

Report: Brantley close to deal with Astros

Outfielder spent first 10 seasons of career with Cleveland

By Mandy Bell MLB.com

The Indians are inching closer to officially parting ways with another free agent.

According to a report from MLB Network insider Ken Rosenthal, Michael Brantley is nearing a two-year contract with the Astros. With the Indians' goal of cutting payroll this offseason, it was never a strong consideration to re-sign Brantley. The team did not make him a qualifying offer, which means it will not receive a compensation Draft pick.

Brantley spent the first 10 of his Major League seasons in Cleveland, making three All-Star appearances (2014, '17, '18). He was acquired as the player to be named later from the Brewers in the CC Sabathia trade at the end of the 2008 season. The other players included in the deal were Matt LaPorta, Zach Jackson and Rob Bryson.

The left-handed-hitting outfielder then made his big league debut as a 22-year-old on Sept. 1, 2009, and has since compiled impressive career numbers with Cleveland, hitting .295 with 87 homers, 528 RBIs and a 114 OPS+ in 1,051 games for the Tribe.

The former Cleveland left fielder had surgeries on his right shoulder and right ankle that cut his 2016 and '17 seasons short, appearing in a combined 101 games. However, Brantley had an excellent comeback season in '18, slashing .309/.364/.468 with 17 homers, 76 RBIs, 48 walks and just 60 strikeouts.

According to Statcast™, Brantley had an 11 percent whiff rate, which ranked third lowest in the league. He swung at 1,008 pitches in '18 and missed just 111 times.

Losing Brantley -- along with outfielders Lonnie Chisenhall and Melky Cabrera -- to free agency has left some holes in the Indians' defense. As of now, Cleveland could have Jordan Luplow -- who was traded by the Pirates to the Indians on Nov. 14 -- in left field, Leonys Martin in center and Tyler Naquin in right. Newly acquired Jake Bauers could also get some reps in either corner outfield position when he's not at first base.

Luplow, 25, had limited Major League experience with the Pirates over the last two seasons, playing in 37 games in '18 and 27 in '17. Last year, he hit .185 with three homers and seven RBIs in 103 plate appearances. Meanwhile, Martin has been cleared to resume baseball activities after suffering a severe bacterial infection in August. Manager Terry Francona said at the Winter Meetings that Naquin feels "really good" after last season's struggles and medical issues (right hip surgery). Bauers has only made a handful of appearances in the outfield, but his athleticism and versatility could add some much-needed depth for the Indians in both left and right field.

Through the team's trades of Yan Gomes, Edwin Encarnacion, Yandy Diaz and Yonder Alonso, Cleveland has trimmed almost \$20 million from its payroll, leaving enough room for either another trade or a free-agent signing to bolster the outfield and lineup.

Tribe acquires prospect to complete Gomes deal

By Mandy Bell MLB.com

The Indians' trade that sent catcher Yan Gomes to the Nationals is officially complete.

On Nov. 30, Cleveland dealt Gomes to Washington for right-hander Jefry Rodriguez, outfielder Daniel Johnson and a player to be named later. That player was announced Monday as Minor League infielder Andruw Monasterio.

Monasterio split the 2018 season between the Cubs and the Nationals organizations. In Class A Advanced across both organizations, the 21-year-old infielder from Venezuela slashed .267/.363/.338 with 14 doubles, three triples, three home runs and 36 RBIs in 122 games. He stole 12 bases on 18 attempts and drew 59 walks while striking out 70 times.

Monasterio is listed as a second baseman, shortstop and third baseman. In 2018, he appeared in 83 games at second, 31 games at short and one at third.

In 2014, Monasterio signed with the Chicago Cubs at the age of 17. He spent the first five seasons with Chicago's organization, but was traded to Washington on Aug. 21 for Daniel Murphy.

Indians prep for 2019 with offseason budget

By Anthony Castrovince MLB.com @castrovince

The Indians have made three trades in the past three weeks. The Major League roster was weakened in at least two of them (the Yan Gomes and Yonder Alonso deals). The impact of the third (a three-way deal that removed Edwin Encarnacion and Yandy Diaz, and added Carlos Santana and Jake Bauers) is more debatable. But all three deals were provoked by a desire to pare payroll, and, as one reader put it in an e-mail, "talking about financial flexibility is not sexy for most fans."

Maybe it says something about my advancing age and my holiday season credit card statement, but I personally think there's something very sexy about financial flexibility.

I understand the angst. The Indians' roster, right now, is quite possibly -- if not definitely -- weaker than it was at the start of the offseason. And the roster at the start of the offseason was -- as a result of the free agencies of Josh Donaldson, Michael Brantley, Andrew Miller and Cody Allen, among others -- definitely weaker than it was at the conclusion of the 2018 season.

There's nothing sexy about that.

But if the offseason grades we hand out at the start of each Spring Training have been proven worthless (and Lord knows they have), I don't even know how to properly characterize the utter meaningless of mid-December roster evaluation (particularly for a club with so many unanswered questions, and particularly at a time in MLB when so much of the offseason heavy lifting bleeds into January and even February) except to say that it makes the DXL Frisco Bowl look like the national championship game.

Go Bobcats!

Besides, it's a lot easier to shrug off any potential ill effects of these three swaps when you consider the track record of the people who made them. Indians president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti and general manager Mike Chernoff didn't build the best American League record over the last six years on a budget by coming out on the short side of swaps or erroneously allocating expenses on the regular. The path to three straight AL Central titles was paved by shrewd decision-making.

Their cumulative 2013-18 Opening Day payrolls were about \$600 million lower than those of the Yankees, and they won 14 more games than the Yanks in that span. Even when you account for the admittedly vast difference in divisions, that's pretty good.

Vinnie Pestano for Mike Clevinger? They did that.

Gomes and Mike Aviles for Esmil Rogers? That's on their greatest hits album.

The creative accounting of the Nick Swisher and Michael Bourn for Chris Johnson trade that freed up some cash for what turned out to be a World Series-caliber 2016 roster? That one was money (literally and figuratively).

Miller at the 2016 Trade Deadline? No matter what becomes of Clint Frazier and Justus Sheffield, if you could go back in time, you'd probably do it again.

None of the above gives the Tribe brass a free pass to gut this club and then try to sell it to the fans as a job well done. Though I actually think the pure baseball merits of the three completed trades is better than many fans are giving the Indians credit for, these deals were necessitated by a maturing and increasingly unwieldy player payroll.

For what it's worth, here are Steamer's 2019 projections for the Weighted Runs Created Plus and Wins Above Replacement marks of players significantly affected by the three swaps:

Gomes: 86 wRC+, 1.2 WAR
Roberto Perez: 79 wRC+, 1.6 WAR
Encarnacion: 122 wRC+, 1.6 WAR
Santana: 121 wRC+, 2.0 WAR
Alonso: 103 wRC+, 0.7 WAR
Bauers: 104 wRC+, 1.3 WAR

The first rule of predictive baseball analysis is that nobody knows anything, but these projections would lead you to believe the Major League roster might have actually improved, on measure.

This club carried franchise-record payrolls in each of the past two seasons. But attendance trended downward, and the Tribe made a quick postseason exit in successive Octobers. That, combined with the guaranteed raises and arbitration raises that offset much of the money that came off the books in free agency, left the front office with a budget that demanded immediate attention. There are various ways to calculate the payroll pertaining to buyouts and signing bonuses involved in the Encarnacion and Santana contracts, but the gist is that the Indians have saved somewhere between \$18 million to \$22 million for 2019 in the last few weeks. They found ways to address the money matters without robbing from the signature strength that is the rotation (in fact, they extended Carlos Carrasco through at least 2022), and they are no longer expected to move Trevor Bauer or Corey Kluber.

So let's call all of the above Phase 1 of the offseason.

It's Phase 2 -- the allocation of the saved salary -- that will ultimately determine whether the Indians' offseason was defensible or lamentable. If ownership pockets that saved sum and the club goes into Spring Training with its present-day lineup (which at the moment would probably have to employ Bauers at both first base and left field, an arrangement that feels physically iffy), go ahead and rip 'em to shreds. But if the entire focus of the offseason was to shed salary, there are frankly much better ways the Indians could have gone about it, up to and including dangling Francisco Lindor ahead of what could be a historic first-time arbitration case.

On the contrary, the Carrasco extension, the Bauers acquisition (he was on MLB Pipeline's Top 100 prospects list a year ago) and the more feasible financials point to a club that is trying to extend, not close, its competitive window.

So let's see what they do with the dollars. It probably still rates as a longshot, but can they make a play for A.J. Pollock? Can they significantly beef up the bullpen in a market saturated with relievers? Are there more trades coming -- ones that more clearly rate as baseball boosts?

Time will tell, as it tends to do. For now, I'm inclined to give Antonetti and Chernoff the benefit of the doubt. They've earned at least that much.

Anthony Castrovine has been a reporter for

Michael Brantley reaches deal with Astros, according to report

By Ryan Lewis

One of the three marquee Indians free agents hitting the open market this winter has found his new home.

Michael Brantley reached an agreement Monday night on a two-year deal with the Houston Astros, according to report from Ken Rosenthal of MLB Network and The Athletic.

The reported deal is valued at \$32 million. Yahoo's Jeff Passan added that Brantley will rotate between left field, first base and designated hitter, giving a talented but top-heavy Astros lineup another weapon.

Brantley turned in a terrific performance last season, rewarding the Indians for picking up his club option. He hit .309 with an .832 OPS, 17 home runs, 36 doubles and 76 RBI en route to his third All-Star selection and second in a row.

"This has been an honor," Brantley said in October when asked if Game 3 of the American League Division Series was his last with the Indians. "It's been an honor to wear that uniform. It's been an honor. Every player I've played with in this organization, for all the help everybody gave me, it was always appreciated. It will never be forgotten."

In a smaller signing, the New York Mets inked Rajai Davis to a minor-league deal with an invitation to spring training. Davis hit .224 and stole 21 bases with the Indians in 101 games last season, but his home run in Game 7 of the 2016 World Series — one of the biggest hits in Indians franchise history — will always be his calling card relating to his time in Cleveland.

Player named

The Indians and Washington Nationals completed their Nov. 30 deal for Yan Gomes on Monday, with the Indians receiving infield prospect Andruw Monasterio as the player to be named later in the trade. Monasterio, who can play shortstop, second base and third base, hit .267 with a .702 OPS at High-A level between the Chicago Cubs and Nationals organizations.

Akron Beacon Journal LOADED: 12.18.2018

How did Yandy Diaz land in Tampa Bay as part of Cleveland Indians' 3-team trade? Hey, Hoynsie

By Paul Hoynes, December 17, 2018

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Do you have a question that you'd like to have answered in Hey, Hoynsie? Submit it here or contact him on Twitter at @hoynsie

How did Yandy Diaz end up with the Rays?

Hey, Hoynsie: Do you have any insight as to why Yandy Diaz was traded to Tampa Bay as part of Thursday's three-team deal with the Indians, Rays and Seattle? It doesn't seem logical. -- Glen Ray.

Hey, Ray: The Indians acquired Jake Bauers from the Rays for Diaz. He's an outfielder-first baseman that they've liked for a while. The Rays, on the other hand, have had Diaz on their radar for a while as well.

The Tribe originally had traditional two-team deals worked out with Tampa Bay and Seattle. They were going to send Diaz to the Rays for Bauers and Encarnacion to the Mariners for Carlos Santana. But it became a three-team deal to help pay the cost of Santana and Encarnacion's contracts.

The Rays sent Seattle \$5 million to help pay for Encarnacion's contract, while the Mariners sent the Indians \$6 million to help pay Santana's contract.

Bauers is younger than Diaz (23-27) and has shown more pop in the big leagues (11 homers to 1). The fact that he can play first base and left or right field also worked in Bauers' favor.

Must Indians trade Corey Kluber or Trevor Bauer to get big hitter?

Hey, Hoynsie: I'm OK with the Indians' payroll juggle and bringing Carlos Santana back. But the only way I see that they get past Houston and the other top teams to reach the World Series is to trade a starting pitcher for a big outfield bat. Does the Indians' front office have the drive to go get a game changer on the offensive side? -- James Lisi, Santa Barbara, Calif.

Hey, James: They're probably sitting on the blueprint for just such a deal right now. But the fact of the matter is they've saved about \$21 million for 2019 with the trades they've made. That may allow them to keep the rotation intact -- at least for one more year -- and add offense through free agency or another trade.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 12.18.2018

Michael Brantley's 17 biggest moments from 10 seasons with the Cleveland Indians

By Joe Noga, cleveland.com | Posted December 17, 2018 at 11:23 PM

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- After spending parts of 10 seasons with the Cleveland Indians, free agent outfielder Michael Brantley is joining the Houston Astros on a two-year contract, according to reports.

Brantley, the player-to-be-named-later from Milwaukee in the 2008 C.C. Sabathia trade, has been one of the most consistent and dangerous hitters in Indians franchise history during the past decade, posting a career .295 batting average and a .781 OPS.

A three-time All-Star with the Tribe, Brantley has been among the hardest hitters to strike out in the American League throughout his career and had the ability to string together hitting streaks that routinely surpassed 15 and 20 games in his career.

He was among the league's best clutch hitters for most of his time in Cleveland, batting .376 with runners in scoring position during the 2014 campaign when he finished third in American League MVP voting.

Here is a look back at some of Brantley's biggest moments with the Indians, from big home runs to walk-off hits, Brantley did it all at the plate for the Tribe.

September 12, 2009

Rookie Michael Brantley went 4-for-5, becoming the first Indians hitter since Andy Allanson in 1986 to collect four hits in a game within his first 10 games with the club.

July 8, 2010

Brantley hit his first big league home run, leading off the game against Tampa Bay's Wade Davis. He went on to have a career-high 19-game hitting streak from Aug. 30 through Sept. 19, the second-longest by an Indians rookie behind Larry Doby's 21-game stretch in 1948.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 12.18.2018

Former Indians outfielder Michael Brantley reportedly agrees to two-year deal with Houston

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- One by one the Indians free agents are waving goodbye for the final time.

Left fielder Michael Brantley and Rajai Davis were the latest to do so. Brantley has reportedly agreed to a two-year \$32 million deal with the Astros. Davis has signed a minor league deal with the Mets with an invitation to spring training.

So far this winter Lonnie Chisenhall, Josh Donaldson, Brantley and Davis have found new homes after ending the 2018 season with the Indians. Tribe free agents who are still unsigned include Cody Allen, Andrew Miller, Josh Tomlin, Brandon Guyer, Melky Cabrera, Oliver Perez, Adam Rosales and Brandon Barnes.

Brantley has never played in the big leagues with any team but the Indians. They acquired him on Oct. 3, 2008 from Milwaukee as a player to be named in the CC Sabathia deal. All he did was save the Indians from getting zilch for a Cy Young winner.

The left-handed hitting Brantley spent eight years and 131 days in the big leagues with the Tribe. He'll go into the record books as a .295 (1,195-for-4,055) hitter with 248 doubles, 87 homers and 528 RBI in 1,051 games with the Indians. His production was cut short by two surgeries on his right shoulder and one on his right ankle in 2016 and 2017 that limited him to 111 games. Brantley enjoyed a nice bounce-back season in 2018, hitting .309 (176-for-570) with 17 homers and 76 RBI in 143 games.

Brantley, who posted a .832 OPS, is an old school hitter whose swing was developed by his father, Mickey, a former big-league outfielder and hitting coach. If you ask Brantley, 31, about the launch angle revolution, he'll act like you're talking Chinese. He swings to make contact, striking out just 60 times, while drawing 48 walks, last year.

The Indians, who are cutting payroll, while still trying to win their fourth straight AL Central title, never gave serious consideration to trying to resign their big free agents such as Brantley, Allen, Miller and Donaldson. They did not make one of them a qualifying offer at \$17.9 million for a one-year deal. Thus they will not receive draft pick compensation.

Of course, there's a chance they could bring one of them back if they are still unsigned at the start of spring training. But it would have to be a club-friendly deal.

Brantley going to the Astros has to sting the Tribe. Houston rolled them out of the ALDS in a three-game sweep in October. The Astros can use Brantley's left-handed bat to balance their predominantly right-handed lineup.

The Indians, meanwhile, have a lot of work to do on their lineup which will start the 2019 season without Brantley (116 starts in the No.2 spot), Edwin Encarnacion (112 starts in the No. 4 spot), Yonder Alonso (77 starts in the No. 5 spot) and Yan Gomes (47 starts in the No. 7 spot and 42 starts in the No. 8 spot). Encarnacion, Alonso and Gomes were traded.

Manager Terry Francona was asked about the turnover on the Tribe's roster last week at the winter meetings.

"It's hard to see anybody go," said Francona. "I think it's unrealistic that you don't have turnover. I think we've actually had probably far less than most teams. But as some point you get to the point in the progression (of players) where there's going to be turnover -- that's the reality of it.

"And it doesn't have to be bad. Now, we have to do it right, and that's hard. I listen to those guys (in the front office). Man, it's like I was saying earlier, I'm trying to be how they are with me after a game, because I see how hard they're grinding."

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 12.18.2018

Rajai Davis signs minor-league deal with New York Mets

By Joe Noga, cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Free agent outfielder Rajai Davis, who spent two of the last three seasons with the Cleveland Indians, has signed a minor-league deal with the New York Mets that includes an invitation to spring training from the club.

Davis becomes the third Indians free agent to sign with another team following Lonnie Chisenhall's deal with Pittsburgh and Josh Donaldson's one-year contract in Atlanta. Key remaining free agents who played for the Tribe last year include outfielder Michael Brantley and relievers Andrew Miller, Cody Allen and Oliver Perez.

In New York, Davis will be reunited with manager Mickey Callaway, who was the Tribe's pitching coach in 2016 when Davis hit .249 and led the American League with 43 stolen bases at age 35. The deal was announced by the Mets via their twitter account.

We've signed outfielder Rajai Davis (@rajai11davis) to a minor league contract with an invite to major league #SpringTraining. #Mets pic.twitter.com/IgByNAX8Xj

— New York Mets (@Mets) December 17, 2018

Davis, who will always be remembered by Indians fans for his game-tying home run in the bottom of the eighth inning against Cubs reliever Aroldis Chapman in Game 7 of the 2016 World Series, played for Oakland and Boston in 2017 before signing a minor-league deal with the Indians during spring training in 2018.

He hit .224 with a home run and six RBI in 216 at-bats for Cleveland last season, appearing in 101 games. Despite playing sparsely and missing most of August on the disabled list, the 38-year-old veteran managed 21 steals in 28 attempts.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 12.18.2018

Cleveland Indians receive infielder Andruw Monasterio from Nationals to complete Yan Gomes trade

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The Indians received minor league infielder Andruw Monasterio from Washington on Monday to complete the Yan Gomes trade. Monasterio was the player to be named after the Indians initially received outfielder Daniel Johnson and right-hander Jeffrey Rodriguez for the All-Star catcher on Nov. 30.

Monasterio played in the minors with the Cubs and Nationals last season. The Nationals acquired him for big-league reliever Brandon Kintzler at the July 31 deadline. The Cubs signed Monasterio, 21, out of Venezuela when he was 17.

The right-handed hitting Monasterio hit a combined .267 (109-for-408) with 14 doubles, three homers and 36 RBI. He stole 12 bases in 18 attempts, while playing 83 games at second base, 31 at shortstop and six at third. He has not played above Class A ball. Over six pro seasons, he's hitting .265 (330-for-1,245) with a .343 on base percentage.

Rodriguez, out of the return for Gomes, is the only one to play in the big leagues. He's on the 40-man roster and has a chance to pitch in the Tribe's bullpen sometime during the 2019 season.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 12.18.2018

Q&A: New Indians first baseman Jake Bauers endures 'shock' of another 3-way trade, 'excited about what's to come'

By T.J. Zuppe Dec 17, 2018 12

CLEVELAND — Jake Bauers opened his eyes at his home in Huntington Beach, California, expecting nothing more than to continue his new offseason hitting regimen and perhaps catch a little of the Winter Meetings activity wrapping up in Las Vegas later that afternoon.

But shortly after he rose to begin what he thought would be a typical day, his phone lit up. He glanced at the screen.

Erik Neander.

"Here comes a little offseason checkup, just see what's going on," Bauers thought.

He answered the call from the Rays GM. He pressed the device to his ear, preparing to dive into boring winter minutiae.

"I could tell pretty quickly by the tone of his voice that wasn't the case," Bauers recalled.

Neander informed Bauers that he'd been traded to the Indians as part of a three-way deal, a trade highlighted by the return of Carlos Santana to Cleveland. Edwin Encarnacion was sent to the Mariners in the swap, and Yandy Díaz was shipped to the Rays.

Leading up to the deal, Bauers hadn't been mentioned in any substantial rumors, and in fact, Neander had told Rays reporters the night before that the left-handed hitter, despite several options at the position, had emerged as "our guy" at first base.

Less than 24 hours later, he was no longer a member of the Rays.

That'd be enough to surprise even the savviest of veterans.

"It caught me a little off guard," Bauers said. "I was a little shocked."

While the why of the deal was certainly unexpected, the when and what of the transaction were not unfamiliar to the former seventh-round pick of the Padres. After all, the 23-year-old infielder and outfielder seems to have a knack for finding his way into complicated deals. His trade to the Indians came nearly four years to the day after he was dealt to the Rays in an 11-player swap.

"Something about the Winter Meetings and three-team trades, I guess," he said.

In 2014, Bauers was part of a group sent to the Rays (Steven Souza Jr., Travis Ott, Rene Rivera and Burch Smith were also included), as Wil Myers, Ryan Hanigan, Jose Castillo and Gerardo Reyes were dealt to the Padres, and Trea Turner and Joe Ross were shipped to the Nationals in a blockbuster three-team trade.

To make matters worse, his name was floated in trade rumors on Twitter for days during the 2014 Winter Meetings. With the deal hanging in limbo prior to completion, he didn't know whether he'd be sent to the Nationals, Mariners, Rays or to anyone else seeking a promising corner bat.

"I didn't hear from anyone with any club for like three days. Seriously," Bauers said. "So, I'm watching MLB Network, learning what's going on with the rest of everybody else. It was nice to get a call and learn about it first before I'm just sitting here checking in on the Winter Meetings and finding out about it there."

At the time of his first trade, Bauers was on the verge of establishing himself as one of baseball's most intriguing hitting prospects, posting an above-average wRC+ at every stop along the way. Now, after his most recent move, he'll make the trek to a new squad having already tasted the majors, posting a 95 wRC+ and .700 OPS with 11 homers in 388 plate appearances as a rookie this past season.

"I just kind of immediately decided that instead of being upset or whatever emotions came up, I just chose to be excited and look forward to the future," Bauers said following the trade. "I'm going to a great franchise. I'm just excited about what's to come."

Since the three-team deal became official Thursday, the Indians have continued their offseason salary shifting, dealing Yonder Alonso to the White Sox for minor-league outfielder Alex Call. The trade opens a path for Bauers to potentially serve as the Indians' first baseman in 2019, and the young infielder is eager to prove his early success with the Rays (he posted a .903 OPS through his first 35 games) was more of a reflection of his ability than his fade in the final two months, a period that featured a .550 OPS.

After the trade, The Athletic caught up with Bauers in an exclusive phone interview, detailing his emotions after the swap, his perception of his new organization and what sorts of changes he's made to his offseason hitting routine this winter to help ensure his time in Cleveland becomes more permanent.

(Note: Questions were edited for clarity.)

How did the experience of being traded the first time better prepare you for the emotions of being traded a second time?

It's still always a shock when you're not expecting it. But more than anything, I think last time I was just nervous about just getting comfortable and having to go to a new team and meet a bunch of new people. I think being traded the first time kind of taught me that it's just baseball guys for baseball guys. When you're going to an organization like Cleveland, you know, they're in a win-now mode. I'm sure they have a good culture going on. So, I just want to do my best to slide in and get along with everyone over there.

On one hand, I'd imagine there is some disappointment over one team sending you away. On the other hand, the team trading for you obviously covets and appreciates you. How do you balance those emotions?

You have a decision to make. You can look at it as, "Why are they trading me away?" Or, you can look at it as, "Why are they trading for me?" For them to trade for me and speak (like they're) excited to have me or say, "You're going to have a role no matter what," and things like that, is just a good feeling. It's also a good feeling going to a team that you know is prime to go to the postseason every year. That's probably what I'm most excited about — having the opportunity to play in some playoff baseball.

Initially, you're probably following the Winter Meetings, curious how the Rays are attempting to get better. Then, without warning, you're now part of the news.

It's definitely different going through it in the big leagues now. You get in the big leagues and it's like, "All right, let's start building a life around Tampa." For example, I thought about living there in the offseason. I didn't end up doing it, but I almost did. It's a little bit bigger of a life change, so I think that comes along with the whole shock of it. I really started to connect with the community in Tampa. I really started to like Tampa as a place to be. But I'm excited to get into that new organization, learn that new city and get involved in the community over there.

Jake Bauers hopes to prove himself to be the intriguing hitter he appeared to be over his first month and a half in the majors. (Kim Klement / USA Today Sports)

The Indians front office was boarding a plane minutes before the trade became official. Did you know of their time crunch when they reached out?

(Mike Chernoff) called me right after Erik called me. Basically, he prefaced the conversation with, "Hey, man, we're on a plane. We're about to leave in five minutes. But I just wanted to call and get ahold of you before we took off." I haven't had much time to talk with anyone on the Indians. Obviously, it's still busy for them, but I'm looking forward to continuing that conversation.

So, essentially, you get life-changing news but little time to discuss it.

He's like, "Got any questions?" I'm like, "Yeah, but do you have time to answer them?" (laughs) No, there's still a lot of time during this offseason. I'll be out in Cleveland for (TribeFest) on Jan. 12. There's plenty of time to get all that squared away and get myself ready for spring training.

Looking ahead to your first matchup against the Rays, how quickly did you circle May 23 on your calendar?

That's the first thing I went and looked for. I'm excited just to see all my guys over there and compete against them. I don't know how many guys will say it, but that's a big motivation right there. Any time you get the chance that early to play against your old team is an exciting time.

You were planning to head to Florida for spring training. Now, you'll be in Arizona. When will you start thinking about heading to Goodyear?

I'm going to play it by ear right now. I just got word about (TribeFest). That's what my first thought is about. I'm looking for a house in Arizona first for spring training. As I get closer and closer, I imagine I'll start looking at my situation for the regular season. Right now, I'm excited to get to Cleveland and meet some people out there, meet the fans, and then beyond that, excited to be close to home for spring training and have my parents out, have my buddies out, and just look to enjoy that.

What was your parents' reaction to the trade?

About the same as mine. A little shocked. A little confused. As the time's gone on, I think they're getting excited about it. Just excited to get into a situation that is — I don't want to say more about winning because it's always about winning — but getting into a situation where the playoffs are almost expected.

What have you heard about playing for Terry Francona?

I've heard nothing but good things, man. I've heard nothing but good things about Terry as well as the whole organization. I heard they really take care of their players from top to bottom. Specifically, about Terry, I've heard he's a lot like (Kevin) Cash in terms of, they say Cash learned everything he knows from Terry. I talked to him briefly (on Thursday). I'm excited to build that relationship and get to know him a little more because he's a legend in the game.

You can probably get on his good side more quickly if you rip on Cash with him.

Yeah, hopefully, I can bring him some dirt.

You got off to a terrific start last season, and overall, your production was encouraging given your age. But you also had some tough times over the final two months. What factored into that?

For me, my swing path kind of changed in the last two months, and I didn't know how to get it back if that makes sense. I was pulling off on a lot of stuff. I can't help but read the things that say, "Oh, the league adjusted to him and he never adjusted back," but to me, that wasn't the case. The case was I lost my swing a little bit and was never able to get it back. I had never worked with a hitting coach before, but this offseason, I made it a priority. I started hitting early in December and working with a guy out there. I'm excited for those changes to kind of take into spring training, get some live at-bats and see how it translates. To me, the guy that I am is the first month, month and a half that I had in the big leagues. That's who I am. That's who I'm going to be. For all these people tweeting at me, telling me to get my batting average up, they need to calm down a little bit (laughs). Just trust me that I know what I'm doing, I got this, I'm making the right adjustments. And I'm going to be ready to go come March 28.

Who are you working with? And what sorts of things does he have you doing that you haven't attempted before?

Craig Wallenbrock. Not to get into too many specifics, working more north-south instead of east-west. Just staying in the middle of the field and letting the ball go where it goes. Toward the end of last year, I had a swing that was completely a pull swing, and I had to commit to pulling the ball or trying to hit it the other way. If I got tied up on one or the other, I wasn't going to get the result I wanted. Just being prepared for whatever is going to come my way and being able to adjust to different pitches throughout an at-bat and not having to commit to one side or the other.

There's so much talk in the game about chasing the ideal launch angle and elevating to help generate more power. Can it be easy as a hitter to fall into some bad habits?

I think I've always had a naturally pretty launch angle-ish swing, but the moment I start thinking about that, I lose my swing. I think the biggest thing I learned last year is you've got to be yourself, man. Whether that's with your swing, your defense, your attitude, how you carry yourself, you've just got to be yourself. People will respect that a lot more than somebody who comes in and tries to be someone who they're not. That's all I'm going to do. I'm going to come in. I'm going to be Jake Bauers, no more, no less, and let the chips fall where they may.

Rosenthal: Allure of the 2019-20 free-agent class; Yanks shopping Andújar?; Happ's confidence; more notes

By Ken Rosenthal Dec 17, 2018

For years, anyone with even a passing interest in baseball eagerly awaited the Great Free Agent Class of 2018-19, topped by its two 26-year-old megastars, right fielder Bryce Harper and shortstop/third baseman Manny Machado.

Turns out the top position players in the 2019-20 class — first baseman Paul Goldschmidt and third basemen Nolan Arenado and Anthony Rendon — might be even more attractive to some clubs.

All three players would be older free agents than Harper and Machado; Goldschmidt would be entering his age 32 season, Rendon his age 30, Arenado his age 29. All three also are candidates to sign extensions, raising the possibility none will hit the open market.

But all three also lack the warts of Harper, who is coming off a poor defensive season and plays a position in plentiful supply; and Machado, whose comments and antics during the postseason raised questions about him as a long-term investment.

This is not to diminish Harper and Machado, both of whom are brilliant talents. Harper, if not quite as iconic as his agent Scott Boras suggests, certainly has the "it" factor, increasing his appeal. Machado lacks the same charisma. So do Goldschmidt, Arenado and Rendon. But the list of stars who might become available does not end there.

Mike Trout and Mookie Betts will be free agents after the 2020 season if they do not sign extensions. Teams also might be eyeing Francisco Lindor, who — with likely salaries in arbitration of \$10-12 million in '19 and \$16-20 million in '20 — eventually might grow out of the Indians' price range and become available in trade.

Another factor in the equation: Most teams are better positioned to absorb big salaries in the future than the present. Both the Yankees and Dodgers, for example, expended considerable time and effort to get under the luxury-tax threshold in 2018 and re-set their penalty rates to the minimum this offseason. But with big salaries coming off the books, both will carry even greater flexibility next winter, assuming they do not sign Harper and Machado.

The Yankees are a realistic suitor for Machado, whom they reportedly will host for a visit on Wednesday. But if Machado's price exceeds the Yankees' comfort level, the team could always sign a second baseman and start the season with Gleyber Torres at short and Miguel Andújar at third while waiting for shortstop Didi Gregorius to recover from Tommy John surgery. Gregorius, a free agent after next season, is another player the Yankees must weigh as a long-term consideration.

The Dodgers are widely rumored to be in on Harper, but the reality, according to major-league sources, is that they do not want him on a long-term, record-setting contract. A short-term deal with a high average salary and opt-outs might hold more appeal, but such an agreement likely would create luxury-tax issues for the Dodgers in 2019, and the team already has too many outfielders.

Either Matt Kemp or Yasiel Puig is in play for a possible trade to the Reds, among other possibilities, sources say. Alex Verdugo also is a candidate to be moved — maybe for Marlins catcher J.T. Realmuto or one of the Indians' starting pitchers — but the Dodgers are reluctant to part with his six years of control, knowing Puig is likely to be either traded or lost as a free agent after the '19 season. The Dodgers do not want to turn their outfield surplus into a deficit, and Verdugo's contact skills would be welcome in a lineup that averaged a strikeout every 3.62 plate appearances in the postseason.

For the moment, the team is committed to Cody Bellinger in center, but A.J. Pollock's ability to play that position might actually make him a better free-agent fit than Harper, provided the Dodgers indeed trade other outfielders. Pollock has not played more than 113 games in a season since 2015, but the Dodgers — due to their depth and versatility — could withstand his absences more easily than most clubs. He would be the position-player version of left-hander Rich Hill, valued for bursts of excellence in limited action. And he would be considerably less expensive than Harper, likely commanding a contract in the three- or four-year range at around \$15 million per season.

The Dodgers then could pursue Arenado or Rendon next offseason, possibly moving Justin Turner to first base in 2020, the final year of his contract. The Cardinals face similar choices — Goldschmidt is entering his walk year and third baseman Matt Carpenter his final guaranteed season (the team holds an \$18.5 million option on Carpenter for '20).

Nationals general manager Mike Rizzo told reporters at the winter meetings that he has made multiple extension offers to Rendon, and Rendon has spoken publicly about his desire to remain in D.C. The Rockies, likewise, are expected to pursue an extension with Arenado, and the Cardinals might do the same with Goldschmidt after he grows more familiar with the city and team.

Still, players rarely sign long-term extensions less than a year away from free agency. Goldschmidt, as I wrote previously, will be coming off a below-market contract. Arenado might be eager to demonstrate his worth outside of Colorado. And Rendon, during the past two seasons, has outperformed Arenado in OPS+ (138 to 131) and fWAR (13 to 11.3), only increasing his value.

The best guess is that all three will want to hit the open market, and that teams will be waiting for them. Especially teams that, for financial and/or performance reasons, might be less inclined to make a run at Harper or Machado.

The Yankees' Andújar: on the move?

A number of rival executives are convinced the Yankees want to trade Andújar, who finished second to Shohei Ohtani for American League Rookie of the Year. Andújar hit 27 homers with an .855 OPS last season, but according to Fangraphs' defensive metric — which includes a positional adjustment — he was the seventh-worst defender in the game.

Only Nick Castellanos, Khris Davis, Bryce Harper, Rhys Hoskins, Trey Mancini and Teoscar Hernández rated below Andújar, who finished at minus-15.5, somewhere between "poor" and "awful" according to Fangraphs. The Yankees continue to say Andújar, 23, can develop into an average defender, but they have little choice but to hold that belief. The signing of Machado, whose long-term position almost certainly is third, likely would change their perspective.

One rival executive views the Padres as a possible destination for Andújar, considering their need for a third baseman and apparent willingness to settle for less defensive skill at the position. San Diego pursued Pablo Sandoval as a free agent in the 2014-15 offseason. They have engaged the Phillies in talks about Maikel Franco. They even tried Wil Myers at third last season.

So, picture this: Andújar to the Padres. Realmuto to the Yankees and young talent to the Marlins (those would be the central pieces; others almost certainly would be involved). The idea is more fantasy than reality, in part because the Yankees say their only involvement in the Realmuto talks was to flip him to another club.

Realmuto, though, makes sense for the Yankees, who could either trade Gary Sánchez or use him as a catcher-first baseman-DH, with Giancarlo Stanton playing more outfield, a scenario first outlined by Joel Sherman of the New York Post.

Sánchez suffers occasional defensive lapses, but The Athletic's Marc Carig recently wrote the Yankees value him for his ability to stick to the pitching game plan, not to mention his offensive attributes.

The true measure of the Yankees' confidence in both Sánchez and Andújar will be if both are on the team's Opening Day roster.

The confidence of Happ

To the Yankees, free-agent left-hander J.A. Happ's willingness to bet on himself at 36 only reinforced their belief that he possesses the mettle to achieve continued success in New York.

Happ's agent, Dave Rogers, told teams he had at least one three-year guarantee. The Phillies were known to be interested, and the Reds, Angels, Braves and White Sox also were in the mix, sources said. But Happ accepted a two-year, \$34 million deal from the Yankees with a vesting option for a third season instead.

His reasons are not yet known, but his \$17 million average annual value with the Yankees might be higher than other teams offered, and the thresholds for the vesting option — 27 starts or 165 innings in 2020, as first reported by Sherman in the Post — are not especially onerous.

Happ will be 37 in 2020, but even if he does not hit one of the thresholds, the Yankees could exercise his option or re-negotiate his deal, provided he is healthy. His other alternative would be to sign as a free agent with another club.

Some in the industry viewed Happ as a must-have for the Yankees, particularly after Patrick Corbin signed with the Nationals. The Yankees' experience with Sonny Gray demonstrated anew that not every pitcher can succeed in New York, but Happ made a strong impression last season by producing a 2.69 ERA in 11 starts after joining the team in a trade from the Blue Jays on July 26.

Tulo ready to go?

When we last saw Troy Tulowitzki, he was still a quality defensive shortstop, ranking sixth in defensive runs saved at the position in 2016 and 19th in '17, even though he did not play after July 28 that season due to a sprained ankle.

Tulowitzki, 34, then missed all of 2018 after undergoing surgery to remove bone spurs from both heels, but he is again working out and is said to be in good shape. Naturally, teams are willing to take a look, knowing they can sign Tulowitzki for the minimum salary; the Blue Jays released him last week despite owing him \$38 million for the final two years of his contract.

The Pirates — under Clint Hurdle, Tulowitzki's former manager with the Rockies — are one team with interest, according to major-league sources. The Yankees might be a possibility if they fail to sign Machado and want a low-cost stopgap while Gregorius is out in the early part of the season.

The Cubs plan to scout Tulowitzki, as reported by FanCred's Jon Heyman, but they would want him only as a utility player, and not as a potential replacement for shortstop Addison Russell, sources said. Even in that role, their interest might be muted — the team is strongly pursuing free-agent infielder Daniel Descalso, sources said.

Contrary to earlier reports, the Athletics are not interested in Tulowitzki. The team is set with Marcus Semien at short and interested in acquiring a true second baseman if it loses free agent Jed Lowrie. Tulowitzki is willing to play second or third, but all 1,033 of his defensive appearances in the majors have been at shortstop.

Around the horn

Information from major-league sources:

*The Phillies lost free-agent lefty Patrick Corbin in part because they would not guarantee a sixth year and Happ in part because they would not guarantee a third. The Yankees made Happ the better short-term offer and got their man.

Each team values players differently, and the Phillies' risk-averse strategies with both Corbin and Happ might be proven correct. But the Phils seemingly took a different approach with free-agent outfielder Andrew McCutchen, whom they signed for three years and \$50 million, a number that surprised many in the industry.

The Phillies lack a left-handed starter, but consider one more of a "want" than a "need." They have been engaged for some time in discussions about a trade for Rangers lefty Mike Minor, who is owed \$9.5 million in each of the next two seasons, but no deal is close.

*The Rangers at one point thought they were close to sending Minor to the Brewers, and also made a strong run at free-agent right-hander Charlie Morton before signing Lance Lynn.

Morton, a resident of Bradenton, FL., not far from the Rays' home in St. Petersburg, accepted the same \$30 million guaranteed over two years that the Rangers gave Lynn over three.

Minor remains a decent possibility to be moved, as does infielder Jurickson Profar, who has drawn interest from both the Athletics and Padres.

*The catching shortage in the majors is acute. The Pirates' Francisco Cervelli is available. But some in the industry believe Cervelli's concussion issues in 2017 and '18 will result in the Pirates receiving diminished offers and ultimately keeping him.

Cervelli, who turns 33 on March 6, otherwise would be appealing; he is considered a strong defender, and his career on-base percentage is .362. His \$11.5 million salary in his walk year also is not prohibitively high.

The Mets reached agreement on Sunday with oft-injured free agent Wilson Ramos, 31, on a two-year, \$19 million contract.

*As The Athletic's Peter Gammons noted on Twitter, the decline of new Mariners DH Edwin Encarnación is undeniable, his OPS dropping from 152 to 148 to 134 to 128 to 115 over the last five seasons and his fWAR from 4.5 to 3.9 to 2.3 to 1.0 over the last four.

The Rays are seeking a right-handed bat, but an analytically driven team is not going to ignore such numbers, particularly when Encarnación, 35, is still owed \$25 million, including a \$5 million buyout at the end of the season.

*And finally, here's Marlins president of baseball operations Michael Hill on the market for Realmuto in the wake of the Mets signing Ramos:

"Nothing changes for us. Still have multiple teams to deal with."

The Athletic LOADED: 12.18.2018

1157633 New York Mets