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Injury-plagued Jones hopes to stay in Chicago

Hard-throwing righty has been limited to 44 games over past two seasons

By Scott Merkin / MLB.com / October 18, 2018

CHICAGO -- Nate Jones might not be part of the White Sox bullpen next season, for the first time since his 2012 Major League debut.

Chicago holds the first of two consecutive club options, at \$4.65 million with a \$1.25 million buyout, on the talented right-handed reliever who has been limited by injury to 44 games over the last two seasons. But the upbeat 32-year-old hopes to continue as the longest-tenured White Sox player on the roster.

"This is the team that drafted me and where I grew up, and this is where I had all those coaches along the way to get me here, the whole staff from the Minor Leagues and big league side," Jones said during a recent interview. "I would definitely like to stay.

"I've been kind of entrenched in getting healthy and being healthy and finishing healthy. But this is the only thing I know and I'm hoping and praying this will be the only thing I know -- the White Sox organization."

Jones posted a 3.00 ERA with five saves over 33 games in 2018, striking out 32 and walking 15 in 30 innings. He was a fifth-round pick in the 2007 Draft. Over 217 career games covering seven seasons, Jones has a 22-12 record, 3.11 ERA and 308 strikeouts in 281 innings.

When healthy, Jones is a solid late-inning option, with a fastball in the upper 90s. But staying healthy has been Jones' biggest issue.

His 2018 season was hampered by a pronator muscle strain, leaving him out of action from June 13 to Sept. 11. His '17 campaign came to an end on April 29, with Jones eventually having ulnar nerve repositioning surgery on his right elbow. He missed all of 2014 and all but 19 games in 2015 after a microdiscectomy procedure to alleviate back discomfort, followed by Tommy John surgery in '14 and the ensuing recovery from the procedure.

To say the last few years have been challenging for Jones would be an understatement. But never once did he believe it was more than he could handle with his wife, Lacy, their three children, and the White Sox organization.

"What crossed my mind was getting back to being healthy and pitching again," Jones said. "I always give 100 percent when I'm out there and sometimes, some things like this happen, so I was going to give 100 percent in the rehab process as well.

"I want to play until someone doesn't want me anymore or until they say I can't. Sum it up as the highs and lows, but I was fortunate enough we have a great training staff and they got me back on the field. That's a lot of determination by them and me as well. It's awesome just to get back out here and feel good."

Ian Hamilton, Jace Fry, Caleb Frare, Juan Minaya and Aaron Bummer represent a handful of young relievers expected to be in the mix for breaking camp with the White Sox in 2019, and Chicago will pursue veteran additions. But with the team's built-in payroll flexibility through the rebuild, Jones' option could make sense as an affordable and useful piece.

"Everything has been going good, recovering well and feeling good while I'm pitching, too," Jones said. "I've been blessed in that aspect."

"As a team, I can tell we are trending in the right direction. We have all this young talent that we've acquired and it's going to be fun to watch and see what pieces they add to it."

Is the White Sox third baseman of the future already on the major league roster?

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago / October 18, 2018

The White Sox future at third base is a pretty big unknown.

Jake Burger is only a year and a half removed from being a first-round draft pick, but the double Achilles tear earlier this year has not just derailed his 2018 but thrown his entire future, and with it the White Sox future at the hot corner, into question. How will the injuries affect Burger's timeline to the majors? How will it affect his ability to play third base?

Those questions and the seeming lack of any other high-end third-base prospect in the White Sox system have made it seem rather obvious that the rebuilding White Sox third baseman of the future currently isn't a part of the organization.

The free-agent lists White Sox fans are salivating over have some pretty intriguing names on them. Josh Donaldson and Manny Machado, who wants to play shortstop but is a two-time Gold Glove winner at third, are free agents this winter. So are less-heralded guys like Mike Moustakas and Marwin Gonzalez, who counts third baseman as one of his many job titles for the Houston Astros. Nolan Arenado and Anthony Rendon are free agents the following offseason. Those are big names, any one of which could be a cherry on top for the White Sox as they plan to shift from rebuilding to contending.

But what if the White Sox already have their third baseman of the future? What if he's already on the major league roster?

No, sorry, this isn't about Yolmer Sanchez. It's about Yoan Moncada, to which you might react thusly: "Wait a minute. Yoan Moncada is a second baseman! Learn to count your bases, Duber!"

My rarely utilized math skills aside, Moncada switching positions has been a bit of a talking point for a little while now, and it has far more to do with what's going on in the farm system than it has to do with Moncada's 2018 season in the major leagues.

The White Sox spent their first-round draft pick on a middle infielder in June despite having two supposed long-term pieces in Moncada and Tim Anderson already playing in the big leagues. Nick Madrigal's versatility on the infield was part of the praise the White Sox heaped on him after making him the No. 4 pick in the draft, but for a guy who's been discussed as a Gold Glove type of defender at either second base or shortstop, it kind of seems like that would be the best place to put him. Now, Madrigal's not exactly knocking on the doors of the major leagues, yet to play his first full season of pro ball, but the White Sox dubbed him the "best all-around player in college baseball" this summer, leading one to believe that his development could move along quickly enough to get him to the majors by the time that much-anticipated shift from rebuilding to contending happens.

If that's the case, either Moncada or Anderson would have to move, right? Maybe, maybe not. Maybe the White Sox end up liking Madrigal at third or elsewhere, but he's playing middle infield in the minor leagues.

Anderson moving to the outfield was a favorite suggestion of White Sox Twitter after he led baseball with 28 fielding errors in 2017. He made 20 more in 2018 (fourth most in baseball), but his defensive improvement by the end of the season was one of the biggest positives to take from the 100-loss campaign.

"That's the thing that really jumps out the most in terms of significant progress he's made," Rick Hahn said of Anderson's defense during his end-of-season press conference last month. "He's managed to capitalize on the athleticism we've always seen from him and convert that into being a potentially, frankly Gold Glove-caliber defensive shortstop based on what we've seen over the last few months.

"This is really a testament in the end to Tim Anderson's work ethic. He knew it was an area that he wanted to improve, whether it was because he wanted to show people wrong or because he knew he wanted to make himself a stalwart at that position and eliminate the rumors about position change. He worked extraordinarily hard both with Joe McEwing and the things he did on his own, and the kid deserves a world of credit and I think it bodes very well for him continuing on the trajectory of becoming an impact shortstop."

It doesn't sound like Hahn is describing a guy who will be moving away from his position any time soon.

Moncada racked up a good deal of errors at second base in his first full season in the majors — 21 of them, to be exact, the third most in baseball — but Hahn and Rick Renteria both said they noticed improvement from Moncada in the field. But Moncada did tell the Sun-Times' Daryl Van Schouwen during the season that he would be willing to make a position switch if the team wanted him to do it.

Hahn got a similar question during his year-end press conference. Though the general manager wasn't directly asked if Moncada would make a position switch, Hahn said Moncada could defend well at other positions on the diamond and that if such a change were desired, the team would probably make it sooner rather than later.

"It's conceivable if we made a decision as an organization to try him elsewhere that we would do it as soon as this offseason or next spring training, you'd see it in action," Hahn said. "I do think he has made a great deal of progress at second base. I also think he has the athleticism also to be an above-average defender at other positions, too. It's a subject for further conversation, but as he sits here today, I am pleased with the progress and the pitch-to-pitch focus and the athleticism, the arm strength and foot movement and his hands at second base."

White Sox fans aren't super high on Moncada being the savior of anything, not just third base, right now after his disappointing 2018 season: a .235/.315/.400 slash line and 217 strikeouts, the fourth-highest single-season total in major league history. But that's not souring the White Sox on his potential, and it's not changing what they think he can be.

By 2020 or 2021, perhaps Moncada's evolution as a big league ballplayer puts him on a similar level as some of the free-agent names mentioned above. Perhaps he's already playing third base by then with Madrigal on the major league infield, too.

The White Sox seem to have a hole at third base, with popular opinion being that it can only be filled by a marquee free agent. Maybe it does get filled this offseason — by a guy standing about 100 feet away.

Rozner: Baseball schools collide in NLCS

By Barry Rozner / Daily Herald / October 18, 2018

As if launch angle wasn't a hot enough topic around the game of baseball, it will be even more of a conversation this winter and during spring training as we parse the words of Theo Epstein and Joe Maddon and ponder the approach of a third Cubs hitting coach in three years.

It was quite the issue on the FS1 postgame show after the 13-inning marathon Tuesday night that ended at 1:25 a.m. Wednesday, so you probably didn't hang around to hear more about the Dodgers' 2-1 victory, if you even stayed up for the conclusion.

But for those of us who did, we were treated to a discussion among Alex Rodriguez (696 home runs), David Ortiz (541) and Frank Thomas (521), who wondered why there was no use of the bunt in that game.

The bunt? That's a dangerous road to travel these days.

In this climate, you're not allowed to have an opinion if it differs from the groupthink. You will be shouted down and called a fool or -- by the laziest screamers -- a dinosaur.

There is only one solution to a problem. It's black and white and you must fall in line or be excoriated by those who possess the unambiguous answer to an inexhaustible question.

So it was fascinating to hear three pretty accomplished players -- all three in the top 20 all-time in home runs -- discuss what occurred that night.

"This is one of the greatest bullpens I've ever seen," Thomas said of Milwaukee. "So many swing-and-miss guys. The Dodgers had 17 strikeouts (Tuesday), 14 (Monday).

"I'm sorry, but you have to dial it down a little bit and try to use the whole ballpark to get some offense going. As a hitter, if you're struggling, go the opposite way. It'll clean up your pull swing."

"We used to talk about it all the time as players," Rodriguez said. "Slap the ball the other way with runners in scoring position."

"When you go the other way," said Ortiz, "you are trying to stay through the ball longer and get your rhythm back."

"Baseball," Rodriguez insisted, "is a game of confidence and rhythm and feel."

Well, there's no metric for that, so that's not going to work for many experts.

Look, the metrics have advanced the game and are essential to furthering our understanding of baseball. To ignore them is absurd, but to pretend there is nothing else in baseball except a spreadsheet is equally obtuse.

And all three men, prodigious bombers, could not believe what they were watching for 5 hours, 15 minutes.

"It's so frustrating," Rodriguez said. "Bunt the guy to third when you have a man on second and nobody out.

"I know sabermetrics are running this. Well, when you have a guy on third and less than two outs, the chances of scoring are 67 percent. It's simple math. Get the guy over to third with a bunt."

"We understand analytics. We get it. It works," Thomas said. "But it's basic strategy when you get to the postseason. Sometimes you have to make the easy play. We've been doing it in baseball for over 100 years."

Careful now, big fella. Just because you were a Hall of Fame player, it doesn't mean you'll be permitted a viewpoint.

"If you want the ring, sometimes you have to do the little things," Thomas said. "In a series with great pitching like this, someone's gonna have to put down a bunt or use a hit-and-run to move the runner to get him in scoring position."

Rodriguez was particularly appalled that Milwaukee shortstop Orlando Arcia, who had 1 bunt in 366 plate appearances in 2018, did not move a runner after a leadoff double in the top of the seventh of a 1-1 game.

Arcia popped to left for the first out and the Brewers failed to score.

"The argument against it is he hasn't bunted during the season," Rodriguez said. "That's a front office issue.

"If a guy hits 3 home runs in the regular season and doesn't know how to bunt, that's an enormous problem. That ego, that philosophy, could cost a team a world championship.

"When I was a young shortstop (in Seattle), (Lou) Piniella would meet me at the top step of the dugout and say, 'Alex, bunt him over. If he misses (with the pitch), look for the hit-and-run 1-0.' "

And Rodriguez was obviously capable of hitting a home run.

"The game has changed a lot," Ortiz said. "Most of these players, when they are about to sign in pro ball, the scouts and everyone else just want them to start launching balls and forget practicing bunting.

"Coming up through the minors, that's something we had to practice. That will save a game. This game took that long because nobody tried to bunt."

"With these great bullpens," Thomas said, "you have to try some hit-and-run. Line drives travel. But right now it's all launch angle.

"Moving runners, this is what you have to do against these bullpens. You're not going to score a lot of runs. There's too much velocity. You're not catching up to these arms."

The Dodgers came back Wednesday afternoon in Los Angeles with a 5-3 victory on 4 RBI singles the opposite way or up the middle, plus an RBI groundout.

"I love it," Rodriguez said. "We were begging, Big Hurt. Walt Hriniaik was your mentor. He loved the head down, go the other way. I saw a lot of head down today.

"They keep that up, the Dodgers will go to the World Series."

"I call it smart ball," Thomas said. "Gotta get back through the middle. Shorten that swing against guys throwing 95 and above. Good things happen when you put the ball in play."

Guys who love home runs -- guys who loved hitting home runs -- merely telling you what they see.

If you're a metrics zealot, this will drive you insane, and if you're strictly old school, you probably enjoyed the conversation and hate the state of today's game.

My belief is there's room in the middle for both, and some independent thinking is necessary to fully comprehend a complicated game.

And in today's world, the middle is a lonely place to be.
