



Press Clips

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FROM THE OC REGISTER**Albert Pujols doubles twice in Angels' victory over Reds**

By Jeff Fletcher

THE GAME: Albert Pujols had a pair of doubles, his first two extra-base hits of the spring, to lead the Angels to a 4-3 victory over the Cincinnati Reds on Monday afternoon in Tempe. They improved to 7-11 this spring.

PITCHING REPORT: Right-hander Garrett Richards walked five, contributing to him failing to get through the fourth inning with his allotted 75 pitches. The Angels had hoped to get him through five innings. Richards gave up two runs. "It was one of those days I was battling a little bit," Richards said. "I was trying to put stuff together. I was inconsistent with the slider. You are going to have days like that and you've got to figure out a way to get it done."... Left-hander John Lamb retired eight of the nine batters he faced, with a walk, against the team that released him after the 2016 season. Lamb has allowed three runs in 8-1/3 innings this spring.

HITTING REPORT: Pujols had two two doubles down the left-field line. On the second, he barely beat the throw to second. He drove in a run with each double. ... Ian Kinsler led off the game with his first homer of the spring. Kinsler also scored a run on a ground ball to third, waiting until the third baseman threw to first before taking off. First baseman Joey Votto came off the bag to relay to home before he got the out at first. ... Shohei Ohtani grounded out to shortstop twice, breaking his bat on one, and he hit a solid line out to left field. He also struck out, completing his first game with four plate appearances. Ohtani is now 2 for 18. "He just missed a couple pitches, but it's just some timing," Manager Mike Scioscia said.

DEFENSE REPORT: Catcher René Rivera threw out Nick Senzel trying to steal second. ... Kinsler made a nice over the shoulder catch of a popup in shallow right field.

UP NEXT: The Angels will have an intrasquad game on Tuesday morning at 11, at Tempe Diablo Stadium. On Wednesday, they will travel to Goodyear to play the Cleveland Indians, with Matt Shoemaker pitching against Corey Kluber at 1 p.m.

Late in season, Angels could revert to 5-man rotation

By Jeff Fletcher

TEMPE, Ariz. — Even if the Angels start the season with a six-man rotation, they still might not finish it that way.

The Angels are planning to have their starters pitch mostly on a six-day schedule this season, which is intended to keep them healthy and also accommodate the pitching and hitting schedule of Shohei Ohtani.

However, Manager Mike Scioscia acknowledged on Monday morning that in the heat of a pennant race, the Angels still could compress the rotation.

“Certainly, when you get into late August and September, there is no doubt you are looking for matchups and some things could change,” he said.

Scioscia also said the starters should be able to do it, even after pitching on a different schedule for most of the season.

“I can’t imagine guys who have pitched every fifth day for their whole career not being able at some point do it again,” Scioscia said.

Ohtani, by the way, has not pitched every fifth day, so it’s an entirely different question if he could adjust to a change late in the year.

INTRASQUAD OPPORTUNITIES

With an off day in the Angels’ Cactus League schedule on Tuesday, they will play an intrasquad game at 11 a.m. at Tempe Diablo Stadium, with Tyler Skaggs and Nick Tropeano pitching.

Chris Young (strained calf), Jefry Marte (tight groin) and Nolan Fontana (right shoulder inflammation) will all hit in the game, but none will play in the field since they are rehabbing from injuries. Shohei Ohtani will also DH in that game.

Obviously, in an intrasquad game, teams can have as many DH’s as they want, and even juggle the batting order if they choose.

The game is open to the public and admission is free.

ALSO

Mike Trout, who was hit in the helmet by a pitch on Sunday, said Monday he planned to try a batting helmet with a protective piece covering part of his face. “I was thinking about it before, but that sealed the deal,” Trout said. He said he would experiment with it to see if it’s comfortable before committing to always wear it. ...

The Houston high school baseball team coached by Andy Pettitte and Lance Berkman was on the field for Angels batting practice. The Second Baptist team is in town playing in a tournament. Pettitte and Berkman both played for the Yankees, the latter briefly, while Billy Eppler was the assistant GM in New York.

Will changes to right field wall help Angels’ Kole Calhoun?

By Jeff Fletcher

TEMPE, Ariz. — Kole Calhoun, who ought to be the ultimate expert on the impact of the changes to the right field wall at Angel Stadium, is just as curious as everyone else to see what happens.

“It will impact some games, that’s for sure,” the Angels right fielder said. “How it will impact games, I couldn’t tell you. ... I’ll have to get out there and find out.”

This year the Angels have added a line across the middle of the right field wall, reducing the height balls need to clear for a home run from 18 feet to eight feet.

Seemingly, that should help Calhoun, the only everyday left-handed hitter in the Angels’ lineup.

According to Calhoun’s spray charts on Baseball Savant, he’s hit two to four balls a year off the part of the wall that is now going to be a home run. So Calhoun might have a few doubles and triples turn into homers.

Calhoun’s numbers have been fairly consistent since he became an everyday player in 2014. He’s hit 17 to 26 homers each year, with a batting average between .244 and .282, and an OPS between .725 and .786. Last season, he hit .244 with 19 homers and a .725 OPS, which was hurt by a career-worst .392 slugging percentage.

Calhoun said mostly what he’s trying to fix are the sharp slumps during those seasons, even though he’s mostly been able to balance them with hot streaks.

“What I’ve tried to do this offseason is become more consistent,” he said. “This is a game of ups and downs. If you can limit those valleys, you’ll be alright.”

So far this spring, Calhoun has made some adjustments, and he’s off to a hot start, with 10 hits in his first 21 at-bats through Monday.

“I think there’s more in Kole,” Manager Mike Scioscia said. “What he’s done the last couple years is demonstrate the ability to drive the ball. When he feels comfortable with his hands in the box, he’s a threat anywhere.”

Calhoun has bounced between the top and middle of the lineup for most of his career, sometimes serving as the best table-setting option ahead of Mike Trout. Now that the Angels have Ian Kinsler in front of Trout, and Justin Upton and Albert Pujols immediately behind Trout, Calhoun seems to be settled into the No. 5 spot, just ahead of Zack Cozart.

“I like being in the middle of the lineup,” Calhoun said. “We have a lot of guys who get on base. I think it’s a pretty awesome lineup the way it’s shaking out now.”

Whether his new spot in the lineup or the new right field wall lead to a new level of production for Calhoun is, to both him and his manager, beside the point.

“He doesn’t chase stats,” Scioscia said. “If he needs to move a runner, he moves a runner. If he needs to work a count, he works a count. He just plays baseball.”

Added Calhoun: "Winning is the only thing that matters. That's what makes this whole thing fun. All the personal stuff doesn't matter if you're at home in October."

FROM THE LOS ANGELES TIMES

Ian Kinsler homers in Angels 4-3 win over Reds

By Jeff Miller

The Angels beat the Reds, 4-3, at Tempe Diablo Stadium. The Angels are 8-11 in Cactus League play.

AT THE PLATE: Ian Kinsler hit a home run in the first inning and his baserunning netted another run two innings later. Kinsler advanced from first base to third base by accurately reading a Mike Trout sinking liner that fell for a hit. He scored on a Justin Upton groundout, timing his break from third and avoiding a tag at home with a clever slide. Albert Pujols had two hits, including a double, and drove in two runs.

ON THE MOUND: Starter Garrett Richards walked five batters in 3 2/3 innings. He gave up two runs and three hits. "It was one of those days I was battling a little bit," he said. "You are going to have days like that and you got to figure out a way to get it done." John Lamb walked one batter in 2 1/3 hitless innings. Lamb has a 3.24 earned-run average. Reliever Jim Johnson struck out one batter in a scoreless inning.

EXTRA BASES: Tyler Skaggs and Nick Tropeano will pitch in an intrasquad game Tuesday, a scheduled day off for the Angels. ... Jefry Marte (groin), Chris Young (calf) and Nolan Fontana (shoulder) are the hitters scheduled to participate in the game.

UP NEXT: Cleveland at 1 p.m. Wednesday at Goodyear, Ariz. TV: FS West; Radio: 830.

Former first-round pick Cowart still trying to make it with the Angels

By Jeff Miller

It was a day when the Angels did little at the plate, finishing with only one run.

In five innings against the Cubs' Jon Lester, they had the same number of strikeouts as hits, three apiece, losing the spring training game last week, 6-1.

Kaleb Cowart, however, walked away feeling encouraged. He singled off Lester in his first at-bat and grounded out sharply in his second.

"He's the ace of the Cubs, right?" Cowart said. "I felt pretty good about that. It was a good day."

There haven't been many of those with the Angels for the 2010 first-round pick Cowart, now 25, trying to earn the final position-player spot on the opening day roster.

In each of the past three seasons, he has had short stints in the big leagues, hitting .197 with a .575 on-base-plus-slugging percentage in 233 at-bats.

Cowart received his most extended look after the All-Star break last summer when the Angels started him at second base for a stretch. After a quick start — 12 hits in his first eight games — he cooled considerably.

"I'm just trying to improve at the plate, not swing at bad pitches," Cowart said. "Trying to get my pitch and, when I get it, do damage with it. Just going out every day and attacking."

He is battling Jose Fernandez, Colin Walsh and Nolan Fontana, who has been slowed by shoulder inflammation.

The Angels likely will keep someone who can back up second baseman Ian Kinsler, though manager Mike Scioscia said third baseman Zack Cozart also will appear at second before spring training is over.

"You go out and fight for those last bench spots," Cowart said. "That's what a few of us are trying to do. You want to be in a position where if something happens during the season, you can contribute when your name is called."

Cowart was drafted the same year Bryce Harper went No. 1 to Washington. Players selected in the first round after Cowart included Christian Yelich, Noah Syndergaard and Nick Castellanos.

Cowart is approaching 800 games and 3,000 at-bats in the minors. Once exclusively a third baseman, Cowart has played second, short and first in recent years as well.

"Whatever makes me more valuable," he said. "I don't mind playing wherever they need me. We have a great lineup here. Hopefully, I can contribute any way possible."

Ohtani still struggling

Shohei Ohtani had another hitless day in a 4-3 victory over Cincinnati on Monday.

He grounded out twice, lined out to left field and struck out looking. Ohtani is two for 18 this spring.

"He just missed a couple pitches," Scioscia said. "But it's just some timing."

Because of his pitching schedule, Ohtani has fewer at-bats than the Angels' other hitters. He'll play Tuesday morning in an intrasquad game with a few teammates who have missed time because of injury.

His next pitching start is set for 1:10 p.m. Friday when the Angels play Colorado at Tempe Diablo Stadium.

Trout debuts new helmet

Mike Trout said he was considering using a batting helmet with a partial face guard before Sunday. Then he took a pitch from Texas right-hander Erik Goedel off his head and the decision became an even easier one.

So, Monday against Cincinnati, Trout debuted the new helmet and went one for two with a walk and scored twice. He said he wasn't sure how long he would stick with it.

Rivera remembers debut

The at-bat happened more than 13 years ago, but Rene Rivera remembers it like it was 13 minutes ago.

"Pinch hit," the Angels catcher said. "Right-handed pitcher. Cutter. Ground ball to second base. The guy made a great play."

That was Rivera's big-league debut, on Sept. 22, 2004 against the Angels when he was playing for Seattle. He was 21 and grounded out against Matt Hensley.

They were the Anaheim Angels then, the lineup that day including David Eckstein, Darin Erstad and Bengie Molina. The Angels' starter was Bartolo Colon.

Colon, now 44, started Sunday for Texas against Rivera and the Angels.

Six-man success

Seventeen days before their opener, the Angels have seen decent results from most of the candidates for their six-man rotation.

More importantly, they've seen all eight pitchers making starts on time and remaining healthy, which has been a problem in recent seasons.

"There are some important hurdles coming up for all these guys," Scioscia said. "We're very optimistic that they're going to hold and start the season and be healthy and effective and remain healthy and effective."

FROM THE ATHLETIC

What can we really expect from Ohtani at the plate? History can give us a good idea

By Cliff Corcoran

Shohei Ohtani is 2-for-18 at the plate thus far this spring. Both of his hits have been groundballs through the infield, including one off 44-year-old Bartolo Colón on Sunday. Of the 12 balls he has put in play, just three of them have been in the air. He hasn't looked great (and Billy Hamilton didn't help), but 21 plate appearances in the first two weeks of Spring Training tell us almost nothing about a hitter. Nonetheless, the vultures are already circling.

Those dubious about Ohtani's ability to be a two-way player in the major leagues have focused their doubts on his hitting. Those doubts got louder on Friday, when Yahoo! Sports published a piece by Jeff Passan citing eight major league scouts, all of whom were similarly pessimistic about Ohtani's form at

the plate. He's off balance, they say. He has to cheat on inside fastballs. His front hip leaks. He's rolling over with his top hand. He'll have trouble with the curve.

That last one led to the most galling assessment. "He's basically like a high-school hitter because he's never seen a good curveball," said one scout. "You're asking a high-school hitter to jump to the major leagues?"

Whatever shortcomings Ohtani may have at the plate coming into his first major league season, comparing a player who has hit .286/.358/.500 in 1,170 plate appearances in Nippon Professional Baseball to a high-school hitter is insulting to that entire league, if not all of professional baseball in the Far East.

Fifteen hitters have preceded Ohtani in making the transition from Nippon Professional Baseball to the major leagues without having previously played in the Western Hemisphere for a full season. The success of those hitters has run the gamut, from Ichiro Suzuki's Hall of Fame-worthy major league career to Norihiro Nakamura's .350 OPS in 17 games. Yet, while hitters have had less success making that transition than pitchers, in the aggregate, the relationship between the production of those hitters in one league compared to the other has been surprisingly consistent and can tell us far more about what to expect from Ohtani this season than any subjective evaluation made based on a small sample of February at-bats.

To establish a baseline for that relationship, I compared each player's OPS in his final NPB seasons to his OPS in his initial MLB seasons. To filter out some of the noise of a single season and get a truer sense of the player's production level in each league, while also minimizing age curve-related changes, I used a six-year sample (three years in each league), and applied a 5/4/3 weighting system to each of those three-year samples, giving the most emphasis to each hitter's final NPB and initial MLB seasons. In practice, this meant the final NPB season and first MLB season were weighted five times, compared to four times for the penultimate NPB and second MLB season, and three times for the antepenultimate NPB season and third MLB season.

What I found was that, as a group, those 15 hitters saw their OPS drop by 22 percent with the move to the major leagues. The lack of significant variation from hitter to hitter suggests that is a meaningful number. The drop in what I'll call weighted OPS for 12 of the 15 players fell in a relatively narrow band from 9.4 percent to 27.1 percent. All three of the exceptions had fewer than 300 total plate appearances in their first three major league seasons, suggesting their production didn't have time to stabilize.

What's most fascinating about that finding is the similarity between players perceived as having had successful transitions to the major leagues and those perceived as having been busts. For example, Kosuke Fukudome, who slugged just .395 in five major league seasons and posted an 89 OPS+ in his first year in the States, saw his weighted OPS drop 24 percent from NPB to the majors. However, Hideki Matsui, who posted a 125 OPS+ in his first three major league seasons and stands as the second-best Japanese-born hitter in major league history, saw his weighted OPS drop 23.9 percent. Similarly, Tsuyoshi Shinjo, who lasted just three seasons in the major leagues, posting a 77 OPS+ over that span,

saw his weighted OPS drop just 11.8 percent, while Ichiro Suzuki, who has 3,080 hits and counting in the majors, saw his weighted OPS drop 16.4 percent after coming to the majors.

This may reveal, at least in part, a lack of understanding on the part of Western observers of the differences between these players prior to their arrival in the major leagues. More importantly, however, it reveals that 22 percent drop to be a genuine reflection of the difference between the two leagues, as it has affected players of varying abilities similarly.

Curious about the shape of that drop in production, I used similar calculations to search for trends in batting average changes and three true outcome rates (home runs, walks and strikeouts per plate appearance). For this closer analysis, I only used the nine hitters from the sample who had at least 400 plate appearances in their first season in the majors. Those were, in order of arrival, Ichiro Suzuki, Tsuyoshi Shinjo, Hideki Matsui, Kazuo Matsui, Tadahito Iguchi, Kenji Johjima, Akinori Iwamura, Kosuke Fukudome and Norichika Aoki.

Again, I found surprisingly consistent translations. Even more surprising, I found that the statistic that translated best was batting average, and that the players, as a group, actually struck out less in the major leagues than they had in NPB (albeit only slightly). Those hitters collectively saw a 6 percent drop in strikeouts per plate appearance and only a 12 percent drop in batting average. The batting average change was remarkably consistent, falling in a range of 6.7 percent to 19.4 percent. Strikeout and walk rates, which typically fluctuate much less than batting average from year to year for a player remaining within a given league, varied much more significantly. What didn't vary nearly as much, however, was the dramatic drop in home run rate.

Six of the nine players in my sample experienced a drop in home run rate between 40.9 and 60 percent. Of the three hitters to fall outside of that range, one, Aoki, wasn't much of a home run hitter on either side of the Pacific, averaging 11 home runs per 162 games across his entire career, while the other three saw much more dramatic drops in their home run rate. As a group, the nine hitters saw their home run rate drop by more than half—54.4 percent, to be exact. Lest we forget, Suzuki slugged .522 and had a pair of 20-homer seasons in Japan, while Matsui averaged 50 home runs per 162 games in his final four NPB seasons, slugging over .600 in each.

That suggests a very different shape to Ohtani's potential production this season. The assumption, as voiced most recently by Passan's scouts, has been that Ohtani's power would translate, but that his imperfect mechanics and his unfamiliarity with major league repertoires would lead to a corresponding spike in strikeouts and drop in batting average that could undermine that power. Instead, what these translations tell us is that Ohtani might not strike out any more often than he did in Japan, and may still hit for a respectable average, but he will have trouble living up to his reputation as an elite power hitter.

Applying these translations to Ohtani's last few seasons in NPB gives us two possible projections for Ohtani: one much more optimistic than the other, but both with the same underwhelming home run total.

To begin with, Ohtani isn't expected to get more than 350 plate appearances this season. The Angels will deploy a six-man starting rotation, likely giving Ohtani a day of rest before and after each of his starts on the mound. That would give Ohtani three starts at designated hitter for every turn through the rotation. If there is no interruption to that schedule, Ohtani will make 27 starts on the mound and 81 at DH. Per the lineups manager Mike Scioscia has been deploying this spring, it looks like Ohtani will open the season in the bottom third of the batting order. Last year, seventh-place hitters in the American League averaged four plate appearances per game. Over 81 games, that would give Ohtani 324 plate appearances. Add in some extra plate appearances to cover games he will pitch in National League parks, the possibility of his hitting higher in the order as the season progresses, and perhaps some extra days at DH when his pitching starts fall next to off-days in the schedule, and we can round him up to 350 PA.

Ohtani's last three seasons in NPB give us a weighted OPS of .884. Reducing that by 22 percent drops it to .690. A 12 percent reduction in batting average drops him from .296 (that's weighted by year, not by plate appearances) to .261. Factoring in the average changes in home run and walk rates from our nine-player sample, and spreading that performance over 350 plate appearances in a manner that results in a .690 OPS gives us this projected performance:

.262/.322/.369, 12 2B, 1 3B, 7 HR, 29 BB, 95 K

For a more optimistic line, we can leave out his 2015 season, when he compiled just 119 plate appearances as a 20-year-old and hit a mere .202/.252/.376, by far his worst showing in five NPB seasons. If we just use the last two seasons, weighing 2017 five times and the 2016 season four times, we get this projection:

.289/.355/.400, 13 2B, 1 3B, 7 HR, 33 BB, 88 K

On the surface, that looks quite different from the projections put forth by Baseball Prospectus cofounder Clay Davenport, who pioneered the act of translating performance from one league to another. Davenport's mean projection for Ohtani's 2018 season is a .264/.329/.441 line with 15 home runs and 134 strikeouts. Those counting stats are inflated by the fact that Davenport projects Ohtani to have 416 plate appearances. Still, the overall projection adheres closer to the conventional wisdom about the shape of Ohtani's likely production, and may also reflect the increases in home runs and strikeouts in the major leagues since the bulk of the players in my sample arrived in the majors (2001 to 2016).

However, with regard to the overall value of Ohtani's projected performance, Davenport's projection isn't radically different from my more optimistic projection above. Using gross production average — which combines on-base percentage and slugging percentage with appropriate added weight given to OBP then sets the result on the batting average scale (think of it as a shortcut version of Baseball Prospectus' True Average or Davenport's Equivalent Average) — Davenport's line works out to a .258 GPA, while the more optimistic of my two lines above works out to a .260 GPA

The key factor here is that Ohtani wasn't just a home-run hitter in Japan. He hit .326 in 525 plate appearances over the last two seasons, and .286 in 1,170 plate appearances in NPB from the ages of 18 to 22. No "high-school hitter" is going to do that in the second-highest league on the planet. I don't doubt that there are holes in Ohtani's swing, and he wouldn't be the first left-handed Japanese power hitter to see a spike in his groundball rate in the majors due to rolling over on pitches. Hideki Matsui, who admitted to being unfamiliar with the two-seam fastball upon arriving in the majors, earned the derisive nickname "Groundzilla" in his rookie year with the Yankees by putting 1.3 balls on the ground for every one in the air. I also don't doubt that being a two-way player, and thus only a part-time hitter, will make it more difficult for Ohtani to adjust to his new league.

However, Ohtani has one advantage over every other hitter who has attempted the transition from NPB to the majors: youth. Ohtani is 23. In their first major-league season, the first 15 hitters to attempt the transition from NPB had an average playing age of 30. Prior to Ohtani, the youngest hitter to move from NPB to the majors without a previous season in the Western Hemisphere was Tsuyoshi Nishioka, who was 26 when he joined the Twins in 2011. A shortstop playing out of position at second base, Nishioka suffered a broken leg in his sixth major game and struggled after his return more than two months later. He spent most of his second season in Triple-A, then gave \$3.25 million back to the Twins to be released from his contract and return to Japan, where he continued to disappoint and became a backup infielder age 29. The next youngest was Ichiro at 27. Everyone else was 28 or older.

Ohtani is on the right part of the aging curve to continue to grow into this higher league. Among other things, that means that .260 GPA is merely a starting point. The Angels should reasonably expect him to mature at the plate in the coming seasons, provided they give him the opportunity to do so. Yes, history suggests it is unlikely that Ohtani will ever echo the .326/.411/.570 line he posted in NPB over the last two seasons. However, the average American League DH hit just .243/.317/.418 (.247 GPA) in 2017, while the Angels' designated hitters (mostly the remains of Albert Pujols) hit .239/.290/.387 (.227 GPA). Ohtani should better both of those lines to start and improve from there, at least according to a comparatively large sample of objective data.

FROM ANGELS.COM

Halos want to fill 'pen with multi-inning relievers

Several pitchers auditioning for spot left by Petit

By Maria Guardado

TEMPE, Ariz. -- **Yusmeiro Petit** was arguably the Angels' most valuable pitcher last season due to his effectiveness and his ability to pitch multiple innings out of the bullpen. Signed to a Minor League deal last spring, Petit recorded a 2.76 ERA over 91 1/3 innings and led the Majors with 33 relief outings of at least 1 1/3 innings in 2017.

Petit is no longer with the team after signing a two-year, \$10 million deal with the A's over the offseason, but multi-inning relievers will continue to be a priority for the Angels as they assemble their bullpen for 2018.

"I think all our guys in the 'pen are obviously going to have to be at the minimum four-out guys, if we can have them," manager Mike Scioscia said. "If you work in the two-inning guys, two-plus inning guys, that'll be important. No doubt, our bullpen, we're trying to create some length in them this week and just see how they respond and how they do."

Several Angels relievers have already received multi-inning looks this spring, including **Jose Alvarez**, **Keynan Middleton**, **Noe Ramirez**, **Luke Bard** and **Felix Pena**, all of whom could help fill the void left by Petit. At the end of last season, general manager Billy Eppler said he'd like the Angels' bullpen to include a minimum of two relievers who are capable of pitching more than one inning.

"I love multi-inning guys," Eppler said. "I believe every bullpen needs at least two guys that can pitch multiple innings. At least two."

The Angels' bullpen emerged as a pleasant surprise in 2017, with the fifth-lowest ERA (3.92) in the American League, but the unit lost three of its best relievers -- Petit, **Bud Norris** and **David Hernandez** -- to free agency and will now look to other arms to fill the gaps.

Blake Parker, **Cam Bedrosian**, **Jim Johnson** and Alvarez are likely the only locks for the bullpen at this point, though Middleton, who impressed last season as a rookie, and **Blake Wood**, who agreed to a one-year, \$1.45 million deal in December to avoid arbitration, also appear well-positioned to earn spots.

Ramirez, Bard, Pena and **Ian Krol** are all potential candidates for the final relief job, and that competition seems likely to go down to the wire. Krol is in camp as a non-roster invitee, and Pena is the only one among the group with options. Bard, a Rule 5 Draft pick, must be offered back to the Twins if he isn't on the Angels' 25-man roster for the entire 2018 season, so that could also help improve his odds of sticking with the club.

Trout fine after being struck in helmet

By Maria Guardado

TEMPE, Ariz. -- The Angels suffered another injury scare on Sunday, as star center fielder Mike Trout was hit on the helmet by a pitch from reliever Erik Goeddel in the sixth inning of a 4-3 win over the Rangers at Tempe Diablo Stadium.

Trout seemed to be OK, immediately putting his helmet back on and jogging to first base before being lifted for a pinch-runner. The Angels did not call for a trainer to examine him before he left the game.

Angels manager Mike Scioscia said Trout is fine and was making his final plate appearance for the day. Trout finished 0-for-2 and is now 4-for-19 (.211) this spring.

Richards not concerned about walks

Trout tries face guard; Kinsler hits 1st spring homer

By Maria Guardado

TEMPE, Ariz. -- Garrett Richards has looked sharp all spring, but he admitted that Monday wasn't his best day.

Richards uncharacteristically struggled with his command in the Angels' 4-3 win over the Reds at Tempe Diablo Stadium, issuing five walks over 3 2/3 innings in his fourth Cactus League start. The 29-year-old right-hander gave up two runs on three hits and struck out two in the outing.

"Garrett had trouble with his release point," manager Mike Scioscia said. "I think his stuff was electric. He started the game off really strong, had trouble with his command. Still, he bounced back, finished strong and got to the pitch count we wanted."

The Angels had hoped Richards would be able to get through five innings on 75 pitches, but he hit his pitch limit before completing the fourth.

"I'm not worried about it," Richards said. "I know it's not going to be that way every time out. I got my pitches in today. I came out of it good. I made some really good pitches. I made some bad pitches. It's part of the game. I've got to overcome some adversity. This was a good one to kind of learn from and move forward with, but definitely not my best day."

Richards has now allowed four runs over 12 2/3 innings (2.84 ERA) with seven walks and 14 strikeouts this spring. The Angels have not yet announced their Opening Day starter, but Richards, arguably the club's most talented pitcher, would be the logical choice.

Trout's new headwear

Mike Trout, who was struck on the helmet by a pitch on Sunday, wore a protective face guard on his batting helmet on Monday.

"I was thinking about it before, but that sealed the deal," said Trout, who will try out the look before deciding whether to use it full-time.

Kinsler goes deep

Ian Kinsler led off Monday's game with his first home run of the spring, drilling a 1-0 pitch from Homer Bailey just inside the left-field foul pole to give the Angels an early 1-0 lead. The veteran second baseman added a single in the third inning and is now batting .381 this spring.

The Ohtani brief

Shohei Ohtani went 0-for-4 with a pair of groundouts, a well-struck lineout to left field and a strikeout on Monday. He is now 2-for-18 this spring. "He just missed a couple pitches, but it's just some timing," Scioscia said.

Camp game

The Angels have a break in their Cactus League schedule on Tuesday, but they will stage an intrasquad scrimmage at 10 a.m. PT at Tempe Diablo Stadium that will feature a matchup between Tyler Skaggs and Nick Tropeano.

Chris Young (strained right calf), Jefry Marte (right groin tightness), Nolan Fontana (right shoulder inflammation) and Ohtani are expected to hit in the game. The game will be open to the public and admission is free.

Up next

Following Tuesday's off-day, Matt Shoemaker will make his fourth start of the spring as the Angels face the Indians at Goodyear Ballpark. First pitch is scheduled for 1:05 p.m. PT, and the game can be viewed on MLB.TV.

Pipeline Q & A: Angels' Chris Rodriguez

By Jonathan Mayo

TEMPE, Ariz. -- As part of MLB Pipeline's visit to all 30 Spring Training facilities, we're sitting down with prospects and getting to know them a little better. At Angels camp, it was Los Angeles' No. 6 prospect, Chris Rodriguez.

Rodriguez was a bit of a pop-up Draft prospect at Monsignor Edward Pace High School, a strong program in the Miami area that produced talent like lefty Gio Gonzalez and outfielder/first baseman Chris Marrero. Rodriguez was a fourth-round pick of the Angels in 2016 and signed for \$850,000, well above pick value. He made his debut in the Rookie-level Arizona League in 2016, then moved up to the Pioneer League in '17 before reaching full-season ball for the first time.

MLB Pipeline: You were recently diagnosed with a stress reaction in your back. I'm sure you were looking forward to being somewhere on Opening Day. Is there any frustration over this bump in the road?

Rodriguez: It's like you said, it's just a bump in the road. It's not a huge deal, it's a stress reaction. The Angels have a great plan for me and I'm just excited to get strong. It's not how you start, it's how you finish. The biggest thing for me is getting out there, staying healthy and doing what I can do.

MLB Pipeline: Is there a timetable for your return, or is it more of a "see how it goes" kind of deal?

Rodriguez: At this point, I don't really know. It's up to [assistant GM] Mike LaCassa and [GM] Billy Eppler. I just do what they tell me to do; I just work and get better.

MLB Pipeline: There could be a blessing in disguise here. They were going to manage your innings this year anyway, so maybe with the delayed start, you can be around for playoff baseball or something like that.

Rodriguez: Exactly. The way I like to look at things is that everything happens for a reason. I just have to keep going and get stronger, trust the plan and trust that they have my back. They're looking out for me, so I have to listen to them.

MLB Pipeline: Eventually you will get back to full-season ball. You got a taste of it last year. What were your takeaways from that experience?

Rodriguez: At the end of the day, it's playing baseball. Guys do get better as you go on, that's for sure. One thing I have to do is trust my stuff, really starting to learn how to pitch and how to perfect my craft. That's the biggest thing I took out of it.

MLB Pipeline: Development is a process, and sometimes results don't match up with your development. I know you're super competitive. Were there times last year when it was tough if the results weren't to your liking?

Rodriguez: There were a lot of ups and downs, but it's a mental game. I know that not every time everyone has a perfect outing. I knew to put a bad outing in the past and just get on the mound the next day. I would try to just worry about the now, not the future or the past.

MLB Pipeline: You mention needing to trust your stuff. What are the things stuff-wise you feel you need to work on as you move up?

Rodriguez: I'd have to say more my command and when to use my pitches. I think my individual pitches are in a good place; I think I have pretty good stuff, but the timing of using them. I have a good coaching staff here teaching me how to sequence my pitches better.

MLB Pipeline: Looking back to your high school days, you grew up in Miami, around a lot of good baseball. How much did that prepare you for the pro game?

Rodriguez: That was huge. Coming from Florida, it's really competitive there. I was lucky enough to have good coaches, too. The baseball program at Pace was really good. We had Division I players on every single team we played against, so we knew what we were getting and we knew we had to compete every time or you'd get hit hard. The biggest thing was to compete, and that's where it all came from for me.

MLB Pipeline: So you were in a baseball hotbed at a good baseball program, but you sort of flew under the radar as a Draft prospect. Were there times that you couldn't understand why teams weren't noticing what you were doing?

Rodriguez: I was a late bloomer. If you ask my coaches in Little League, they never would've expected me to become a pitcher. I studied the game a lot and as I was growing up, as my body was developing, I knew I was going to become a pitcher. I kind of created my own program, stuck to it, worked hard and kept competing.

MLB Pipeline: When the Angels did take you, did that serve as vindication that all that work had paid off?

Rodriguez: It was huge. It was an exciting day, actually, because my family was there. We had an idea I might get drafted, but it wasn't a sure thing. When the Angels took me, I couldn't have been more excited. I've heard how great this organization is. I was super pumped, my family started crying. It was just a big day.

MLB Pipeline: Since you've joined this organization, this farm system has taken a nice step forward. How excited are you to be thought of as part of that group that is turning things around?

Rodriguez: I'm super stoked. We have great guys now. Everybody competes, that's the biggest thing. All of the guys, we're all great friends, but at the same time, we know we have to compete with each other and that brings out the best in us. It's amazing how big of a jump this organization has taken. You see the arms now, you see the hitters developing. It comes from the weight room and it comes from the coaching, it's amazing.

Pipeline report: Angels camp

By Jonathan Mayo

Every Spring Training, prospects get a chance to show what they can do as they prepare for the upcoming season. Some compete for jobs in big league camp, while others vie for spots on Minor League affiliates. MLB Pipeline will visit all 30 camps this spring, and today we check in on the Angels.

TEMPE, Ariz. -- Don't look now, but things are cooking down on the farm for the Angels.

Over the past several years, the organization has had one of the weaker systems in baseball, one that didn't boast a single Top 100 prospect at the start of the 2016 or 2017 seasons. Now there are four, obviously starting with No. 1 overall prospect Shohei Ohtani. The other three -- Jo Adell (No. 62), Kevin Maitan (No. 87) and Jahmai Jones (No. 93) -- might be far away from the big leagues, but are a sign of a growing amount of high upside talent collecting in the lower levels of the Minors for the Angels.

"Down here on the back fields, there's a lot of excitement in this building," Angels director of minor league operations Mike LaCassa said from the club's Minor League facility. "Many of these players have been in Arizona for several weeks already in 2018. The depth beyond that, at pretty much every position across the system, there's excitement and potential future to help us in the big leagues."

Much of that depth, at least in terms of true impact talent, is a few years away. The summers toolsy outfielders Adell, the Angels' first-round pick in 2017, and Brandon Marsh, the 2016 second-rounder, had were outstanding, but it was in rookie ball. Their feel for the game might have been a pleasant surprise, but patience will be a tremendous virtue for them and others. LaCassa points out that it's not just about learning fundamentals, but things like mental development and strength conditioning also come into play,

"Whenever you take a high school player, and we have a lot of Latin American and other young players in camp today, for all of them there is a learning process," LaCassa said. "We have to hit on all those areas to help a player develop and maximize their skills."

This renaissance isn't coming during a true rebuilding process, which does make it a more difficult task. In order to do that, the recent Drafts that have added a ton of talent to the system have tried to find a mix of players.

"It's a challenging undertaking for [general manager] Billy Eppler and [owner] Arte Moreno," LaCassa said. "We want to win at the Major League level here. Some recent examples of franchises who built from player development and scouting didn't win at the big league level while they were doing that. And we're trying to do both."

"Looking at some of our recent Drafts, the last two years alone, our first-rounder last year was Jo Adell, a toolsy high school kid. Our second-rounder, Griffin Canning, is a polished college pitcher. The year before, Matt Thaiss, a polished college hitter went in the first round; in the second, we took Brandon Marsh. Just like every aspect of our baseball operations department, there has to be a balance. A balance of players you bring in, a balance of what information is weighted when making decisions, from our analytics department to our scouts to our coaches' evaluations. I think it all plays a big factor. You have to be patient if you want to sign and develop players and have them impact your big league team because that's how the game is."

New international signees impressing early

Ohtani wasn't the only free agent acquisition from the international pool the Angels are really seeing for the first time in Tempe. When the Braves were penalized for their violations of the international rules, that made a pair of shortstops, Maitan and Livan Soto, free agents. The Angels were happy to bring both into the fold for just over \$3 million combined.

"We're very excited about both players," LaCassa said. "We were pretty ecstatic when we found out we were getting both of them. It happened on the same day."

Maitan's offensive upside has already stood out, but given reports about Maitan's future, or lack thereof, at shortstop, the Angels brass has been even more pleasantly surprised about his glove.

"Maitan, obviously there's thunder in the bat," LaCassa said. "When you watch him take BP, he's hitting in a group with guys who are seven years older than him, the most upper-level players in our system, and the ball just sounds different. Physically, he's done a great job since he got here, learning about our

program and us personalizing a program for him. We couldn't be happier with the work he's put in off the field, in the weight room.

"Watching him at short, our director of baseball development, Mike Gallego, and our infield coordinator, David Newhan, they are thrilled with what they see in working with him at short."

Soto's work up the middle has never been in question and he's been flashing some serious leather in camp, though he has work to do on the other side of the ball.

"He has pretty unbelievable defensive tools," LaCassa said. "His hands, his feet, his range, his arm, they're all well above-average. He has a very projectable frame. There's room for him to add strength, which is definitely a goal for him in the coming years to be able to impact the ball more offensively. Both of them are great kids and fitting right in."

Camp standouts

A group of starting pitching prospects, all in the top half of the Angels' Top 30, got to Tempe early and have already created some early buzz. Canning, last year's second rounder, has lived up to that billing as a polished college starter, while Jose Suarez and Jose Soriano have also looked sharp.

"Soriano is a guy who pitched in short-season ball last year and his stuff is even better than when we left instructional league," LaCassa said. "Physically, he's growing, he's strong, he's flexible, he's an athlete. He looks really good. Suarez is very polished beyond his years. He's a guy who could move quickly. His bullpens are as professional as they get. Griffin Canning, he and Suarez, it's like watching big league bullpens the way they command multiple pitches. Those guys definitely stand out."

FROM ESPN.COM

Which team would be MLB's best if every player were in his prime?

By Sam Miller

For every player in Major League Baseball, a hope exists *somewhere* -- in the GM who signed him, the fans who will cheer for him, or the player himself -- that this year he will play as well as he's ever played. Whatever the player has done in the past, there's a little hope somewhere that he can do it again. It's true of 26-year-old backup catchers and 35-year-old Hall of Fame-bound second basemen. It's true of Aaron Judge, it's true of Mike Trout, it's true of Tim Lincecum and it's true of Darwin Barney.

The hope is true. The reality, of course, is very few players will hit their peaks this year. But what if they did? What if in 2018, every player played as well as he's ever played? If every player in baseball were in the middle of his prime for this one year alone, which team do you think has the best shot of winning the World Series?

So we did it. We found the 25 best players in every team's organization, where "best" means "best season they ever had," using Baseball Prospectus' model for wins above replacement. If they've never had a season as good as they're projected to have this year, we gave them credit for this year's projection. Such that 2007 Curtis Granderson (6.9 WAR) is now teammates with 2017 Marcus Stroman (4.4 WAR) and 2018 Max Pentecost (0.2 WAR). We weren't sticklers for position, but we did make sure every position was covered, including two catchers. We gave each team 13 hitters -- after the top eight, we scaled down their career-best WARs to reflect the reduced playing time that a bench player gets -- and 12 pitchers, who (through some extra steps) typically included a near-even split of relievers and starters. Unsurprisingly, replacing 2018 Curtis Granderson with 2007 Curtis Granderson (and pairing him with 2007 Troy Tulowitzki, 2009 Kendrys Morales, 2015 Josh Donaldson, 2016 Aledmys Diaz and 2017 Justin Smoak) makes the Blue Jays really good! But who does this exercise make *the best*? Think about it. Get an answer in your head. Be ready to guess. Are you ready?

OK, but let's start with who it's not.

The worst team in its prime

Before they signed Jonathan Lucroy this past weekend, it was the A's, who, even under the most generous rules possible, managed to not have a single player who had earned even a 10th-place MVP vote in his "prime" season. Their best player, in this exercise, was 2013 Jed Lowrie, at just 3.7 WAR. Their second-best player was Matt Chapman's 2018 projection. Their best pitcher is 2014 Yusmeiro Petit, when he was a swingman with an ERA+ worse than the league average. Their 14th-best player was prospect A.J. Puk, who has thrown 64 innings in Double-A. This is an extraordinarily nondescript prime roster.

The 2014 version of Lucroy gives it some star power -- he finished fourth in MVP voting -- and gives the A's a late-spring push out of this exercise's cellar. They're replaced at the bottom by the White Sox, who manage just four above-average (2-plus WAR) position players. That is our floor.

The teams just above the ChiSox:

- 29. Padres, 48.8 WAR (2012 Chase Headley, 2015 Tyson Ross)
- 28. Marlins, 49.4 WAR (2017 J.T. Realmuto, 2010 Martin Prado)
- 27. Tigers, 50.9 WAR (2013 Miguel Cabrera, 2007 Victor Martinez at catcher)
- 26. Pirates, 53.0 WAR (2015 Francisco Cervelli, 2014 Josh Harrison)
- 25. A's, 53.1 WAR (2014 Jonathan Lucroy, 2013 Jed Lowrie)

The sneaky-prime league MVP candidates

When you start thinking this puzzle through, your mind probably goes in two directions: the massive superstars of yesteryear who are still hanging around (like Ichiro, Lincecum, David Wright, Albert Pujols), or the superstars of today. But building a spreadsheet of 750 players' best seasons reminds you of career years you've completely forgotten about, from players you've almost completely forgotten about. Remember the year Mike Aviles hit .325/.354/.480 as a shortstop? Remember when Aaron

Hill had 36 homers and 108 RBIs as a second baseman? Remember when Mike Morse hit .303 with 31 homers?

Those guys are all unsigned free agents, assigned to none of our Prime rosters. But almost every team has at least one unexpected star in this game, perhaps none more unexpected than Cliff Pennington. Before he signed with the Reds this winter, before his years spent in Anaheim, Toronto and Arizona, Pennington was a pretty good Oakland A. In 2010 he stole a bunch of bags, played excellent defense and was a roughly league-average hitter, which was worth 4.8 wins above replacement. He has never topped 2 WAR since, and as a part-timer in his mid-30s he's unlikely to reach even one win this year. But the Prime Reds get to bank it: 2010 Cliff Pennington is their second-best position player.

Every team's sneaky MVP -- either a player you forget was good, you forget exists, or you forget was that good:

Angels: 2010 Chris Young (5.3 WAR)
Diamondbacks: 2012 Kris Medlen (4.2 WAR)
Braves: 2007 Scott Kazmir (5.6 WAR)
Orioles: 2013 Colby Rasmus (3.9 WAR)
Red Sox: 2008 Hanley Ramirez (8.3 WAR)
Cubs: 2011 Peter Bourjos (2.6 WAR)
White Sox: 2007 James Shields (6.9 WAR)
Reds: Pennington or 2004 Oliver Perez (5.8 WAR)
Indians: 2012 Ryan Hanigan (4.5 WAR)
Rockies: 2011 Gerardo Parra (4.4 WAR)
Tigers: 2010 Francisco Liriano (5.5 WAR)
Astros: 2014 Collin McHugh (3.6 WAR)
Royals: 2008 Ricky Nolasco (5.9 WAR)
Dodgers: 2007 Rich Hill (5.4 WAR)
Marlins: 2010 Martin Prado (4.9 WAR)
Brewers: 2009 Yovani Gallardo (5.4 WAR)
Twins: 2011 Erick Aybar (3.9 WAR)
Mets: 2009 Adrian Gonzalez (7.9 WAR)
Yankees: 2009 Adam Lind (3.6 WAR)
A's: Lowrie
Phillies: 2014 Drew Hutchison (3.6 WAR)
Pirates: 2015 Francisco Cervelli (5.3 WAR)
Cardinals: 2011 Bud Norris (3.1 WAR)
Padres: 2012 Chase Headley (5.9 WAR)
Giants: 2012 Austin Jackson (5.5 WAR)
Mariners: 2013 Hisashi Iwakuma (6.0 WAR)
Rays: 2014 Denard Span (5.7 WAR)

Rangers: 2011 Doug Fister (5.1 WAR)
 Blue Jays: 2008 Russell Martin (8.0 WAR)
 Nationals: 2012 Miguel Montero (6.3 WAR)

Here are the next nine spots on our list:

24. Phillies, 57.4 WAR (2015 Jake Arrieta, 2016 Odubel Herrera)
23. Braves, 59.3 WAR (2016 Freddie Freeman, 2008 Nick Markakis)
22. Royals, 59.4 WAR (2011 Alex Gordon, 2008 Ricky Nolasco)
21. Reds, 60.8 WAR (2017 Joey Votto, 2004 Oliver Perez)
20. Rays, 61.4 WAR (2013 Carlos Gomez, 2015 Chris Archer)
19. Rockies, 61.9 WAR (2017 Charlie Blackmon, 2016 Nolan Arenado)
18. Orioles, 66.3 WAR (2015 Manny Machado, 2013 Chris Davis)
17. Twins, 68.4 WAR (2009 Joe Mauer, 2008 Ervin Santana)
16. Brewers, 69.1 WAR (2011 Ryan Braun, 2015 Lorenzo Cain)

The most interesting team in its prime

The Rangers are barely in the top half of our standings, but they're easily the nostalgist's favorite team. Consider the starting rotation alone:

1999 Bartolo Colon, 18-5 with Cleveland -- 6.3 WAR
 2007 Cole Hamels, 15-5 with Philadelphia -- 6.3 WAR
 2009 Tim Lincecum, 15-7 with San Francisco -- 8.3 WAR
 2008 Edinson Volquez, 17-6 with Cincinnati -- 3.7 WAR
 2011 Doug Fister, 11-13 (with a 2.83 ERA) with Seattle and Detroit -- 5.1 WAR

That pushes 2013 Mike Minor to the bullpen, which is so crowded that all sorts of once-pretty-good starters (Matt Moore, Martin Perez, A.J. Griffin) are left off the roster entirely. Colon's 1999 season is by far the most ancient "prime" season on our spreadsheet; the next oldest is also on the Rangers, Adrian Beltre's 2004.

One thing that stood out putting these rosters together is how few "old" seasons made it -- which is another way to say how quickly the young replace the old in this sport. Well more than half of our Prime seasons either came in the past two seasons or are anticipated this season. Fewer than 10 percent came in 2010 or earlier. Most major leaguers are either in their prime or were very, very recently. The Rangers' roster was a nice rebuttal to this rule. In addition to the pitchers named, there's 2011 Mike Napoli, 2012 Darwin Barney, 2013 Shin-Soo Choo and 2014 Trevor Plouffe and Kevin Jepsen. Those names used to mean something in our lives!

15. Diamondbacks, 71.7 WAR (2015 Paul Goldschmidt, 2009 Zack Greinke)
14. Cardinals, 74.5 WAR (2012 Yadier Molina, 2013 Matt Carpenter)
13. Blue Jays, 78.5 WAR (2008 Russell Martin, 2015 Josh Donaldson)

- 12. Red Sox, 78.7 WAR (2008 Hanley Ramirez, 2017 Chris Sale)
- 11. Rangers, 78.9 WAR (2004 Adrian Beltre, 2009 Tim Lincecum)

The most present prime team

You might notice that we're into the top 10 and most of the actual best teams in baseball are still unmentioned. There's quite a correlation between how good a team is and how good its Prime team would be, it turns out. The Astros and Cubs, especially, are teams who tore down, rebuilt from scratch, and thus have almost no history before their current rosters.

Twenty-two of the 25 Prime Astros seasons came in 2014 or later; 14 came in 2016 or later. The only exceptions: 2008 Brian McCann, 2011 Justin Verlander and 2012 Josh Reddick, and you could easily swap in recent Verlander and Reddick seasons without losing much. The Astros have the best pitching staff in this exercise, just edging the Rangers.

- 10. Cubs, 80.1 WAR (2016 Kris Bryant, 2016 Anthony Rizzo)
- 9. Mariners, 81.7 WAR (2010 Felix Hernandez, 2014 Kyle Seager)
- 8. Indians, 82.4 WAR (2017 Corey Kluber, 2017 Jose Ramirez)
- 7. Astros, 82.8 WAR (2008 Brian McCann, 2011 Justin Verlander)

The team everybody thinks the answer will be

But it isn't.

The Giants traded for Evan Longoria and Andrew McCutchen this winter. Pablo Sandoval is still on the roster from last year; Austin Jackson is there, and was once upon a time better than we remember. Johnny Cueto, Buster Posey, Madison Bumgarner: There's a lot of older star power there. But there's no depth, and almost nobody on the roster has reached Prime in the past few years. Only six Giants' prime seasons came in 2016, 2017 or are projected for 2018. Those six are all close to replacement level: Ty Blach is on this Prime roster. Chris Stratton is on this roster. So is Steven Duggar.

Still, the Giants do very well in this exercise. So do the Mets, whom you also might have thought to guess: They get credit for 2007 David Wright (fourth in MVP voting), 2008 Jose Reyes (24th), 2009 Adrian Gonzalez (12th) and 2010 Jay Bruce. So do the Angels, who have the best position players in this universe. Their lineup would look something like:

- 1. 2011 Ian Kinsler (.255/.355/.477, 32 HR) -- 6.0 WAR
- 2. 2015 Mike Trout (.299/.402/.590, 41 HR) -- 10.0 WAR
- 3. 2009 Albert Pujols (.327/.443/.658, 47 HR) -- 12.8 WAR
- 4. 2011 Justin Upton (.289/.369/.529, 31 HR) -- 5.6 WAR
- 5. 2017 Zack Cozart (.297/.385/.548, 24 HR) -- 5.3 WAR
- 6. 2010 Chris Young (.257/.341/.452, 27 HR) -- 5.3 WAR
- 7. 2014 Chris Carter (.227/.308/.491, 37 HR) -- 2.6 WAR

8. 2013 Andrelton Simmons (.248/.296/.396, 17 HR) -- 5.4 WAR

9. 2014 Rene Rivera (.252/.319/.432, 11 HR) -- 5.1 WAR

Their starting lineup alone would break the all-time team home run record, with excellent defense at almost every position.

Anyway, the best team is not any of these teams.

6. Giants, 83.6 WAR (2012 Buster Posey, 2014 Johnny Cueto)

5. Angels, 85.8 WAR (2009 Albert Pujols, 2015 Mike Trout)

4. Yankees, 86.7 WAR (2017 Giancarlo Stanton, 2008 CC Sabathia)

3. Mets, 89.4 WAR (2007 David Wright, 2009 Adrian Gonzalez)

2. Dodgers, 93.7 WAR (2011 Matt Kemp, 2015 Clayton Kershaw)

The best prime team

The Washington Nationals, if we're to believe that my playing-time adjustments and math are anywhere close to accurate, would produce about 98 wins above replacement, and win around 145 games against a typical league. This ... seems impossible. But let's consider this team. Here's the lineup:

1. 2016 Adam Eaton (.284/.362/.428, 19th in MVP voting) -- 7.5 WAR

2. 2015 Bryce Harper (.330/.460/.649, MVP) -- 11.2 WAR

3. 2009 Ryan Zimmerman (.292/.364/.525, 25th in MVP voting) -- 6.5 WAR

4. 2017 Anthony Rendon (.301/.403/.533, sixth in MVP voting) -- 6.2 WAR

5. 2016 Daniel Murphy (.347/.390/.595, second in MVP voting) -- 6.8 WAR

6. 2018 Trea Turner (.290/.340/.465, projected top-10 player this year) -- 5.3 WAR

7. 2012 Miguel Montero (.286/.391/.438, 32nd in MVP voting) -- 6.3 WAR

8. 2017 Michael Taylor (.271/.320/.486) -- 3.9 WAR

With a lot of career-best defensive ratings. Pretty good.

Rotation:

1. 2017 Max Scherzer, 16-6, Cy Young winner -- 7.4 WAR

2. 2012 Gio Gonzalez, 21-8, third in CY voting -- 6.1 WAR

3. 2014 Stephen Strasburg, 14-11, ninth in CY voting -- 6.0 WAR

4. 2009 Edwin Jackson, 13-9, All-Star -- 4.5 WAR

5. 2016 Tanner Roark, 16-10, 10th in CY voting -- 3.1 WAR

So all but one starting pitcher, and all but one starting position player, good enough to get named on an MVP or Cy Young ballot, and all of them stay almost totally healthy.

Bullpen:

1. 2010 Joaquin Benoit, 1.34 ERA -- 2.0 WAR
2. 2014 Sean Doolittle, 2.72 ERA -- 1.8 WAR
3. 2016 Shawn Kelley, 2.64 ERA -- 1.5 WAR
4. 2009 Ryan Madson, 3.18 ERA -- 1.9 WAR
5. 2013 Brandon Kintzler, 2.69 ERA -- 2.0 WAR
6. 2016 Sammy Solis, 2.41 ERA -- 0.6 WAR
7. 2015 Joe Ross, 3.64 ERA mostly as a starter -- 1.6 WAR

And the bench includes Matt Wieters' best season, Howie Kendrick's best season, Alejandro De Aza's 17 HR/20 SB season, and 16 homers from Matt Adams. I don't think they'd win 145 games. But there's a little hope in me that someday, by chance or supernatural design, we'll see an exceptional roster of career years give it a good try.

FROM CBS SPORTS

Los Angeles Angels 2018 season preview: Will winter moves translate to a big year?

The Angels were one of the big winners of the offseason. How will it translate?

By Matt Snyder

The Angels haven't won a playoff game since 2009, where they lost the ALCS, four games to two, to the eventual World Series champion Yankees. They also have the best player on the planet right in the middle of his prime. Time's a wastin' on taking advantage of having Mike Trout, no? They've made the playoffs one time in Trout's career (a 98-win season in 2014), but were swept in the first round. It's time to surround him with more talent.

Thanks in part to finally getting out from under some unhelpful and relatively suffocating contracts, general manager Billy Eppler got aggressive this past offseason.

Actually, it started last August with the trade acquisition of power-hitting outfielder Justin Upton. He had an opt-out clause in his deal to become a free agent, but the Angels agreed to a five-year, \$106M extension with him.

Things ramped up for the Angels in December, when they traded for second baseman Ian Kinsler, signed shortstop (to move to third base) Zack Cozart and two-way Japanese stud Shohei Ohtani.

The Angels even added useful bench players in backup catcher Rene Rivera and outfielder Chris Young in January.

All told, it was a very productive offseason for the Angels. Now it'll need to translate on the field.

- **2017 record:** 80-82 (plus-one run differential)
- **Probable lineup**
 1. Ian Kinsler, 2B
 2. Mike Trout, CF
 3. Justin Upton, LF
 4. Albert Pujols, 1B
 5. Kole Calhoun, RF
 6. Zack Cozart, 3B
 7. Shohei Ohtani, DH
 8. Andrelton Simmons, SS
 9. Martin Maldonado, C

Bench: C Rene Rivera; IF/DH Luis Valbuena; IF Kaleb Cowart; OF Chris Young

Obviously, Ohtani won't be serving as the everyday DH. He figures to get the job roughly three times a week, assuming things are going well. Otherwise, Pujols could DH with Vabuena at first base or Young could DH (or play LF with Upton at DH). It'll be revolving on a regular basis due to the unique nature of Ohtani's roster spot.

Probable rotation

1. Garrett Richards, RHP
2. Shohei Ohtani, LHP
3. Matt Shoemaker, RHP
4. Andrew Heaney, LHP
5. Tyler Skaggs, LHP
6. J.C. Ramirez, RHP

Righties Parker Bridwell and Nick Tropeano (coming off Tommy John surgery) are also options here.

Probable bullpen

Closer: Blake Parker or Cam Bedrosian, RHP

Setup: Parker/Bedrosian; Jim Johnson, RHP

Middle: Keynan Middleton, RHP; Jose Alvarez, LHP; Noe Ramirez, RHP

Long: Luke Bard, RHP

Pitching depth with high variance possible

In looking above, I listed eight viable big-league starting pitchers. Prospect Jaime Barria is also on the radar here, but a debut this year seems unlikely.

Back in December, I explored the rotation situation in detail, but here's the basic takeaway: This group could be anywhere from very good to a total, injury-riddled mess. Fortunately, there are enough names here to believe that the Angels can get through most of the season with five pitchers at any given point in the season performing at a moderately good level. It isn't difficult to see something like Richards-Ohtani-Heaney-Shomaker-Skaggs being an above-average rotation come September.

Possibly dominant back-end duo

We won't be hearing about the Bedrosian-Parker duo in the same air of the Indians' Andrew Miller and Cody Allen or the Yankees fearsome foursome, but there's potential here for a great eighth and ninth inning combo in Orange County.

Parker took over as closer last season and had an exceptional year overall. He had eight saves and 15 holds against three blown saves with a 2.54 ERA, 0.83 WHIP and 86 strikeouts against 16 walks in 67 1/3 innings. His increased usage of the splitter got him more swing-and-miss in addition to posting one of the higher groundball rates in the majors (again, we'll get to what that means with this defense).

A repeat season establishes Parker as one of the better relievers in baseball.

Bedrosian has the capability to join him. The son of former Cy Young winner Steve "Bedrock" Bedrosian, Cam enters his age-26 season ready to break out. A groin injury early last season really held him back -- he returned but his velocity dipped in July and August -- but he still posted a solid strikeout rate (53 K in 44 2/3 IP; 10.7 K/9) for the second straight season. He was brilliant in 2016 (1.12 ERA) and staying healthy could be key to getting back to dominance.

Infield defense; well, defense as a whole

The Angels were already a good defensive team last season. Anchored by probably the best defensive player in the game in Andrelton Simmons, they were fourth in the majors in defensive efficiency and second in defensive WAR. They showed a bit lower elsewhere (11th in defensive runs saved), but there's nothing to say this was even an average defensive team. It was good to great.

It got better this offseason, too.

Kinsler is one of the better defensive second basemen in baseball. Cozart was a good defender at short and now he moves to third base, where you don't need as much range. That infield defense is going to be incredible, so the pitchers who rely on sink (such as we mentioned above with Parker) stand to reap the benefits.

Behind the plate, Maldonado is one of the better backstops in the league while Rivera is known for his quality work as well.

The outfield of Upton, Trout and Calhoun isn't outstanding, but it's not bad either.

We're likely looking at a top-five defense in baseball and that really helps massage some of the concerns with the rotation.

Improved offense

The Angels were 11th in the AL in runs last season. They were 14th in average, 11th in on-base percentage and last in slugging. They were a bad offensive team. No reason to sugarcoat it.

But!

Trout managed only 114 games due to injury. Upton only played in 27 after he joined the club.

Kinsler takes over at second, where the Angels collectively hit .206/.274/.327 (gross) last season. Cozart takes over at third, where the Angels collectively hit .238/.318/.395 last season.

Even with age-related regression for the duo, they are far better than what the Angels had last year.

Simply eye-balling the order listed above, it *looks* legit, doesn't it? The offense will be much-improved. We can probably bump them from 11th in the AL in runs to somewhere in the ballpark of sixth.

Mike Freaking Trout

Don't forget to enjoy the greatness we're witnessing with Mike Trout. The two-time MVP has led the league in runs four times, RBI once, steals once, OBP twice, slugging twice and OPS+ four times. He's led the league in WAR five times in six full seasons. Even with fewer than 115 games played last season, he was sixth. The four most similar players through age 25, statistically, per baseball-reference.com are Frank Robinson, Ken Griffey Jr., Mickey Mantle and Hank Aaron. Yowza.

Or how about this? Most career WAR though age 25 in MLB history:

1. Ty Cobb, 55.8
2. Mike Trout, 55.2
3. Mickey Mantle, 52.2
4. Rogers Hornsby, 46.9
5. Alex Rodriguez, 46.3

You think he gets too much attention? You are wrong. He doesn't get enough. He's on pace to be one of the 10 best players in baseball history. Perhaps a deep playoff run would help in getting him the proper recognition in terms of his place in history among casual fans.

Playoff run?

Even the most die-hard, glass-half-full Angels fans would probably admit the Astros are far superior on paper heading into the season. Outside the AL West, it seems obvious the Yankees, Red Sox and Indians are better, too. The Angels might well be the next-best AL team, though.

That would be enough to get a wild-card spot. As we saw with the 2014 Giants, sometimes that's all it takes to win a championship.

SportsLine has the Angels winning 82 games with a 27.2 percent chance to make the playoffs. Fangraphs has them at 84-78 while Baseball Prospectus' PECOTA has them at 80-82.

I'm a bit more bullish. A few teams over-perform the projections every year and I'm gonna go with the Angels being one of those this season. Unless they suffer a few injuries before the season starts, I'll be predicting the Angels to secure a wild-card spot this season with something like 87 wins.

FROM SPORTING NEWS**Mike Trout to wear face guard after getting hit in helmet**

By Alec Brzezinski

Angels slugger Mike Trout is going to look a little different at the batter's box this season.

Trout, after getting hit in the helmet by a pitch Sunday in a spring training game, said he would try wearing a protective face guard this season.

[Jeff Fletcher tweet]: Mike Trout, who got hit in the helmet by a pitch yesterday, said he's going try wearing a face guard with his helmet, starting today. "I was thinking about it before, but that sealed the deal," he said. #Angels

Should Trout find the transition smooth, he would join Yankees designated hitter Giancarlo Stanton as face guard-wearing sluggers. Stanton suffered a gruesome facial injury in 2014 when he was hit in the face by a pitch.

The Angels made a big splash this offseason signing Japanese star Shohei Ohtani, but the Angels will need Trout to return to MVP form to have a chance in the loaded American League.

FROM USA TODAY**AL keys to winning: Team-by-team outlook**

USA TODAY Sports takes a closer look at each American League team and their key to a winning, successful season.

AL EAST**Baltimore Orioles**

Start off well: Given the uncertain future of Manny Machado, Adam Jones, Zach Britton and Brad Brach, who all become free agents after the season, the Orioles need to win early and a lot. Otherwise, the quartet could be gone by the July 31 trade deadline.

Boston Red Sox

David Price returning to form? In his second season for Boston, Price battled injuries, starting only 11 games and pitching 74.2 total innings. However, he did make an impact down the stretch as a reliever, proving there were no aftereffects of his injury. Now that he's fully healthy, Boston is looking for him and Chris Sale to set the tone at the top of the rotation and form one of the better 1-2 punches.

New York Yankees

The rotation: The Yankees hope Luis Severino can repeat his breakthrough 2017 season and Masahiro Tanaka can return to form after a regular-season ERA that hovered near 5.00. They have a full season of Sonny Gray, but they'll also be hoping CC Sabathia's arthritic right knee will hold out. As injury insurance, Chance Adams is the closest prospect to the majors.

Tampa Bay Rays

Replacing Evan Longoria: Evan Longoria is the Rays' all-time leader in games played, home runs and RBI, so his departure leaves a hole. After missing the season because of injury, Matt Duffy is penciled in at third. Duffy's best season was in 2015, when he had 12 homers and 77 RBI. It doesn't match Longoria's 2017, with 20 homers and 86 RBI, but it's not bad.

Toronto Blue Jays

Joey Bats' incumbent: Randal Grichuk is slotted to replace Jose Bautista in right field, and the former Cardinals player outproduced Bautista in 2017. If Toronto wants to contend, Grichuk likely has to approach Bautista's 2016 production.

AL CENTRAL

Chicago White Sox

Yoan Moncada: Moncada is the face of the White Sox rebuild thanks to being the main piece in the Chris Sale trade. The second baseman had a solid rookie year, hitting eight homers with 22 RBI and a .750 OPS, but enters his first full season looking for improvement.

Cleveland Indians

Jason Kipnis: The Indians second baseman spent half of last season on the disabled list, and even when he was healthy he struggled to produce. In fact, the Indians got into their groove when Kipnis was injured, forcing the veteran to play center field when he was healthy for the playoffs.

Detroit Tigers

Staying healthy: Miguel Cabrera had the worst season of his career in 2017 and must find a way to regain his form. Victor Martinez enters what could be his final season after having cardiovascular surgery for an irregular heartbeat in September, so it's unclear how he will perform after recovery. Michael Fulmer had a strong first half but struggled mightily in the second half, partially because of an elbow injury.

Kansas City Royals

Replace the free agents: In Eric Hosmer and Lorenzo Cain, the Royals lost two of their best players this offseason. Lucas Duda was signed to be Hosmer's replacement at first, but he last played in 2016. Free agent signee Jon Jay will start in center for Cain, but he hit .198 last year.

Minnesota Twins

Byron Buxton: He finished 2017 with a .253 average, 16 home runs and 51 RBI. While Buxton is a sure thing to play tremendous defense in center field, he can really make a difference at the plate as a five-tool player.

AL WEST

Houston Astros

Keep hitting: By OPS+, which adjusts for a team's era and hitting environment, the 2017 Astros tied the 1927 Yankees as the best offensive team in MLB history. The majority of Houston's lineup will return, so it will only need to avoid regression to repeat as the league's best hitting team.

Los Angeles Angels

Ohtani magic: Lost amid the hype, excitement and curiosity over two-way player Shohei Ohtani is the fact that the Angels really need him to perform, especially on the mound. A debut season ranging from consistent to dominant would be a significant boost for a team relying on several injury-plagued pitchers. Ohtani's season high for innings came in 2015, when he struck out 196 batters in 160 2/3 innings for Nippon Ham. So 33 starts likely won't happen, but 25 mostly excellent ones would be huge.

Oakland Athletics

Young starters emerge: Kendall Graveman performed fairly well but served two stints on the disabled list. Jharel Cotton had a 5.58 ERA. Only Sean Manaea (12-10, 4.37 ERA) performed up to expectations. Those three return, and at the back end of the rotation, unproven pitchers including Daniel Mengden, Paul Blackburn and Daniel Gossett will get a shot.

Seattle Mariners

A healthy King: Any path to the playoffs for the Mariners involves a healthy Felix Hernandez. While he was limited to a career-low 16 starts and 86 innings in 2017, the rotation listed, posting an overall 4.36 ERA and fading badly down the stretch. While a 200-inning season out of James Paxton would help, King Felix still sets the tone here — and anything less than his career standard of 34 starts would create an uphill climb.

Texas Rangers

Rotation experience: Matt Moore, Mike Minor and Doug Fister — all reclamation projects — join Cole Hamels in the rotation. All four have won at least 10 games and made at least 30 starts in multiple seasons. Then there's Bartolo Colon, who at 44 is trying to make the club as a non-roster invitee. Matt Bush, who was used as a closer and setup man last season, is also wild card. The club is also expected to get Martin Perez back for the second half of the season.

For MLB's Puerto Rican players, Hurricane Maria still hits home: 'It breaks your heart'

By Jorge L. Ortiz

When they joined their U.S.-based teams for spring training, Puerto Rican players left behind relatives who are still dealing with the aftermath of Hurricane Maria – almost six months after the Category 4 storm devastated the island.

The recovery has been slower than expected, with more than 10% of residents still lacking electricity and most of the rest enduring frequent outages.

Nine-time All-Star Carlos Beltran, who retired after winning a World Series championship with the Houston Astros in the fall, has been among those expressing their disappointment over the relief efforts from the Trump administration. On Monday he skipped the team's visit to the White House, as did star shortstop Carlos Correa, a fellow Puerto Rican.

Both were among a contingent of players from the U.S. commonwealth, including St. Louis Cardinals catcher Yadier Molina, who have contributed money, supplies and their toil to helping communities back home.

All agree there's still a lot of work to be done. Here's a look at what some of the players found when they returned home in the offseason, and what they were able to do.

Player: Edwin Diaz, RHP, Seattle Mariners

Hometown: Ceiba, on the eastern coast.

Damage: Diaz's apartment and his parents' home survived the hurricane in fairly good shape – except for the predictable loss of electricity – but his grandmother's house was flooded and rendered useless. She lost virtually all its contents, along with her car. The basketball arena in Diaz's native town of Naguabo was destroyed, and the seawall sustained major damage.

Is the power back?: It returned to Diaz's place about three weeks after the storm, but his parents' house still doesn't have power from the grid – they lost it when Hurricane Irma hit two weeks before Maria – and likely won't for some time. They get their electricity from a generator he bought for them.

Helping out: The military personnel would inform Diaz when they were going to hand out water and supplements to the neighborhood, and he would lend a hand. He and Gold Glove catcher Martin Maldonado organized a fund-raising softball game in Naguabo, with the participation of Mariners teammate Robinson Cano, Molina and Cubs infielder Javier Baez. Diaz and Molina also handed out \$100 supermarket vouchers.

Reflections: “I was lucky to get power back pretty quickly, after three weeks, because I live close to the (Roosevelt Roads) military base and they had to get them electricity. ... I’m thankful to the military folks because they provided great help, and they’re still doing it.”

Player: Kike Hernandez, utilityman, Los Angeles Dodgers

Hometown: Toa Baja, close to the north coast west of the capital city of San Juan.

Damage: Hernandez spent most of the offseason training in L.A. but returned home for a week around both Thanksgiving and Christmas. He noticed widespread damage and debris everywhere, in addition to lots of residents still without power. His family joined him stateside for the playoffs.

Is the power back?: It returned at his parents’ home sometime in November.

Helping out: Hernandez is involved with Habitat for Humanity of Puerto Rico, which aims to help rebuild homes in the island.

Reflections: “It breaks your heart to go there two months later and see how it still looked. And then for my parents to tell me it was way worse two weeks before that, it opens your eyes even more. The last time I had seen Puerto Rico it was nothing like that.”

Player: Martin Maldonado, C, Los Angeles Angels

Hometown: Naguabo, on the east coast.

Damage: His current home didn’t sustain major damage but the house where he grew up – and where the family lived for 25 years – was destroyed.

Is the power back?: It was finally restored at his mother’s house right around the time spring training began in mid-February. She relied on a generator before that.

Helping out: Maldonado teamed up with Diaz and others in putting together the charity softball game, which provided a respite to affected residents and raised funds. He found the government’s response lacking: “There are still people going to bed hungry,” he said.

Reflections: Maldonado went home in November, more than a month after the hurricane hit on Sept. 20. “Everybody told me things were better by the time I got back, but it really amazes you to see what happened to some of my friends’ houses, or seeing the damage to El Yunque (the rain forest). It was very sad.”

Player: Dereck Rodriguez, minor-league RHP, San Francisco Giants

Hometown: The son of Hall of Fame catcher Ivan Rodriguez now lives in South Florida but returned to Puerto Rico to play for the Mayaguez Indians in the abbreviated winter ball season, which was just 18 games long.

Damage: Because of flooding and other damage to most ballparks, most of the games were played during the day. Rodriguez said he saw a photo of Roberto Clemente Stadium, usually the home field of the Carolina Giants winter league team, and the water level had risen above the outfield fences.

Reflections: “It was important to go back and bring a bit of joy to the people,” he said of playing winter ball. “I enjoyed it because it was such a short season that every game was like a playoff. It was like a round-robin.”

FROM YAHOO! SPORTS

MLB season preview: The breakout teams of 2018

Editor’s note: From now until opening day, Yahoo Sports will be getting you ready for the 2018 MLB season with a series of previews and roundtable discussions with our writers. First up, we’re talking about the breakout teams of 2018.

There hasn’t been a baseball season in recent memory where the haves and have-nots are more defined. We know which teams are good. They’re pretty much the same teams that were good last year. It wouldn’t be a shock if most of the teams that won their division in 2017 win it again in 2018.

All that means is the teams that break out will have a tougher time doing it.

As we consider the breakout teams of 2018, we’re thinking about a few things: Which teams made the moves necessary to make their way into the postseason mix? And which teams have the clearest path to that breakout? Yahoo Sports’ experts Jeff Passan and Tim Brown make their picks in the video above, as the Big League Stew writers are making their choices below.

MARK TOWNSEND: The Los Angeles Angels

I don’t know that the Angels are the sexiest pick here. Nor do I feel like they’re on the verge of long-term success. However, I like them to break their string of disappointing seasons with a postseason berth in 2018. Obviously, Shohei Ohtani was a dynamic addition over the winter. Acquiring Justin Upton late last season and locking him up is a big move too. But they further lengthened the lineup by bringing in Zack Cozart and Ian Kinsler. It’s a tough division and they still have flaws, but now that Mike Trout has real help, this is the time for them to surge.

CHRIS CWIK: Philadelphia Phillies

Think about last year’s breakout teams for a second. Both the Twins and the Yankees performed much better than anticipated. What did they have in common? Both were thought of as future contenders whose timelines moved up after their youngsters emerged early. The Phillies bring a similar approach to the table in 2018. J.P. Crawford will finally get a shot at a full season in the majors. Nick Williams, Jorge Alfaro and Rhys Hoskins can build on last year’s success. Aaron Nola might finally reach the 200 innings mark. While you could make similar arguments for the Braves and White Sox, the Phillies actually participated in the offseason, signing Carlos Santana and Jake Arrieta. If surprise performances are

keyed by youngsters turning into stars faster than anyone expected, the Phillies have the best shot at making that happen in 2018.

LIZ ROSCHER: Philadelphia Phillies (again)

Before the Phillies signed Jake Arrieta, I was confident that the Phillies would surprise people. Now with Arrieta on board, they probably won't surprise people because the team has made their intent clear: competition or bust. The front office obviously has a lot of faith in its young players, not to mention their ability to fulfill the potential that has yet to be realized. If not, they wouldn't have spent so much money on Arrieta and Carlos Santana. Arrieta joins a rotation that contains Aaron Nola and several promising (if not overwhelmingly talented) other starters. Santana joins an infield with great defense and will obviously compete with shortstop J.P. Crawford for the season's highest walk total. And the outfield has power in Rhys Hoskins and all-around talent in Odubel Herrera. And I haven't even gotten to their remade bullpen. The Phillies are ready to take the leap into contention, and even though people are expecting it now, it doesn't make it any less surprising. Looking back a year ago, would anyone have thought they'd be here now?

MIKE OZ: Milwaukee Brewers

Before the Phillies and the Minnesota Twins, the Milwaukee Brewers were the team making the most of a cold winter in baseball. They added Lorenzo Cain in free agency and ponied up to acquire Christian Yelich in a trade with the Miami Marlins. That turns Milwaukee into the home of one of the best outfields in baseball, especially when you consider that Yelich is probably better than you know. He was the 24th most valuable position player in MLB last season, according to Fangraphs, and is only getting better. The Brewers are better than you know too. They won 86 games last year and almost made the postseason — not bad for a team on which the casual fan would have trouble naming a player other than Ryan Braun. What really gives the Brewers a chance to break out is the fact that the NL Central looks weak. The Cubs should win the division title again, but after that? The Cardinals could be good, but maybe not. The Reds and Pirates are both rebuilding. There's a lane there, and the Brewers look ready for it. The Brewers could very easily finish in second place and — heck, if their pitching surprises us — might even close the gap some on the Cubs.

FROM CINCINNATI.COM

Former Cincinnati Red Zack Cozart happy to be an Angel, but misses his former teammates, Cincinnati

By John Fay

TEMPE, Ariz. — Zack Cozart harbors no bitterness.

Cozart is now a Los Angeles Angel after spending his entire professional career as a Cincinnati Red. He was in the lineup against his old team for a game Monday.

"I love where I'm at," he said. "Obviously, I miss the Redlegs in the sense that I came up with the guys over there. I played with Devin (Mesoraco) – I was drafted with him '07 – so I've been with him for 10 years.

"Playing with Joey (Votto). Bryan (Price) was the pitching coach when I first came up. There's just a lot of guys over there that obviously I miss. But I love where I'm at. I'm excited to be an Angel. But I'll always cherish those Redlegs days and I'll miss Cincinnati, but it was time to move on."

There was a report that Cozart moved on ultimately because the Angels offered a chance to win now. Cozart didn't mention that. He said he talked to owner Bob Castellini and president of baseball operations Dick Williams about returning but understood why the Reds let him move on.

"I had talks with a lot of guys. Mr. Castellini, Dick," Cozart said. "Everybody kind of knew the direction they wanted to go. It was no secret about the rebuild and trying to get the young guys there to get more opportunities. There's no hard feelings. Mr. C and Dick, they know how much I loved being with the Reds. I hope the fans know that.

"I know the guys I played with know that. I talk to them, probably every other day I get a texted from someone. I'll stay in touch with those guys."

Part of moving on was moving to third base. The Angels have Andrelton Simmons at short, the one shortstop who is obviously superior to Cozart defensively.

"I feel like I'm getting better everyday at third," he said. "At the beginning, it's kind of fast over there. It's slowing down for me a little bit. I actually played shortstop (Sunday), which felt weird, which is weird. I'm trying to concentrate on third base and get better over there, try to be like Geno (Suarez) over there, try to be a stud like him."

FROM MLB.COM

Most indispensable players for all 30 teams in 2018*

By Anthony Castrovino

Baseball is a team game -- and an unpredictable one, at that. So the idea that a single player can swing a team's fortune one way or another can be faulty. Last year, the Angels were a game under .500 (19-20) in the six weeks **Mike Trout** was on the disabled list and a game under .500 while he was on the active roster (61-62). The Dodgers are an incredible 74-25 over the past two seasons when **Clayton Kershaw** has been on the shelf with back issues.

Everything written below, then, is not to be treated as gospel (and if it were treated as gospel, that would be an unusual religion).

Still, there's no denying that there are certain players whose long-term absence or major performance decline would have their clubs scrambling, if not stumbling. With a tip of the cap to the New York Post's Ken Davidoff, whose recent column on **Noah Syndergaard** as the Mets' linchpin inspired this piece, here are my picks for the most indispensable player on each team for 2018.

Angels: Mike Trout

Though I cited the Halos' 2017 record with and without Trout above, I'm not dumb enough to go with anybody else here. Last year's thumb injury thankfully cost Trout just six weeks. If Trout were to miss, say, half of 2018, you could probably kiss that hope of making a significant rise in the standings goodbye.

**Cut to only include Angels-related material.*

FROM FANSIDED.COM

Don't panic if Shohei Ohtani has a slow start in 2018

By Adam Strangis

There may not have been a bigger free agent signing this winter than pitcher-hitter Shohei Ohtani, but some early returns aren't great.

Japanese sensation Shohei Ohtani is a baseball rarity in this day and age. While the game continues to move towards specialists in the bullpen and at the dish, Ohtani is striving to break that mold in Los Angeles. The Angels are letting him be a starting pitcher while also playing the designated hitter role two to three times a week. This is unheard of in the Majors at this point but some around the game are questioning whether it can work out already.

Yahoo's Jeff Passan reported over the weekend that scouts had serious doubts if Ohtani can handle himself at the plate. They fear that his bat needs seasoning in the minor leagues, something that is highly unlikely to happen. The talent level is too tantalizing to send to the minors, especially on the mound. It's pretty easy to see why when he's up there throwing this kind of a pitch.

GIFs of pretty pitches are one thing, stats are another. Right now, there's not a lot of encouraging stats to pull from anywhere for Ohtani. He has a 6.75 ERA in just 1 1/3 innings officially, although he did strikeout eight of the 12 batters he faced against the Milwaukee Brewers "B" team. Offensively, he's hit two singles in 14 official at-bats. That's not going to cut it during the season but it also serves as a reminder of the last time a highly touted foreign player tried to make the transition to MLB in former Pirates third baseman Jung-Ho Kang.

In 2015, the Buccos signed Kang and it was around this time of spring that some scouts started to worry if he could make the switch. Dang was excellent overseas but had struggled mightily, batting just .200 with four walks to 17 strikeouts in 50 plate appearances. Folks around the league started to question the

signing and if Kang could be successful. Once the season actually started, Kang responded well and finished the 2015 campaign with a healthy .287 batting average, .816 OPS and 15 home runs.

This isn't an exact comparison, of course. Kang just had to play the field and bat. Ohtani is attempting to pitch once a week on top of playing offense. The pressure surrounding Ohtani is much different as well. Since he's already such a big name, the 23-year old carries a lot of weight on those shoulders. He's trying to change the way some think about baseball, while adjusting to an entirely new country and culture off the field. The changes in his life are enormous right now.

It truly wouldn't be surprising in the least to see Ohtani struggle out of the gates. He's going to need some time to find his footing in the Majors. It's important to remember that the first few months does not a career make. Also, the Angels were able to sign him for pennies thanks to the way MLB handles international free agents. The Angels will get more than their money's worth in due time.

If baseball fans can be a little patient, they can see a true game changer develop in 2018.

FROM THE RINGER

The Worst Possible Version of Mike Trout is still an All-Star

Building a FrankenTrout season out of the worst category-specific production of Trout's career might tell us as much about how good the Angels star is as lauding his record-setting achievements.

By Zach Kram

By virtue of his being an athlete and a member of the human race, Mike Trout is fallible. He pops up meatballs, he swings and misses, he loses fly balls in the sun, and gets up on the wrong side of the bed. He's the best baseball player alive and the best 25-and-under baseball player in a century, but he still plays a game that embraces a theme of failure, and he's not immune to its effects.

He has, however, thus far been immune to widespread failure; struggles have afflicted just small sections of his game at a time, never—aside from his lackluster 40-game debut in 2011—metastasizing into a slump broad enough to derail a full season. In 2014, Trout rated as one of the worst defensive center fielders in the majors and led the American League in strikeouts; he also won the league's MVP award because he hit for power, ran well, and led the league in both runs scored and runs batted in. He possesses so many diverse skills that it's hard to imagine an across-the-board bad Trout season.

But what if we tried? What if we cherry-picked the worst component parts of past Trout seasons and combined them into one hypothetical season of struggles? What would a Frankenstein's monster collection of Trout's worst individual statistics look like?

Trout's initial 2018 projection on FanGraphs calls for him to hit .299/.427/.599, club 39 homers in 651 plate appearances, steal 22 bases, and reach 8.3 wins above replacement (no other position player is above 6.4). But that projection is an average composed of a wide range of possible performances for Trout in 2018. In one timeline, as *Baseball Prospectus's* Zach Crizer wrote last month, Trout would "break out" and produce a peak Bonds season. In another—the actual worst possible Trout season—he would suffer a season-ending injury leaving the batter's box in the first inning on Opening Day.

And in our hypothetical scenario, he'd spend the whole season getting up on the wrong side of the bed, and fastening the buttons on his jersey one spot askew, and forgetting to dab sunscreen on the back of his neck before jogging around the Angel Stadium outfield. He'd be out of sorts all year long, and it would manifest in the worst on-field performance possible, based on his past results, for the best player in the sport. Using his 2018 projection as a baseline, were Mike Trout to become mortal, here's how far he could sink.

Step 1: Worse Running, Worse Defense

Trout is an exceptional baserunner. In 2012, he succeeded on 49 of 54 stolen-base attempts while posting the most productive baserunning season of the past 16 years (as far back as FanGraphs' metric reliably extends), and even as he's traded some speed for power and scaled back his running exploits, he's still excelled. His total of 45.1 runs added with his legs is second only to Billy Hamilton's (46.1) since 2012.

But of all the areas in which Trout could regress from exceptional to merely OK in 2018, baserunning seems the most likely. His projection already forecasts a slight career worst in total baserunning value this season, and after he tore a ligament in his thumb on a stolen-base attempt last year, the Angels might prefer that he conserve his long-term health rather than try to extract every fractional run on the basepaths.

The baserunning metric that goes into WAR calculations comprises three factors: stealing bases, taking the extra base, and avoiding double plays. Trout's worst season in stolen bases came in 2015, when he succeeded on just 11 of 18 tries; his worst season by each of the latter two factors came last year. Mashed together, the worst baserunning version of Trout adds just 0.8 runs with his legs over an average player, well below the 3.1 runs Trout is projected to contribute this season.

Moving on to defense, Trout is projected as an average fielder this year, factoring in the difficulty of his center-field position, but he has slumped with the glove before. In 2014, when he suffered his worst season with both his arm and range, his defense cost the Angels 8.4 runs. Combine his hypothetical losses on defense and the bases, and Trout's projected WAR drops by a full win from its initial total of 8.3.

A decline in speed coupled with a decline in fielding prowess would engender some introductory whispers about Trout's long-term future in center. But those issues alone would have no impact on his consensus standing atop the sport. A Mike Trout who runs and fields as poorly as possible would be worth 7.3 WAR in 2018, which would still peg him, comfortably, as the best player in baseball.

Step 2: More Strikeouts

Trout's all-around dominance obscures the reality that he's also the best hitter in baseball. His offense might even be underrated because he's considered separately from bat-first stars like Giancarlo Stanton and Joey Votto, but Trout has posted a wRC+ of 167 or better in each of his full seasons. (That statistic is park-adjusted and measured on a scale in which 100 is league average, with 167 representing a mark 67 percent better than average.) Trout owns six of the top 14 batting lines since 2012; no other player appears on that list more than once.

Chipping away at that consistent dominance starts with relaxing his control of the strike zone. Since reaching a peak of 26.1 percent in 2014, when Trout led the AL in strikeouts, his K rate has fallen by about three points each year. Last season, he managed the dual feat of a career low in strikeout rate and a career high in walk rate. The first step to reverse those trends is to nudge Trout's strikeout rate back up to 26.1 percent, giving him an extra 39 strikeouts this season compared to his projected total. That's 39 fewer opportunities to homer or reach base or otherwise contribute in a positive way, which would cause Trout's WAR to take its first real plummet.

A Mike Trout who runs and fields as poorly as possible while reversing his strikeout gains would be worth 5.6 WAR. It would easily be the worst full season of his career, and his batting line would drop to .270/.405/.539, which translates to a 152 wRC+. But even a compromised Trout would be an MVP candidate; his hypothetical 5.6 WAR trails only the projections for Stanton, Josh Donaldson, Carlos Correa, Kris Bryant, and Francisco Lindor, while tying Mookie Betts and Bryce Harper for sixth place among all position players in the majors.

Step 3: Fewer Walks

The second half of Trout's strike-zone demise concerns his walk rate, which last year ranked third in the majors among qualified hitters. In 2012, though, a young Trout put forth a career low in both unintentional and intentional walk rate—and, for good measure, a career low in hit-by-pitch rate. Roll those three up into a collapse-of-Trout's-strike-zone package and he would lose 48 automatic times on base, and although some of those plate appearances would redistribute as hits, the macro change would make him a less valuable presence at the plate.

A sudden penchant for strikeouts combined with a lack of walks would represent an odd development for Trout, especially if those trends persisted for a full season. Trout is the major leagues' master of the adjustment; as Ben Lindbergh wrote last year, Trout has displayed a "remarkable ability to evolve" by fixing whatever small problems ail his game, from whiffs on high fastballs to a weak throwing arm. So at the very least, an extended spate of struggles in the most basic of plate-discipline metrics would pose some introductory questions about Trout's future as a threat to become the greatest player who ever lived.

For just 2018, though, Trout would still receive MVP consideration, as a Mike Trout who runs and fields as poorly as possible while reversing his strikeout gains and losing control of the zone would produce a 145 wRC+ (.280/.360/.560) and be worth 5.1 WAR. His mark would tie Nolan Arenado's projection for

10th place among position players in WAR, although he would still rate as the game's most valuable center fielder.

Step 4: Fewer Homers

The redistribution of walks to batted balls in Step 3 actually increased Trout's projected 2018 home run total to 40. That extra homer—along with many of its sisters—is about to disappear.

Last season, Trout managed a home run on 10.4 percent of batted balls, a career-best rate. His 2018 projection calls for a similarly lofty 9.8 percent. Dropping that rate to his career low, from the pre-juiced-ball 2013 season (5.9 percent), would send his projected homer total from 40 to 24.

Of all the steps on this list, Trout losing his home run stroke would cause the greatest kerfuffle in the sport. A heightened strikeout rate equates to just an extra K or two per week and fits with the game's broader trend; a sudden decline in his homer frequency, amid an ongoing league-wide long-ball spike, would be reason for real concern for observers who have been conditioned to expect nothing less from Trout than consistent, almost daily superstardom. Number crunchers would consider whether Trout, whose \$33.3 million base salary is the highest in the majors this year, is overpaid. The Trout vs. Harper debates would recommence. Someone, on some debate show somewhere, would float the theory that the presence of two-way wunderkind Shohei Ohtani is causing Trout to press at the plate.

Of all the steps on this list, Trout losing his home run stroke would also have the most drastic effect on his statistics. Hitting a home run is the most valuable action a hitter can contribute on a baseball field; removing 40 percent of his homers, even if some become base hits in play, would strip Trout of a huge chunk of his value.

A Mike Trout who runs and fields as poorly as possible, reverses his strikeout gains, loses control of the zone, and drops his home run rate would produce a 116 wRC+ (.261/.343/.459) and be worth 2.8 WAR. He would fall outside the top 50 in position-player WAR, although he'd still be as valuable as Addison Russell and Evan Longoria, and given the combination of his popularity and still-viable production, he'd still make his seventh straight All-Star team.

Step 5: Fewer Hits Overall

The last step in dosing Trout with kryptonite is to reduce his hits in play in addition to his hits over the fence. Trout's .359 batting average on balls in play since 2012 is the third-highest among qualified hitters, thanks to his combination of speed and hard contact. But a slower and less powerful Trout would naturally collect fewer hits, and dropping Trout's BABIP to his career low of .318—from last season, when so many of his best-hit balls went for homers rather than hits in play—would drop his batting line even further.

A Mike Trout who runs and fields as poorly as possible, reverses his strikeout gains, loses control of the zone, drops his home run rate, and loses his BABIP magic would produce a 113 wRC+ and a .256/.338/.452 batting line. He would be worth 2.5 WAR and barely rate as a top-10 center fielder,

though he would tie with the projections for Justin Upton and Kole Calhoun as the Angels' most valuable outfielder.

The worst hypothetical version of Trout is still better than versions of current stars that have actually manifested. Harper has already played a season worse than that, as have Stanton and Manny Machado. Barring injury, Trout seems immune to even average play, let alone a bad season by anyone else's standard.

In the end, this thought experiment winds up being just—surprise—another confirmation of Trout's greatness. The worst overall version of Trout based on his prior categorical worsts still adds baserunning value and non-disastrous defense, and he is better than league average at collecting walks, hitting homers, and reaching base on balls in play. He's not a \$33 million-per-year player, but he's a fringe All-Star who fits comfortably in the top half of a playoff lineup and is worth starting in even the shallowest fantasy league.

Oh, and performing the reverse calculations by maximizing Trout's output for each component would yield a 13.8-WAR season, which would be the single-season high for any player other than Babe Ruth. That's one of the possible timelines for this season, too.