiff per swing rate (18.6 percent to Olson's 32 percent) while also swinging at fewer pitches outside the zone. The Indians, for their part, don't appear to be in a rush to change Diaz's mechanics.

"I think if you try to change somebody's launch angle -- you hear that all the time now -- I probably have a differing opinion on that than maybe a lot of other people" manager Terry Francona told MLB.com last spring. "I think you learn how to hit, and I think Yandy has a really good idea."

There's a large enough data sample to think Diaz's ball-to-bat skills are elite. But if Diaz's power continues to fall short this spring, it's worth wondering if some further swing changes could -- or should -- be on the way.

Inbox: Is Perez a lock to be Tribe's starting C?

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

Everywhere I look I see that Roberto Perez is listed as the starting catcher. Is this something that is for sure set in stone or is it fluid going into Spring Training?

-- Matt, Dublin, Ohio

No, Matt, I wouldn't say it is set in stone that Perez is the starting catcher for the Indians. When Spring Training begins, what I expect you'll hear from manager Terry Francona is that either Perez or Yan Gomes could get the call on any given night. They have each built a strong rapport with the pitching staff and are especially valued for what they bring defensively.

That said, there is a reason for Perez currently being billed as the No. 1 catcher in this 1A and 1B situation that Cleveland has behind the plate. When last season ended, Perez had started to assume a higher percentage of the innings for the Indians.

Overall in the 2017 regular season, Gomes logged 96 starts and caught 856 innings. He caught runners at a 42.1-percent clip and Cleveland's pitchers posted a 3.36 ERA with him doing the catching. Perez handled 580 2/3 innings and made 66 starts in the regular season, cutting down would-be basestealers at a 43.3-percent rate, and the staff pitched to a 3.22 ERA with him behind the plate.

Gomes caught more innings in each month from April through August, but Perez saw his workload increase over the final two months. In fact, Gomes (286 2/3) and Perez (278) nearly caught the same total of innings from August through the end of the Indians' postseason run. Perez did start to see a higher percentage of innings down the stretch, though.

Perez logged 146 innings compared to 120 for Gomes in September and also caught more innings (32) than Gomes (15) in the American League Division Series. From the start of Cleveland's 22-game winning streak (Aug. 24) through the end of the ALDS, Perez covered 205 innings vs. 171 for Gomes. This spring, we'll learn more about how Francona plans to divvy up his catchers' duties this year.

Can you give me some statistical analysis of @VizquelOmar13's HOF chances after 37% on his first ballot. Have any players ever climbed up from 37 to the Hall in the past? What does 37 mean for his future chances. I'm personally in the camp that that many Gold Gloves is #HOFworthy

Instead of going through every Hall of Fame ballot since 1936, I looked at the 30 years prior to the 2018 ballot, in which Omar Vizquel garnered 37 percent of the vote. I cast a slightly wider net, narrowing the field to players who earned between 20-45 percent of the vote on the first try. I included Andre Dawson, who netted 45.3 percent in his first year on the ballot in 2002.

There were 29 players who fit that criteria. Within that group, seven went on to earn a place in the Hall of Fame via voting by the Baseball Writers' Association of America: Jeff Bagwell, Tim Lincecum, Goose Goslin, Gary Carter, Bruce Sutter, Jim Rice and Dawson. One more, Jack Morris, was voted into the Hall this year by the Modern Era Committee.

The seven I noted (not counting Morris) needed an average of 9.9 years on the ballot to finally get in via the BBWAA. That, however, includes two (Sutter and Rice) who were voted in between Years 11-15 on the ballot. Now, a player can only remain on a ballot for 10 years. So, that leaves five out of 29 whom the BBWAA eventually voted in before they reached a decade on the ballot.

What does this mean for Vizquel? It means he's going to need some good campaigning over the next several years to convince the voters who didn't check his name this year. It will also help if the current logjam of names on the ballot is loosened up over the next few rounds of voting. Advanced metrics are not really on Vizquel's side, so his case will likely have to be helped by strong endorsements from those who watched him play or played alongside him.

@yeah_mitch

What is the likelihood of Mike Clevinger starting the year in AAA to retain an extra year of team control? Ideally, a strong spring completely ends that rumor, right? #IndiansInbox (Daniel Mitchell, Ashland)

If all of the Indians' rotation options get through Spring Training healthy and pitch well in the preseason, something will have to give. That could mean someone goes to the bullpen, or it could mean someone goes to the Minors. In Clevinger's case, he has a Minor League option remaining. So, if Cleveland wants to maintain depth at the start of the season without messing around with a move to the 'pen, I could see Clevinger opening at Triple-A Columbus. I think sending the righty down would have more to do with that than anything involving his service time.

@hogsback10

are the Indians set with Kip at 2 base? I loved Urshella at 3rd. Is he going to start in the minors this year? #indiansinbox

So much depends on where Michael Brantley is in his comeback from right ankle surgery as Opening Day approaches. Jason Kipnis fits the roster best as Cleveland's second baseman, but I could still see a scenario where he moved to left if Brantley's rehab lasts into April. That would open the door for Jose Ramirez to play second, and give guys like Yandy Diaz and Giovanny Urshela a shot at winning the job at third. If everyone is healthy, Urshela would probably be up against Erik Gonzalez for a utility role off the bench. Both Urshela and Gonzalez are out of options.

Is there a reason Tyler Naquin doesn't seem to be in the outfield conversation much anymore? His 2016 rookie season was a pleasant surprise, but he barely got any time with the team last year. He didn't have a good showing in his 19 games with the club in 2017, but that's a small sample size and his Triple-A numbers were solid (.833 OPS, 131 wRC+).

-- Phillip C., Bellbrook, Ohio

It's a no-room-in-the-inn situation for Naquin at the moment, if everyone is healthy. Bradley Zimmer is the favorite to return for center field and Lonnie Chisenhall (right) and Brantley (left) have the corners covered. Now, as noted earlier, if Brantley isn't ready for Opening Day, maybe that

gives someone like Naquin an opening. Cleveland is also factoring in that all of these outfielders hit from the left side. That is why a right-handed hitter like Melvin Upton Jr. is being brought into camp and why the Tribe is still exploring right-handed options on the market.

Who else will be playing first base besides Yonder Alonso? Could he platoon with Chisenhall perhaps?

-- Kiran R., Atlanta

Platooning with Chisenhall would not make much sense, considering they both hit from the left side. If Alonso is out of the lineup, though, Chisenhall could certainly serve as a backup for that spot. Edwin Encarnacion will get the bulk of the at-bats as a designated hitter again, but he can also back up Alonso at first. I could also see Diaz potentially getting reps at first this spring to see if his right-handed bat might fit there on occasion. Urshela also got some limited action at first base last year.

How will you remember Cleveland Indians' Chief Wahoo logo? Hey, Hoynsie

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com

There has been a lot of reaction to Tuesday's decision by MLB and the Indians to retire the Chief Wahoo logo after the 2018 season. The majority of fans who I heard from were in favor of keeping Chief Wahoo. It should be noted that I wrote a column on Tuesday saying I liked Chief Wahoo and equated it to baseball, not racism.

Here are two examples of the comments I received covering both sides of the debate.

Hey, Hoynsie: Thank you for taking the time to speak up on behalf of all of us who find Chief Wahoo to be nothing more than a logo. I have a handful of acquaintances who have been crowing about the logo change since Tuesday, saying that it should have happened years ago.

Unfortunately, in this day and age, the majority doesn't matter. Somebody was offended and they needed to be made whole again. My first reaction at hearing the news was "Well, I better go stock up on Wahoo gear for the next fifty years (I'm 48 and a lifelong Clevelander/Tribe fan). Thanks to the half-baked agreement, I can save my money (for the time being). – Jim Abbott, Cleveland.

Hey, Hoynsie: Words and images hurt. Racist images and stereotypes are inseparable from people. To you it was an image on a baseball cap, but to Native Americans it was much more insidious and offensive. How would those human beings like to be treated? Probably with dignity and respect – none of which comes from images like Chief Wahoo, people hooting and hollering in mock Indians' chants and making tomahawk chops.

But it should not take them crying out to recognize or oppose racism ... when we are silent in the face of discrimination, racism and persecution, we are complicit. – Rabbi Benjamin Zober.

Hey, Jim and Rabbi Zober: I think we can all agree that there are bigger things to worry about in the world than a logo for a baseball team. I still like Chief Wahoo and I don't think my opinion will ever change on that. To me it means baseball and going to the old Stadium when I was growing up.

But MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred and the team have agreed that this will be the logo's last season. The organization will retain the trademark and retail rights to Chief Wahoo, meaning they will continue to sell it on a limited basis in Northeast Ohio.

The Indians have worn some form of Chief Wahoo on their uniform for over 70 years. Perhaps it was a time for a change, but it will be interesting to see what kind of staying power The Chief has among the team's fans over the next five to 10 years.

Hey, Hoynsie: Is there any hope for former No. 1 pick Brady Aiken? – Brandon Baumgartner, West Fargo, N.D.

Hey, Brandon: James Harris, the Indians' director of player development, said the organization viewed Aiken's performance last season at Class A Lake County as his first full professional season after coming back from Tommy John surgery on his left elbow. The results weren't pretty in terms of the bottom line (5-13, 4.77 ERA), but the fact that he made 27 starts and threw 132 innings was encouraging.

Obviously, his control was not as he wanted as he walked 101, struck out 89 and threw 13 wild pitches. But the fact that he was able to make that many starts was a reflection of how hard he worked to get to that point. The Indians and everyone else will know a lot more about Aiken, their No.1 pick in 2015, based on how he performs in 2018.

Will Tribe try six-man rotation?

Hey, Hoynsie: Given the importance of keeping the rotation healthy, do you think the Indians would ever consider a six-man rotation? They certainly seem to have the depth for it. It would keep guys like Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco and Danny Salazar fresh for the postseason. – Sandy Rosenbluth, Beachwood.

Hey, Sandy: The Indians have avoided using a formal six-man rotation since Terry Francona took over as manager in 2013. I think they want to give Kluber, Carrasco and Trevor Bauer as many chances as possible to pitch on regular rest given the success they had last season. They've flirted with it on occasion and I still think they'd do it if they had a big lead in September and some of their starters needed a rest or were nursing an injury.

But for the most part I think they'll stick with a five-man rotation.

Are the Indians being too patient?

Hey, Hoynsie: Since Terry Francona has been manager of the Indians, he and management have shown that patience is a virtue. But I've been waiting since 1957 to see a World Series championship banner flying over Cleveland. In my opinion, it's time to pull the trigger and deal some pitching for some solid position players. – Fritz Johnson, New Philadelphia.

Hey, Fritz: I think the Indians have certainly explored that possibility this winter. They feel they have a depth of starting pitching and could afford to make a deal. I think a trade along those lines could still happen before or after the regular season begins.

It's just hard for an organization such as the Indians to deal starting pitching. It's taken them a long time and a lot of money to put this rotation together. But who knows what happens when push comes to shove?

Is Encarnacion's contract hurting the Indians?

Hey, Hoynsie: I have seen a lot of comments saying that Edwin Encarnacion's contract has limited the Indians from signing free agents this winter. I disagree. I think his contract was a great signing at the price the Indians paid after the 2016 season. I think the problem is Jason Kipnis' contract. – Bob Earnest, Mansfield.

Hey, Bob: I think the Encarnacion contract was a good one, especially considering how much offense the Indians have lost this winter with the free agent departures of Carlos Santana, Jay Bruce and Austin Jackson.

I heard few, if any, complaints about the six-year, \$52.5 million deal Kipnis signed in April of 2014. When a team signs a player to that long of a contract, it assumes the risk of the player getting injured or having a bad season. No doubt Kipnis had a bad season in 2017, but that was due to injuries. If he can stay healthy this year, and have his normal season, I think the Indians will be pleased.

Hey, Hoynsie: What became of the 28-foot Chief Wahoo that graced the roof of Municipal Stadium? – John Brandel, Perrysburg.

Hey, John: It's in my basement. That's a joke. It is preserved in the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland.

Friction between MLB players and owners grows, while free-agent market remains frozen

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

CLEVELAND, Ohio - While baseball's free agent market remains frozen, the friction between owners and teams keeps getting hotter.

On Tuesday, Tony Clark, executive director of the players association, issued a statement saying teams that aren't bidding for free agents are "engaged in a race to the bottom."

Clark went on to say, "This conduct is a fundamental breach of the trust between a team and its fans and threatens the very integrity of our game."

MLB responded with a statement of its own, saying "Our clubs are committed to putting a winning product on the field for their fans. Owners own teams for one reason: they want to win. In baseball, it has always been true that clubs go through cyclical, multi-year strategies directed at winning."

There are over 120 unsigned free agents on the market with MLB's 30 teams reporting for spring training next week in Florida and Arizona. Indians pitchers and catchers report to Goodyear, Ariz., on Feb. 14.

The MLB statement continued, "It is common at this point in the calendar to have large numbers of free agents unsigned. What is uncommon is to have some of the best free agents sitting unsigned even though they have substantial offers, some in nine figures.

"It is the responsibility of players' agents to value their clients in a constantly changing free agent market based on factors such as positional demand, advanced analytics, and the impact of the new basic agreement. To lay responsibility on the clubs for the failure of some agents to accurately assess the market is unfair, unwarranted, and inflammatory."

Clark, on Sunday, issued a statement saying reports that the players would boycott spring training because of the large number of unsigned free agents was false. But in an era of labor peace between owners and players, this kind of rhetoric recalls the days of strikes and lockouts.

High-profile players such as Eric Hosmer, J.D. Martinez, Yu Darvish, Jake Arrieta, Carlos Gomez, Carlos Gonzalez, Mike Moustakas, Alex Cobb, Greg Holland and Lance Lynn are among the unsigned free agents. Agent Scott Boras represents several of those players including Hosmer, Martinez, Arrieta, Gomez, Gonzalez, Moustakas and Holland.

It has been reported that Hosmer has received a seven-year \$140 million offer. It's also been reported that Boston offered Martinez a five-year \$120 million deal. Those offers have reportedly been on the table for two to three months, but Boras and his clients haven't accepted them.

Boras, speaking to Jon Heyman of fanrags sports on Tuesday, ripped MLB for disclosing contract terms and hinted that collusion may be at work again. Boras didn't use the word collusion, but in 1987 owners were fined \$280 million for colluding to control free agent salaries.

Several reasons have been given for the slow free agent market, but the fact that so many good players are still unsigned is shocking.

Every November teams add three or four players to the 40-man roster to protect them from the Rule 5 Draft. Multiply that by 30 teams and it's going to cost some veteran free agents jobs.

Several big league teams are in the process of rebuilding and have not participated in the free agent market. Other teams, such as the Yankees, who used to drive the free agent market with their lavish spending, made their big splash this winter by trading for Giancarlo Stanton.

Other big-market teams have curtailed spending to stay below the luxury tax that is acting more and more like a salary cap. Other teams seem set on waiting until next year when Bryce Harper, Manny Machado, Josh Donaldson and others become free agents.

The growth and use of analytics has also given general managers a set of common tools to evaluate players. That evaluation process has frowned on awarding certain free agents multi-year deals.

So far the top two free agent contracts handed out belong to Lorenzo Cain and Carlos Santana. The Brewers signed Cain to a five-year \$80 million deal. The Phillies signed Santana to a three-year \$60 million deal.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 02.07.2018

DRAFT SERIES PARTS 1-2

'That's the one that gives you nightmares': Inside the Indians' drafting process — it's no longer in the cards

By Zack Meisel 3 hours ago

The name on the card still haunts Brad Grant. At the time, the moniker offered little more than hope.

Now, it represents the career of a player named to multiple All-Star teams, the owner of plenty of hard-earned hardware for his hitting prowess. But that player never donned an Indians uniform, and it eats at Grant and everyone else in the team's amateur scouting department.

Scouts, cross-checkers and every front-office figure in the room scrambled to ensure everything was in order as the Indians' selection approached that day. Behind the card with the now-dispiriting name sat another card with the particulars of a pitcher who fizzled out in the minors.

The Indians planned to draft the future All-Star. They had hosted him in Cleveland for a workout and meet-and-greet. But a regional supervisor, who watched the pitcher dazzle in an early-spring start, implored the rest of the room to convert to his campaign.

Take this guy! Take this guy! Take him!

A customary moment of chaos turned contentious, with the supervisor's crusade reaching a crescendo as the clock ticked down.

I can't believe you're taking these other guys! Take this guy! He's gonna go!

"If we would've just stuck with it ..." Grant's voice trails off as he reflects on the verdict. In a panic, the Indians flipped the order of the two cards and drafted the pitcher. He never reached the majors.

"That's the one that gives you nightmares," Grant told The Athletic.

The misfires sting, especially since it takes a few years for a team to comprehend the gravity of its blunder.

"It changed the course of the organization," Grant said, "all by flipping a card."

The Indians have since ditched the cards and adopted a more pragmatic approach. They have stripped as much emotion and personal bias from the equation as possible to ensure that one emphatic voice or one intrusive gut instinct can't influence the masses.

Still, the process will never be foolproof, especially when competing with 29 other organizations for the country's premier prospects. That's where a scout's input proves essential.

The Indians' 25-man amateur scouting department devotes the entire year to identifying the top, obvious talent in national showcases and the hidden gems on the desolate fields far from civilization.

They make long, humdrum drives just to witness a few at-bats or a few innings, over and over and over until the organization has established its 800-player big board in preparation for its annual three-day exam. All of the work — each scout's 60,000 miles behind the wheel, 150-200 continental breakfasts, hours and hours spent sitting on a rigid metal bench or conversing with the friend or mother or old coach of a player who, odds are, stands little chance of becoming a Cleveland Indian — fuels that early-June madness.

Then, the team makes its 40 selections, says a prayer, tosses them in a time capsule for later and moves on to the next batch of prospects. The cycle never ceases.

"It's the lifeblood of a franchise," Cody Allen said. "It's pretty crazy."

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The Indians owned the eighth overall choice in the 2011 draft, and they had narrowed their focus to two middle infielders: Francisco Lindor and Javy Baez.

The valued Lindor's handling of the shortstop position. When they watched his high school games, his glove acted as a magnet for any ground ball hit in his ZIP code. Their confidence in his fielding ultimately served as the deciding factor.

Lindor's name appeared on every outlet's must-see list. Every time he stepped onto the diamond, a horde of scouts filled the stands.

So, area scout Mike Super and others in the department committed to assessing Lindor's lumber and learning more about his makeup. He oozed energy and constantly smiled. He bounced around the infield like a candy-toting toddler. The Indians also marveled at his ability to relocate to Florida from Puerto Rico and learn English on the fly.

That all convinced the Indians to select Lindor. The Cubs grabbed Baez with the following pick.

In 2009, the Indians snagged Jason Kipnis in the second round, banking on a fruitful transition to second base. They knew Kipnis played shortstop in high school, and their scout worked him out at second base while he attended Arizona State.

"It's trying to find that one piece of information that other teams aren't valuing," Grant said.

Each detail can swing the pendulum toward a different player. It's more than what the radar gun registers or what the slash line states. A player's position, character and signability all matter. The key is having a dependable process in place to home in on the candidates who fit the criteria the organization values most.

The Indians' old card system encouraged intuition and partiality. Now, the process is more measured and nuanced, and it evolves every year as the department learns from past missteps. There will always be some inherent bias, since a team determines its preferences — for example, an organization might focus on collegiate pitchers who stand at least 6-foot-3 and possess a plus curveball — but the arrangement deters the team from any last-minute, panic-induced decision reversals.

"(Those in charge) have put mechanisms in place to try to strip out some of that irrational, reactionary behavior that we could all succumb to, just given the stakes and the circumstances," said Clint Longenecker, the Indians' amateur scouting coordinator.

The team's 17 area scouts initiate the process. The job description used to include pinpointing the player on a particular field who seemed destined for stardom. That step is now superfluous.

"We already know who that player is," Grant said, "so now it's the quality of your evaluation. It's being able to provide expertise, knowing the player and asking a lot of questions. 'If he's not striking a lot of guys out, but I know he has a really good fastball, why isn't he striking a lot of guys out?' Those types of questions. It's not just what you're seeing; it's how and why the player is going to get better."

The Indians had six or seven people cross-check Quentin Holmes, the team's first pick last summer (No. 64 overall). He played on the under-18 U.S. National Team and was widely regarded as one of the top players in the Northeast. So, watching the speedster glide through the outfield grass for a few innings would only confirm what area scout Mike Kanen already knew. Instead, he needed to study up on the individual. He met with Holmes' family, teammates, coaches, even people Holmes had worked with since he was in middle school, all to retrieve insight into his character and dedication.

"Every player is going to face adversity at some point in their career," Grant said. "What's going to allow them to overcome that adversity? Is he just going to fall back to talent, or is he going to push himself and work harder and fight through it? Knowing that and knowing from sources around him how he's handled those things, what type of teammate he is — a lot of those things that Tito preaches at the major-league level, we also look for at the amateur level."

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Grant spent his college summers gripping a broom and dustpan at Municipal Stadium. He gained enough familiarity with the Indians' staff to attain a marketing internship with the Indians in 1994. Grant switched over to the scouting department and, over time, ascended to the role of director. He presided over the Indians' drafts for the last decade before he earned a promotion to vice president of baseball operations this winter.

Now, he'll assist the heads of the pro and international scouting departments, as well as offer perspective to Chris Antonetti and Mike Chernoff. He'll no longer rack up millions of Marriott points or watch a few innings of a teenage pitcher on a poorly tended field in the middle of nowhere.

For the past 10 years, Grant has received the public praise for the organization's improved drafting.

"Is it nice to read? Absolutely," he said. "But it's our scouts who are allowing us to have that success. It's not a primary evaluator that's doing it."

For years, no one wanted to be associated with the team's draft results. Constant misses, especially in the early rounds, crippled the farm system and hampered any attempt by the front office to swing a trade for an established player.

From 2000-2007, the Indians selected 17 players in the first or supplemental round (all within the first 43 picks). Of those 17 players, eight reached the majors. Only five reached the majors with the Indians. The 17 players combined to total 13.9 WAR as big-leaguers, and only 2.6 WAR with the Indians. (Lindor has amassed 16.5 WAR in his first three seasons with the Tribe.)

Over the years, technology has helped teams enhance their scouting and drafting processes. Instead of comparing hundreds of handwritten reports, teams can input the information into a database and let algorithms spit out suggestions. The Indians re-evaluate their preferences and revisit past mistakes each year to identify where along the process they might have erred. Did they overvalue a certain aspect of a pitcher's repertoire or overlook a debilitating flaw in a hitter's swing? Did they misjudge a player's character or fail to accurately gauge someone's pitching acumen?

Longenecker is tasked with coordinating all of the information. To the rest of the department, he's a wizard who can seemingly relay any detail about any prospect at any time. He typically exits the office at 2 a.m., despite Grant's pleas to head home at a reasonable hour.

"He's probably the most unselfish guy you'll ever meet," said Scott Barnsby, who took over for Grant as the amateur scouting director. "On his list, he has 30 things to do in a day. He might not get to any of them, because he's constantly helping everybody else."

Longenecker plays a prominent role as the department prepares for its three pre-draft meetings. In January, the staff introduces the players it deems worthy of spring scouting. In April, they home in on the top 150-200. In May, the group compiles its vaunted draft board.

And in June, after a full year of scouting and stressing, grading and analyzing, comparing and contrasting, draft day arrives.

"It's rapid-fire," Chernoff said. "There's a lot of chaos in the room."

The Indians fly their scouts to Cleveland to join the rest of the department and other front-office members in the draft room. Terry Francona usually stops by for a bit. Players pop their heads in as well.

Bradley Zimmer entered the room last summer and hugged Don Lyle, who scouted and signed him out of the University of San Francisco in 2014. Kipnis, Tyler Naquin and Yan Gomes made brief cameos last year. Michael Brantley sat in on the madness a couple of years ago when he was sidelined with a shoulder injury.

"They're like, 'Wow, there's an awful lot of information that these guys have,'" Barnsby said. " 'I never thought it was that detailed.' The guys get excited when Tito comes in. He's always had a great sense of humor, so he usually loosens things up."

They're reviewing their reports of each player, surveying the scouts for their input, checking on potential contract terms with agents and planning for what might come next. By the end, they're running on fumes. Longenecker estimated he gets three to four hours of sleep each night during draft week.

"If you're not organized," Barnsby said, "it speeds up on you pretty fast."

It's one thing to draft in the top five and have a sensible guess at which players will be available. But since Francona took over, the Indians have typically selected late in the first round, which can complicate the operation. Last year, they forfeited their first-round pick to sign Edwin Encarnacion.

"We didn't pick until No. 64," Longenecker said. "We were on the clock at 11:09 p.m."

And at that point, who knows who might be available?

"We're continuing to ask each other questions right up until the last minute," Barnsby said. " 'Hey, one more time, let's walk through this scenario.' But not a heated debate. Several years ago? Sure, we would get emotional."

That's the result of a refined process.

"We try not to get into, 'loudest voice wins' and make a decision at the end," Grant said. "We try to have all those conversations before and then stay true to the board. What we want is to have a thorough process so that when we go to make the decision, we feel good about that decision. What we don't want is for a surprise to happen after we make that decision."

Since the team won't know how it really fared for a few years, there's no escaping that sense of wonder. It's an entire year's worth of homework stuffed into a 72-hour period of pandemonium. And then, it's a waiting game.

"Your heart absolutely races quite a bit," Longenecker said. "They're some of the three best, most exciting days of the year."

The Chase: Introducing a series that will take you behind the scenes of the Indians' scouting department

By Zack Meisel 22 hours ago

Every summer, Scott Barnsby falls into the same trap.

He'll be sitting with his wife, watching his 9-year-old son's Little League team and, instead of chatting with the other parents or chuckling at the right fielder being chased by a bee, he'll evaluate each kid's throwing mechanics, athleticism, footwork and focus. (That right fielder isn't going to receive a favorable report.)

These are kids who can hardly spell their team name, who are still developing hand/eye coordination, who don't know the difference between a two-seam fastball and a four-seamer. And there's Barnsby, assessing their on-field attributes as if the fate of the Indians' draft depends on his detailed analysis.

"I have trouble turning the scouting brain off," Barnsby told The Athletic.

It's understandable, considering Barnsby has scouted thousands of players during his 15 years in the department. He started as an area scout, hunting for talented prospects in Kentucky, Tennessee and Mississippi. He served as a regional and national cross-checker, assembling and comparing attributes of draft-eligible players in the Southeast and Midwest. This winter, he shifted into the role of director of amateur scouting. He'll serve as the point person for the Indians' draft in June.

This is about when the scouting schedule turns silly. For the next four months, scouts will each tack on tens of thousands of miles to their cars as they finalize their appraisals of each prospect.

By May, the Indians will have established their 800-player draft board. They'll select 40 of those players. They'll sign 30 or so. And then they'll pray that a handful will morph into major-league talents one day.

Of course, they'll have no idea how they fared until a few years down the road.

It all begs several questions: How do the scouts remain motivated to maintain such a grueling schedule when the odds of unearthing a prime prospect are so slim? How do they stay awake (and stay healthy) when completing these taxing trips, all to watch an 18-year-old pitcher log a few innings on the mound? What sort of criteria do the department value when evaluating these hundreds of players, and how does it all fuel the team's drafting strategy?

This offseason, The Athletic has interviewed Indians scouts, coordinators and other front-office figures to gain insight into the function of the amateur scouting department, the life of a scout and the drafting process. We spent time with Brad Grant, who anchored the team's drafts for the last 10 years prior to his offseason promotion to vice president of baseball operations, strategy and administration. We obtained perspective from Chris Antonetti, Mike Chernoff, Terry Francona and rival front-office executives. Cody Allen shared his unique viewpoint of the process; because the Indians drafted him twice and he transferred colleges in between, two different scouts led the charge to bring him to the franchise.

What resulted is a three-part series, a head-first plunge into the chaotic world of amateur scouting, from the vantage point of a team that relies heavily upon the unit's production. It's an around-the-calendar chase for both quantity and quality, all to supply the organization with up-and-coming talent — assets valued as much by other teams as they are by the Indians.

Sound strategy in the department helped the Indians land Andrew Miller two years ago, with a package of four homegrown prospects. It has contributed to the club's position as a World Series contender, thanks to the shrewd selections of Allen, Francisco Lindor, Jason Kipnis, Bradley Zimmer and others. The amateur scouting department is the backbone of any organization, especially one with financial limitations.

"There have been a couple times when we've been fortunate where our (scouting) staff has been in Cleveland when somebody makes their big-league debut," Barnsby said. "Watching the scouts so focused on the game, with a lot of pride, it's almost like they're watching their kid out there. It's pretty cool."

As part of the series, here is an offer with a 30 percent discount on a year subscription if you give us a try for free for a week. Let us know what you think of the series in our comments section of each story.

The life of a baseball scout: Long drives and little sleep, but a chance to attain the game's greatest reward

By Zack Meisel 4 hours ago

Kate Grant hung on every word of her husband's instructions.

Go to Concourse C and take a left.

Yep, there was the doughnut shop he had mentioned.

Go down 17 gates and, to the right, there's a bookstore.

She walked to the back of the store, turned left, found the shelves he had described and there it was: Marley & Me.

Brad Grant had read the book on a plane a week earlier. A flight attendant checked on him, bawling in his seat as he finished the novel.

"He could be a travel agent," Kate said. "He says, 'Is it embarrassing? Is it pathetic that I know every single square foot of every airport in the U.S.? Or is it a badge of honor?'"

Grant recalled a voyage through Arkansas with Paul Gillespie, the Indians' senior director of international scouting.

“Turn right, turn left and there’s a Starbucks right there,” Grant told him.

“How the hell do you know these things?” Gillespie replied.

No GPS necessary. No Maps app or hand-held atlas required.

“It becomes a sickness, to some extent,” Grant told The Athletic.

That’s life for a member of a major-league scouting department. It has its perks — Grant once directed his wife through a construction-filled labyrinth in downtown Providence, Rhode Island — but he says he “won’t miss that too much.”

He now spends most days at his standing desk on the fourth floor of the Indians’ offices at Progressive Field, after an offseason promotion from senior director of amateur scouting to vice president of baseball operations. He’ll leave the taxing travel to the rest of the scouting crew.

The 17 area scouts carry the greatest burden. They’re the ones driving eight hours to watch a player who holds a tiny chance of being drafted by the Indians and a microscopic chance of making it to the majors with the Indians. They’re the ones saddling their company cars with 50,000 miles a year, listening to every last podcast and audiobook, humming along to countdown after countdown on ‘90s on 9, tapping the end of that Red Bull can to see if there’s one more energy-boosting drop and chatting with fellow scouts and department members just to stay awake or kill time.

They’re the ones who remain motivated to complete this grueling operation year after year after year, because when the group produces talent for the farm system — the backbone of any MLB franchise — there’s hardly a better feeling in the world.

“What drives me most of the time,” said Mike Kanen, the club’s northeast area scout, “is the chase.”

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A glance at Kanen’s mid-May 2017 itinerary reveals the mad dash scouts must finish as the amateur draft approaches.

Tuesday: Watched eventual second-round pick Quentin Holmes in Queens, New York

Wednesday: Watched a high school player in Buffalo, New York

Thursday: Met Grant in Scarborough, Ontario, for a Prep Baseball Report showcase

Friday: Watched a pitcher throw in Buffalo

Saturday: Watched a game at the University of Connecticut

Sunday: Watched a player at Delaware Tech Owens Junior College in Delaware

He attempts to avoid such a debilitating stretch, but when the clock ticks toward the early-June draft, convenience vanishes.

“You need to love baseball,” Kanen said.

Kanen covers New York, New Jersey, all of New England, eastern Canada and eastern Pennsylvania. He spent about 170 nights on the road last year.

It’s not always glamorous.

Grant, who has scouted in every state save for Alaska, Wyoming and the Dakotas, can remember a visit to an uncelebrated field in a nondescript town in Arkansas, where scouts stood with their radar guns in the beds of pickup trucks so they could see over the top of the backstop.

A scout’s objective is to compile a thorough profile of each prospect: his tools and mechanics on the field and his mettle off of it. Kanen typically watches 100-120 players in his area each year. By the spring, he’ll pare down the list to 40-45.

Sometimes, he’ll drive six hours just to watch a first baseman walk three times and ground out in his four plate appearances. That can muddle the judgment-making process, so he’ll meet with a player’s coaches, teammates, opposition, girlfriend, grandmother and looney uncle, all in an effort to gain insight into the player’s character and background and to try to project how the player might handle adversity as a professional.

“How do you go in and see a guy go 0-for-4, but know he’s going to go in the third round?” Grant said. “You have to keep going back and keep digging. And then do it again. And do it again.”

Scouts receive a two-year lease on a company car. Some return the vehicles with 100,000 miles on them. They log the majority of that mileage between February and June.

The Indians employ five regional cross-checkers and one national cross-checker. They aggregate and compare reports from each area scout, and they rack up tens of thousands of airline miles to watch players who merit a second set of eyeballs. In the spring, they'll spend eight to 10 days on the road, return home for two days and then trek back to the airport.

That results in plenty of downtime in the car, at the gate and on the plane.

Scott Barnsby, who replaced Grant as the Indians' amateur scouting director, recently adopted books on tape as his diversion of choice. He'll also listen to MLB games on the radio and podcasts. The department is instituting a book club and a podcast club so scouts can maintain a dialogue about their time-killing fixtures.

Scouts also use travel time to call each other or the department's coordinators to share information or to burn a few hours of a long drive.

"It's not uncommon to be on a six-hour drive and be on the phone for five of those," Barnsby said. "I try to get as many conversations with the scouts as possible to find out what's going on throughout the country."

Those lengthy commutes force scouts to make pit stops for food, which presents another challenge: staying fit.

"Everybody jokes around about their freshman year of college, the freshman 15," said Clint Longenecker, the Indians' amateur scouting coordinator. "That's not uncommon for a first-year scout to experience, because of the pace of everything and the lack of availability to get nutritional."

Kanen searches for Panera Bread locations. He'll force himself to go for a run in the morning or at night, to offset the hours he spent sitting in the front seat of his car or on a metal bench at a baseball field.

Some scouts swing by a grocery store to snag fruit and snacks. Some book early-morning flights to grant themselves time for a workout the moment they reach their Marriott.

"The other ones are stopping at Taco Bell," Barnsby said. "I'm talking to them at 11 p.m. and they're pulling in the drive-thru."

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Bob Mayer, Bo Hughes and Don Lyle with their MLB Lifetime Achievement Awards. (Courtesy of Brad Grant)

While Kanen manned the infield at Johns Hopkins, he also interned with Baseball America. He was a college baseball player writing about college baseball players.

"I had this planned all along," he said, "that I wanted to be the guy who finds the players."

After his sophomore year, some of his friends participated in the Cape Cod League. He was there, too, but with a notepad and a recorder in lieu of batting gloves and cleats.

When he interviewed for an Indians internship after college, he told Mike Chernoff and Derek Falvey his aim was to be the northeast area scout within five years. (Mission accomplished.)

He welcomed the long days, the late nights, the abbreviated stints of sleep. He wanted to unearth details about a prospect that no other scout could discover. He embraced the challenge of crafting a bulletproof travel schedule, one malleable enough to absorb the blows delivered by Mother Nature or the injury bug.

Two years ago, Kanen and a cross-checker planned to observe one high school pitcher in New Jersey at 11 a.m. on a Saturday and another at 2 p.m. Rain washed away both games, and left the two sitting in a diner, sorting through their contingency plans. They ultimately watched a pitcher at the University of Pennsylvania that afternoon.

Another time, a cross-checker met him at Bryant University in Smithfield, Rhode Island, to view a center fielder. Early in the game, that player dove for a ball in the outfield grass and broke his wrist. So, they drove 45 minutes to Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, to catch the semifinals of the Patriot League tournament.

"You basically have to be ready to go with three different backup options every day," Kanen said. "You're even more paranoid when sending a cross-checker in to make sure you're not having them fly across the country and then that guy you're having him see isn't playing or isn't catching or is facing a crappy team and he's going to get intentionally walked three times."

Grant once arrived at an airport at 6 a.m. only to receive a text imploring him not to board his flight to New York because of a pitching schedule change. He walked to a different gate, secured a boarding pass and flew to Dallas instead.

"You learn how to manage it," Grant said. "You learn how to travel. You learn to make multiple hotel room reservations, multiple car reservations and then cancel as you go. Those guys can do it in their sleep now. It's crazy."

Grant recalled a time in which he boarded a half-empty flight and the attendant sat beside him for takeoff.

“Go ahead and help yourself to whatever you want,” she told him. “You’re a captain, right?”

“No,” Grant replied, “I just fly a lot.”

The schedule is far from forgiving. Scouts typically receive a breather after the draft (for about a week), before they head to the Perfect Game Showcase in Florida and the Tournament of Stars in North Carolina. They’re awarded some down time around Thanksgiving and Christmas. They’ll take all the family time they can get.

Grant’s daughter turned 16 on Aug. 1. The East Coast Showcase begins on July 31 each year. He was home for her birth, but has missed nearly every birthday.

Therefore, Grant said, laughing, “she got a car at 16.”

He’ll have a more traditional schedule in his new role, which will allow him to watch his 13-year-old son play Little League.

But for area scouts, pinpointing a work/life balance can be impractical. Kanen is single, with no kids. He can’t imagine fulfilling his duties under any other circumstances.

“I’m kind of amazed at how they’re able to pull it off,” Kanen said.

Barnsby will move to Cleveland this summer as he assumes Grant’s old position. He lives with his wife and two sons in Huntsville, Alabama. He once drove eight hours to the University of Arkansas to scout a player and returned the same night because his son had an event at school the next morning.

“Sure, you lose a little bit of sleep,” Barnsby said, “but it’s worth it. My biggest fear is that I look up in 10 years and my kids say, ‘Where were you?’”

Each summer, he and Scott Meaney, the national cross-checker, bring their families to Cape Cod for a week. The two work while everyone else vacations.

“You try to find ways to balance it like that,” Barnsby said.

It requires a certain blend of passion and perseverance, and some of the Indians’ scouts are on their third decade in the role. Bob Mayer, Don Lyle and Bo Hughes received Lifetime Achievement Awards from the league last month.

“It can be a demanding job,” Barnsby said, “but it can also be one of the most rewarding.”

When they nail a pick, it rejuvenates them. It validates those demanding days of driving unthinkable distances, and keeps them going the next year and the year after that. Even after a fruitless trip bookended by a pair of ruthless commutes, an innocent phone call from a fellow scout who had a productive day or a peek at the stat line of a flourishing homegrown player can provide the perfect reminder of what makes the job so satisfying.

“There is a literal chase,” Kanen said. “Anybody I go see could be a Cleveland Indian, and could be an impactful Cleveland Indian. That gets you through it.”

‘I just always have wanted people to know that Cleveland has always been my home’ — Jim Thome discusses the Hall of Fame, his return in 2011, the logo

by Ryan Lewis

Along with the distinction of being a first-ballot Hall of Famer, Jim Thome can spend the next six months celebrating as one of Cleveland’s toasts of the town, the human embodiment of a sports role model and one of the more beloved figures in the city’s sports pantheon.

Thome was inducted in the National Baseball Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility, joining Chipper Jones (also a first-ballot entry), Vladimir Guerrero and Trevor Hoffman in the Class of 2018. The induction ceremony will take place July 29 in Cooperstown, N.Y.

Until that time, everywhere he goes in which he’s surrounded by Indians fans, he can be sure to receive a warm welcome, if not a standing ovation. Thome is one of the strongest ties to the high-powered Indians teams of the mid-90s and one who already has a statue outside of Progressive Field. He also carries the distinction of being widely thought of as one of the nicest human beings to ever hit a home run, let alone 612. Thome has been serenaded by Indians fans countless times, though he also remembers a few jeers from a mostly-empty Cleveland Municipal Stadium during his tough-luck days at third base, which came with some errant throws.

Speaking to Tom Hamilton in front of a group of season ticket holders for an interview to be aired on a future date on SportsTime Ohio, Thome discussed a wide range of topics, including the phone call telling him he was a Hall of Famer, the 1995 and 1997 World Series, the logo as it relates to his plaque and leaving Cleveland for Philadelphia. It also included the one occasion in which Thome wasn’t sure what kind of reception he was going to receive as a member of the Indians.

That was in 2011, when Thome returned to Cleveland in a trade from the Minnesota Twins. It was his first time back in that uniform, and while Thome had a large fan base leftover from his first stint, he also knew that he had chosen to leave Cleveland in favor of the Phillies following the 2002 season.

It wasn't until he received his positive ovation that Aug. 26 night that he could calm himself.

"I'll be honest, I was very nervous coming back," Thome told Hamilton on Friday. "I loved it here, but I also left here. I just always have wanted people to know that Cleveland has always been my home. I've always loved it. And to get a chance to come back, that night there was a lot of anxiety. The reception I got I think released a lot of that anxiety.

"I thank everybody for the reception and everything they did for me when I came back. It meant so much. I don't think they know how much that meant."

Thome called it a "no-brainer" that he'd go into the Hall of Fame as an Indian. He's the 13th to do so and only the second to go in on the first ballot, joining Bob Feller in 1962. One decision he still has to make is what will be on his hat on the plaque.

The timing of Thome's Hall-of-Fame candidacy has pushed him into controversial waters surrounding the decision to remove Chief Wahoo from the Indians' uniforms after the 2018 season. Thome can choose from Chief Wahoo and the block "C" insignia. He said on Friday that he's leaning toward the latter, and that he agrees with the Indians' handling of Chief Wahoo.

"I think we're going to have some thoughtful conversation once we go there," Thome said. "I know my decision would be to wear the 'C,' because I think it's the right thing to do and I fully support the way the Indians, through this week, have done the decision that they've done. That's what I support. But, to be thoughtful, I think I need to have a conversation with the Hall of Fame, because of all the history and everything involved. I just think that's the right thing to do."

Thome called it "so special" to receive a text message from Albert Belle after the announcement, one of the several hundred messages he received. Thome couldn't contain his excitement Thursday night as he was speaking on the phone with Sandy Alomar while texting with Kenny Lofton, Carlos Baerga and Belle, all trying to coordinate a dinner during spring training.

Certainly, seeing Thome inducted into the Hall of Fame could transport some fans back to the summers of 1995 and 1997, two seasons that changed the outlook on a franchise that had been long downtrodden. Those memories and connections are what matter to Thome, as well.

"My wife was sleeping, I was in the other room trying to be quiet, and here my excitement level is through the roof, and it's bringing back all these old memories," Thome said. "That was truly what the game is about."

Rosenthal: Red Sox monitoring market along with Martinez; Royals' motive on Hosmer; Boras 15 update; more notes

By Ken Rosenthal 11 hours ago

The industry-wide assumption remains that free-agent outfielder J.D. Martinez will land in Boston, but the Red Sox cannot be sure.

Martinez, 30, has yet to accept Boston's reported five-year, \$125 million offer. He is telling people in Miami that he is willing to hold out until he gets his price, as first reported by FanRag Sports' Jon Heyman. He also is telling people that he is fed up with the Red Sox's inflexibility and would rather sign with another club, sources say.

Perhaps Martinez is simply posturing. It's difficult to imagine why he would be upset with a team reportedly willing to give him a nine-figure deal. It's also difficult to imagine him saying no if the Red Sox improved their offer—which the team, sensing an absence of competition, evidently does not feel compelled to do.

The Red Sox, though, must at least consider the possibility that they will not sign Martinez. Dave Dombrowski, the team's president of baseball operations, told The Athletic on Tuesday he will continue to take a wait-and-see approach, citing the potential for other opportunities to arise due to the slow-developing free-agent market—not simply opportunities with free agents, but also opportunities with trades.

"Normally in the spring you're just touching base with clubs to have a feel of what they're looking to do," Dombrowski said. "Early in the spring, most people don't do a lot. But this year might be different. This year you might have active looks at clubs that you normally would not. It's amazing. At this time of year, you normally don't get phone calls out of the blue about such-and-such being available. I have. I don't know what's going to go on."

Dombrowski said the signing of free-agent first baseman Mitch Moreland made the Red Sox essentially complete. He specifically named Martinez while acknowledging the team would benefit from the addition of a middle-of-the-order hitter, but added, "the reality is that we do have Hanley (Ramirez) as a DH. If he bounces back, which we think he can, we have somebody for every position we like."

In the meantime, the Red Sox figure to assess free-agent and trade contingencies while remaining in contact with Martinez. They have shown interest in free-agent infielder Eduardo Nunez, sources say. The market also remains deep in outfielders and first base/DH types. Dombrowski is keeping all possibilities open.

"There are more free agents than we've ever dealt with," Dombrowski said. "You take a look at your own players, analyze them, see how they're doing and say, 'Maybe this guy fits in better.' Or, 'Maybe we give this young guy a chance that we didn't anticipate giving a chance.' You're just going to have to experience it and know what all of your alternatives are at all times.

"I don't have a (timetable) on it because I really don't know. Perhaps if I was losing options, juggling three guys, or if we were in the starting-pitching market where there are four (top) guys, I would say, 'Hey, I need an answer now, or I'm going to turn to this guy.' But we're really not in that situation. I guess we'll just continue to be patient and see where it takes us."

The Royals' rationale on Hosmer

Fan, media and industry reaction will be predictable if the Kansas City Royals succeed in re-signing free-agent first baseman Eric Hosmer with a monster long-term contract. What are the Royals doing? Aren't they rebuilding and cutting payroll? Why keep Hosmer, whose offensive production does not warrant a major investment?

Well, the Royals generally see the world differently than more analytically-driven teams, and it worked out well for them when they reached the World Series in 2014 and won it in '15. General manager Dayton Moore believes in the value of experience and leadership, and the signing of Hosmer would merely be the latest example of the team's more subjective approach.

Go back to June 2014, when the Royals signed Raul Ibanez even though they had little playing time to offer. Or to '15, when they signed outfielder Alex Rios before the season started and traded for second baseman Ben Zobrist in July. In each case, Moore wanted to add veterans who would allow the team's younger players to play without fear and reach their ceilings.

The way the Royals see it, even players on rebuilding clubs need positive examples, and a star player such as Hosmer is more of a role model than Moore, manager Ned Yost and his coaches ever could be. Hosmer's stature in the community also carries weight. As one Royals official put it, young fans in Kansas City might know the team's record last season, but they know who Hosmer is. Some boys even get their hair cut like him.

Keeping Hosmer would reflect well on owner David Glass, who would avoid a recurrence of old questions about the team losing its top players. The signing of pitcher Gil Meche in December 2006 proved the Royals could attract a free agent. The re-signing of outfielder Alex Gordon in January 2016 proved they could keep one of their own. The signing of Hosmer would be the next step, proving that the team could retain a superstar.

Yes, that is how the Royals see Hosmer. They're perfectly aware Meche did not fulfill the expectations created by his contract, and know Gordon has not, either. But they believe Hosmer still has upside, viewing him as a candidate for 2,000-plus hits—he already has 1,132 through his age 27 season—and a possible all-time Royals great.

The finances would be difficult. The Royals almost certainly would back-load Hosmer's contract in anticipation of a new local TV deal that would begin in 2020. Trades of left-hander Danny Duffy and others might be necessary to accommodate the Hosmer money short-term. The payroll crunch, however, will ease when Gordon's contract expires after 2019 and pitcher Ian Kennedy's after '20.

The Royals know Hosmer better than any other club, view him as a cornerstone of their franchise and their community. To Moore and his front office, this is not about Hosmer's dollar value based upon Wins Above Replacement. This is about something more.

The Boras 15: all still available

	Stephen Drew	Mike Moustakas
Hosmer and Martinez are two of 15 Scott Boras clients who declared free agency at the end of last season and remain unsigned.	Carlos Gomez	Mike Pelfrey
	Carlos Gonzalez	Oliver Perez
The rest of the list, in alphabetical order:	Jeremy Hellickson	Tony Watson
Pedro Alvarez	Greg Holland	Jayson Werth
Jake Arrieta	Matt Holliday	

Boras is not the only agent with a large number of unsigned clients. Creative Artists Agency (CAA) has 10 remaining free agents, though its list includes two pitchers coming off arm surgery, Matt Garza and Drew Storen, and lacks Boras' star power overall. Third baseman Todd Frazier, who reached agreement with the New York Mets on Monday, is the first CAA client this off-season to receive a major-league contract; Shohei Ohtani joined the Los Angeles Angels on a minor-league deal and outfielder Nori Aoki signed with the Yakult Swallows of Japan.

Boras, meanwhile, has yet to sign a free agent to a major-league contract in 2017-18. He rarely professes concern about extending negotiations or carrying a large number of free agents, and he launched into a parable on Tuesday when I asked him to explain what is taking him so long this winter.

"The off-season is like the America's Cup," Boras said. "We have 30 boats in the water. They take off and eventually they get to the free-agent docks. Normally, there are trade winds, and there are economic investments in the capacity of the boat, which allow those boats to get to the appropriate free-agent docks.

"This year, there was a detour to Japan, where there was a \$250 million asset available for \$3 million (Ohtani). All boats went to Japan. Then they sailed back a good distance. They came to Florida and found a sinking ship and all of its cargo was in the water (Dee Gordon, Giancarlo Stanton, Marcell Ozuna, Christian Yelich). All teams tried to load it on their boats.

"That took additional time. Then, as they moved forward to the free-agent docks, they found other ships dumping cargo—Pittsburgh and Tampa Bay and a few others—which then slowed their arrivals to the free-agent docks. So, trade winds, Japan, shipwreck in Florida, more cargo-spewing, all those things artificially delayed the arrivals to the free-agent docks."

Boras, of course, does not find the market to be humorous. He has been critical the entire offseason of the game's economic system, calling it "cancerous" because it provides teams with the incentive to lose. Boras and union chief Tony Clark engaged in a war of words with baseball officials Tuesday over what Clark called "a race to the bottom." Teams indeed need greater incentives to win; an owner admitted as much to me on Tuesday. But the union should have addressed their concerns in collective bargaining prior to accepting the current CBA in Dec. 2016.

As for the current market, many rival agents are waiting for Boras to fail, just as they do every off-season. A number of the top non-Boras free agents—outfielder Lorenzo Cain, first baseman Carlos Santana, closer Wade Davis—have signed strong deals, as have a number of lesser relievers. Right-hander Yu Darvish is believed to be weighing multiple \$100 million-plus offers. Boras, though, just keeps waiting.

Hosmer and Martinez reportedly have nine-figure offers, and might end up with the two biggest contracts of the off-season. But Boras reportedly turned down an extension for Carlos Gonzalez from the Rockies last spring, and his chances of keeping Holland in Colorado this off-season ended when the Rockies signed Davis. In some cases, it seems almost certain the agent overplayed his hand. But Boras, who still expects a demand for his players, said it's too early to make such a determination.

"Traditional time dynamics are now upside down," Boras said. "There are a lot of things that delayed the free-agent process. But the process is still a process. There is still a demand and there is still money to be spent. So, let's not judge this process at great length. It has yet to happen."

Around the horn

*Some of the tensions between the owners and players is needless. Of the 25 cases initially slated for arbitration hearings, 13 were over differences of \$500,000 or less. The smallest of those is \$100,000—pitcher Mike Foltynewicz asked the Braves for \$2.3 million, and the team offered \$2.2 million.

Some teams spend more than \$100,000 on legal fees and travel expenses simply to try a case. But the "file-and-trial" process employed by many clubs, including the Braves, forces players to hearings once figures are exchanged. A period of 24 to 72 hours to allow for further negotiation would make sense for both sides.

*The Baltimore Orioles engaged in discussions last week with free-agent right-hander Lance Lynn, but the talks—at least to this point—have not advanced to a serious stage, sources say. Agents and rival clubs say the Orioles routinely go hot and cold in discussions, making them difficult to read.

The O's, who need to add at least two starting pitchers, have been linked by sources and reports to a number of other free agents, including Andrew Cashner, Jason Vargas and Chris Tillman.

*Free-agent right-hander R.A. Dickey has yet to make a decision on whether he will pitch in 2018, sources say. Dickey wants to pitch. He has offers to pitch. But he is married with four children, and his oldest child recently turned 16.

Dickey, 43, made 31 starts for the Braves last season, producing a 4.26 ERA in 190 innings.

Nick Cafardo / SUNDAY BASEBALL NOTES / A conversation with Dustin Pedroia

By Nick Cafardo

You can hear it all from the best seat in the house: "Season Ticket"

In a wide-ranging interview with Dustin Pedroia, who is recovering from major knee surgery, the de facto Red Sox captain touched on many topics, including his grueling rehab, the perception people have of David Price, new manager Alex Cora, and how much the team is looking forward to breaking its pattern of losing in the first round of the playoffs.

Pedroia said his rehab has gone well, with no setbacks and no swelling. In addition to the cartilage restoration surgery on the inner part of his left knee, he also underwent microfracture surgery on his left fibula, the damage caused by playing through his knee injury. There's no real target date on when he can return to the Red Sox, but estimates based on what's left on his rehab schedule put it sometime in late April or early May.

"It's been quite a process," Pedroia said. "Even though there are times you feel great, those are the times you feel vulnerable to messing up. If I feel great and want to push more, they're always there to remind me that you still need to stick to your program."

There's likely another six weeks or so of the running program, and then there's a period of agility work. After that, barring any setbacks, Pedroia will start baseball activities.

"Right now I'm concentrating on the running and strength exercises to support the knee. I'm doing my legs, I'm going up in weight. My knee has responded well. I don't have any swelling and that's the most important thing with this injury. How are you going to be the next day? So far it's been perfect. We play so many games, so the bounce-back is important and a sign I'll be able to get back to normal from this surgery," Pedroia said.

Pedroia was told at the time of the surgery that rehab would be a seven-month process, but he also said the timetable varied among doctors. Some gave him a 4-to-6-month timetable while others said 7-10 months.

"Nobody knows for sure," Pedroia said. "The doctor said this surgery was good for me because I'm not a big guy. He said you're going to crush the rehab because when it's time to work you're going to be able to do it and that's the most important thing, to be able to do the rehab work."

Pedroia acknowledged he was in constant pain last season.

"I dealt with a lot throughout the year, but you play the cards you're dealt," he said. "I had to play smart and take a deeper angle on balls, because if I cut sharp it was awful pain. Now nothing hurts. The strength in my legs is back.

"The hard part is that a lot of my attention and focus wasn't on the game, it was on trying to get ready for the game and be able to play. I've never had to do that. Instead of spending three hours game-planning on studying how to beat the opposing pitcher and talking hitting, I was with training staff trying to figure out ways just to be out there. Looking back on that, that was tough."

■ On Cora and whether he can take the Red Sox to the next level:

"Absolutely. Obviously everyone knows my relationship with him. He helped me become a major leaguer. The amount of help he gave me, I can't thank him enough. It's not just me. He did that with a ton of guys, and for our young guys to experience that? When we were sitting around at dinner, I would tell stories to the younger guys about him and Mike Lowell and [Jason Varitek] and what they did. I told them I didn't necessarily ask questions, I just watched them.

"In my second year I didn't steal any bases, and Alex said, 'Hey, listen man, you can steal 20 bases in the big leagues,' and I said to him you're out of your mind. Yeah, I can get out of the gate, but I'm not Jacoby Ellsbury fast, and he said, 'You don't have to be. You've got to study relievers, study their times, study their keys. Study everything.' So he sits me down in the video room, he teaches me how to use it and how to get better as a base runner, or if I'm in a hitting funk he would be able to recognize [that I'm] getting pull happy and you have to hit the ball the other way. Do the little things that make you what you are. If you start going the other way, they'll stop pitching you away and come in to your strength."

■ On the perception that the Red Sox were a fractured team in the clubhouse mostly due to Price's incident with Dennis Eckersley:

"That's the part of the perception that is tough for everybody to see. We kept hearing, 'Oh, we don't like each other,' but no, we did like each other. We did have team dinners. We did get along. We were all around each other for so much. We all dealt with a lot. I think in that environment when you hear that every single day, it changes the mood of a lot of things. You come onto the field and you know that everyone from the outside thinks you hate each other. We were saying block all that out. It's difficult to do because we're human. But what was being said about the team and everybody, it wasn't true. We all get along. We're all on the same page. We're trying to do the things work-wise and win the World Series. That's how we tried to deal with it.

"I think a lot of guys learned from a lot of things. You have to learn from everything. If you have a bad at-bat, learn from what you did wrong and take it into your next at-bat. How am I not going to let this happen again?"

■ On the perception that Price isn't a good guy:

"We all talk to David. I talked to him after that situation and I listened to what he had to say. I try to put myself in their shoes and feel what they're feeling. I think in the end, he was trying to stick up for a teammate and that was it, right or wrong. Everybody has opinions and once something happens you say, 'I should have done this, I should have done that.' I came up in this environment. I was drafted by the Red Sox, so I was getting yelled at in Double A. So you kind of learn to do things a certain way.

"I'll say this: [Price is] a great guy. He's very caring. He loves his teammates and he wants to do whatever he can to help us win. People will see that. If they haven't seen that yet, they're going to. He's obviously a huge part of our success going forward and we need him."

■ On the Red Sox' slow offseason:

"The market has been slow for everybody. It's kind of weird and alarming. There's a ton of great players out there. We know what we have right now and we have to be better. Offensively we have to play better.

"In 2016, everything clicked — the top of our lineup, middle, bottom. If one guy didn't get it done, the next guy was stepping up. That's what we need to do. Last year we had injuries that definitely affected our performance. Jackie [Bradley Jr.] had a knee [injury]. Hanley [Ramirez] dealt with the shoulder. Mitch [Moreland] broke his toe. My knee was jacked up. [Xander Bogaerts] was smoked in the hand. Mookie [Betts] dealt with hand issues. There are a ton of things that play into performance and that's a part of it. It's unfortunate that it happened to so many of our guys. In '16 we called [Andrew Benintendi] up and he hurt his knee in Tampa. It makes it difficult to perform at a high level when you have five guys beat up. We did a great job finding a way. At the end of [last] year we couldn't get hot at the right time."

■ On John Farrell getting fired:

"I'm never surprised about anything anymore. I've been around long enough to know things happen like this. I appreciate all the stuff I learned from John and how he helped me become a better player. You try to take what they give you and be better."

■ On whether the Red Sox lacked player leadership:

"Every player has a responsibility to the guy next to him. It just doesn't fall on one guy. Everybody has to have the mind-set that he has to be about the team. It's everybody. And it's a grind. We play so many games. There are guys who when they wake up there are days where [they think] I don't want to do anything today. And then you look at the guy next to you and he's drenched in sweat. That's your motivation. You do it for that guy.

"We heard that we don't have any leadership or that this guy or that guy isn't a natural leader. You block that out. You figure out what your job is and you make everyone better. That's a leader."

■ On why the Red Sox get picked apart after winning 93 games and the AL East title each of the last two years:

"I understand it. That's what makes our environment special. I feel the same way as the fans. Ninety-three wins is great. When I was flying back to Arizona after the season I felt awful. You work hard and play through injuries, for what? We lost. That hurts. [The fans'] expectations are high and they should be. That's how our team feels as well. We're trying to win our last game. We wouldn't want it any other way."

PASSIONATE ABOUT PATRIOTS

New England ties are tough to break

Baseball executives who grew up in New England certainly have fond memories of following the Patriots as youngsters. Giants general manager Bobby Evans is still a diehard fan. He spent part of his childhood in Framingham.

"John Hannah spoke at our church in Sudbury when I was 7. He had a huge impact on my faith, perspective of life and sports," Evans recalled. He also recalls "meeting Russ Francis and Tony McGee at Shopper's World in Framingham and meeting Tom Brady at Scottsdale Stadium after the Pats won their first Super Bowl and taking him into the [Giants] clubhouse to meet some of the guys. He and [Barry] Bonds sat and talked for an hour (both went to Junipero Serra High School in San Mateo, Calif.)."

Then there's Twins executive vice president Derek Falvey, who grew up in Lynn and went to Trinity College in Hartford.

"I was definitely a fan," Falvey said. "Growing up in Lynn and playing football through high school I'd always loved the sport. My childhood and teenage years were mostly connected to those '90s teams and I remember being crushed during that '96 Super Bowl against the Packers. Obviously once I got to college and the current run began, it was a lot of fun to watch."

"I remember driving home from Trinity for that Patriots-Rams Super Bowl to watch with my family — notably my grandfather and mother who were more passionate. That was a special memory for me."

Matt Klentak understandably decided not to discuss this topic. After all, he's the GM of the Phillies and works in the City of Brotherly Love. He's from Medfield and was a Patriots fan growing up.

Abington's Mike Hazen, GM of the Diamondbacks, grew up a huge Stanley Morgan fan.

And of course we had to ask No. 1 Patriots fan Brian Butterfield, now of the Cubs, to assess Sunday's game.

"The Eagles' defensive front is the best in football. Pats offensive line has to have a great game, especially protecting Brady up the middle," the Maine native said. "If he has enough room to step into his throws and maneuver just a little, he'll kill 'em. I hope we no-huddle a lot, especially in the second half so we don't let them substitute or catch their breath."

Apropos of nothing

1. After Mookie Betts won his arbitration case and secured \$10.5 million in his first year of eligibility, we seem to be looking at a \$25 million-\$30 million player in two years barring an extension.
2. Remember Rey Fuentes? He was the Red Sox' first-round pick (28th overall) in the 2009 draft and there were certainly high hopes for him. He was traded to the Padres in the Adrian Gonzalez deal. Theo Epstein also gave up Anthony Rizzo in that trade. But while Fuentes saw some time with the Padres and then the Royals, he just never met the promise expected of him. The Diamondbacks last week designated him for assignment. Another interesting thing about Fuentes? He's Carlos Beltran's cousin.
3. Former Red Sox reliever John Trautwein has devoted his life to the "Will to Live Foundation" that he founded after his son Will, then 15 years old and a freshman at Northview High School in Johns Creek, Ga., committed suicide in 2010. Trautwein is a compelling speaker who began the foundation in his mind and made it a reality when giving his son's eulogy. Trautwein decided then and there he was going to help kids from taking the same tragic path as Will, who was by all accounts a well-adjusted kid who was great at sports and music and had numerous friends. Trautwein will be speaking at Ashland High School and Ashland Middle School on March 26.
4. It was Larry Lucchino who gave the late Kevin Towers, one of the finest people in baseball, his first GM job with the Padres. Towers died last week at age 56 after a long battle with thyroid cancer.
5. Mike Hazen has revamped the Diamondbacks organization and hired a couple of ex-Red Sox. Daniel Bard is the team's player mentor, Jonny Gomes was named hitting coach for the Diamondbacks' rookie league affiliate, and Burke Badenhop will serve as a special assistant to Hazen.

Extra innings

From the Bill Chuck files — "Andrew Miller led the majors in 2017 by ending six innings with a bases-loaded strikeout, a feat that Dellin Betances has done 12 times over the last three seasons, the most in the majors." . .

Ken Rosenthal / Tensions are high between MLB and union and players have only themselves to blame

By Ken Rosenthal Feb 2, 2018

Baseball is in the midst of 27 years of uninterrupted labor peace through 2021, but the era of good feeling is over. The players are more galvanized against the owners than at any point since the strike of 1994-95, and the current dispute over pace of play is merely the first skirmish.

Commissioner Rob Manfred bent again Thursday, bent for the second time in trying to reach an agreement with the players' union on new pace-of-play rules. Manfred clearly wants to strike an agreement with the players rather than exercise his right to unilaterally implement his original proposal. But Tony Clark, the head of the union, doesn't sound all that interested in making a deal.

"As we sit here today, the first week of February, our focus is on the 100-plus free agents still available," Clark said in a text message to reporters. "The players and (union) remain committed to the competitive integrity of the game on all fronts, including on-field rules."

Want further proof of the players' disenchantment?

Earlier this week, in conference calls that union officials held with player representatives, players asked about the viability of collectively refusing to show up at spring training until Feb. 24, the mandatory reporting date, according to sources. It was a significant step — signed players standing up for unsigned players — but the union informed the players that an organized action of that sort would constitute an unlawful strike in violation of the CBA, and the players dropped the idea, sources said.

The players, in many ways, have no one but themselves to blame for their current predicament, as Oakland Athletics first baseman Brandon Moss acknowledged Wednesday in an interview on MLB Network. Moss said the current CBA, which the players agreed to on Nov. 30, 2016, depresses the free agent market by forcing clubs to forfeit draft picks, international signing money and actual cash for certain types of spending.

"We've given the owners and teams an excuse not to pay top free agents, to have a reason to say no," Moss said. "The only reason those things are there is because we bargained them in."

"If you run too good a deal out there in a bargaining agreement, of course the owners are going to jump on it. You have to be willing to dig your heels in a little bit and fight for the things that guys in the past fought for. I'm sure those guys in the early '90s were not excited about going into spring training without a job, without having a salary. But they did it. And players like me benefited from it. And I just hate to see players like me taking advantage of a system set up for me by other players and not passing it along to the next generation of players."

"Everybody wants to look up and scream, 'Collusion.' Everybody wants to look up and scream, 'This isn't fair.' But sooner or later, you have to take responsibility for a system you created for yourself. It's our fault."

Much of what Moss said is undeniable. A number of player agents expressed concern with the CBA from the moments the details emerged. But as the owners press their advantage, the current generation of players is learning what the previous ones did — that baseball is a business, an often cold and callous business. And that players, to better protect their interests, need to better identify their priorities. They made too many financial concessions in the CBA.

The union almost certainly will examine the possibility of a collusion grievance after it conducts the annual review of the free agent market. Some on the players' side believe that the owners do not merit the benefit of a doubt after paying \$280 million to settle three collusion cases from the late 1980s, and another \$12 million to address allegations of collusion without an admission of guilt in 2006.

Collusion, though, is difficult to prove. One agent predicts in the coming weeks 20 of the better free agents will receive strong deals, enabling baseball to say all is well and the union to sigh in relief. The agent, though, also believes that 20 to 30 other free agents will get below-market contracts, while the remaining 60 or so will be forced to sign minor league deals or leave the game. The conditions for free agents next offseason, with so many players coming off one-year deals and flooding the market, figure to be even worse.

So, barring an unlikely triumph in a collusion case, how can the players fight back when the current CBA will be in effect for four more seasons? In small, vindictive ways toward the clubs. Acting less cooperative. Become more adversarial. Continuing to stonewall on issues such as pace of play, even when Manfred repeatedly is making peace offerings in his desire to strike a deal.

As I detailed in a recent roundtable with five player leaders, many players are fundamentally opposed to the pitch clock Manfred is proposing, insisting they do not want to change the game. Washington Nationals second baseman Daniel Murphy, a member of the union's executive subcommittee, echoed Clark on Thursday night, telling *The Athletic*, "As a player group, we understand, and remain committed to maintaining the competitive integrity of all aspects of the game."

The union rejected a revised proposal from baseball in early January, even though it was more player-friendly than the original plan Manfred would implement. The revised proposal included an 18-second pitch clock that would have been in effect only with no runners on base. The addition of a 20-second clock with runners on base would have kicked in only after any season in which certain time-of-game goals were not met.

Baseball's latest proposal goes even further to address player concerns, withdrawing a pitch clock and between-batter timer entirely for 2018. An average game time of two hours, 55 minutes or longer this season would trigger an 18-second clock with no runners on base for '19 starting on May 1, with ball-strike penalties in effect. And if the clock was implemented, an average game time of 2:50 or longer in '19 would trigger an additional 20-second clock with runners on base for '20.

To avoid the clock, all the players must do is quicken their pace and stay under the prescribed thresholds. The proposal also includes a limit of six mound visits per game and the possibility of reducing the 30-second limit for managers' challenges and the number of challenges available for each game. Manfred surely is open to further negotiation, having already compromised twice. But judging from Clark's initial reaction, the players do not seem particularly eager to engage.

Time is running out. The first spring training games are less than three weeks away. Manfred gave no deadline but indicated baseball needs to act within the next 10 days in order to implement the new rules in time for the Cactus and Grapefruit Leagues. Some players actually want Manfred to implement his original proposal, believing it will backfire on him. Others are simply in no mood to play nice.

The tension is familiar. The era of good feeling is over. But in many ways, the union created its own mess. It won't be easy finding a way out.

The Athletic LOADED: 02.04.2018