

Cleveland Indians: Talking trading a pitcher, front office -- Terry Pluto

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

ABOUT WINTER DECISIONS

After the season, the Indians had serious talks about how to approach 2019.

They faced a few realities:

1. They are a good team, but not on the same level as Houston, Boston and the New York Yankees.
2. Their payroll is not going to rise, meaning it will remain in the middle of the pack. They ranked No. 14 in payroll in 2018, according to spotrac.
3. Attendance will probably remain about the same. The Indians ranked 21st out of 30 teams. Quick playoff exits in 2017 and 2018 hurt off-season ticket sales.
4. They could keep the core of their team together. They'd have a strong rotation and Silver Slugger winners Francisco Lindor and Jose Ramirez together – and win the Central Division. They remain in excellent shape in terms of the playoffs– something not to be taken for granted. Over the last six seasons, the Indians have the best overall record in the American League.
5. But they want find a way to improve and make another run at returning to the World Series. They know it won't be through a big free agent signing.
6. Should they make a bold trade to add outfield help, bullpen arms and younger prospects? The idea would not be simply to trade and dump payroll.
7. There is nearly a zero chance Michael Brantley will return to the Tribe. At the moment, the starting outfield would be Jason Kipnis (LF), Leonys Martin or Greg Allen (CF) and Tyler Naquin (RF). Bradley Zimmer is recovering from shoulder surgery and probably won't be ready for opening day.
8. I can't believe the Indians will stick with that outfield. Trades are the most logical way to fix it. The Indians plan to keep Francisco Lindor and Jose Ramirez. They want to add more hitters, not subtract from the lineup.
9. The one exception would be Edwin Encarnacion. He's averaged 35 HR and 107 RBI in his two years with the Tribe, while batting .252 (.848 OPS). He'll turn 36 in January and is primarily a DH. So he can still hit.
10. Encarnacion is guaranteed \$25 million – a \$20 million salary in 2019 and he has a \$5 million buyout in 2020. It's hard to find a big market team needing a DH on that kind of deal. But I expect the Indians to see if there is any market for Encarnacion.

WHO TO TRADE?

The top three starters would be the most attractive to other teams in a trade:

1. Corey Kluber will be 33 years old in April. He is a two-time Cy Young Award winner. He was 20-7 with a 2.89 ERA last season. He will make \$17 million in 2019. He's under contract for three years, totaling \$45 million.
2. Carlos Carrasco will be 32 in March. He was 17-10 with a 3.38 ERA last season. He'll be paid \$9.5 million in 2019 and \$10 million in 2020.
3. Trevor Bauer is 28 years old. He was 12-6 with a 2.21 ERA last season. He is under team control for two more years thanks to arbitration. His projected salary is \$11 million in 2019.
4. The cheapest to keep is Carrasco. The best is probably Kluber. The one with the most upside is Bauer. All of them will have appeal. The Indians probably are willing to trade any of them for the right return.
5. The deeper I look at the rotation and the state of the Tribe, the more likely it seems a big trade could happen. The Indians don't want to trade any more top prospects. One of their top three starting pitchers could bring in young talent and players to help immediately.
6. I really have not heard any names, and I can't guess. But I do know you'll hear a lot of rumors.

ABOUT ROTATION OPTIONS

1. The other reason the Indians can afford to trade a starter is they have options. Mike Clevinger was 13-8 with a 3.02 ERA. He can't be a free agent until 2023.
2. Shane Bieber was 11-5 with a 4.55 ERA as a rookie. The Indians believe the 24-year-old has a chance to be a big-time starter.
3. As a rookie, Adam Plutko was 4-5 with a 5.28 ERA. The Tribe likes him as a fifth starter.
4. Cody Anderson is coming back from major Tommy John elbow surgery. He is healthy and has been throwing at the spring facility in Goodyear. The 28-year-old was 7-3 with a 3.05 ERA in 2015. The Indians will use him as a starter in spring training, but he could become a reliever if needed.
5. The top minor league starting prospect is Triston McKenzie. At the age of 21, he had a 7-4 record and 2.68 ERA at Class AA Akron. He'll start in Class AAA, but he could help the rotation by midseason in Cleveland.

6. I hear the Indians will bring back Danny Salazar, who missed all of last season with shoulder issues. He'll be a \$5 million lottery ticket, hoping he can stay healthy.

ABOUT MIKE CHERNOFF

The news about Mike Chernoff signing a three-year contract extension to remain as the Tribe's general manager isn't a surprise.

Nor is it a surprise the Mets and Giants reportedly were interested in interviewing Chernoff to fill major openings in their front offices.

The Tribe's front office is respected all over baseball, and that's been true for decades.

The Indians consistently hire from within. The top spots in the baseball organization went from Hank Peters to John Hart to Mark Shapiro to Chris Antonetti.

After the 2007 season, Antonetti turned down a chance to run the St. Louis Cardinals to remain with the Indians as the top assistant to Shapiro.

Antonetti had other job offers, but that was one where he went to St. Louis for meetings and was the first choice of the Cardinals.

He eventually took over the Tribe's baseball operations with Chernoff as his right-hand man.

Consider these two names: David Stearns and Derek Falvey.

At one point, they were top assistants to Antonetti and Chernoff.

Now, Stearns is the general manager of the Milwaukee Brewers, baseball's surprise team in 2018.

Falvey is in charge of the Minnesota Twins.

There are other Tribe front office people all over baseball. Neal Huntington is the GM of the Pittsburgh Pirates. Ross Atkins holds that same job for the Toronto Blue Jays, where Shapiro is team president.

This says something very positive about the Dolan ownership. Despite budget limitations, people want to work in the Tribe's front office. Terry Francona wanted to manage the Indians because of the strong front office and an ownership that allows the baseball people to do baseball.

As the Indians face a tough winter with payroll decisions, it's worth noticing that Chernoff stayed.

And how people who know a lot about the game want to keep working in Cleveland, despite its status as a small baseball market with a limited payroll.

What should we remember about Jose Ramirez's 2018 season before he drove off a cliff? Tribe Take

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

CLEVELAND, Ohio – A lot of writing has become instant analysis. If you need a long walk in the woods to reflect and process before hammering your laptop keys, maybe you should write a book. Better yet, paint a picture or build a house.

After the final pitch, basket, goal or touchdown people want to know why it happened. They already know the final score and the heroes and goats. What they don't know is why.

When Jose Ramirez's 2018 season is put under the microscope, what do those who watched him play every day for the Indians see? For me it's the end of the season slump when it seemed like he was swallowed by the Federal Witness Protection Program. When Ramirez came out of hiding in the ALDS against Houston, he went 0-for-11.

A 0-for-11 skid coming on the heels of a 24-for-146 (.166) slump to end the regular season leaves a mark. But should that be all we remember? Is there something else to see here?

Since this is the baseball award season, the answer would appear to be yes.

On Thursday night, Ramirez and teammate Francisco Lindor received their second straight Silver Slugger awards for being the top offensive players in the AL at their positions. Lindor plays shortstop and Ramirez received the award for his actions at third base.

On Thursday we'll find out who wins the AL MVP award. It probably won't be Ramirez, but the fact that he received enough votes from members of the Baseball Writers Association of America to finish in the top three is an indication that people who get paid to watch baseball for a living overlooked Ramirez's face plant at the end of the season.

This is the second straight year Ramirez can finish no worse than third in the MVP voting. It is worth noting that Ramirez received enough votes this year to keep J.D. Martinez out of the final three spots in the MVP race. Red Sox fans aren't happy about that. The same goes for Martinez's agent, Scott Boras, which isn't exactly a bad thing. Having Boras lecture BBWAA members on who they should and shouldn't vote for always makes for good entertainment.

Did Martinez get robbed? Maybe.

He had a great season, hitting .333 (188-for-569) with 43 homers. He led the big leagues with 130 RBI and 358 total bases, while posting a 1.031 OPS.

So why wasn't he one of the top three MVP vote getters instead of Mookie Betts, Mike Trout and Ramirez? I didn't vote on the award, but the fact that Martinez played 93 of his 150 games at DH had to play a role.

Ramirez hit .270 (156-for-578) with 39 homers, 105 RBI and an OPS of .939. He made 157 starts, 137 at third, 16 at second and four at DH. He stole 34 bases in 40 attempts and scored 110 runs.

Recently Ramirez was named DraftKings MLB MVP. Last week, along with being named an MVP finalist by the BBWAA, he was a finalist for a Gold Glove for his defensive play. The Gold Glove at third base went to Oakland's Matt Chapman.

Too often what we hear or see last makes the biggest impression. We can't forget about Ramirez driving off the cliff in mid-August. It should sound an alarm that carries into spring training and the regular season in 2019. But the first 4 ½ months of the season didn't go over the cliff with him.

What kind of king's ransom will the Cleveland Indians demand for a starting pitcher? Hey, Hoynsie

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com | Posted November 10, 2018 at 12:56 PM

What could the Indians get for one of their starting pitchers?

Hey, Hoynsie: Knowing how the Tribe values controllable starting pitching, especially at the price tag it has them under, would you consider trading Corey Kluber or Carlos Carrasco? If they do venture down this treacherous path with the Yankees, wouldn't you demand an extraordinary return from the Yankees? How about Aaron Hicks and Aaron Judge? -- Jeff, Sydney, Australia.

Hey, Jeff: It's a delicate situation, but payroll wise it sounds like the Indians are seriously considering moving one of their talented starters. The problem is, at least to me, is that if you trade Kluber you're never going to get back equal value based on the work he's done on the mound and in the clubhouse, especially over the last five years.

Plus the Indians aren't conducting a fire sale. If they trade Kluber, Carrasco or Trevor Bauer, they need big league ready players coming back because they need help in the outfield and bullpen. If they do something like this, they can't miss.

Can the Indians bring back Clint Frazier in a deal with Yanks?

Hey, Hoynsie: If the Indians really do trade Corey Kluber to the Yankees, what about getting Miguel Andujar, Justus Sheffield and Clint Frazier in return? The Indians could get a couple of our No.1 picks (Sheffield and Frazier) back and some salary relief. -- Rich Shawbell, Lake Worth, Fla.

Hey, Rich: If the Indians traded Kluber or another starter to the Yankees, they'd have to get a starter back and it's possible Sheffield could fill that role. They'd need another major-league ready player to fill a hole in the outfield or bullpen. They'd also need at least one of the Yankees top prospects.

Frazier, an outfielder and the Indians' No. 1 pick in 2013, could help in the outfield. But he played only 69 games last year after suffering a concussion in spring training. He appeared in 15 games with the Yankees. That would have to be taken into consideration.

The Indians sent Sheffield and Frazier to the Yankees in 2016 as part of the Andrew Miller trade.

Is Trevor Bauer the ace of the Indians' rotation?

Hey, Hoynsie: Regardless of whether Corey Kluber or Carlos Carrasco are traded this winter, do you feel Trevor Bauer is the ace of the staff and should start on opening day? -- Andy Meese, Sandusky.

Hey, Andy: I think Bauer still has to earn that job. I think he'd tell you the same thing.

The Indians think highly of him or he wouldn't have started Game 1 of the ALDS in 2017 or been put in a pivotal spot in the bullpen for the 2018 ALDS. But if Kluber is on the 2019 opening day roster and healthy, I think he gets the ball for Game 1.

Would Terry Francona represent Cleveland or Boston in Hall of Fame?

Hey, Hoynsie: If and when Terry Francona is elected to the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, will he go in representing the Red Sox or Indians? Can he go in as both? -- Stephen Frost, Petersburg, Va.

Hey, Stephen: I don't think Francona is ready to retire just yet so we should have time to contemplate your question. When a player enters Cooperstown, the Hall of Fame decides what logo he'll wear on his cap based on where he made the biggest contribution in his career.

When manager Tony La Russa was inducted in 2014 along with fellow managers Joe Torre and Bobby Cox, he elected to be enshrined with no logo on his cap even though he won two World Series and the majority of his games with St. Louis because he did not want to slight the two other teams he managed -- the White Sox and Oakland.

Francona, in six years with the Indians, has a 545-425 (.562) record. He's taken the Indians to the postseason four times, winning three division titles and one pennant. In eight years in Boston under Francona, the Red Sox went 744-552 (.574), won two pennants, two World Series and appeared in the postseason five times.

If Francona was inducted tomorrow, he'd probably go in wearing a Boston cap. But he's under contract through 2020 with the Tribe so let's see what happens.

Craig Muder, director of communications at Cooperstown, said the inductee can have input in the decision, but the Hall of Fame has the final say.

Why didn't the Indians make Michael Brantley a qualifying offer?

bsHey Hoynsie: How could the Indians not offer Michael Brantley a qualifying offer? I read that Chris Antonetti said they didn't want to potentially commit to the \$17.9 million dollar one year deal, but all the walleye in Lake Erie know that Brantley was not going to accept it. This is likely his last chance to cash in on a multiyear deal. I just can't understand why they wouldn't at least get a draft pick. Do you think the front office didn't offer him the qualifying offer as a favor to not limit his opportunities? -- Frank Galas, Campbell, Calif.

Hey, Frank: I think they felt there was a chance that Brantley would take the qualifying offer. He knows his injury history better than anyone else.

Brantley hitting the free agent market without being restricted by a qualifying offer is a good thing for him, but I don't think that was the driving force behind the decision not to make him the qualifying offer. At this time of the year, most decisions are based on money, not sentiment.

Why would the Indians trade Carlos Carrasco and not Jose Ramirez?

Hey, Hoynsie: I understand listening to offers for Corey Kluber and not Francisco Lindor. I do not understand listening to offers for Carlos Carrasco, but not Jose Ramirez. Right now Carrasco is at least Kluber's equal at a substantially lower price. Trading Kluber and Carrasco would leave only Trevor Bauer and Mike Clevinger as veteran starters. Why not make Ramirez available? He's disappeared in the last two postseasons and the way he finished 2018 is a concern going forward. -- David Frederick, St. Augustine, Fla.

Hey, David: Unless I have my signals crossed, I think the Indians are considering trading just one starting pitcher, not two. As for trading Ramirez based on two quick exits from the postseason and an ugly end-of-the-season slump in 2018, I understand your frustration, but I'm not going there right now.

Then again, who's to say the Indians aren't listening to offers on Ramirez? They have a lot of talented players that other teams like and the winter lasts a long time in Cleveland.

Why is good not good enough for Indians' fans?

Hey, Hoynsie: After not having won a World Series championship since 1948, I don't think fans care about a team that is just good or just wins division titles. Many of us want the World Series trophy, not just a team to entertain us. It's time for the Indians to realize that being good is not good enough. -- Les Kaminski, Parma.

Hey, Les: This may surprise you, but the Indians open every season with the goal you're talking about -- winning the World Series. They keep giving themselves a chance -- six straight winning seasons, four trips to the postseason, three division titles and one pennant, but it hasn't worked yet.

In giving themselves a chance, they're giving fans like you the opportunity to go along for the ride. Whether you chose to be entertained or not is up to you.

The Indians need more contact hitters

Hey, Hoynsie: It seems to me that the Indians need more contact hitters to go with their home run hitters. How will the Tribe go about putting together a more balanced roster? -- Tommy Fairchild, Fairfield, Ia.

Hey, Tommy: The Indians struck out the fewest times of any team in the big leagues last season (1,189). They had the second best batting average (.259) and scored the third most runs (818). So I don't think contact was a big problem.

Could they have been better in the clutch, sure. They hit .260 with runners in scoring position, but that still ranked fifth in the AL. They hit .269 with runners on base, the third highest average in the league.

The 2018 Indians were far from perfect, but they did make contact.

The Cleveland Indians are open to make a trade and they have the talent to do it

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com | Posted November 11, 2018 at 09:23 AM | Updated November 11, 2018 at 09:28 AM

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The Indians entered the offseason with the same goal for 2019 as they had in 2018 -- to win a World Series.

But they're operating under different conditions. There will be no increase in the franchise-record payroll from 2018. There will be no big free-agent signings and the 12 free agents that left them after Boston beat the Dodgers in Game 5 of the World Series in all probability aren't coming back.

Still, the Indians know they have big holes to fill in the outfield and bullpen. To do that they're going to attempt to thread the needle -- trade one or two of their talented players to fill the holes and take another run at something the Indians haven't won since 1948.

With a game plan like that, it is necessary to have a talented roster and the Indians do. Teams want to trade for the players on the Tribe's roster, which has kept executives Chris Antonetti, Mike Chernoff and others busy.

Starting pitching is the crown jewel of the Tribe's roster. They have frontline talent in Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco and Trevor Bauer. They have potential in Mike Clevinger and Shane Bieber and Adam Plukto and depth in Cody Anderson and Danny Salazar.

In the middle infield they have Francisco Lindor, Jose Ramirez, Jason Kipnis and Erik Gonzalez. The price for Lindor and Ramirez would be extravagant, but it doesn't cost anything to listen. Yu Chang, who can play shortstop or third, is hitting well in the Arizona Fall League.

Several teams are looking for catchers and the Indians have veterans in Yan Gomes and Roberto Perez. Eric Haase is right behind them. The Indians hold club options on Gomes through 2021 and Perez through 2022. Perez is coming off a bad season, but he's shown in the past that he can handle a pitching staff fulltime.

If a team is looking for power at DH or first base, they have that in Edwin Encarnacion and Yonder Alonso. Encarnacion is signed through 2019 with a club option for 2020. Alonso is signed through 2019 with a vesting option for 2020.

Encarnacion, making \$20 million in 2019, will be hard to trade. Alonso will make \$8 million. Yandy Diaz is waiting behind them and Bobby Bradley hit 24 homers in 97 games at Class AA Akron.

Now it just comes down to making the right deal. Something that is a lot easier said than done.

Jose Ramirez: The slump continues

Ramirez, via Twitter, said he and his girlfriend were going on vacation to Costa Rica, but immigration officials would not let them in the country. Officials escorted them back to their plane and they had to return to Miami.

Unfazed, at least in his Tweet, Ramirez said they'd simply go to Punta Cana, a resort in the Dominican Republic, for their vacation.

Ramirez, the Indians All-Star third baseman, ended the regular season in a 24-for-146 slump. He then went 0-for-11 against Houston in the ALDS. It seems he still hasn't found his swing.

Free agents updates on Andrew Miller, Josh Donaldson

Andrew Miller's agent, Mark Rogers, told the New York Post, that Miller underwent a physical after leaving the Indians through free agency to show interested teams that he's healthy. Dr. David Altchek, the Mets medical director, conducted the physical.

Miller helped the Indians reach Game 7 of the World Series in 2016, but made five trips to the DL in 2017 and 2018. He made three of those trips this past season with hamstring, shoulder and knee problems. Altchek gave Miller a clean bill of health and the Cardinals are one of the teams showing interest in him.

This year Miller made only 37 appearances, going 2-4 with a 4.24 ERA for the Indians. He'll be 34 in May.

Third baseman Josh Donaldson played just 16 regular season games with the Indians after they acquired him from Toronto on July 31. For the season, he was limited to 52 games between the Jays and Indians because of a left calf injury.

Donaldson, a free agent like Miller, has reportedly drawn interest from at least six teams, according to Mark Feinsand of mlb.com. Donaldson turns 33 in December and what kind of contract the former AL MVP signs covers a wide range of variables.

Winter ball updates

Perez went to winter ball early this year and one of the reasons may have been to show the Indians and other teams that he can still hit.

Playing for Licey, Perez is hitting .370 (10-for-27) with three RBI in the Dominican Republic. Last season he hit .168 (30-for-179) with two homers and 19 RBI.

Gonzalez, another player who wore out the bench last season for the Tribe, is hitting .310 (9-for-29) with three RBI for Escogido in the Dominican. Gonzalez hit .265 (36-for-136) with one homer and 16 RBI in 81 games last season.

Tribe minor leaguer David Martinez is also playing for Esogido. He's 0-1 with a 2.54 ERA and two saves in as many chances. He's struck out eight without a walk, but has allowed 11 hits in seven innings.

In the Arizona Fall League Chang and right-hander Justin Garza were finalists for the player of the week awards. Chang is hitting .343 (24-for-70) with three homers and 12 RBI. Garza is 1-2 with a 4.00 ERA in five starts covering 18 innings. He's struck 15, but walked 10.

Quentin Holmes is at the team's academy in the Dominican playing instructional league games. Holmes, a No.2 pick in 2017, played just seven games last season because of a hamstring injury. He's at the Tribe's academy in the Dominican making up for lost time.

Take a bow, Terry Francona

Tribe manager Terry Francona received the Brooks Robinson Community Service Award on Thursday in New York City as part of the 19th annual Legends For Youth Dinner. Hall of Famer Bob Gibson received the Lifetime Achievement award.

The dinner is the primary fund raiser for the Legends Youth baseball clinics that reach 18,000 children annually.

Hall of Famer Jim Thome will receive the 2018 lifetime achievement award for sportsmanship at the annual Musial Awards in St. Louis on Nov. 17. The Musial Awards are named for St. Louis Cardinal great Stan Musial.

In closing

Giovanni Urshela, the Indians starting third baseman in the 2017 ALDS against the Yankees, has signed a minor league deal with the Yankees. . .Evan Marshall, who made 10 appearances with the Tribe last season, has signed a minor league deal with the White Sox. . .Brian Graham, a former minor league manager and big league coach for the Indians, is running the day-to-day operations for the Orioles while they search for a general manager. Graham is Baltimore's director of player development. . .Kevin Kouzmanoff, who hit the first big-league pitch he saw for a grand slam in his debut with the Indians, is now Oakland's hitting coach at Class A Vermont. . .Twins great Joe Mauer has announced his retirement. The Indians respected him, but are not sad to see him go. He slashed .316/.397/.454 in his career against the Indians. Mauer hit .372 (16-for-43) against Carrasco, .296 (16-for-54) against Kluber and .283 (13-for-46) against Bauer.

Nick Cafardo / SUNDAY BASEBALL NOTES / On baseball's agenda: roster size, pitch clocks, and defensive shifts

By Nick Cafardo Globe Staff November 10, 2018

While Scott Boras offered plenty of ideas to improve major league baseball during his press gathering this past week in Carlsbad, Calif., the general managers offered their ideas and concerns to MLB deputy commissioner Dan Halem, who will brief owners at this coming week's owners' meetings in Atlanta.

Those ideas and concerns will likely be a part of the CBA negotiations, which should take place this offseason.

Here are some issues that have been raised, according to Halem:

- **Roster size.** This is an ongoing topic. Halem said it was a major discussion during the last CBA but while a proposal was made to change the 25-man roster, the sides couldn't quite agree. As a result, the 25-man roster with the usual September call-ups from the 40-man roster were kept intact. One idea that was floated was to move to a 26-man roster, but during the first month of the season the roster size would be 29. That would allow teams to transition better from spring training to the regular season and gradually turn up the intensity to perhaps avoid injuries. The 26-man roster makes sense in today's game, in which teams are using their bullpens more than ever and going with fewer bench players. It makes sense, but it has to be collectively bargained. It also costs the owners more money to have more players on the active roster, so there might be some resistance on such an idea from the owners' side. The flip side to keeping the roster size status quo is that there's a lot of downtime for players spending significant time on the disabled list.

- **A 20-second pitch clock.** From this point of view, say it isn't so. And maybe it won't be. The idea has been floated for a while, but commissioner Rob Manfred has not pulled the trigger on it. Certainly, the Players Association is against anything that makes players uncomfortable. David Price was the second-slowest pitcher between pitches to Justin Verlander. Price has publicly said he wouldn't change a thing about how he goes about his pitch-to-pitch routine. It works for him. It works for Verlander. Halem and Manfred are certainly happy that the average time for a nine-inning game had been sliced by 4 minutes, 30 seconds, to 3 hours. MLB managed to accomplish this by reducing time between innings and during pitching changes. Also contributing were limiting mound visits to six per game, a good idea that did not affect the integrity of the game. "It's going in the right direction," Halem said.

- **Defensive shifts.** This one I'd love to ban altogether as it takes away from offense and takes several points off the batting averages. David Ortiz hated shifts and it took him a while to solve them. What's so great about a lefthanded power hitter grounding out to right field? The argument that hitters should go "the other way" and beat the shift — well, if it were that easy everyone would do it. It's harder to do than people think. Just ask the hitters. Realistically, there could be an alteration on how much shifting can be done. One idea is when a team lines up in a shift, they can't change it depending on the count. Once you declare your shift position prior to the at-bat, you must stay in that position.

- **Reducing strikeouts.** When MLB has more strikeouts than hits in a season, it's something that needs to be looked at. "We're an entertainment product," Halem said. "Certainly we want to play the game in a way that's compelling for our audience, including our younger audience. So we're constantly looking at the way the game is changing organically. We work very hard on trying to reduce as much dead time in games as possible so games are played as crisply as possible." Halem emphasized the need for "more balls in play." How do you get that done? That's a huge discussion for the Competition Committee, which will also convene in Atlanta.

- **Sign stealing.** There's much discussion about safeguards for the use of electronics and video used to steal signs. The issue came up again in Game 1 of the Red Sox-Astros ALCS, when an Astros employee was caught videotaping the Red Sox dugout from the camera well at Fenway. The Astros were absolved when their reason for videotaping was to make sure the Red Sox weren't engaged in hanky-panky. The Red Sox had their incident in 2017 when they were fined for using an Apple Watch to steal signs from the Yankees. Halem said that in discussing this issue with the GMs he got a unanimous response that none of them are engaged in any electronic shenanigans. "I think the real issue here is giving clubs comfort that other clubs are not using electronic technology to steal signs," Halem said. "So we took a variety of measures in the postseason to give clubs comfort that the rules were being enforced. We got some additional suggestions on things we can do at the more granular level. The issues that we talked about — the use of the center-field camera, how much the commissioner's office should monitor video rooms — those sets of issues we're going to talk to the commissioner about and he's going to make a decision about what we should do next year just so we can sort of tamp down this conversation of whether ball clubs are playing by the rules."

- **Halem rejected Boras's idea that lower attendance was linked to teams tanking it or in less-dramatic terms, rebuilding.** "I certainly don't agree with that characterization," Halem said. "I don't, and our owners don't believe that there's any connection between the rebuilding process and overall attendance. There are a variety of reasons for our attendance numbers. We had poor weather." There were 54 postponements, which was the most since 1989, and 26 occurred on the weekend when attendance is normally higher. And there were 35 games in which the temperature was 40 degrees or below in April.

- **I asked Halem about whether new Mets president of baseball operations Brodie Van Wagenen, who left his players agency (CAA) to switch sides, had divested his interests.** Halem said the issue is addressed in the Basic Agreement, and that Van Wagenen has divested his interests to the satisfaction of MLB. Now the tricky part is that Van Wagenen represented several Mets, including stars Yoenis Cespedes and Jacob deGrom. How do you deal with players you're still drawing commissions from?

Apropos of nothing

1. One of the many players Red Sox manager Alex Cora was proud of was catcher Christian Vazquez. "Maybe he didn't start good," Cora said, "but he's in a good place. I told him, I said, 'Hey man, you went from the doghouse to the fricking penthouse.' He understood the situation and Sandy [Leon] was playing great, but then you know we needed offense and he did provide us with that and plus-defense. He caught better too because at one point . . . I don't know if it was the contract or whatever it was, he wasn't the guy that we were expecting early in the season." Two other interesting things from Cora: He expects Andrew Benintendi to keep getting better, hitting for more power and one day to challenge for a batting title. And he predicts Jackie Bradley Jr. will take off offensively next season after making major adjustments in his swing during the second half of the season.

2. Brian Cashman was the last general manager to repeat a World Series championship and in fact three-peated and almost won four in row. "It's hard, no doubt about it," Cashman said about repeating. "Those [Yankee] teams were different but there were some similarities at the same time we had back then. You just have to be willing to adjust on the run and be willing to plug holes that pop up, and thankfully back then we were able to do that. But this is now and now we're continuing to focus on ways to take a 100-win team that didn't even win the division and improve upon it."

3. Terrific "celebration of life" event in Carlsbad, Calif., this past week for longtime scout Don Welke, who died in September at age 75. Heartfelt speeches by Rangers GM Jon Daniels and Padres GM A.J. Preller, who were mentored by Welke. Welke helped build the Blue Jays with Pat Gillick in the early 1990s and then helped build the Rangers, who played in two World Series. He had spent the last several years with the Padres.
4. Here's a thought: I'm not sure why J.D. Martinez wouldn't be up for spending some time learning how to play first base in spring training. If the Red Sox don't resign free agent Steve Pearce, Martinez could spend some time playing first base in a platoon with Mitch Moreland.
5. Yes, Dodgers first baseman David Freese was one of the hitters the Red Sox considered trading for when they wound up making the deal with the Blue Jays for Pearce.
6. Mike Tamburro, the longtime president and part owner of the Pawtucket Red Sox, was named "King of Baseball" by Minor League Baseball and will be recognized at next month's winter meetings in Las Vegas. In the Larry Lucchino ownership of the PawSox, Tamburro serves as vice chairman.
7. I've learned over the years never to believe the Yankees when they downplay interest in a free agent. This offseason we've heard that sentiment when it comes to Bryce Harper and Manny Machado. Wallace Matthews of the New York Daily News had an item during the GM meetings that, according to a source, the Yankees might be eyeing a deal to trade Giancarlo Stanton in effort to sign Harper. Anything is possible with the Yankees, who didn't like getting beaten by the Red Sox.

Updates on nine

1. Miguel Cabrera, 1B/DH, Tigers — Cabrera (biceps tendon surgery) is said to be 100 percent healthy and ready for spring training, according to Tigers GM Al Avila. Cabrera will be playing on a rebuilding team where his hitting talents will go largely unnoticed. The Tigers could strip down even more by dealing starting pitcher Michael Fulmer, right fielder Nicholas Castellanos, and reliever Shane Greene (who wouldn't be a bad pickup for the Red Sox). The Tigers also have parted ways with former Red Sox shortstop Jose Iglesias, a free agent, and likely will sign a cheaper veteran in his place.
2. Jacoby Ellsbury, CF, Yankees — His agent, Scott Boras, indicated that Ellsbury was healthy again after hip surgery and is ready to go for the 2019 season. "We all know how talented Jacoby is when he's healthy," Boras said. It'll be interesting to see whether Ellsbury will be able to take the starting job back.
3. Alex Cora, manager, Red Sox — Yes, according to a major league source, Cora did have bonus incentives in his contract for postseason success. Cora will reap the financial rewards of winning it all. We're not privy to the exact amount, but we hear it's substantial.
4. Billy Owens, assistant GM, Athletics — Owens is said to be a GM candidate in San Francisco after Farhan Zaidi, who spent many years in Oakland before going to the Dodgers, was named president of baseball operations of the Giants. Owens is a longtime Billy Beane employee who has done a lot of the scouting legwork in evaluating players, which Zaidi will need given his more analytical background. Owens is deserving but he is also very loyal to Beane.
5. David Chadd, assistant GM, Tigers — Chadd, a former Red Sox scouting director, has been considered for the Orioles' general manager position. The process has dragged out as team owners John and Lou Angelos try to settle on a replacement for Dan Duquette. Chadd was responsible for drafting Dustin Pedroia, Jon Lester, Brandon Moss, David Murphy, and Jonathan Papelbon for the Red Sox, and James McCann, Castellanos, Drew Smyly, Rick Porcello, and Andrew Miller for the Tigers. Chadd has certainly paid his dues and has excelled in multiple roles.
6. Yusei Kikuchi, LHP, Seibu Lions — He is going to draw considerable interest once he is posted by the Lions in the near future. There's no telling which team will emerge as the leader, but the Yankees are certainly interested, especially if they're unable to land one of the top pitchers in free agency. The Red Sox have scouted the 27-year-old Kikuchi extensively, but because they already have three lefties in the rotation it seems unlikely they would dive into his market.
7. Ruben Amaro Jr., adviser, Mets — Amaro, who spent two years coaching first base for the Red Sox and another year with the Mets, moved to the front office to be an adviser to Brodie Van Wagenen. A longtime Phillies GM, Amaro had applied for the Mets' GM job but was rebuffed. As a player agent, Van Wagenen had many dealings with the Stanford-educated Amaro (also Van Wagenen's alma mater) on Phillies players. Suffice it to say, Amaro has had a very interesting baseball career. In the Mets' coaching shakeup, Gary DiSarcina, a former Red Sox bench coach, will go from bench coach to third base coach.
8. Kenta Maeda, RHP, Dodgers — We don't know whether the Dodgers reworked Maeda's unique incentive-laden contract to reflect that he was moved to the bullpen after making 20 starts. Maeda signed a deal in 2016 for eight years at \$25 million, but the deal was worth up to \$106 million with incentives. He can make \$1 million for making 15-plus starts, and \$1.5 million for 25-plus starts. He also makes \$250,000 for every 10 innings pitched after 90 innings through 190 innings, and \$750,000 for 200 innings. So in 2018, Maeda made \$2 million extra for 20 starts, and for his 125⅓ innings he earned an additional \$800,000 or so. Interesting calculations.
9. Cory Kluber, RHP, Indians — The Indians had conversations with teams about dealing Kluber, according to a major league source. We did spot Brian Cashman with Indians president Chris Antonetti during the GM meetings, so there's likely some Yankee interest. Kluber, who will be 33 in April, is entering the final year of his contract. He won 20 games in 2018 while pitching 200-plus innings for the fifth straight season. No doubt one of the best pitchers in the game, Kluber should draw interest not only from the Yankees, but from the Rangers, Braves, Phillies, Angels, Padres — well, you name it.

Rosenthal: Greinke's trade value; Canó's future in Seattle; Yanks seeking background info on Machado

By Ken Rosenthal 33m ago 1

He's 35, placing him far outside baseball's circle of trust. His average fastball velocity each of the past two seasons was below 91 mph, a decrease of nearly 2 mph from 2016. But reduce the financial burden — as the Arizona Diamondbacks are willing to do for a prospective trade partner — and right-hander Zack Greinke might be the second-most-attractive starting pitcher available, behind only his teammate, free-agent lefty Patrick Corbin.

Greinke's 3.21 ERA ranked 10th in the National League last season. His walk rate ranked second, and his hit rate and strikeout rate also were in the top 15. He threw 207 2/3 innings, the fourth-highest total in the NL and his second-highest since 2012. Take a broader view, and his ERA-plus during his three seasons in Arizona ranks eighth in the majors among those with a minimum 500 innings.

Not only is Greinke creative and skilled enough to adjust to his diminished velocity, but he also remains, in the words of his manager, Torey Lovullo, "an unbelievable competitor." As an example, Lovullo recalls an episode from early September, when the Diamondbacks were still in contention and Greinke wanted to discuss his pitching schedule for the rest of the season.

"Him marching into my office is not altogether uncommon," Lovullo recalls. "He is extremely aware of everything going on around him, even though he might give you that aloofness. He's dialed in to the most important details.

"He came in, and I had everything kind of mapped out on a calendar inside my office. It talks about who is going to be projected 7-10-15 days in advance. And it obviously changes very often. He said, 'Hey, I just want to make sure I'm on the same page with you guys.' And he mapped it out. He pointed to it and said, 'I want to pitch here and here, and if I get the chance I'll pitch on the fourth day if we're still involved on the final weekend of the season in San Diego.'

"When Zack does that and makes those kinds of statements, you just say OK and listen. Then I asked him, 'Why?' I can't remember all the details. But he said, 'I don't want the Dodgers to clinch here (in Arizona). We're still going to be in it here. And on the last day, obviously, I want to be the guy who is going to step up and win a game to help us go to the playoffs.'

"It was as simple as that. The explanation was crisp and easy and perfectly clear. When he walked out of there, it was another chapter in that special Zack Greinke book. He loves to go out there and compete."

The D-Backs, as it turned out, fell out of contention. They entered September leading the NL West but were eliminated on Sept. 23 after opening the month 5-16. Greinke's ERA for the month was 4.55, the only month other than April in which he was above 3.00. But overall, his numbers were still quite good.

Now for the \$100 million question — \$104.5 million over the next three years, to be precise, which is the remaining guarantee to Greinke, including annual \$3 million installments of his signing bonus: How much money must the D-Backs include in a trade to interest prospective suitors and produce even a modest return?

Club officials have not said definitively they want to move Greinke, but the team clearly is entering a transition. Corbin and center fielder A.J. Pollock are free agents, and first baseman Paul Goldschmidt, who is scheduled to hit the open market after next season, is available by trade.

Greinke's average salary over the next three seasons is \$34.8 million. He also will receive a \$2 million assignment bonus if he's traded, and he can block deals to 15 clubs. The Rangers and D-Backs reportedly discussed a Greinke deal last offseason, in which the D-Backs would have taken back the contract of outfielder Shin-Soo Choo. That's one way to defray the cost. Straight cash is another.

Teams surely would grow interested if the D-Backs included enough money to bring Greinke down to, say, the range of \$20 million to \$25 million annually. The D-Backs then could make this case: "Which pitcher would you rather have: Greinke for three years or a free agent such as Dallas Keuchel at a comparable salary for five?"

Keuchel, mind you, is no slouch, though his strikeout rate, like Greinke's, diminished last season. At 30, he's also five years younger than Greinke, so teams might still prefer him on a longer deal. Greinke's performance, though, at least legitimizes the discussion. The D-Backs have an attractive item to sell. They just need to price him accordingly.

And what about Canó?

When Seattle Mariners GM Jerry Dipoto says, "We have no intention of tearing down to the studs and building back up," well, he probably could not pull off such a demolition even if that were his intent.

Right-hander Felix Hernandez, owed \$27 million next season, is all but immovable. Third baseman Kyle Seager, coming off a career-worst season but owed \$57.5 million over the next three years, also would be extremely difficult to trade. Ditto for second baseman Robinson Canó, who is 36 and owed \$120 million over the next five years.

What distinguishes Canó from Greinke, who is only a year younger and is guaranteed a "mere" \$15.5 million less? For starters, Greinke wasn't suspended for 80 games last season for violating baseball's Joint Drug Agreement. He also is performing in his accustomed role, while Canó soon might move to a less valuable defensive position, first base.

Canó can still hit — he batted .317 with an .860 OPS in 179 plate appearances after returning from his suspension on Aug. 14. He wants to remain at second base, too, but the Mariners' addition of center fielder Mallex Smith might create a domino effect, prompting the return of Dee Gordon to second and forcing Canó into more of a first base/DH role.

First baseman/DH types are plentiful, and a team in need easily can find one who is younger than 36 and earning less than \$24 million annually. For the Mariners to stand any chance of moving Canó, they almost certainly would need to take back an inflated contract or two. But good luck finding even a potential match.

A return to the New York Yankees probably would be the preference of Canó, who holds a full no-trade clause. The Yankees could send the Mariners outfielder Jacoby Ellsbury, a native of Madras, Ore., who is owed \$47.2 million, including a \$5 million buyout on his club option for 2021. But what would be the point?

Ellsbury, who also holds a full no-trade clause, might represent dead money, but only for the next two years. About the last thing the Yankees or any other team wants is five years of an older player with limited defensive versatility and a punctured image, even at a reduced price.

Canó surely wants to salvage his legacy, but his path to Cooperstown might be as difficult to forge as his path out of Seattle. He made his choices. Now he faces the consequences.

Awaiting a new day in Baltimore

The Baltimore Orioles obviously should pick the best person available to be their new lead executive, but it would not be the worst idea for their new front office to include someone from the commissioner's office — either Peter Woodfork, a known candidate, or Kim Ng, whose status in the process is unclear. Both are senior vice presidents of baseball operations with MLB.

In recent years, the Orioles have not enjoyed a strong relationship with the commissioner's office, in part due to their role in baseball's version of the Hundred Years' War — their dispute with the Washington Nationals over rights fees from the Mid-Atlantic Sports Network (MASN), in which the O's are the majority owner.

The impact of the Orioles' frosty dealings with MLB is not clear, but baseball awarded the past four All-Star Games to NL cities rather than choosing Baltimore to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Camden Yards in 2017. The last All-Star Game in Baltimore was in 1993, the second year of existence for Camden, a park that forever changed the way professional sports facilities are built.

Toronto and Oakland have gone even longer without an All-Star Game. Tampa Bay has never hosted one. The 2019 game will be in Cleveland, which also hosted in 1997, and the 2020 game will be in Los Angeles. Maybe baseball went to the NL cities simply to reward Cincinnati, San Diego, Miami and Washington for opening new parks. But suffice it to say the Orioles didn't earn any favors from the sport.

The team has much work to do — hiring a front office, naming a manager and coaching staff, building analytics and international scouting departments, for starters. Under the circumstances, a better relationship with MLB probably is down on the Orioles' list of priorities. But for lack of a better phrase, it's time for the Orioles to come in from the cold.

About that MASN dispute ...

All right, the Hundred Years' War reference was a bit of an exaggeration; the staredown between the Orioles and Nationals is only in its seventh year. A resolution, however, soon might be at hand. MLB's internal arbitration panel is expected to begin a hearing on the matter this week.

According to the SportsBusiness Journal, the Orioles and MASN will retain the right to appeal to the New York Court of Appeals, the state's highest court. But baseball officials are hopeful the network will abide by the decision of the Revenue Sharing Definition Committee, which, according to SBJ, comprises Milwaukee Brewers owner Mark Attanasio, Seattle Mariners CEO Kevin Mather and Toronto Blue Jays CEO Mark Shapiro.

The Nationals eagerly await the adjustment of their rights fees, saying more than \$200 million is in dispute from the period between 2012 and 2016 (the fees between 2017 and 2021 still must be determined). The expected influx of money will improve the Nats' cash flow and allow for additional payroll flexibility. But a decision is not expected in time to boost the team in its bid to retain free-agent outfielder Bryce Harper.

Around the horn

*Speaking of the Nationals, one agent offers an interesting theory of how general manager Mike Rizzo might proceed in the coming weeks. The agent believes Rizzo will aggressively try to address the team's needs, then leave ownership to make the final call on Harper if the player remains on the open market.

Rizzo has little choice but to proceed as if Harper will not return; Harper, according to the Washington Post, rejected a 10-year, \$300 million offer from the Nats on the final day of the regular season. But Rizzo also knows ownership is fond of Harper, wants him to stay and still might re-enter the bidding, even with the team's potential luxury-tax issues.

Additional upgrades, particularly on the pitching staff, presumably would bolster the team's appeal to Harper, perhaps helping persuade him to re-sign. Such an outcome would be win-win for Rizzo and the Nats, topping off an already improved team.

*Teams routinely seek background information on potential acquisitions, but the Yankees appear to be doing particularly extensive work on free-agent infielder Manny Machado, sources tell The Athletic's Jayson Stark.

The sources said manager Aaron Boone, front-office members and scouts are among those calling around about Machado, whose on-field conduct and "I'm not Johnny Hustle" interview with FS1 during the postseason invited additional scrutiny.

Machado, though, is generally well-regarded by those who know him.

"I really like him," one of his former Orioles teammates said. "He was always a good teammate. Good guy, too — he was great with my kids. Now he did some dumb stuff on the field but that never truly reflected the guy I know off the field."

*A rival executive says the Philadelphia Phillies are "shopping the hell" out of first baseman Carlos Santana, with the idea of returning left fielder Rhys Hoskins to first.

Good idea: According to the latest Bill James Handbook, Hoskins' minus-24 defensive runs saved was the second-worst number for a left fielder since Sports Info Solutions began tracking the metric in 2003, ahead of only Adam Dunn's minus-26 in 2007.

The Phils, who signed Santana to a three-year, \$60 million free-agent contract last off-season, undoubtedly would need to include cash to facilitate any deal — and that might be on top of paying, ahem, Harper or Machado and whoever else they might acquire.

Santana, entering his age-33 season, is owed \$35 million in the final two years of his deal, including a \$500,000 buyout on his club option for 2021.

*The Los Angeles Angels might be trying to clear payroll for other pursuits. Rival executives say outfielder Kole Calhoun and right-handed reliever Blake Parker are highly available, while right-handed starter Matt Shoemaker, after missing most of the season with a right forearm strain, is considered a non-tender candidate.

The actual and projected salaries of Calhoun, Parker and Shoemaker would amount to approximately \$18 million, with Calhoun also owed a \$1 million buyout on his \$14 million option for 2020. The Angels' payroll is not terribly high — including arbitration-eligible players such as Parker

and Shoemaker, it projects to \$144.75 million, according to Cot's Baseball Contracts. But the team badly needs pitching, and all teams covet flexibility.

A trade for a pitcher the caliber of the Mariners' James Paxton is unlikely. The Angels, knowing they probably cannot catch the Astros in 2019, do not want to move top prospects. They have worked hard to rebuild their system, which now ranks 10th according to Baseball America, up from 30th the previous two seasons. The major-league club, overdue for an injection of youth, should be getting one soon.

*And finally, I noticed this while checking where Greinke ranked in ERA-plus over the past three seasons:

The three Indians right-handers currently available in trade — Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco and Trevor Bauer — rank first, seventh and 11th in that category (minimum 500 innings).

Translation: Those guys are good.

AL Central offseason preview: Will Indians actually trade Corey Kluber?

With free agency underway, the offseason is going to pick up steam. What are the big questions facing all 30 teams? Today we look at how baseball's weakest division, the AL Central, might try to get a little tougher.

Cleveland Indians: Will they trade Corey Kluber?

2018 record: 91-71

2019 World Series odds: 10-1

The Indians are aiming for a fourth straight division title, but they might try to do it without two-time Cy Young winner Corey Kluber as they reportedly will listen to offers for one of their starters. The emergence of Trevor Bauer into an ace-level starter and Mike Clevinger into a 200-inning workhorse -- plus a solid rookie season from Shane Bieber and the pending arrival of top prospect Triston McKenzie -- would allow the Indians to deal from strength.

Always Late w/ Katie Nolan

Always Late with Katie Nolan is a late-night sports comedy show covering the big (and small) stories of the week. Watch on ESPN+

Kluber will be 33, but he's a Cy Young finalist after going 20-7 with a 2.89 ERA in 2018. He's signed through 2021 (including club options for 2020 and 2021) at below-market rates for a pitcher of his caliber, so he's an attractive trade target. The Indians also might need to trim payroll after increasing it about \$50 million since 2016. They'll be looking for outfield help and some bullpen arms to replace free agents Andrew Miller and Cody Allen. Even with Michael Brantley, who is a free agent, their outfield ranked 21st in the majors in wOBA in 2018. -- David Schoenfield

Minnesota Twins: Will they be players in free agency?

2018 record: 78-84

2019 World Series odds: 60-1

Joe Mauer's \$23 million salary is off the books. Brian Dozier was traded. Ervin Santana's option wasn't picked up. Last year's free agents -- Logan Morrison, Lance Lynn, Fernando Rodney -- are gone. Their current estimated payroll is about \$70 million -- or about \$60 million less than 2018.

Depending on what they do with Miguel Sano -- he's currently listed at first base on the team's depth chart -- they'll have openings at second base and third base, and maybe first. They need help in the bullpen and another proven starter to line up with Jose Berrios, Kyle Gibson and Jake Odorizzi would be nice. The free-agent market is loaded with second and third basemen, so the Twins are in good shape to find help at those positions. The big question: Will they go big and use their payroll flexibility to make a run at Manny Machado, Bryce Harper or Patrick Corbin? -- Schoenfield

Detroit Tigers: What can they expect out of Miguel Cabrera?

2018 record: 64-98

2019 World Series odds: 200-1

The Tigers went 64-98, a .395 winning percentage, for the second straight season. It doesn't seem there will be much better results in 2019, but there are still plenty of things for the Tigers to mull over in the offseason.

One of the biggest questions the team faces in planning for 2019 and beyond is what can be expected out of Miguel Cabrera. The slugger is signed through at least 2023, with a potential buyout for 2024 and 2025. Cabrera had two separate DL stints in 2018, first for a right hamstring strain in May, then for a ruptured biceps tendon, which ended his season in mid-June, just about two weeks after he returned from the first injury. He played in a career-low 38 games.

It's a very small sample size, but Cabrera's .448 slugging percentage would have been the second lowest of his career, behind his .399 slugging percentage in 130 games in 2017. Cabrera received MVP votes as recently as 2016, when he hit .316 with a .956 OPS, 38 home runs and 108 RBIs. But it has been a steep descent since then. In 2017 and '18 combined, Cabrera hit .260 with a .754 OPS, including a .410 slugging percentage.

In that small sample in 2018, Cabrera did have a 94.4 mph average exit velocity according to Statcast, which would have been his highest in the four years Statcast has tracked the number. But with that based on only 108 batted balls, it's hard to know if that would've stood up for a full season. -- Sarah Langs

Chicago White Sox: Is the timing right for a big splash?

2018 record: 61-100

2019 World Series odds: 60-1

There are different components to any good rebuilding plan. One that is too often overlooked is the cleansing of the payroll. The ideal for a team such as the White Sox is not just to acquire enough prospects to fill out a future roster, because that almost never happens. The miss rate on prospects is simply too high. That's why it's also crucial to clear away onerous salary commitments, leaving flexibility to fill in the gaps around the waves of talent you hope will hit the big league roster.

The White Sox are still waiting for those waves to crash to shore, but the payroll cleanse is all but complete. That means Chicago can go heavy on any premier free agents it sees as being a fit for the long term. That puts a special premium on pre-peak free agents who hit the majors at a tender age, which is why there is so much curiosity about whether the White Sox will emerge as a fit for Bryce Harper, Manny Machado or both.

The possibilities are tantalizing. If Chicago were to land both, as early as the latter part of next season they could field a lineup almost entirely of position players in their early to mid-20s -- plus Silver Slugger first baseman/DH Jose Abreu -- with plenty of organizational depth behind them. Tim Anderson, Yoan Moncada and Eloy Jimenez would be the start, augmented over the next couple of years by other high-grade prospects such as Zack Collins, Jake Burger, Luis Robert, Nick Madrigal, Micker Adolfo and Blake Rutherford.

There is lots of starting pitching in the pipeline as well, and GM Rick Hahn has proved to be pretty adept at finding bullpen solutions. But that position player group -- with Harper and Machado in the middle of it -- looks amazing. Will the representatives of those premier free agents agree? Mr. Boras? -- Bradford Doolittle

Kansas City Royals: Can the timeline be shortened?

2018 record: 58-104

2019 World Series odds: 200-1

The Royals' first rebuilding "process," as it was sometimes sarcastically referred to, was a painstaking endeavor that unfolded over about eight years from the time that Dayton Moore took over as Kansas City's general manager in 2006. With his team plummeting to 104 losses last season, Moore might seem to find himself back at square one.

Offseason overviews

As the offseason gets rolling, we're taking a look at the biggest question facing every team.

AL East | NL East | AL West

NL West | AL Central | NL Central

However, this time around, Moore is seeking to shorten the "process" considerably. His recent trades have tended to target big-league-ready prospects and young veterans, rather than high-upside, high-risk teenagers. In the draft, he went big on college pitching. He went huge on college pitching, in fact, taking five college starters among the first 58 picks of the 2018 draft.

The difference between the first-half and the second-half Royals last season was immense. The first-half version went 27-68, with a .667 team OPS and a 5.40 ERA. The second-half version was 31-36 with a .740 OPS and a 4.30 ERA. Shortstop Adalberto Mondesi emerged as a potential star. Righty Brad Keller emerged as one of the top rookie pitchers of the season. In both innings pitched and plate appearances, the turnover in personnel between halves was about a third of the roster.

It's only a start and ultimately, the success of the Royals' scheme will depend on the success of all those advanced arms from the 2018 draft. It will depend on the premium picks K.C. will have this June, including the No. 2 overall selection. But for the time being, it seems possible that the long dark age in Royals baseball that looked as if it were inevitable might be illuminated faster than anyone thought. -- Doolittle