



CHICAGO CUBS DAILY CLIPS

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November 29, 2018

- NBC Sports Chicago, **Cubs trade for infield depth in deal with Yankees**
<https://www.nbcsports.com/chicago/cubs/cubs-trade-infield-depth-deal-yankees-addison-russell-ronald-torreyes-baez-shortstop>
- NBC Sports Chicago, **The Cubs have a bullpen question this winter: Will Carl Edwards Jr. be the answer?**
<https://www.nbcsports.com/chicago/cubs/cubs-have-bullpen-question-winter-can-carl-edwards-jr-be-answer-chavez-closer-playoffs>
- NBC Sports Chicago, **Cubs add lefty reliever Kyle Ryan to 40-man roster**
<https://www.nbcsports.com/chicago/cubs/cubs-add-lefty-reliever-kyle-ryan-40-man-roster>
- NBC Sports Chicago, **The Comeback Kids: An all-time Cubs team of players who left and returned**
<https://www.nbcsports.com/chicago/cubs/comeback-kids-all-time-cubs-team-players-who-left-and-returned>
- Chicago Tribune, **Cubs' acquisition of Ronald Torreyes adds intrigue to arbitration issues**
<https://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/baseball/cubs/ct-spt-cubs-salary-arbitration-20181128-story.html>
- Chicago Tribune, **Cubs fill 40-man roster after signing of left-hander Kyle Ryan**
<https://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/baseball/cubs/ct-spt-cubs-kyle-ryan-20181128-story.html>
- Chicago Sun-Times, **Cubs' trade for IF Ronald Torreyes about depth, not Addison Russell's status**
<https://chicago.suntimes.com/sports/cubs-trade-infielder-ronald-torreyes-depth-addison-russell-status/>
- Chicago Sun-Times, **Cubs acquire infielder Ronald Torreyes from Yankees, sign LHP Kyle Ryan**
<https://chicago.suntimes.com/sports/cubs-acquire-infielder-ronald-torreyes-from-yankees/>
- Daily Herald, **Cubs acquire infielder Torreyes from Yankees, sign pitcher Ryan**
<https://www.dailyherald.com/sports/20181128/cubs-acquire-infielder-torreyes-from-yankees-sign-pitcher-ryan>
- The Athletic, **Mythbusters: Did the lack of a prototypical leadoff man hurt the Cubs offense in 2018?**
<https://theathletic.com/682216/2018/11/29/mythbusters-did-the-lack-of-a-prototypical-leadoff-man-hurt-the-cubs-offense-in-2018/>
- Cubs.com, **Cubs sign lefty Ryan, bolster bullpen depth**
<https://www.mlb.com/cubs/news/cubs-sign-kyle-ryan-to-major-league-contract/c-301220038>

- Cubs.com, **Cubs face non-tender deadline with Russell**
<https://www.mlb.com/cubs/news/addison-russell-among-cubs-arb-eligibles/c-301200574>
- Cubs.com, **Infielder Torreyes acquired from Yankees**
<https://www.mlb.com/cubs/news/cubs-acquire-ronald-torreyes-from-yankees/c-301214664>

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NBC Sports Chicago

Cubs trade for infield depth in deal with Yankees

By Tony Andracki

The Cubs traded for infielder Ronald Torreyes Wednesday afternoon, sending a player to be named later or cash considerations back to the New York Yankees in return.

The Cubs are very familiar with Torreyes after acquiring him along with pitcher Travis Wood and outfielder Dave Sappelt in exchange for Sean Marshall on Dec. 23, 2011 — one of the first trades made by the Theo Epstein administration in Chicago.

Torreyes only spent a little over a year in the Cubs system, playing for Class-A Daytona in 2012 and Double-A Tennessee for the first part of 2013 before he was purchased by the Houston Astros. He later bounced from the Blue Jays to the Dodgers before settling on a home in New York for the last three seasons.

The 26-year-old was a valuable utility infielder for the Yankees, racking up 1.5 WAR while appearing in 221 games over the last three seasons, hitting .281/.310/.375 (.685 OPS) in 615 plate appearances. He doesn't have much power and doesn't walk much, but he also rarely strikes out and can play second base, third base and shortstop.

So what does this mean for the Cubs?

At the very least, Torreyes represents infield insurance, which was an underrated need for the Cubs this winter.

Then there's the Addison Russell situation. The Cubs can choose to part ways with Russell before Friday's nontender deadline and if so, Torreyes is insurance as another guy besides Javy Baez who can play shortstop. If the Cubs keep Russell, they'll still need middle infield depth for the first month of the season in which Russell is suspended.

Torreyes was known as a very popular player with the Yankees, both by players and fans:

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NBC Sports Chicago

The Cubs have a bullpen question this winter: Will Carl Edwards Jr. be the answer?

By Tony Andracki

Jesse Chavez won't be riding in like a white knight to save the Cubs bullpen in 2019.

But maybe the Cubs won't need it this year. Maybe they'll somehow avoid the dreaded wall the bullpen has run into the last two seasons.

Carl Edwards Jr. could play a huge role in that.

The 27-year-old right-hander has the best pure stuff of any pitcher in the Cubs bullpen and has been described as a future closer by just about everybody in the organization. He's also one of the hardest pitchers in baseball to square up — among those who permitted at least 100 batted balls in 2018, only 11 pitchers allowed a lower exit velocity than Edwards, who sported an average exit velocity against of just 84.3 mph. (For perspective, Edwin Diaz was arguably the best reliever in baseball in 2018 and he ranked 180th with an exit velo of 87.5 mph.)

The only issue is...Edwards has a bad history of fading at the most important time of the year.

For the first four months of the year, Edwards is one of the top relievers in the game. But from August on, he's run into some trouble:

March-July (2016-18)

94 G
92.1 IP
2.44 ERA
0.99 WHIP
4.39 BB/9
13.26 K/9
0.68 HR/9
4.48 H/9

Aug-Nov (2016-18, including playoffs)

88 G
73 IP
4.32 ERA
1.23 WHIP
6.04 BB/9
10.97 K/9
0.74 HR/9
5.05 H/9

As you can see, there's not a major drop off in terms of hits or homers allowed, which means the control is the biggest issue coupled with a precipitous dip in whiffs.

That's a bad combination for any pitcher at any time let alone the most crucial point in the year.

And it's not like Edwards is just any old pitcher in the Cubs bullpen. For the first four months of the season, he's the team's top setup guy, most often utilized against the other team's heart of the order by manager Joe Maddon.

Sure, Pedro Strop and Brandon Morrow going down to injury was key this past season, but if Edwards had been able to maintain his early-season production, the Cubs would've been able to navigate things quite a bit easier in the final month. Things got so bad for Edwards, he wasn't even active for the National League Wild-Card game with what was characterized as a forearm issue.

So what's behind the late-season struggles?

Is it simply a matter of Edwards — who notably has a very slight build (listed at 6-foot-3, 170 pounds) — wearing down physically? Is it a mental block when the pressure mounts? Is it mechanical or approach-oriented?

The answer is probably a combination of all of that, but Edwards certainly struggled with the mental component in 2018, with bad moments too often snowballing — he walked nearly 1/3 of the batters he faced in September (12 of 38).

"He's focused on his entire game," Cubs president of baseball operations Theo Epstein said earlier this month. "Physically, he needs to be in great shape to be as durable as he could possibly be and get through a whole season pitching in a role that if it's not gonna be a protected role, then he needs to be really strong physically to get through the whole year. That's what he wants to get to. Mechanically, there's a few tweaks and check points he needs to remember.

"And then on the mental side, it's an area where he can work to improve — locking in his mental game so he can try to eliminate those outings where he really just misses the strike zone from the beginning and then can't self-correct. So developing a little bit more consistency with his mental game should help his consistency on the mound.

"He's one of the most talented relievers in the game, so there's significant upside by developing even incrementally more consistency."

Edwards is entering his first year of arbitration and is slated to make about \$1.4 million for 2019. Given the Cubs' financial concerns and the desire to retool the bullpen this offseason, that salary is an absolute bargain when weighed against Edwards' potential impact.

All things considered, Edwards will enter 2019 as one of the most important players on the Cubs roster.

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NBC Sports Chicago

Cubs add lefty reliever Kyle Ryan to 40-man roster

By Dan Santaromita

Randy Rosario became a key part of the Cubs bullpen as an effective lefty last season and the Cubs have brought in some additional help for 2019 in that role.

The Cubs signed left-hander Kyle Ryan to a major league contract on Wednesday. Ryan, 27, was signed to a minor league deal last January and pitched for Triple-A Iowa in 2018. He had a 2.86 ERA with 61 strikeouts and 18 walks in 66 innings for the Iowa Cubs.

Ryan also has 128 innings of major league experience over four seasons with the Tigers. He has a 3.87 career ERA in the majors with 70 strikeouts and 44 walks.

Signing a major league contract means Ryan is added to the Cubs' 40-man roster. The 40-man roster is now full at 40.

Rosario is still likely to be the Cubs' top lefty in 2019, but Ryan can bring some competition for Brian Duensing in spring training. Duensing had a 7.65 ERA with the Cubs in 2018.

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NBC Sports Chicago

The Comeback Kids: An all-time Cubs team of players who left and returned

By Chris Kamka

Ronald Torreyes is back. Well actually, he never played in a Major League game for the Cubs (he made his debut with the Dodgers), but at the very least it's an excuse to roll out the all-time* team of Cubs who left the team, played elsewhere^ and returned. Here we go...

*1900 to present. Apologies to Fred Pfeffer.

^The term "played elsewhere" disqualifies Ryne Sandberg, who didn't play at all in 1995.

Catcher: Randy Hundley (1966-73, 1976-77)

Fan favorite Hundley caught 160 games in 1968 (!!), spent 1974 with the Twins and 1975 with the Padres before playing a combined 15 games for the Cubs to close out his career in 1976-77.

First Base: Frank Thomas (1960-61, 1966)

The Frank Thomas whose final career MLB game DID come in a Chicago uniform (for the Cubs in 1966). He played for the Braves, Mets, Phillies, Astros and Braves again before rejoining the Cubs for a handful of games.

Second Base: Manny Trillo (1975-78, 1986-88)

The Venezuelan second baseman was an All-Star for the Cubs in 1977. He played for the Phillies, Indians, Expos and Giants before returning to Chicago.

Shortstop: Joe Tinker (1902-12, 1916)

He of the famed double play combination. He was player-manager for the Reds in 1913, then served in the same capacity for the Chicago Federal League team in 1914-15. Since Wrigley Field (then known as Weeghman Field) was originally built for the Federal League team, Tinker was the first Chicago manager in ballpark history.

Third Base: Randy Jackson (1950-55, 1959)

His full name was Ransom. His nickname was Handsome Ransom. He played for the Dodgers (Brooklyn and Los Angeles) and Indians before returning to the Cubs partway through the 1959 season.

Left Field: Dave Martinez (1986-88, 2000)

He returned to the Cubs yet again in 2015 to serve as Joe Maddon's bench coach.

Center Field: Doug Glanville (1996-97, 2003)

Glanville could also make the list of Phillies who left and returned.

Right Field: Jerry Morales (1974-77, 1981-83)

After his 1977 All-Star campaign for the Cubs, he was traded to the Cardinals for 1978, then played for the Tigers and Mets before coming back to Chicago.

Pitcher: Mordecai Brown (1904-12, 1916)

“Three Finger” Brown left for Cincinnati in 1913, then tried his hand in the Federal League in 1914-15 before returning to the Cubs in 1916. In his final Major League game he started opposite the great Christy Mathewson in his final Major League game in a farewell matchup.

Pitcher: Fergie Jenkins (1966-73, 1982-83)

Went to Texas, Boston and Texas again in between his stays in Chicago. By the way, he completed 30 of 39 starts in 1971. Pitchers don't do that anymore.

Pitcher: Greg Maddux (1986-92, 2004-06)

Appropriately, as Jenkins made this list, so does Maddux. The Cubs retired No. 31 for both men.

Pitcher: Rick Reuschel (1972-81, 1983-84)

“Big Daddy” compiled an impressive 69.7 Wins Above Replacement for his career. He made only 12 appearances (11 starts) for the Yankees after a midseason 1981 trade to the Yankees. He missed all of 1982 with a rotator cuff injury and after being released by the Bronx Bombers in June 1983 returned to the Cubs.

Pitcher: Kerry Wood (1998-2008, 2011-12)

Wood signed a free agent deal with the Indians on the heels of an All-Star 2008 season for the Cubs where he posted 34 saves. He was brilliant for the Yankees after a midseason 2010 trade (0.69 ERA in 26 innings) then returned home to the North Side to finish his career in 2011-12.

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Chicago Tribune

Cubs' acquisition of Ronald Torreyes adds intrigue to arbitration issues

By Mark Gonzales

In a move that creates more intrigue leading up to Friday's 7 p.m. deadline for tendering contracts to unsigned players, the Cubs acquired infielder Ronald Torreyes from the Yankees for a player to be named or cash considerations.

The deal was finalized two days before the Cubs must decide whether to tender a contract to arbitration-eligible shortstop Addison Russell, who is serving a 40-game suspension for violating Major League Baseball's domestic abuse policy and won't be eligible to return until May 3.

Backup infielder and pinch-hit maven Tommy La Stella, like Torreyes, also is arbitration eligible.

Torreyes, 26, initially joined the Cubs' organization in December of 2011 with outfielder Dave Sappelt and left-hander Travis Wood from the Reds for left-hander Sean Marshall.

Torreyes never reached higher than Double A in the Cubs' organization and was sold to the Astros in the middle of the 2013 season. But the 5-foot-8 Torreyes has ascended during parts of the last three seasons with the Yankees, batting .281 and displaying the ability to play second base, third base and shortstop.

Torreyes has drawn only 24 walks while striking out 80 times in 615 plate appearances with the Dodgers (2015) and Yankees (2016-18). His best season occurred in 2017, when he batted .292 with 36 RBIs in 108 games.

Torreyes is one of nine arbitration-eligible players for the Cubs, who face the possibility of playing a luxury tax penalty after next season with more than \$160 million earmarked to signed players and about \$41 million projected for arbitration players.

Russell is coming off his second unproductive season, but he coped with finger and shoulder ailments for nearly half of 2018.

At 24, Russell still has a chance to regain the production he displayed in 2016, when he hit 21 home runs and drove in 95 runs.

But the bigger issue for the Cubs is whether they are convinced Russell has completed his rehabilitation and can assure team officials that he can prevent domestic abuse incidents from occurring again.

By tendering a contract, the Cubs simply retain Russell's rights while negotiating a salary that could reach \$4.3 million, according to MLBtraderumors.com.

They also could monitor Russell's rehab while entertaining interest from other teams, although Russell's value won't be as high as it was before his suspension.

La Stella, a left-handed hitter, led the majors and set a Cubs franchise record with 24 pinch hits. La Stella is projected to earn \$1.2 million, so his cost is reasonable while giving manager Joe Maddon a mid-to-late-inning weapon.

But the Cubs have other pressing needs, such as another late-inning reliever and a productive full-time hitter. With Yu Darvish (\$20 million), Jason Heyward (20) and Tyler Chatwood (12.5) accounting for about one-fourth of the projected payroll, there's little wiggle room unless the Cubs are willing to pay a tax penalty.

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Chicago Tribune

Cubs fill 40-man roster after signing of left-hander Kyle Ryan
By Mark Gonzales

The Cubs temporarily filled their 40-man roster Wednesday by agreeing to terms with left-hander Kyle Ryan.

Ryan, 27, was 1-2 with a 2.86 ERA in 22 appearances (eight starts) with Triple-A Iowa. Ryan, one of the last cuts by the Cubs in spring training in 2018, has an 8-6 record and 3.87 ERA over parts of four seasons with the Tigers (2014-17).

The Cubs' 40-man roster currently has four left-handers with relief experience: Mike Montgomery, Brian Duensing, Randy Rosario and Ryan.

The Cubs appear likely to make more moves prior to Friday's 7 p.m. deadline for tendering contracts to all remaining unsigned players. Duensing (\$3.5 million) is in the second year of a two-year deal. Montgomery is arbitration eligible, and Rosario is under team control.

Ryan is 45-51 with a 3.64 ERA in 209 minor league appearances covering nine seasons.

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Chicago Sun-Times

Cubs' trade for IF Ronald Torreyes about depth, not Addison Russell's status
By Gordon Wittenmyer

The Cubs added middle infield depth in a small trade Wednesday, but it has less to do with troubled shortstop Addison Russell's status with the club than backup infielder Tommy La Stella's.

The Cubs were in need of infield depth this winter regardless of whether they decide to keep Russell through the rest of a 40-game suspension he received in September under baseball's domestic violence policy.

The trade with the Yankees for the versatile Ronald Torreyes for a player to be named later or cash fills that need, but it falls well short of any reasonable insurance against a possible decision to move on from Russell.

The move comes two days ahead of Friday's non-tender deadline, with the Cubs continuing in the final days to mull whether to tender the arbitration-eligible Russell a contract and retain his rights for 2019 – independent of the Torreyes trade.

Russell, Torreyes and La Stella are among nine arbitration-eligible Cubs subject to Friday's deadline.

Whether the Cubs tender La Stella – who set a franchise record with 24 pinch hits last season – Torreyes looks like a threat for the last backup infield job.

La Stella, a lefty, is the better hitter off the bench, but Torreyes, a right-handed hitter, is a better fielder and far more versatile.

Torreyes, 26, has played mostly second base in his professional career but played shortstop in 213 games, including 60 in the big leagues (42 starts).

He's a .281 hitter with a .310 on-base percentage – hitting .292 in a career-high 108 games in 2017, including significant work filling in when injuries sidelined shortstop Didi Gregorius and second baseman Starlin Castro.

Projected by mlbtraderumors.com for a \$900,000 arbitration salary, Torreyes also brings the important added value of having minor-league options left.

Torreyes, a popular teammate in New York, was a one-time Cubs minor-leaguer acquired from the Reds in 2011 in the Sean Marshall-Travis Wood trade during Theo Epstein's first two months as Cubs president. He was subsequently traded to the Astros for cash in July 2013.

Russell's status has been in doubt since a yearlong investigation into domestic violence allegations involving his then-wife resulted in the suspension and mandated participation in an education/counseling program.

He has 28 days left to serve at the start of the 2019 season.

Russell is projected to make about \$4.3 million through arbitration (minus the prorated percentage for the month he's suspended).

Epstein said during the general managers meetings early this month that the club is open Russell's return pending its evaluation of Russell's progress this winter and the club's expectations of his future behavior.

"Before he can play another game in a Cubs uniform, we need to know that he's serious about self-improvement and has grown to the point where he can represent the club well," Epstein said then.

The Cubs have MVP runner-up and Gold Glove finalist Javy Baez capable of handling the everyday job at short at a high level.

Roster note: The Cubs on Wednesday also re-signed left-handed reliever Kyle Ryan to a big-league deal, filling their final spot on the 40-man roster. He spent the 2018 season pitching at AAA Iowa for the Cubs after spending parts of the previous four seasons in the majors with the Tigers.

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Chicago Sun-Times

Cubs acquire infielder Ronald Torreyes from Yankees, sign LHP Kyle Ryan

By Madeline Kenney

The Cubs announced Wednesday that they acquired infielder Ronald Torreyes from the New York Yankees for a player to be named or cash considerations and signed left-hander Kyle Ryan, who was a minor-league free agent, to a major-league deal.

The Cubs first acquired Torreyes in 2011 — one year after he signed with the Cincinnati Reds as a non-drafted free agent. As part of one of the first moves made by team president Theo Epstein, the Cubs sent left-hander Sean Marshall to the Reds in December 2011 for Torreyes, left-hander Travis Wood and outfielder Dave Sappelt.

Torreyes, who made his major-league debut with the Los Angeles Dodgers in 2015, is a career .281 hitter (162-for-576) with 30 doubles, four home runs and 56 RBI in 229 games with the Dodgers and Yankees. The 26-year-old from Venezuela has played four different positions in the big league: second base (92 games), third base (74 games), shortstop (60 games) and right field (three games).

Last season, Torreyes hit .280 (28-for-100) in 41 games with the Yankees. He also spent some time with Class AAA Scranton/Wilkes-Barre.

Ryan has a 3.87 ERA in 86 mostly relief appearances for the Detroit Tigers.

At 27, he has spent the majority of his last nine seasons with six minor-league teams. Last season, Ryan went 1-2 and pitched 66 innings with a 2.86 ERA over 22 games (eight starts) with Class AAA Iowa.

With the two moves, the Cubs' 40-man roster is filled.

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Daily Herald

Cubs acquire infielder Torreyes from Yankees, sign pitcher Ryan
By Bruce Miles

The Cubs Wednesday acquired infielder Ronald Torreyes from the New York Yankees in exchange for a player to be named later or a cash consideration.

The also signed left-handed pitcher Kyle Ryan, filling their 40-man roster.

Torreyes was a member of the Cubs organization earlier this decade. They originally acquired him in a December 2011 trade with the Cincinnati Reds that also brought pitcher Travis Wood and outfielder Dave Sappelt to Chicago for pitcher Sean Marshall.

The 26-year-old Torreyes appeared in 41 games for the Yankees this year, putting up a line of .280/.294/.370 with no homers and 7 RBI.

For his big-league career, Torreyes has a line of .281/.310/.375 with 4 home runs. He has played 92 games at second base, 74 at third base, 60 at shortstop and three in right field.

Ryan, 27, went 1-2 with a 2.86 ERA in 22 appearances (8 starts) for the Cubs' Class AAA Iowa affiliate this past season after agreeing to a minor-league deal last January. He spent parts of four seasons in the majors with the Detroit Tigers (2014-17), going 8-6 with a 3.87 ERA in 86 appearances, all but 7 in relief.

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The Athletic

Mythbusters: Did the lack of a prototypical leadoff man hurt the Cubs offense in 2018?
By Sahadev Sharma

Cubs fans won't soon forget Dexter Fowler's impact in his two seasons in Chicago.

"You go, we go," as Joe Maddon loved to say.

With the way the Cubs offense has frustrated everyone over the last two years, those halcyon days of Fowler at the top of the order seem like a bygone memory. It's easy to assume some of the Cubs' inconsistencies stem from the lack of a traditional, everyday leadoff man, but is it accurate?

"We'd love to have that guy you can point to, everyone knows going in who is in the one hole, who's setting the tone, who's getting on base," Cubs president Theo Epstein said at the end of the season. "But if you don't have it, then I think it's better to just find a way to be productive in that spot and find guys who get on base. And we did. Whether it was through a player evolving, meeting a challenge, a combination of players or acquiring someone midseason – far better to be productive than to fabricate it and force someone into that role when he's not ready and suffer the consequences."

And if you're looking for more speed at the top, along with OBP, don't expect the front office to make that a top priority either.

“It’s definitely on the list of priorities, but it’s a matter of where it ranks on the list of priorities, knowing we’re not going to check everything off the list that we want to,” Epstein said. “We want to hit more homers, we want to walk more, we want to get on base more and yeah, we’d like to steal more too. But that’s probably last on that list of priorities.”

The reality is: finding the prototypical leadoff man on the open market just isn’t easy. Considering his drop-off in production for St. Louis, it was probably a good thing the Cubs said goodbye to Fowler.

Should the Cubs have made a push for Lorenzo Cain last offseason? Yes and no. Assuming Cain was a great leadoff candidate going into 2018 wasn’t really accurate. Of his 3,052 plate appearances prior to joining the Milwaukee Brewers, Cain only had 225 in the leadoff spot. Overall, he’d posted a solid, if unspectacular, .342 on-base percentage and a 6.7 percent walk rate — hardly the type of numbers that scream top-tier leadoff man. Of course, then Cain went on to compile 439 plate appearances as a leadoff man in 2018 and delivered a career-high .395 OBP and 11.5 percent walk rate, massive jumps over his previous career-bests. So, you never know.

But the Cubs’ focus last offseason was on improving what they felt was their main weakness: pitching. They decided to trust that youngsters Albert Almora Jr. and Ian Happ could hold down center field for 2018, and hopefully beyond. In hindsight, that looks like a mistake, especially considering what Yu Darvish and Tyler Chatwood did last season. But it also isn’t clear that the leadoff spot is an actual issue with the Cubs.

The above graph shows how the Cubs have performed OBP-wise from the leadoff spot, overall as an offense (non-pitchers) and in runs per game, compared to the rest of the league since their run of four straight playoff appearances began in 2015. Essentially, 100 is average and any amount above or below is the percent better or worse than league average.

On-base percentage has been shown over the years to correlate well with runs scored. As the chart shows, the Cubs’ team on-base percentage moves in line nicely with the team’s scoring, while the large drop in production from the leadoff spot in 2017 didn’t seem to have much impact on the team’s overall ability to score runs.

However, that 2017 season was a nice learning experience for the Cubs as far as experimenting with the leadoff spot goes. They tried to ride Kyle Schwarber in that spot longer than they probably wanted to. They had no quality backup for the spot with Ben Zobrist struggling through injuries. By the end of the season, Jon Jay and Zobrist became the primary leadoff men. In 2018, they pulled the plug on Ian Happ at the top pretty quickly. Zobrist’s bounce-back season helped them find some stability and Maddon rode Anthony Rizzo for an extended period until the team added Daniel Murphy to try and kickstart a dormant offense.

Of course, the Cubs would love to find their next Fowler. The reality is, those types of players are rare in today’s game. Not every team is going to have Mookie Betts at the top of their lineup. While the Cubs have been clear that they’ll continue to utilize their depth and avoid a set lineup like many successful teams do, perhaps some consistency at the top would help in a small, immeasurable way.

But the reality is, the lack of consistency at the top isn’t what sunk this offense last season. After the season ended, Epstein famously said that in the second half the Cubs’ offense “broke.” There were a litany of reasons why that happened (as run down in this deconstruction of the team’s disastrous second-half offensive performance), but production from the top just isn’t one of them.

The Cubs' leadoff OBP+ was 109 after the All-Star break. Their overall OBP+ was 100 and the Runs/G+ was 91. Put more simply, they had the fourth-best OBP and sixth-best wRC+ from the leadoff spot in baseball in the season's final 70 games. But their overall OBP dropped to 14th, their wRC+ to 21st (tied with the dreadful San Diego Padres and Baltimore Orioles) and their 4.07 runs/game during that span was seventh-worst in baseball.

Here's what Epstein said, among many other things, about the offensive issues the Cubs had down the stretch.

"The indicators in the second half were not where we want to be," Epstein said. "We were among the worst in the league at hitting the ball out of the ballpark, our power was way down, our walk rate was dramatically down, our OPS was down, our runs scored were down, we hit more ground balls in the second half than any other team by a huge margin. And our goal is to hit line drives and fly balls out of the ballpark."

Notice Epstein didn't mention fixing any issues with the leadoff spot. And why would he? The Cubs were statistically one of the most productive teams when it came to that spot in the lineup (second in baseball in OBP and fourth in wRC+). Would they take production out of center field like what Fowler gave them in 2016 or what Cain gave the Brewers in 2018? Undoubtedly. But they'd take that at any spot in the lineup, regardless of whether that player batted first, ninth or anywhere in between.

The Cubs need improvement in pretty much every other spot in the lineup. Most of that will come from a healthy season from Kris Bryant and a rebound year from Willson Contreras. It's finding more power from the team as a whole. Even adding another impact bat to the middle of the lineup — whether it be through spending big in free agency or for Epstein to get creative in the trade market — wouldn't hurt either.

The leadoff spot is immensely important. But so are any of the spots near the top of a lineup. As long as the best offensive players get the most at-bats (and obviously, the leadoff spot gets the most plate appearances by season's end), and those players produce up to or near their capabilities and the rest of the lineup falls into line, then the Cubs' offense will be fine.

The Cubs will look to correct the many flaws that were exposed over the season's final few months. They'll want more power and more consistent production up and down the lineup. If there's a single intangible they're focused on, it won't be forcing consistency at the top to find some immeasurable advantage, it will be finding players who can provide that edge and sense of urgency that Javier Báez, Jon Lester and Epstein spoke of when the season ended.

A lot needs to change for the Cubs to right the ship offensively in 2019. But if they can correct those issues while getting similar production out of the leadoff spot to what they did last season, they'll be exactly where they need to be.

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Cubs.com

Cubs sign lefty Ryan, bolster bullpen depth

By Jordan Bastian

One of the items on the Cubs' to-do list this offseason was to add more left-handed depth to their bullpen. The club took a step in that direction on Wednesday by retaining one of its free agents.

Chicago announced that it reached an agreement on a Major League contract with left-hander Kyle Ryan, who was a Minor League free agent this offseason after spending last year in the Cubs' system. With Ryan added to the fold, the team's 40-man roster is now at capacity.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Cubs acquired infielder Ronald Torreyes from the Yankees in exchange for a player to be named later or cash.

Ryan, 27, spent parts of four Major League seasons with the Tigers from 2014-17, but he stayed at Triple-A Iowa in '18. In 22 Minor League games, which included eight starts, Ryan turned in a 2.86 ERA with 61 strikeouts against 18 walks. He held lefties to a .237 average (.596 OPS) and was tough on righties (.193 average and .620 OPS) in his stint with Iowa.

In his MLB career, Ryan has posted a 3.87 ERA across 86 appearances, including seven starts. Over 128 innings in the big leagues, the left-hander has 70 strikeouts against 44 walks.

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Cubs.com

Cubs face non-tender deadline with Russell

By Jordan Bastian

By the end of this week, there will be a little more clarity about how the Cubs plan to address the middle of their infield next season.

There is, of course, no doubt that Javier Baez -- the National League's runner-up for the Most Valuable Player Award -- will have a home up the middle. The question that needs to be answered is how, if at all, shortstop Addison Russell will factor into the 2019 equation. By Friday's 7 p.m. CT deadline for tendering contracts to any unsigned players on the 40-man roster, Russell will either remain in the fold or hit free agency.

Russell is one of nine arbitration-eligible players on the Cubs' roster who fall under the criteria for Friday's deadline. On Wednesday, the Cubs acquired arbitration-eligible infielder Ronald Torreyes from the Yankees for a player to be named or cash considerations. That move adds a layer of middle-infield depth as the Cubs plot the course of action for Russell.

Six players within this winter's arbitration class -- Baez, Kris Bryant, Carl Edwards Jr., Kyle Hendricks, Mike Montgomery and Kyle Schwarber -- are all part of the '19 plans. Russell and pinch-hitting specialist Tommy La Stella are the only two who at least warrant discussion about being non-tendered.

There are a few layers to the situation surrounding the decision on Russell.

First, Russell is in the midst of a 40-game suspension for violating Major League Baseball's Joint Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Child Abuse Policy. He will not be eligible for activation until May 3, meaning the Cubs would still need a contingency plan for the season's first month, if the team opts to offer Russell a contract for the upcoming campaign.

There is also the decline in Russell's performance over the past two seasons. Following a breakout 2016 showing, in which the shortstop was an NL All-Star and hit 21 homers with 95 RBIs, Russell has turned in a .245/.311/.376 slash line in 240 games across the 2017-18 seasons. In that two-year period, he has posted a 79 OPS+, meaning he has been 21 percent below MLB average as a hitter.

Last year, Russell dealt with a left middle finger sprain down the stretch and hit .201 (.508 OPS) in 57 games from July 1 through the end of the season. That came after he hit .285 (.762 OPS) in 73 games over the season's first three months. In 130 games overall, Russell hit .250/.317/.340 with five homers, 38 RBIs and 13 Defensive Runs Saved at short (1,003 2/3 innings) last year. Russell is just 24 years old, so age is on his side.

Russell made \$3.2 million last season and is expected to get a raise via arbitration for the upcoming year, but his salary is not exorbitant for a club with a payroll that will run north of \$200 million in 2019. That said, the Cubs might also want to save some dollars as they account for exceeding MLB's luxury-tax threshold. If Russell is not retained, Baez could stick at shortstop and the Cubs would then weigh internal and external alternatives for second base.

Ben Zobrist and Ian Happ offer in-house options for second, while the open market includes Cubs free agent Daniel Murphy, along with DJ LeMahieu and Jed Lowrie.

Torreyes offers depth around the infield, as he has appeared in 92 games at second, 74 at third and 60 at short in parts of four seasons with the Dodgers and Yankees. Over the past three years with New York, the 26-year-old infielder hit .281/.308/.374 in 221 games. This marks a return to the Cubs for Torreyes, who was acquired in December 2011 from the Reds as part of the Sean Marshall trade. Torreyes was acquired by the Astros two years later and found his way to the Yankees by '16.

La Stella seems likely to be tendered, but the Cubs will undoubtedly weigh whether his potential price tag (after earning \$950,000 in 2018) makes sense for a player used primarily as a pinch-hitter. La Stella excelled in that role off manager Joe Maddon's bench, though. In 77 pinch-hit at-bats in '18, La Stella hit .312 and set a Cubs single-season record for pinch-hits (24).

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Infielder Torreyes acquired from Yankees

By Jordan Bastian

The Cubs addressed a need for some up-the-middle depth on Wednesday and did so by landing a player who was once a prospect in their organization.

Chicago acquired infielder Ronald Torreyes from the Yankees in exchange for a player to be named later or cash considerations, adding a versatile defender for multiple spots around the diamond. The fact that Torreyes can handle second base and shortstop gives the Cubs an added layer of depth as the team maps out its plans for its infield alignment next season.

National League MVP runner-up Javier Baez finished the season at shortstop and will likely begin the 2019 campaign at that same spot, given Addison Russell's uncertain status. The Cubs have until 7 p.m. CT on Friday to decide whether to tender Russell a contract (along with any other unsigned members of the 40-man roster) for next season. Even if Russell is retained, the shortstop won't be eligible to be activated until May 3, the end of his 40-game suspension for violating Major League Baseball's Joint Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Child Abuse Policy.

Torreyes provides depth at shortstop behind Baez, who could easily shift back to second base, if necessary. Another scenario for the Cubs would be pursuing an alternative for second base this winter and keeping Baez at short. Either way, having Torreyes as a bench option for both positions helps

Chicago's planning. Ben Zobrist, Ian Happ and David Bote represent other in-house alternatives for second.

Over parts of four Major League seasons playing for the Dodgers and Yankees, the 26-year-old Torreyes has appeared in 92 games at second, 74 at third base and 60 at shortstop. In the past three years with New York, he has hit .281/.308/.374 in 221 games. Torreyes hit .280 with eight extra-base hits and a .664 OPS in 102 plate appearances with the Yankees in 2018.

Torreyes was originally acquired by the Cubs in December 2011 as part of a trade with the Reds that sent Sean Marshall to Cincinnati. The Cubs later dealt Torreyes to the Astros for international slot money in July 2013, and the infielder eventually found his way into the Yankees' system by the 2016 season.

Torreyes, who is eligible for arbitration for the first time this offseason, has strong bat-to-ball ability, posting an 85.1 percent contact rate over his career in the Majors. For perspective, only 20 qualified MLB batters had a higher contact rate during 2018. Torreyes also boasts a 91.5 percent contact rate on pitches in the strike zone in his career.

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