

Press Clips

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FROM THE OC REGISTER**Tyler Skaggs continues to work on new changeup in Angels' loss to A's**

By Jeff Fletcher

THE GAME: The Angels lost to the A's 7-3 on Thursday afternoon in Mesa, Ariz., with the teams using most of the players who will be in the lineup when they meet again for the season-opening series in Oakland. The Angels have lost three in a row and five of seven to fall to 6-8.

PITCHING REPORT: Left-hander Tyler Skaggs gave up two runs, including one that scored after he was finished with his 3-2/3 innings. Skaggs struck out four. Skaggs said he's been happy with the progress of a changeup he's trying to add to his fastball and curve this spring. "I can be a two-pitch pitcher, but I can only go so far doing that," he said. "I need to make a cognizant effort to throw it, even if I'm not throwing it for a strike. Just keep throwing it to show these guys. I've thrown against (two) AL West teams. I need to put it in their head that I have it." Skaggs' last two starts have been against the Seattle Mariners and A's. After a likely intrasquad start on the Angels' off day next week, Skaggs would be in line to face the Texas Rangers on March 18... Right-hander Keynan Middleton, who entered with the Angels leading 3-2, gave up four runs in an inning. He had not allowed a run in any of his first three innings. ... Left-hander Jose Alvarez struck out the side in a scoreless inning. He has not allowed a run in four innings this spring. ... Right-hander Noe Ramirez allowed the A's to steal three bases in the seventh inning. Catcher Juan Graterol made perfect throws on two of them. ... Right-hander Felix Peña pitched a scoreless inning. He has not allowed a run in five innings, with seven strikeouts.

HITTING REPORT: Ian Kinsler walked and doubled and scored two more runs. He's 4 for 11 with five walks this spring. Kinsler also aggressively took third on a ground ball to third baseman Sheldon Neuse, breaking from second after Neuse threw the ball and beating the relay back across the diamond. Kinsler then scored on a bloop single. ... Luis Valbuena attempted to bunt for a hit for the second time this spring, but this time pitcher Kendall Graveman threw him out. Valbuena said he's going to try to bunt for a few more hits this year when teams shift against him. ... The Angels scored three runs in 2-2/3 innings against Graveman, who is likely to be the A's opening day starter against the Angels.

DEFENSE REPORT: Catcher Martin Maldonado nailed Marcus Semien trying to steal second in the first inning. ... Mike Trout made a lunging catch in the gap in right-center field. He also had to leap for a line drive.

UP NEXT: Angels (Matt Shoemaker) vs. Cubs (Jon Lester), Friday, noon PT, Sloan Park, Fox Sports West/KLAA (830 AM). The Angels will also have a squad face the Tijuana Toros of the Mexican League in an exhibition at Tempe Diablo Stadium, with Shohei Ohtani starting. That game, which starts at 11 a.m. PT, will not be televised in the United States.

Angels' Andrelton Simmons hurts shoulder on diving play

By Jeff Fletcher

MESA, Ariz. — Andrelton Simmons was diagnosed with a strained left shoulder after undergoing an MRI exam on Thursday night, according to the Angels, who characterized Simmons as “day to day.”

The news comes as a relief for the team after Simmons was hurt diving for a ball in Thursday afternoon’s game against the Oakland A’s. Simmons came out of the game with a trainer, but shortly after the game Manager Mike Scioscia said the team was optimistic.

“I think as he came out of the game and left here, he gave us a feeling he’s fine,” Manager Mike Scioscia said before the MRI. “We’re definitely going to be cautious.”

The Angels’ Gold Glove shortstop dove to his right and rolled over on his shoulder trying to get a ground ball in the fifth inning.

Jose Fernandez looks to revive career with Angels after failed defection from Cuba

By Jeff Fletcher

TEMPE, Ariz. — This spring, Jose Fernandez can focus on simply trying to win a major league job, rather than the head-spinning adjustments of a year ago in Dodgers camp.

Not only was the Cuban infielder acclimating to a new country, he was trying to get his spikes back under him after barely playing baseball for the previous three years.

“Being on the field allows you to at least be thinking about what you need to do to make sure everything comes back,” Fernandez said in Spanish, via Angels broadcaster Jose Mota. “I’m happy about where I am.”

In camp competing for a spot on the Angels bench, Fernandez is still looking to make his major league debut as he bears down on his 30th birthday next month. He is making up for time lost from the prime of his career, the result of a ban in Cuba after he failed in an attempt to defect.

Fernandez said he went nearly three years without playing baseball after the defection attempt.

“There were some days when it seemed so far away that I was ever going to play again,” Fernandez said. “There were days I just kept pushing myself and saying ‘It’s going to happen.’ But there were dark days when you think, ‘Is this going to happen? Or am I wishing for something that’s not reality?’”

Fernandez seemed to be a prime candidate to come from Cuba to become a major leaguer after he hit .524 in the 2013 World Baseball Classic. He hit .319 with a .402 on-base percentage in parts of eight years in Cuba's Serie Nacional, the country's top league.

"I knew that I wanted to come to the United States," he said. "I hit a ceiling in Cuba where I knew there wasn't going to be anywhere for me to go to get the next challenge."

Fernandez attempted to defect in 2014. He did not want to go into detail about what happened, but it did not end well. He was unable to play until he was finally allowed to leave Cuba legally in December 2015.

"It was very tough," he said. "This is what I love to do, and you are at an age where you think you are at the top of your game, and your skills are flourishing. To be in a position where I couldn't play was very frustrating. That was the issue that kept driving me, the idea that I could get out of the situation."

Once Fernandez got out, to the Dominican Republic, he spent more than a year just working out with a track and field coach to get himself in shape, before he even returned to the baseball field. He played in the Dominican in the winter of 2016-17, earning a \$200,000 signing bonus with the Dodgers.

His time in Dodgers camp last year was a whirlwind, he said.

"I was a little out of sorts," he said. "It was like, 'Is this reality? I have been seeing these guys on TV, and now I'm in the same clubhouse.' Once I got more comfortable, it was about playing baseball. It gave me a chance to know that this is the same game I could play back in Cuba."

Fernandez spent most of the season at Double-A, hitting .306 with a .366 on-base percentage. His season was cut short when he broke his hand in late July. Fernandez had a clause in his Dodgers contract mandating that he be added to the 40-man roster or released over the winter, so the Dodgers released him.

The Angels signed him, and now he's in camp fighting for the last spot on the bench, most notably with Colin Walsh, Kaleb Cowart and Nolan Fontana. Fernandez is working out at second and third, but he's considered more advanced as a hitter than a defender. A left-handed hitter, Fernandez is 4 for 15 with 3 walks this spring.

"In the batter's box, he's very comfortable," Manager Mike Scioscia said. "He can swing the bat. He's having a good spring."

Fernandez said so far he's confident he picked the right team after the Dodgers let him go.

"With the opportunity I'm getting, I know I'm in the right spot," he said. "I've been given a chance to play. I've shown my versatility at second and third. I'm ready for whatever role they want."

Notes

Chris Young (strained calf) is scheduled to take live batting practice Friday. Young said he could get at-bats in minor league games in the next few days, and perhaps play in big league exhibition games in about a week. Young said there's still time for him to be ready opening day. ...

Jefry Marte (groin tightness) returned to the field Thursday for some agility work and hitting. Scioscia said Marte is "healing quickly" but he isn't sure when he'll be able to play in a game. Marte, who is out of options this spring, has a shot to win the last spot on the Angels bench, but that would leave them with Zack Cozart as the backup second baseman. ...

Shohei Ohtani is scheduled for four innings and 60 pitches in his outing Friday against the Tijuana Toros, of the Mexican League. The game starts at noon, Arizona time, at Tempe Diablo Stadium. It is open to the public, with no charge for admission...

The Angels made their first cuts of the spring, sending catchers Michael Barash and Jack Krueger to minor league camp.

FROM THE LOS ANGELES TIMES

Change in right field means fewer sluggers will hit the wall at Angel Stadium

By Jeff Miller

At any given moment, there are 750 active players in the big leagues, and the Angels are making a change that will impact one of them far greater than any of the others.

Yet, for now, Kole Calhoun seems only moderately interested in and generally uninformed on a subject that will alter the very way he does his job.

"I know as much about it as you do," the Angels outfielder said. "It's all hearsay until we can get there and see it."

The topic? The most-discussed yellow line in franchise history, the Angels lowering the right-field home-run boundary in their home ballpark.

The line is being dropped to the height of eight feet from the previous 18 feet in the area of the out-of-town scoreboard.

As the team's regular right-fielder, Calhoun is the Angel who must adjust to the new dynamic.

As the only everyday hitter who bats left-handed, he's also the Angel who could most benefit from the move.

"It's not really going to change anything we do," Calhoun insisted. "You might get away with a couple you didn't last year. But, other than that, you still have to go out and play the same game."

Same game, sure, but with results that certainly will be different.

Based on three-dimensional trajectories provided by Statcast, a report on MLB.com determined that there would have been 17 more home runs hit in Angel Stadium in 2017 and 16 more in 2016.

The totals represent an 8.5% increase, which might not sound like a lot — unless it's your job to prevent baseballs from clearing outfield walls.

"It is what it is," Angels reliever Blake Parker said, without specifying that, as a pitcher, what it is is perfectly dreadful.

"We're going to have to deal with it, keep the ball down and get some ground balls," Parker continued. "I've never seen a ground ball go over a wall."

On defense, the line means Calhoun will have the opportunity to make homer-robbing catches at the fence, something previously impossible at home except for along the short walls that will continue to exist in both outfield corners.

Gone will be the option of simply turning to play caroms coming high off the wall. Now, Calhoun will have to aggressively pursue any drive that could clear the line.

"Hopefully," Angels reliever Cam Bedrosian said, "Kole will be providing some highlights for everybody."

Offensively, the Statcast numbers suggest Calhoun would have hit as many as six more homers the past two seasons combined, including four in 2016, when he finished with 18.

For a player coming off a year in which his batting average (.244) and slugging percentage (.392) both were career lows for a full season, the change could be arriving at the perfect time.

"I don't remember hitting four of them out there [in 2016]," Calhoun said. "But I do know I have a few dings in that wall."

When the change was announced last month, general manager Billy Eppler said the Angels "ran through some analyses internally" that evidently indicated the new height could aid the Angels' home-field advantage.

He refused to offer specifics, explaining only that the team's goal was to "create an environment that had a little more balance," meaning the balance between being a more pitcher- or hitter-friendly ballpark.

However, the Statcast data indicates the Angels actually would have surrendered 11 of those 17 additional homers in 2017, a season in which they had the poorest home slugging percentage in the American League.

"The joke around here is that the league hates pitchers," Parker said. "I guess the game wouldn't be what it is without the fans. And the fans want to see homers hit."

Angels fall to Athletics 7-3 in spring training

By Jeff Miller

The Oakland Athletics defeated the Angels 7-3 on Monday in a Cactus League game at Mesa, Ariz.

AT THE PLATE: Justin Upton and Albert Pujols both had run-scoring singles as manager Mike Scioscia started what could be the opening-day lineup March 29 when the Angels and A's meet again, in Oakland. Kole Calhoun had a sacrifice fly. Leadoff hitter Ian Kinsler singled, walked and scored twice. Kinsler has reached base nine times in 17 plate appearances.

ON THE MOUND: Starter Tyler Skaggs went 3 2/3 innings, giving up two runs and four hits and striking out four. This was his second straight start against an American League West team, prompting Skaggs to show his changeup more. "I have to put it in their heads that I still have one," he said. Jose Alvarez has given up one hit in four innings. After three scoreless appearances, Keynan Middleton gave up four runs.

EXTRA BASES: Shohei Ohtani is scheduled to throw the equivalent of four innings or about 60 pitches Friday in a "B" game at noon MST at Tempe Diablo Stadium. ... The Angels will face their second tough left-hander in three days Friday when they match up against Jon Lester. They were shut out over three innings Wednesday by Clayton Kershaw.

UP NEXT: Chicago Cubs at noon PST Friday at Sloan Park. TV: FS West; Radio: 830.

Angels' Andrelton Simmons is day to day after suffering shoulder strain

By Jeff Miller

The Angels' largely healthy spring training ended abruptly Thursday when shortstop Andrelton Simmons landed awkwardly on his left shoulder and was removed from the game against Oakland.

An MRI exam Thursday night showed a shoulder strain, and Simmons is considered day to day. Manager Mike Scioscia said Simmons didn't think the injury was serious and called the medical test a precaution.

"He gave us the feeling he's fine," Scioscia said. "We're definitely going to be cautious." Simmons hurt himself attempting to stop a Jed Lowrie single in shallow left field. He rolled on the ground briefly before being attended to by team medical personnel.

Scioscia said Simmons was evaluated by a doctor before leaving Hohokam Stadium shortly after coming out of the game.

"He was a little bit sore," Scioscia said. "Everything looks like it's intact."

Changing pace

Garrett Richards is emphasizing his curveball this spring and Tyler Skaggs his changeup.

"I can be a two-pitch pitcher, but I can only go so far with that," Skaggs said. "It's one of those things where I have to make a cognizant effort to throw it even if I'm not throwing it for a strike."

The left-hander made his third start of the spring Thursday in a game the Angels lost 7-3.

In his 32/3 innings, Skaggs struck out four, including Matt Chapman twice. In September, Chapman was ejected from a game against the Angels after an altercation that stemmed from an alleged episode of sign stealing.

"Everything I've heard about him is he's a great guy," said Skaggs, who was pitching that day. "I haven't met him yet. I've only heard great things from some close friends of mine. If they like him, I like him."

Injury report

Despite still being slowed by a strained calf, fourth outfielder Chris Young remains confident he'll be ready for opening day.

Young, who signed after spring training began, was injured only hours into his Angels career. He said he hopes to play in a game "in the next week or so."

Infielder Jefry Marte (groin) said he could return to games Monday.

Short hops

The Angels reassigned catchers Michael Barash and Jack Kruger to minor league camp. ... Reliever Keynan Middleton hit Josh Phegley in the head with a fifth-inning pitch. Phegley walked off on his own and was removed from the game.

FROM ANGELS.COM

Simmons sent for precautionary MRI (shoulder)

Angels shortstop exits in 5th inning after diving for grounder

By Maria Guardado

MESA, Ariz. -- Angels shortstop Andrelton Simmons exited Thursday's 7-3 loss to the A's with a left shoulder strain incurred while diving for a ball in the fifth inning.

Simmons will undergo a precautionary MRI, but Angels manager Mike Scioscia said the 28-year-old infielder indicated he was "fine" before departing Hohokam Stadium.

Simmons dived to his right to try to field Jed Lowrie's single in the fifth, but he ended up rolling awkwardly onto his left shoulder on the play. Scioscia and a team trainer immediately came out to attend to Simmons, who subsequently left the game and was replaced by Colin Walsh at shortstop.

"He's a little bit sore, but he got evaluated by our medical staff and a doctor in the clubhouse here," Scioscia said. "Everything looks like it's intact. He will have a precautionary MRI tonight just to see what's going on, and from there we'll take it one step at a time. I think as he came out of the game, he left here, he gave us the feeling that he's fine. We're definitely going to be cautious."

Skaggs progressing

Left-hander Tyler Skaggs surrendered two runs on four hits over 3 2/3 innings in his third start of the spring. Skaggs, who walked none and struck out four, is working on developing his changeup this spring, though he said the pitch remains "a work in progress."

"I can be a two-pitch pitcher, but I can only go so far doing that," said Skaggs, who has relied on his fastball and curveball in the past. "It's one of those things where I really just need to make a cognizant effort just to throw it, even if I'm not throwing it for a strike, just keep throwing it and show these guys. I've thrown it against all AL West teams, so it's one of those things that I need to show and put it in their heads to know that I still have one."

Trout's web gem

Shortly after arriving to camp last month, Angels star Mike Trout said one of his goals was to work on improving his defense. But the 26-year-old center fielder appeared to be in midseason form Thursday, making a diving catch in right-center field to rob Marcus Semien of a hit in the third inning.

Camp battle

Three relievers who are vying for relief jobs this spring saw action against the A's on Thursday. Left-hander Jose Alvarez struck out two in a scoreless sixth and has not allowed a run in four appearances this spring. Noe Ramirez gave up a run on two hits in the seventh, while Felix Pena worked a clean eighth.

Injury updates

- Outfielder Chris Young (right calf strain) has started running on the field and is slated to take live batting practice on Friday. Young, who is projected to be the Angels' fourth outfielder this season, said he is hoping to get some at-bats in a Minor League game in the next couple of days.

"I think the most important thing right now is just to find a way to get some at-bats and try to start getting timing at the plate," Young said. "I think the outfield, whether that comes sooner or later, I don't think that's the biggest area of concern. I think the hitting would be the first priority. You don't have to find timing in the outfield. You have to find the timing at the plate."

Young has yet to make his Cactus League debut this spring, but the Angels do not expect the injury to affect his availability for Opening Day.

- Infielder Jefry Marte (right groin tightness) has resumed taking swings and said he is aiming to return to game action on Monday. He has not played since tweaking his groin Saturday against the Mariners.

The Ohtani brief

Shohei Ohtani will make his third start on the mound Friday in a "B" game against the Mexican League's Tijuana Toros at Tempe Diablo Stadium. Ohtani is scheduled to throw about 60 pitches over four innings. The game will begin at noon MT and is open to the public. Admission is free.

First round of cuts

The Angels reassigned catchers Jack Kruger and Michael Barash to Minor League camp. Fifty-nine players remain in big league camp.

The Angels' Minor League position players were scheduled to report Thursday, with their first full-squad workout scheduled for Saturday.

Up next

Matt Shoemaker will make his third start of the spring on Friday, when the Angels head to Sloan Park to face the Cubs. Shoemaker has allowed four runs over 4 2/3 innings (7.71 ERA) in his first two Cactus League outings this year. First pitch is scheduled for 12:05 p.m. PT, and the game can be viewed on MLB.TV.

Listen to Mike Trout talk about his wife and family and how they keep him grounded

By Jessica Kleinschmidt

Mike Trout became a married man this offseason. He and longtime girlfriend Jessica, after 11 years of dating, exchanged nuptials in a beautiful winter-themed wedding.

MLB Network's "30 Clubs in 30 Days" stopped by Angels camp recently and talked to the outfielder. In addition to asking him about improving his defense, they had a few personal questions for Trout.

Brian Kenny mentioned it was amazing a lot of young superstars tend to get married fairly young.

"She's been there before baseball and through the whole journey," Trout explained. "You say we're getting married young -- I was with her for 11 years," he added.

He continued by discussing how his entire family contributes to his remaining grounded. "That's why I love my family, they're great people."

Now we know one of the many reasons why the six-time All-Star is so well-rounded.

Middleton working to mix in more changeups

Reliever relied on fastball, slider in breakthrough 2017 for Angels

By Maria Guardado

TEMPE, Ariz. -- After an encouraging rookie season, Keynan Middleton is working on expanding his arsenal this spring.

Middleton, who relied primarily on his fastball and slider after debuting with the Angels last year, has decided to increase the usage of his changeup, a pitch that he used in the Minors but threw only seven times in the Majors (less than 1 percent of his total), according to Statcast™.

"I threw it all in the Minor Leagues, and I threw it a little bit last year, too," Middleton said Thursday. "I just thought having another weapon would be necessary because everyone knows from last year that I'm a fastball-slider guy. I worked on my changeup this offseason, and I've thrown it a lot in spring so far. I like how it comes out. It plays good off my fastball and my other pitches."

The 24-year-old right-hander logged a 3.86 ERA in 64 games for the Angels after being called up in May last season, becoming a reliable option out of the bullpen in late-inning situations. But Middleton also encountered a few speed bumps along the way, yielding 11 home runs in 58 1/3 innings. One of his takeaways was that he couldn't simply lean on his upper-90s fastball to blow away hitters as he had in the Minors, prompting him to diversify his mix this season.

"I can't get away with the same stuff that I got away with in the Minor Leagues," Middleton said. "I learn from my failures. I think about all the times that I got beat, and I just tried to learn from those mistakes. That's pretty much all I'm trying to do. Quality pitches, going into each at-bat with a plan and knowing who the hitter is."

Middleton opened the spring by pitching three scoreless innings, but he had a rough outing Thursday in the Angels' 7-3 loss to the A's, allowing four runs on three hits and a hit-by-pitch in the fifth inning.

"He missed some spots with some fastballs, but you had a couple balls that just missed being double-play balls," Angels manager Mike Scioscia said. "I don't think he pitched as poorly as his line score would show, but it's still Spring Training. He's still trying to find some stuff. He'll be better next outing."

Middleton is projected to be a key cog in the Angels' 2018 bullpen and will likely be in the mix to close this season, along with Blake Parker, Jim Johnson and Cam Bedrosian.

"We've got a lot of good arms," Middleton said. "A lot of people ask me, 'Who's going to be the closer?' I don't think anyone knows. A lot of people are capable of doing it. None of us care. I know I don't care."

I'm going to go out there whenever he calls my name, get outs, get the ball to the next person and give our hitters a chance to get wins."

FROM MLB.COM

Injury updates: Judge, Simmons, Baez

Yanks slugger 'on track' for Opening Day; Orioles duo sidelined

As we near the end of the second week of Spring Training games, here's a roundup of the latest injury news around the Cactus and Grapefruit Leagues:

Aaron Judge, Yankees

Judge, who belted 52 home runs en route to winning the American League Rookie of the Year Award last season, underwent arthroscopic shoulder surgery last November and said on Thursday that he is "right on track for Opening Day."

"When I first got down here, there was a little soreness left in there, but this past week especially, it's pain-free, no soreness, been feeling great," Judge said. "I'm just trying to maintain that and keep that rolling into the season."

Judge slashed .284/.422/.627 in his first full MLB season, leading the AL in homers and finishing as the runner-up to the Astros' Jose Altuve in AL MVP Award voting.

Andrelton Simmons, Angels

Simmons hurt his left shoulder while trying to make a diving play in the Angels' 7-3 loss to the Athletics on Thursday. He was scheduled to undergo an MRI on Thursday night.

The 28-year-old shortstop is coming off a career season in which he slashed .278/.331/.421 with 38 doubles, 14 home runs and 19 steals in 158 games for Los Angeles.

Javier Baez, Cubs

Baez was forced from Thursday's game versus the Padres with tightness in his left hamstring, an injury likely caused by dehydration.

Baez smacked an RBI double off San Diego's Jordan Lyles in the second inning and came up limping as he headed toward second base.

"I felt a cramp," Baez said. "After I passed first base, [my leg] went back to normal. When I stopped, I felt the cramp. Obviously, [manager Joe Maddon] didn't want me to stay in the game. I'm completely fine, 100 percent. I got some treatment. The [athletic] trainers were all over it, and everything is fine."

Baez, who batted .273/.317/.480 with 23 home runs and 75 RBIs in 145 games for Chicago last season, was not scheduled to play Friday. It's possible he could return for one of the club's split-squad games Saturday if ready.

The 25-year-old infielder does not believe the ailment to be serious, but with about three weeks until Opening Day, he says he may need to start drinking more water.

"I haven't been drinking a lot of water," Baez said. "I drink water during the workouts, but outside of the workout, it's also important, and I haven't been drinking a lot of water."

Chris Davis, Orioles

Davis has been dealing with a sore right elbow, and he won't play in a Grapefruit League game until this weekend at the earliest, manager Buck Showalter said on Thursday morning. Davis hasn't played in the field since Feb. 26 and hasn't made a plate appearance since last Friday, when he went 0-for-3 with a walk. An MRI on Saturday revealed no structural damage to the elbow, which Showalter said is improving.

"It's something that's going to be a day-to-day thing," Davis said on Tuesday. "I felt like I was getting close to being 100 percent the other day and had a little setback. Hopefully not too much longer. I'm getting tired of doing the same thing over and over."

The 31-year-old slashed .215/.309/.423 with 26 home runs in 128 games last season.

Mark Trumbo, Orioles

Trumbo felt his right quad muscle tighten during Tuesday's game against the Twins, and Showalter said on Thursday that the outfielder/first baseman could be sidelined for up to a week.

"During the season, he could probably continue to play and wouldn't worry about it as much," said Showalter. "We've got plenty of time. We don't want it to turn into something [more serious]."

Trumbo, 32, slashed .234/.289/.397 with 23 homers in 146 games last season, his second with Baltimore. In 2016, he was an All-Star, posting a 122 OPS+ with 47 home runs in 159 games.

Michael Conforto, Mets

Conforto continues to progress in his rehab from shoulder surgery -- he dislocated his left shoulder while swinging a bat last August. According to MLB.com's Anthony DiComo, the 25-year-old outfielder took full batting practice on the field and shagged fly balls on Thursday.

Prior to his injury, Conforto was having a strong season at the plate, slashing .279/.384/.555 with 27 home runs in 440 plate appearances during an All-Star campaign.

While Conforto targets a return date of May 1, the Mets will have Brandon Nimmo and Juan Lagaresplitting time in center field.

Stephen Vogt, Brewers

Competing for a backup-catcher role with Milwaukee, Vogt did some plyometric throwing drills Thursday morning. According to MLB.com's Adam McCalvy, Vogt said it was a "huge, huge step in the right direction" in his recovery from a strained right shoulder. Vogt strained the shoulder early in Spring Training, and at that time he was estimated to miss two to three weeks of action.

The two-time All-Star slashed .217/.287/.357 with four home runs in 54 games with the Athletics last season before being traded to Milwaukee. With the Brewers, he slashed .254/.281/.508 with eight home runs in 45 games.

MLB, Facebook partner for weekly broadcasts

25-game package to be distributed on Facebook Watch, MLB Live show page

Major League Baseball and Facebook on Wednesday unveiled a newly expanded partnership for the 2018 MLB season, highlighted by a historic agreement to produce and broadcast one game every week to a global audience on Facebook. This 25-game package of weekly broadcasts will be distributed exclusively on Facebook Watch in the United States via the MLB Live show Page -- marking MLB's first digital-only national broadcasts. Every game also will be available globally on the show Page, excluding select international markets. Today's announcement was made after the 30 Major League Clubs unanimously approved the deal.

"This partnership with Facebook reflects the ongoing commitment of Major League Baseball and our Clubs to connect with people around the world," said Tony Petitti, Deputy Commissioner of Business and Media for Major League Baseball. "It is a major creative step forward in serving our diverse, passionate community of fans, who will enjoy a uniquely interactive experience watching our games on Facebook each week."

Produced by MLB Network and its Emmy Award-winning production team specifically for Facebook Watch across its supported devices, including mobile phones and connected televisions, this package of weekday afternoon games will debut a variety of presentation and interactivity innovations. MLB Network will introduce new in-game production elements specially designed for intuitively watching, sharing and interacting on Facebook. Details on broadcast talent and social integrations will be announced at a later date.

"We're excited to extend our partnership with Major League Baseball to make Facebook Watch a home for exclusive, live games every week this season," said Dan Reed, Facebook Head of Global Sports Partnerships. "Community and conversation are central to both baseball and Facebook, and MLB Network's innovative broadcasts will bring these interactive and social elements of the game to life to fans around the world in new ways on our platform."

The first scheduled Facebook Watch broadcast this season is a matinee matchup between National League East rivals, the Philadelphia Phillies and New York Mets, live from Citi Field on Wednesday, April

4, at 1:10 p.m. (ET). Fans may add this game and every weekly broadcast on Facebook Watch to their Watchlists by following the MLB Live show Page.

Following is the complete schedule for April (subject to change; all times are Eastern). Each additional monthly broadcast schedule will be announced during the season.

- Wednesday, April 4: Philadelphia Phillies vs. New York Mets, 1:10 p.m.
- Wednesday, April 11: Milwaukee Brewers vs. St. Louis Cardinals, 1:15 p.m.
- Wednesday, April 18: Kansas City Royals vs. Toronto Blue Jays, 4:07 p.m.
- Thursday, April 26: Arizona Diamondbacks vs. Philadelphia Phillies, 1:05 p.m.

MLB also will produce and distribute specially curated content in addition to each live game broadcast, including on-demand highlight packages for every regular season game as well as Club-specific weekly recap packages for all 30 MLB teams. These will be available on Facebook Watch in the United States and to baseball fans around the world.

Last May, MLB and Facebook partnered to live stream 20 games during the 2017 regular season with those airing weekly on Friday nights as national simulcasts of a participating team's local television broadcast. MLB also has leveraged Facebook Live since it launched for a variety of means to interact with fans and take them behind the scenes to connect with their favorite teams and players.

FROM YAHOO! FINANCE

Major League Baseball is doubling down on YouTube TV

By Daniel Roberts

In the ongoing race to collect live sports streaming content, chalk up another point for YouTube TV over competitors like Amazon, Facebook, and Twitter.

Major League Baseball announced on Thursday that it has renewed its partnership with YouTube TV, making YouTube TV the "presenting sponsor" of the 2018 and 2019 World Series. This means that everywhere you see the World Series logo, you'll also see the YouTube TV logo. But YouTube will also be able to use MLB players in more of its advertising going forward, not just around the World Series.

More importantly, the extended deal will bring the entire MLB postseason to YouTube TV subscribers for the first time. (YouTube TV launched in April 2017 and costs \$35 per month, increasing to \$40 on March 13.) YouTube TV already offered Fox, which has the rights to the World Series, but MLB Network airs some of the League Division Series games, and MLB Network will hit YouTube TV this week. Add Fox and MLB Network to TBS, which YouTube TV announced in February, and that's the full MLB Playoffs on YouTube TV. The platform now also gets every nationally broadcast Spring Training game and regular season game.

In addition, MLB.tv will be available to YouTube TV subscribers for an extra fee—news that was included (though somewhat buried) in YouTube’s announcement of a slew of new sports content back in February. MLB.tv would allow a YouTube TV subscriber to watch regular season out-of-market games.

YouTube was the first ever “presenting sponsor” of the World Series last year, and, “It turns out that our fans are interacting with them in a higher way than they’ve seen before,” MLB EVP of commerce Noah Garden tells Yahoo Finance. “It turns out that the people who are buying YouTube TV are interested a lot in baseball.”

Of course, YouTube isn’t the only place that has MLB streaming. Dish Network’s Sling TV offers regular season out-of-market games of 20 MLB teams. AT&T DirecTV Now shows any MLB games that air on Fox or Turner channels like TBS. And both DirecTV Now and PlayStation Vue have MLB Network. “Our philosophy has been, if it has a button or you can plug it in, we should be on it,” says Garden. “You can’t really dictate where your fans are going. The different devices people use and the way they consume content has changed so dramatically, even over the last 12 months. So as a result, right now, the strategy is to be everywhere.”

Consider the sponsorship extension a win for YouTube in its close race with Amazon for sports streaming. MLB has a tech relationship with Amazon (AWS powers MLB Statcast) but does not stream any of its games on Amazon Prime. Last month, YouTube TV added Turner channels and MLB Network, while Amazon Prime announced it will start selling UFC fights. The two giants are going toe for toe in signing new deals with a whole host of leagues, small and large, in an effort to win over cord-cutting sports fans.

FROM BLEACHER REPORT

MLB Position Power Rankings 2018: B/R’s Top 30 Second Basemen

By Joel Reuter

Ahead, we’ve set out to identify the top 30 second basemen in the league heading into the 2017 season.

A few things to consider before we get started:

- **League averages:** For the sake of reference, the league average triple-slash line for a second baseman last season was .268/.332/.421.
- **Eligibility:** To be considered for inclusion, a player must have played at least 300 innings at second base last season. Exceptions were made for an expected position change (Asdrubal Cabrera) and prospects (Franklin Barreto, Scott Kingery and Gleyber Torres).

For draft fans, think of this as a big board of the position if the entire league were doing a redraft for one all-or-nothing season in 2018.

Someone like Yoan Moncada has more upside than Jason Kipnis going forward, but is he going to be better this coming year?

Let's find out.

6. Ian Kinsler, Los Angeles Angels

Age: 35

2017 Offensive: 90 OPS+, .236/.313/.412, 50 XBH (22 HR), 52 RBI, 90 R

2017 Defensive: 6 DRS, 7.5 UZR/150, 8.1 DEF

WAR: 2.1

Player Outlook

Elite defense and 20-homer pop—even in a down season overall offensively—are enough to land Ian Kinsler the No. 6 spot in these rankings.

Can he bounce back with a change of scenery?

Kinsler posted a 122 OPS+ with 28 home runs while winning his first career Gold Glove and accumulating 6.1 WAR during the 2016 season.

When the the 12-year veteran calls it quits, he'll be in elite company.

His 55.0 WAR ranks 18th all-time at the position, and he's well within striking distance of Jeff Kent (55.2) and Hall of Famer Joe Gordon (57.1) for the upcoming season.

He's also one of just six second basemen with 200 home runs and 200 stolen bases, joining Joe Morgan, Ryne Sandberg, Roberto Alomar, Craig Biggio and Brandon Phillips.

2018 Spring Training Predictions for All 30 MLB Teams' Final 25-Man Rosters*

By Zachary D. Rymer

With Opening Day looming on March 29, teams across Major League Baseball don't have long until the games stop being for practice and start counting for real.

They also don't have long to finalize their rosters.

We're here to take a whack at predicting which 25 players each team will take into 2018. This means plugging in a few outstanding free agents, as well as accounting for spring performances, injuries and other factors (e.g., minor league options and Rule 5 status) that go into shaping an Opening Day roster.

We'll go in alphabetical order by city, starting now.

Los Angeles Angels

Position Players

Position	Player	Bats
C	Martin Maldonado	R
1B	Luis Valbuena	L
2B	Ian Kinsler	R
3B	Zack Cozart	R
SS	Andrelton Simmons	R
LF	Justin Upton	R
CF	Mike Trout	R
RF	Kole Calhoun	L
DH	Albert Pujols	R
Bench C	Rene Rivera	R

Bench INF	Kaleb Cowart	S
Bench OF	Chris Young	R

The Los Angeles Angels still have baseball's best player in the person of Mike Trout. And this year, he has plenty of company in what should be an excellent offensive and defensive lineup.

Perhaps the only question is how the Angels will fill out their bench. Kaleb Cowart deserves a spot based on his defensive versatility. They'll need to find a fourth outfielder if Chris Young is slow to recover from a calf injury. But so far, there's little indication that will be necessary.

Another thing to keep in mind is that this three-man bench will become a four-man bench on days when Shohei Ohtani isn't pitching. His bat is useful like that.

Pitchers

Position	Player	Throws
SP 1	Shohei Ohtani	R
SP 2	Garrett Richards	R
SP 3	Andrew Heaney	L
SP 4	Tyler Skaggs	L
SP 5	Matt Shoemaker	R

SP 6	JC Ramirez	R
CL	Greg Holland	R
RP	Blake Parker	R
RP	Jim Johnson	R
RP	Cam Bedrosian	R
RP	Keynan Middleton	R
RP	Jose Alvarez	L
LR	Luke Bard	R

Angels manager Mike Scioscia confirmed to ESPN's Jerry Crasnick that Ohtani will be part of a six-man rotation to start the year.

That makes sense for Ohtani, who isn't used to pitching every fifth day. It also makes sense for the club's other starters, as they haven't been especially durable in recent years.

Elsewhere, what should stand out is the inclusion of Greg Holland. The Angels would consider him at "the right price," according to Morosi. His price must be approaching the "right" range by this point, and the Angels bullpen would look that much better with him in it.

*Cut to only include Angels.

FROM FANRAG SPORTS**Inside Baseball MLB Notes**

By Jon Heyman

Los Angeles Angels

- After the smallest of sample sizes (2.2 innings of pitching and a handful of at-bats), Shohei Ohtani does look better as a pitcher than a hitter. He has a little bit of Ichiro's funkiness in his swing, but he is expected to be a power guy.
- Albert Pujols looks like he's going to be able to play a lot more first base this year, writes Bob Nightengale in USA Today.
- Cam Bedrosian is seen as the current favorite for the closer's job. Another alternative could a closer by committee deal.

Justin Upton Isn't Trying to Hit Fly Balls

By David Laurila

Justin Upton hits the ball in the air. Just over 63% of his batted balls were classified either as liners or flies in 2017, the 28th-highest mark among 144 qualified hitters. His career mark of roughly 60% is nearly as high. At a time where launch angle is all the rage, the 30-year-old outfielder is doing what a middle-of-the-order hitter is expected to do. That includes output. Upton is coming off a campaign where his loft-efficient right-handed stroke produced 109 RBIs (yes, those are still counted), a .540 slugging percentage, and a 137 wRC+.

It would be inaccurate to say that J-Up is following a trend.

"I don't try to hit the ball in the air," Upton told me recently at the Angels' spring camp in Tempe. "To be brutally honest with you, I've never in my career tried to hit the ball in the air. I've always tried to hit line drives, and if you just miss a line drive it becomes a deep fly ball."

He hits a lot of deep fly balls. The lucrative contract he signed with the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim in November came on the heels of a 35-dinger explosion. The total represented a career high, but it wasn't an anomaly. Over the past five seasons, Upton has bopped 148 home runs, 11th most during that stretch.

The swing that produced them is "basically the same one" he's had since he was a kid growing up in Virginia. Upton explained that he's always been taught to hit the ball with backspin. He also knows that pitch selection plays a role in lifting pitches.

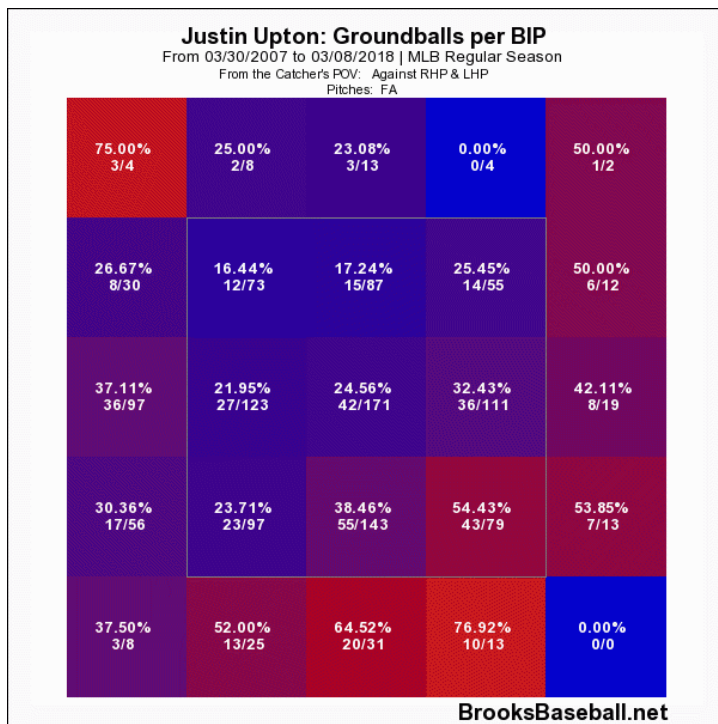
“Absolutely,” Upton acknowledged when I suggested that it does. “If a ball is elevated and you hit it the right way... those are the ones that carry the most. They go a long way, especially breaking balls up in the zone. The way they’re spinning, they usually go in the air if you can barrel them.”

According to Alan Nathan, the last of those statements is true. The physics-of-baseball expert explained to me via email that “a pitch with topspin (such as a curveball) will more likely be hit at a larger upward angle than ones with backspin, assuming everything else is the same, especially swing plane.”

As for the theory that squared up breaking balls travel farther than fastballs... this is less clear. A 2004 Wall Street Journal piece (based on an article in the American Journal of Physics) claimed that they do, largely because they leave the bat with more backspin. However, a more recent study done by Nathan and published in The Hardball Times, found that they actually don’t. Regardless of the discrepancies, the difference isn’t especially meaningful

And then there is location. At first, Upton’s comments on location might seem antithetical to the results. He told me that “balls down can be a little easier to lift” while also suggesting that “a good elevated fastball, one that’s up-up, can be a little tougher.”

A glance at Upton’s career ground-ball rates by pitch location against four-seamers would appear to contradict his personal observations. (This is from the catcher’s point of view.)



As you can see, Upton’s ground-ball rates are higher on pitches at the bottom of the zone than at the top. He isn’t elevating as much there.

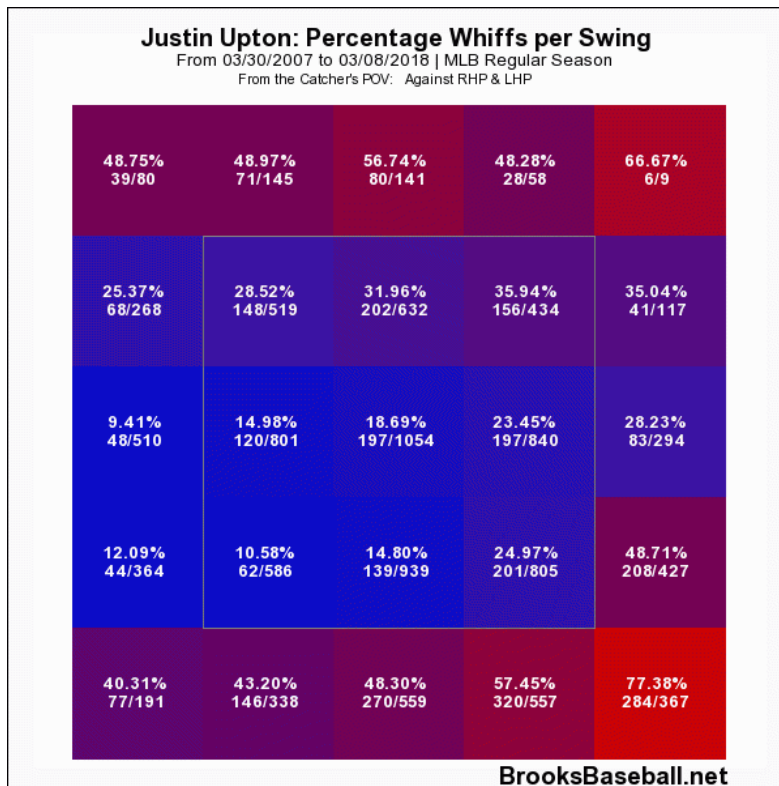
But something else Upton said explains the possible reason for this discrepancy. The chart above includes only balls in play, which means pitches *at* which Upton has decided to swing and *with* which

he’s made contact. So there’s some bias in the data: it doesn’t accurately reflect the zones with which Upton actually feels more comfortable. And for Upton, a lot begins with pitch selection.

“You have to know which balls you can drive, which ones you can get in the air and get in the gaps” opined the veteran slugger. “You learn what they are, and you challenge yourself to get better at hitting them.

Even if Upton hasn’t necessarily hit more balls in the air on lower pitches, both the data and Upton himself suggest that he feels *a lot more comfortable* handling pitches in that location. “A good elevated fastball, one that’s up-up, can be a little tougher to backspin,” he told me.

Here’s a heat map, for example, featuring Upton’s career whiffs per swing by zone against four-seamers:



On four-seamers at the bottom of the zone — and, in particular, on the lower and more inside part of the zone — Upton has made much more contact than he has at the top of the zone, recording a whiff rate per swing that’s about a third of what he’s produced at the top of the zone. It’s no surprise Upton targets lower pitches: he’s had a lot more success making contact there.

Upton’s approach isn’t entirely without nuance, either. Different contexts require a different approach. “You have your A swing and your B swing. Your A swing is what lets you drive the ball. You want to maximize those and limit the Bs.”

In order to get pitches to drive, you have to be willing to take strikes. A well-placed bender on the black may cause an umpire's right arm to go up, but the likelihood of a batter making flush contact with it is relatively small. Upton knows this. He also knows that the more strikes you take, the more susceptible you are to fanning. He accepts that, with a caveat.

"You want to take pitcher's pitches most of the time — unless you have two strikes — but I wouldn't completely sacrifice my at-bat to get a pitch I can elevate," said Upton. "You never want to strike out. And sometimes the game dictates that you hit a ground ball to move a runner. That's the B swing you sometimes go to."

Upton is prone to punch outs — he fanned 180 times last year — but he's not what you'd call a free swinger. His 44.4% swing rate was lower than the MLB average (46.0%), as was his 29.6% chase rate (30.0%). Nor was he overly aggressive on pitches inside the strike zone. He was above average, but by a mere 1.1 percentage points.

If Upton is aware of those numbers, he doesn't spend much time dwelling on them. A dozen years into his professional career, he knows what works for him and what doesn't.

"In an attempt to learn the game, you tend to overthink sometimes," admitted Upton. "You can think all you want, but you have to be able to separate. You have to be able to go out on the field and compete. Where guys become better is when they think the game off the field, then be mindless on the field. It can help to know the numbers, but once you're in the batter's box you have to put that stuff aside and just hit the ball."

In Upton's case, that usually means in the air and often over a fence. Last year, he hit it over a fence more frequently than ever before, which is further proof that his swing — the one he's always had — is doing exactly what it's supposed to do.

FROM THE JAPAN TIMES

Compatriots in MLB happy Ichiro playing on

By Kyodo, AP

Fellow Japanese major leaguers welcomed Wednesday's news that Ichiro Suzuki would be returning to the Seattle Mariners and Major League Baseball for at least one more season.

Ichiro admitted he needs to prove himself at the plate and in the outfield, and promised to bring his trademark devotion to the game and work ethic back to the Pacific Northwest, the same effort he has shown for his last 17 seasons in the majors.

While the 44-year-old baseball legend carefully picked his words at his re-introduction news conference in Peoria, Arizona, New York Yankees right-hander Masahiro Tanaka, Ichiro's teammate briefly in 2014, made no attempt to hide his excitement.

"We're both in the American League so I think there's a chance we'll face each other. He got two hits off me last time so I'll do my best to hold him hitless next time," Tanaka said.

Ichiro and Tanaka went head-to-head just once in June 2015, the same season Suzuki was dealt from the Yankees to the Miami Marlins.

Ichiro will reunite with Hisashi Iwakuma at Safeco Field after a six-year absence, giving his compatriot more reason to hurry back to the Mariners' rotation as he continues to show progress in his rehab from shoulder surgery.

"I had no idea (about his return). I'm really excited about playing with him," Iwakuma said.

While Ichiro's challenge will be to last the season on the 25-man active roster, Los Angeles Angels rookie Shohei Ohtani says he also understands how intense the battle will be for a roster spot.

Belonging to the same AL West Division, the Mariners and the Angels are scheduled to play 19 regular-season games against each other in 2018.

When told Ichiro was looking forward to facing him, the 23-year-old Ohtani said he has a long way to go to reach the level of the 26-year pro. Further underlining the generation gap, Ichiro pointed out that the MLB newcomer is young enough to be his son.

"For that to happen I need to earn my place in a game. That's an absolute must, and right now, I'm striving to grab that place," Ohtani said.

Ohtani is limited to a minor league contract due to the MLB's international hard cap, and it remains to be seen whether he will be able to squeeze into the Angels' roster for the team's first regular-season meeting with the Mariners on May 4.

Ichiro signed a one-year contract with a base salary of \$750,000, a figure that pales in comparison to the \$18 million per season he was paid by the Mariners between 2009 and 2011, according to baseball-reference.com.

Despite being at opposite ends of their careers, Ichiro and Ohtani will have to prove their worth, Ichiro sticking to his old routines and Ohtani finding new ones.

On Wednesday, Ichiro clarified that he intends to play until "at least 50," not until 50 as had previously been thought.

“I want to become someone who is welcomed back by the fans, and I want them to mean it from their hearts when they say that. I will work hard every day,” Ichiro said.

“Getting an opportunity to play (for the Mariners) again, I’m having an emotion that is very different from the excitement I felt when it was decided I would be playing in the major leagues in 2001. I’m very happy.”

Guerrero Jr. has splash debut

In Sarasota, Florida, Vladimir Guerrero Jr. had four singles in his spring training debut for the Toronto Blue Jays, a 9-3 win at the Baltimore Orioles on Thursday.

The 18-year-old third baseman, whose father Vladimir will be inducted into the Hall of Fame this summer, signed with Toronto in July 2015 for a \$3.9 million bonus.

He was the designated hitter and had hits in the second inning off Nestor Cortes Jr., in the sixth and seventh against Tim Melville and in the ninth versus Asher Wojciechowski.

Guerrero also flied out in the fourth against Darren O’Day. He hit .323 with 13 homers and 76 RBIs at a pair of Class A teams last year with a .910 OPS.

“Good looking hitter,” Orioles manager Buck Showalter said. “He looks like he has fun playing.”

Royals re-sign Moustakas

Mike Moustakas is staying with the Kansas City Royals in a surprising turn dictated by a historically slow free agent market.

Kansas City agreed Thursday to a one-year contract that guarantees the third baseman \$6.5 million, a person familiar with the negotiations told AP.

The deal could be worth up to \$22.7 million over two seasons, the person said, speaking on condition of anonymity because the agreement was subject to a successful physical.