

Kluber, Ramirez finalists for heavy hardware

By Anthony Castrovince MLB.com @castrovince

Like the Hot Stove season, the exhibition season, the regular season and the postseason, awards season has become a season unto itself in MLB. The central focus of awards season began with Monday night's MLB Network announcement of the Baseball Writers' Association of America awards finalists.

The American League and National League winners of the following awards will be revealed next week live on MLB Network at 6 p.m. ET on the scheduled day:

AL and NL Jackie Robinson Rookies of the Year -- Monday, Nov. 12

AL and NL Managers of the Year -- Tuesday, Nov. 13

AL and NL Cy Young Awards -- Wednesday, Nov. 14

AL and NL MVP Awards -- Thursday, Nov. 15

For now, we know the top three vote-getters on each ballot. Remember that BBWAA awards voting took place at the conclusion of the regular season, so postseason performance did not factor into consideration.

Here are the finalists for each of these prestigious honors:

AL MOST VALUABLE PLAYER

Mookie Betts, OF, Red Sox: With a .346 average, 32 homers and 30 stolen bases, Betts became the first 30-30 batting champ in history, and he also led the Majors in slugging percentage (.640) and runs scored (129). He had the Major League-leading Wins Above Replacement mark in both the FanGraphs (10.4) and Baseball Reference (10.9) calculations. Many thought teammate J.D. Martinez might join him as a finalist, but he missed the cut.

Jose Ramirez, 3B, Indians: Ramirez actually beat Betts to the 30-30 club entrance, notching his 30th steal in early September and becoming the first player since 2012 (and only the fourth third baseman) to reach 30-30 status. He became just the 25th player in MLB history with at least 30 homers and 30 steals and at least 100 runs and 100 RBIs.

Mike Trout, OF, Angels: After Trout delivered a career-high OPS (1.088) and on-base percentage (.460), to go with 39 homers, 24 doubles and 24 steals, the question, as usual, is how many first-place votes his team standing (the Angels finished 80-82) cost him. He may have finished in the top two of the MVP voting for the sixth time in seven seasons.

NL MOST VALUABLE PLAYER

Nolan Arenado, 3B, Rockies: For the third straight season, Arenado had an OPS over .900 (.935, to be exact). For the third time in the last four years, he led the NL in homers (38). For the sixth straight year, his all-world defense at third was recognized with a Gold Glove. Whatever the exact result, this will be his highest finish in the MVP voting.

Javier Baez, 2B/SS, Cubs: The NL RBIs leader (111) became the first player in Cubs history to reach 40 doubles, 30 homers and 20 stolen bases in a single season. He finished second in the league in extra-base hits (83). Baez's defensive versatility (he played 104 games at second base, 65 at short and 22 at third) added to his value.

Christian Yelich, OF, Brewers: The NL Hank Aaron Award winner led the league in the FanGraphs (7.6) and Baseball Reference (7.6) WAR calculations, batting average (.326), OPS (1.000) and total bases (343). A September surge in which he slashed .370/.508/.804 while the Brewers stormed to the top of the NL Central might have sealed this award for him.

AL CY YOUNG

Corey Kluber, RHP, Indians: After winning the AL Cy Young Award in 2014 and '17, Kluber is a finalist for the third straight year. He won 20 games for the first time, led the league in innings (215) and had the third-best WHIP (0.99) and fifth-best ERA (2.89) among qualifiers.

Blake Snell, LHP, Rays: Snell didn't have the typical volume of a Cy Young Award winner, but he made his 180 2/3 innings count. He led the Majors with 21 wins and a 219 ERA+, and his 1.89 ERA was the best among AL qualifiers.

Justin Verlander, RHP, Astros: Verlander's 159 ERA+ was the best by a qualified pitcher aged 35 or older since Roger Clemens' 226 mark in 2005. Verlander led the AL in strikeouts (290) and led the Majors in WHIP (0.90) across 214 innings, with a 16-9 record and 2.52 ERA.

NL CY YOUNG

Jacob deGrom, RHP, Mets: To focus on deGrom's 10-9 record would be to ignore the 1.70 ERA that was the best in the NL by 67 points. He had 18 starts in which he went at least six innings and allowed one or zero earned runs, and he set a record with 29 straight starts allowing three runs or fewer. There was talk of deGrom making his way into NL MVP consideration, but he was not one of the finalists.

Aaron Nola, RHP, Phillies: The ace of an improved Phillies team, Nola tied deGrom atop the NL in total WAR via the Baseball Reference tally (10.0). He was second in the league in ERA (2.37), third in innings (212 1/3) and third in WHIP (0.97).

Max Scherzer, RHP, Nationals: Vying for his third straight NL Cy Young Award (and his fourth Cy Young Award overall), the Nats' indefatigable ace led the Majors in innings (220 2/3) and strikeouts (300) and tied deGrom with a 0.91 WHIP. He finished third in the NL in ERA (2.53).

AL ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

Miguel Andujar, 3B, Yankees: To go with his 27 homers, which tied the White Sox outfielder Daniel Palka for the Major League lead among rookies, Andujar also set a Yankees rookie record with 47 doubles, surpassing Joe DiMaggio's 44 in 1936.

Shohei Ohtani, RHP/DH, Angels: Billed as the "Japanese Babe Ruth," Ohtani delivered, becoming the first player since Ruth with 10 pitching appearances and 20 homers in a season. Though a right elbow injury that required Tommy John surgery prevented him from pitching in the second half, he was above average both in 51 2/3 innings pitched (126 ERA+) and in 367 plate appearances (152 OPS+).

Gleyber Torres, 2B, Yankees: Though Andujar eventually overtook him in several key categories, Torres finished with a solid .271/.340/.480 slash line to go with 24 homers and 16 doubles.

NL ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

Ronald Acuna Jr., OF, Braves: The 20-year-old had the third-highest OPS of any player in baseball in the second half (1.028) and finished with 26 homers, 16 steals and a .552 slugging percentage. His ascension to the leadoff spot after the All-Star break sparked the Braves in the NL East race.

Walker Buehler, RHP, Dodgers: The votes came in before Buehler truly flipped the star switch with a terrific postseason. But his regular season had plenty of highlights, too. Buehler's 2.31 ERA as a starter was the lowest by a rookie with at least 130 innings since Jose Fernandez's 2.19 mark in 2013.

Juan Soto, OF, Nationals: The 19-year-old wound up in the teenage-season record books for second-most homers (22, tied with teammate Bryce Harper from 2012), most multihomer games (three), most walks (79) and highest OBP (.406) and OPS (.923).

AL MANAGER OF THE YEAR

Kevin Cash, Rays: In the last year, the Rays traded away established talent like Chris Archer, Evan Longoria, Corey Dickerson, Jake Odorizzi and Alex Colome. And they tasked Cash with implementing a revolutionary pitching plan that involved not just routine bullpen days but the "opener" strategy. Despite all this, the Rays won 90 games.

Alex Cora, Red Sox: Becoming just the fifth rookie manager to win the World Series might have cemented this award for Cora had the voting taken place at the end of October. As it stands, the winningest regular season in Red Sox history (108 wins) is still pretty solid for a first-timer.

Bob Melvin, A's: The A's were the first team on record to reach the postseason despite beginning the year with the lowest payroll in MLB. Melvin has already won Manager of the Year in both leagues (with the D-backs in 2007 and the A's in '12), but this might have been his finest work yet.

NL MANAGER OF THE YEAR

Bud Black, Rockies: Though Black's Rockies weren't able to down the Dodgers in Game 163, they went an NL-best 53-30 after June 28 to grab a Wild Card spot for the second straight season.

Craig Counsell, Brewers: Counsell finished fourth in this voting last year, after the Brewers fell one game shy of a postseason berth. With the Brewers having gotten over the hump by defeating the Cubs in Game 163 to win the NL Central title, Counsell is firmly in the running this year.

Brian Snitker, Braves: The longtime organizational guy proved to be the right person to take the Braves to the next level. Atlanta took over the top spot in the NL East ahead of schedule and hung tough in the second half.

Inbox: What do trade rumors mean for Tribe?

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

#IndiansInbox With the rumors out there that were shopping almost everyone is it fair to say were looking at another rebuild Just so everyone's caught up, ESPN's Buster Olney tweeted this on Friday:

"Faced with market constraints, the Indians will listen to trade offers for some of their veteran players this winter, according to sources. Kluber, Carrasco, Encarnacion, Gomes, etc. Lindor, Ramirez will definitely be held."

No, this does not mean Cleveland is entering a rebuild. In the previous Inbox, the concept of trading Corey Kluber was discussed. Flash back to last winter, and there were reports that the Indians were open to trade dialogue about Edwin Encarnacion, Jason Kipnis and others. Carlos Carrasco's name has been involved in trade rumors several times over the years.

If anything, Olney's report was confirmation -- via his sources -- of normal speculation. The Indians ran a franchise-record payroll in 2018 and project to do so again in '19. So, working logically through that reality, the team would need to be open to listening on offers for any veterans making substantial money, to see what avenues are available to free up salary space and address other areas of need.

What the Indians are trying to do is navigate through this transitional period in club history. There are veteran players hitting free agency (names like Michael Brantley, Cody Allen and Andrew Miller this offseason), young core players hitting arbitration (Francisco Lindor leading the way) and players coming off the books in upcoming seasons. Cleveland wants to find a way to sustain its current run of success amid the moving parts.

Kluber is signed through 2019 with two team options. Carrasco has a team option for '20. Yan Gomes is signed through '19 with two team options. Kipnis and Encarnacion have team options for '20. So, if Team X comes along with an intriguing trade offer that features controllable assets and helps the Major League team continue to contend for the World Series, of course the Indians will be open to listening.

Listening to offers does not always equal shopping players. That said, if the Indians want to add any impact players via free agency -- or acquire a player earning significant money -- the team will need to shed some salary already locked in. In that sense, it would stand to reason that Cleveland will be putting feelers out there on names like Encarnacion, Kipnis and Yonder Alonso.

What do you see as a reasonable total team salary for 2019? Are the rumors of financial downsizing true? #IndiansInbox
Nothing the front office has said this offseason has indicated that reducing the payroll substantially is the end goal. Instead, it is a situation where the team would need to subtract in order to add. Last season, the payroll climbed to about \$140 million.

Right now, if you factor in guaranteed and non-guaranteed contracts in place, and then fold in projected arbitration salaries, pre-arb estimates and buyouts for '19 and '20 options, the payroll is already in the range of \$135 million to \$140 million. And that's before any additions. The expectation is that the Indians will be operating on a similar budget as last season.

With the Tribe not issuing a qualifying offer to any of their free agents, does that make it more likely that they are in the running for a big outfield bat? Or is it more likely they go after bullpen help?
-- Matt R.

As things stand, it's hard to see Cleveland being a major player in free agency unless the team is able to move money around in trades. That's just reality. During a conference call on Friday, president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti said the decision to not extend any qualifying offers was largely due to not wanting to risk locking in \$17.9 million this early in the offseason. Cleveland has a long list of situations to sort out before it can commit that type of money to a player.

"That was a big part of it," Antonetti said. "Ultimately, the first week of the offseason, as we looked at our path ahead, it wasn't the best decision to potentially allocate [\$17.9 million] right now."

#IndiansInbox do you think they'll resign Brantley, Miller and Allen? And is their priority list in that order? Greg from Indianapolis
That is the priority order I'd put them in, yes. Cleveland knew it was likely going to lose both Miller and Allen to free agency this offseason. Never say never, but giving large free-agent contracts to veteran relievers has not been part of the Indians' modus operandi. The team acquired All-Star closer Brad Hand and controllable righty Adam Cimber in July to help account for the potential relief losses.

Brantley's production on the field and leadership in the clubhouse are highly valued by the Indians, whose outfield is unsettled at all three spots. So, if there's a way to retain Brantley, I think the club will attempt to do so. That could be difficult to do if Kipnis (set to earn \$14.7 million) remains in the fold and stays in the outfield plans. Left field might make the most sense for Kipnis, if he is not going to head back to second base next year.

What are the odds the Dolan family will pay Lindor to keep him in Cleveland? #IndiansInbox Taylour- Chillicothe Ohio
The Indians have engaged in extension talks with Lindor in the past, and the shortstop's camp -- at least in one instance -- declined a substantial offer. Lindor will be eligible for arbitration for the first time this offseason. During that process, it will be natural for Cleveland to once again gauge Lindor's interest in penning his name on a long-term pact.

It takes two to tango, but put yourself in Lindor's shoes. He could be a free agent in 2022, and there is no denying a lucrative, long-term contract would await him. I would imagine Lindor wants to see what Manny Machado gets in free agency this offseason. He surely wants to see how Cleveland's front office goes about trying to sustain the team's ability to contend for a World Series crown over the next several years.

#IndiansInbox who do you think starts at 2B on Opening Day - Kipnis, Ramirez, or someone else?
I'd pencil Jose Ramirez's name in as the Tribe's Opening Day second baseman. Unless more at-bats open up at first base or designated hitter (Encarnacion and Alonso cover those spots), the best way to finally give Yandy Diaz his shot is at third base. Given what manager Terry Francona said at the season-end meeting with reporters, that feels like the plan.

"What Yandy showed in a small sample offensively," Francona said, "it's something that we need to think through, because I think we all feel like he's got a chance to be pretty special offensively. Where does that fit on a team? Is it first? Is it third? Is it sometimes DHing? We have that role pretty much filled, but we're going to have to think through that one."

Chang notches another multi-hit game in AFL

By Mike Rosenbaum MLB.com @GoldenSombbrero

GLENDALE, Ariz. -- Another multi-hit performance by Yu Chang in the Arizona Fall League powered Glendale's offense on Monday as the Desert Dogs outslugged Peoria, 9-5, at Cambelback Ranch to snap the Javelinas' six-game winning streak.

Chang, the Indians' No. 6 prospect, singled and doubled in his first two trips to the plate, both on line drives to left field, and later added a sacrifice fly to deep center field to finish 2-for-3 with an RBI and one run scored.
The multi-hit game was Chang's sixth in his last 10 contests -- a stretch during which he's also hit safely in nine games.

"I'm just thinking about trying to hit the ball hard and through the middle and timing the pitcher. Those are my goals," said Chang, who owns a .358 average with three home runs and four doubles through 18 games in the Fall League.

"My timing is better [in the Fall League]," added the 23-year-old infielder, "and I'm just hitting the ball hard."

The Desert Dogs jumped out to an early lead in the second inning when Jared Walker pushed across a run on a sacrifice fly after Chang, Keibert Ruiz and Connor Marabell had each singled in order to open the frame. Cody Thomas, Glendale's nine-hole hitter, followed with an RBI double to left-center field, and Thairo Estrada plated two more runs with a two-out single to right field to cap a four-run frame.

Peoria threatened to score against Desert Dogs starter Chris Lee in the third by putting runners on first and third base via two singles, but the left-hander worked back from a 3-0 count against Keston Hiura to induce an inning-ending double play.

Glendale added to its lead with two more runs in the fourth inning, courtesy of a Steve Wilkerson sacrifice fly and an RBI single by White Sox No. 4 prospect Luis Robert.

Hiura, Milwaukee's top-ranked prospect, delivered a two-run single to center field with two outs in the fifth inning to put Peoria on the board while also atoning for his double play two innings earlier.

The Javelinas continued to chip away at Glendale's lead in the following frame, scoring once on an infield throwing after a pair of infield singles by Evan White and Cristian Pache, only to see the Desert Dogs respond with three runs in their next trip to the plate.

Steve Wilkerson plated a run with a single ahead of Robert, who laced an RBI double to left field. The next batter, Chang, turned around a fastball, driving it to the warning track in deep center field for a sacrifice fly.

"Triple-A pitchers throw a lot of sliders and changeups," noted Chang, who produced a .256/.330/.441 line with 13 home runs and 28 doubles in 127 games at Triple-A Columbus during the regular season.

"Here, it's more fastballs ... and I can hit a fastball," he added, while fighting back a grin.

Hiura would add another run-scoring single in the seventh as part of a two-run frame, though it ultimately was all the offense Peoria would muster over the final three innings. The No. 30 overall prospect finished the game 2-for-4 with three RBIs, giving him an overall average of .352 to go along with an AFL-best 30 RBIs.

Robert, No. 44 on the Top 100, also collected multiple hits, going 2-for-4 with two RBIs. He's hitting .356 in the Fall League and has at least one hit in each of the 11 games in which he's played for the Desert Dogs.

Lee threw the ball well once again for Glendale, allowing two earned runs on six hits over five innings to earn the win. The Orioles prospect issued one walk with zero strikeouts but did record 10 of his 15 outs via ground balls. The victory was Lee's first in the Fall League, where he sports a 2.60 ERA through 17 1/3 innings (five starts).

Belle, Carter on Today's Game ballot for HOF

By Daniel Kramer MLB.com @DKramer_

The Today's Game Era ballot for the National Baseball Hall of Fame was revealed Monday, comprised of a combination of 10 players, managers and an owner who will receive consideration to be enshrined in baseball's most historic and distinguished place in history.

Harold Baines, Albert Belle, Joe Carter, Will Clark, Orel Hershiser, Davey Johnson, Charlie Manuel, Lou Piniella, Lee Smith and George Steinbrenner are those receiving consideration for the class of 2019. Baines, Belle, Carter, Clark, Hershiser and Smith are included for their contributions as players, while Johnson, Manuel and Piniella are included for their roles as managers. Steinbrenner, who is the only candidate that is no longer living, is nominated for his role as former Yankees owner.

Voting for the Today's Game Era Committee will take place on Dec. 9 at the Winter Meetings in Las Vegas. A 16-member Hall of Fame Board-appointed electorate charged with the review of the Today's Game Era ballot will be announced later this fall.

The Today's Game Era is one of four Eras Committees -- along with Modern Baseball, Golden Days and Early Baseball -- that provide an avenue outside voting by the Baseball Writers' Association of America for Hall of Fame consideration to managers, umpires and executives, as well as players retired for more than 15 seasons. Specifically, the Today's Game Committee encompasses candidates who made the most indelible contributions to baseball from 1988 to the present.

The Today's Game ballot, along with Modern Baseball, are considered twice over every five-year period. The last electees from the Today's Game ballot were John Schuerholz, the architect of the '90s Braves, and Bud Selig, the former MLB Commissioner and Brewers owner, in 2016.

The finalists revealed Monday were selected by the Historical Overview Committee, which is appointed by the BBWAA. Veteran historians took part in determining this year's ballot, including Bob Elliott of the Toronto Sun, Jim Henneman, formerly of the Baltimore Sun, Rick Hummel of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Steve Hirdt of the Elias Sports Bureau, Bill Madden, formerly of the New York Daily News, Jack O'Connell of the BBWAA, Jim Reeves, formerly of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, Tracy Ringolsby of Baseball America, Glenn Schwarz, formerly of the San Francisco Chronicle, Dave van Dyck of the Chicago Tribune and Mark Whicker of the Los Angeles News Group.

Indians pass on QOs for Brantley, Miller, Allen

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- With a long list of questions to answer this offseason, combined with limited financial resources, the Indians opted against extending any qualifying offers to their free agents prior to Friday's deadline.

All-Star left fielder Michael Brantley, relief ace Andrew Miller and closer Cody Allen were the most likely candidates for the one-year, \$17.9 million offer, which was due by 5 p.m. ET on Friday in order to potentially secure Draft pick compensation if the players signed elsewhere. In the end, the Indians made it clear that the offer was too steep a price to risk locking in so early in this important offseason for the ballclub. "That was a big part of it," Indians' president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti said in a conference call Friday afternoon. "Ultimately, the first week of the offseason, as we looked at our path ahead, it wasn't the best decision to potentially allocate [\$17.9] million dollars right now."

Brantley, Miller and Allen are among Cleveland's 12 free agents, along with Brandon Barnes, Melky Cabrera, Lonnie Chisenhall, Rajai Davis, Josh Donaldson, Brandon Guyer, Oliver Perez, Adam Rosales and Josh Tomlin. Donaldson was ineligible for a qualifying offer due to being traded to Cleveland by Toronto during this past season.

Given the uncertainty that hovers over all three outfield positions for the Indians, it seemed possible that Brantley -- who has been with the Tribe for parts of 10 seasons -- might receive the one-year proposal. One issue is that the Indians are still sorting out where Jason Kipnis (due to earn \$14.7 million in 2019) will fit on the roster. Barring a trade, Kipnis' future in Cleveland might involve playing left field.

The Indians are considering giving Yandy Diaz an opportunity at third base -- a move that would keep Jose Ramirez at second base. Kipnis moved to center field from second down the stretch last season, but he may need to shift to left if Leonys Martin (signed to a one-year contract on Wednesday) is healthy and ready to patrol center for '19.

Position alignment aside, if Brantley were to have accepted the \$17.9 million offer, that would result in \$32.6 million of the Indians' payroll being committed to him and Kipnis. That is a hefty sum for a Cleveland club that could have more than \$30 million added in '19 through arbitration raises and raises built into guaranteed contracts. Even with a dozen free agents, the increasing internal salaries restrict the Indians' flexibility.

Antonetti emphasized that the Indians still have interest in re-signing Brantley, who hit .309 with 17 home runs, 36 doubles, 76 RBIs, 89 runs and an .832 OPS in 143 games this past season.

"I talked to Michael this morning and reiterated that. The interest is undoubtable," Antonetti said. "We could not have any more respect for any individual than we have for Michael. He's the guy that epitomizes, as I've shared before, all of the things we look for in a player. He's exceedingly productive on the field, he defines professionalism in the clubhouse and he's an extraordinary teammate. The interest and desire is there.

"What we will have to work through is, can we make the pieces fit? How, with the balance of our roster and all the other decisions we have to make? And Michael will have to assess how we fit within what his market might be."

Friday's decision not to extend a qualifying offer to any free agents does nothing to change the fact that the Indians need to search for outfield help and bullpen reinforcements throughout this offseason. That approach does, however, give the Tribe's decision-makers more time to weigh alternatives, explore trades and continue dialogue on different types of contracts with its free agents.

"We will be creative in looking at ways to improve our team," Antonetti said. "Certainly, one of the avenues we could pursue is to trade from an area of depth to address another area of our team."

Barnes elects free agency

The Indians outrighted Barnes off the 40-man roster Friday, but the outfielder elected free agency rather than accepting a Minor League assignment. Barnes, 32, appeared in 19 games for Cleveland down the stretch last season, but spent the majority of the year with Triple-A Columbus. He had been eligible for arbitration prior to becoming a free agent.

In a series of other paperwork moves Friday, the Indians activated right-handers Cody Anderson, Nick Goody, James Hoyt and Danny Salazar, as well as outfielders Tyler Naquin and Martin from the 60-day disabled list. Cleveland's 40-man roster now consists of 34 players.

The state of the Cleveland Indians, their window for contention, and their tricky approach to the offseason

Zack Meisel 43m ago 2

CLEVELAND — A few days before the full squad reported to Arizona for spring training in 2013, the Indians snagged a straggler on the free-agent market.

They inked Michael Bourn to a four-year deal, a late signing that fortified the club's outfield, vaulting the position group toward the top of the team's list of strengths. An outfield with Bourn, Michael Brantley and Drew Stubbs was supposed to resemble a graveyard for fly balls.

Well, it didn't pan out as anticipated. Bourn never recaptured his All-Star form. Stubbs spent one strikeout-filled season in Cleveland. And while the Indians qualified for the wild card game in Terry Francona's first year at the helm, it certainly wasn't the direct result of a dynamic outfield trio.

Ah, but it could always be worse.

The Indians are still waiting for that dream outfield to appear, nearly six years later. Only now — as the ghosts of Collin Cowgill, Marlon Byrd, Brandon Moss, Ryan Raburn, Jerry Sands, David Murphy, Nyjer Morgan, Tyler Holt, Abraham Almonte and Daniel Robertson haunt the fourth-floor offices at Progressive Field — the pressing need underscores the club's central dilemma.

For the Indians to threaten the Red Sox, Astros, Yankees and any other American League behemoth that emerges by next summer, the outfield (and bullpen) must be infused with talent. The club enters a bone-chilling winter with Leonys Martin, Greg Allen and Tyler Naquin as its candidates. They might reluctantly toss Jason Kipnis' name into the mix if it comes to that. Bradley Zimmer could return from shoulder surgery at some point in 2019, but no one knows whether he'll be fully recovered from his strikeout plague.

Chris Antonetti conceded that the outfield is "the area on our team with the least certainty." In order to rectify that, it will require some creativity. Barring a stroke of fortune in the Mega Millions or a historically lucrative lemonade stand, the Indians' payroll won't be increasing much, if at all, according to multiple sources.

So, that's the origin of the hullabaloo about the Indians potentially dealing a starting pitcher to patch their holes. Tap into your surplus and swap it with another team's surplus.

"That's one way in which we could do that," Antonetti said. "It's not the only way."

How the Indians approach this offseason, though, figures to shape not only the team's 2019 prospects, but also its expectations in future seasons.

The first thing to note:

The Indians aren't going to make a trade with the intention of decreasing their immediate chances of winning a title

Teams don't fixate on "contention windows" in the manner that fans (and reporters) often do. So much can change from year to year, and front offices feel that, so long as they have a sound decision-making process in place and a strong player development program, they can extend their "window" beyond when their top talent is under team control.

That said, the AL Central provides an atypical landscape. Without question, the Indians have a better chance at a busy October schedule as long as the Tigers, Royals and White Sox continue their meticulous rebuilds and the Twins do whatever the Twins are doing.

I asked The Athletic's beat writers for each of the four other division foes for two pieces of information:

1. In an ideal scenario, when could your team challenge for the division title?
2. In a realistic scenario, when should your team challenge for the division title?

White Sox: 2020, 2021

Royals: 2021, 2022

Tigers: 2021, 2022

Twins: 2019, 2021

The Indians will benefit from a weak division again in 2019 (and probably in 2020). But we also witnessed the pitfalls of such a setup. It's one thing to be granted the right to an October journey. It's another to stall out before reaching the bottom the driveway.

So, the Indians need to retool. They need to flood their outfield and bullpen with new bodies. They need to cut some dead wood from the roster. They need to get younger; they were the second-oldest team in the majors last year (average age of 29.9 years), behind Toronto, and the only one of the eight oldest teams to make the playoffs.

That doesn't mean they should sell off integral pieces in exchange for 19-year-olds. That wouldn't fit with the timeline. This isn't a rebuild.

Antonetti and Co., however, must face some unsettling questions, including:

Should they trade a starter? Should they trade Corey freakin' Kluber?!

Mike Chernoff talks about it all the time: To complete a trade, teams must have aligning means of motivation. Deals often take the form of veteran-for-prospects or surplus-for-surplus.

The Indians could follow the latter principle and deal from their rotation to help fill out the rest of their roster. This isn't a new strategy. Teams have routinely checked in on the availability of Carlos Carrasco and Danny Salazar in winters past. The difference in this instance is that the Indians have more holes to plug and little flexibility to do so.

They didn't address their bullpen last winter, and now Cody Allen and Andrew Miller are hobbling off into the sunset. The outfield was already a mess, and now Michael Brantley is likely being removed from the equation. (Antonetti called Brantley last Friday morning and said the team wants him to remain in Cleveland, even though it didn't extend him a qualifying offer.)

"The interest and desire is there," Antonetti said. "What we will have to work through is, 'Can we make the pieces fit?'"

Enter the notion of trading a starter.

Dealing Kluber might make some sense, but it would come with a mountain of risk. Really, all of this would, which is why an opposing team is going to have to make an offer Antonetti can't refuse.

Kluber is under team control through 2021, but he's also the oldest and most expensive of the club's five starters. He'll turn 33 in April. He'll earn \$17 million next season.

He's also still supremely effective, a Cy Young Award finalist for the fourth time in five years. And that's why he holds plenty of trade value, even if his strikeout rate dipped in 2018 and questions arose about his release point and his health. Maybe the Indians would be selling high. But given his work ethic, it's also tough to bet against him pinpointing some way to thrive beyond 35.

Welcome to the major-league stock market.

Mike Clevinger and Shane Bieber lack the track record to land the Indians a godfather haul and the salaries to save the Indians any money. If the club moved Kluber, it could use the savings to replace him or some other vacancy on the roster, depending on the return.

Pump the brakes, though. This is far from simple.

Which teams could use someone like Kluber? Contending teams. Therein lies the primary challenge. Sure, the Yankees have a bounty of young talent to dangle, but that'd be a tough pill for the Indians to swallow.

Another thought to consider: If your financial situation dictates that you have to resort to consider dealing your two-time Cy Young winner when he's still near the top of his game and you're still in contention, what does that say about ownership and the payroll? Well, that's a bit murky, since teams aren't required to reveal their bank statements.

The money matters

Antonetti said the team is still working through precisely what financial flexibility it will have this winter. But the Indians aren't going to jump into the Yankees/Red Sox/Dodgers stratosphere.

Offloading Kipnis' contract or Edwin Encarnacion's hefty final year would breathe some life into the payroll, but that's a tall order. The structure of Encarnacion's contract is particularly painful now, as he'll earn \$21.7 million in 2019, plus a \$5 million buyout if the team doesn't exercise his \$20 million option for 2020.

The Indians ranked 14th in the league with a payroll of \$143 million last year, according to Spotrac. The team ranked 18th in 2017, with a payroll of \$132 million.

The club's departures (Brantley, Allen, Miller, etc.) will be mostly offset by raises handed out to those eligible for arbitration or those with escalating salaries built into their long-term deals. Kluber and Francisco Lindor alone could earn about \$16 million more in 2019 than they did in 2018.

The team does not anticipate its attendance to exceed its 2018 figures. The Indians have come to accept that a season total of about 2 million is its best-case scenario.

Here are the Indians' season-ticket holder totals from the past decade, according to a source:

2010: 8,700
2011: 8,300
2012: 7,900
2013: 7,400
2014: 8,200
2015: 9,100
2016: 8,600
2017: 12,200
2018: 13,800
2019: Nearly 13,000 committed so far

Average attendance per game, by year:

2010: 17,435 (30th)
2011: 22,726 (24th)
2012: 19,797 (29th)
2013: 19,661 (28th)
2014: 18,428 (29th)
2015: 17,806 (29th)
2016: 19,650 (28th)
2017: 25,285 (22nd)
2018: 24,083 (21st)

The team's local TV ratings remain strong. There are still plenty of people waiting for the franchise to break its 70-year title hex.

The rotation — one of the best in the league — is intact for at least two more seasons. Lindor and José Ramírez, an AL MVP finalist, are locked up through 2021 and 2023, respectively.

The rest of the roster needs some work, though. And without financial flexibility, a trade or two or three must be in order. Otherwise, the Indians might be hankering for the days of Bourn, Brantley and Stubbs in the outfield.

Cleveland Indians: Difficult winter coming for the front office with painful payroll decisions -- Terry Pluto

By Terry Pluto, The Plain Dealer tpluto@plaind.com

ABOUT THE ROTATION

Before discussing the bad news, let's not forget the Indians are likely to be in the playoffs again in 2019.

The weak Central Division is part of the reason.

But so is the starting rotation.

"It's a much better position going into the offseason knowing we have continuity and some depth in our rotation," Tribe President Chris Antonetti said this week.

1. If the Indians had not signed Corey Kluber to a contract extension in 2015, the 2-time Cy Young Award winner would be a free agent this winter. Instead, he's signed through 2019, and the team has two more years of options on him. So Kluber is under Tribe control until the end of the 2021 season.

2. I periodically receive emails from fans wanting to trade Kluber because of his poor starts in the last two postseasons. As my father would sometimes tell me, "Don't even think about it." Kluber will be paid about \$17 million annually over the next three years. It's an absolute bargain for a pitcher of his quality.

3. Carlos Carrasco also would be a free agent if the Indians hadn't signed him to an extension in 2015. He's under control for \$9.75 million in 2019 and the Indians have a \$10 million option in 2020 on the man who has a 35-16 record and 3.33 ERA over the last two seasons.

4. Trevor Bauer is eligible for arbitration the next two years. His salary is expected to rise from \$6.5 million to about \$11 million in 2019.

5. So the Indians have their Big Three of Bauer, Kluber and Carrasco under control through the 2020 season.

6. Mike Clevinger has a 25-14 record and a 3.06 ERA over the last two seasons. He can't be a free agent until 2023. He should be a prime target to sign to a contract extension. Clevinger isn't even arbitration eligible this season.

7. Rookie Shane Bieber (11-5, 4.55 ERA) is the fifth starter. Another rookie supplies depth in the rotation. That's Adam Plutko (4-5, 5.28 ERA).

Antonetti said having so many starters, "gives us a leg up on our planning going forward."

That's because the vast majority of teams are looking for solid starting pitching. It's the most expensive to acquire, be it in free agency or trades.

Kluber, Clevinger, Bauer and Carrasco all came to the Tribe via trades. But none were close to established big league pitchers.

A lot of Tribe fans take the starting rotation for granted. But it's been the backbone of the team rising from losing an average of 93 games between 2009-12 to winning an average of 91 games from 2013-18.

It's also a reason for hope in the next two years. Having a rotation like this is a huge, HUGE reason the team can remain a contender. But the Indians are facing some payroll constraints. The only way to make a dramatic move to improve the team could be to deal one of the starters.

It's also very painful to think about that -- but it's something they have to consider.

Also, teams are calling about Tribe starters because their contracts make them very attractive in a trade.

ABOUT THE WINTER

Here's what I'm hearing. All contract figures come from Cots Contracts on the Baseball Prospectus website:

1. Don't expect any big moves in the off-season, unless it's a trade. It won't happen in free agency.

2. It also won't be a deal where the Indians trade top prospects for immediate help. If anything, they want to add prospects.

3. The 2018 payroll was at a franchise record \$134 million. Attendance (1.9 million) was flat. An early exit from the playoffs was no help. I heard revenue was up slightly from a year ago.

4. Antonetti hates to talk about budgets and payroll. It's a turnoff to fans, and he knows it can sound like an excuse. The Indians have built a winner with a payroll that was in the bottom 25 percent of baseball until 2018. They were middle of the pack last season.

5. At the postseason press conference, Antonetti did say: "Whatever payroll might be coming off the books with free agents we may be losing, we're going to need just as much — if not more — to retain guys through arbitration raises and increases in guaranteed contracts."

6. His point was the team had a "franchise record payroll (in 2018)" to keep the 2017 team in place.

7. I've been hearing some media speculation about the team making a big contract pitch to retain Michael Brantley or go after another name free agent. I don't see it coming. They declined to give him the \$17 million qualifying offer because of budget constraints. It would be a shock if the 31-year-old Brantley returned as he'll probably be in line for a 3-year contract elsewhere.

8. I'd love to see a way for the Tribe to sign Francisco Lindor to a long-term deal. He turned down an extension worth more than \$100 million last year. Lindor made \$632,000 in 2018. He is arbitration eligible, and that could take his salary above \$10 million in 2019. He can't be a free agent until after the 2021 season. Hard to know what kind of long-term deal it would take to convince Lindor to sign.

9. Bauer has talked about wanting to sign one-year contracts. His salary will rise from \$6.5 million to \$11 million (estimate with arbitration). It's doubtful he'll sign an extension.

10. Relievers Cody Allen and Andrew Miller were paid a combined \$19 million in 2018. They are free agents. They both had lousy seasons. But relievers are so precious to teams, I expect both to sign high-priced deals elsewhere. There will be teams willing to gamble they'll come back.

11. The Indians do have new closer Brad Hand under contract. His salary rises from \$3.5 million to \$6.5 million. He is under team control through the 2021 season. So they will build a bullpen around him.

12. When the Indians build their payroll for 2019, they also include the buyouts (for 2020) for two eventual free agents. Edwin Encarnacion has a \$20 million salary in 2019. But he has a \$5 million buyout for 2021. That means they budget \$25 million for him. Jason Kipnis has a \$14.5 million salary in 2019, plus a \$2.5 million buyout for 2020. That means they budget \$17 million for Kipnis.

ABOUT DANNY SALAZAR

1. Danny Salazar didn't pitch an inning for the Tribe in 2018. He was paid \$5 million.

2. Since he made the 2016 All-Star team, he has pitched only 133 innings. In that span, he's 7-9 with a 5.03 ERA.

3. Salazar had arthroscopic surgery on his right shoulder on July 2. It was to clear up inflammation. He still is rehabbing at the team's training facility in Goodyear, but he's not throwing in game-like conditions.

4. That's why when fans ask about Salazar helping in 2019 — perhaps in the bullpen — it's hard to even write his name down in pencil. It's been 2-1/2 years since he was fully healthy and pitching well.

5. The Indians also have to ask if he's worth re-signing. He is arbitration eligible, meaning he could end up with another \$5 million deal. Don't ask why, it's too complicated to explain how the system works — it's rare any player going to arbitration receives a pay cut. I just have little confidence in Salazar coming back.

ABOUT LEONYS MARTIN

1. The \$3 million deal signed by Leonys Martin is not guaranteed. After being obtained from Detroit, Martin played only three games for the Tribe when he was struck with a life-threatening bacterial infection. He didn't play the last two months of the season.

2. Martin is healthy now. The Indians love his defense in center field. They believe he can be a major asset in a position of real need. Martin batted .255 (.747 OPS) with 11 HR and 33 RBI last season.

3. Martin is a very important player. Bradley Zimmer had major shoulder surgery, and the Indians don't know if he'll be ready for opening day. They don't want to play Tyler Naquin in center. He is much better in right field.

4. Greg Allen also becomes a key player. He can handle all three outfield positions. His overall stats were unimpressive: .257 (.654 OPS) with two HR and 20 RBI. The rookie switch-hitter batted .310 (.784 OPS) in 46 games after the All-Star break.

How long will the Cleveland Indians keep the window of contention open? Hey, Hoynsie!

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com | Posted November 03, 2018 at 06:05 AM | Updated November 03, 2018 at 10:24 AM

How will the Indians keep the window open?

Hey, Hoynsie: The Indians still have a two-year window of contention open with a lot of key players under contract. Why don't they spend what it takes to make a run at a World Series title? After they start rebuilding, they can always trade any free agents they acquire. -- Joe McCorkle, Naples, Fla.

Hey, Joe: I see where you're going with this. Splurge over the next two years and then take it down to the concrete footers. It's a romantic notion, but the impression I get from the Indians is that they want to be a consistent winner, avoiding the pitfalls of mid-market teams that soar to the top of the standings for a year or two before burning out.

That's not to say the Indians aren't going to need help to keep the window of contention open. They need to get a lot better in the bullpen and outfield for 2019. How they address those problems will offer a good indication of how far they expect to go in 2019 and beyond.

Can Jose Ramirez get his swing back?

Hey, Hoynsie: The last two years Jose has done the same thing -- he gets hot at the plate, hits loads of home runs and then gets himself into a mess trying to hit more and finishes the season terribly, especially in the postseason. Do you think he can refine his hitting, and improve in the second half, or is he too stubborn to change? -- Aussie Jeff, Sydney, Australia.

Hey, Jeff: Ramirez is a good hitter, a very good hitter. He's going to have all winter to think about what happened to his swing over the last month and a half of the season.

In 2017, he went into a slump after the All-Star break and came out of it. From Aug. 5-23, he went 8-for-60 (.133). From Aug. 24 through the end of the season, he hit .400 (46-for-115) with 11 homers and 24 RBI in 30 games.

This year his slump started on Aug. 14 and he never came out of it. Will he get straightened out before 2019? I don't know, I'm not a hitting coach. Does he understand his swing well enough to find the flaws in it or to recognize how pitchers took advantage of him? Again I'm not a hitting coach, but I don't think you go from being a utility player to a two-time All-Star by not being able to adjust.

Ramirez is a switch-hitter and that makes it doubly difficult to get fixed because he has different swings from both sides of the plate. I know he played a lot of baseball (157 games, 578 at-bats) during the regular season, but as long as he's healthy, perhaps he should play some winter ball in the Dominican Republic or spend time working with the Tribe's hitting coaches this winter to put him on the right path.

In the last two postseasons, Ramirez has gone 2-for-31. I think that's more random than anything else. In 2016, he hit .500 (5-for-10) in the ALDS and .310 (9-for-29) in the World Series.

Can the Indians re-sign Michael Brantley?

Hey, Hoynsie: What is the likelihood that the Indians will re-sign Michael Brantley? It seems to make sense because he was the one steady contributor in an outfield that changed a lot last season. How about a two-year deal? -- Roger Luca, Tallahassee, Fla.

Hey, Roger: I think the Indians and Brantley would make a good match. Brantley has spent his entire big-league career with them and there is a lot of respect for him in the clubhouse and front office.

But if a team is going to give him a Carlos Santana contract -- three years for \$60 million -- I don't think he'll be playing in Cleveland next year.

On Friday the Indians did not offer Brantley or any of their other free agents a qualifying offer. Chris Antonetti, president of baseball operations, said they still wanted to re-sign Brantley, but he is going to draw a lot of interest on the free agent market.

Can Danny Salazar successfully pitch out of the bullpen?

Hey, Hoynsie: If Danny Salazar can make it back healthy for next season, I believe he'd be better in the back-end of the bullpen than in the rotation. He has nasty stuff and I think he could close. Or will manager Terry Francona want to keep him in the rotation? -- Shawn Kamrad, Youngstown.

Hey, Shawn: First the Indians want to get Salazar healthy. He's scheduled to start a throwing program in November following surgery on his right shoulder. In the past, Francona has said Salazar's arm is better suited for the consistent routine of a starter. He did not think Salazar's arm would flourish in the pen where the work is often erratic. Plus I never got the impression Salazar was that crazy about relief.

But first, he has to get healthy.

How about trading Francisco Lindor to the Yankees -- really?

Hey, Hoynsie: How about trading Francisco Lindor to the Yankees for Gleybar Torres to play second base and Miguel Andujar to play third. Then they could move Jose Ramirez to shortstop. The Tribe would get some payroll relief and the future infield is basically set. -- Jerry McNally, Bluffton, S.C.

Hey, Jerry: I think that's a trade that would make a few headlines. You do realize the Yankees would be giving up 10 years of control on Torres and Andujar compared to three years of control on Lindor. But maybe you figured the Yankees would be able to sign him to a multiyear deal.

That would be a hard trade for me to make. Lindor has proven what he can do in the big leagues for 3 1/2 years. The future looks bright for Torres and Andujar, but they both just finished their rookie year.

I know the chances of signing Lindor to a multiyear deal are long, but if you trade him you have no chance. Plus I'm not crazy about Ramirez playing short based on how he played second at the end of the regular season.

On Leonys Martin and a free-agent outfielder who could help the Tribe

Hey, Hoynsie: How is Leonys Martin doing and will he be able to play next year? Also what free agent outfielder would be a good fit for the Indians? -- Marvin Lewis, Phoenix.

Hey, Marvin: Since the Indians just reached a one-year deal for \$3 million with Martin, I would say they believe the chances of him playing next season are good.

Assuming that the Indians aren't going to be able to afford Bryce Harper -- although they did try to trade for him at the deadline -- I'd go for Houston's switch-hitting Marwin Gonzalez. He's not a traditional outfielder, but he made 73 starts in left field this year and his versatility and offensive production would make him a good fit on the Tribe.

Could No. 2 pick Nick Sandlin help the Tribe in 2019?

Hey, Hoynesie: Do you think fans could see right-hander Nick Sandlin in the Indians' bullpen at some point in 2019? -- Brandon, Fargo, N.D.

Hey, Brandon: Sandlin, the Indians' second-round pick in last year's draft, moved from the Arizona Rookie League to Class AA Akron after being drafted. That's a big jump as he made stops at Class A Lake County and Class A Lynchburg along the way.

He was knocked around at Akron, but overall had an impressive first year as a professional. Sandlin went 2-0 with a 3.00 ERA and five saves in as many chances. In 24 innings, he struck out 36, walked three and allowed 21 hits in 25 games.

Sandlin needs more time in the minors, but it's not inconceivable to think he could help the Tribe next year. But as Joe Noga and I talked about on our last Indians podcast, Sandlin's path could be blocked by Adam Cimber, another right-handed sidearmer. It all depends on what the Indians need and how Sandlin is pitching.

Heroes and goats from Cleveland Indians' 2016 World Series run are among 13 minor league free agents

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com.phoynes@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Not only do the Indians have 12 big-league free agents, but they have 13 free agents who hit the open market last week from their Class AAA Columbus affiliate. Three of them have ties to the Indians' memorable run to Game 7 of the World Series in 2016.

Mike Napoli, Ryan Merritt and Michael Martinez were among the players who declared themselves free agents last week from the Columbus Clippers.

During the 2016 season, Napoli hit .239 and set career highs with 34 homers and 101 RBI to help drive the Indians to the first of three straight AL Central titles. Napoli hit just .173 (9-for-52) with one homer and three RBI in the postseason, but the Indians still managed to reach Game 7 of the World Series against the Cubs before losing in extra innings.

Napoli, after spending the 2017 season with Texas, was invited to spring training by the Indians this year. He agreed to open the season at Columbus, but injured his right knee chasing a foul ball at first base. Napoli, 37, needed surgery and did not play for the rest of the season.

Merritt pitched in four games for the Indians during the 2016 season, going 1-0 with a 1.64 ERA. He struck out six and didn't walk a batter in 11 innings. But it was his performance in Game 5 of the ALCS against Toronto that endeared him to Indians' fans.

The Indians had a 3-1 lead in the best-of-seven series, but their rotation was a mess. Danny Salazar and Carlos Carrasco were injured. Trevor Bauer, the little finger on his right hand gashed by a freak drone accident, didn't get out of the first inning in Game 3 because his finger wouldn't stop bleeding.

After the Blue Jays beat ace Corey Kluber in Game 4 to prevent a Tribe sweep, manager Terry Francona had no choice but to start Merritt. Since the end of that season, Merritt had been limited to throwing bullpen sessions and simulated games at the team's spring training site in Goodyear, Ariz. to stay sharp. When Toronto's Jose Bautista heard that the Indians were starting a rookie in Game 5, he told reporters, "He must be shaking in his boots."

Merritt, with just one big-league start to his credit, pitched 4 1/3 scoreless innings before the bullpen took over in a 3-0 victory as the Indians advanced to the World Series.

This year Merritt, 26, came to spring training with knee and shoulder problems and never caught up. He was out of options and spent a good deal of the year on the disabled list. The left-hander went 3-3 with a 3.79 ERA in 15 games, including 13 starts, for Columbus. He struck out 52 and walked two in 71 1/3 innings.

Martinez, who missed this year with a torn Achilles tendon, spent parts of three years (2015-2017) in the big leagues with the Indians. Like Merritt, the switch-hitting Martinez, 36, earned a spot in Indians' postseason history by making the last out of the World Series in the 10th inning of Game 7 in the a 8-7 loss to the the Cubs at Progressive Field.

Other players who filed for free agency included 2B Ordemar Valdez, RHP Mitch Talbot, INF Drew Maggi, OF Todd Hankins, 3B Joe Sever, RHP Josh Martin, RHP Myles Jaye, C Rob Brantly, LHP Adam Wilk and RHP Stephen Fife. Here's a look at their numbers:

*Talbot, who pitched for the Tribe from 2010 through 2011, went 4-5 with a 2.52 ERA at Columbus.

*Maggi, suspended for the first 50 games of the season for a PED violation, hit .272 (63-for-232) while playing mostly second base at Columbus.

*Hankins, a 15th round pick in 2011, hit .273 (44-for-161) with one homer and nine RBI at Columbus.

*Martin, a 10th round pick in 2012, was 4-0 with a 2.91 ERA in 19 games.

*Sever, a 21st round pick in 2012, spent most of the year at Class AA Akron where he hit .262 (111-for-424) with seven homers and 57 RBI.

*Wilk went 6-9 with a 3.66 ERA in 27 starts at Columbus.

*Jaye went 2-5 with a 9.62 ERA in nine games, including five starts, at Columbus. He made five appearances with Detroit in 2017.

*Brantly appeared in just 15 games for Columbus, hitting .171 (7-for-41) with one homer and two RBI. He played in the big leagues with Miami and the White Sox.

*Fife went 5-7 with a 6.80 ERA in 20 games, including 17 starts, at Columbus. He appeared in parts of the 2012, 2013 and 2014 seasons.

*Valdez did not play this year.

Cleveland Indians have two BBWAA AL finalists: Corey Kluber (Cy Young) and Jose Ramirez (MVP)

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com phoynes@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The last impression is often the one that lingers. But it is good to know that there are those who value the longer view as well.

The final impression that Corey Kluber and Jose Ramirez left with Indians' fans was not a good one. In Houston's three-game sweep of the Indians in the ALDS last month, Kluber stumbled through a Game 1 loss and Ramirez went 0-for-11.

Still, that did not stop Kluber and Ramirez from being named finalists for the AL Cy Young and MVP awards, respectively. The finalists for the Baseball Writers Association of America's annual awards were announced Monday night on MLB Network. The awards, voted on by two baseball writer's in each city, are based on a player's performance in the regular season and must be voted on before the start of the postseason.

Kluber, Tampa Bay's Blake Snell and Houston's Justin Verlander are the AL Cy Young finalists. The winner will be announced on MLB Network at 6 p.m. on Nov. 14.

In the last four years Kluber won the Cy Young in 2014, finished ninth in 2015, finished third in 2016 and won it for the second time in 2017. He's been a finalist three times in the last five years.

Kluber, the only pitcher to win the Cy Young twice in franchise history, is coming off the first 20-win season of his career. He went 20-7 with a 2.89 ERA in 33 starts. He led the AL with 215 innings pitched and finished second in wins. Kluber's strikeouts dropped from 265 in 2017 to 222, which still ranked fifth in the AL.

While Kluber's last two ventures into the postseason have not gone well, he has won 18 or more games in four of the last five seasons with an ERA that never rose above 3.49.

The writer's final vote will be an interesting one to dissect. Snell (21-5, 1.89) appears to be the favorite, but he pitched just 180 2/3 innings. Verlander, meanwhile, went 16-9 with a 2.52 ERA. He made 34 starts and pitched 214 innings, while leading the AL with 290 strikeouts. Snell struck out 221 batters.

Ramirez is a finalist for the second straight year. He finished third last year.

This year he's joined by Boston's Mookie Betts and Mike Trout of the Angels. If not for disastrous end-of-the season slide, Ramirez could easily be the Indians first MVP since Al Rosen in 1953.

Despite ending the year in a 24-for-146 slump, Ramirez still hit .270 with 38 doubles, four triples, 39 homers and 105 RBI. He scored 110 runs and stole 34 bases to become just the third 30-30 man in team history. Over the last two years, Ramirez leads the big leagues with 172 extra base hits.

Last year Ramirez finished third in the MVP voting behind Jose Altuve and Aaron Judge. He could finish third again, which would be worth a \$150,000 bonus.

Betts posted a 10.6 WAR with 129 runs, 42 doubles, 32 homers and 80 RBI. He led the big leagues with a .346 (180-for-520) batting average and a .640 slugging percentage, while stealing 30 bases. While Ramirez played 157 games, Betts played only 136 games.

Trout posted a 10.2 WAR with 101 runs, 24 doubles, 39 homers and 79 RBI. He led the AL with 122 walks and led the big leagues with a .460 on base percentage and a 1.088 OPS. The AL MVP will be announced at 6 p.m. on Nov. 15.

Here are the other finalist:

AL Rookie of the year finalists: Miguel Andujar, Yankees, Gleyber Torres, Yankees and Shohei Ohtani, Angels; NL Rookie of the Year: Ronald Acuna, Braves, Walker Buehler, Dodgers and Juan Soto, Nationals. Winners announced on Nov. 12 at 6 p.m. on MLB Network.

AL Manager of the Year finalists: Kevin Cash, Rays, Alex Cora, Red Sox and Bob Melvin, A's; NL Manager of the Year: Bud Black, Rockies, Craig Counsell, Brewers and Brian Snitker, Braves. Winners announced on Nov. 13 at 6 p.m. on MLB Network.

NL Cy Young finalists: Jacob deGrom, Mets, Aaron Nola, Phillies and Max Scherzer, Nationals. Winner announced on Nov. 14 at 6 p.m. on MLB Network.

NL MVP finalists: Nolan Arenado, Rockies, Javier Baez, Cubs and Christian Yelich, Brewers. Winner announced on Nov. 15 at 6 p.m. on MLB Network.

Indians make no qualifying offers for pending free agents

By Ryan Lewis

None of the Indians' pending free agents received a qualifying offer as the team heads into a potentially tumultuous offseason with resources at a premium.

Friday at 5 p.m. was the deadline for clubs to make qualifying offers to their free agents. If offered, the player would have the option of accepting a one-year, \$17.9 million deal or turning it down. If a player turns down the offer and signs elsewhere, the original team receives draft-pick compensation based on a number of factors, including its market size and the total dollar amount of the new deal.

Three Indians players — Andrew Miller, Cody Allen and Michael Brantley — were at least possibilities to receive qualifying offers. The Indians surely could have benefited from the draft-pick compensation, considering all three can seek long-term deals with a new team, but the risk was in locking up \$17.9 million in salary when the front office is already near its financial ceiling because of the expected arbitration salaries and long-term contract raises.

Even with the salaries of those three and others coming off the books for 2019, the built-in raises to keep so many others on the roster all but wipe out those savings. So the Indians have chosen to stand pat and not tie themselves to any player with a qualifying offer, which if accepted would have severely limited their financial flexibility.

"I think that was a big part of it," president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti said. "Ultimately, the first week of the offseason, as we looked at our path ahead, it wasn't the best decision to potentially allocate [\$17.9] million dollars right now."

The Indians and their potential free agents can still negotiate long-term deals to stay in Cleveland. Friday's deadline was solely to determine which players receive qualifying offers.

Allen and Miller are, in some ways, in similar situations as relievers who should receive lucrative deals. Both, though, are coming off down seasons, either because of an extended slump (Allen) or a slew of injuries (Miller). The trade for All-Star closer Brad Hand, along with reliever Adam Cimber, wasn't only to bolster the bullpen for 2018. It was also completed with an eye on 2019 and beyond to give the bullpen some insurance if both Allen and Miller left in free agency.

Brantley, meanwhile, enjoyed a healthy, All-Star-caliber season and, despite his lengthy injury history in the past, did well for himself entering free agency. In all three cases, the door is still open for a new deal. The interest is certainly there with Brantley, considering the Indians' outfield outlook heading into 2019 is murky at best.

"I talked to Michael this morning and reiterated that. The interest is undoubtable," Antonetti said. "We could not have any more respect for any individual than we have for Michael. ... What we will have to work through is can we make the pieces fit? How, with the balance of our roster and all the other decisions we have to make? And Michael will have to assess how we fit within what his market might be."

The Indians are always said to be open to at least discussing just about any potential trade opportunity, not wanting to close any doors that could lead to a creative way to structure the roster. That's certainly true this offseason as well.

"We will be creative in looking at ways to improve our team," Antonetti said. "That's one way in which we could do that. It's not the only way, but it's certainly one of the avenues we could pursue is to trade from an area of depth to address another area of our team."

Akron Beacon Journal LOADED: 11.03.2018

Rosenthal: Agents of change rule the day; Harper to Yanks unlikely; a big White Sox splash?; Kimbrel's case

By Ken Rosenthal 29m ago 1

The baseball off-season already is rocking, but not from trades and free-agent signings. The biggest current movement involves players changing agents, agents joining new agencies and other agents recruiting other players for new representation. Business as usual in other words, except with a couple of twists.

The latest chapter in the ongoing breakup of the Legacy Agency resulted in two Legacy agents, Brian Peters and Kenny Felder, joining Excel Sports Management, as first reported by FanCred's Jon Heyman. Excel now will represent one of Peters' free agents, outfielder A.J. Pollock, and one of Felder's, outfielder Michael Brantley.

An even more prominent Legacy client, Houston Astros shortstop Carlos Correa, also is talking to other agencies, according to sources. Correa is not a free agent until after the 2021 season, but he becomes eligible for arbitration for the first time this off-season.

The other change in the landscape is the New York Mets' hiring of CAA's Brodie Van Wagenen as general manager, a move that prompted one of his former clients, free-agent second baseman Jed Lowrie, to also join Excel, according to sources.

Lowrie's decision likely will slow down any push by the Oakland Athletics to re-sign him, and rival agents also are interested in talking to former Van Wagenen clients such as Mets pitchers Jacob deGrom and Noah Syndergaard, sources say.

DeGrom, Syndergaard and others might simply opt to stay at CAA, whose baseball division also includes agents Jeff Berry, Joe Urbon and Nez Balelo. But Scott Boras, the game's most prominent agent, recently told the New York Post that players should not even be faced with such a choice.

"The Boras Corporation stands for a total commitment to players, and while I have been offered many opportunities with teams, I would never violate the trust that I have with any player and that is very important to what I do," Boras said.

"I am an attorney and I want (players) to tell me everything and a lot of these things are confidential, they are personal, and if I went to work for a different employer, I would have to divulge all that information because I have to do my job for that other employer I made a commitment to."

Some in the industry interpreted Boras' comments as a recruiting message to players who might be considering a switch. CAA's other agents, who had nothing to do with Van Wageningen's decision, can argue they are just as committed as Boras to serving their players. One or more of Van Wageningen's former Mets clients, however, might want a clean break, an advocate with no previous ties to their former agent and new boss.

Van Wageningen joined the Mets more than a week ago, and to this point little has changed in CAA's client list. Lowrie is the only known defection, and he had a previous relationship with Excel's Casey Close, who represented him when he was partners with Van Wageningen at CAA.

Legacy's issues — believed to stem in part from their signing of Cuban star Hector Olivera, which is part of an investigation by the FBI and Department of Justice, according to Yahoo Sports — are a separate matter, having already produced major changes in the industry.

Two Legacy agents, Stephen Veltman and Ed Cerulo, formed their own agency, taking clients such as the Boston Red Sox's Mookie Betts and San Francisco Giants' Madison Bumgarner with them. Another, Brodie Scoffield, made the same choice, and clients such as Astros third baseman Alex Bregman and Atlanta Braves right-hander Kevin Gausman followed him.

Peters and Felder are the latest to depart, bringing Pollock and Brantley to Excel. Remember the old phrase, you can't tell the players without a scorecard? Can't tell who their agents are, either.

Harper to Yankees? Not likely

The Yankees never can be ruled out on any potential acquisition, but barring a dramatic change — say, a trade of Giancarlo Stanton — Bryce Harper would appear to be a difficult fit.

The re-signing of Brett Gardner leaves the Yankees with six outfielders — Gardner, Stanton, Aaron Judge, Aaron Hicks, Clint Frazier and Jacoby Ellsbury. And while virtually all of them have health questions, the Yankees surely could find better things to do with the \$300 million-plus Harper is expected to command — unless the team somehow could acquire Harper at a depressed price, the way it did when it traded for Stanton a year ago.

Harper at first base? The thought is intriguing, given the failure of Greg Bird to establish himself as a regular and question of whether Luke Voit could be productive over a full season. Harper originally was a catcher, and scouts say he has decent hands and feet. Playing first also would result in less wear and tear on him physically, perhaps enabling him to be even better offensively.

Imagine, though, if the Yankees signed Harper to a monster deal and his transition to first somehow did not go well. The Yankees traded for Alex Rodriguez in February 2004 fully confident he could make the relatively easy switch from shortstop to third base. They could not have the same confidence that Harper would adapt smoothly to first.

Manny Machado remains the more likely Yankees target if the team decides to splurge on one of the two major position-player free agents. The team could play Machado at short while Didi Gregorius recovers from Tommy John surgery, keep him at that position if Gregorius departs as a free agent after next season or play him at third while either trading Miguel Andújar or moving him to first.

Planets aligning for White Sox splash?

White Sox owner Jerry Reinsdorf rarely is a major player in free agency — the team's biggest signing was first baseman Jose Abreu, who agreed to a six-year, \$68 million deal in October 2013. But if ever there was a time for the White Sox to spend, it's this winter.

For one thing, the White Sox are coming off their sixth straight losing season, and second straight with 95 or more defeats. They have minimal contractual commitments in 2019 and beyond. And they are due to sign a new local TV contract, the kind that often prompts clubs to spend more freely.

The partnership between the White Sox, Cubs, Chicago Bulls and Chicago Blackhawks with NBC Sports Chicago includes only one more guaranteed year, sources told The Athletic. The White Sox then expect to enter into a joint venture with the Bulls and Blackhawks, be it with NBC Sports Chicago, a different media distribution partner or perhaps even a private equity firm.

The changing media landscape is full of uncertainty, but the White Sox ultimately should land in a stronger position. The same is true of the Cubs, but as Rob Huff recently pointed out in The Athletic, the Cubs' luxury-tax calculation for '19 presently stands at \$228 million, including estimates for arbitration, 40-man roster spots and player benefits.

Around the horn

*Free-agent closer Craig Kimbrel had several rocky outings in the postseason, producing a 5.91 ERA and .842 opponents' OPS in 10 2/3 innings. His strikeout rate in the regular season was down from 2017 and his walk rate was up. But for teams willing to consider the breadth of his career — and the historic nature of his accomplishments — Kimbrel presents a powerful free-agent case.

Among pitchers with a minimum of 500 innings, Kimbrel ranks first all-time in ERA-plus, opponents' OPS and strikeout rate, and also places highly in a number of other categories. And while he was less dominant last season than in his brilliant '17 campaign, it's important to consider the context of his performance.

Kimbrel, 30, missed approximately three weeks in spring training after his daughter, Lydia Joy, underwent a second surgery for a heart condition. Yet he still made his seventh All-Star team, and his velocity returned to its normal 97-98 mph level in the latter part of the season

*Add the Padres to the list of rebuilding clubs that are itching to be more competitive in 2019. The Pads need a third baseman and starting pitching, and trading left fielder Wil Myers — who is owed \$64 million through 2022, including a \$1 million buyout — is one possibility, sources say.

Myers, who turns 28 on Dec. 10, appeared in only 83 games last season due to three separate injuries — right arm nerve irritation, a strained left oblique and a left foot contusion and bone bruise. The Padres have grown increasingly enamored with Franmil Reyes in left and are comfortable with Hunter Renfroe in right, potentially leaving Myers without a position.

Keep this in mind as well — Myers is due \$5.5 million of his signing bonus by the middle of this month, and another \$8.5 million of it next November.

*Dodgers GM Farhan Zaidi will have numerous factors to consider if the Giants offer to make him their top executive, as Joel Sherman of the New York Post reported.

One major concern: The Giants, with few moveable assets, will not be an easy fix. As one rival exec put it, "There is not a lot of juice to squeeze from that fruit."

*Yankees GM Brian Cashman told reporters on Monday that he wants to keep free-agent lefty CC Sabathia, but at least two rival clubs will be interested if Sabathia is willing to leave New York.

Athletics manager Bob Melvin recently expressed his personal opinion on MLB Network he would like to see Sabathia return to his native Bay Area with the A's. The Astros, facing the potential losses of free-agent starters Dallas Keuchel and Charlie Morton, are another team that likes Sabathia, sources say.

Nick Cafardo / Baseball's hot stove will begin to cook this week

By Nick Cafardo

The GM meetings take place in Carlsbad, Calif., this coming week. Usually they serve as a launching point for activity at the Winter Meetings in Las Vegas the second week of December. But the general managers begin their face-to-face preliminaries at these meetings, and also meet with agents in the early stages of the free agent market.

The Nationals already have been aggressive in acquiring reliever Kyle Barraclough from the Marlins and signing free agent reliever Trevor Rosenthal. So that could be a sign that teams are moving more quickly than usual. Players and agents also remember last offseason and how slowly the market moved. Those who signed early seemed to get the better deals.

Here's a look at what the thinking of each team might be:

AL East

Red Sox — The Red Sox would love to bring their entire team back. They want to re-sign Nathan Eovaldi and Steve Pearce, and then must make a tough decision on Craig Kimbrel. They'll look for bullpen help if they lose Kimbrel and Joe Kelly. You won't see too much else unless they deal one of their catchers or if they're in the market for a second baseman should Dustin Pedroia not make it back.

Everything baseball every Monday-Friday during baseball season, and weekly in the offseason.

Yankees — GM Brian Cashman will try to make his starting rotation great again. Look for the Yankees to consider free agent lefthander Patrick Corbin, Eovaldi, Gio Gonzalez, Dallas Keuchel, and Charlie Morton — while trying to re-sign J.A. Happ. Cashman has said he'll try to move righthander Sonny Gray to a smaller market.

Rays — The Rays will look for a "bargain" power hitter such as Nelson Cruz, Matt Adams, Adam Jones, or Mike Moustakas.

Blue Jays — The Jays are building with top prospects Vladimir Guerrero Jr., Cavan Biggio, and Bo Bichette, but they'll look to improve their rotation with one of the better starting pitchers on the market.

Orioles — As of this writing, the Orioles do not have a GM or manager. Interim GM Brian Graham will likely represent the Orioles at the meetings. Believe me, the Orioles won't be active in free agency or on the trade front for some time — unless they're trying to unload starters Alex Cobb or Andrew Cashner or any other veteran who wouldn't be of use to them for a while.

AL Central

Indians — The Indians will have defections in their bullpen, namely Andrew Miller and Cody Allen, and possibly in their outfield with Michael Brantley and Lonnie Chisenhall, who are free agents. Another free agent is third baseman Josh Donaldson. So the Indians have some work to do. Brantley, a really good player, would be a huge loss, but the Indians might devote their resources toward a less-expensive outfielder.

Twins — The Twins desperately need a rebound season with their new manager, Rocco Baldelli, who will likely bring the Rays' ways of doing things to the Central division. The Twins will be hunting for pitching. Could they be a possible trade partner with the Yankees for Gray?

Tigers — The Tigers remain in their rebuild mode, but two interesting players who could be traded are righthander Michael Fulmer and right fielder Nicholas Castellanos. We'll see if Al Avila has the appetite to trade one or both. Both would be attractive trade chips. The Tigers could be in the hunt for a shortstop with Jose Iglesias testing the market.

White Sox — Their long rebuild will continue. We're not expecting much to happen here, though there will be dialogue to deal first baseman Jose Abreu for more prospects.

Royals — The Royals continue their rebuild. They could get feelers for Danny Duffy, who didn't have a good season. But he's lefthanded, experienced, and with the dearth of starting pitching, could bring back a good return. Duffy (8-12, 4.88 ERA) is 29 years old and will make about \$15.2 million a year for the next three years.

AL West

Astros — Keuchel and Morton are free agents, but they have internal replacements for the back end in Lance McCullers Jr., Colin McHugh, and flame thrower Josh James. Look for the Astros to dip into the catcher market, where they could make the Marlins an offer for J.T. Realmuto or target free agent Wilson Ramos.

Athletics — They made great progress this past season in winning 97 games. Could the A's actually be a player in trying to reacquire Gray from the Yankees? They lose reliever Jeurys Familia, second baseman Jed Lowrie, and catcher Jonathan Lucroy, among others. Lowrie might be re-signed, but the A's will likely seek lower-cost replacements and also need a starting pitcher or two.

Mariners — They could be losing Cruz to free agency so they'll likely need offense. Will they be a player for Bryce Harper or Manny Machado? Robinson Cano may move to first base or even DH. They still need a bat or two. If Dee Gordon stays at second base, they'll need a center fielder. Could Andrew McCutchen be a fit?

Angels — The Angels will be looking for pitching and they'll pay the price for it. With Cashman and Angels GM Billy Eppler having a close relationship from their Yankee days together, this could be another landing spot for Gray. But the Angels will be in the hunt for Happ or Corbin, and the bigger names in free agency. They may also consider CC Sabathia. They could also use a fourth outfielder who can play center field.

Rangers — The Rangers hired Dodgers third base coach Chris Woodward as manager on Saturday, and now GM Jon Daniels's attention turns to pursuing pitchers. After dealing with the Cubs for Drew Smyly, who missed all of 2018 with Tommy John surgery, expect them to pursue at least one more starter. Drew Pomeranz or Marco Estrada could make some sense for them on the back end.

NL East

Braves — They seemed too young to go far in the playoffs in 2018, but 2019 could be different. The Braves might be in position financially to go after a notable pitcher (Happ, Eovaldi, Corbin) to augment a young staff. They'll also seek to enhance their bullpen. Take your pick from Craig Kimbrel, Kelvin Herrera, and Zach Britton, among others. They could also go big with Harper and/or Machado.

Phillies — Are the Phillies ready to spend some serious money? It would appear so. Harper, Machado, or both are definitely in play. The Phillies have serious TV money to spend and they have a chance to take the next step in their comeback. Watch for the beginnings of trade or free agent talks on starter and bullpen enhancements. They are certainly one of the teams who could afford the rest of Zack Greinke's \$104.5 million contract over the next three years if the Diamondbacks want to deal him.

Nationals — Don't count the Nationals out on Harper because they have the money to re-sign him and agent Scott Boras has an excellent relationship with the Lerner family, which owns the team. President of baseball operations Mike Rizzo already has acquired Barraclough and signed Rosenthal, who missed this past season following Tommy John surgery. Rizzo is sick of this team not playing to its potential. He also may upgrade the infield with DJLeMahieu or a facsimile.

Mets — The Mets have a new leader in former agent Brodie Van Wagenen — we'll see what he has planned. The Mets have a solid core of starters but need offensive help and bullpen reinforcements. It's all about how much the Wilpons are willing to spend.

Marlins — The Marlins will continue to shed rather than add. They'll give young players a chance to develop with no option but to exercise patience. They'll have to decide whether Realmuto is a player they want to build around or trade for more down-the-road pieces. Dan Straily could be a trade chip as a back-end starter.

NL Central

Brewers — What a nice 2018 season. It ended with a Game 7 loss to the Dodgers in the NLCS, but the Brewers aren't going away. They have virtually all of their team back. A couple of defections in the coaching staff (pitching coach Derek Johnson and hitting coach Darnell Coles) will result in some change. The Brewers must decide whether they want to go with the "opener" concept. Wade Miley and Joakim Soria are two free agents the Brewers must replace or re-sign.

Cubs — The Cubs need an offensive boost, but who they are and where they play are the issues. The Cubs may also have a luxury-tax concern, which could prevent them from a big splash. Minus that issue, you could see them having interest in Machado with Addison Russell suspended to start the season. The Cubs traded Smyly to the Rangers and picked up their \$20 million option on Cole Hamels.

Cardinals — They need to do something at third base. They have long coveted Donaldson, so that's a possibility, but Moustakas might suit them better since they need balance with a lefthanded bat. Harper and Machado also have been linked to the Cardinals, but they generally don't overpay anyone. They could also dabble in the starting rotation market. A guy like Corbin would interest them.

Pirates — The Pirates made a gutsy move not picking up Josh Harrison's option, as he was a fixture at second base for a long time. The Pirates are in and out of rebuilding and going for it, so it's hard to gauge what they'll do this offseason. They may get a veteran shortstop or re-sign Jordy Mercer.

Reds — They are slowly rebuilding their organization, naming David Bell manager. With Johnson leaving the Brewers to become the Reds' pitching coach, one wonders whether Miley could be in their plans to rebuild the rotation. Look for them to also be in on Keuchel, Gonzalez, Hyun-Jin Ryu, and Lance Lynn, among others.

NL West

Dodgers — They may need to replace Ryu in the rotation if he defects. The big story will be whether they'll try to re-sign Machado, who didn't endear himself to a lot of Dodgers players and officials with his no-hustle stance. Anyway, shortstop Corey Seager is scheduled to return after missing 2018 with elbow and hip surgery. The Dodgers have strong catching in their system so they may not want to bring back free agent Yasmani Grandal, who is a defensive liability.

Rockies — With LeMahieu and Carlos Gonzalez hitting free agency, they will be in the market for a proven bat, in the outfield or at second base. There's also speculation — though I can't see this — they could deal third baseman Nolan Arenado, who is heading into his last controllable season.

Diamondbacks — Look for some Greinke trade talk this offseason. A big-market team with money such as the Yankees or Phillies could have some interest in picking up the remaining three years of his contract. He does have a no-trade clause to 15 teams. The D-Backs will likely lose A.J. Pollock to free agency so they'll need to acquire an outfielder. There's also been talk of a Paul Goldschmidt deal as he enters the final season of his contract. Arizona could be in transition to a rebuilding mode.

Giants — A new GM is about to dictate what direction they go in, but whether it's more analytics-based or not, offense will be the accent during this offseason. The Giants need some pop (Steve Pearce?) in their lineup. They also need youth.

Padres — Given that their 5.09 rotation ERA was the worst in the NL, starting pitching will be the priority. The Padres spent big on first baseman Eric Hosmer last offseason, so they probably have one big purchase available on the pitching front. Those on the younger side, such as Eovaldi and Corbin, could be on their radar.

Apropos of nothing

1. Alex Cora said that Rafael Devers will spend the majority of the winter working with J.D. Martinez in Miami. This is a pretty good idea as Martinez can get the 22-year-old Devers in a solid mindset at the plate. This is an even better idea than Devers going off to play winter ball.
2. Roger Clemens and Tom Seaver both loved Bill Fischer, their longtime Red Sox pitching coach (Fischer also coached Seaver with the Reds) who died this past week at age 88. Fischer worked in baseball up until this past season with the Royals, for whom he acted as a pitching adviser. "It's with great sadness and a heavy heart that I say goodbye to one of my first professional coaches, Bill Fischer," Clemens wrote in a text. "Fish helped so many of us young pitchers while we were chasing our dreams to be great at the major league level. We visited last Monday about my record-setting 20-strikeout game and how he loved that I struck out 20, but even more that I didn't walk a batter. For those who don't know, Fish still holds the MLB record for most consecutive innings without allowing a walk! I will miss this man. He knew that my nickname was Rocket, but he always called me 'Smoky' after Smoky Joe Wood. Fish, thanks for being the best at what you did."
3. Like Eddie Mathews walked behind Hank Aaron, Billy Williams behind Ernie Banks, and Roger Maris behind Mickey Mantle, Willie McCovey walked behind Willie Mays. McCovey died this past week at age 80. He was one of the most feared lefthanded hitters of his era. Some of the most touching comments came from Barry Bonds, who referred to McCovey as his uncle. "Mac, I am crying over losing you even when you told me not to," Bonds wrote. "I remember asking you what I would do without all of you around. You told me when that day comes — and it will one day — to keep the tradition of Giants baseball living forever. You told me to help the next generation of ballplayers get better. You told me to be thankful that we had so much time to spend together and talk about the love we have for the game, San Francisco, the Giants, and for each other."
4. Red Sox special assistant Dick Berardino and wife Kathy celebrated their 57th wedding anniversary on the day the Red Sox won the World Series.
5. Now that Cora has had so much success with the Red Sox, will brother Joey Cora, a coach with the Pirates, get a legitimate look for a manager's job? Joey was once a very hot managerial candidate, but he fizzled out.
6. Texas and/or Baltimore should consider Red Sox bench coach Ron Roenicke for their managerial opening. The constant message Cora gave about Roenicke, "He's a great teacher." That's so important, since as Cora accurately points out, players don't spend that much time in the minor leagues anymore and the learning continues in the majors.

Ken Rosenthal / Rosenthal: Why Kershaw may be worth the gamble for Dodgers; the Giants' GM search; an early, curious signing

By Ken Rosenthal Nov 2, 2018

The best guess is the Dodgers will sign Clayton Kershaw to a new contract by 4 p.m. ET on Friday and prevent him from opting out of his present deal. If indeed the two sides reach an agreement, the Dodgers will be betting on Kershaw the person. Kershaw the pitcher, while still quite good, is not necessarily a wise gamble the way players currently are evaluated — in a calculated, detached manner, almost devoid of emotion.

The Dodgers, of course, cannot view Kershaw solely from that perspective. He is their modern-day Sandy Koufax, their three-time Cy Young Award winner, their franchise pitcher whom they selected seventh overall in the 2006 draft. Kershaw's work ethic makes him a model for their other pitchers, for their entire organization, really. And his plan, as he told me in an interview for Fox Sports 1 during the National League Championship Series, is to regain at least some of the velocity he once had.

The odds will be against Kershaw pulling off such a feat, just as the odds are against every pitcher whose stuff diminishes over time. Justin Verlander, 35, is the exception — his average fastball velocity increased from 93.3 mph in 2014, the year in which he was recovering from core muscle surgery, to an average of 95.5 mph the past two seasons.

Kershaw, 30, has been on the disabled list three consecutive years with back trouble, averaging just 162 innings (he also missed time this season with biceps tendinitis). His average fastball velocity, strikeout and swing-and-miss rates all have plummeted, while his hard-hit rate this season increased to 36.1 percent, the first time in his career it was in the 30s. Yet, when I asked him what it was like learning to pitch with less power than he had in years past, he offered a lengthy, revealing answer.

"I don't think of it like that," Kershaw said. "And I don't compare to past years either. With that aside, I think the hitters tell you what you need to do. So for me, I'll do whatever it takes to get outs. I've always said I don't care how you get the outs; you've just got to get them.

"There's always going to be times where strikeouts are important and you need to get strikeouts in big situations with guys on base and things like that. But other times, a first-pitch groundout is better than a strikeout. I just want to get outs as quickly as possible. I want to get outs as efficiently as possible. And when the time comes to strike somebody out, I still think I have the stuff I need to do that. But I don't really think about the adjustments or the changes I've made. I don't really think about that in context to years past.

"Now with that said, I am throwing slower. I know that. And I don't know if that's going to be for the rest of my career, either. I firmly believe that I can get that back and I'm going to spend a lot of time this offseason working on that."

I followed up by asking Kershaw if he relishes the challenge of needing to evolve. Over the last 10 years, only Verlander and Max Scherzer have thrown more innings than the Dodgers' ace — including postseason — and such a workload generally exacts a toll.

"No, I'd rather just be the same the whole time," Kershaw said. "I don't want to change if I don't have to, but you know everybody says Father Time, you've thrown all these innings.

"I'm 30. I'm not that old. I've got a few innings (2,248 1/3 in his career), but there are a lot of guys who have thrown more than me that are still throwing just as hard, so I really do believe there's plenty left in the tank. I'm going to spend the offseason figuring that out."

Kershaw in his present state is hardly a slouch, though the perceptions of some skew negative due to his 4.32 ERA in 152 playoff innings and 6.06 ERA in six elimination-game starts. Consider his performance, though, during the most recent regular season: Kershaw's 2.73 ERA, while his highest since 2010, would have ranked seventh in the majors if he had not fallen 2/3 of an inning short of qualifying for the league leaders.

According to FanGraphs' dollars metric, which converts wins above replacement to a dollar scale based upon what a player would make as a free agent, Kershaw was worth \$28.2 million. While that figure represented the lowest of his career — down from \$68.3 million, \$52.2 million and \$37.1 million the previous three seasons — it was still within range of his actual \$33 million salary.

The logical solution for the Dodgers is to sign Kershaw to a longer deal at a lower base salary than the \$32.5 million average he will earn the next two seasons if he sticks to his current deal. The new number — probably in the \$25 million to \$30 million range — still would be uncomfortable for the Dodgers. But if you're not going to bet on Kershaw — bet on his commitment and all he means to the franchise — who exactly are you going to bet on?

Giants seek to go big

The Giants do not view themselves as the type of club that should settle for a team's No. 2 executive. No, according to major-league sources, they want a current No. 1 — their own Theo Epstein, their own Andrew Friedman, their own Dave Dombrowski.

The team's ambition is admirable, but such a high-profile executive does not appear to be available. Which might explain why, in the words of one source, the team's search is "nowhere at the moment" — and why Dodgers general manager Farhan Zaidi, Friedman's No. 2 but a big name in the industry, is an attractive target.

MLB.com's Jon Paul Morosi first reported the Giants' interest in Zaidi on Tuesday. Zaidi and Friedman declined to comment on the possibility at a news conference on Thursday, but an interview of Zaidi is likely, according to a source. The Dodgers probably would not stand in the way of Zaidi trying for a promotion to president of baseball operations, but they could boost his salary to prevent him from even considering a jump to their biggest rival.

And if Zaidi were unavailable to the Giants, then what?

As I reported Oct. 11, the Brewers denied permission for the Giants to interview David Stearns for their opening (Stearns has at least one year left on his deal, sources say). The Athletics recently signed top execs Billy Beane and David Forst to extensions, and the Indians' Chris Antonetti and Mike Chernoff are not in play, according to sources.

None of the four candidates known to be interviewed by the Giants — the Rays' Chaim Bloom, Cubs' Jason McLeod, Diamondbacks' Amiel Sawdaye and MLB's Kim Ng — would give the team the type of splash it is seeking. Bloom likely would get strong consideration if the Giants failed to land a bigger name, and it also is not out of the question the team will hire two executives, one as president of baseball operations, one as GM.

Did D-Backs' Escobar jump too soon?

Three years ago, when Ben Zobrist signed his four-year, \$56 million free-agent contract with the Cubs, the super-utility man was coming off a .776 OPS and 118 OPS-plus in his age 33 and 34 seasons.

Like Zobrist, Eduardo Escobar is a switch-hitter who offers defensive versatility, though he is not as experienced in the outfield. Escobar had comparable two-year numbers to Zobrist — a .794 OPS, a 110 OPS-plus — while five years younger. Yet on Oct. 22, Escobar agreed to a free-agent deal with the D-Backs for less than half of Zobrist's guarantee — three years, \$21 million.

Escobar isn't Zobrist, who helped the Royals win the 2015 World Series and was the 2016 Series MVP with the Cubs. But more than one executive believes the D-Backs got an excellent deal with their early signing, with one projecting Escobar's outer limit to be four years, \$40 million if he explored the open market.

Why would Escobar settle for a lesser deal before other teams had the chance to bid for him? His agent, D.J. Rengifo, did not respond to a request for comment. But Escobar, after reaching his agreement, indicated his comfort with the D-Backs was a major factor.

"I think the most important thing for me coming here was the people here," Escobar said. "There are great people here. Everybody took care of my family and that's the most important thing for me. I signed it because I like it here. I'm happy to be here and ready for next season."

By signing before the market opened, Escobar also avoided the logjam awaiting free agents at similar positions.

Second basemen: DJ LeMahieu, Brian Dozier, Jed Lowrie, Daniel Murphy.

Third basemen: Manny Machado, Mike Moustakas, Josh Donaldson.

Super-utility men: Marwin Gonzalez. Josh Harrison.

Escobar is more attractive than many of those players, but he obviously was paying attention last offseason, when many free agents lingered on the market and/or received contracts for less than they desired. This way, he gets peace of mind and a sizable guarantee at a place where he already was comfortable. It will be interesting to see how many other free agents take a similar approach.

The Realmuto Chronicles (cont.)

Jeff Berry, the agent for Marlins All-Star catcher J.T. Realmuto, created something of a stir on Tuesday when he told MLB Network Radio on Sirius XM that his client would not sign an extension, adding his opinion that Realmuto "definitely" will be traded by spring training.

From the Marlins' perspective, however, little has changed since last offseason, when they did not move Realmuto after he requested a trade. The Marlins, like all teams, are open to anything, particularly coming off a 98-loss season. Realmuto, 27, surely would command a significant return. But he also is the Marlins' best player, their leader and an asset in the community — and under team control for two more years.

Not surprisingly, the Marlins' position is they will trade Realmuto only if they receive an offer they cannot refuse. Otherwise, they might just keep Realmuto and continue trying to convince him of their commitment to building a sustainable contender — a tough sell, based on Berry's comments.

The Marlins traded outfielder Christian Yelich to the Brewers last offseason when he was under five years of control. Their return included center fielder Lewis Brinson and their Nos. 2, 9 and 17 prospects, according to MLB Pipeline.com — outfielder Monte Harrison, infielder Isan Diaz and right-hander Jordan Yamamoto. But with Yelich the likely NL MVP, it still can be argued the team acted too soon.

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