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NBC Sports Chicago

Brewers emerging as 'most likely destination' for Madison Bumgarner on trade market

By Tony Andracki

For all the talk of how quiet the Cubs have been this winter, the Brewers have been almost equally as silent.

After winning the division and coming up just short of the World Series, the Brewers haven't done much in the way of adding to their core this offseason. They've acquired a trio of smaller parts via trade and free agency (reliever Alex Claudio, outfielder Ben Gamel and infielder Cory Spangenberg) while losing Jonathan Schoop, Domingo Santana, Keon Broxton and Joakim Soria and potentially a host of others (Mike Moustakas, Wade Miley, etc.).

So while Cubs fans are understandably angsty this winter, a saving grace at the moment is the fact the Brewers' roster doesn't appear to be any better than it was in 2018.

However, that would all change if Milwaukee managed to put together a trade for Madison Bumgarner.

The San Francisco Giants are reportedly shopping their ace and the Brewers were linked to Bumgarner back in November. Now, it appears as if Milwaukee has risen to the top as the "most likely destination" if the Giants trade Bumgarner, MLB.com's Jon Paul Morosi said Monday:

"The Brewers and Giants have had substantive communication about a Bumgarner trade this winter, sources say, and the Brewers are continuing their internal deliberations about how much they're willing to give up in order to acquire the three-time World Series hero."

The Brewers have a slew of question marks penciled in to their 2019 rotation and adding a guy of Bumgarner's caliber would be an instant boost to the starting staff. He's also only owed \$12 million in the final year of his contract before free agency, so he wouldn't break the bank for the small-market Brewers.

It's a matter of whether the Brewers want to pay the asking price in terms of prospects to go all-in for 2019, sacrificing the future and taking the risk on just the one season.

Bumgarner's production has fallen off a bit in the last couple seasons as he's struggled to stay healthy and he has a ton of innings and wear and tear on his arm even though he's only 29. But if he joined the Milwaukee rotation, he would instantly become the No. 1 and shore up the only real weakness on the Brewers roster at the moment.

It doesn't appear as if any trade is imminent and Morosi said the Giants may opt to keep Bumgarner and trade him at before the July deadline when the market could be hotter.

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The Athletic

Tracking the Cubs' offseason changes (even if they don't include the addition of a superstar free agent)
By Patrick Mooney and Sahadev Sharma

Change. That's what fans and the media expected for the Cubs when team president Theo Epstein had strong words for his club after its early-October exit from the playoffs. Suggesting that the offense "broke" and then in December using the word "reckoning" to describe the 2019 season created expectations this group will look different come April.

So let's catch you up on the hot stove action at Wrigley Field now that the Bears' season is over: The Cubs signed super-utility guy Daniel Descalso to a two-year, \$5 million contract three weeks ago.

There are still roughly 150 free agents available on the open market in the second week of January, including Bryce Harper and Manny Machado, though the Cubs could not find enough financial flexibility to sign reliever Jesse Chavez and would have to get creative just to fit a swingman like Adam Warren within the budget for baseball operations, sources told The Athletic's Ken Rosenthal and The Athletic Chicago.

Letting Chavez sign a two-year, \$8 million contract with the Texas Rangers — three weeks after Brandon Morrow underwent arthroscopic surgery on his right elbow, essentially ruling last season's first-half closer out for at least April 2019 — might be one of the defining moments of this offseason. It dovetails with the Cubs moving Drew Smyly's \$7 million salary in an early-November trade with the Rangers so they could pick up Cole Hamels' \$20 million option.

As Epstein has repeatedly mentioned, the \$206 million luxury-tax threshold is not dictating decisions for the Cubs this winter. When asked if the max luxury threshold of \$246 million was more appropriate — a number that if exceeded has implications on how much the Cubs could spend on international free agency and could affect their draft position — one source suggested ownership's budget was significantly below that. According to Rosterresource.com, the Cubs' estimated payroll is a tad above \$214 million, while their estimated payroll for luxury-tax purposes is slightly above \$228 million. But again, the luxury tax doesn't appear to be the issue.

That should not be interpreted as an immediate opening for Harper, whose megadeal would still require the Cubs to shed major salary commitments and fundamentally restructure their roster. It does not mean Epstein is hoping for a magical exception from ownership. The Ricketts family runs the team as a business and the Cubs have already committed more than \$200 million to the roster, plus around \$25 million more for player benefits and a trade-deadline cushion for midseason additions.

It's not the luxury tax as much as the overall number given to the baseball operations department. Like it or not — we can't wait to hear what the fans have to say to the organization's business-side leaders during Cubs Convention later this month — those are the parameters Epstein and general manager Jed Hoyer are working within this winter.

"We just have to do a better job with our decision-making," Epstein told 670 The Score, the team's flagship radio station, last week. "Off the field, (it's) making sure we give ourselves every little competitive advantage that we can (along) with our preparation on the field. And then I think overall, as a group, we need to just have more of a sense of urgency.

"It's a special opportunity, so we all need to put our absolute best foot forward, including myself, including everyone in the organization. I think that's really the theme. Talking to players, talking to coaches, talking to the front office, I think we're all sort of hunkering down and making sure we leave no stone unturned, making sure that we do our jobs the absolute best way that we all can. And that we all set up our lives in a way that leaves nothing undone to try to help the Cubs win a championship (this) year."

While this has so far looked like an offseason about nothing, behind the scenes the Cubs have experienced an unusual amount of turnover. Team officials have felt genuine happiness for friends who have left for bigger and better opportunities — and a degree of frustration with the timing and volume of all these changes. Stacking the personnel moves shows how much has changed around the Cubs — and why this is such a critical season for the franchise:

If Joe Maddon can't get a meeting about a possible contract extension after guiding the Cubs to the 2016 World Series and winning more games than any other big-league manager across the past four seasons, then no one should get too comfortable. A Game 163 loss to the Milwaukee Brewers and a one-and-done playoff run should be a wake-up call for the entire organization, though Maddon will take most of the heat in the final season of his contract.

"I expect more out of myself also," Maddon said. "It's not just somebody else bringing that to your attention. First of all, I do want to say that I think a lot of our guys did do well. It wasn't a horrible season. You can't look at 95 wins and totally flush it down the toilet. But when you get ejected that quickly, you're going to look more deeply. How do you avoid that from happening again? So that's where we're at right now. I actually like it. I love challenges."

One of the first decisions of the offseason was moving on from hitting coach Chili Davis after just one season.

"I think Chili Davis is an outstanding hitting coach," Epstein told reporters at the GM meetings in November. "I think it didn't work as we expected last year for a number of reasons."

Later on in that discussion with reporters, Epstein reiterated that Davis is great at his job: "It's just a fact," Epstein said about Davis being a special hitting coach. With 19 years of big-league experience and an impressive reputation as a coach, Davis was expected to instantly have some gravitas with a young group. He was brought in with the idea that he'd be finishing these hitters' educations off, a sort of grad school for the offense.

However, it turned out that certain players just weren't ready for the message. Sources also made it clear that Davis struggled to build relationships with some of the younger players early on in his tenure and never really found common ground with them (which might say more about organizational culture).

To replace Davis, the Cubs went with a familiar face in Anthony Iapoce. Iapoce served as the team's minor-league hitting instructor from 2013-2015 and worked as the Rangers' hitting coach for the past three seasons. He brings back a similar philosophy to that of John Mallee, whom the Cubs dismissed after three seasons to bring in Davis.

"We're sort of trying to return a bit to our roots, to our core," Epstein said about Iapoce's return to the organization. "Along with the team investing with this group, I think (Iapoce) is someone who worked really well with many of these hitters in the past. He's someone who is really multi-dimensional as a hitting coach. He's as cutting edge as anybody."

While Iapoce will be returning to the Cubs, another Mallee protégé, assistant hitting coach Andy Haines, has departed for the hitting coach job with the rival Brewers. Haines was a big supporter of many of the Cubs' young players and developed a strong rapport with the group, particularly Ian Happ. In his stead, former big-leaguer Terrmel Sledge comes over from the Dodgers organization, where he spent the past three seasons as the hitting coach for Double-A Tulsa.

The Cubs promoted Chris Valaika, 33, to minor-league hitting coordinator. Valaika appeared in 44 games for Rick Renteria's Cubs in 2014 and spent last season as the co-hitting coach for Triple-A Iowa. Valaika replaces Jacob Cruz, the new assistant hitting coach for the Pittsburgh Pirates.

Sources confirmed the Cubs have added Brad Mills to their pitching infrastructure, part of the domino effect from pitching coach Jim Hickey resigning for personal reasons and run prevention coordinator Tommy Hottovy earning a promotion.

Mills, 33, pitched in the big leagues for parts of six seasons and will absorb some of Hottovy's responsibilities in advance scouting. Mills has been described as a good communicator with a personality that matches Hottovy's personable approach. Kendall Graveman — who took a one-year, \$575,000 guarantee to complete his recovery from Tommy John surgery under the Cubs' supervision — hinted at the Mills hire during a recent appearance on MLB Network Radio.

The Baltimore Orioles named Brandon Hyde their 20th manager in franchise history. While Dave Martinez went from being Maddon's bench coach to managing a Washington Nationals team that didn't live up to World Series expectations last year, Hyde is now the face of an organization coming off a 115-loss season.

The Cubs will miss Tim Cossins, who joined Hyde's big-league coaching staff in Baltimore. As the organization's minor-league field/catching coordinator for the past six seasons, Cossins worked closely with Willson Contreras and Kyle Schwarber. With his energy and enthusiasm, Cossins also helped create the culture of "When It Happens" and "That's Cub." The Orioles will need that kind of hands-on teaching in their youth movement.

The Cubs have promoted Jeremy Farrell to minor-league field coordinator, a club source said. Farrell's father John managed the Boston Red Sox to the 2013 World Series title. Farrell's brother Shane is a regional crosschecker for the Cubs, scouting amateur talent on the West Coast. Farrell's brother Luke pitched for the Cubs last season and was recently claimed by the Rangers on waivers.

The Cubs clearly see a bright future for Jeremy Farrell, who played at the University of Virginia and in the minors for the Pirates and White Sox. Farrell, 32, has worked for the Cubs as a minor-league hitting coach and infield coordinator, giving him a good base of experience for this expanded role.

David Ross signed a contract extension with ESPN last month that allowed him to continue in his high-profile TV role, spend time with his family and maintain his connection to the Cubs as a special assistant to baseball operations. Ross is an obvious managerial candidate and he can afford to be choosy about his next job.

With Ross and Mark DeRosa viewed as unrealistic candidates, the Cubs hired Mark Loretta away from the San Diego Padres to be Maddon's bench coach. Loretta, who signed a two-year contract with the Cubs, met his wife Hillary at Northwestern University and she still has extended family in the Chicago area. As the Padres general manager in 2010, Hoyer helped Loretta's post-playing transition, hiring him as a special assistant in the San Diego front office. Hoyer helped launch the next phase of Loretta's career in late December.

"Jed reached out, kind of caught me off guard really, but I was sort of intrigued by it," Loretta told San Diego's 1090-AM. "At some point, I didn't know when, I was probably going to think about getting back on the field, either as a coach or as a manager or whatever it's going to be. This opportunity seemed to be at the right time. There's not many places I would think about it. Chicago is a place we know. It's a very experienced manager, a front office that we have a lot of history with, and it's a good team. It's a World Series-caliber team, so all those factors really added up to: 'You know what, these opportunities don't come around that often. Let's try it. Let's see what happens.'"

Once again relying on their San Diego connections, the Cubs moved Chris Denorfia from special assistant to quality assurance coach, a hybrid role that will make him a go-between for the coaching staff, the players and a front office that has been restructured. Jeff Greenberg moved from director of baseball operations to director of pro scouting with Kyle Evans shifting into an evaluator role that will put him closer to the big-league team. Shiraz Rehman, who was involved in strategic initiatives last year, left the organization to become the new assistant general manager for the Rangers.

With research and development becoming such an integral part of baseball, the Cubs are making adjustments there as well. Under Epstein's regime, the department has slowly been built out, but they haven't developed quite the reputation around baseball as teams like the Yankees, Dodgers and Astros. This winter has seen both the Orioles and Braves significantly improve in those areas as well. Along with some interns being promoted into analyst roles, sources suggest the Cubs have been interviewing analysts during the offseason and that there is at least one addition the organization is excited about.

With the unfortunate and sudden passing of Ken Ravizza, the Cubs had a large hole to fill in their mental skills department. It's clear the organization takes the role seriously as they brought in one of the most respected minds in the game, former big-leaguer Bob Tewksbury, as a mental skills coordinator.

Tewksbury's big-league career spanned 13 seasons and six teams, peaking with an All-Star appearance and third-place Cy Young finish in 1992. After his playing career, Tewksbury earned his master's in psychology from Boston University. Since 2004, he's spent 12 seasons with the Red Sox as a mental performance coach, two in the same role with the Giants and one year working with the MLB Players Association in a similar capacity.

Tewksbury co-wrote "Ninety Percent Mental: An All-Star Player Turned Mental Skills Coach" with longtime baseball columnist Scott Miller, chronicling moments in his career that helped shape him and teach him how important a proper mindset is to find success in the big leagues. In the book, Tewksbury dedicates numerous pages to the relationships he's developed with both Anthony Rizzo and Jon Lester at various points in their careers.

As the Cubs continue to look for every small advantage they can get to help deliver the best on-field product, Tewksbury could prove to be an under-the-radar addition.

One name missing from this list of additions is "Bryce Harper." And without that name, outside observers might call this winter a failure for the Cubs. But with real budget restrictions, Epstein has pushed to improve the organization in ways that aren't as obvious. Some of these moves came out of necessity. Defections of some sort have become a seemingly annual occurrence for this organization. But even if the moves aren't what many had envisioned months ago, the Cubs have had a hectic offseason nonetheless. Whether it leads to success on the field this summer remains to be seen. But as Epstein has pointed out numerous times, that's how he hopes to be judged. Not by whether he wins the offseason, but by whether he can deliver another winner on the field.

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