

## Tribe prez disputes 'intensifying' Kluber talks

By Mandy Bell MLB.com

LAS VEGAS -- Although it took little time for rumors regarding a potential Corey Kluber trade to spread on the first day of the Winter Meetings, Indians general manager Mike Chernoff and president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti aren't rushing to make any decisions.

"You try to use the meetings to help increase the frequency of interactions with teams, but not change your decision-making dynamic," Chernoff said. "That can be hard when you're outside of your element. We're usually in our office doing this, so you have to make sure you're creating those safeguards to keep your same decision-making principles."

MLB Network insider Jon Paul Morosi tweeted Monday morning that talk surrounding Kluber had been intensifying among multiple teams, including the Dodgers, but both Chernoff and Antonetti downplayed the report.

"I think we were reading one of those [tweets] on the [television] screen," Antonetti said. "We were sitting here eating lunch by ourselves going, 'Oh, really. Who is intensifying those talks?' I'm not sure who is having those talks intensified."

The trade talks may not have "intensified," but Antonetti did say that the discussions are happening more often through text messages, phone calls and in-person meetings.

"I do think with all of us being in the same building and with everyone really focused on transactions, it does pick up the frequency of interactions between teams," Antonetti said. "And the calendar. We're later in the offseason than we were a few weeks ago, so teams are trying to check things off their lists."

Kluber, 32, pitched to a 20-7 record and a 2.89 ERA while valued at 5.9 Wins Above Replacement in 2018. Despite those numbers, the Indians are looking to trim their payroll and are seeking outfielders. The two-time American League Cy Young Award winner will make \$17 million in 2019, with team options for \$17.5 million in '20 and \$18 million in '21.

"Ownership's invested incredible resources into our team over the course of the past few seasons to try to help push us to a World Series championship," Antonetti said. "At some point, you have to make sure you have sustainable finances that work for the long term. And we're in the process of working through exactly what that will be."

With the Dodgers among the clubs reportedly interested in Kluber, a trade involving the right-hander could get Cleveland some much-needed depth in the outfield.

The Dodgers are loaded with outfielders, and Alex Verdugo, the team's top prospect per MLB Pipeline, could be a perfect fit for the Tribe. The 22-year-old slashed .329/.391/.472 at Triple-A Oklahoma City in 2018, is Major League-ready and, most importantly for the Indians, is cost-controlled.

"So we're cognizant of where we are age-wise," Antonetti said when asked if a younger roster was the team's goal. "I think oftentimes what happens is a roster gets older, it also comes with less control. So in a sense, one of our goals, as I think I've shared, is to make sure that we have a chance to contend for an AL Central title in 2019, but also position the organization for success beyond that. One way to do that is to infuse players with longer-term control into the organization. Typically, these players are going to be younger players than older players."

Morosi also reported that both the Yankees and Brewers could be contenders in a Kluber trade. In keeping with Cleveland's theme of wanting young talent and filling a necessary need in the outfield, New York's top prospect, Estevan Florial, and Milwaukee's second-ranked prospect, Corey Ray, could both be of interest, though neither is Major League ready. Florial hasn't been promoted past Class A Advanced Tampa, and Ray spent 2018 in Double-A Biloxi.

These early rumors do not mean that Trevor Bauer is off the market. Although Kluber is starting to make the headlines now, anything can change throughout the next few days at the Winter Meetings.

## Fall League unveils Top Prospects team

By William Boor MLB.com @wboor

Braxton Davidson's dramatic walk-off homer in the 10th inning back on Nov. 17th lifted the Peoria Javelinas to back-to-back Arizona Fall League titles and signified the end of the AFL season.

However, here at MLB Pipeline, coverage of the AFL is constant. Following the on-the-field play, we have released our top 10 breakout prospects, the top 25 prospects of the AFL and our All-Arizona Fall League Team.

Of course, there's always room for more accolades and that's just what we have below as the Arizona Fall League announced its 2018 Top Prospects team on Monday morning.

The team, selected by league managers and coaches, recognizes players who distinguished themselves against other top prospects throughout the AFL. Voters were asked to consider not only a player's AFL performance, but also their Major League projectability.

### Catchers

Daulton Varsho, D-backs No. 5 prospect: Varsho, who put together four multihit efforts over a five-game span, hit .262 and drove in nine runs in 18 games.

Keibert Ruiz, Dodgers No. 2 prospect (No. 39 on Top 100): Ruiz played in just 13 games, but left a strong impression on the league's managers and coaches. The 20-year-old hit .286 with six RBIs and also drew six walks while striking out just twice.

Third Base:

Vladimir Guerrero Jr., Blue Jays No. 1 prospect (No. 1 on Top 100): Guerrero entered the AFL as the most talked-about prospect and certainly didn't disappoint. Guerrero picked up a trio of hits on Opening Day and kept the hits coming as he began the season with a 13-game hitting streak. The 19-year-old also impressed on the league's biggest stage, hitting a 117 mph double in the Fall Stars Game and concluded his stint in Arizona with a .351 batting average.

Yu Chang, Indians No. 6 prospect: Chang, who also played in the 2017 Fall League, put together a strong offensive showing. The shortstop hit .337, thanks in large part to a stretch where he strung together eight multihit efforts over 12 games. Chang also finished tied for third in total bases (45) and fourth in hits (29).

### **Lindor meet and greet on Tribe's auction list**

By Mandy Bell MLB.com

LAS VEGAS -- The Indians are providing a special opportunity for fans to spend time with shortstop Francisco Lindor or manager Terry Francona through the 2018 Winter Meetings charity auction.

This year's auction will support the Jackie Robinson Foundation and the Negro Leagues Museum, two important institutions that educate future generations of young people through honoring significant moments and individuals of baseball's past.

The auction is live on MLB.com/wintermeetingsauction through Thursday, when it will conclude at 10 p.m. ET. Items include special baseball experiences, including meetings with some of the game's biggest stars, along with unique items donated by MLB and the 30 clubs.

The Tribe is offering up a chance to win four passes to watch the team take batting practice from the field and a chance to meet three-time All-Star Lindor before an evening game next season, plus four tickets to the corresponding game.

Fans can also win a meet and greet with Francona in New York. The Indians will have a week-long stretch of games in the Big Apple in 2019, playing against the Yankees and Mets from Aug. 15-22. The winner will receive four tickets to one of those games in addition to the meet and greet.

The final experience up for auction is a chance to take batting practice on the big league diamond before hanging around to watch the Indians take BP from the field about three and a half hours prior to first pitch. The winner will then receive four lower box tickets to that night's game.

Since 2012, the Winter Meetings charity auction has raised approximately \$1.5 million for causes including cancer research, a youth baseball and softball field in memory of Shannon Forde and a scholarship fund in memory of Katy Feeney.

### **As the Winter Meetings fuel negotiations, the Indians inch closer to a trade decision**

By Zack Meisel Dec 10, 2018 19

LAS VEGAS — After an afternoon spent assessing trade scenarios, free-agent values and coaching hires, Chris Antonetti wheeled away a room-service cart from the center of the Indians' hotel suite. All that remained, following hours of discussion and evaluation, was a pile of french fries and some chips and salsa.

Terry Francona popped up from the leather sectional and headed out for some fresh air. After all, the Winter Meetings can sap anyone's energy, with itineraries chock full of meetings, conference calls and deliberations. For the Indians, this week will proceed at a more rapid pace than it has in past years, when the team has remained mostly quiet. Now, they're the center of attention, the team poised to spearhead the signature trade of the annual transactional circus.

It's a deal they've studied for weeks now, and the Winter Meetings serve as a medium to help narrow their discussions and pin down their preferred trade partner. The most efficient manner of filling their gaping holes in the outfield and bullpen might be to move Corey Kluber or Trevor Bauer. At this point, it seems more like when and for whom than if.

There are a handful of teams — playoff contenders and wannabe contenders — who have interest in one or both of the starting pitchers. Now, it boils down to which team can meet the Indians' demands, which are said to be lofty.

The Indians' brain trust was downing lunch on Monday when a tweet flashed on MLB Network claiming that the team's talks with the Dodgers about Kluber were "intensifying." They wondered what, exactly, that meant. Was their soft-spoken dialogue with Los Angeles' executives evolving into a shouting match?

"Who is intensifying those talks?" Antonetti asked in a light-hearted manner.

The club's objective is clear (and something we've repeatedly covered in this space): The Indians need a more well-rounded roster to more effectively compete with the Red Sox, Astros and Yankees. They need to unearth a way to improve that doesn't rely heavily upon free agency, and that likely involves taking on a risky assignment in dealing from their strength. But after being bounced in the first round of the postseason the past two years, it might be worth a try.

That means getting younger — the Indians were the second-oldest team in the league last year, behind only Toronto — and ensuring that the team's talent level won't fall off a cliff in a year or two. But they'll have to swing the right deal, provided the right deal even exists.

Yes, talks will gain steam this week, mostly because all 30 teams have converged upon the same glitzy hotel and casino near the Las Vegas Strip. The Indians met with other teams on Monday. (Antonetti admitted that a review of the hotel's security footage would offer some pertinent intel about the team's plans.) They texted with other team's executives, fielded some phone calls.

"With all of us being in the same building and with everyone really focused on transactions," Antonetti said, "it does pick up the frequency of interactions between teams. And the calendar — we're later in the offseason than we were a few weeks ago, so teams are trying to check things off their lists."

With each passing day, the Indians lose an iota of leverage. They don't have to move Kluber or Bauer, but they also can't arrive in Arizona in two months without any roster alterations, not when their already-stout American League rivals are plotting to enhance their more-than-formidable rosters. And other teams want to get on with their offseasons.

So, these will be three, long days, with constant in-house conversation and debate about the most prudent course of action. Breaks are crucial.

"We had lunch outside of the room," Antonetti said, "so that was progress for us."

There are plenty of distractions at this year's venue, too. One sleuth reporter spotted Francona at a card table on Sunday. Might the manager be attempting to help boost the club's payroll with a well-timed blackjack heater?

"That's one of the strategies we talked about," Antonetti said, joking.

"Might not bet on that one," said Mike Chernoff.

Antonetti said the front office has not been assigned a specific payroll figure for 2019. It seems imperative, though, that the club use any savings gained via trade toward its roster deficiencies. The bullpen, in particular, can't be ignored.

The entire plan, though, revolves around the decision to trade a starter, to part with a piece of the foundation of the roster. Other parents pepper Chernoff with questions about it when he drops off his kids at school. Antonetti was asked about it three different times as he passed through security at the airport on his way to Las Vegas.

It's not a leap to argue that the future of the franchise hinges on the Indians' ultimate decision. The Winter Meetings should push the Indians closer to a resolution, and soon enough, we'll have clarity on the makeup of the roster for 2019 and beyond.

### **Indians notebook: Discussions for Indians ace Corey Kluber have 'intensified'; Dodgers, top prospect could be a fit**

Ryan Lewis

LAS VEGAS— The Indians, expected to be among the most active clubs at the 2018 winter meetings this week as a team dangling two of the most valuable assets on the trade market, have had talks "intensified" regarding their ace and two-time Cy Young Award winner.

The Indians and Los Angeles Dodgers have been viewed all winter as a potential fit for a trade, with the Indians shopping ace Corey Kluber and Trevor Bauer in an effort to acquire some younger talent, especially an outfielder to help replace Michael Brantley and several others who left in free agency.

As of now, the Indians are discussing both Kluber and Bauer with a number of teams, weighing what the potential return for each talented pitcher might be in a deal.

Trade discussions regarding Kluber, at least, have "intensified," according to a report by Jon Morosi of Fox Sports and MLB Network. The Dodgers have been listed as one of the more interested teams, according to the report, which added that Dodgers top prospect Alex Verdugo would likely be the centerpiece of the deal.

The Indians are known to be interested in seeing if they can find enough value to move Kluber or Bauer. The more difficult part to completing any trade is finding the right partner. Needs, interest and positional surplus all have to align, making it easy for the best laid plans to go awry.

Verdugo checks all the boxes for the Indians. A 22-year-old left-handed hitter, Verdugo is the Dodgers' No. 1 prospect, according to MLB Pipeline, and has less than a year of service time, making him a controllable and inexpensive asset.

Verdugo is seen as one of the best pure-hitting prospects in the game. Last season, he hit .329 with an .863 OPS at Triple-A. He logged 77 at-bats at the major-league level, hitting .260 with a home run and six doubles. In the outfield, Verdugo has played all three spots but has a plus-plus arm that could allow him to be a natural fit in right field.

Rehabbing hurler

Danny Salazar didn't throw a single pitch in a major-league game in 2018, eventually having his season ended with right shoulder surgery.

The Indians and Salazar reached an agreement for \$4.5 million for the 2019 season, keeping him in the fold as a somewhat risky but potentially rewarding pitcher who could factor into either the rotation or the bullpen. Salazar has dealt with a number of arm issues, but when on the mound he's at times been an all-star caliber hurler. That \$4.5 million investment is thus all on potential.

Salazar is expected to begin throwing in the next week or so, according to president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti, who added it's possible that Salazar could have a normal spring schedule, although his recent and lengthy injury history will force the Indians to take a wait-and-see approach.

"Each guy, especially returning from [a] shoulder [surgery], has a little bit of a different timetable," Antonetti said at the winter meetings. "You almost react to how they did in the prior throwing session to build the next one."

As the Indians explore trade options that could drastically alter the roster, Salazar's role could still be up in the air. The initial plan will be to stretch him out to start, but the team need could send him to the bullpen.

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

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### **Indians don't have exact number for future payroll, but getting younger remains key goal at winter meetings**

Ryan Lewis

LAS VEGAS — As the Indians lifted themselves from being the Detroit Tigers' proverbial younger brother five or six years ago to three-time American League Central champions and World Series contenders over the last several seasons, their collective payroll ballooned to new heights.

But it can be difficult to breathe at these altitudes for too long.

During this recent stretch of three trips to the postseason, the Indians increased their payroll above \$140 million for the first time in franchise history. It boosted their payroll ranking around the league to the middle of the pack. As the roster has become top-heavy, more expensive and collectively older, a reallocation of resources — rather than simply additions or subtractions — has become one of the club's driving forces as it aims to address both short- and long-term needs.

The challenge of extending a contention window while also dealing with a higher payroll for a smaller-market team has given the Indians a lengthy to-do list at baseball's winter meetings, being held this week at the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino. As president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti and General Manager Mike Chernoff field hundreds — if not thousands — of phone calls, texts and emails from their hotel suite, they aren't dealing with any specific number for the club's payroll moving forward from owner Paul Dolan.

There's no doubt the franchise wants to become younger and shed some salary to reallocate it elsewhere — the outfield is barren and the bullpen took a major hit. But where the Indians payroll ends up in 2019 could fluctuate like a stack of chips at a blackjack table, depending on what cards the Indians might be dealt in an offer.

"I'll be honest — we still don't have exact — there's no one specific number we're working toward payroll-wise," Antonetti said Monday. "As we've shared, ownership's invested incredible resources into our team over the course of the past few seasons to try to help push us to a World Series championship. At some point, you have to make sure you have sustainable finances that work for the long term. And we're in the process of working through exactly what that will be."

The Indians already dealt All-Star catcher Yan Gomes this offseason, shedding \$7 million in salary. Corey Kluber and Trevor Bauer, among others, are being heavily discussed in trades. The Indians essentially had a continuous upward climb since the 2016 deadline trade for Andrew Miller, which was then followed by the Edwin Encarnacion signing, the largest in franchise history, the following winter.

But the front office has essentially hit a wall in terms of how the team's needs can be addressed, with a trade involving a highly-valued, higher-priced asset becoming a potential path. Finding the right trade partner is priority No. 1, which means finding the right positional talent that's also major-league ready and controllable for several years down the road.

This winter meetings — and this offseason if a deal isn't reached in the next few days — for Antonetti and Chernoff is as much about addressing the roster now while adding to the sustainability beyond this upcoming season as anything. That isn't exactly anything new in terms of their daily goals, but it has become a balancing act made more difficult by salary raises and other factors.

As they begin one of the most challenging offseasons in quite some time, the Indians are trying to fight a battle on two fronts.

"So we're cognizant of where we are age-wise," Antonetti said of the roster. "I think oftentimes what happens is a roster gets older, it also comes with less control. So in a sense, one of our goals as I think I've shared is to make sure that we have a chance to contend for an AL Central title in 2019, but also position the organization for success beyond that."

"One way to do that is to infuse players with longer-term control into the organization. Typically these players are going to be younger players than older players. So in that scheme of things, I guess indirectly [getting younger is] a goal, but it's more about the timeframe in which players could be in the organization and about their specific age."

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### **Cleveland Indians' executives weigh impact trade of Corey Kluber or Trevor Bauer will have on team**

By Paul Hoynes,

LAS VEGAS — Owner Paul Dolan will make the final decision, but Chris Antonetti and GM Mike Chernoff are the guys preparing the recommendations that will guide that decision. It's something they approach with great diligence.

If they don't, just about anyone they encounter reminds them what's at stake.

Yes, few in Greater Cleveland have missed the fact that the Indians are contemplating trading starting pitchers Corey Kluber or Trevor Bauer. If Antonetti didn't know that before he left for the winter meetings, he does now.

When he arrived at Hopkins International Airport for Sunday's flight to Las Vegas, he was grilled at the ticket counter and the TSA screening station.

"I got it from the security guard when I was getting screened on my way out here," said Antonetti, president of baseball operations. "(And) at the check-in (counter) at the airport. It's great. It's one of the things that are great about sports. People are passionate about it. They have opinions and are often happy to share those opinions."

Chernoff's grilling usually takes place in the morning when he drops his kids off at school.

Twenty years with the Indians has given Antonetti a thick skin. If he hasn't heard it all by now, well, he's heard close to it all.

"I'm thankful that people care about the Indians," said Antonetti. "And care enough to ask or offer their opinions. As long as they're not throwing sharp objects when they're doing it."

If the trade happens, it's going to be a tough one to sell no matter who goes and who stays. It is something that Antonetti and Chernoff are thinking about constantly because the goal never changes.

"We feel a great responsibility and understand the impact of the decisions and recommendations that we make," said Antonetti. "We wake up every day thinking about how we're going to win a World Series and go to bed at night thinking about that. And we recognize that there are a lot of people that cheer for the Cleveland Indians who are thinking the same thing and there's a responsibility that goes a long way with it."

Before the Indians' traveling party left for Vegas, Chernoff and Antonetti established some safeguards for themselves. With 30 teams in close confines at the winter meetings, the urge to make a trade can sometimes take over. They said they'd remind each other to use those safeguards.

"We try to use the meetings to help increase the frequency of interaction with teams," said Chernoff. "But not change your decision-making dynamics. That can be hard when you're outside your element. We're usually in our office doing this."

It can cause a laugh or two as well.

Monday afternoon Antonetti, Chernoff and manager Terry Franco were eating lunch in their hotel suite. They were watching MLB Network and a Tweet was shown saying that talks were intensifying between the Indians and Dodgers in a trade involving Kluber. They were in the room together and not a Dodger representative was in sight, so they laughed and continued eating lunch.

The Indians have been talking about trading a starting pitcher for at least seven weeks. They know what the other teams are offering. The fact that they're meeting face to face this week at the Mandalay Bay Resort with the same teams only re-affirms what they already know.

Maybe nothing gets done this week, but sometime in the near future the Indians are going to have to make a decision – make the trade or walk away.

The hard part is deciding which team has made the best offer in terms of what the Indians are trying to do – win a fourth straight AL Central championship and make a strong October run, but also positioning themselves for the coming years with a younger roster and a more flexible payroll.

"Trying to place values on individual players, let alone sets of players, is a really hard thing to do," said Antonetti. "But we spent a lot of time thinking about that; what are the right combinations of players that will help our team the most?"

Money is the motivating factor behind this potential trade. Asked if the goal is for the Indians to have a smaller payroll than last season's franchise record \$135 million, Antonetti said, "I'm not sure. Finances are an element of any decision that we make. As we've shared, ownership has invested incredible resources into our team over the course of the past few seasons to help push us to a World Series championship. At some point, you have to make sure you have sustainable finances that will work for the long term. We're in the process of working through exactly what that will be."

As for now the Indians continue to work both sides of the aisle. They just traded catcher Yan Gomes to Washington for three young players. It was a deal to shed Gomes' upcoming salary of \$7 million. Right after that they extended Carlos Carrasco's contract through 2022 with a vesting option for 2023. The guaranteed portion of the deal was worth \$37.25 million.

They saved some money for today, while adding stability for the future. But can they maintain that kind of balance in a trade for Kluber or Bauer?

### **Teams keep mining pitching and coaching instructors from Cleveland Indians' minor league system**

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com

LAS VEGAS -- The Indians have developed a good reputation for acquiring and developing pitchers over the years. The current starting rotation is a perfect example.

Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco, Trevor Bauer and Mike Clevinger were acquired in trades. They all spent time in the minors before establishing themselves with the Indians. No. 5 starter Shane Bieber was drafted in the fourth round in 2016 and made his big-league debut last season.

It has not gone unnoticed among the Tribe's opponents.

Milwaukee hired Class AAA pitching coach Steve Karsay to be their bullpen coach. Karsay not only pitched for the Indians, but worked in their minor league system for seven years. Rigo Beltran, the pitching coach at Class AA Akron, is in line to replace Karsay at Columbus.

Cincinnati hired Chris Tremie as its minor league field coordinator. Tremie spent 12 years in the Indians' organization, the last six as manager at Triple-A Columbus.

San Francisco has hired Mark Allen as its minor league pitching coordinator. He just ended his eighth season with the Indians and second as their lower-level pitching coordinator in the minors.

Allen started his career with the Indians as a scout from 2010 through 2015. His first coaching job with the Indians was in 2014 with the Arizona Rookie League Indians. Allen pitched four years of college ball at Vernon Junior College, University of Texas at San Antonio and Phillips University.

Max Weiner, the Tribe's bullpen coach in the Arizona Rookie League, is in line to be Seattle's minor league pitching coordinator. This was Weiner's first year with the Indians.

Weiner founded and operated The Arm Farm LLC, a performance development and player services company in Miami. He worked with coaches regarding pitching development. He was also the pitching coach for one season with St. Petersburg Junior College in Florida.

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## Tampa Bay Rays still evaluating Edwin Encarnacion, Yandy Diaz for possible trade with Cleveland Indians

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com

LAS VEGAS – The Tampa Bay Rays, coming off an unexpected 90-win season, are looking to upgrade their offense for the season ahead in the AL East.

They're evaluating several players who could help them, including Yandy Diaz and Edwin Encarnacion of the Indians. Diaz is a man without a position with less than a year of big-league service time. Encarnacion is the Tribe's top paid player, scheduled to make \$20 million in 2019, and in the final year of a three-year \$60 million deal.

Those are two hitters at the extreme ends of the spectrum to be sure. The Rays interest in Diaz and Encarnacion surfaced last week.

The Indians need bullpen help and the Rays have a lot of it. Tampa Bay's relievers went 55-36 last season and posted the sixth lowest ERA at 3.80 in the AL. They also threw 824 1/3 innings, the most in the league, because of their "opener" strategy.

The Rays had 14 relievers make 20 or more appearances last season. Some of the busiest were Ryne Stanek (2-3, 2.89, 59 games), Jose Alvarado (1-6, 2.39, 70 games), Diego Castillo (4-2, 3.18, 43 games), Ryan Yarbrough (16-6, 3.91, 38 games), Austin Pruitt (2-3, 4.65, 23 games), Chaz Roe (1-3, 3.58, 61 games), Adam Kolarek (1-0, 3.93, 31 games) and Andrew Kittredge (3-2, 7.75, 33 games).

Diaz, 27, hit .312 (34-for-109) with the Indians and .293 (102-for-348) at Class AAA Columbus. He posted a .797 OPS at both levels, but hit just four combined homers while driving in 55 runs. The Indians have tried to get him to pull the ball more to increase his power, but he's at his best when he hits to the ball up the middle or to right field.

If the Rays really are interested in Encarnacion, they'd be getting a proven middle-of-the-order hitter, but it's hard to believe they'd pay what remains of his salary -- \$20 million for 2019 and a \$5 million buyout on a club option for 2020. Perhaps this is a deal that may have to wait on until the Indians save some money by trading starters Corey Kluber or Trevor Bauer. Then they could absorb some of Encarnacion's salary.

Or the Indians could see this as a way to lighten their payroll, while keeping Kluber and Bauer.

Last season Encarnacion, 36 in January, hit .246 (123-for-500) with 32 homers and 107 RBI. He is the only player in the big leagues to hit 30 or more homers in the last seven seasons.

Last season the Rays finished third in batting average, but ninth in runs, 10th in total bases and 14th in homers.

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### Olney: Carrasco's surprising extension changes Indians' plans

Not long after the World Series, the Cleveland Indians made it known to the rest of the industry that they would take offers for their best available starting pitchers -- two-time Cy Young Award winner Corey Kluber, right-hander Carlos Carrasco and Trevor Bauer, who was coming off a breakout performance in 2018.

It was not part of the Indians' strategy at the time to work out an unusual contract extension through their trade conversations, but that's exactly what happened. Carrasco has really enjoyed his time with the Indians, and likes the life that he has built for himself in Cleveland. So after the first reports of the Indians' willingness to trade a starting pitcher, Carrasco and his agents, Sam and Seth Levinson, approached the team about extending his existing contract.

Carrasco is 31 years old and, like Kluber, has been working under a contract that has a succession of one-year team options. Carrasco and Kluber got a chunk of money guaranteed at the front end of their deals; in return, there is less risk for the team through the options. Carrasco was guaranteed to make \$9.75 million in 2019, and the Indians held a club option for \$9.5 million in 2020.

After Carrasco's surprising idea about a possible extension, the Indians worked out new terms -- Carrasco will be guaranteed \$10.25 million in 2020, \$12 million in 2021 and \$12 million in 2022. The Indians hold a \$14 million option on the 2023 season, with a \$3 million buyout. In addition, Carrasco's deal possesses a \$3 million assignment bonus if the Indians trade him -- something Cleveland has no interest in doing, and Carrasco has demonstrated that he has no interest in leaving, having fostered an excellent relationship with the folks at the Cleveland Clinic, the team's medical and support staff.

Chris Antonetti, the head of baseball operations for the Indians, talked on Friday about how thoughtful Carrasco is, and how he understands and appreciates what he has.

Other teams expect that the Indians will trade Kluber or Bauer, and because the Indians possess more cost certainty with Kluber, some executives with other teams believe that Bauer is more likely to be dealt.

No matter what happens, the Indians can now start to envision a rotation that will be fronted by Carrasco, Mike Clevinger and Shane Bieber in 2021 and in the years that follow, meaning that even after Kluber, Bauer and perhaps shortstop Francisco Lindor move on, Cleveland will continue to have a core necessary to contend in the AL Central.

- The Levinsons also represent Nathan Eovaldi, the right-hander who just signed a four-year, \$68 million contract to return to the Boston Red Sox. Eovaldi is incredibly polite, dutiful and understated, which is part of the reason teammates responded so strongly to him as Eovaldi took the ball for a seventh inning of relief in Game 3 of the World Series. Rick Porcello acknowledged afterward that he was moved to tears by Eovaldi's effort, and David Price stayed by his side in the hours after that performance.

The first decade of Eovaldi's time in professional baseball has been somewhat luckless, filled with injury, including a second elbow reconstruction -- elbow revision surgery. Through his time on the disabled list, his rehabilitation stints and trades, Eovaldi has maintained that

same personality. So it was with some relish that the Levinsons made the call to Eovaldi to detail the biggest contract that he will get in his lifetime. Sixty-eight million dollars.

The pitcher was on the roof of his house, putting up Christmas lights. On the call, somebody joked that Eovaldi might think about climbing down the ladder and let somebody else decorate the house. Eovaldi was quiet, taking it all in, and happy.

- On paper, Eovaldi seemed like the perfect fit for the Houston Astros, who have a history of taking pitchers with really good arms and making them better. But the Astros never really engaged on the right-hander, leading to one industry theory that Houston is more locked into the trade market than folks realize and looking to pluck one of the best available starters in a swap -- and right now, the best appear to include Kluber, Bauer, Zack Greinke and Noah Syndergaard.
- While the New York Mets have pulled back in their public comments about possibly dealing Syndergaard, other teams say they think the Mets absolutely would trade the right-hander for the right offer.
- Just as the Diamondbacks have this winter, the Pittsburgh Pirates executed tough financial decisions last winter when they traded Gerrit Cole and Andrew McCutchen. Following a year in which their attendance dropped significantly, the Pirates are not operating with much payroll flexibility for 2019. The Dodgers, Astros and Mets are all in the market for catching help, and if one of those teams makes an offer on catcher Francisco Cervelli, the Pirates will listen. Cervelli, who turns 33 in March, will make \$11.5 million next season before becoming eligible for free agency.
- The St. Louis Cardinals have a long history of trading for veterans and then coaxing them to stay with contract extensions, from Mark McGwire to Matt Holliday, and it's possible that they could do that with Paul Goldschmidt, just acquired from the Diamondbacks. Goldschmidt, 31, will be eligible for free agency after next season.

But the financial trends are also very different now than even five or eight years ago, when teams routinely made multiyear, big-money investments in players in their early and mid-30s. (See: Carlos Carrasco.) That does not happen nearly as frequently as it once did, and talks between Goldschmidt and the Cardinals -- a star player in his 30s, and a team flush with money -- will be seen as an interesting test of that recent trend.

## **Harold Baines and the Election That Could Change Cooperstown**

By Tyler Kepner

LAS VEGAS — Harold Baines has been a punch line before. At a presidential debate in 2000, George W. Bush, the former owner of the Texas Rangers, invoked him when asked to name the biggest mistake of his adult life: "I signed off on that wonderful transaction — Sammy Sosa for Harold Baines," Bush said.

Now Baines is a Hall of Famer and Sosa is an afterthought, his steroid-era home run binge largely discredited. Baines will make a speech this summer in Cooperstown, N.Y., thanks to a panel vote on Sunday that no one saw coming.

Voters on the Today's Game Era Committee elevated Baines and Lee Smith to the Hall of Fame, with Smith collecting all 16 votes and Baines receiving 12 of 16, meeting the 75 percent threshold for induction. Smith held the career saves record for 13 years and once got more than half the votes from the writers. Baines peaked at 6.1 percent.

"To be honest, I wasn't sitting around waiting for the call," Baines said on Monday. "I didn't play for the Hall of Fame. I played the game to have a job and to try to win championships."

Baines had a fantastic career. The first overall pick in the 1977 draft, he played 22 seasons, collected 2,866 hits and made six All-Star teams. He was so revered by the Chicago White Sox that they retired his No. 3 jersey a month after trading him to Bush's Rangers in 1989. Then the White Sox brought him back — twice — as a player and again as a coach.

Their owner, Jerry Reinsdorf, was part of the voting committee on Sunday. So was the Hall of Famer Tony La Russa, who managed Baines with the White Sox and the Oakland Athletics. Eight other Hall of Famers, plus three other executives and three news media representatives, comprised the panel.

La Russa praised Baines's longevity, pure hitting stroke and ability to hit in the clutch. Baines was too humble to campaign for himself, La Russa said, and missed out on 3,000 hits because of two prolonged M.L.B. work stoppages in his career.

"There was a lot of discussion — in the '80s and the '90s, that's 20 years, in just about every offensive category, he was in the top four or five guys, the best in our game," La Russa said. "I just think he was a little too quiet."

It is safe to say that modern metrics, like wins above replacement and OPS+, were not widely debated. Baines compiled 38.7 WAR and an OPS+ (on-base-plus-slugging percentage, adjusted for league and ballpark) of 121, both well below Cooperstown standards.

Recent players with more WAR include Tim Salmon, Reggie Sanders and Andy Van Slyke. Recent players with a better OPS+ include J.D. Drew, Andre Ethier and Nick Johnson. Again, all had excellent careers. But you wonder, with the election of Baines, where the line for induction now sits.

In some ways, his election is a triumph of traditional stats in an era of more refined — or more confusing — evaluation metrics. Every eligible player with more hits than Baines is already in the Hall, except for two with steroids ties (Barry Bonds and Rafael Palmeiro) and Omar Vizquel, who debuted on the ballot last winter with 37 percent.

Like Baines, Vizquel never got a first-place vote for Most Valuable Player; the writers did not view them as dominant in their time. Unlike Baines, who was mostly a designated hitter, Vizquel was a magician on defense, with 11 Gold Gloves at shortstop. You have to believe he will now make it, eventually.

What about a player like Don Mattingly, who peaked at 28.2 percent on the writers' ballot but might have been the game's best player in the mid-1980s? Mattingly won an M.V.P. award for the Yankees in 1985, hit .307 to Baines's .289, made six All-Star teams and won nine Gold Gloves in his 12 full seasons.

Mattingly was here in Las Vegas on Monday for baseball's winter meetings as the manager of the Miami Marlins. Two of his other A.L. contemporaries of the 1980s, Jack Morris and Alan Trammell, were inducted by a different committee last winter. A process once famously stingy is now more open to reconsidering candidates the writers rejected — though Mattingly claimed not to care much.

"Honestly, the Hall of Fame comes, you get in, O.K., you write 'H.O.F.' on a ball and after that, your life's going to be the same," he said, adding that he was happy for Smith and Baines. Only with a follow-up question would Mattingly compare himself to Baines.

"When you see Harold, I think he played 22 years and you end up with a pile of numbers that grow and grow," he said. "I think Harold had 2,800 hits. I get 21-something, I do it in 12 years, 13 years. I just didn't play long enough, wasn't able to stay healthy long enough to really put that pile of numbers together."

He added: "There was a period of time that I could hit with anybody and do things on the field, at my position and with the bat, that nobody else was doing."

Mattingly had a big impact, but not longevity or exceptional advanced metrics (42.4 WAR, 127 OPS+). A different class of passed-over candidates had extraordinary WAR values, but perhaps less fame: players like Buddy Bell, Dwight Evans, Bobby Grich, Rick Reuschel and Lou Whitaker, none of whom ever got more than 10.4 percent of the writers' vote.

Bell, a six-time Gold Glover at third base for the Texas Rangers, compiled 66.3 WAR, almost as much as Baines and Smith combined. His son David, the new manager of the Cincinnati Reds, hopes that recent trends might help his father.

"I can't imagine that he's not a Hall of Fame player, the way he played third base, the kind of hitter he was, the way he played the game," Bell said. "I don't know if it hurts him that he didn't play in a World Series. I hope not, because I don't know what more he could have done, individually, to be deserving."

One player this election almost surely helps is Edgar Martinez, David Bell's former teammate with the Seattle Mariners. Martinez reached Cooperstown's doorstep last year, with 70.4 percent of the writers' vote, and this is his final year of eligibility in that forum. Martinez, also a D.H., had 68.4 WAR and a 147 OPS+.

There is a simpler way to explain Martinez's candidacy: Major League Baseball named an award for him, given annually to the best D.H. Clearly, with Baines now in the Hall of Fame, Martinez should be, too.

Baines's signature moment may have come in Chicago on May 9, 1984, when he ended the longest game in major league history — 8 hours, 6 minutes — with a towering home run to beat Milwaukee in the 25th inning. Baines, ever understated, gave a succinct postgame summary.

"The writers came up to him after the game: 'You got all of that one,' and he said, 'Evidently,'" La Russa said. "That's about as precise as you can be."

Debate it all you want, but the case has been decided. Harold Baines, Hall of Famer? Evidently.

New York Times LOADED: 12.11.2018

### **MLB auction will benefit Negro Leagues Baseball Museum and help pay for vandalism**

By Sam McDowell

Las Vegas—The opening news conference of baseball's winter meetings detailed the event's annual charity auction, and this year, it's hitting close to Kansas City.

The Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, to be exact.

The 2018 Winter Meetings Charity Auction will benefit the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum and the Jackie Robinson Foundation, MLB announced. The auction is organized by a cooperation between MLB, its 30 teams and MLB Network.

The timing is ideal for the museum. During the summer, vandals cut a water pipe at the Buck O'Neil Research and Education Center, causing significant damage.

"I was reminded of something that Buck O'Neil would so often say: Bad people will do bad things. Good people will go fix them," museum president Bob Kendrick said during Monday's news conference in Las Vegas. "And the good people stepped up to the plate. Even as much as the resources that they generated through this wonderful auction, and the support of Major League Baseball and the players' association, what it did was it renewed the spirit in people."

Kendrick said the money generated from the auction will go toward fixing the damage at the Buck O'Neil Research and Education Center, which occupies the former Paseo YMCA building.

Among the many items up for sale: Four tickets to the MLB All-Star week game and festivities, meet-and-greets with various players including Mike Trout, Eric Hosmer and several others, a chance to play catch or take batting practice at Wrigley Field.

Fans can bid on the items at [MLB.com/wintermeetingsauction](http://MLB.com/wintermeetingsauction).

In its lifetime, the auction has raised \$1.15 million.

The Kansas City Star LOADED: 12.11.2018

### **Winter Meetings Report: Free agent market for relievers moves at snail's pace**

By La Velle E. Neal III

LAS VEGAS -- The signals keep getting stronger that the Twins will not be very active this week at the MLB Winter Meetings. They will meet with agents and explore trades with clubs -- and could use a bullpen arm or two -- but it doesn't look like anything big will go down this week.



Here's a midday update from the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino.

"Being able to address our first base and second base needs by way of, first, through a waiver claim in (C.J.) Cron then to get (Jonathan) Schoop, we felt like we stabilized in two areas we knew we needed to," said Twins Chief Baseball Officer Derek Falvey. "Now we can be more open-minded about some other conversations we have moving forward. I don't think we have any specific goals we're hoping to come out of this week with here. But we will meet with teams and meet with agents and continue the conversations we've been having for the last few weeks."

The key part of that statement being, "I don't think we have any specific goals we're hoping to come out of THIS WEEK with here." For some reason, the free agent market for relievers has moved at a snail's pace. Craig Kimbrel is the big cheese on the market, and reports that he wants a six-year contract might be scaring teams. And the market might not shake out until he decides where he wants to play.

Or, maybe some clubs will grow impatient and start signing the Cody Allens and Kelvin Herreras of the free agent world.

"It feels as if it is a little bit of a different free agent relief class this year where you have some high-end closers whereas, last year, there were a lot more guys that we viewed collectively as more seventh and eighth inning guys," General Manager Thad Levine said. "So I don't know if those closers are going to move a little bit more slowly."

With the Twins hot stove currently set to simmer, the organization hopes to continue its get-to-know-you tour with new manager Rocco Baldelli. Baldelli will spend the week sitting in on meetings and getting to know members of the organization.

"With a new manager, what we can control at these meetings is having him integrate with some of our player development folks and some of our senior scouting voices who know him or have met him but really haven't had a chance to spend a lot of time with him," Levine said. "Any time you get your group together it is kind of a de-facto organizational meeting. So we will try to move forward as a group and continue the bonding there."

All it takes is one phone call for the Twins to turn up the burners and make news at the winter meetings. As of now, it doesn't look likely.

#### ROMERO TO THE RESCUE?

As I have written, the Twins believe they have four-fifths of their rotation figured out, and will select a fifth starter from the group of arms they have in camp (I'm sure we'll see the "opener" used a couple of times).

And that affects the bullpen too. Some pitchers who don't make the rotation could be earmarked for the bullpen. And, since I'm on that subject, you might want to prepare to see Fernando Romero come out of the bullpen in 2019. The rumblings about such a move are back. Romero, whose fastball averaged 95.4 mph last season but has touched 97, so has shown the mentality of a late-inning pitcher – and a future closer.

For more details, be sure to catch my story in the Strib tomorrow -- which means it will be available online this evening.

#### PRAISE FOR ROCCO

The managers press conferences have begun, and Tampa Bay manager Kevin Cash was asked about one of his former employees -- new Twins manager Rocco Baldelli.

Cash was full of praise. He believes that Baldelli's ability to understand new-school dynamics while connecting with individuals personally is a great combination.

"To watch how he really learned to communicate with players and have some difficult conversations and also understanding the game, the end game decision making, he's going to do a really good job in Minnesota," Cash said.

Star Tribune LOADED: 12.11.2018

#### Winter Meetings Confidential: Twins downplay rumored interest in free agents

By La Velle E. Neal III Star Tribune

LAS VEGAS – The Twins aggressively shot down rumors Monday about their level of interest in a few free agents, such as slugger Nelson Cruz, righthanders Trevor Cahill and Joakim Soria and even former Twins catcher Wilson Ramos.

The Twins definitely have checked in on these players, but nothing more at this point. Could they grow more interested? Absolutely. But now they're just in the preliminary stages.

"There have been a lot of reports and indications," Chief Baseball Officer Derek Falvey said. "I would say a lot of this right now — and to be truly candid — is like due diligence work. There are a lot of rumors. I think there is a responsibility to check in with different people around potential fits for our team. That's where things stand."

A club could have general interest in a free agent but want to make sure he's healthy. So it requests medical reports. Someone on the other side could read that as serious interest, when it is not. Of course, when there is a report that Cruz and the Twins have "mutual interest," that's a way of Cruz's side making it known he's cool with playing in the Twin Cities.

For now, the signals point toward the Twins not being very active this week. They will meet with agents and explore trades, but it doesn't look like anything big will go down.

• Managers have news conferences during the winter meetings. Tampa Bay's Kevin Cash was asked about one of his former employees, new Twins manager Rocco Baldelli.

Cash was full of praise. He believes that Baldelli's ability to understand new-school dynamics while connecting with individuals personally is a great combination.

"To watch how he really learned to communicate with players and have some difficult conversations and also understanding the game, the end game decisionmaking, he's going to do a really good job in Minnesota," Cash said.

Star Tribune LOADED: 12.11.2018

## Stark: The state of the free-agent market — déjà vu all over again?

By Jayson Stark Dec 10, 2018 148

LAS VEGAS – Nobody at the Winter Meetings needs to worry about Bryce Harper and his ability to pay all future electric bills. Will he get \$300 million or \$400 million? Ten years or 12? Whatever!

"I just want that to be over with," said one agent whose free-agent clients get none of these headlines. "I'm tired of it already. I just hope that he and Manny [Machado] sign at the Winter Meetings, so we can all move on — because it affects the rest of the guys."

Oh, them. The "rest of the guys"? Did you even notice this free-agent class includes a group we'll now refer to as the "rest of the guys"? Right. Thought so.

For that group, the free-agent winter of 2018 (and soon to be 2019) doesn't feel dramatically different than the free-agent winter of a year ago. A whole lot of unemployed baseball players. A whole lot of nothing happening in their world.

And that, says union chief Tony Clark, is "concerning." The union is "watching" this market, he says. The union is "tracking" this market. And the union, Clark says, is seeing signs that this offseason could be lurching down a road that looks painfully familiar.

"None of us know yet how this is going to manifest itself moving forward," Clark told The Athletic on Friday. "But on the heels of what we saw last year, obviously when you start to see certain things arise ... your antennas pop."

All right, we know what you're thinking: What? The players' union has antennas? No, not literally! OK, now here is what you should be thinking: What are those "certain things" he's referring to? That's the big news here. These would be some of those things:

The free-agent negotiating period kicked off more than five weeks ago. By our estimate, 20 teams still haven't signed a single major-league free agent. Depending on how you define "major-league free agent," you could adjust that number upward to 22 or downward to 17. But either way, the overall theme is the same. More than half the teams in baseball have signed zero free agents. In five weeks.

Over those five weeks, only two players who reached free agency have signed a contract longer than two years. They're both starting pitchers — Patrick Corbin (six years, \$140 million with Washington) and Nathan Eovaldi (four years, \$68 million with Boston) — and both signed just in the past few days.

More than half of the 13 signings so far have been one-year deals. And only six of those 13 will be earning more than the approximately \$4 million average salary.

Meanwhile, in the entire month of November, only three players who reached the free-agent market signed a contract longer than one year. None was for longer than two years. And none was for more guaranteed dollars than the two-year, \$10 million deal that Kurt Suzuki agreed to with the Nationals. (The one asterisk here is Clayton Kershaw's opt-out and subsequent three-year, \$93 million extension with the Dodgers. But remember, Kershaw opted out and then stayed in L.A. before other teams could even bid on him.)

We mention those November signings because agents we spoke with for this story tend to use November as a barometer of the health of the entire free-agent market. If you look back over the previous five offseasons, you can see why.

### Pre-December signings

Year	Signings	Multi-year deals
2017	1	0
2016	16*	7
2015	13**	5
2014	12	9
2013	17	12

\* — 3 players also accepted qualifying offer

\*\* — 2 players also accepted qualifying offer

One of those years clearly was not like the others. Yes, that would be last year. And it's apparent now that last offseason's free-agent slowdown has left deep scars on veteran players, their agents and the union that represents them. So there are rumblings that if this winter follows the same pattern, players might decide they're not open to working with the commissioner's office on pace-of-play issues — or anything else.

But you probably won't be shocked to learn that Dan Halem, Major League Baseball's chief legal officer, has a different view of all this. Halem says MLB has studied free-agent markets going back a decade and a half. He sees nothing particularly unusual about this one.

"These statements just aren't supported by the data," Halem said. "There is not much that has changed. We've had slow free-agent markets before over a multi-year period. There are ebbs and flows."

What MLB sees is data that supports a very different point of view. We've delved into that data, too. Here are some facts they would likely use to counter players' concerns:

You can make a case (as you can see above) that this year's free-agent market has been virtually identical to 2015's market. And that was followed by a robust market the following winter. So they would argue it's illogical to connect these dots, because every market is different. If you include Kershaw's extension, the average total value of the free-agent contracts signed through the first week of December is \$21.2 million. That's relatively close to the five-year average for free-agent contracts by this point on the calendar (\$22.8 million).

And even before Harper and Machado sign what could be two of the largest contracts ever, we've already seen Josh Donaldson agree to the biggest one-year deal (\$23 million, with Atlanta) by any free-agent position player in history. So that falls in line with yet another trend — that

the big money in this sport now goes to the big stars. In 2010, just seven players had salaries that paid them \$20 million. By 2018, that number had exploded to 45.

So what MLB undoubtedly sees is a sport in which the total percentage of money going to its players (about 54 percent) hasn't changed substantially in over a decade – a statistic the union doesn't dispute. What has changed is who gets that money. Increasingly, it's the stars who are getting paid. So the financial squeeze on older players could be viewed as a reflection of how many dollars are left in the piggy bank after the stars eat up their share.

But Clark told The Athletic that the union's issues go beyond the inability of veteran free agents to find teams that are in any hurry to sign them or pay them the way guys in their strata used to get paid. Those issues include these:

**TANKING?** Clark never uses that word, and he didn't use it in this interview. But as he has in the past, he expressed "concerns" about the sizeable number of teams that appear to the union to fall under the category of no longer "competing to be the last team standing." He never mentioned the Diamondbacks or Mariners by name, either. But he pointed to contending teams that are suddenly "making significant roster changes" instead of trying to add to the talent that allowed them to contend deep into 2018.

**THE DISAPPEARING MIDDLE CLASS?** While Clark conceded that teams have always had cycles where they felt a need to retool, he said the union is concerned that this is becoming an industry where either "you want to be all in or all out." And because those "all-out" teams then turn around and unloaded "marquee players," he said, that is having an effect on attendance and the free-agent market – and "we believe that is all intertwined."

**COLLUSION?** Clark never uttered the word "collusion" to describe the leisurely pace of this market. But he did say "there appears to be more groupthink now" than in the past and "more like-mindedness in [teams'] decision-making." Though he never got specific, it's obvious that the union has come to believe that when more than half of the clubs go a month into free agency without signing a single player, that's collective strategy, not a coincidence.

"It's sophisticated, collective behavior," said one longtime agent. "And it's impossible to detect and prove."

But on the other side, they think there's a perfectly sensible explanation for that "like-mindedness." In an age of analytics, why wouldn't teams be valuing a large group of players in the same way? So no wonder one executive on management's side laughed at the mere suggestion of collusion — and at the idea that, if there was collusion, it would be impossible to prove.

"No, [if it's really happening] it is possible to prove," the executive said. "File a grievance. If it's impossible to prove, it means it's non-existent."

But the agent who made that claim believes clubs love the idea that they can use analytics as a cover. And despite the potentially record-setting deals that could be out there for Harper and Machado, the same agent predicted that for most free agents, this offseason might actually be worse than last year's, when dozens of players remained unsigned even into February.

Asked why he believed that, he replied: "Because it worked. And they knew it. It was easy to see."

What worked, in the eyes of many agents, was a strategy to wait players out, by basically passing the ball around the perimeter until the other side got worn down – whereupon clubs were able to get players to jump at below-market deals that at least kept them from lining up at the unemployment bureau.

"I feel like teams are preying on players' insecurities," said another veteran agent. "What are they going to do – not play? Are they going to take \$8 million or zero? You don't want to wait around until February, so you say, 'Let's take a one-year deal.' But then you're back out there again the next winter and you're a year older."

Yet for all this talk about another free-agent freezeout, we've still seen two big contracts in the starting-pitching market — to Corbin and Eovaldi. And Eovaldi's agent, Seth Levinson, a longtime proponent of aggressively trying to make deals for his free-agent clients early in the offseason, says it's still possible to get deals done by "recognizing the trends and undercurrent of the market," grim as that undercurrent may be.

Levinson said he has never believed in waiting for "another agent or club to set the market." And his agency, Aces Inc., has a long track record of pre-Christmas deals for a group of players as diverse as Jon Lester (six years, \$155 million from the Cubs in 2015), Brett Cecil (four years, \$30.5 million from the Cardinals in 2016) and Josh Reddick (four years, \$52 million from the Astros in 2016).

But even though he was able to continue that streak with Eovaldi, Levinson paints a bleak portrait of the market most players have been plunged into.

"With about 10 clubs tanking and only dabbling in a market of 180-ish unsigned free agents and nontenders," he wrote in an email, "it does not take an economist to predict that the [January-February] offseason will likely mirror last year's market. The evolution of the game has created serious fundamental issues that must be addressed for the parties to co-exist and thrive."

Serious. Fundamental. Issues.

Uh-oh. Those three words sum up exactly why this matters. This is more than a story about agents, players and union chiefs grumbling about how veteran free agents aren't getting paid like they used to. It's a story that is leading someplace — and not a place anyone wants to visit.

If veteran players are going to be viewed as essentially interchangeable parts, then free agency after six big-league seasons can't hold the same value that it used to hold. And that value it used to hold – for four prosperous decades – was to serve as a reward that players viewed as worth waiting and toiling for.

But if the game is going to continue to skew dramatically younger, then a lot of free agents in their 30s aren't going to wind up getting rich. They're going to wind up unemployed. Or waiting around until February for a minor-league deal with a spring-training invite.

And that's why the fate of "the rest of the guys" matters to so many agents we've spoken with — and to their union. Because "it's all part and parcel of what we're seeing," Clark said. "And what we're seeing is that we have a system that appears to be changing."

So how is it changing? And where is it leading? Very possibly to a dramatic labor confrontation in three years, as the union pushes for a completely new system that will get players paid at a younger age, and earlier in their careers.

What could possibly go wrong there? Don't ask. This is no time to hash over everything that could go awry between now and 2021. There will be a place for that. And nobody wants that place to be the beginning of another Winter Meetings – especially considering that by the time these meetings are over, a guy named Bryce or Manny might be the proud owner of the most humongous contract in history.

But the big question for the industry is: Then what? Does that kick-start what just turns out to be a healthy if late-developing market? Or do we look up in a month and find 120 of "the rest of the guys" still looking for a team?

"I think it will be important to review the entire landscape at the end of the market," Clark said, "to appreciate what may have manifested itself. So that's why I'm not trying to jump-start an engine yet. I can acknowledge what it is we've seen thus far ... that some of what we're seeing is similar to last year.

"But I'm not going to presume or assume what the next month and a half is going to look like, and offer a definitive backdrop on what it means," said the head of the union. "I won't do that."

And that, says the chief negotiator on the other side, is a good thing. The pace of free agency has always been dictated by the biggest stars on the market, not the clubs signing them, Dan Halem said. Teams chase the biggest stars, then move on to the next tier. And agents often wait until those stars set the market, then home in on their own deals.

So what will happen after Harper and Machado rake in more money than the Gross National Product of Belize? Halem said, simply: "We'll see."

But in the meantime, "this is the system the union has negotiated," he said. "If they want to sit down before the next round of collective bargaining and discuss a different system, then we'll be happy to discuss a different system with them."

That, however, is a story for the winter of 2021. Back here in the present, it's a couple of weeks before Christmas of 2018. And to the agents swirling in the Winter Meeting breezes of Las Vegas, it feels like last winter all over again.

"Last year was crazy," said one of them. "This year feels exactly the same. Something's going on, man. Something is up."