

José Ramírez: He gambled on himself and found stardom

By Zack Meisel 1

CLEVELAND — A yellow ball struck the window of the library, which startled José Ramírez. His eyes widened and the circle of students sitting before him, hanging on the All-Star's every word and every twitch, erupted in laughter.

Little surprises Ramírez anymore. He's typically a step ahead of pitchers, prepared to pounce on any feeble fastball foolishly fired his way. He's typically a step ahead of his teammates, as he darts across the dugout after supplying one of his signature smacks to the back of Edwin Encarnacion's dome. He's typically a step ahead of his "Mario Kart" opponent, as he waits for the perfect moment to deploy the rogue turtle shell that disrupts their peaceful cruise along the sandy shores of Koopa Troopa Beach.

He hasn't traveled a seamless journey to stardom, though. Ramírez opted to bet on himself around the time he became a teenager, when adults would wager wads of cash on the pint-sized shortstop's performance in his native Baní in the Dominican Republic. He staked his future on baseball, and he granted himself no margin for error.

When Ramírez first sat down in the library, he commended a student for his similar haircut, with blond springs resting atop his head. He then stressed a simple message to the awestruck students: Don't be like me.

Many players receive a hefty signing bonus or devise a secure fallback plan should their baseball pursuit fizzle. Ramírez played the lottery, and he won, and he is The Athletic Cleveland's 2018 Person of the Year.

"One in a million," he said to the students. "I was that (one)."

The Thomas Jefferson International Newcomers Academy houses students from pre-K to 12th grade during their transition to the U.S. Those new to the country attend the school for two years, learning the language and culture before shifting to the Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

Ramírez visited with a group of students on the final day of August. They hailed from Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Cuba, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico and the Dominican. Each spoke fluent Spanish.

Ramírez, wearing a pewter shirt, black jeans and a sparkling watch, sat near the far corner of the room, a collection of Oxford and Merriam-Webster dictionaries resting on a shelf behind him. A few students sported Indians gear. One teacher donned a bright red "Yes Way, José" T-shirt.

Ramírez craves the limelight on the field. He wants to be the imposing figure hovering over home plate with the game hanging in the balance, a wad of tobacco tucked under his lower lip and a menacing glare aimed at the pitcher. He oozes personality and energy, strutting through the clubhouse on a Sunday morning, shouting random words and phrases and pitchy song lyrics in English and Spanish as his teammates wipe the crust from the corners of their eyes.

A school library is not his element. Neither is a speaking engagement with a room full of students, prepped to pepper him with inquiries about his background, his career and his experience in America.

Ramírez dropped out of school long before he reached high school age. When he arrived in the U.S. at 17, at the Indians' complex in Goodyear, Arizona, he couldn't have felt more lost, more out of place, the runt of the litter in a foreign setting, backed only by the faint dream of a major-league opportunity and a family-aiding salary.

"I consider that to be the worst thing that has happened to me in my life," Ramírez said.

And that made the chance to connect with the students at Thomas Jefferson so appealing to a guy who, away from his teammates and the cameras and the baseball diamond, is soft-spoken and humble. When he returns to rural Baní each winter, he treks to the familiar dirt fields and plays baseball. The last few years, a pack of kids has followed him, like ducklings to their mother. (Ramírez noted that the kids waddle and swing their arms like he does.)

This was a chance to preach the value of education and communication, a chance to explain how fortunate he is, and how his journey isn't one to model.

"Nobody knows the path that he took," said Anna Bolton, the Indians' education and language coordinator, "all the way back to his development before he signed. These international players, sometimes as young as 12, they leave home and start working out with trainers. Then they get signed at 16 and there are obstacles that come with that, including leaving school early, which results in limited literacy skills in Spanish, which makes it harder to learn English. They don't fully understand their own language, so it's going to be way harder to learn another language." Ramírez's younger sister often teases him.

You're a person — you have money. But I'm a professional. I'm a professional.

>Ramírez laughs. He understands her argument. She's an architect. She stayed in school and sought out her career. Ramírez had no backup plan, no degree to serve as a safety net.

"I'm an athlete," Ramírez told the students. "Now, that's a profession, because that's what we've chosen. But she's the real professional. That's why I say, 'Never stop studying.' ... You need to keep moving forward in whatever sport you're in, but never drop out of school."

And then came the forthright, to-the-point question from a curious, candid student.

Why did you drop out of school?

“Even I don’t understand it,” Ramírez answered. “Or, rather, that’s why I’m advising all of you not to leave school. ... I only wanted to play ball, you know what I mean? That was an error that I committed. That was a mistake that I made. Listen, very few make it in this business. Very few. It’s very difficult, extremely difficult.”

Part of the challenge is adjusting to unfamiliar surroundings and a foreign language. When Ramírez first arrived in Arizona, he didn’t know what it meant when people said “Hi.”

“Everybody in the world knows how to say that word,” Ramírez said. “I didn’t.”

He would starve for stretches of 12 or 13 hours because he didn’t know how to order food. He waited until an English-speaking teammate was ready to eat and he’d tag along. Sometimes, he offered to treat just to persuade them to accompany him.

“I couldn’t even eat Chipotle,” he said, “because I didn’t know anything.”

He could fall out of bed and slap singles through the infield, but he struggled to survive off the field. His family kept him going. He strived to earn enough money to support them.

“Sometimes, one starts to lose hope,” Ramírez said. “I, myself, felt desperate a lot.”

This year, Bolton implemented a new education program for the organization’s international signees at its Dominican baseball academy. Teachers visit the academy once a week and offer lessons in the core subjects: math, language arts, science and social studies, all to guide players toward high school diplomas.

Bolton hopes to host a graduation ceremony next November. She has pegged Erik González — traded last month to the Pirates — as her ideal candidate to deliver the commencement speech.

When González attended the academy nearly a decade ago, before beginning the arduous climb through the farm system, he would drive a few hours to his hometown each Saturday, take high school classes Sunday and then drive back to the academy Sunday night.

“Long days,” González said, smiling. “But it’s really important.”

“Imagine how tolling that is,” Bolton said. “His parents made him (do it). They really value education.”

Bolton is also planning to enhance the team’s English program with a baseball-specific curriculum. She scripted a proposal for these initiatives last year, and the front office signed off without hesitation.

It’s all to guide players like Ramírez along their path to the majors. Or, in the event that a long-lasting career in baseball doesn’t pan out — the end result for the majority of aspiring players — it’s an extra dose of preparation for the real world.

Bolton can picture Ramírez in her classes at the academy eight years ago. He was shy, always sitting in the back of the classroom, praying she wouldn’t call on him.

Now, he’s a back-to-back AL MVP finalist. That doesn’t mean he has cleared every last hurdle. Ramírez suffered through a miserable slump at the plate in August and September, which fed into a second consecutive October disappearing act in the ALDS.

If history tells us anything, it’s that he’ll unearth a way to conquer this latest obstacle. He did still finish third in the MVP balloting, with a .939 OPS, 38 doubles, 26 more walks than strikeouts and a career-high 39 home runs.

“There are people who spend a million years (playing the lottery) and they don’t win,” Ramírez said. “I had some luck, I played the lotto and I won. I dropped out of school to get into baseball, knowing how difficult baseball is. I would have ended up (in trouble).”

Earlier in the day, Ramírez had signed about 100 Indians-themed notebooks, intended to encourage the kids to practice their English writing. At the end of the session, he handed out each one and posed for a photo with each student and teacher.

A faculty member made an announcement in English. The students all nodded to confirm they understood.

“You all are good,” Ramírez said. “Now, you all have to help me with my English.”

Rosenthal: Angels more active than anticipated; Harper to St. Louis unlikely; Reds want to move Scooter; more notes
By Ken Rosenthal 39m ago 11

LAS VEGAS – The Angels were the sleeper team at the 2011 winter meetings, signing free-agent first baseman Albert Pujols and left-hander C.J. Wilson seemingly out of nowhere.

Might history repeat? Probably not, but the Angels are active to perhaps a greater extent than anticipated. According to major-league sources, the team made quiet runs at free-agent left-hander Patrick Corbin and righty Nathan Eovaldi, only to fall short with both.

Corbin went to the Nationals for six years, \$140 million. Eovaldi returned to the Red Sox for four years, \$68 million. The Angels still can bid on righty Charlie Morton and lefties Dallas Keuchel, J.A. Happ and Yusei Kikuchi, along with a host of lesser starters. Upgrades to the rotation will be necessary if the team is serious about returning to contention behind perennial MVP candidate Mike Trout.

Shohei Ohtani, who had a 3.31 ERA in 10 starts last season, will not pitch in 2019 after undergoing Tommy John surgery. Garrett Richards, who had a 3.66 ERA in 16 starts before undergoing his own Tommy John, signed a two-year, \$15 million free-agent deal with the Padres.

As presently constituted, the Angels' rotation consists of Andrew Heaney, Felix Peña, Jaime Barria, Tyler Skaggs and Nick Tropeano. The team also is looking for a catcher and considering infield help, according to general manager Billy Eppler. The question is whether owner Arte Moreno will authorize an increase in spending in the club's first year under new manager Brad Ausmus.

The Angels, who opened last season with a club-record \$166.6 million payroll, currently project to \$140.6 million, according to Cot's Baseball Contracts. Their urgency should only be growing – their last postseason victory was in 2009, two years before Trout joined the club. And Trout is under contract for only more two seasons, though talks about an extension are expected later this winter.

Earlier this off-season, citing sources, I reported the Angels were trying to clear money by entertaining offers for outfielder Kole Calhoun, who will earn \$10.5 million in 2019, and reliever Blake Parker, who projected to earn in the \$3.3 million to \$3.5 million range in arbitration. They eventually non-tendered Parker, and a trade of Calhoun further would increase their payroll flexibility.

It might not be 2011 all over again, but the Angels are a team to watch. A sleeper.

Harper in St. Louis? Still difficult to imagine

The Cardinals' lineup improved dramatically when the team acquired first baseman Paul Goldschmidt from the Diamondbacks. The signing of free-agent outfielder Bryce Harper would make the offense even better, but the move still appears to be a long shot.

While the Cardinals' payroll flexibility will greatly increase after 2019, their roster inflexibility remains an obstacle to any deal with Harper.

Right fielder Dexter Fowler, owed \$49.5 million over the next three years, is virtually impossible to trade after a sub-par injury-marred season, and almost certainly will be unhappy if the Cardinals reduced him to a reserve.

Left fielder Marcell Ozuna also would be difficult to move – he underwent a shoulder cleanup procedure at the end of October and is entering his final year of arbitration before free agency, in which he projects to earn more than \$13 million, according to MLBTradeRumors.com.

Might the Cardinals simply dump Ozuna and consider whatever money they lose part of the price of business for landing Harper, who would move from right to left field? Such a move would be completely out of character for ownership. And if Ozuna returns to form, the difference between his production and Harper's next season would not be significant enough to warrant such a mammoth outlay, at least short-term.

The more likely move for the Cardinals remains the signing of a free-agent left-handed reliever such as Zach Britton or Andrew Miller. The addition of Goldschmidt and move of Matt Carpenter to third base will make Jedd Gyorko a \$13 million bench player, but the Cardinals are not necessarily uncomfortable with that idea, knowing Gyorko would protect them at every infield position.

A trade of José Martínez, whose defensive deficiencies make him better suited for the AL, is more feasible. But Martínez, who will play one more year at near the major-league minimum of \$550,000 before becoming eligible for arbitration, also could be useful to the Cardinals off the bench.

Bye-bye Scotter in Cincy?

Reds second baseman Scooter Gennett averaged 25 home runs and an .859 OPS the past two seasons, but projects to earn \$10.7 million in his final year of arbitration before hitting the open market.

The Reds, sources say, would like to move him.

A trade of Gennett would open second base for top prospect Nick Senzel and also create other possibilities, such as the signing of free agent Josh Harrison, a Cincinnati native who can play both infield and outfield.

The problem for the Reds in trying to deal Gennett is the free-agent market is flooded with second basemen, from DJ LeMahieu to Jed Lowrie to Brian Dozier, Daniel Murphy to Ian Kinsler to Neil Walker.

Around the horn

*A rival executive in contact with the Indians says the team is open to both straight trades of Corey Kluber or Trevor Bauer as well as those in which they would attach the contract of a highly paid position player to one of the pitchers.

Jason Kipnis and Edwin Encarnación – owed \$17 million and \$25 million respectively, including buyouts – would be leading candidates to move in the latter scenario. Such a trade would save money, an important consideration for the Indians. But it also would lessen the return significantly.

Kipnis, who turns 32 on April 3, is coming off a .704 OPS, his lowest since 2014, and some teams question whether he would accept a secondary role. Encarnacion, who turns 36 on Jan. 7, is coming off an .810 OPS, his lowest since '11.

*As The Athletic's Dennis Lin writes, the Padres are one of the teams trying to trade for Marlins catcher J.T. Realmuto. One club official, however, does not sound especially optimistic, saying the Marlins currently are asking for "Koufax, DiMaggio and Ted Williams in return."

No Padre has ever been confused with any of those Hall of Famers, but Baseball America recently ranked the team's farm system No. 1 in the sport. One prospect who definitely is in play, according to a rival executive: Left-hander Adrian Morejon, who cost the Pads \$22 million – \$11 million in signing bonus, \$11 million in penalty – when he signed as a 17-year-old out of Cuba in 2016.

*The Mariners are not simply selling. According to a source, they are one of many teams expressing interest in right-hander Blake Parker, who became a free agent when the Angels non-tendered him rather than offer him a contract through the arbitration process.

Mariners general manager Jerry Dipoto previously signed Parker as a free agent on Dec. 17, 2015, only to lose him on a waiver claim to the Yankees the following August. The M's, after trading Edwin Díaz and Álex Colomé, need late-inning help. Anthony Swarzak, acquired from the Mets, currently projects as their closer.

*The markets for the top free-agent relievers below closer Craig Kimbrel appear to be intense. At least six teams are in the mix for right-hander David Robertson, according to MLB.com's Mark Feinsand, and nine are showing legitimate interest in Andrew Miller, baseball sources say. Lefty Zach Britton and righties Adam Ottavino, Kelvin Herrera, Jeury Familia and Joe Kelly also are in the large group of quality free-agent relievers. The signing of one could produce a domino effect leading to a flurry of moves, but due to the extent of the demand, the market might not sort out quickly.

Indians enter 2018 winter meetings with pressing need to make a splash

Ryan Lewis Beacon

The Indians enter the 2018 winter meetings with much work to be done and a label of traditional tranquility to shed.

Historically, the Indians have been one of the quieter teams during baseball's annual winter assembly. As the Indians have methodically constructed their roster, carefully allocating their limited resources, they often have let the other 29 teams enjoy a bigger slice of the frenzy of the winter meetings, much of it resembling a blurred haze of discussions, news and rumors.

On Monday, the entire baseball world will converge on the Mandalay Bay resort and casino in Las Vegas for a few days, turning it into its own baseball-themed micro-city full of agents, executives and reporters buzzing between suites, the lobby and, this year especially, blackjack tables and poker rooms.

This time, the Indians not only stand as one of the most intriguing clubs at the winter meetings, but one that is looking — and needing — to make at least one (additional) major move this offseason.

Several key players leaving via free agency and expected raises to many more have left the Indians with a top-heavy roster, one that boasts an elite starting rotation and a couple of Most Valuable Player candidates but also one with holes in the outfield and the bullpen.

The Indians' front office has already made one move (along with a series of smaller ones) that would have been their headliner in any other winter meetings setting, trading All-Star catcher Yan Gomes to the Washington Nationals. That deal netted outfielder Daniel Johnson, 23, pitcher Jefry Rodriguez, 25, along with a player to be named.

In all likelihood, that won't be the end of the major moves made by the Indians this winter. That trade freed up \$7 million and gave the Indians some controllable pieces, but their roster woes are far from addressed.

Carlos Carrasco was locked up to a contract extension on Thursday, keeping him with the Indians through at least 2022 and potentially 2023. It'll put even more heat on rumors surrounding a potential trade involving ace Corey Kluber or Trevor Bauer.

The Indians need to address their outfield with Michael Brantley a free agent. As currently constructed, Leonys Martin, Greg Allen and Tyler Naquin make up some of their primary options. Bradley Zimmer is out for at least a significant portion of the season after undergoing shoulder surgery last July. Jordan Luplow was added to the mix in a trade with the Pittsburgh Pirates involving utility man Erik Gonzalez. Oscar Mercado was acquired from the St. Louis Cardinals last August. Trayce Thompson was offered a minor-league deal with an invitation to spring training. Jason Kipnis could be moved from second base to left field. The Indians have serviceable options, but replacing Brantley is a tall order. It is a dilemma that, as of now, for which the Indians don't have the answer. Among any legitimate World Series contenders, the Indians' outfield falls well short of ideal.

The bullpen, meanwhile, has to replace Andrew Miller and Cody Allen, whose absences would — barring a return as a free agent — leave moon-crater-sized holes in how the club can fill their quota of high-leverage innings in front of closer Brad Hand. One or more of the likes of Adam Cimber, Dan Otero, Tyler Olson and a few others could be needed to step into a much larger role.

The Indians have already dealt from a surplus (catcher) and are looking to do it again with their rotation. But it takes two to tango. The Indians will spend the winter meetings holed up in their suite, trying to find a suitor who not only is willing to pay the high price to acquire a Kluber or a Bauer, but one who also has the players they covet. Or they could end up moving somebody else on the roster, effectively trying to piece together a jigsaw puzzle any way they can.

They say what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas. But the club the Indians currently have and the one they'll bring to spring training likely won't be the same. Their chips need to be pushed to the middle of the table.

If the Indians don't find the trade for which they're searching during the winter meetings — Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday make up the bulk of the itinerary before the Rule 5 Draft on Thursday — they would still have a couple of months before heading to Goodyear, Arizona, for spring training. It'll be a gamble to trade away such a valuable piece of the vaunted starting rotation, but it's just as risky to leave the roster needs unaddressed.

Las Vegas might be the perfect destination to mirror this Indians offseason.

Ryan Lewis

Akron Beacon Journal LOADED: 12.10.2018

What are the Cleveland Indians going to do in the outfield for 2019?

By Paul Hoynes,

LAS VEGAS -- Maybe the Indians' outfield will be saved by whatever return the Indians get if they trade Corey Kluber or Trevor Bauer. But one thing is certain, the outfield needs work -- lots and lots of work.

First let's review what they've lost. Michael Brantley is a free agent. So is Rajai Davis, Brandon Guyer, Melky Cabrera and Brandon Barnes. Lonnie Chisenhall, another free agent, has already signed a one-year deal with the Pirates.

All of them played outfield for the Tribe last season.

Bradley Zimmer, the opening day center fielder, is still recovering from surgery on his right shoulder. Tyler Naquin, who played 61 games in the outfield last season, had surgery on his right hip, but is expected to be ready for spring training. Leonys Martin recently received a clean bill of health. But he was hit with a life-threatening bacterial infection in August after playing just six games with the Indians.

So far the Indians have added one outfielder to the 40-man roster since the end of the season -- Jordan Luplow from Pittsburgh. Oscar Mercado, an outfielder acquired from St. Louis in July, will be in spring training for the first time as well. Trayce Thompson, who been in the big leagues with the White Sox, Dodgers and Oakland, will be in Goodyear, Ariz. as a spring training invitee.

There is still a lot of winter left and it would appear the front office has bigger fish to fry at the moment. They always could re-sign Barnes or Cabrera, or someone just like them, if Kluber or Bauer aren't traded.

But one way or the other an outfield whose core is Greg Allen, Martin, Naquin and Luplow is going to need some reinforcements.

Yan Gomes (right) and Corey Kluber. (Chuck Crow, The Plain Dealer)

Update on the player to be named and the Rule 5 Draft

The Indians received three players from Washington for catcher Yan Gomes -- outfielder Daniel Johnson, right-hander Jefry Rodriguez and a player to be named.

The Indians will supposedly have a better idea who that player is after the Rule 5 Draft on Thursday. In other words, the player to be named was not deemed talented enough for the Nationals to protect on their 40-man roster.

The Tribe came to the winter meetings with their roster at 39, meaning they could select someone at the Rule 5 Draft.

They could also lose some players. According to Indians Prospective, the Tribe has 23 unprotected players eligible for the Rule 5 Draft. The list includes outfielder Oscar Gonzalez, who hit .292 (134-for-462) with 13 homers and 52 RBI at Class A Lake County. Gonzalez ranks 23rd on the Tribe's top 30 prospect list according to mlb.com.

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Outsiders Lee Smith and Harold Baines crash Hall of Fame party; Albert Belle, Joe Carter fall short

By Paul Hoynes,

LAS VEGAS -- A closer and DH, outsiders to a part of the baseball community, were elected Sunday to the Hall of Fame by the Today's Game Era Committee at the winter meetings.

Lee Smith and Harold Baines received the necessary 75 percent of the vote from the 16-member panel of historians, executives and Hall of Famers. Smith was named on all 16 ballots, while Baines was named on 12 of 16. Lou Piniella, who started his playing career with the Indians and was nominated as a manager, missed by one vote as he was named on 11 of 16 ballots.

Albert Belle, Orel Hershiser, Joe Carter, Will Clark, Charlie Manuel, Davey Johnson and George Steinbrenner received fewer than five votes each.

The 6-5, 220-pound Smith pitched for 18 seasons with eight teams, but spent the bulk of his career with the Cubs. When he retired after the 2006 season, his 478 saves were the most in history. He still ranks third behind Mariano Rivera's 652 saves and Trevor Hoffman's 601 saves.

"I've got to go in (to Cooperstown) as a Cubbie," said Smith. "They gave me the chance to get to the big leagues."

Closers have not always been treated kindly by Hall of Fame voters, but they are on a good run of late. Hoffman was elected last year. Smith joined him on Sunday and Rivera is all but guaranteed to be elected by the Baseball Writers Association of America when its ballot is announced on Jan. 22.

"It will be awesome," said Lee, about a possible induction with Rivera. "A lot of closers don't have longevity now, but that young man (Rivera) didn't come up until he was 26 or 27 and he did it all with one pitch (the cut fastball)."

Smith was a seven-time All-Star. He led his league in saves four times and had 10 seasons of 30 or more saves.

He spent 15 years on the BBWAA ballot until his eligibility expired last year. He never received more than 50.6 percent of the vote. On Sunday he was plowing the snow out of his driveway on his tractor when the call came.

"This is pretty much the most nervous I've ever been (waiting for a vote)," said Smith.

Baines, a left-handed hitter, played 22 seasons, most of them with the Chicago White Sox. He made a cameo with the Indians in 1999 on the way to recording 2,866 career hits, 384 homers and 1,628 RBI. Baines, a six-time All-Star, played 1,643 of his 2,830 games at DH because of bad knees. He played 1,042 games in right field and hit .324 with five homers and 16 RBI in 31 postseason games.

He was twice voted the AL's top DH, an honor that has now been named after Edgard Martinez. Like closers, players who spend most of their careers at DH have not received a lot of love from Cooperstown voters.

"I think they look at us as half a player because all we do is hit," said Baines. "We don't play in the field."

Baines was only on the BBWAA ballot five years and never received more than 6.1 percent of the vote.

Well, the times may be changing for DHs as well as closers. Martinez, on the BBWAA ballot for the last time, has a good chance of joining Baines and Smith at the Cooperstown induction ceremonies at the end of July. Martinez received 70.4 percent of the vote last year.

Baines said he was at home with his wife and their dogs when he got the call.

"I wasn't really expecting it, but I'm very grateful that it happened," said Baines. "We've got four children who are very proud of their dad.

"I had orders (from the Hall of Fame) not to tell anybody until 8 p.m. Since then my phone hasn't stopped ringing."

The 16-member Today's Game Era committee was comprised of Hall of Famers Roberto Alomar, Bert Blyleven, Pat Gillick, Tony La Russa, Greg Maddux, Joe Morgan, John Schuerholz, Ozzie Smith and Joe Torre; MLB executives Al Avila, Paul Beeston, Andy MacPhail and Jerry Reinsdorf and veteran media members/historians Steve Hirdt, Tim Kurkjian and Claire Smith.

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Rosenthal: 'Agent Wars' between Scott Boras and Dan Lozano are a huge part of the Harper, Machado pursuits

By Ken Rosenthal

It's not just Bryce Harper vs. Manny Machado in the Battle for Biggest Baseball Contract Ever. It's Scott Boras vs. Dan Lozano in the latest installment of Agent Wars, a rarely discussed subtext in every offseason.

Few care about which agent reigns supreme, but if you want to know why the Harper and Machado negotiations are likely to drag beyond the winter meetings in Las Vegas this week, you certainly cannot ignore the egos — er, desires — of Boras and Lozano.

The two agents have a history. Machado, the third overall pick in the 2010 draft, first was represented by Boras, then switched to Lozano in February 2011. Alex Rodriguez, who also started his career with Boras, went to Lozano in May 2011, but only after he had signed two record free-agent contracts with Boras as his agent of record.

The prevailing assumption in the industry is that Boras wants to set new benchmarks with Harper's free-agent deal, whether in total guaranteed salary, average annual value or — preferably — both. Therefore, he will want Machado to sign first, securing the negotiating equivalent of "last licks," in which he would step to the plate knowing the number to beat. Boras' track record also indicates he would be willing to go to extra innings, moving at his own pace, stretching talks into January, if necessary.

Machado, though, is not necessarily going to come off the board quickly. As I reported on Saturday, it's not just the Phillies, White Sox and Yankees that are pursuing him. One rival executive hears at least three other teams are in the mix and will meet with Lozano at the meetings. What is not known: Whether Machado has met personally — or when he will meet — with interested clubs.

Such meetings are necessary in the wake of Machado's "I'm not Johnny Hustle" comments and assorted on-field antics during the postseason. Yankees owner Hal Steinbrenner, speaking to the team's YES Network, said of Machado last month, "There needs to be a sit-down before we're comfortable." Other executives and owners surely share that sentiment.

Boras already has staged a series of meetings with teams in Harper's hometown of Las Vegas, as well as Los Angeles. The teams and particulars are not known; the Dodgers disputed a Yahoo report saying they met with Harper, and minority owner Magic Johnson went so far as to publicly deny his reported presence at the supposed sit-down. Well, another round of meetings is expected in Vegas, if not with the Dodgers (who surely are interested in Harper at some level), then other clubs.

But how many teams actually are involved, knowing Boras' goal surely is to exceed Giancarlo Stanton's record \$325 million contract, which the Wasserman Media Group secured from the Marlins without the benefit of free agency? As always when Boras aims high, rival agents — not to mention club executives — suspect his market is limited. One agent said of the interest in Harper, "It's Philly bidding against Philly."

Agents annually engage in such wishful thinking, hoping Boras gets his comeuppance, gets caught looking in free agency. To some degree, it happened last offseason. Boras negotiated the winter's largest deal — Eric Hosmer's eight-year, \$144 million contract with the Padres — but J.D. Martinez (five years, \$110 million) Jake Arrieta (three years, \$75 million, Phillies) and Mike Moustakas (one year, \$6.5 million) were among his clients who struck agreements for less than they were believed to be seeking.

Of course, Boras was not the only agent to experience disappointment last offseason. But as the most publicly vocal player representative — the only one to stage well-orchestrated and well-attended news conferences at the general managers' meetings and winter meetings — he is a target of resentment and envy from his peers.

His criticisms of the owners for their lack of spending fill a void created in part by the reluctance of other agents and union chief Tony Clark to address such topics. But while most agents respect Boras and his accomplishments, many accuse him of grandstanding, resent that the media too often accepts his declarations at face value and believe that their own negotiating successes too often go unnoticed.

Lozano, like virtually every other agent and club executive, will be all but invisible at the meetings, holed up in his suite with his team, ordering room service, meeting with clubs, plotting strategy. He is not the same type of showman as Boras — no agent is — but he is a big man with a big personality, negotiating in a more direct style and raising his profile considerably since leaving the Beverly Hills Sports Council in 2010. One club executive describes Boras, Lozano, Harper and Machado as four of the top 10 characters in the sport, saying the offseason drama among them would make a great book.

The agents, like their clients, are among the best at what they do, building relationships with players, making clubs uncomfortable in negotiations, maintaining steely resolves while holding out for top dollar.

Boras is credited with the second- and third-biggest signings in baseball history — A-Rod at \$275 million and \$252 million — though Warren Buffett and other advisors to Rodriguez played a significant role helping him return to the Yankees on the larger of those contracts. The agent

also has negotiated two other \$200 million deals — Prince Fielder at \$214 million and Max Scherzer at \$210 million — though the deferrals in Scherzer's agreement lowered the present-day value below \$200 million.

The sport's history includes eight other \$200 million contracts, for which Lozano is responsible for two: Albert Pujols' \$240 million deal, which ranks fifth, and Joey Votto's \$225 million deal, which ranks seventh. Lozano began the current offseason by getting \$23 million for Josh Donaldson, the largest one-year free-agent contract ever for a position player. And now, he's squaring off with Boras for bigger stakes.

Club officials chuckle that the two agents, while selling the virtues of their own clients, are not above pointing out the deficiencies in the other — Harper's defense, Machado's conduct, etc. Such negative campaigning is not without purpose. Some of the same clubs, notably the Phillies and White Sox, are pursuing both players.

Boras believes Harper, as an "iconic" performer whose value transcends his on-field performance, can help raise the values of a team and its regional sports network. Lozano believes Machado is the better all-around player, a defensive asset at shortstop and third base.

Welcome to the Agent Wars. Next battleground: Vegas.

Gammons: There's a crucial difference between rebuilding and tanking

By Peter Gammons

Diamondbacks general manager Mike Hazen was in Chatham, Mass., at a Cape Cod League event last Saturday. Several former major league players and current scouting executives asked him about Paul Goldschmidt and the rumors that he would be traded, and Hazen's answers were true to his beliefs: That the player was a model worker, teammate and person, baserunner, defender. He added, "As far as I'm concerned, over the last four years he's been the best player in the National League."

Left unsaid was the reality that Hazen and Arizona owner Ken Kendrick faced. They believe they will get a new stadium, if they're fortunate, right about the time Goldschmidt turns 35. The Diamondbacks won 93 games and the wild card play-in in 2017, when Kendrick gave Hazen the OK to do what he believes he should do when possible — go for it. He traded for J.D. Martinez, who in 62 games had a 1.107 OPS and 29 homers and, in Hazen's mind, "changed the culture of the franchise."

We can all wonder how that 2017 NLDS might have played out if Robby Ray hadn't had to pitch the play-in game for Arizona, but regardless, it was worth the chase, worth sending three minor leaguers to the Tigers to take the chance, even knowing there was no chance Martinez would re-sign. (He went to Boston, and led the Red Sox to the World Series.)

The Diamondbacks at various times in 2018 traded three players for Eduardo Escobar, four players for Steven Souza, two players for Jake Diekmann, and one for Brad Ziegler. They tried.

Last season they drew 2.24 million fans, their best seasonal attendance in a decade. They did what they could in 2018, but injuries to A.J. Pollock and Jake Lamb led to an offensive breakdown that ended with the team in third place. The farm system was thin, they were \$25 million over budget, and when the season finished they were staring down the barrel of the reality that Goldschmidt had one year left and wasn't going to be signed. That left them a choice of trading him, or holding on for a farewell season and take a compensation round B draft pick.

What they are doing now isn't tanking.

They could have done more of a risky prospects deal, with a double-A tools guy and four guys out of the Gulf Coast League whose radar readings and/or tool chests made them low or sub-A hot prospects, one or two of whom might hit. But instead, the Diamondbacks got three players they believe are going to be good major league players, all of whom are expected to be contributing in Phoenix this season.

"The Cardinals got the best player in the league," says Hazen. Many of us agree — a legitimate star; even if it's for only one season, he puts the Cardinals back in the high life again. Instead of the Gulf Coast League's No. 7 prospect, they also got a Comp B first-round pick, so once Pollock signs for more than \$50M — as assumed — they will have two first round, two Comp A and two Comp B first rounders, a position similar to the place Hazen, Amiel Sawdaye and Jared Porter were in with the Red Sox in 2011. In case you missed it, Mookie Betts, Jackie Bradley, Matt Barnes and Blake Swihart all were parts of the 2018 world champions.

"I am the most unpopular man in the valley," said Hazen on Thursday. "I expected it. I accept it. This is what we thought we had to do. We like the players we got. I hate the rebuild thing, but we're trying to do it the best way we can, without it seeming as if we're tanking, whatever that is."

Tanking was a legitimate topic in 2018. Three teams lost 100 games, five lost 90, nine had run differentials of -100 or worse. Attendance throughout the game declined. Somehow, you didn't go to a box office three weeks in advance of the Marlins coming to town. In 2017, eight teams lost 90 games, six had run differentials over -100. In 2016, six lost 90, one lost 100, five had run differentials over -100.

Now, some would rationalize that the Braves and Phillies lost 90 games with -100+ run differentials two years in a row, and in 2018 they are the hot new guys, with more promise in 2019 in what is suddenly a rising NL East. Some look back and point to the Cubs and Astros rebuilds, but the Cubs used trades, signed the right free agents early on and drafted really well. The Astros had George Springer, José Altuve and Dallas Keuchel in the system when Jeff Loria took over, and took Mark Appel and Brady Aiken with the first pick in the draft in consecutive Junes. So it's not quite that simple.

In lieu of a half dozen rookie leaguers, the Diamondbacks have three major leaguers not yet eligible for arbitration. "A year ago, you couldn't have gotten the Cardinals to even talk about Luke Weaver (off his 7-2, 3.85, 72 K, 60.1 I season)," says one Rays official. "We still really like him, and the Cardinals have a lot of depth in young pitching." They believe Carson Kelly will handle pitches, frame and eventually hit. And they love 24-year-old infielder Andy Young, a 37th round draft choice in 2016 who has a .281/.367/.462/.829 minor league power, 21 homers last season and had a big Arizona Fall League.

A few days ago, the Diamondbacks signed Merrill Kelly, who had risen to Triple A in the Tampa Bay organization, went to Korea for three years, saw his velocity jump from 89-90 mph to 96 and may fit as a reliever or starter. It takes work to follow them, but American pitchers who go to Asia are an interesting market. The Rangers did a fantastic job bringing back Colby Lewis. The Cardinals did it with Miles Mikolas. The Red Sox won a World Series with Ryan Brasier.

It does not seem likely that Arizona can trade Zack Greinke, even if three years and the \$94.5 million owed him (the signing bonus doesn't count on the AAV) may be a better bet than six years and \$140 million for Patrick Corbin. One rival GM says, "I keep remembering that he had

arguably the best defense in the league behind him, and a great catcher (Jeff Mathis).” Others point to his declining velocity. But Greinke doesn’t pitch off velocity; he can manipulate the baseball, a 21st century Greg Maddux. “Wait until the trade deadline,” one GM suggests. “His value may skyrocket.” Hey, he struck out 199 in 207 2/3 innings, and he has an exceptional pitching IQ.

The Diamondbacks also have Robby Ray (whom Hazen does not want to trade), Taijuan Walker, Zack Godley, Weaver, Kelly and some very interesting young pitchers in Taylor Clarke, Jon Duplantier and Taylor Widener, whom they acquired from the Yankees last spring. And, like the Athletics, they will be knocking on doors for every possible arm that is looking for a job.

They need a comeback season from Souza, a healthy one from Lamb. But with the exception of the young potential starters, they are major league players and pitchers. And now the team gets six high picks this June.

As hard as the Commissioner’s Office tries to level the playing field, the divide between big and small markets is the essential split that has existed for 30 years. As Rob Manfred was approaching the nomination process for commissioner, he talked of “redefining revenues,” a phrase that set off alarms for some big-revenue clubs, which can generate huge streams that do not count in revenue-sharing.

So if you’re Arizona or Kansas City, Cleveland or Tampa, you realize that you’re in the business of fattening frogs for snakes. Even the players a general manager likes most of all can and will probably leave, which leaves Hazen the task of building from the bottom — yet creatively shopping for the present to avoid the dreaded T word.

Because no one competitive ever wants to tank.

The Athletic LOADED: 12.10.2018

Lee Smith, Harold Baines elected to Baseball Hall of Fame

By BEN WALKER | The Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Longtime closer Lee Smith and smooth-swinging Harold Baines were elected to the baseball Hall of Fame on Sunday.

“Very shocked,” Baines said on a conference call.

Former outfielder and manager Lou Piniella fell one vote short.

Results of the 16-member Today’s Game Era Committee were announced at the winter meetings. It took 12 votes for election — Smith was unanimous, Baines got 12 and Piniella had 11.

Smith and Baines both debuted in Chicago during the 1980 season. Smith began with the Cubs and went on to post a then-record 478 saves while Baines started out with the White Sox and had 2,866 hits.

George Steinbrenner, Orel Hershiser, Albert Belle, Joe Carter, Will Clark, Davey Johnson and Charlie Manuel all received fewer than five votes.

Baines was a .289 hitter with 384 home runs in a 22-year career. He never drew more than 6.1 percent in five elections by the Baseball Writers’ Association of America, far from the 75 percent required.

“I wasn’t expecting this day to come,” the six-time All-Star said.

The Hall board-appointed panel included longtime White Sox owner Jerry Reinsdorf, and Baines said he was grateful for his support. Hall members Greg Maddux, Roberto Alomar, Joe Morgan, Bert Blyleven, Pat Gillick, Tony La Russa, John Schuerholz, Ozzie Smith and Joe Torre also were on the panel.

Smith’s fastball helped him become a seven-time All-Star in an 18-year-old career. He owned the major league record for saves when he retired during the 1997 season while with Montreal, and Trevor Hoffman and then Mariano Rivera reset the mark.

Smith, who never reached 51 percent in 15 BBWAA elections, became the seventh pitcher who mostly was a reliever to make the Hall. Baines was a designated hitter for much of his career, and DHs have struggled to gain backing from Hall voters.

Both closers and DHs could see the numbers increase again very shortly.

Rivera is eligible for the first time and big-hitting DH Edgar Martinez will be back on the ballot when results of the next BBWAA election are announced Jan. 22.

Induction ceremonies are scheduled for July 21 at Cooperstown, New York.

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