

10 pitchers who made impressive debuts in '18

By Andrew Simon MLB.com @AndrewSimonMLB

Yesterday, MLB.com looked at position players who impressed in their debut seasons in 2018. Now it's time to turn attention to those who stepped on a big league mound for the first time this year.

While there were numerous pitchers who tasted success in their initial MLB opportunities, here are 10 who stand out not only for their results, but also the way in which they produced those results. With an assist from Statcast™, each is paired with a stat that helps show why his performance is so intriguing. (Pitchers are listed in descending order of innings pitched in 2018).

Ryan Yarbrough, LHP, Rays

Key stat: 26.9 percent hard-hit rate

Yarbrough's line might cause a double take -- he went 16-6 despite starting only six games. That was the product of Tampa Bay's use of "openers" on the mound, with Yarbrough typically coming in afterward and going multiple innings. Unorthodox usage aside, the 26-year-old was able to post a 3.91 ERA, in large part because of how he limited hard contact (95-plus mph exit velocity). Of the 139 pitchers who allowed at least 300 batted balls, five had a lower hard-hit rate, including two (CC Sabathia and Chris Sale) in the AL.

Dereck Rodriguez, RHP, Giants

Key stat: 3.9 percent barrel rate

He's not just Pudge's kid anymore. Rodriguez was the Giants' best starter in 2018, outpitching Madison Bumgarner in a similar number of innings (118 1/3). The 26-year-old didn't generate tons of strikeouts or ground balls but nonetheless made it difficult for opponents to square him up for barrels -- the most dangerous form of contact, according to Statcast™, based on exit velocity and launch angle. Rodriguez's barrel rate tied Carlos Martinez for third lowest in MLB (minimum 300 batted balls), behind only Noah Syndergaard and Mike Montgomery, and just ahead of NL Cy Young Award winner Jacob deGrom.

Shane Bieber, RHP, Indians

Key stat: 20.5 percent called-strike rate

Bieber's 4.55 ERA across 20 games (19 starts) doesn't look like anything special, but among MLB pitchers with at least 100 innings, the 23-year-old ranked 18th in FIP (3.23), tied for 11th in walk rate (4.7 percent), and tied for 10th in strikeout-to-walk ratio (5.1). A big key was Bieber's ability to pound the strike zone. Of the 135 starters who threw at least 1,500 total pitches, Bieber had the 10th-highest rate of in-zone pitches (53.5 percent), sandwiched between Max Scherzer and Gerrit Cole. Only Kyle Hendricks and Rich Hill drew a higher percentage of called strikes, and Bieber was 14th in overall strike rate (67.4 percent).

Freddy Peralta, RHP, Brewers

Key stat: 77.7 percent four-seam fastball usage

It's difficult to believe a righty could succeed while throwing a four-seamer -- one that averaged under 91 mph -- more than three-quarters of the time. And yet, here we are with Peralta. The 22-year-old posted a 4.25 ERA, 3.72 FIP and excellent 29.9 percent strikeout rate over 16 games (14 starts), then notched six Ks over three hitless innings in Game 4 of the National League Championship Series. While his curveball was an effective second pitch, Peralta threw his high-spin, "invisible" four-seamer far more often than any other regular MLB starter, and opponents batted just .195 against it.

Jordan Hicks, RHP, Cardinals

Key stat: 100.5 mph average fastball velocity

For the first time since 2012, Aroldis Chapman did not lead the Majors in this category. Instead, he was dethroned as MLB's No. 1 flamethrower by a 22-year-old who had not pitched above Class A prior to this year. Not only did Hicks finish 1.6 mph ahead of Chapman, but he did it while throwing sinkers -- some of which seemed to defy the laws of physics with late movement that was perhaps even more impressive than the velocity. Hicks threw a whopping 659 pitches that reached triple digits, more than three times as many as anyone else. He also was responsible for 39 of the 50 fastest individual pitches, including two that popped at 105 mph.

Adam Cimber, RHP, Padres/Indians

Key stat: 2.07-foot average vertical release point

It's fun when someone does things a different way, and Cimber certainly qualifies. Though he was less effective after a trade to Cleveland, the 27-year-old rookie still finished 2018 with a 3.42 ERA in 70 appearances despite throwing mostly 86-87 mph fastballs. Cimber succeeded by getting lots of grounders and posting one of MLB's lowest barrel rates, with his unusual delivery likely playing a big role in throwing off hitters' timing. Cimber may have the most extreme release point in the game. It was lower than anyone's other than fellow Padres rookie Kazuhisa Makita (a 33-year-old from Japan), and tied for the 12th widest by either a righty or lefty (3.54 feet).

Seranthony Dominguez, RHP, Phillies

Key stat: .185 expected BA allowed

Aside from one short rough patch in August, Dominguez was pretty dominant out of the Philly bullpen after debuting in May. Pairing a 98-mph fastball with an 89 mph slider that generated a whiff rate above 50 percent, Dominguez ranked in the top 25 in MLB (minimum 50 innings) in both strikeout rate and ground-ball rate. That helped him tie Scherzer for the 16th-lowest xBA -- which factors in strikeouts and quality of contact -- among more than 350 pitchers who faced at least 200 batters.

Inbox: Who's in Indians' outfield for 2019?

By Mandy Bell MLB.com @MandyBell02

How do you see the Indians' outfield panning out for next season?

-- @brownsfan623

If the season were to start now, Cleveland could have Jordan Luplow (acquired from the Pirates on Nov. 14) in left field, Leonys Martin in center and Tyler Naquin in right. Jake Bauers could then get in the mix in the corner-outfield spots from time to time.

Luplow, 25, had a limited Major League role for the Pirates the past two seasons, playing in 37 games in 2018 and 27 in '17. Last season, Luplow hit .185 with three home runs and seven RBIs in 92 at-bats. With Triple-A Indianapolis, Luplow slashed .287/.367/.462 with eight homers, 49 RBIs, 39 walks and 64 strikeouts in 88 games. He appeared in 16 games in left, three in center and three in right for Pittsburgh.

At the Winter Meetings, Indians manager Terry Francona said Martin was about 6 pounds from being back to the weight he was before a severe bacterial infection affected his vital organs in August. He was cleared on Nov. 20 to resume baseball activities, so he should be more than ready once the spring hits.

Francona also said Naquin feels "really good" as the 2019 season approaches despite last season's struggles and medical issues (right hip surgery).

"That's good, because that was hard for him what he had to go through," Francona said. "But he's in a really good place."

Indians president Chris Antonetti has said multiple times that the offseason is not over for Cleveland, so more moves should be coming. Whether the Indians make a splash in the free-agent market or complete another trade remains to be seen. The outfield will be fluid and many names could be thrown into the mix, including Jason Kipnis or even Bradley Zimmer -- who could return at some point next year after having surgery on his right shoulder in July.

@MrSack4

When will the @Indians announce the signing of Bryce Aron Max Harper?

Now, this is just a hunch, but I think Bryce Harper might be a tad too pricey for the Indians to sign.

Dan Walk

@WalkTalk1

Due to his constant injury issues and lack of veteran arms in the bullpen right now, is Salazar being considered as a reliever? This assumes Bauer or Kluber isn't traded this year.

During the Winter Meetings, Antonetti said Danny Salazar was progressing with his rehab in Arizona. He began throwing that same week for the first time and had gotten up to 90 feet. Both Antonetti and Francona said the right-hander's timetable is up to him. Because of that, it's hard for them to predict whether he will be in the bullpen or used as a starter. However, now that it seems as if the team will keep both Corey Kluber and Trevor Bauer in the rotation, signs are pointing to Salazar being a reliever.

Like you said, there are a lack of arms in the bullpen after losing guys like Miller, Cody Allen and Josh Tomlin to free agency. Antonetti said the plan, at least as of the Winter Meetings, was to try to stretch Salazar out as a starter, then assess what the team's needs may be once he gets back to full strength (or close to it).

"That gives us the most flexibility," Antonetti said.

Stoutmyre

@JStoutmyre

What are some possible additions we can make for a 3rd basemen that is feasible at the right price?

The most feasible solution is staying in-house and moving Jose Ramirez back to third base and having Kipnis (as long as he's on the roster) back at second. As of now, that will most likely be how the lineup shakes out.

If the Indians were to spend some money, it would probably be on the outfield or the bullpen. With Ramirez as an option at third, and both Max Moroff and Carlos Santana with at least some experience to back up at the hot corner, the most likely option is for the Indians to focus on the bigger needs of the team.

Csparrow12

@csparrow12

with their recent trades, how likely are they going to keep Kluber and Bauer this season? How close were the negotiations between LA and CLE? What was the hang up in the deal, LA not willing to give up the goods, or CLE asking too much? Look forward to following you this season

Now with the Winter Meetings behind us and the Indians having cut payroll significantly, they are much more likely to have Kluber and Bauer in their rotation next season than they were at the beginning of the month.

Obviously, either of the two starters would get more talent in return than other moves the Indians could make this offseason, but keeping its greatest strength intact could definitely pay off in the end. As far as the negotiations between the Tribe and Dodgers, those details are unknown, however the Dodgers appear to still be strongly in the mix.

Cleveland Indians' Francisco Lindor: The pros and cons of waiting for the big payoff

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

CLEVELAND, Ohio – Early in the 2017 season the news broke that Francisco Lindor, the Indians young shortstop, turned down a contract extension thought to be in the range of \$100 million. Lindor at the time was making just over the major league minimum.

One of the reasons Lindor and his agent, David Meter, said no was because of the much anticipated free agent class of 2018. That would be the one currently on display with Manny Machado and Bryce Harper each looking for contracts in the 10-year \$300 million vicinity. Lindor still has three years to play before he's eligible for free agency, but the rising tide of Machado and Harper's anticipated deals would definitely raise his boat as well.

What Lindor has done over his first three years with the Indians certainly gives every indication that he'll be in line for a similar deal when he gets a shot at free agency. At 24 he's gone to three All-Star Games, played in Game 7 of the World Series, won three division titles, two Silver Slugger awards, one Gold Glove and one Platinum Glove.

He's a switch-hitter with a .288 career average, 98 home runs and 310 RBI. Last season he set a franchise record for shortstops with 39 homers. The record he broke belonged to him after he hit 33 homers in 2017.

Lindor tied for the MLB lead with 129 runs last season. He was second in the AL in total bases, second in multi-hit games and stole 25 bases in 35 attempts.

So just to be clear, Lindor, in the immortal words of Brandon Phillips, "can pick it and swing it." He has a face-of-the-franchise smile, is kid and adult friendly and bi-lingual. And Indians' fans are reluctantly counting the days until he disappears down the free-agent highway.

But that highway is not an endless seam of flawless blacktop. The 2018 free agent class was supposed to be one of the best in history and it wasn't all about Machado and Harper. But Josh Donaldson tore a calf muscle last season and settled for a one-year deal with Atlanta. Yes, it was for \$23 million, but Donaldson was anticipating something a lot longer and with a lot more zeroes.

Right-hander Matt Harvey, the one-time Dark Knight of the Mets, saw his value drop because of injuries and signed a one-year \$11 million deal with the Angels. Elvis Andrus didn't opt out of his deal with Texas at the end of last season after breaking his elbow. Cody Allen, the Indians dependable closer for so many years, is still on the market after an inconsistent season. The Cardinals took a leap of faith by signing lefty Andrew Miller to a two-year \$25 million deal despite five trips to the disabled list in the last two seasons with the Tribe.

Lefty Dallas Keuchel is still unsigned as he tries to recapture his 2015 Cy Young magic. Give Andrew McCutchen props for signing a three-year \$50 million deal with the Phillies, but he is not the MVP-caliber player that he was in Pittsburgh.

The Indians have a history of signing young players to contract extensions that offer protection at the expense of the top dollar available. Players such as Grady Sizemore, Michael Brantley, Carlos Carrasco, Corey Kluber and Jose Ramirez have signed such deals. They've been criticized for them as well.

But when Sizemore's body broke down, how do you think he felt about that guaranteed deal? What about Brantley missing almost two years with shoulder and ankle surgeries and still getting paid like an All-Star? How about Carrasco and the heart problems he's had?

People seem to feel the Indians pulled a fast one on Ramirez by signing him to a club-friendly long-term contract. But if you think about how far Ramirez has come -- from a projected utility player to a talent that has out-shined Lindor -- why wouldn't he take the guaranteed money when it was offered.

Athletes, like all of us, are not invincible. Talent, no matter how great, is finite.

Harper, before he became a free agent, signed two extensions with the Nationals. Machado never did with the Orioles, choosing to go year to year. So far Lindor has gone year to year with the Tribe, qualifying for arbitration for the first time this winter.

After Lindor turned down the extension, he was asked if he was concerned about injury. He said he wasn't. He said he put his faith in God.

As for the Indians, Chris Antonetti, president of baseball operations, said he is always willing to talk contract with Lindor and his representatives.

Which Cleveland Indians outfielder will have a breakout season in 2019? (poll)

By Joe Noga, cleveland.comjnova@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio — As the 40-man roster currently stands for the Cleveland Indians, the outfield is comprised of young, controllable pieces that don't cost much but also lack a whole lot of experience.

Barring any additions via trade or free agency, the senior member of the group entering spring training will be Leonys Martin. No other outfielder listed on the roster has a full major league season under his belt. If the Tribe is going to get back to the postseason in 2019, one or more of these players need to have a breakout season at the plate.

Here's a rundown of outfielders on the 40-man roster. Vote in the poll below or let us know if you think somebody who is not listed could perhaps become the breakout star(s) next season.

Greg Allen: Allen hit .257 with 20 RBI and 21 steals in 91 games as a rookie last season. He was optioned and recalled five different times to the big league club, and managed a .654 OPS. Allen drew 14 walks and struck out 58 times in 265 at-bats while playing all three outfield spots.

Tyler Naquin: Naquin appeared in just 61 games for the Indians as he battled through a hamstring strain and a hip injury that eventually required season-ending surgery. When healthy, he found some success at the plate, hitting .264 with a .651 OPS. Naquin drove in 23 runs and smacked three homers in his limited duty, and showed flashes of the player who hit .296 with a .886 OPS as a Rookie of the Year finalist in 2016.

Leonys Martin: Martin was limited to just six games with the Indians after he was acquired at the trade deadline from Detroit for Willi Castro. A serious infection landed Martin in the hospital, and his recovery was dubbed nothing short of miraculous by those close to the team. Before taking ill, Martin was settling in nicely, belting a pair of home runs in his first two Tribe games. He hit .255 for the season with a .747 OPS and 33 RBI. It was his best season at the plate since he hit .274 in 2014 during his second year with the Rangers in Texas.

Jordan Luplow: Luplow, acquired from Pittsburgh in the Erik Gonzalez trade, could slot in as a fourth outfielder with a little bit of pop for the Indians. In 2018 he appeared in 37 games for the Pirates and hit three home runs with seven RBI. BaseballReference.com projects Luplow to play part-time (232 at-bats) while hitting eight homers and posting a .700 OPS in 2019.

Oscar Mercado: Acquired at the trading deadline from St. Louis in exchange for Conner Capel and Jhon Torres, Mercado was a second-round pick of the Cardinals in 2013. In 132 games between Class AAA Memphis and Class AAA Columbus last year he hit .278 with eight homers and 47 RBI. He struck out 87 times against a career-high 49 walks with 37 steals. The 24-year-old from Tampa is the only player on this list who has yet to make his big-league debut.

Bradley Zimmer: If you had asked this question of Tribe fans at this time in 2017, Zimmer would have been the overwhelming favorite. After a strong rookie season cut short by injury that saw him appear in 101 games and hit .241 with a .692 OPS, Zimmer made the club out of spring training as the starting center fielder. But injuries resulting from his relentless play in center field limited the 26-year-old to just 34 games. He was placed on the disabled list in mid-May with a rib contusion after crashing into the center field wall at Yankee Stadium. When he returned in June, he struggled at the plate, hitting just .226 with a .611 OPS. The Tribe optioned Zimmer to Class AAA Columbus where he injured his shoulder during a workout and required season-ending surgery. He's not expected to be available until well into the season as he rehabs the injury.

Francisco Lindor and Jose Ramirez must play even better in 2019 if the Cleveland Indians are going back to the postseason

By Joe Noga, cleveland.comjnova@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Before 2017, it was unheard of for a Cleveland Indians shortstop to hit 30 home runs in a season. Now, it's expected thanks to Francisco Lindor, who followed up his 33-homer campaign with 38 more in 2018.

And prior to 2018, no Indians third baseman had slugged more than 30 home runs while also stealing at least 30 bases in a single season (not to mention 100+ runs scored). Ramirez wrapped up that accomplishment in early September just as his well-documented season-ending slump was setting in.

Lindor ended up with a .277/.352/.519 slash line and Ramirez a .270/.387/.552 mark. It's not completely unreasonable to predict that both players will have similar seasons, statistically speaking, in 2019. They're both back-to-back All-Star selections who have also won back-to-back Silver Slugger awards. Ramirez has been an MVP finalist in the American League for two straight years.

But if you think Lindor or Ramirez can afford to rest on their laurels in 2019 or take their time fighting through a mini-slump here and there while teammates pick up the slack, think again. Beyond Lindor and Ramirez, the bulk of the current Indians roster is relatively unproven.

Thanks to the cost-cutting moves implemented this offseason by the Tribe's front office, the burden of propelling the Indians' offense now rests squarely on the shoulders of the club's dynamic duo without a lot of help behind them. And the pressure will only continue to grow as Cleveland tries to get back to the postseason for the fourth straight year.

Michael Brantley (.832 OPS), Edwin Encarnacion (32 HR), Yonder Alonso (83 RBI) and Yan Gomes (101 wRC+) are gone. And while versatile slugger Carlos Santana has returned, the team has gotten younger at key positions both on the infield and in the outfield. That means the expectation is there for Lindor and Ramirez not only to maintain their high level of production from the last two seasons, but they must also add to it if the Indians are going to continue contending.

Lindor and Ramirez each posted a mark of 7.9 wins above replacement according to BaseballReference.com in 2018. Only four times in history has a pair of infield teammates reached 8.0 bWAR in the same season, most recently when Albert Pujols and Scott Rolen did so for the 2004 NL champion St. Louis Cardinals. The Tribe tandem is clearly among baseball's elite when it comes to producing runs and playing defense at the highest level.

By comparison, Colorado third baseman Nolan Arenado and shortstop Trevor Story each posted 5.6 bWAR in 2018. Arenado was a National League MVP finalist like Ramirez in the AL, and collected 38 homers and 110 RBI (.935 OPS). Story belted 37 home runs and drove in 108 (.914 OPS) while playing in Coors Field's hitter-friendly conditions.

But besides second baseman D.J. LeMahieu (3.0), no other Rockies position players ranked among their top 12 in terms of bWAR. Meanwhile, the Indians have now traded away or lost to free agency the aforementioned players that comprised one-third of the top 12 bWAR performances on last season's roster.

And looking internally for replacements could be a long shot.

Jake Bauers, acquired in the Encarnacion trade, has 65 big-league hits to his credit and batted .153 after Aug. 1 last year. Jordan Luplow, added via trade with Pittsburgh, has 18 RBI in 64 major league games. Prospects Oscar Mercado and Daniel Johnson, both acquired in trades, are not expected to make an impact on the lineup any time soon.

That leaves Lindor and Ramirez to drive the bus. Sure, they'll have Santana, who historically suffers at the plate during the early part of the season, and Jason Kipnis, who will be looking to prove that the injuries and struggles of his last two campaigns are behind him. But beyond that handful of veterans, the lineup as it currently stands lacks any other proven, consistent run producer.

Just as it's not completely unreasonable to expect Lindor and Ramirez to repeat their performances of the last two seasons, it's also not unreasonable to expect their numbers to climb even higher. Prior to 2017, Ramirez had never hit more than 11 homers in a season, and Lindor not more than 15. Both are clearly trending in the right direction.

But projections posted on BaseballReference.com have both players finishing 2019 with significantly fewer home runs and runs batted in over the course of the season. If that's the case, the Indians are going to struggle mightily to score runs as a team, a category in which they've ranked third among AL squads the last two seasons.

The Indians will go as far as Lindor and Ramirez will carry them in 2019. Whether that calls for a fourth straight AL Central Division title or not depends on both players continuing to raise their games to places they've never been.

Why don't the Cleveland Indians add a left-handed starting pitcher? Hey, Hoynsie

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com | Posted December 26, 2018 at 04:12 PM | Updated December 26, 2018 at 10:12 PM

Does Tribe's all-righty rotation need a lefty?

Hey, Hoynsie: Is there a reason the Tribe doesn't have any lefty starting pitchers? It seems to me they're quite important, as the teams currently set up to use the most lefty starters -- the Yankees, Cubs, Dodgers and Boston -- appear to have four of the best teams in the majors. There are plenty of lefties available in free agency or through trades: Gio Gonzalez, Francisco Liriano, Dallas Keuchel, Wade Miley and others. Do you think the Tribe will go after any of these pitchers? -- AZCardman, Gilbert, Ariz.

Hey, AZCardman: The Indians' rotation had the second lowest ERA in the AL last year without a lefty. In fact, the last lefty to make a big impression on the rotation was T.J. House, who had 18 starts in 2014.

Here's what lefties hit against the Tribe's top four starters last season: Corey Kluber .227, Trevor Bauer .202, Carlos Carrasco .248, Mike Clevinger .234 and Shane Bieber .316. Except for Bieber, who was trying to keep his nose above water in his rookie year, they did a great job against lefties.

Even if the Indians trade a starter, I don't see an overwhelming need to go out and get another starter just because he's left-handed. As long as you have capable lefties in the bullpen, the main goal for a front office is to find a starting pitcher who can get lefties and righties out regardless of what hand he throws the ball with.

What's the arbitration story on Trevor Bauer, Francisco Lindor?

Hey, Hoynsie: When will the arbitration hearings for Trevor Bauer and Francisco Lindor take place? When the Indians get the results, they can resume building their roster -- Mitch, Lewis Center, Ohio.

Hey, Mitch: You're getting ahead of yourself.

If the Indians do not reach an agreement with Bauer or Lindor, the two sides will exchange salary figures on Jan. 11. A hearing date will be set, but negotiations can continue right up until the hearing.

Bauer went to a hearing last year against the Indians and won his case. He was the first Indians' player to win an arbitration hearing since Greg Swindell in 1991. This will be Lindor's first trip through the arbitration process.

MLBtraderumors.com estimates that Bauer could make \$11.6 million in arbitration, while Lindor could threaten Kris Bryant's record \$10.85 million award for a player eligible for arbitration for the first time.

Is a Corey Kluber-Yasiel Puig trade in the mix?

Hey Hoynsie: Do you think the Reds made the trade with the Dodgers as a precursor to a trade with the Indians to get Corey Kluber? The Reds could trade Puig, Alex Wood and their top two minor league players to the Indians for Kluber? -- Erich Golden, Westfield, N.J.

Hey, Erich: I like the way you're thinking, but I don't see the Indians taking on Puig's salary (he's eligible for arbitration). Plus he's only got one year left before free agency.

Fan doesn't understand the Yan Gomes trade

Hey, Hoynsie: I understand the Tribe's trades except the catcher Yan Gomes trade to Washington. Did they really get better at a such a key position with Roberto Perez moving into the No. 1 spot? Gomes seemed to me a great catcher, good clubhouse guy and a bargain at \$7 million. -- Jerry Kernan, Dublin.

Hey, Jerry: Here are the two reasons behind the Gomes' deal -- the Indians wanted to cut payroll and get younger.

Why doesn't Paul Dolan family sell the Indians?

Hey, Hoynsie: If Indians' owner Paul Dolan refuses to expend the financial resources to keep or sign top level players, why doesn't he consider selling the team? Surely there would be a market for owners who might have deeper pockets. -- Mark, Maumee.

Hey, Mark: Maybe Dolan and his family just like owning the Indians. He's put six straight winning seasons together. In that time the Indians have won three division titles, one pennant and more regular season games than any team in the AL. Yes, there are degrees of success, but that's not a bad run.

How long before Carlos Carrasco has the right to veto a trade?

Hey, Hoynsie: In your last edition of Hey, Hoynsie you answered a question about whether or not Carlos Carrasco had a no trade clause in his recently agreed upon contract extension. The answer was no, but Isn't Carrasco close to being a 10 and five player, which would give him the right to veto any trade?-- Jack Bacevice.

Hey, Jack: Carrasco has played seven years and 147 days -- all with the Indians -- in the big leagues. So he has the five years with the same team requirement, but he's still almost three years short of reaching 10 years in the big leagues to get his 10 and five rights.

Carrasco's extension runs through 2022 with a vesting option for 2023.

Why not play Jason Kipnis at third base?

Hey, Hoynsie: We keep hearing that second baseman Jason Kipnis could move into the outfield in 2018. Why not play him at third base? -- Tom Rauckhorst, Geneva.

Hey, Tom: This is just me, but I wonder if his arm could stand the grind of third base? The throw is certainly longer from center field or left field, but it's usually not as intense. Kipnis missed time in 2017 with a strained right rotator cuff and at times last season it did not look like his throwing arm with fully recovered.

Why not keep Lonnie Chisenhall?

Hey, Hoynsie: Just curious as to why the Indians didn't try to sign Lonnie Chisenhall? Seems as if he is as good as any other relatively inexpensive outfielder. -- Dennis.

Hey, Dennis: No question Chisenhall has talent, but the last two seasons, he played 82 and 29 games, respectively, because of calf injuries. In both seasons, he missed almost the entire second half with left and right calf injuries.

After 11 years in the organization, it seemed like it was the right time for Chisenhall and the Indians to part company.

Hey, Hoynsie: If the Indians decide to not trade Corey Kluber or Trevor Bauer, and patch our offense with a lower cost free agent, what about Avasail Garcia of the White Sox? He plays right field, bats right handed, and is one of the younger players on the free-agent list. Sounds like a fit. -- Bill Drummer, Wauseon.

Hey, Bill: I like Avasail's bat, but I'm not crazy about his defense in right field. He was an All-Star in 2017, but played only 93 games last year because of hamstring problems.

The Indians have certainly seen a lot of Garcia over the years. He's spent his career playing in the AL Central for Detroit and Chicago. So they know what kind of player he is.

It would be interesting, however, to hear Bauer explain the rules of the game to him once again.

Gordo: Baseball divides into the haves and the have-nots

Jeff Gordon Jeff Gordon is an online sports columnist for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

While the Paul Goldschmidt trade was great for the Cardinals and their entitled fan base, it was still another bad sign for the baseball industry.

Just two years back the Arizona Diamondbacks won the wild-card game before falling to the Los Angeles Dodgers in a National League Division Series. Last season they finished 82-80, staying in the postseason hunt for five months until losing 20 of their last 28 games.

But in 2019, this will be one of many stripped-down teams taking a near-term beating while hoping for long-term reward. The Diamondbacks will be just another seller heading toward the cellar.

They conceded their campaign by trading Goldschmidt for pitcher Luke Weaver, catcher Carson Kelly, infield prospect Andy Young and a high draft pick. Pitcher Patrick Corbin departed for the Washington Nationals as a free agent. Outfielder A.J. Pollock also hit the open market.

This is one more example of how baseball's middle class has evaporated. The competitive balance is long gone. In any given season, a large percentage of MLB teams are eliminated before opening day.

The bad teams routinely lose 100-plus games in this environment and contenders must shoot for 100 victories. The gap between the haves and have-nots is massive, and so-so teams tumble deep into the void.

If the Cardinals want to contend every year — which is Bill DeWitt Jr.'s stated goal — then management must dig deep and go for it every year. There is not much in-between these days.

The Houston Astros started the tank-and-rebuild trend, losing 106, 107, 111 and 92 games while trading proven players for prospects and losing deliberately to gain high draft picks. They won a World Series that way, as did the Chicago Cubs after losing 91, 101, 96 and 89 games.

The tanking epidemic is terrible for Our National Pastime, rendering several teams unwatchable any given year. Former Diamondbacks general manager Dave Stewart threatened to go there before getting fired after the 2016 season.

His replacement, Mike Hazen, insists he wouldn't go that far. "One, I think it's tricky to do that," he told reporters earlier this month. "I think it's a risky strategy. I just don't think our draft is built the way other games' drafts are. There's a long development process."

OK, but what if the loss of Goldschmidt, Corbin and other stars buries the Diamondbacks miles behind the front-running Los Angeles Dodgers?

"I'm not sure exactly how I feel about it, honestly," he said. "If we get put in that situation, we'll have to react to that situation. I don't think treading water over a long period of time is going to be an answer to winning a World Series. We need to make some hard decisions and we will if we have to. I still see a lot of creative solutions out there, if we can put it together the right way, and that's on me. I've got to do that."

Translation: "Let's hope it doesn't come to that, but if it does the garage sale will continue."

The Cardinals have exploited this trend by acquiring Marcell Ozuna from the tanking Miami Marlins last winter and landing Goldschmidt this time around. But they should mourn the demise of baseball's middle class.

The Cardinals famously won the 2006 World Series with a team that won just 83 times during the regular season. Historians will look back in time, see pictures of blurry Jeff Weaver and Anthony Reyes winning games, and wonder what happened.

Twice since 1996 they reached the playoffs after winning 88 games. Twice they advanced with 90 victories, winning another World Series in one of those seasons.

But these days, teams are either in or they are out. Often that determination is made long before Christmas.

The Diamondbacks bailed early on the '19 season, as did the Seattle Mariners, who won 89 games last season and still finished 14 games off the American League West pace. They have been ditching talent this winter at a frantic pace.

DeWitt Jr. is a staunch opponent of tanking, but will he embrace the "all in" mentality needed to reach postseason play? True contenders must load up on talent, pound the tanking teams at every opportunity and build a huge victory total.

The wild-card play-in game was supposed to keep more teams in the race, but it offers marginal incentive to make big late-season additions. Increasingly, general managers see their challenge as division title or bust.

(The play-in game was just one more harebrained scheme from Commissioner Bud Selig, who had lots of them. Single-elimination baseball is exciting and unpredictable, but so are Australian ax fights. Either is OK as an occasional tiebreaker, but neither should be regularly scheduled in civilized society.)

As for baseball's rebuild-mania, it puts managers like Torey Lovullo of the Diamondbacks in a most difficult position.

"I want to go out and win and expect to win every single night," Lovullo told reporters at the winter meetings. "And I think the players feel the same way. It's something that I've rehearsed, saying it publicly, that I want these guys to know that there's a special group left there."

Good luck with that.

Nick Cafardo / Baseball's top free agents, this year and beyond

By Nick CafardoGlobe Staff

The next recipients of break-the-bank contracts are likely to be free agents Bryce Harper and Manny Machado, but looking beyond this year, Paul Goldschmidt, Nolan Arenado, and Chris Sale are up after next season, and Mike Trout and Mookie Betts are up after 2020. Beyond that, you'd have to consider Francisco Lindor, Carlos Correa, and Kris Bryant, but we're focusing on the next two years right now.

Machado and Harper are both 26 with their prime years ahead of them. Scott Boras is Harper's agent and it appears he's looking to break the \$400 million mark with a 10-year deal. Machado could come in at slightly less, with estimates of 8-10 years in the \$300 million-\$350 million range.

Who will bite on these superstars and which will stay with their current teams?

■ Harper — We think the market is the Dodgers, Phillies and Nationals, with an outside shot of the Cardinals and Giants. There might be a mystery team, but we're guessing these are the major players. We know the Nationals' offer of 10 years, \$300 million was rejected, but given that they may have the richest ownership in baseball, we never rule them out.

We know that the Phillies are willing to spend "stupidly," according to their owner, so we're not sure any team can outbid them. But it may come down to where Harper wants to play. It's not known if Philadelphia appeals to him or whether after spending years on the East Coast, the West Coast native would rather move and perhaps take less to play for the Dodgers or Giants.

The Dodgers cleared out two outfielders in Matt Kemp and Yasiel Puig (traded to the Reds in the Homer Bailey swap), and while we understand part of that reasoning was exchanging big contracts with Cincinnati, there's a theory that they're making room for Harper.

The Dodgers seem to have moved on from Machado, especially with Corey Seager ready to return to play shortstop after Tommy John surgery last season.

We never expect negotiations of this magnitude involving Boras to go quickly, so we'll wait patiently to see where this mega-talent winds up. Wherever Harper goes, he has a chance to change the dynamic of any team and any division. Harper has a career .900 OPS but has surpassed 1.000 in two seasons.

■ Machado — It's obvious he wants to play for the Yankees. His idol is Alex Rodriguez, a fellow Miami native, so Machado would love to follow in his footsteps. The Yankees have an opening at shortstop with Didi Gregorius (elbow) out until midseason or later. The Yankees must convince Machado that third base is where he needs to end up. He's one of the best defensive third basemen in history, but only a good shortstop.

The Phillies would love one or both of Harper and Machado. They could make bids on both given their current payroll, which would significantly change the National League East dynamic.

There would likely be more than the Yankees and Phillies involved in pursuit of Machado, but for the moment that's all we've heard about. You could see the Giants being involved, as they would be with Harper, because they're doing everything they can to improve their offense. If it means moving some infield bodies around, they'd be willing to do it. The Mets? Who knows?

■ Arenado — Considered the best third baseman in baseball, the Rockies slugger is also one of the premier all-around players in the game. While it doesn't appear the Rockies will be able to re-sign him, they could always justify the financial outlay because he is the face of their franchise, much as Troy Tulowitzki once was.

Otherwise, Arenado, who will be 30 at the time of his free agency, will likely get six or seven years on a deal, and likely north of \$30 million per. He should have plenty of suitors given the position he plays.

There have been rumors about the possibility of Arenado being dealt this offseason so the Rockies can get a significant package for him, but so far there's been no sign of that.

■ Sale — Do the comparisons and the math. Is Sale not due to be in the financial land of David Price, Clayton Kershaw, and Zack Greinke? Well, if he has a healthy, productive 2019 season, of course he is. Would the Red Sox go there with a second starting pitcher? There are a lot of miles on that left shoulder, which has not only shown signs of fatigue since Sale came to Boston, but this past season, with added rest between some starts and a reduction in innings, he suffered from what the team called mild inflammation. Obviously, it was more than that, but Sale has prohibited the Red Sox from revealing anything more.

Sale will be 31 the first season after becoming a free agent. So, if healthy, he appears to be in line for a 5-7-year deal at \$30 million per.

■ Goldschmidt — Just traded to the Cardinals, who realize that just one year of Goldschmidt wouldn't go over well with the fan base. So, they realize that for a premier slugger, they'll have to dish out north of \$25 million per year. The number of years will become a major issue. Goldschmidt is 30, and will be 31 at the time of free agency. He has a career .930 OPS.

■ Trout — Trout becomes a free agent after the 2020 season, and this will be a big deal. Trout is 27, so he'll enter free agency in his 29-year-old season, which means he would likely receive an 8-10-year deal. If Harper goes for \$400 million, then Trout's AAV should be more. Trout has accomplished far more than Harper, and he will be in demand. Would Trout "go home" and play for the Phillies? The Phillies certainly must have this in mind if they don't land Harper or Machado this offseason, or just one of the two. Don't rule out the Angels re-signing him. Trout, who has a .990 career OPS, has settled into the West Coast lifestyle, so the New Jersey native doesn't necessarily have to come back east.

■ Betts — Last, but certainly not least. The Red Sox have two more years of control, but they would love to sign him long term right now. But Betts, to this point, has wisely rejected any overtures. However, there may be a number that the Sox can tempt him with that will be too good to pass up. When that happens — and it could happen this offseason — Betts just may forgo his leverage in free agency. After all, once the money gets in the \$300 million-\$400 million range, what else is there? How much money do you need?

Apropos of nothing

1. The Red Sox should not deal Jackie Bradley Jr. anywhere. He's simply too valuable as a defender to break up a superb defensive outfield. The consequences of that would be J.D. Martinez having to play more outfield, and that's where, in the past, he's missed time as a result of injuries.

2. The Orioles have a lot of work to do. New general manager Mike Elias just added a pair of coaches to Brandon Hyde's staff, but player development, scouting, and analytics all have to be built up. Terrific baseball people such as former GMs Wayne Krivsky, Ed Lynch, Ed Wade (who really built the current Astros), Jim Beattie, and others remain without jobs and could help Elias from the administrative and scouting aspects. And outstanding former managers/instructors such as Dave Trembley, Arnie Beyeler, and many others also remain without jobs. A real shame.

3. Yes, that was former Giants GM Bobby Evans in attendance at the Celtics-76ers game on Christmas Day. Evans, who grew up in Framingham, is still an executive with the Giants.

4. Derek Falvey of Lynn is doing a nice job of rebuilding the Twins as their new chief baseball officer. He chose Rocco Baldelli as manager. Then he signed Jonathan Schoop for second base and Nelson Cruz for DH. With the Indians' talent level dropping, Falvey sees a great opening for the Twins to take the division. The Twins obviously lost the great Joe Mauer, who retired this offseason. The feeling is Cruz can fill that leadership void. Falvey next needs to upgrade the pitching.

5. Poor Montreal. As hard as the city tried to put itself in position for an expansion team, you wonder if Portland, Ore., or Las Vegas has surpassed it in the eyes of Major League Baseball. The toughest thing to do is build a stadium. There's an agreement in principle on a stadium site in Portland, and Vegas is also considering building one on the site of the Rio casino, about 100 acres of land. If those two stadium ideas go through, those cities will certainly surpass Montreal, which would need to build a downtown stadium.

6. Judging by the e-mails I get from Blue Jays fans from across the border, they seem fed up with the organization and its lack of commitment to winning. The Jays obviously have some talented young players on the horizon, none more so than Vladimir Guerrero Jr., the top prospect in baseball. But Jays fans believe they need to compete now and build their team, rather than tear it down and just try to be competitive. Why is it that the Rays, who had the second-lowest attendance in baseball this past season, and the poorest owners, are adding, while the Jays, with often big attendance and corporate giant ownership in Rogers Communications, are scaling back?

7. I find it odd that the Athletics haven't re-signed team leader Jed Lowrie, who I think would be a nice fit for the Brewers, Dodgers or Nationals.

8. It's almost Jan. 1 and there are hundreds of players still available. Time to implement a free agent signing deadline, isn't it?

Updates on nine

1. J.T. Realmuto, C, Marlins — Those teams still trying to obtain him remain in disbelief at the asking price for the All-Star. We had heard the price had come down a bit, and maybe it has slightly, but it is still making a deal prohibitive. The Marlins seem to think there will be a market for Realmuto indefinitely, and that one team will cave to their demands. The Padres have been the most persistent.
2. David Robertson, RHP, free agent — Robertson, who represents himself, isn't tipping his hand on what he's looking for, but he's likely seeking at least in the Andrew Miller range of two years at \$25 million total. Robertson, who lives in Rhode Island, has been linked to the Red Sox, Yankees, and Phillies, but there are several other teams who have inquired and made offers. The Red Sox are trying to get a veteran reliever on a one-year deal. They feel there will be enough top-shelf veterans they can sign under those terms.
3. Nelson Cruz, DH, Twins — The Twins needed a leader type and a solid bat in the middle of their order, and they got it in Cruz. The Rays and Astros tried hard to land Cruz for the same reasons, but it seems the Twins see an opening to win the American League Central. So, they signed Cruz for one year at \$14 million, plus an option year at \$12 million.
4. Robbie Ray, LHP, Diamondbacks — Ray may be the next Diamondback to be traded. There is word that teams are calling about his availability. The Phillies and Astros are very interested. Ray, 27, went 6-2 in 24 starts last season. He earned \$3.95 million and is arbitration eligible for the second time.
5. Jose Martinez, 1B, Cardinals — The Cardinals would deal Martinez to an AL team, which would likely use him as a DH. The Rays and Astros, both of whom missed out on Cruz, could become engaged on Martinez, who hit .305 with 17 homers and 83 RBIs in 2018. Martinez is now available after the Cardinals acquired Paul Goldschmidt from the Diamondbacks.
6. Marcus Stroman, RHP, Blue Jays — The Jays are listening to offers for Stroman, but does it make sense for them to deal him? Stroman is only 27 and likely hasn't reached his peak. An injury reduced his number of starts to 19 last season, when he went 4-9 with a 5.54 ERA. He can become a free agent after the 2020 season. Teams that could potentially deal for him include the Padres, Athletics, Braves, Rangers, and Phillies. But again, we're not convinced Stroman is going anywhere.
7. CC Sabathia, LHP, Yankees — Yes, Sabathia should have a full recovery after a stent was placed in an artery to the heart. But don't be surprised if the Yankees seek a back-end starter for depth purposes to protect themselves as Sabathia recovers. Last season, they picked off Lance Lynn to be that guy. There are certainly those types out there — Drew Pomeranz, for instance. Pomeranz had a dreadful 2018, but two years ago he won 17 games and he would be a good pickup for any team.
8. Clay Buchholz, RHP, free agent — Buchholz had a good season once he came back from flexor surgery in his pitching arm. He went 7-2 with a 2.01 ERA in 16 starts for the Diamondbacks, but was shut down in mid-September when he suffered a flexor strain. Nobody is completely sure about Buchholz's status, but the 34-year-old could be a nice back-end option if he could stay healthy. The Diamondbacks could be interested in keeping him.
9. Jason Heyward, RF, Cubs — There's been talk about trying to move the remaining \$106 million of Heyward's deal, with the Cubs having to subsidize a certain amount in order to pave the way for bigger signings, but it seems unlikely they can find a team willing to take it on. The Braves could be a possibility for a return engagement for Heyward after they lost Nick Markakis, but the Cubs would likely have to take on more than half of the remaining deal. The Braves now seem more inclined to address a starter and a reliever. This one could be tough for the Cubs.