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Sox announce TV partnership with Hawks, Bulls

By Scott Merkin / MLB.com | January 2, 2019

CHICAGO -- NBC Sports Chicago and the White Sox, Bulls and Blackhawks announced a multiyear media rights deal providing NBC Sports Chicago with exclusive local and multi-platform media rights to present game coverage of all three teams, starting with the 2019-20 season.

Now the question for the White Sox becomes whether they will have a player such as outfielder Bryce Harper or infielder Manny Machado at the forefront of their team for this new deal. The Sox have pursued both premium free agents during this current offseason.

"That would be great," said White Sox senior vice president of sales and marketing Brooks Boyer of the potential of adding one of these elite players. "If we get a big name, that would be terrific.

"One of the great things about a network like this, partnered with the Bulls and Blackhawks, is as they succeed, we succeed, and as we succeed, they succeed. You are pulling for great players, not just for the Sox.

"I'm a little biased because I work for the White Sox," Boyer said. "I would like to see the great players be with us, but if [the Blackhawks and Bulls] get one that's great too."

Since 2004, the Cubs were part of a deal with these three teams running to October '19. But the Cubs chose to go in a separate direction with their own network, leaving the remaining three teams to forge a partnership. The deal is subject to formal documentation and pending MLB, NBA and NHL approval, per the release sent out by the White Sox Wednesday.

"Their vision for distributing content and promoting the clubs and having continuity with what our fans are used to, it is of value to us," said Boyer of staying with NBC Sports Chicago. "We are excited to be able to have multi-platform distribution, to be able to have a place where our fans of the three teams can go and be part of something that is consistent with what they have done before.

"They don't have to go search for the program or the station. We'll be able to provide more and more as time goes on."

All White Sox games are scheduled to be on this new network, beginning with the '20 season. NBC Sports Chicago and NBC Sports Chicago+ will be the exclusive regional home for all regular-season games, preseason/Spring Training, and the first round of postseason coverage for the Bulls and Blackhawks. This new agreement also enables the continuation of all games to be streamed on NBCSportsChicago.com and the MyTeams by NBC Sports app.

"We are very pleased to extend our relationship with our partners at NBC Sports Chicago," said Bulls/White Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf in a statement from Wednesday's release. "Chicago sports fans are the greatest, and we are pleased that this agreement allows for the very best access to Bulls, Blackhawks and White Sox live action and content."

Sox have more to do despite busy offseason

By Scott Merkin / MLB.com | December 30, 2018

CHICAGO -- It has been a productive offseason for the White Sox, with the team trading for a closer in Alex Colome, a starting pitcher in Ivan Nova and a left-handed bat in Yonder Alonso. The White Sox also have added catcher James McCann through free agency.

But there are still things left to be done for White Sox general manager Rick Hahn, executive vice president Ken Williams and the team's front office as Spring Training approaches. Here's a look at those items.

1. Premium pursuit

At some point, outfielder Bryce Harper and infielder Manny Machado will decide on their free-agent destination. The White Sox have been heavily involved with both premium talents, hosting Machado in Chicago the Monday after the Winter Meetings concluded in Las Vegas. The remainder of the franchise's offseason, in some significant ways, waits on whether Harper and/or Machado pick the White Sox. It's most likely an "or" scenario, but the White Sox have the payroll flexibility to sign both.

2. Gaining greater late-inning leverage

The trade that sent catcher Omar Narvaez to Seattle brought back Colome as an important high-leverage piece of the White Sox bullpen. But it was a bullpen in need of an overhaul, and Hahn pointed out Colome would not be the last arm added. Look for at least one more veteran reliever to join.

3. Where does Moncada play?

There has been plenty of talk about Yoan Moncada moving from second to third base, and Moncada told MLB.com he was ready and willing to make the move. Hahn said this decision would come closer to Spring Training and would seem unlikely to happen if the White Sox agreed to terms with Machado.

4. Deepen the starters

Reynaldo Lopez, Carlos Rodon, Nova and Lucas Giolito already are in place as part of the White Sox rotation, with Dylan Cease, the 2018 Minor League Pitcher of the Year per MLB Pipeline, moving fast toward the big leagues. Picking up Nova from the Pirates doesn't preclude the White Sox from bringing in another starter, but they also could fill the fifth slot through a combination of Dylan Covey, Manny Banuelos, Jordan Stephens and a non-roster invite or two in competition.

5. More free agents

If neither Harper nor Machado chooses the White Sox, will the team go back into the free-agent market, explore another trade or work with what they have in-house as their prospects develop? Hahn has consistently stressed two points during the past couple of years: No prospect will be rushed to the Majors before everything on that player's checklist has been crossed off, and they won't make moves just to make moves and disrupt the core plan of working toward multiple-championship contention.

But there will be questions. If Machado chooses the White Sox but Harper goes elsewhere, the White Sox still might want to add to their outfield mix as an example.

6. The Abreu/Alonso/Palka mix

Jose Abreu and Alonso have played primarily at first base over the past few years, but White Sox manager Rick Renteria will have to figure out the parameters of a first base/designated hitter split for the two. Let's not forget Daniel Palka, who hit 27 home runs as a rookie, but if Harper chooses the White Sox, Palka could become a man without a set position once Eloy Jimenez arrives.

7. Prepare for Eloy

OK, this one can wait until the end of Spring Training, if not a little later. But the team's No. 1 prospect, according to MLB Pipeline, will be in Chicago at some point in April.

Inbox: Which prospects could debut in '19?

Beat reporter Scott Merkin answers questions from fans

By Scott Merkin / MLB.com | December 26, 2018

Besides (Eloy Jimenez), what Top 30 Prospects do you see in Chicago in '19?

-- Nick, Orland Park, Ill., @nd1330

Jimenez, ranked as the White Sox No. 1 prospect by MLB Pipeline, is a given and he should be the early co-favorite with Vladimir Guerrero Jr. for the American League Rookie of the Year Award. Right-hander Dylan Cease (No. 3) should follow the path set previously by Reynaldo Lopez and Michael Kopech,

meaning the reigning Minor League Pitcher of the Year per MLB Pipeline will be up at some point later in this coming season. Also keep an eye on catchers Zack Collins (No. 8) and Seby Zavala (No. 22) as the season progresses.

If you want a long shot candidate for a big league promotion in 2019, how about Nick Madrigal (No. 5)?

Do you think that Madrigal could start the season at second base and they move (Yoan Moncada) to third?
-- Tom, Chicago, @Flynnertwit

And so, we move on to Madrigal. He won't break camp with the White Sox, not with the second baseman finishing last season at Class A Advanced Winston-Salem. If the Major League club doesn't agree to terms with Manny Machado, I could see Moncada moving to third and Madrigal taking over at second at some point later in the 2019 season. Remember, general manager Rick Hahn's mantra of no player coming to the Majors before their time, so Madrigal, 21, would have to fulfill all the items on the organization's internal checklist to get there so fast.

I'm really bummed the Sox decided to non-tender Matt Davidson. He looked promising as a pitcher, and at the very least could be a great part-time hitter against lefties offensively. Why is there no room for him? His stats while playing the field were also much better than as a DH, and since the Sox have refused to commit to (Jose Abreu) long term, I'm not sure why Matt didn't get a fair shot at 1B.
-- Nick, Evanston, Ill.

Davidson was a high character guy in the clubhouse and he certainly gave us something to write about down the stretch with his three sharp pitching appearances. Davidson wants to add pitching to his repertoire, and he is working toward that goal this offseason. He believes it's possible for players to pull off a form of what Shohei Ohtani accomplished.

Ultimately, Davidson's at-bats were going elsewhere on the roster. That fact becomes especially true with the recent acquisition of Yonder Alonso from the Indians.

"You know of our level of affection for Matty and the work he's done over the last several years, and the position he's put himself in to potentially continue to contribute as a right-handed-hitting DH or first baseman/third baseman, and perhaps even pitch," Hahn said. "We just felt switching that up would put us in a stronger position going forward."

Are the Sox still pursuing another starting pitcher or are they planning to look within for a fifth starter?
-- Mark, Minooka, Ill., @MarkMyWords35

The answer is both. Hahn mentioned the addition of Ivan Nova doesn't preclude from adding another starter, but they also could turn to Manny Banuelos, Dylan Covey, Jordan Stephens and a non-roster invite or two to compete for that fifth spot.

Any information on how Jake Burger's rehabilitation is going?
-- Bruce, Lemont, Ill.

According to Hahn's comments at the Winter Meetings, the White Sox project the third baseman to be active with an affiliate "come June 1," which is "provided everything goes smoothly." Burger, who happens to be a diehard Blackhawks fan, is working his way back from a pair of left Achilles tears.

If Khalil Mack played for the Sox, would he be as good as or better than Frank Thomas? I'll hang up and listen.
-- Julie, Naperville, Ill., @JulieDiCaro

I asked on Twitter the other day about an athlete in Chicago lore who has made a bigger initial individual and team-wide impact than Mack on the Bears. There were some interesting and accurate answers, ranging from Michael Jordan to Marian Hossa to Rick Sutcliffe, and Jon Lester to Scott Podsednik, Jermaine Dye

and A.J. Pierzynski with the 2005 White Sox. But Mack has turned a subpar team into a Super Bowl candidate, not single-handed, but he has been a major reason.

Ken Williams shaped by father's indelible lesson

By Scott Merkin / MLB.com | December 21, 2018

CHICAGO -- There was a specific moment during Ken Williams' high school time that still shapes him to this day.

It involved him getting a D in biology and receiving crucial wisdom from his father, Jerry. The elder Williams asked at the time if his son thought everybody was smarter than him in class and that's why he was getting the D.

Being kind of a self-professed "smart ass" at the time, Ken Williams' response was, "Well, it looks like the evidence shows that appears to be the case." Williams' father wasn't exactly satisfied with that answer.

"He said something that I used for the rest of my life," Williams said. "He said, 'Let's assume you are right, and they are smarter than you. So, are they two times smarter or three times smarter? If they are two times, then if you work doubly hard, you are even. If you work harder than that, then you are ahead of them. You are smarter.'

"That kind of created my work ethic, set the foundation of my work ethic for the rest of my life no matter what I embarked on. I told him, I said, 'I wouldn't be sitting in the position that I am without that one piece of advice because I still stand by it.'"

Jerry Williams passed away at 73 on Oct. 11 after a battle with squamous cell carcinoma. Ken Williams shared this story with his father as he sat at his bedside for six weeks in California before his passing.

The White Sox executive vice president and architect of the team's 2005 World Series championship was kind enough to share this story while sitting with his son, Ken Jr., at the recently completed Winter Meetings in Las Vegas. He brought up the best advice ever received despite not really being ready to talk about his father.

"Listen, it's still very raw to me, and it still has the ability to take me back to sitting by his bedside for six weeks and what cancer can do to someone," Williams said. "It's still hard to believe because this is Jerry Williams. Always kept in shape, fit, strong man, so it's hard for us to put our arms around it."

"I was blessed to have this man in my life for 32 years and as Senior was handling his responsibilities on the baseball field, he really took ownership of being a second father figure for me," said Ken Jr. of his grandfather. "He was a confidant to me. He was the backbone to this family and although he will be sorely missed, we were blessed to have that person in our family to support all of us through everything we've been through."

Ken Sr. has passed on Jerry's guidance to his son, the White Sox sixth-round selection in the 2008 Draft who is currently working as the organization's special assistant, baseball operations. Williams feels his son needs to be better than everyone else because of who his father is, but working through challenges has been a staple of the Williams family for generations.

"This is not foreign to him and he's going to have an excellent future whether it be here or somewhere else," said Williams of his son, who has been looking at scouting reports since he was 12 and was unofficially scouting even when he was playing at Double-A per his father. "My fear is someone is going to probably see the advantage of having him and we are not going to be able to keep him. But he's been an asset already."

"Work ethic has been a strong quality from our family that has been passed down through Jerry Williams," Ken Jr. said. "I've always been one who has never been afraid to work, whether it was on the field, off the field. I've decided to take the same work ethic as a player into this new career."

The White Sox showed up in style for Lucas Giolito's wedding

By Eric Chesterton / MLB Cut4 | December 24, 2018

While the White Sox continue to be mentioned in rumors for top free agents like Manny Machado and Bryce Harper, the current members of the team have lives to live. In the case of Lucas Giolito, that means getting married.

And on Saturday, that's just what he did:

Of course, the rest of the team showed up to the wedding and they were looking super fly:

Tyler Saladino is the clear champion in the facial hair competition, as he always will be. Best-dressed was a much tighter race, but James Shields came out on top with his vest.

It wasn't just White Sox who showed up to celebrate Giolito, however. A collection of young pitchers including Jack Flaherty, Tyler Skaggs, Max Fried and Conner Greene were also in attendance.

While the crazy workouts are always impressive -- and sometimes weird -- weddings will always be the best part of every offseason.

If no Bryce Harper or Manny Machado, one national writer says of A.J. Pollock: 'The best fit clearly is the White Sox'

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago | January 3, 2019

The White Sox — and, perhaps more so, their fans — are hoping for a huge splash this offseason in the form of Bryce Harper or Manny Machado coming to the South Side.

But Machado supposedly prefers the New York Yankees. The Los Angeles Dodgers are angling for a run at Harper. There's continued talk about Harper potentially returning to the Washington Nationals. And what about those "spend-stupid" Philadelphia Phillies?

The point is none of those teams are the White Sox, and while there are new twists and turns in these ongoing sagas every couple of hours, it's obviously possible the South Siders aren't the final choice of either of the two biggest names on the free-agent market.

So then what? What's Plan B? Move on to the next-best free agent, right?

Well, that's not necessarily the case. It's seemed for a while like the White Sox foray into free agency, no matter how aggressive, at this stage in their rebuilding process could result in either Harper, Machado or nothing of great significance. General manager Rick Hahn has often talked about capitalizing on opportunities, no matter when they come along, and Harper and Machado represent the kind of unique players who warrant a year-early spending spree. There aren't many other players, if any, on the market right now who share that distinction.

However, that didn't stop ESPN's Jeff Passan for making a case that should the White Sox miss out on Harper or Machado, the next-best free-agent position player would be a solid fit. Describing former Arizona Diamondbacks outfielder A.J. Pollock, Passan wrote Wednesday that "the best fit clearly is the White Sox," pointing mostly to the team's current outfield situation, and it's hard to argue that Pollock wouldn't be an upgrade in the White Sox outfield.

With the organization's top-ranked prospect, Eloy Jimenez, likely ticketed for left field at some point in the opening weeks of the 2019 campaign, the other two spots are way less solid. Adam Engel's played Gold Glove type defense in center field but has struggled to find success at the plate, and right field is a real head-scratcher after the non-tendering of Avisail Garcia. Daniel Palka, I guess?

So is Pollock actually a great fit for the White Sox?

Well, while he's shown promise in the past and at 31 years old could certainly fit into the team's long-term plans if they thought highly enough of him, there are some pretty glaring red flags when it comes to Pollock. Chiefly, it's injuries. He had a sensational 2015 season, slashing .315/.367/.498 with 20 homers, 39 doubles and 39 stolen bases. He was an All Star, won a Gold Glove and finished 14th in NL MVP voting for a D-backs team that finished four games under .500. But in the three seasons since, he's played in only 237 games. That's 79 games a season, a number dragged down significantly by the just 12 he played in in 2016, but he got into only 112 games in 2017 and 113 last season. And with that has come a big dip in production, with a combined .261/.323/.473 slash line over the last three seasons. It's worth noting, though, that he hit a career-high 21 home runs in those 113 games in 2018.

Had he been a free agent coming off that 2015 season as a 27-year-old, Pollock would've been the hottest commodity around. Three injury-filled seasons later, not so much. Does a 31-year-old outfielder with persistent health issues make sense when the White Sox have Jimenez, Luis Robert, Micker Adolfo, Luis Basabe and Blake Rutherford on the way?

Let's just say it doesn't make as much sense as Harper or Machado.

And that's kind of the point. The White Sox aren't making serious runs at Harper and Machado because they need them to turn the 2019 team into a playoff contender. It's rather likely adding one of those guys wouldn't even accomplish that. The White Sox are going after one of these 26-year-old superstars for what they can do for the team in the long term, to combine them with Jimenez and Robert and Michael Kopech and Dylan Cease and build a perennial contender for years to come. And if they can't do that with Harper or Machado, then they have the flexibility to look ahead to next winter's loaded free-agent class or spend some prospect capital on a trade down the road or simply watch Jimenez blossom into the type of superstar they think he can be.

Pollock doesn't accomplish those long-term goals like Harper and Machado would. It's not to say he can't, with health, rediscover some of that 2015 magic. And the longer free agency drags on, there could be quite a deal to be had as spring training nears.

But the White Sox aren't in a position where Harper heading to Los Angeles and Machado heading to New York will send them scrambling for a consolation prize. In a sense, there are many Plan Bs. In another, more immediate sense, there are none and there don't need to be.

Or maybe not: New report says White Sox won't go over seven years with Bryce Harper, Manny Machado

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago | January 2, 2019

Some new info trickled out on the Bryce Harper front Wednesday, with ESPN's Jeff Passan writing that the White Sox are willing to guarantee a 10-year deal to the biggest name on the free-agent market.

Or maybe not.

Hours later, The Score's Bruce Levine followed that up with a report of his own, one saying the White Sox won't go past seven years with either Harper or fellow mega free agent Manny Machado.

This ping-ponging might have the initial smack of negotiating through the media, but there's reasons to believe either could be true.

After all, the financially flexible White Sox have the ability to offer a gargantuan contract like a 10-year deal. And with challenges on either or both the Harper and Machado fronts from the 100-win New York Yankees, NL-champion Los Angeles Dodgers and "spend stupid" Philadelphia Phillies, their ability to potentially offer more than any other team — they currently have almost no long-term financial commitments to speak of — could give them an edge. Heck, it might be the only way to get an edge.

But the White Sox also don't need either of these guys for 2019, or really at all. While a swath of the fan base has declared that the offseason will be a failure if neither Harper nor Machado come to the South Side, the White Sox rebuilding plans will not at all be negatively impacted should these guys go elsewhere. Eloy Jimenez could end up providing a similar kind of impact addition. Same goes for Michael Kopech, Dylan Cease and Luis Robert. And then there's next winter's absolutely loaded free-agent class, which the closer-to-contending White Sox could take better advantage of — and still with all this financial flexibility to put to use.

The lack of a real need of these specific players could very well convince the White Sox to not hand out some kind of record-breaking decade-long deal.

Then there's the timing factor, with Jimenez under team control for seven seasons once he hits the big leagues in April. Why spend a ridiculous sum on three more years of Harper or Machado if those teams, potentially without Jimenez, Kopech or whichever other young players, aren't at the same level of contention as the ones over the next seven seasons?

There's a lot of factors here, and so it is easy to see why either of these possibilities could be true. And then there's that idea of negotiating through the media, or simply conflicting parties presenting differing information to different reporters. Remember during the Winter Meetings when in the span of just a few hours we heard the White Sox didn't see themselves as favorites in the Harper and Machado derbies and also that they were the front runners for Harper?

The point being, things change quickly this time of year, if not in reality at least for those of us not sitting at the negotiating table. Stay tuned.

White Sox reportedly willing to guarantee Bryce Harper a 10-year deal: Does it give them an edge?

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago | January 2, 2019

The Bryce Harper sweepstakes is ongoing. So, too, is the one involving Manny Machado.

The White Sox are in the mix for both 26-year-old free-agent superstars, who are expected to land a couple of the biggest contracts in baseball history.

With super agent Scott Boras at the wheel of the Harper negotiations, many are expecting Harper's to be the richest ever, but who will offer it? The New York Yankees and Los Angeles Dodgers — the former in on Machado, the latter in on Harper — aren't expected to hand out a contract that lasts a decade. The White Sox and the Philadelphia Phillies are.

We already know the Washington Nationals did, with Harper reportedly turning down their 10-year offer worth \$300 million. In referencing that choice, ESPN's Jeff Passan wrote that "the Phillies and White Sox are the other two teams known to be willing to guarantee Harper the decade-plus-long deal he and Machado ... are seeking."

That's a big deal, considering a big deal might end up the deciding factor in Harper's decision, as well as Machado's, for that matter. Money talks, as anyone who follows professional sports knows. Will it outweigh all other factors in these decisions?

The White Sox would seem to be at a disadvantage when it comes to pitching the ability to win and win soon. The Yankees and Dodgers have plenty of recent success, with the Yankees fresh off a 100-win season, perhaps heading into the 2019 season as the preseason World Series favorites, and the Dodgers the back-to-back NL pennant-winners. The Nationals just added Patrick Corbin to a roster capable of contending, and the Phillies, despite a second-half slide, made huge strides in their own rebuilding effort and spent time in first place in the competitive NL East in 2018. The White Sox, of course, are coming off a 100-loss campaign and have mere plans of future success to pitch.

Of course, those plans are mighty intriguing ones, especially if you're looking for a place to spend the next decade of your career. The White Sox boast a loaded farm system and on-the-way talent like Eloy Jimenez, Michael Kopech, Dylan Cease and Luis Robert that could power contending clubs for years to come. Rick Hahn believes that's as good a pitch as any and said during the Winter Meetings that the White Sox have received positive feedback about their bright future from prospective additions.

But the team's financial flexibility might end up being an even stronger argument for one of these guys to come to the South Side. The rebuilding process hasn't just infused a wealth of talent into the minor league system, it's also made it so the White Sox have almost no long-term financial commitments to speak of. Given that, they have the ability to dedicate quite a bit of their long-term finances to a player like Harper or Machado. And apparently that ability is a little more than just the ability, with them reportedly willing to guarantee 10 years to Harper.

It doesn't end the discussion, though. The Dodgers, in the middle of a media capital like Los Angeles, can offer opportunities Harper wouldn't be able to find on the South Side, though he didn't seem to have any trouble being the face of baseball while playing for the Nationals. The Yankees, playing in New York and just generally being the Yankees, offer similar opportunities for Machado.

But when entering a derby in which the idea for the player is to get a really big payday, offering the biggest payday is only going to increase your chances of success. Does it make the White Sox the favorite in the Harper sweepstakes that they're willing to guarantee 10 years and an unspecified number of millions of dollars? No. But it makes them in it to win it.

Sox Drawer Q&A: Will Harper and/or Machado complete the White Sox? What's Chuck's best Paul Konerko story?

By Chuck Garfien / NBC Sports Chicago | December 31, 2018

Happy New Year everybody! I hope you've had a great holiday season with your friends and families. That includes you, Manny Machado. I know you have a big life decision to make in the next few days. Fortunately, your close friend and brother-in-law, new White Sox slugger Yonder Alonso, is nearby to help persuade you to sign with the White Sox.

It sure looked like both of them had a great time playing golf together last week in Florida. Alonso posted a photo on Instagram of their foursome in front of the clubhouse with the hashtags #GreatTimes, #Golf and #TheBoys.

Utilityman Danny Valencia was also in the foursome. Hmmm. He and Machado were teammates in Baltimore. Valencia and Alonso played together at the University of Miami in 2006. Valencia can play first base, third base, left field and right field coming off the bench. And, he's a free agent....

Okay, lots of questions to answer in this edition of the Sox Drawer. A whole bunch about Harper and Machado. Let's get to it!

Q: When are the Sox signing Harper and Machado? I need answers Chuck. --@ThePruhFessor

CG: Not to burst your bubble, but it's highly unlikely the White Sox will be able to sign both of them. Let's hope for one out of two! Machado is expected to make his decision soon after the new year. Unless

something radical occurred over Christmas, it's a three-team race between the White Sox, Yankees and Phillies for Machado. The Harper situation is not as clear. We don't know exactly how many teams are in the running for him. His agent Scott Boras likes to slow play negotiations. If that occurs, the White Sox could actually be in a stronger position for Harper since they aren't expected to contend in 2019 and can wait Harper out, while teams like the Dodgers have other pressing needs (like 2B and catcher) that could affect their budget. My guess is, Machado will sign in the next week to 10 days. This will help burst open the free agent dam that's been clogged since the winter meetings. Harper will eventually sign towards the end of January.

Q: @DanClarkSports claims the Yankees will indeed sign Machado. What have you heard? & @StevePhillipsGM stated that the #whitesox are the only "All In" team in on Bryce Harper. ---@mr_zablocki

CG: The White Sox have both right field available and the financial flexibility to sign Harper, but I wouldn't say they're the only team that's "IN" like Steve Phillips tweeted, but I understand his point.

We're all trying to read the tea leaves with Harper. There really isn't a slam dunk team out there. Every club has at least one ding against them. Everything else is just speculation. Speaking of which, the tweet by @DanClarkSports about Machado signing with the Yankees got hot for about two hours last week, but after his tweet blew up it hasn't been backed up by a single baseball reporter. This isn't to say it's not true, but don't read into anything just yet. I've heard various things both good and bad about the White Sox chances of landing Machado — everything from "he's going to the Yankees" to "he's signing with the Phillies," to "it's between the White Sox and Phillies" and that the Yankees are out of it! Strange, but I've actually heard that.

Where's the truth? Who knows? We're grabbing at straws right now.

The whole Harper/Machado saga has been playing with our emotions for almost two months. The good news is: the suspense (at least with Machado) should end soon!

Q: Will you get Yolmer Sanchez to dump a celebratory bucket of Gatorade on your head if the Sox sign Harper or Machado? Catch is it has to be at the GRate on the signing day. #BundleUp --- @Leonard42

CG: If Yolmer is there, he has my permission. Did I just say that?

Q: If the WSox don't land either Machado or Harper, what are believed to be the reasons? 1. Not enough cash offered? 2. WSox not close enough to contending? 3. WSox considered the second team in a large market? Combination of all the above? Other factors? --- @chrishepp77

CG: Assuming the White Sox aren't able to sign either of them, it'll probably come down to two things: money and market. Machado and Harper both like the bright lights. While Chicago is a huge market, it doesn't have the glitz and glamour of New York and Los Angeles. In the end, I think that's what the White Sox are competing against: the two biggest markets in the country, which is where Harper and Machado reportedly prefer to be. But then, there's the money. If the Yankees and Dodgers make offers to Machado and Harper that are much less than what the White Sox (and Phillies and whoever else) are offering, then it's a total wildcard as to where they'll end up signing. You can't flatly assume that since the Yankees and Dodgers have such deep pockets, that they will easily shell out the hundreds of millions of dollars required to sign them. Another thing to consider: I'm sure the Yankees and Dodgers would love to have Machado and Harper. They might want them, but with all the talent already on their rosters, do they NEED them? I say no. You can argue the White Sox and Phillies NEED Machado or Harper because of all that they'd bring to the table: more wins, more tickets, more merchandise, more advertizing, more buzz, higher TV ratings, etc. All is not lost if the White Sox can't sign either of them, but it would be a huge boost for the franchise no doubt.

Chicago might not be New York or Los Angeles, but it isn't Cleveland. Sorry, Cleveland. It's one of the best cities in the country. Players love coming here as visitors and living here as members of the White Sox and Cubs. The White Sox might be coming off a 100-loss season, but they sold their future to Harper and

Machado and it's not false hope. It's real. In the end, I believe it will come down to those two words: money and market. No offense to Philadelphia, but if Harper and Machado don't sign with the Dodgers or Yankees, and if the White Sox make a big enough offer, I like the White Sox chances to get one of them.

Q: If Machado or Harper don't sign, do the Sox reassess their strategy to fully commit to building their young players rather than going through free agency? Or do they continue vying for the big fish after being spurned? ---@HWMNBN1988

CG: As much as we all love the prospects, they are still just that: prospects. You don't know who or how many of them will reach their ceilings and excel in the majors. That's a big reason why the White Sox are pursuing Harper and Machado. They are special MVP talents who are rare in the game, even more so as available free agents at the age of 26. You can wait around and hope that someone like Micker Adolfo can become Bryce Harper or you can try to sign Bryce Harper. If the White Sox can't reel in either of these guys, they should try again next winter when the likes of Nolan Arenado, Anthony Rendon and Gerrit Cole will be available. Chris Sale is set to hit the open market as well. However, he's got such a good thing going in Boston (and getting to live at home in Naples, FL during spring training), I don't see him leaving.

Q: Do you honestly believe Harper and/or Machado will complete this team? Why? --- @ronnieranola

CG: Neither of them will complete the White Sox. Heck, both of them won't complete them, at least not yet. You still have the starting rotation and bullpen, but either of them would be huge additions to the team. There are some who question if Machado should really be the face of the franchise. That's a whole other discussion. All I know is, he would be a tremendous upgrade to the ballclub. He's not a clubhouse cancer. He'd immediately make the White Sox better. A lot better.

Q: Media vibe of late doesn't have Sox as favorites for either Harper or Machado...what odds do you give for either landing on 35th St.? -- @DARTHBOBBYA

CG: This is basically like throwing darts. I have no idea, but here goes.

White Sox chances of signing Machado: 8 to 1

White Sox chances of signing Harper: 20 to 1

*longshots do win from time to time

Q: Give me your best Pauly story! --- @RyanODell14

CG: My favorite Paul Konerko story is actually one that occurred years before he even played for the White Sox. We all know about the legendary brawl between Robin Ventura and Nolan Ryan in 1993 when Ventura charged the mound in Arlington, Texas and the 46-year-old Texan pounded a slew of noogies to Ventura's head. It turns out that a young Paul Konerko was actually in the crowd that night with his junior Olympic baseball team. And before the game, Ventura spoke to Konerko's team about of all things: sportsmanship! I wrote this story in 2012 and it's one of my all-time favorites. Some memorable quotes:

Konerko: "They probably just grabbed (Ventura) and he didn't even know what it was, and he came out, said hello, good luck guys, that kind of stuff. Two hours later, there's a riot on the field that he caused."

Ventura: "Apparently, I was talking to an amateur team about sportsmanship. Things went a little haywire in the game."

Q: In Vegas. Where's Harper? --- @Pjcasey2

CG: Craps table at the Wynn. Go get him! Bring him to the South Side!

Q: So our Chuck...This is going to be Year 3 of the rebuild. What's your take on where the rebuild stands right now? --- @pfrickey

CG: All things considered, I believe the rebuild is on the right track. The White Sox got some great talent back in the trades for Sale, Quintana, Eaton, Frazier, Robertson, etc. They've also put together two very promising drafts. This turned their farm system from one of the worst in baseball into one of the best. But that was only Phase One of the rebuild. We're currently in Phase Two, which consists of many of these young players making their way to the big leagues. Those who have — like Moncada, Lopez, Giolito, Kopech — had some growing pains last year. There will be more of that development ahead as prospects like Jimenez, Cease, Dunning, Burdi, Collins, Robert, etc. reach the majors in 2019 and beyond. I don't have the actual blueprints to the White Sox rebuild, but if they are able to sign big names like Harper and Machado, I'd look at that as essentially the start of Phase Three: adding premium veteran talent to the young core. If it doesn't happen this offseason, the White Sox will be in position to add next offseason, when a very strong free agent class hits the market again. You can't look at the White Sox 62-100 record in 2018 and make a judgment call about the rebuild. Most of the players they acquired are still in the minors and those who have made it to Chicago need more time to develop.

That said, I'm really excited about the future. There are some dynamic players in the organization. I'm hoping to see a lot of progress in both the majors and minors next season. Better days are ahead.

Q: Would like to hear who is the likely 5th starter (and in reality with Rodon's injury track record-6th). Coming from within the organization or as a Free agent signing? Thank you for the podcast. You are a great and informative listen. Happy New Year. --- @lmbass57

CG: It's probably safe to say that the White Sox will be adding a veteran starter or two before spring training to compete for a spot in the rotation. Not sure if they will be getting major league or minor league contracts. The free agents still out there don't exactly jump off the page. If you play fantasy baseball, it's very similar to the middle of summer when you need a starter. You look at the free agents available and the list includes Gio Gonzalez, Wade Miley, Ervin Santana, Doug Fister, Jaime Garcia, Marco Estrada, Edwin Jackson. You know what I'm talking about. All of them have shown flashes in the past, but you really have no idea what you're getting. Maybe you're lucky. You sign the right one, they have a comeback season and you look like a fantasy genius! That's probably what Rick Hahn is contemplating right now. Which one of those guys should he sign and for how much? Fantasy baseball is a lot easier than reality baseball, Rick, may the force be with you.

As for internal candidates, there's Jordan Stephens, Kodi Medeiros and Spencer Adams, although he's not on the 40-man. Dylan Cease is, and if he has another stellar season in the minors, you could see him in the majors later in 2019. Thanks for listening to the podcast!

Q: How come we haven't heard more about signing guys like Curtis Granderson or Adam Jones? Veterans that are good in clubhouse and can be signed for low cost 1 year deal. --- @bsell86

CG: Give it some time. Guys like Granderson and Jones will probably be the last to be signed once the bigger free agents are all taken.

Q: Chuck, how about a trivia question that would make any Sox fan as myself disgusted. Clayton Richard was just traded to Toronto. He is one of the two remaining active players from our last playoff team in 2008. Who is the other? --- @ralph6esposito

CG: I believe the only other active player remaining from 2008 is Boone Logan. The Brewers DFA'd him, so he's without a team right now. He's had a pretty good run in the majors. 13 seasons. Not bad.

Q: Who will be World Series MVP in 2020? Cease? Kopech? Harper? Moncada? ---@Remember_Roar

CG: I'll go with Jimenez.

Q: Do you like gladiator movies? --- @Snarky_Dave

CG: Have you ever been in a Turkish prison? (We're quoting from the movie "Airplane.")

Q: What's the fastest animal on Earth? -- @Jozefowski

CG: Another quote from "Airplane." Not sure what happened here. I think it's a sign we need to wrap this up.

Q: What would we do without chuck? -- @oglando23

CG: I do not know. Seriously, Happy New Year to all of you great White Sox fans out there! You're the best! Hope it's a happy and healthy 2019!

What other bullpen additions are coming for the White Sox? Are there any long-term solutions out there?

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago | December 31, 2018

Rick Hahn vowed upgrades to the bullpen this winter, and so far, he's got a good one. But he's pledged more changes to the South Side relief corps.

Thing is, it's tough to figure out what kind of changes could still be coming.

Hahn made a surprise move earlier this offseason in acquiring Alex Colome, the 2017 major league saves leader, in a trade that sent catcher Omar Narvaez to the Seattle Mariners. It looked like a slam dunk of a trade, selling high on a guy who only maybe would have been the White Sox starting catcher in 2019 for a potentially elite closer.

But Hahn raised at least this set of eyebrows when asked how Colome fit into the team's long-term plan. After all, everything the White Sox do is with an eye (if not both eyes) on the future, on the time when the organization's highly touted prospects arrive on the South Side and shift things from rebuilding into contending. Colome, who turned 30 on Monday (happy birthday!), would figure to be an option in the long term, though almost certainly his contract situation has something to do with Hahn being more than a tad noncommittal. Colome has only two years of team control remaining.

"Obviously he fits in well for the short term over the course of the next two seasons. How he'll fit in '21 and beyond, it's way premature to make that assessment," Hahn said after the trade. "Obviously we can extend him at some point during his stay here or revisit it once he hits free agency.

"On relievers it's tough to project out on any of them, even the best, quite how they're going to perform three or four years out into the future. We're very optimistic about what he's going to bring the for at least next two seasons. If it makes sense at that point to extend him and have him continue to be part of this growing core into '21 and beyond, we'll certainly remain open-minded to that."

Those comments remain interesting when it comes to Colome's long-term future — could he be a candidate to get flipped at the 2019 or 2020 trade deadline? — but they are potentially important as the offseason wears on and Hahn looks to make more additions to the bullpen. Could they also be a clue to what kind of additions he makes?

For example, the White Sox have been repeatedly linked to free-agent reliever Adam Ottavino, one of the top relief pitchers on the market. That connection popped up again in recent days.

Ottavino was excellent with the Colorado Rockies last season, finishing the regular season with a 2.43 ERA and a whopping 112 strikeouts in 77.2 innings. He figures to be a significant upgrade to any relief corps he

joins. While he's 33, older than Colome and perhaps not as obvious a long-term solution, he's expected to get a multi-year deal that could have him as a member of the White Sox bullpen, should they be the team to sign him, into their period of contention.

But Hahn's point about reliever volatility makes sense, even when talking about someone who was as good as Ottavino last year. The season before posting that 2.43 ERA, he had a 5.06 ERA. The season before that, his ERA was a sterling 2.67. See? Volatile.

If arms the caliber of Colome and Ottavino fall into the "we don't know if they're long-term options" category, can any reliever be part of the long-term planning on the South Side? Any outside addition to the bullpen, at least?

That volatility is going to affect what Hahn & Co. do the rest of this winter. He said as much during the Winter Meetings earlier this month.

"It has a real impact. Relievers are obviously very tough to predict and other than the elite, elite versions, you tend to see a lot of fluctuation season to season," Hahn said in Las Vegas. "So when you're talking about whether to commit three years or more to a reliever, you have to be pretty confident about what you're going to get coming back, which is no easy trick in the reliever market."

Now, Ottavino is pretty darn good. Even with that ERA north of 5.00 in 2017, he's got a career ERA of 3.68 and that's with 181 of his 366 career games coming at Coors Field.

But again, can you expect to keep getting the kind of 2.43 ERA production as Ottavino moves into his age-33, 34 and 35 seasons?

That's what the White Sox front office is grappling with as they look to add to the bullpen this winter. If every move they make is about the long-term impact, it takes careful consideration when it comes to determining what long-term value you're going to get from even the best relievers. So are there any guys on the market who warrant a long-term investment? Or will it be more fill-in types and flippable pieces as the young players in the 'pen grow up?

White Sox linked to Mariners slugger Edwin Encarnacion, but where the heck would he play?

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago | December 29, 2018

The looming decisions of mega free agents Bryce Harper and Manny Machado might be the only thing on the minds of White Sox fans as the new year approaches, but there are other players out there — and other offseason rumors involving the South Siders.

The latest, however, is a bit of head-scratcher.

MLB Network's Jon Morosi mentioned the White Sox as one of the teams turning attention to a potential acquisition of Edwin Encarnacion. This after a player the White Sox were linked to earlier this offseason, Nelson Cruz, signed with the division-rival Minnesota Twins.

Encarnacion has launched no fewer than 32 and as many as 42 home runs in each of the last seven seasons. He terrorized the White Sox as a member of the Cleveland Indians in 2017 and 2018. But now he's a Seattle Mariner, and if you've been paying attention to the offseason they've been having in the Pacific Northwest, they want to trade just about everybody.

If you're a team looking for a stopgap at designated hitter for the next one or two seasons, then you could do a lot worse than Encarnacion, who has an option for 2020. But the White Sox aren't that kind of team.

First off, bringing in a soon-to-be 36-year-old designated hitter doesn't exactly mesh with the rebuilding team's long-term plans. But perhaps more importantly, they don't have anywhere for him to play as the

roster is currently constructed. The trade with the aforementioned Indians for Yonder Alonso created a two-man, tag-team situation at first base and designated hitter with Jose Abreu. Those two are expected to fill those two spots, in one combination or the other, in most games during the 2019 season. Adding a third wheel to that mix makes no sense, especially considering none of those guys can play any other positions, unless a move sending Alonso or Abreu out of town would accompany a trade for Encarnacion.

And there's another bit of info that makes this a tough one to understand from a White Sox perspective. While Rick Hahn has already made a trio of trades this winter — with the Indians for Alonso, with the Mariners for Alex Colome and with the Pittsburgh Pirates for Ivan Nova — dealing away prospects to a rebuilding team like the Mariners in exchange for a player who's about to turn 36 doesn't make a lick of sense with where the White Sox are in their own rebuilding project. The players dealt away in the Alonso, Colome and Nova deals weren't expected to be big parts of the future, with major league catcher Omar Narvaez the biggest name sent out of town. But someone like Encarnacion could cost a little more as the Mariners look to further stockpile their farm system.

The same confusion seemed to arise from the reported interest in Cruz, though at least he was a free agent, where the only cost would be in dollars.

Morosi also mentioned Jose Martinez of the St. Louis Cardinals as an option for teams looking for a DH, as he just got squeezed out of first base by the Redbirds' acquisition of Paul Goldschmidt. Martinez would make far more sense than Encarnacion, only 28 and not a free agent until 2023. But the same questions apply in that the White Sox would need to spend prospect capital to acquire him and that they have no place for him to play. That being said, in 270 career games with the Cardinals, he's batting .309 with a .372 on-base percentage. His power numbers, however, leave a little to be desired, with just 31 career home runs, a smaller career total than any single-season total Encarnacion has posted since 2011.

The White Sox have already added a designated hitter to the mix this winter in Alonso, and when you throw in Daniel Palka, who hit 27 homers as a rookie last season, that makes a crowded group of DHs on the South Side. And so adding another doesn't seem to be very logical. But the Hot Stove rumor mill doesn't stop this time of year.

Steve Phillips reading between the lines on Bryce Harper's suitors will encourage White Sox fans

By Dan Santaromita / NBC Sports Chicago | December 28, 2018

Everyone is trying to read between the lines and figure out where Bryce Harper and Manny Machado will be signing.

As far as Harper goes, former Mets GM Steve Phillips tweeted out some of his thoughts on the outfielder's suitors. It's a wild ride with an ending White Sox fans will like.

There is being "in" on a free agent player and there is being "IN". A team (#Cubs) saying they might be in on Bryce Harper, if they can move \$ or if the owner changes his mind, is not really "IN."

A team (#Phillies) that is "IN" on Bryce Harper, would meet with him at the winter meetings in Las Vegas when he was three blocks away. If not, they aren't really "IN."

A team (Dodgers) that is "IN" on Bryce Harper, only if he is willing to accept a deal half as long as he wants, is not really "IN." They are a fallback option.

Phillips isn't saying the White Sox are the favorites for Harper and he isn't saying he expects them to sign him. Still, for White Sox fans looking for any bread crumb of information or a reason to be optimistic, this is probably as good as it's going to get until after the New Year.

There is no end in sight for the Harper saga and with agent Scott Boras involved, this could take a while. Things can and likely will change for the teams involved, but as things stand, Phillips makes about as good of a pro-White Sox argument as there is.

Top White Sox stories of 2018: Michael Kopech reaches the South Side

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago | December 28, 2018

As the new year approaches, we're counting down the top White Sox stories from 2018.

In a season that was always going to be about waiting, getting some payoff, some tangible proof of progress was huge.

Michael Kopech had been one of the biggest names of the White Sox rebuild since the second it started, one of the two big pieces to come back to the South Side in the trade that sent Chris Sale to Boston and kickstarted this whole thing. After he dominated at the Double-A level in 2017 and earned a late-season promotion to Triple-A Charlotte, many fans figured it wouldn't be long until they were watching him star in the majors.

That didn't turn out to be the case, with Kopech going through some notable struggles after a strong start to the 2018 campaign. For a while there, Kopech was dealing with what he later admitted was a case of the yips, and it showed in his numbers: He had a 5.69 ERA and a 76:47 strikeout-to-walk ratio over a 12-start span from May 6 to July 5.

But once Kopech figured things out, he figure them out in a big way, following up that aforementioned stretch with these numbers: a 1.84 ERA and a jaw-dropping 59:4 strikeout-to-walk ratio over seven starts, leading to a promotion to the major leagues.

And the fans were pumped when #KopechDay finally came, giving Kopech a standing ovation every time he got a batter into a two-strike count.

"That was pretty exciting stuff," Kopech said after his debut. "I didn't really know how many people were going to be here tonight in general. I knew that maybe half the crowd was going to be my family. It was exciting to see how invested the fans were tonight. A standing ovation every time I had two strikes, I didn't expect that, but that was, it made me feel like I was in a big-time game, and I guess it was a big-time game for me. It was awesome."

Kopech's arrival at the big league level symbolized more than it ended up producing in the immediate aftermath, though, as once he got to the majors, it was one frustration after another for the top-rated pitching prospect in the White Sox organization. Though three of his four starts came in front of the home fans, all three were short, with rain impacting all of them and none lasting more than 3.1 innings. Then came the bad news that Kopech would need Tommy John surgery after just four major league outings. He's likely to miss the entirety of the 2019 season.

"It's been a whirlwind of emotions for me in the past couple of weeks, obviously. From just about my absolute peak to the absolute rock bottom for me," Kopech said the day his surgery was announced. "I think to say it's unexpected would be an understatement.

"It sucks. That's it. It sucks."

That came like a gut punch to the fan base, too, but it's important to remember what his initial arrival showed: that the rebuilding effort is moving along in a positive manner.

If 2018 was all about the waiting game, one of the biggest waits came to an end in late August with Kopech reaching the majors. The light at the end of the rebuilding tunnel that Rick Hahn has talked about in recent

weeks, part of that is thanks to Kopech, who reached all the developmental milestones the White Sox were hoping he would reach in the minor leagues.

And while another waiting game is underway as he recovers from the surgery, the most electric moment on the South Side in 2018 was the end of the wait for Kopech's major league debut.

Recruiting time? Yonder Alonso goes golfing with Manny Machado

By Dan Santaromita / NBC Sports Chicago | December 27, 2018

Manny Machado's decision may not come until 2019, so in the meantime fans of his potential suitors are desperate for any bit of news or rumored info.

So when brother-in-law and newly acquired member of the White Sox Yonder Alonso puts a photo on Instagram with Machado, it created a bit of buzz. Alonso and Machado apparently went golfing together as part of the same foursome down in Miami.

That's Alonso on the end and Machado to his left. Alonso may have put in a good word for the White Sox while another player lined up a putt on the green. He may be just spending time with his brother-in-law around the holidays, which is a normal thing to do. Either way, the comments are bombarded by White Sox fans looking for Alonso to recruit Machado.

When the White Sox acquired Alonso, his relationship with Machado quickly became a major storyline of the trade. When Alonso talked to the press after the trade, many of the questions were about Machado. While the actual influence he may be able to have on Machado is debatable, things like this are why his relationship with Machado was so talked about.

By the way, Danny Valencia was also in the foursome. He is a free agent. The 34-year-old spent last season with the Orioles with Machado before he was traded to the Dodgers in July. They were also teammates in 2013 in Baltimore. Valencia and Alonso were teammates at the University of Miami in 2006.

Good news for White Sox? Bryce Harper, Manny Machado reportedly not fans of Philadelphia

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago | December 27, 2018

Is this good news for the White Sox in their pursuits of two of the biggest names in baseball?

According to a report from the New York Post's Joel Sherman, neither Bryce Harper nor Manny Machado are big fans of Philadelphia, the home of the Phillies, one of the most logical landing spots for either of the two biggest prizes on this winter's free-agent market.

"Word is neither player particularly likes Philadelphia and both would have preferred the Yankees, who have shown little interest in Harper."

Oh really?

The Phillies vowed to spend "stupid" earlier this offseason and because of that declaration have seemed to be one of the most likely destinations for Harper and Machado. Machado just wrapped his free-agent tour last week in Philadelphia, a string of visits he kicked off on the South Side. That visit to Citizens Bank Park was, let's say, eventful, with Machado confronted by a shouting construction worker who told him to "do the right thing" and sign with the Phillies. And remember that at one point the Phillies seemed so likely a landing spot for Harper that one national writer said "book it."

But this latest bit of info in a saga that's stretched on for months and seems to feature new twists and turns every day could be good news for the White Sox.

Skeptical fans might roll their eyes at that notion, especially considering Machado's reported preference for the New York Yankees (mentioned by Sherman in that sentence above) and the blockbuster trade pulled off by the Los Angeles Dodgers that seemingly cleared room for a run at Harper. But Sherman points out that the Yankees and Dodgers might not be willing to offer up the kind of record-breaking contract it was expected would be necessary to land either of these guys. The White Sox and Phillies both have the financial flexibility to offer such contracts. So if neither necessarily likes the idea of signing up to spend a decade in the City of Brotherly Love, perhaps the South Side ends up the best option.

Sherman illustrates the option, too, of playing in New York or Los Angeles on a shorter deal and then cashing in on another round of free agency a few years down the road.

There's always the possibility of agents and teams steering the conversation, too. What better way to get teams to up their offers if they think the Phillies are out of the running?

The White Sox, meanwhile, have confidence in their pitch to these two 26-year-old superstars, that playing alongside Eloy Jimenez, Michael Kopech, Dylan Cease and Luis Robert for the better part of the next decade is as attractive as anything else. That and the aforementioned financial flexibility figure to make for a situation worth considering, even if other teams can offer immediate contenders.

There's still no finality to this in sight, and Machado's decision will reportedly wait until after the calendar turns to 2019. It would make sense that Harper's wouldn't come until then, too.

Top White Sox stories of 2018: Eloy Jimenez mashes in the minors

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago | December 25, 2018

As the new year approaches, we're counting down the top White Sox stories from 2018.

"When is Eloy Jimenez going to get called up to the majors?"

That's the question that started 2018 and continued throughout, with no satisfying answer ever coming for the White Sox fans who wanted to see the organization's top-ranked prospect mash on the South Side just like he did all year long in the minor leagues.

But while Jimenez ended the year with a projected arrival date of the first few weeks of the 2019 season, the constant pestering general manager Rick Hahn faced about one of the highest-rated minor leaguers in the game was one of those good problems to have.

Jimenez was such a hot topic because he swung such a hot bat. He finished 2018 with a .337/.384/.577 slash line, 22 home runs and 75 RBIs in 108 games between both Double-A Birmingham and Triple-A Charlotte. Things were particularly good after he earned a promotion to Charlotte, where he slashed .355/.399/.597 with 12 homers in 55 games.

He caused a bit of a stir when he penned a midseason piece for the Players' Tribune, insisting he was ready for the major leagues. But this was nothing new for those who followed the uber-confident Jimenez ever since he arrived in the Crosstown swap with the Cubs. He was talking about being ready for the bigs during SoxFest way back in January.

His confidence wasn't limited to his personal goals then, either, as he was just as bullish on the rest of his fellow White Sox prospects.

"I talked with Zack (Collins) one day in Double-A. I told him, 'When we figure it out and get together in the big leagues, I know we're going to be awesome.

"We're going to win a lot of World Series."

And all that was before his first full season in the White Sox organization, when he lit the minors on fire.

Jimenez was a daily follow during 2018, White Sox fans checking Double-A and Triple-A box scores for his latest homer or extra-base hit. Pretty soon, they'll be able to watch that every night on the South Side.

Top White Sox stories of 2018: Hawk Harrelson's farewell tour

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago | December 24, 2018

As the new year approaches, we're counting down the top White Sox stories from 2018.

White Sox fans knew from the start of the 2018 campaign that it would be Hawk Harrelson's final season in the booth. But for those who have loved him as the voice of the White Sox for the last three decades, it didn't make the end any easier to accept.

It likely won't hit viewers until the start of the 2019 season, when there will be no more "he goes," "dadgummits," "you gotta be bleepin' mes" and "you can put it on the boards." But as sendoffs go, it's hard to imagine any as appropriate as the one Harrelson got throughout 2018.

The longtime broadcaster was celebrated on Hawk Day, was joined by special guests in the booth all season long, was the subject of an excellent documentary and signed off for the final time in a Crosstown rivalry game against the Cubs.

And as has been the case with Harrelson throughout his career, one thing was abundantly present: emotion.

Whether you were sad to see Hawk ride into the sunset or happy you'll finally hear someone else's voice narrating White Sox baseball, what the South Siders said goodbye to in 2018 was one of the game's legendary characters, someone who was himself from start to finish.

"I get a lot of letters every year," Harrelson said before his final broadcast on Sept. 23. "I get close to 100, maybe, from the young college aspirants who seek to become an announcer. And (they write), 'Is there any advice, Hawk, you can give us?' I tell them, 'Yes, be yourself.'

"Curt Gowdy and Howard Cosell both told me exactly the same thing: Don't try to please everybody because you can't. The guys who try to please everybody really don't last a whole bunch of time. I've been behind the mic for 42 years: seven with Boston, two with the Yankees and 33 with my Sox here. And I don't try to please everybody. There are a lot of people out here I piss off.

"It doesn't bother me because of the fact that I'm going to say what I think. Always have and I always will.

"Especially about the Cubs."

Regardless of anyone's opinion, what is inarguable is that he loves this team. His passion is real, and he lives and dies with every pitch, something that will surely continue outside the booth — even if all he's doing is "watching 'Walker, Texas Ranger' and turning a lot of Smirnoff into urine."

In relaying his advice to Jason Benetti, who will be the full-time voice of the White Sox starting next season, Harrelson let that passion show once more, enthusiastically declaring that Chicago baseball fans — on both sides of town — are in for a treat.

"Jason, who is going to be sitting in my chair for a long time, he's a wonderful young man and a terrific announcer. I told him sit back, relax and strap it down because you are getting ready to go on the wildest ride you've ever been on," Harrelson said, "because our club in two years is going to be a monster.

"It's going to be fun to watch, and it's going to be fun because the Cubs, they are good and they are not going anywhere. So it's going to be fun to watch these two clubs butt heads.

"I think it has the chance to be the greatest decade in Chicago baseball history."

Greatest on the field, everyone hopes. But can it be the greatest in the booth without the Hawk?

Cubs and White Sox seasons storylines for 2019, from the Cactus League openers to the World Series

By Paul Sullivan / Chicago Tribune | January 2, 2019

The 2019 season is approaching, and though plenty of free agents remain unsigned, it's time to start thinking ahead.

Here's a monthly planner for the Cubs, White Sox and Major League Baseball:

January

Cubs Convention: Jan. 18-20 at Sheraton Grand Chicago

Joe Maddon explains what he has learned about millennials this offseason. Business operations president Crane Kenney explains the Cubs Network plans. Anthony Rizzo wedding stories will be told.

Hall of Fame announcement: Jan. 22

Mariano Rivera, Roy Halladay, Edgar Martinez and Mike Mussina are expected to join Lee Smith and Harold Baines in the Class of 2019. Will Barry Bonds or Roger Clemens finally get in? Stay tuned.

SoxFest: Jan. 25-27 at Hilton Chicago

Are they still in the hunt for Manny Machado or Bryce Harper? General manager Rick Hahn again gets to assure everyone Eloy Jimenez can make the team out of spring training. No, really.

February

Pitchers and catchers report

No dates are official yet for the Cubs and Sox, but most teams are expected to report Feb. 12 or 13 with the first workout the next day.

Cactus League openers

Cubs, Feb. 23 vs. Brewers at Sloan Park in Mesa, Ariz. Rematch against the NL Central champs. Game 164?

Sox, Feb. 23 (split squad) vs. Dodgers at Camelback Ranch in Glendale, Ariz.; at A's at HoHoKam Stadium in Mesa.

March

MLB season opener: March 20

A's vs. Mariners in Tokyo. AL West rivals play a two-game series in Japan one week before everyone else begins. Look for the M's to start newly signed Japanese lefty Yusei Kikuchi in one of the games.

Cubs and Sox season openers: March 28

Cubs at Rangers. "The Reckoning" begins as the Cubs start the season with a nine-game trip.

White Sox at Royals. Rematch of last year's opener in which Matt Davidson hit three home runs in a Sox romp. Davidson wound up with 20 homers and was non-tendered by the Sox come November.

Wrigley Field: Renovations continue at the historic ballpark
Photos of the ongoing renovations at historic Wrigley Field in Chicago. (Chicago Tribune)
April
Sox home opener: April 4

Mariners at Sox. Time for the Sox to turn the corner in the rebuild.

Cubs home opener: April 8

Pirates at Cubs. Natives are getting restless after a two-year championship drought.

Traditional late April call-ups

Elite prospects whom teams want to retain through 2025 (instead of 2024) figure to be up by the end of the month. Jimenez, Vladimir Guerrero Jr. and Fernando Tatis Jr. are three to keep an eye on.

Traditional postponements

Foul spring weather brings dozens of postponements and cries of "Why do the schedule makers make (fill-in-team) play so many home games in April?"

May
Traditional "It's a grind" reminder

Teams off to poor starts remind everyone it's a long season (i.e. "a marathon") and it's not how you start, it's how you finish. Cubs have a 24-day stretch in May that consists of 17 home games and six road games.

June
City Series, Part I: June 18-19 at Wrigley Field

Cubs and Sox begin their annual four-game series for the "coveted" Crosstown Cup. The midweek games (Tuesday and Wednesday) are at night.

July
City Series, Part II: July 6-7 at Guaranteed Rate Field

Cubs and Sox conclude their annual series for the "coveted" Crosstown Cup. The Saturday game is at night, while the Sunday game time is TBD. In a scheduling quirk that makes no sense, both teams have a rare Friday off July 5 to prepare.

Home Run Derby: July 8 in Cleveland

MLB's premier event. Bryce Harper is defending champion after his controversial win over Kyle Schwarber at Nationals Park. Assuming he's signed by then, look for Harper to sit this one out.

All-Star Game: July 9 in Cleveland

The 90th midsummer classic returns to Cleveland for the first time since 1997. That's seven years after the Cubs last hosted an All-Star Game at Wrigley Field.

Start of second half: July 12

Cubs open at Wrigley vs. the Pirates. Sox open in Oakland.

Hall of Fame inductions: July 21 in Cooperstown, N.Y.

Rivera is expected to head up the Class of 2019, while Baines and Smith will represent the Sox and Cubs, respectively.

Hall of Famer Harold Baines

Photos of Harold Baines, the Hall of Famer and former White Sox outfielder/DH.

Trade deadline: July 31

Paul Goldschmidt, Nolan Arenado, Xander Bogaerts, Anthony Rendon, Jose Abreu and Ben Zobrist are among the potential free agents after 2019 who might become available at the deadline.

August

MLB Little League Classic: Aug. 18 in Williamsport, Pa.

Cubs vs. Pirates. Third annual game pitting MLB teams at the site of the Little League World Series. Noah Syndergaard and other Mets starting pitchers sat in the stands with Little Leaguers last year. Look for the Cubs to keep that tradition alive.

September

Labor Day: Sept. 2

Traditional mile marker for baseball's stretch run. This is where the Brewers began their comeback against the Cubs in 2018, in case anyone forgot.

End of regular season: Sept. 29

Cubs at Cardinals. Age-old rivals finish the season at Busch Stadium after ending things at Wrigley in '18.

Tigers at Sox. Which team's rebuild will be closer to fruition by the end of '19?

October

Wild-card games: Oct. 1 and 2

This is the game the Cubs hope to avoid after the 13-inning loss to the Rockies ended their brief playoff run in '18. But the NL Central should be a dogfight again with the Cardinals adding on this winter.

World Series begins: Oct. 22

Is it Series or bust for Joe Maddon? Will the Cubs' core be dismantled next winter if they don't get here? And can the Sox pull off the Inconceivable Dream of going from 100 losses to the Series in one year?

November

Free agency begins

Players are eligible to sign with new teams five days after the World Series ends. (Spoiler alert: No one does.)

December

Winter meetings: TBD in San Diego

Lots of rumors of blockbuster trades and signings, plus the traditional Scott Boras filibuster. If the last two years are any indication, many teams will wait until the start of 2020, when free-agent prices figure to drop.

Will White Sox fans get over it if neither Manny Machado nor Bryce Harper comes to the South Side?

By Paul Sullivan / Chicago Tribune | December 20, 2018

If you thought you were going to get an Xbox One or PlayStation 4 for Christmas and wound up with some socks, would you eventually get over it?

White Sox fans may face that kind of scenario with the possibility neither Manny Machado nor Bryce Harper will wind up on the South Side despite all the recent media attention and wooing by Sox personnel.

In a tweet Thursday about the difficulty of playing in the AL East, Blue Jays pitcher Marcus Stroman led with two declarative statements: "Machado is going to the Yankees. Yankees go out and get everyone."

Machado is going to the Yankees. Yankees go out and get everyone. Red Sox are lethal. Rays are dangerous. Can never sleep on the Orioles. I'm going to the gym. Gonna be in my zone all year. Excited to compete in the best division in baseball! #ALEast

Machado met with the Yankees on Wednesday after Monday's meeting with the Sox. But the Yankees had not signed Machado, leading to an explanatory tweet from Stroman that began: "Just my opinion on Manny to the Yankees. No insider info."

Just my opinion on Manny going to the Yankees. No insider info. Preparing to see Judge, Harper, Machado, Stanton, Sanchez, Hicks, Gleyber, etc. all in the same lineup...then go pitch against Mookie, JD, Bogaerts, Devers, Bradley, etc. in my next start! Lol #readyforall

Machado met with the Phillies on Thursday, so there is still a chance he won't wind up a Yankee. Still, the presumption is the Yankees get whatever they want, so if they want Machado they will make him the proverbial offer he can't refuse.

If the Sox lose out on Harper, too, which seems likely considering Harper expects to become the highest-paid player in baseball history, that leaves them with a haul of Ivan Nova, Alex Colome, Yonder Alonso and James McCann. OK, but just more socks. Of course there are many players remaining on the free-agent market and available via trades and plenty of time left this offseason.

No one expected the Sox to seriously be in the mix for either Machado or Harper right after a 100-loss season, mostly based on their history of free-agent spending. But some talking heads were calling them favorites to sign one of the two during the winter meetings in Las Vegas.

After all the build-up it will be a disappointment if the Sox don't succeed in signing one or the other, even if it makes sense not to give anyone a 10-year contract in this era. Total spending was down on MLB player payrolls for the first time since 2010, and there have been no major signings to date this offseason. The Sox wound up with the lowest payroll at the end of the season, \$82,889,649, so there is room to spend. That doesn't mean it makes sense in Year 3 of a rebuild.

Trade opens door for Dodgers to pursue White Sox target Bryce Harper

By Daryl Van Schouwen / Chicago Sun-Times | December 21, 2018

Will New York and Los Angeles win the sweepstakes for the two marquee free agents this offseason, leaving Chicago to finish third?

The Dodgers' trade that sent outfielders Yasiel Puig and Matt Kemp and left-hander Alex Wood to the Reds on Friday cleared space in their outfield. More important, it cleared the salary space they probably need to sign Bryce Harper.

Manny Machado, meanwhile, reportedly will wait until after the holidays to make his decision among the Yankees, Phillies and White Sox, with the Yankees believed to be his top choice, unless the Sox or Phillies blow him away with their offer.

The Sox' pursuit of both superstars has been serious and aggressive, although it's not known how much chairman Jerry Reinsdorf is willing to pay. It's known the Sox are enamored with Harper, and their presentation in November made a greater impression than Harper and his camp had expected.

Bryce Harper, left, laughs with the Cubs' Kris Bryant at Nationals Park in Washington, the day before Game 1 of a National League Division Series. (AP)

However, the Dodgers are a proven winner and are closer to Harper's Las Vegas home. Hollywood would offer anything he would want or need to advance his brand. The trade with the Reds appears to set the stage, although it's not out of the question that the Dodgers have their sights set on Marlins catcher J.T. Realmuto or Indians right-hander Corey Kluber as trade targets instead.

As for Machado — who visited the Sox on Monday, the Yankees on Wednesday and the Phillies on Thursday — the Yankees and Phillies will be tough to beat. The All-Star shortstop/third baseman is reportedly telling friends in Miami that he prefers the Yankees. The Phillies declared that they are “ready to spend stupid money,” making them a force in the pursuit. Machado has conveyed his Yankees love since this summer.

“The Phillies continue to overpay in free agency, so they are a perfect target,” an industry source said. “And they have the money. But I'm not sure he wants to play there.”

The Sox, meanwhile, might have to overpay to land Machado or Harper. They are not in a competitive window two years into their rebuild but expect to be in another season or two, which is why they are seizing an opportunity and pursuing Harper and Machado now. While their well-regarded farm system is expected to produce talent in the years to come, converting on free agents or trading for premium major-league talent has always been part of the plan.

The Reds, who likely will look to improve their team even more, acquired Puig, Kemp, Wood, infielder Kyle Farmer and cash from the Dodgers for right-handers Homer Bailey and Josiah Gray and infielder Jeter Downs, saving the Dodgers about \$14 million in luxury tax and allowing for more flexibility to spend while staying under the tax threshold.

NBC Sports Chicago announces multi-year deal with White Sox, Bulls, Blackhawks

By Madeline Kenney / Chicago Sun-Times | January 2, 2019

While the Cubs are branching out to create their own network, the White Sox, Bulls and Blackhawks will stay put with the network they've been with since 2004.

As the Sun-Times reported last month, NBC Sports Chicago will be the home for the White Sox, Bulls and Blackhawks for several more years starting in the 2019-2020 season.

The multi-year contract, announced Wednesday morning, is pending MLB, NBA and NHL approval. If granted, NBC Sports Chicago, the regional NBC-Comcast sports channel, will have exclusive regional rights to regular-season games, pre-season and spring training games and the first round of postseason coverage for the Bulls and Blackhawks.

The one notable team that won't return to NBC Sports Chicago is the Cubs, who are in the process of starting a new network with Sinclair Broadcast Group, the Sun-Times previously reported.

NBC Sports Chicago, previously known as Comcast SportsNet Chicago, was pressured to put in place a new contract given the fact their current deal expires October 2019.

White Sox and Bulls chairman Jerry Reinsdorf said he's "very pleased" to extend his relationship with NBC Sports Chicago.

"In addition to being the experts in consistently delivering the finest game and surrounding game coverage in the business, it is their year-round commitment to providing our fans with innovative and entertaining multi-platform content that makes NBC Sports Chicago among the very best in the regional sports industry," Reinsdorf said in a statement. "Chicago sports fans are the greatest, and we are pleased that this agreement allows for the very best access to Bulls, Blackhawks and White Sox live action and content."

Blackhawks chairman Rocky Wirtz echoed Reinsdorf in his statement, adding that fans should be "very excited" that the team will continue its partnership with the local sports network.

NBC Sports Chicago announces multiyear deal with Sox, Bulls, Hawks

By Staff / Daily Herald | January 2, 2019

NBC Sports Chicago and the White Sox, Bulls and Blackhawks Wednesday announced a multiyear media rights deal that provides NBC Sports Chicago with exclusive local, multiplatform media rights to present game coverage of all three teams starting with the 2019-2020 season. The deal is subject to formal documentation and pending MLB, NBA and NHL approval.

NBC Sports Chicago and NBC Sports Chicago+ will be the exclusive regional home for all regular season games, preseason/spring training, and the first round of postseason coverage for the Bulls and Blackhawks. This new agreement also enables the continuation of all games to be streamed on NBCSportsChicago.com and the MyTeams by NBC Sports app.

"The Chicago White Sox, Bulls and Blackhawks have provided countless memorable moments for this city's fans, and NBC Sports Chicago has been dedicated to immersive coverage of each and every one," said David Preschlack, President, NBC Sports Regional Networks and Platform & Content Strategy. "This is a significant agreement, and we are proud to continue to provide the most comprehensive, multiplatform coverage of these historic franchises."

"We are very pleased to extend our relationship with our partners at NBC Sports Chicago," said Jerry Reinsdorf, Bulls and White Sox chairman. "In addition to being the experts in consistently delivering the finest game and surrounding game coverage in the business, it is their year-round commitment to providing our fans with innovative and entertaining multiplatform content that makes NBC Sports Chicago among the very best in the regional sports industry. We are pleased that this agreement allows for the very best access to Bulls, Blackhawks and White Sox live action and content."

"Blackhawks fans should be very excited we are continuing our partnership with NBC Sports Chicago. In addition to raising the bar on our game day broadcasts, NBC Sports Chicago has elevated nongame day television coverage and evolved their digital and social media platforms into some of the most viewer-friendly in the industry," said Rocky Wirtz, Blackhawks chairman.

From non-tender to contender? James McCann 'can't wait' to join White Sox

By James Fegan / The Athletic | December 27, 2018

Coming off the worst offensive campaign of his four-plus seasons in the majors, new White Sox catcher James McCann was non-tendered at the end of November by the only organization he's ever known, and the 28-year-old spent two weeks unemployed for the first time in his professional career.

As offseasons go, it's been pretty chill.

A year ago, McCann had a regular starting catching role still with the Tigers, but he and his wife Jessica were spending their days in the neonatal intensive care unit at Vanderbilt Children's Hospital in Nashville after their twin boys Christian and Kane were born 10 weeks premature. Born on Dec. 6, 2017, the twins spent seven weeks in the NICU, and in that time McCann built up enough of an appreciation for the doctors and nurses working there that he made a point to return this Christmas to drop off gifts.

"I don't have enough good things to say about them," McCann said by phone after stopping by Vanderbilt Children's. "We just remember being in the hospital and what it's like having to spend Christmas with your babies in the hospital and tubes around them. You go home at night and it's not the same when you've got a piece of your heart and your family in the hospital. We remember that feeling and it's just something that we've talked about that we'd like to do. This is the first Christmas that we had the opportunity to do that."

With that ordeal in the rearview mirror, free agency was not that stressful. McCann turned down the White Sox when they drafted him out of Dos Pueblos High School in Southern California 10 years ago, choosing instead to go to the University of Arkansas. But when they were the first team to call with interest after the Tigers let him walk, he felt it was time.

McCann's one-year, \$2.5 million deal gives him a slight raise over his 2018 salary. But after getting purged from a Tigers club that figures to still be near the beginning of a multi-year rebuild, the selling point for McCann is his belief that the White Sox might soon be coming out of theirs.

"I can see them being ready to contend," McCann said. "Just their involvement in the big-time free agent market shows they still like their prospects for out there. I competed against them the last year, two years, seeing the strides that guys like Tim Anderson, (Yoán) Moncada has made and the arms they're starting to run out there, they've got a very, very good young core and that's something to be excited about."

Having one more year of arbitration eligibility after the 2019 season offers some flexibility for McCann to be around for that emergence if he performs. While a .220/.267/.314 batting line in a career-high 457 plate appearances last year made the Tigers willing to move on and go younger at the position, he — and obviously the White Sox, who always covet offensive upside from their catching corps — thinks he's closer to the guy who floated around league average offense in 2017 (.253/.318/.415 with 13 home runs).

"I'm really a year removed from a fairly decent season in 2017 offensively and you sometimes just have a down year," McCann said. "There's multiple situations where a ball falls in or a ball bounces my way, it's a different outlook as far as overall stats. At the end of the day, I do believe there's more in there. That's my goal is to prove that there is."

Offensive struggles that saw McCann's power production slip and a career-high infield fly rate obscured some quiet defensive improvements in 2018. His pitch framing ticked up to around major-league average last year according to Baseball Prospectus and Baseball Info Solutions' metrics, while he cut his passed ball totals in half (10 to five in slightly more playing time). Since he still possesses one of the most powerful and successful throwing arms in the game (his 33 percent caught stealing rate is the best in the American League since 2014 among catchers with over 300 games caught), an offensive rebound could put McCann in position to carve out a significant portion of the timeshare he's entering with the incumbent Welington Castillo, or at least offer an alternative if Castillo doesn't see a 2019 rebound of his own.

But with two catching prospects in the high minors, the Sox didn't acquire McCann assuming he would return to career-best performance in every major aspect of his game. When Rick Hahn described the White Sox's most logical catching fit at the winter meetings, he said they needed "probably more of a backup type, a guy who can catch and throw, handle a staff, be a complement to Wely (Castillo) and give Zack (Collins) and Seby (Zavala) more time to develop."

McCann is prepared to provide that, and expressed excitement about working with Carlos Rodón, Reynaldo López and Lucas Giolito, and letting them in on what was being said about them by hitters in the Detroit dugout last season. In an offseason in which the White Sox have deflected concerns about how easily they

can sell superstar free agents on a hard-charging, constant hustle culture installed by manager Rick Renteria, they certainly won't struggle to get buy-in from their new veteran backstop.

"That's no doubt something that I can't wait to be a part of and know that there is a standard," McCann said. "I've talked to quite a few people who have played for (Renteria) and they have nothing but good things to say. I've seen some of the moves he's made when guys haven't run balls out hard and he's taken them out of the game. He's not afraid to do that. From what I can tell from the outside, he preaches playing the game the right way and that's kind of how I am. I was brought up more of an old-school-type feel to the game. You put your head down and you run, you run balls out. You can control the way you hustle. You can't always control the outcome of the at-bat or your pitch, or the game, but you can control your demeanor on the field."

How Gavin Sheets plans to add power to take his game to the next level

By James Fegan / The Athletic | December 21, 2018

When White Sox first base prospect Gavin Sheets was last spotted on a baseball field, he was circling the bases after lifting a dramatic ninth-inning home run to pull the Winston-Salem Dash within a run in an elimination playoff game. A cagey situational hitter all season long, Sheets found himself in a spot where his team needed a big blast to get within shouting range, and delivered.

The Dash still ended up losing and the Sox had to settle for only one league title among their minor league affiliates in 2018. But Sheets was integral to helping his team play .600 baseball for over five months, providing a steady 123 wRC+ in the middle of a lineup that promoted its starting outfield to Birmingham at midseason and kept on cooking.

The White Sox signed Sheets for \$2 million in 2017, over \$600,000 more than his mid-second-round slot, on the basis that the Wake Forest star matched a polished approach and feel to hit from the left-hand side with the traditional power-hitting first baseman frame. The 22-year-old delivered on that too in 2018, striking out just 16.3 percent of the time at High-A (fourth-lowest on the team), racking up a .368 on-base percentage, and showing the ability to refine his swing and shorten up for the game situation (.302/.396/.406 with two outs and runners in scoring position).

"I'm really happy with my year last year," Sheets said by phone from Baltimore this week. "I think it was a good year. You can add a little bit more power to the mix and it would have been a great year. I'm not trying to bounce back, it's more just build off it and build off the success and add more to my game and add more tools and see where we go from there."

With Casey Gillaspie's struggles, Sheets is not just the most high-value first base prospect in the White Sox system, but now the most advanced. When/if an opening emerges in the Sox's current big league rotation of Yonder Alonso and José Abreu, it's reasonable to expect Sheets to fill that spot in the next year or two. A captain during his junior year at Wake Forest, he's seen as having the makeup for leadership as well. Even though he thinks vocal direction is less necessary on the professional level, Sheets organized group dinners among his Dash teammates to help build a clubhouse atmosphere he described to player development director Chris Getz as being "as close to college as you could possibly get."

With all that in his favor and with such a large investment already made in his ability, the reason Sheets remains on the periphery of White Sox top-10 prospect lists — and not quite on the tip of Rick Hahn's tongue when talking about the imminent core pieces quickly making their way to Chicago — is one he readily alludes to. It would be nice if he could reach the majors and be over 20 percent better than the average hitter like he was at Winston-Salem, but as a 6-foot-4, 230-pound first baseman who clubbed 21 homers in his last year of college, there are greater expectations for him than just hitting for average and getting on base.

"I know that's the biggest focal point going into next year, is the power," Sheets said. "I know it's got to play more. I know it's got to be a higher number in that home run slot. The biggest thing is that I proved to myself

that I can hit, hit for average and get on base. Now it's important to have a little bit more intent, do a little bit more damage. Pick times in every at-bat when you get ahead to try to do a little bit more damage. I've made some adjustments to my swing that I feel good about but I think it's more just a plan at the plate to where I'm looking to do more damage."

That playoff blast isn't counted in his season statistics, but Sheets hit .293/.368/.407 with six home runs in 119 games last year. Of those six blasts, two came in a stretch of a May night game and the first half of a doubleheader the next morning, in which he collected four hits and also drove a triple to the wall. Another two came in a single game at the end of June. Those explosions, combined with thundering batting practice sessions and Sheets' imposing physical frame, combat any notion that he's lacking for home run power. There are just droughts in accessing it that need to improve for Sheets get more attention as a first base prospect.

Since Sheets joined the organization, the White Sox coaching staff has made little tweaks to build separation in his swing to try to find the right balance. He was toying with a larger leg kick in instructional league after the 2017 season that ultimately didn't take, as he went back to a quiet, small step for timing. The adjustment that Sheets was excited about from his work with hitting coordinator Mike Gellinger near the end of 2018 was moving the placement of his hands back in his stance, to counteract his tendency not to get them back on his own within his natural swing motion. Loading his hands back is critical for generating power through separating them from his initial stride, and now he feels he's not only able to do that but feel fluid as he does.

As is often the case with hitters, Sheets would give just as much if not more weight to changing his mindset than a mechanical tweak. His ability to keep himself alive at the plate and his Nick Madrigal-esque hatred of strikeouts has been well-established, but now he wants to counteract it by being more aggressive driving the ball when he's ahead in the count and not bound to shorten up by a specific game situation. But with either factor, he thinks his feel to hit is developing ahead of his power production in the pros just like it did in college.

"I really do," Sheets said. "I think you look at my freshman, sophomore and junior year, I went two, to nine, to 21. The average as well went up with each one. When I really learned how to hit, I went from .250 average to somewhere over .320. That was the biggest thing. Once you prove to yourself that you can hit at each level and hit with a wood bat and hit at pro ball, I think that gives you more confidence to free up your swing and not just try to get hits and have your average where you need it to be. This is kind of like my junior year coming up. I'm ready to make that step with the power and I think it's going to come."

Sheets is swinging the bat again at this point in his offseason, but his offseason training regimen with former Orioles strength and conditioning coach Tim Bishop has not focused too much on adding power — again, as is clear from looking at Sheets or watching him practice, it's not needed. As a first baseman, he is going to be judged by his bat — and judged harshly — but Sheets doesn't want to take any value off the table with the other parts of his game either. He's started doing yoga and is working on agility and lateral movement to build himself into a better fielder and baserunner, even if those skills will never be his moneymakers. While he can't punch his own ticket for Double-A Birmingham yet, Sheets is thrilled by the prospect of working on footwork and doing pick drills under Omar Vizquel for another year.

"I don't have a goal of where I want to end up or anything like that because that's out of my control at the end of the day," Sheets said. "The biggest thing for me is seeing the work I put in pay off on the field, seeing the power numbers go up while still being a good hitter. If I can do that, if I can put up the same numbers from last year but more home runs, that would be a really exciting year for me."

White Sox year in review: Solid jumping-off point or bad omen?

By James Fegan / The Athletic | December 19, 2018

The White Sox have 12 more days to sign Bryce Harper or Manny Machado and forever mark 2018 as the year they signed the biggest free-agent deal in their history, and declared the seriousness of their effort to compete for all the world to see.

Otherwise, it was pretty clearly a bad year on the South Side.

But there were allowances for a bad year in the grand White Sox rebuild. Development isn't linear and all that, and the Sox bad year'd themselves all the way to the third overall pick this coming June, so the litany of bad events they endured did not destroy the grand decade-long outlook they have been putting together. Whatever holes continue to emerge in the great collection of prospect depth they've built can always be papered over by spending the payroll room they've created — maybe even in the next 12 days, still.

With all that silver lining and existing hope for the future established, it can be acknowledged that losing 100 games in a particularly sloppy fashion, noted by both the manager and general manager, was bad. Former No. 1 overall prospect and franchise cornerstone Yoán Moncada challenging the all-time single-season strikeout record is something that will drive him to improve, but was bad. He and his clubhouse mates setting a new team record was just bad. Avisaíl García felt something bad in his knee on Opening Day and his season never shook its hindrance. The pitching staff only had so many guys who can be expected to be on the next contending Sox team, and the few who can were very young and learning to compete at the big league level. But as a group, their results were bad. José Abreu is a great guy and player, so why did he have to go through something as bad as testicular torsion and a hair follicle infection in his final quarter of the season? There were other difficult seasons, too, but we don't have all day.

Prospects, the selling point of the organization and the solace for the fanbase, mostly get to struggle and triumph out of sight. Except for when they get hurt, which was frequent through 2018 and also bad. Top pitching prospect Michael Kopech had a tremendous year of personal and pitching development, but then he blew out his elbow after reaching the majors, which was bad. Luis Robert entering Year 3 of his pro career without ever being seen at the height of his powers because of various injuries is bad. Watching 2017 first-round pick Jake Burger doubled over in agony on the first base line of Camelback Ranch in February felt like a bad setback; hearing about his second tear in May was worse. Dane Dunning has been so consistent and reliably good on the mound since joining the Sox organization, so losing him for half the season to an elbow sprain was all the more bad. Alec Hansen is healthy again, but has gone from a possible 2018 September call-up to trying to put the whole season behind him, because it was bad. Micker Adolfo played great and took a developmental leap forward, and still had to get Tommy John surgery in the end. In between eviscerating every level of pitching he faced, even Eloy Jiménez dealt with a litany of minor soft tissue injuries that never drew that much concern, probably just because there wasn't enough left over to go around. Not promoting him to the majors at the end was also bad.

This is all within the realm of reasonable results to expect at the outset of the 2018 season. For example, when the Sox threw three rookies (or at least first full-year starters) at their starting rotation, a decent result would have been getting one solid major league season out of it. Reynaldo López delivered it, Lucas Giolito struggled mightily, and Carson Fulmer was sent back to the minors and shifted to relief. It was painful and difficult to watch the failures of the latter two and they face uncertain futures, but it was a standard hit rate for developing young players. An injury-heavy 2018 still saw the ascension of Dylan Cease, the addition of Nick Madrigal, a rebound for Blake Rutherford (because a bad 2017 was not the end), and the emergence of guys who weren't being talked about as future meaningful pieces this time last year like Jace Fry, Luis González, Jimmy Lambert and Ian Hamilton. Rick Hahn talking about Tim Anderson's defense being Gold Glove-caliber would not have been setting reasonable expectations before 2018, but now it is.

But Hahn doesn't talk about getting reasonable outcomes from this process. He doesn't say that back-to-back playoff appearances would be a breakthrough for this franchise, or talk about the median outcome for a full-scale rebuild, but rather tirelessly reiterates the goal of multiple championships. Such an audacious

goal requires luck, development outcomes beyond expectations, or more than likely both. More often than not, the 2018 season found the White Sox straining to work through setbacks, not looking impervious to the difficulties of building a contender from the ground up.

That's all fine, potentially. One difficult year doesn't dictate the fate of an organization anymore than it does for a single prospect. Adversity is such a common feature in major league player development that some view it as a necessity, where down years are like the chickenpox: everyone has to go through it and the sooner they do, the better.

That may be true, and 2018 may be remembered not just as the year Daniel Palka entered our lives, but as the turning point for the organization and many players who will serve as parts of its future core. And the hope is that they decide they don't want to tolerate the difficulties of this season again ... because it was bad.

Exclusive interview: Rick Hahn on the process and what's next

By Matt Cassidy / FutureSox | January 2, 2019

General Manager Rick Hahn has been spending much of the off-season hunkered down with the White Sox front office, working angles on free agents, trade targets and roster machinations. Press conferences and interviews have been somewhat rare, outside of the Winter Meetings. When he is speaking with the press, the questions Hahn fields have been primarily focused on MLB-level free agents, especially the Big Two, along with roster construction and queries about the direction of the team for 2019.

I was fortunate recently to get some time with Rick. But we didn't talk about Bryce Harper or Manny Machado, and we only brushed by the 2019 big league club in passing. We didn't even talk much about specific prospects, with a couple exceptions. The goal was to dig into the system, the process, and the direction of the rebuild from a talent acquisition and player development point of view. So instead of trying to build a theme or narrative here, I'll just lay out what he had to say on some key topics, point by point. These are just snippets of the full interview.

On the international market

The White Sox have been in the "penalty box" for the past two July 2nd signing periods for foreign prospects. That means they've been unable to sign anyone to a bonus of more than \$300k, thus missing out on most of the premium talent. In fact they've been trading away spending rights in exchange for pro prospects as a result.

I asked if having the two year pause presented any particular advantage or disadvantage going into the 2019 period (when the penalty limits are gone). The short answer was no, but that the club does feel well-positioned for the 2019 class. The longer version included some insight into how the scouting cycle works:

I don't know if it gives us any advantage, but we certainly have been preparing for this for a few years. Quite frankly, it's pretty remarkable how early before the July 2nd where a player is eligible to sign, the scouting process begins. So regardless of the penalty box or not, you are still planning for 2-3 years out. Marco [Paddy, who leads the team's international scouting] and his staff and our international scouts are really in the process of evaluating 13 and 14-year-olds. Which is just stunning, being the parent of a 13-year-old...

And even when we were still in the penalty box, I should make clear that Marco and his guys are still going through the normal process. They knew we are very likely not going to be players on many of the players they are seeing because they will wind up signing for above three hundred thousand. But that doesn't mean that we won't be able to acquire those players down the road, and we want that information in our database to go back and compare the progress and our projections.

Further on the international market, Hahn said they were open to going in the opposite direction they've taken recently, instead seeking out more signing rights space to grab more talent than their designated pool would allow if Marco Paddy and his staff had some conviction on a player worth going after that way. But he added that as of this moment, they already have a good idea who they are going to get and their general price points, and it doesn't seem like going over in 2019 is likely. The market is still, of course, fluid.

One other note on the non-US markets. I asked about the apparent lack of international signings in the White Sox system from areas outside of Latin America, such as leagues in Japan, Korea, Australia and others. The South Siders haven't signed anyone direct from those markets since Po Yu Lin in 2006, as far as I can find. I wondered aloud if the team had anyone in place in the Far East or other locales to even scout such players, to which he had this response:

We do, we have boots on the ground, for lack of a better description, in the Far East, that provide us White Sox-owned reports. We also like every other team subscribe to statistical and video services that provide us further reinforcement on those leagues as well... premium type guys, guys who might be more than say a low six-figure guy... of course would get cross-checked.

On player development and the current setup

With Hahn and the rest of the team's front office leaders touting the development of a more sustainable talent model, I had some questions about some of the changes that may be occurring in the way the farm is run. Using a topic I wrote about recently as a jumping-off point, I asked if the impending increase in international talent flow along with some of the crowding issues were prompting discussion of the White Sox adding a 7th US affiliate. More than half of the MLB teams now have that. Apparently the Sox have indeed explored this, and he went a step further than just a potential addition (see the bolded, emphasis mine):

We've talked about that a decent amount. We've talked about altering our current composition as well as adding to it. Chris Getz, our head of Player Development, feels comfortable at this time about the number of spots we have and how we have them allocated. Having been in the penalty box the last two years, having had a little more college-heavy drafts the last few years, we haven't quite felt that strong need for the additional lower level affiliate. But it is certainly something we could pivot to at some point in the future.

A pet topic of mine, I wanted to get Hahn's take on the subject of minor league pay. There's been a steadily increasing recognition among media and the fans that the conditions most minor leaguers live in day-to-day, as a result of stunningly low salaries, are a problem. We've written on this a number of times, starting with this piece from 2015 pointing out it was not only legally and morally tenuous, but also probably not the right business decision. Knowing Hahn couldn't speak to the legal side of things nor was likely to make a moral stand on the subject when speaking in his professional role, I asked if the White Sox were doing anything within their current restrictions to improve the situation. Here's part of his response:

Clubs including the White Sox are doing what we can in certain elements of the minor league experience to help make it more comfortable and improve performance of our players. And as you said, those two primary areas are in housing and perhaps even more importantly, nutrition. We've taken over our supply of food, it comes only from White Sox-sanctioned menus and suppliers, whether at home or on the road. We've also augmented, outside of the specific per diem the players receive, we've actually created a separate account for all the food in both home and road clubhouses, well beyond what it was in previous years. It was a bit of an antiquated system in terms of how it was run, especially at the lower levels. You had these clubbies who had a number of responsibilities, none of which are simplistic, responsible for feeding players on the road. And more often than not that meant a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, or some sort of fast food, carry-out, pre-game or post-game. And that was simply because of ease, of habit, and affordability. All of which was understandable based upon the structure that was in place. We're certainly not alone in trying to address this, and ameliorate it for the players, and try to put them in a much better position to perform by improving their diets. But we like other clubs see it as a pretty high priority item in recent years and one where we are continuing to improve.

Moving to the coaching and training side, I asked about the team's recent hire of Matt Lisle. It seemed at first glance a nod to the recent surge of recognition that some of the best analytical and coaching talent may be found in the college or even private practice realms. So I asked if the hiring of Lisle was indicative of any sort of shift in philosophy or addition of a new track or department within the White Sox:

I don't know if I view it as a different track, or just the evolution of things. As Trackman has grown, and the availability of large data throughout the minor league system has become more readily available, we've adapted. We added Everett Teaford prior to last season on the pitching side, and he helped work with all of our pitching coaches and directly with our arms on the use and analysis and implementation of that data. And, how to maximize performance based upon what that data was showing. And this season yeah, we added Matt Lisle to do something similar on the hitting side. It's cliché, but, it's really just looking through the other lens of the binoculars. It's something that works in conjunction with our coaches and our more subjective evaluation side of things. It's really just putting us in the best position to use the available data to provide the best holistic picture of what a player is currently capable of doing, and means of improving them going forward.

On roster construction and managing the balance of talent

Less than a month ago, the Rule 5 Draft was conducted. Prior to that, the White Sox had to make some tough calls on who to protect on the 40-man roster. For the second year in a row, their apparent gambles in leaving some potential picks exposed have paid off, as the Sox haven't lost a player in the MLB phase of the draft since 2015.

I wanted to know how the team goes about making decisions on who to add to the 40-man each fall. I was expecting something vague in response to this query, but got a specific, multi-part plan of attack (forgive the long quote here, but it's worth it):

It's kind of a three-pronged test, with the first two being more important than the third. The first level or threshold is, do we think this player is going to get taken? That logic is pretty simple; if you don't think that player is going to wind up getting taken there's really not too great of a need to protect the player. The second one is, whether you feel if they were taken that they're capable of surviving and contributing on a 25-man roster for an entire season. Now that obviously varies. When you're talking about a team selecting the player, that's perhaps in a position to win and let's say, they're looking to round out their bullpen. Or they're looking for a 4th or 5th outfielder who might bring some speed and defense skills that would balance them out, it's a little easier for them to protect a player and carry the player for a full season. If it's a toolsy outfielder, that's probably not going to go to a contending team to carry them for an entire season on their active roster. The third element, which I said was a little less important, is how would we feel if in fact they were taken and they did survive for the entire season. Would it leave a void in the system? Would we be unable to replace, or really hurt from a depth standpoint?

In terms of this specific off-season's decisions, the team did have some concern around reliever Zach Thompson being selected. And in fact Hahn added that he wouldn't be surprised if Thompson had a role to play on the 2019 White Sox. But they also felt they had a deep core of right-handed relievers behind him. Next year's 40-man decisions, as nicely laid out here by Sox Machine, will likely be even tougher. And that connects nicely with the next words from Hahn.

I prodded a bit about how the Sox plan to handle balancing uneven talent streams across positions and roles. The farm is currently quite deep in outfield and pitching talent, but less so at some other positions. Like playing Tetris, as some of the key pieces get closer to the main block, it will be harder and harder to avoid uneven results. How will that be addressed, and is it time to start addressing it now?

In short, the Sox feel that while those sorts of re-allocation exercises are an eventuality, it isn't something they feel motivated to move on just yet. The way the GM described it, there are still viable possibilities all over the diamond, and they'll know more a little further down the road. He did add though that the Sox had reached out to, and been reached by, other clubs on possible prospect-for-prospect trades. There's no

apparent drive to move on those for need-based reasons, but if the right move presented itself, they'd be open to it.

One thing Hahn made clear in terms of roster construction and role-specific talent streams was that none of that would effect their draft philosophy (BPA ad infinitum) nor their main focus in prospect talent acquisition. On the latter, Rick described the core mission as this:

Acquiring premium talent and premium positions. For us from an offensive point of view that means catcher, short, second and center field, and from a pitching standpoint that means guys who can project to be front end starters.

That was followed by an acknowledgement that naturally, some players won't hit their ceilings, and others will slide down the defensive or role spectrum in both cases. In other words, some of this will work itself out, and for the rest we'll tackle that when the decisions start to effect the major league rosters.

Everything else

The interview also covered the new rules in play for Cuba, pitching versus offense in a rebuild philosophy, what is riskier in the free agent space, the toughest jobs in scouting, and more. To hear the rest, look for a podcast with the full audio, coming out soon.