

6 NL first-timers among Silver Slugger honorees

By Anthony Castrovince MLB.com @castrovince

The list of 2018 American League and National League Silver Slugger Award winners announced on Thursday night on MLB Network includes quite a few past recipients of the offense-based honor. Most notably, Mike Trout won for the sixth time, Jose Altuve for the fifth, and Paul Goldschmidt and Nolan Arenado for the fourth apiece.

But the list also includes the first two-time winner ... within the same season. J.D. Martinez's selection as both a designated hitter and an outfielder makes him the first player in the 39-year history of the award, which is presented annually by Louisville Slugger, to win two Silver Sluggers in the same year.

MLB managers and coaches fill in their blank Silver Slugger ballots at the conclusion of the regular season and are not allowed to vote for players on their own team. It's not unusual for players to receive votes at multiple positions, though that usually works to the detriment of a player's chances of winning. Martinez's exceptional year, in which he spent 62 percent of his time at DH and the other 38 in the corner outfield for the World Series champion Red Sox, created an exception all its own.

Here is the full list of winners for 2018:

CATCHER

AL winner: Salvador Perez, Royals (second Silver Slugger Award)

Perez, who also won a Silver Slugger in 2016, was the only AL catcher to notch enough plate appearances to qualify for the batting title, and he repeated the career highs he set in 2017 with 27 homers and 80 RBIs. The Indians' Yan Gomes led AL catchers in OPS (.762) but in 107 fewer at-bats than Perez (.713 OPS).

NL winner: J.T. Realmuto, Marlins (first)

A much-discussed trade candidate of late, Realmuto led all qualifying catchers with his career-best .825 OPS while hitting 21 homers, 30 doubles and three triples.

FIRST BASE

AL winner: Jose Abreu, White Sox (second)

In a down year for productivity for AL first basemen, Abreu recaptured the award he last won in his rookie season of 2014. He had a .265/.325/.473 slash with 22 homers, 36 doubles and 78 RBIs.

NL winner: Paul Goldschmidt, D-backs (fourth)

A four-time Silver Slugger, Goldschmidt took an un-Goldschmidt-like .198 batting average into play on May 23 but wound up with a very-Goldschmidt-like .290/.389/.533 slash with 33 homers, 35 doubles and five triples by season's end. His .922 OPS was 25 points higher than any other qualifying first baseman in the Majors.

SECOND BASE

AL winner: Jose Altuve, Astros (fifth)

Beset by injury, Altuve endured a significant step down from his 2017 MVP numbers but will take home hardware anyway. He led all full-time AL second basemen in batting average (.316) and OPS (.837).

NL winner: Javier Baez, Cubs (first)

Baez had the potential to invite the same positional vote split as Martinez because he made 75 starts at second and 52 at short (with another 18 at third). Wherever he played, he was one of the most productive players in the league, with an RBI total (111) that trailed only that of Martinez and the A's Khris Davis. Additionally, his .290 average, .326 on-base percentage, .554 slugging percentage, 34 homers, 40 doubles, nine triples and 21 steals were all career bests.

SHORTSTOP

AL winner: Francisco Lindor, Indians (second)

Lindor continued to assert himself in a field of electric AL shortstops with his second Silver Slugger Award in as many seasons. He tied for the Major League lead in runs (129) and became the first shortstop in MLB history with at least 35 homers (he hit 38), 40 doubles (he hit 42) and 20 stolen bases (he swiped 25) in a single season.

NL winner: Trevor Story, Rockies (first)

Story made shortstop history of his own. With 37 homers, 42 doubles and 27 steals (all career bests), he became the first shortstop with a 40-double, 30-homer, 25-steal season. He drove in 108 runs, and his .914 OPS was the best of any qualified shortstop in the bigs.

THIRD BASE

AL winner: Jose Ramirez, Indians (second)

Ramirez leads all MLB players in extra-base hits over the last two seasons (172) and, appropriately, has been named a Silver Slugger winner both years. He finished fourth among all AL players in slugging (.552), OPS (.939), RBIs (105), runs (110), total bases (319) and homers (39). He and Lindor are the first Indians teammates to win back-to-back Silver Sluggers since Roberto Alomar and Manny Ramirez in 1999-2000.

NL winner: Nolan Arenado, Rockies (fourth)

If Arenado were only busy collecting his six straight Gold Gloves, he'd be an impactful player. But he's mixed in four straight Silver Slugger seasons, too. For the third time in the last four years, he led the NL in homers (38), and his .935 OPS and 111 RBIs were the best among NL third basemen.

OUTFIELD

AL winners: Mookie Betts, Red Sox (second); Mike Trout, Angels (sixth); J.D. Martinez, Red Sox (second, third)

Aaron Judge's second-half wrist injury opened the door for Martinez, who had 219 at-bats as an outfielder vs. 350 as a DH, to command a higher vote tally here. Martinez previously won a Silver Slugger with the Tigers in 2015 (as an outfielder). His overall numbers were what earned him his votes in 2018, but it's worth noting that his numbers as an outfielder (.384/.450/.680 slash) were actually even better than his numbers as a DH (.297/.373/.597).

Martinez is not the first player to receive votes at multiple positions in the same season. In fact, it happened a few times this year. Ramirez got votes at second base and third base in AL, while Baez got votes at second base at shortstop in the NL. They ended up winning at third and second, respectively. Meanwhile, Oakland's Davis got votes in the outfield and at DH in the AL but didn't win at either spot.

Betts and Trout, meanwhile, were no-brainers.

Trout, who has now collected a Silver Slugger in six of the seven seasons in which he's qualified for the batting title, led all qualified hitters in the Majors in OPS (1.088), and Betts was second (1.078). Trout's OPS and OPS+ (199) were both the best of his Cooperstown-worthy career.

Betts' .346 average was the best in the Majors by 16 points, and he tied Lindor for the Major League lead in runs (129). Betts, who also won a Silver Slugger in 2016, joined Ramirez in becoming baseball's first 30-homer, 30-steal players since 2012.

NL winners: Christian Yelich, Brewers (second); David Peralta, D-backs (first); Nick Markakis, Braves (first)

Yelich already won the NL Hank Aaron Award and now adds his second Silver Slugger. Yelich led the NL in average (.326), slugging (.598), OPS (1.000) and total bases (343), hit for the cycle against the Reds twice (becoming the first to do so against the same team), and finished two homers and one RBI shy of the first NL Triple Crown in 81 years.

So he was an easy selection, whereas Peralta and Markakis (both first-time winners) had a lot of competition for this honor.

Peralta hit a career-high 30 homers, and his .868 OPS ranked fourth among NL qualifiers in the outfield.

Markakis had a power surge in his age-34 season, with his highest slugging (.440) and homer total (14) since 2012 and his highest doubles total (43) since 2010.

DESIGNATED HITTER

AL winner: J.D. Martinez, Red Sox (second, third)

As noted, Martinez saw the bulk of his playing time here (93 of his 150 games). Overall, he led the Majors in RBIs (130) and total bases (358) while finishing second in homers (43). His .330 average was nearly 40 points higher than his career norm, and his .402 OBP was nearly 50 points higher.

PITCHER

NL winner: German Marquez, Rockies (first)

Pitchers are obviously graded on a steep curve here. In a year in which pitchers, as a whole, posted an ugly slash line, Marquez hit .300/.300/.350 in 65 plate appearances (his .650 OPS was the highest of any pitcher with at least 35 plate appearances). His homer off a position player (Daniel Descalso) -- a true role reversal if ever there was one -- likely stuck in the minds of voters.

Bradley named Indians' best power prospect

By Jonathan Mayo and Jim Callis and Mike Rosenbaum MLB.com @JonathanMayo and @JimCallisMLB and @GoldenSombbrero
Baseball has witnessed a proliferation of home run-hitting rookies in recent years.

In 2016, Gary Sanchez became the first player to homer 18 times in his first 45 games, only to see that record obliterated when Rhys Hoskins went deep 19 times in his first 34 games the next season. Overshadowing Hoskins in 2017, Aaron Judge (52) and Cody Bellinger (39) each set league records for long balls by a rookie. This year, Ronald Acuna became the youngest player (age 20) known to have homered in five straight games and seven of eight, finishing the season with 26, while Juan Soto slammed the second-most homers ever by a teenager (22).

Who will form the next wave of young sluggers? Below, we identify the top power-hitting prospect in each organization, focusing on usable power (translatable into home run production) as opposed to simply raw power.

AL Central

Bobby Bradley, 1B, Indians No. 7

The 22-year-old left-handed slugger connected on 27 home runs between Double- and Triple-A and has now totaled at least 23 long balls in each of his first four full seasons. Bradley's massive raw power comes paired with strikeout concerns as well as some inherent streakiness, but he also has a sound approach that portends even more consistent game power down the road.

Frick nominee Graney a 'man of many firsts'

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- Having former players in the broadcast booth is a standard part of baseball these days. They can speak from first-hand experience, offering knowledge and insight from a unique perspective. There was a time, however, when this was not common practice.

Jack Graney helped alter that aspect of broadcasting history, playing a role in his candidacy for the 2019 Ford C. Frick Award.

When Graney joined the WHK team in 1932 to broadcast Indians games, he became the first former player to have a regular role in a radio booth. That fit right in with the rest of Graney's career, which included a number of firsts throughout his time as a player for Cleveland.

"He was a man of many firsts," said Jeremy Feador, the Indians' team curator.

When Babe Ruth reached the Majors for the first time as a pitcher, Graney was the first batter to step into the box to face him. When Cleveland wore uniform numbers on its sleeves in 1916 -- becoming the first club to don digits -- Graney was the first one to the plate. At some point, a former player was going to transition to broadcasting. Graney just happened to be the first.

Graney is among eight finalists for the 2019 Frick Award, with the winner being announced on Dec. 12 at the Winter Meetings in Las Vegas and then honored in a presentation during the July 19-22 Hall of Fame Weekend in Cooperstown, N.Y. Besides Graney, Connie Desmond, Pat Flanagan, Harry Heilmann, Al Helfer, Waite Hoyt, Rosey Rowswell and Ty Tyson are on the ballot.

The eight candidates are all deceased and fall under the Broadcasting Beginnings category, which is featured every three years in accordance with the Frick Award election cycle. Eleven living Frick Award recipients and four broadcast historians/columnists will vote on the award, which is based upon "commitment to excellence, quality of broadcasting abilities, reverence within the game, popularity with fans, and recognition by peers."

"He's overshadowed by a lot of other names," Feador said of Graney. "Hopefully, he can get his recognition."

Graney -- born in St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada, in 1886 -- was sold to the Cleveland Naps in 1907, reached the Majors the following years and spent 14 years with the ballclub. Graney came up as a pitcher, but later transitioned to the outfield, hitting .250 in 1,402 career games for Cleveland. He was a member of the 1920 Cleveland team that won the World Series.

For many years, Graney had a bull terrier named Larry that would appear in team photos, and served as a mascot for the team.

"I love that part of Graney's story," Feador said. "It's such a quirky aspect."

Following his playing career, Graney operated a Ford dealership, but he fell on hard times in the wake of the stock market crash in 1929. Three years later, Graney was offered a spot in the radio booth and he went on to spend 21 years (1932-44, '46-53) broadcasting Cleveland games. In 1948, Graney and Jimmy Dudley (a Frick Award winner) called the Indians' World Series triumph over the Boston Braves.

Many Indians fans can swiftly share a favorite call of current radio voice Tom Hamilton, who is entering his 30th season in the booth. Hamilton's roaring voice is not only on the radio, but can be quickly accessed online or via social media. That is obviously not the case for Graney, but historic accounts note that he spoke with sincerity and enthusiasm for the game.

Graney died at the age of 91 in 1978, and he was inducted into the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame in '84. In 2012, the Indians inducted Graney into the team's Distinguished Hall of Fame for non-uniformed personnel.

The Indians are hoping the National Baseball Hall of Fame is next.

"Bob Feller, Larry Doby -- those guys have sticking power. Their stories are more well-known," Feador said. "It's important to get stuff out there, so people are more aware. We have this rich history. One of the double-edged swords of having such a long history is some guys might get overlooked that shouldn't be overlooked."

"It's a point of pride. In our press box [at Progressive Field], we put up a big mural to highlight our broadcasting history. Having Jack being the first, being able to change from player to a broadcaster, it kind of goes to show that he wasn't a one-faceted talent."

Cleveland Indians RHP Dan Otero allows 3 runs as MLB All-Stars defeat Japanese team, 9-6

By Joe Noga, cleveland.com jnoga@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Cleveland Indians reliever Dan Otero served up an inside-the-park, three-run home run to pinch hitter Seiya Matsubara in the fourth inning Thursday, but the Major League Baseball All-Star team held on to defeat the Yomiuri Giants, 9-6 at the Tokyo Dome.

Matsubara hit a fly ball to left center that dropped under the glove of Washington Nationals left fielder Juan Soto in the bottom of the fourth and rolled all the way to the fence. By the time Atlanta center fielder Ronald Acuna Jr. retrieved the ball, Matsubara had raced around the bases and cut the MLB stars' lead to 7-4.

Soto was among four MLB stars with multi-hit efforts in the game, which represented the opener of an six-game tour of Japan, the first for MLB players since 2014. Former Indians 1B Carlos Santana had a hit and struck out three times for the MLB stars.

Only two of the runs Otero allowed were earned as he pitched one inning. He allowed a leadoff single to Giants center fielder Daikan Yoh, but got Shuta Tanaka on a ground out to end the inning.

Miami Marlins catcher J.T. Realmuto hit a two-run double in the third and a solo home run off Giants lefty Ryusei Ohe in the fifth to lead the MLB stars.

The series continues Friday at 4:05 a.m. EST with the game airing live on MLB Network.

Cleveland Indians infielders Francisco Lindor and Jose Ramirez are back-to-back Silver Slugger Award winners

By Joe Noga, cleveland.com jnoga@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Francisco Lindor and Jose Ramirez did not get the gold earlier this week, but on Thursday they both brought home some silver for the second straight year.

The Cleveland Indians infielders earned Louisville Silver Slugger Awards in the American League for 2018 based on their offensive productivity. Lindor and Ramirez were also finalists at their defensive positions for Rawlings Gold Glove Awards that were announced Sunday.

The Indians were among four teams with multiple Silver Slugger Award winners, including Boston, Houston, Colorado and Arizona. Yan Gomes was a finalist among AL catchers with the award going to Kansas City's Salvador Perez.

Lindor and Ramirez become the first Indians duo to claim the honor in back-to-back seasons since Manny Ramirez and Roberto Alomar in 1999-2000. The duo combined for 77 home runs and 163 extra-base hits as the Indians won the American League Central Division title for the third straight year.

Lindor, a three-time All-Star at shortstop, saw his increased power numbers from 2017 carry over to this season. The 24-year-old upped his career-high home run total by five (38). He collected a career-best 183 hits, including 42 doubles and two triples. He became the first shortstop in MLB history and first Indian with at least 35 home runs, 40 doubles and 20 stolen bases in a single season.

Among all-time MLB switch-hitting shortstops, Lindor's 38 home runs ranks first, ahead of Jimmy Rollins (2007) and Jose Valentin (2004), who each hit 30. Lindor led the AL with 129 runs scored.

Lindor finished the season ranked tied for fourth in the AL in hits, tied for sixth in home runs, tied for first in runs scored, eighth overall in stolen bases and second overall in total bases. He connected on a franchise-best and MLB-high nine leadoff home runs.

Ramirez, 26, had a historic season, posting an OPS of .939 and career-highs in home runs (39), RBI (105) and walks (106). Selected to his second straight All-Star Game, Ramirez scored 110 runs and collected 156 hits.

Only four AL players have ever matched the 39 homers and 34 steals that Ramirez totaled in 2018. He became just the third player in Indians history with at least 30 home runs and 30 stolen bases, joining Joe Carter (1987) and Grady Sizemore (2008).

Ramirez finished ranked second among AL Leaders in walks (106), third in steals (34), fourth in slugging percentage (.552), OPS (.939), RBI (105), runs (110), total bases (319) and homers (39). He is the first Cleveland third baseman in club history to capture multiple Silver Slugger Awards.

Here is the entire list of 2018 Silver Slugger Award winners.

AMERICAN LEAGUE

Catcher: Salvador Perez (Royals). First base: Jose Abreu (White Sox). Second base: Jose Altuve (Astros). Third base: Jose Ramirez (Indians). Shortstop: Francisco Lindor (Indians). Outfield: Mookie Betts (Red Sox). Outfield: Mike Trout (Angels). Outfield & DH: J.D. Martinez (Red Sox).

NATIONAL LEAGUE

Catcher: J.T. Realmuto (Marlins). First base: Paul Goldschmidt (Diamondbacks). Second base: Javier Baez (Cubs). Third base: Nolan Arenado (Rockies). Shortstop: Trevor Story (Rockies). Outfield: Christian Yelich (Brewers). Outfield: Nick Markakis (Braves). Outfield: David Peralta (Diamondbacks). Pitcher: German Marquez (Rockies).

Silver Slugger Awards have honored the game's best offensive players since 1980. Coaches and managers of MLB teams vote for players at their respective positions in each league based on batting average, on-base percentage and slugging percentage.

Coaches and managers are not allowed to vote for players on their own team.

Cleveland Indians navigating thin line between payroll, trades and winning

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

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The rumor season is upon us and the Indians find themselves smack dab in the middle of it. That's not unusual for a winning team with a talented roster.

It has happened plenty of times before. Remember when Cliff Lee was supposedly traded to the Pirates? Or Omar Vizquel was shipped to Seattle? What about Danny Salazar being traded to the Cubs? All those rumors surfaced during the winter.

Those rumors never came to fruition, which is not uncommon. But this winter, when you see the Indians linked to a rumor there could be more than a kernel of truth involved.

The Tribe's roster is getting more and more expensive. Chris Antonetti, president of baseball operations, and GM Mike Chernoff watched 12 free agents -- Michael Brantley, Cody Allen, Andrew Miller, Lonnie Chisenhall, Josh Tomlin, Brandon Guyer, Rajai Davis, Melky Cabrera, Oliver Perez, Adam Rosales, Josh Donaldson and Brandon Barnes -- come off the books after the World Series. Those players earned an estimated \$49 million this year.

But that has not prompted a spending spree because the \$49 million has been almost neutralized by raises due to players still on the roster via their guaranteed contracts or upcoming arbitration negotiations. The Indians' payroll in 2018 was a record \$135 million, according to Cot's Baseball.com. They ranked 15th (out of 30 teams) in payroll, but only 21st in attendance. Attendance isn't the only revenue stream for teams, but it is still an important one. The Indians have topped two million in attendance just once in the last 10 years.

The Indians have 12 players under contract for an estimated \$94 million in 2019. That does not include Francisco Lindor and Trevor Bauer, who are eligible for arbitration. Lindor could top Kris Bryant's record of \$10.8 million for a player in his first year or arbitration. Bauer's salary could jump from \$6.525 million to \$11.6 million, according to mlbtraderumors.com.

This week Antonetti and Chernoff are at the GM meetings in Carlsbad, Calif. talking to teams about possibly trading one or more of their veteran players. They have been fielding calls on starting pitchers, including Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco and Bauer, and middle infielders Lindor, Jose Ramirez, Erik Gonzalez and Jason Kipnis. Lindor and Ramirez are thought to be off limits, but it never hurts to talk.

The Indians are also deep at catcher with Yan Gomes, Roberto Perez and Eric Haase, but the most attractive part of the Tribe's roster is the rotation -- Kluber, Carrasco, Bauer, Mike Clevinger and Shane Bieber. Jon Heyman reported that the Yankees talked to the Tribe on Tuesday about Kluber and Carrasco.

What the Indians are trying to do is move payroll -- Edwin Encarnacion will make \$21.7 million and Kipnis \$14.7 million next year -- and still stay competitive. They've won three straight AL Central Division titles and have posted a winning record for six straight seasons.

If the Indians can pull off this delicate surgery, the AL Central might allow them to continue to prosper. The Twins, White Sox, Tigers and Royals are all rebuilding. The Indians won the division by 13 games this year with a 91-71 record. Minnesota was a distant second at 78-84.

The division didn't prepare them for the postseason where they were swept in three games by Astros. But because this does not appear to be a fire sale, the Indians could still continue to rule the Central for one or two more seasons as long as their ego doesn't get in the way. Bad teams can turnaround fast as the Indians showed in 2013 when they won 92 games to win a wild card spot after losing 94 games in 2012.

What the Indians need is to find a way to acquire help in the outfield and bullpen. They could do that by trading one of their prized starting pitchers, but they have to get it right. It took too long for them to acquire and develop that rotation to punch a hole in it by making a bad deal.

Free agent Michael Brantley not expected to re-sign with Cleveland Indians

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

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Free agent outfielder Michael Brantley is not expected to return to the Indians.

Brantley has reportedly received offers from Atlanta, Philadelphia and the White Sox. The Indians did not offer Brantley a one-year \$17.9 qualifying offer on Friday.

Chris Antonetti, Indians president of baseball operations, explained the decision not to make Brantley a qualifying offer this way, "Ultimately, the first week of the offseason, as we looked at our path ahead, it wasn't the best decision to potentially allocate (\$17.9) million dollars right now."

This year Brantley played 143 games. He was limited to 101 games in 2016 and 2017 because of right shoulder and right ankle injuries. Both injuries required surgery.

The Indians acquired Brantley from Milwaukee as part of the CC Sabathia trade in 2008. He did not join them until Oct. 3 as the player to be named in the deal. Brantley has spent his entire big league career with the Tribe.

Late this season, Brantley, 31, was asked what he would say to the Indians if he didn't re-sign, "I would thank them for the honor of playing here," he said. "I grew from a young man to a man here."

MLBtraderumors.com ranked Brantley at No. 10 among its top 50 free agents in this winter's class. It speculated he'd sign a three-year \$45 million deal with Atlanta. Brantley hit .309 (176-for-570) with 36 doubles, 17 homers and 76 RBI this season. He struck out just 60 times, while drawing 48 walks.

Cody Allen, Andrew Miller, Melky Cabrera, Lonnie Chisenhall, Josh Tomlin, Brandon Guyer, Rajai Davis, Oliver Perez, Adam Rosales, Josh Donaldson and Brandon Barnes were the other Indians' players who became free agents.

Brantley is represented by Kenny Felder of Excel Sports Management. Brantley and Felder left The Legacy Agency near the end of the season.

Time to pay the piper: Indians are victims of their own success

Jim Ingraham | The Chronicle-Telegram Published on Nov. 8, 2018 | Updated 8:07 a. m.

We've now reached the point where the Indians are too good for their own good.

For that, they've got only themselves to blame. If they were awful, like they were virtually every year between 1960 and 1993, when they had a losing record in 28 of the 33 years, with zero trips to the postseason, we wouldn't be talking about what we're about to talk about.

Which is this: the Indians are too good because they have too many good players, which means too many high-priced players, which means too bad for the too-good Indians.

The tax bill is coming due for making the playoffs in four of the last six years, the last three in a row, and it is not a pretty sight — unless you consider the news that the Indians are reportedly listening to offers for Corey Kluber to be a pretty sight.

Which, if you do, you need to immediately make an appointment with the Corey Kluber of optometrists.

Welcome to the Indians' nuclear winter. Put on your parka and button up, the hardball wind chill could get brutal. Given their mouth-watering roster, their buttons-bursting payroll and the economic limitations within their modest-to-meek market, Indians officials are facing some hard decisions in the coming weeks, decisions that could leave many of their customers — how shall we say it? — “testy”?

Simply put, the Indians can no longer afford the gold-plated roster they so artfully constructed over the last several years.

The hired help is getting too pricey, which for ownership is making it dicey. The team's independent contractors have reached the stage in their careers in which there are too many commas in the “amount” box on their paychecks.

For example, when Kluber won his first Cy Young Award in 2014, his salary was \$514,000. Five years, three All-Star selections, two Cy Young Awards and four top-three finishes in the Cy Young voting later, Kluber in 2019 will be paid \$17 million.

Francisco Lindor, who this year will likely finish in the top five in the MVP voting for the second consecutive year, will see his salary jump from \$623,000 in 2018 to around \$10 million (through arbitration) next year.

Trevor Bauer, who might have won the Cy Young Award this year had he not gotten hurt late in the season, will likely see his 2019 salary (through arbitration) pushing \$12 million, after making \$6.5 million last year.

Those are just three examples, but you get the point. In 2018, the Indians' payroll was \$134 million, the highest in franchise history. The Indians aren't expected to re-sign any of their significant free agents, a list that includes Michael Brantley, Cody Allen, Andrew Miller, Josh Donaldson and Lonnie Chisenhall, among others, but the savings there will merely help cover the raises due the players still on the roster.

In other words, they could downsize their roster, from a talent standpoint, and still see their payroll go up. Next year they'll dance that dance again.

This is the most talented, high-priced roster the Indians have had since their last golden era, from 1995-2000. The difference is this: from 1995 through 2000 the Indians finished first or second in the American League in attendance every year.

In the Terry Francona Era, which started in 2013 and includes four trips to the postseason and one World Series appearance, the Indians have finished 14th, 15th, 14th, 13th, 11th and ninth in the league in attendance.

That's not to blame the fans. They are doing the best they can. These are different economic times in northeast Ohio compared to the late 1990s. Interest in the Indians now is just as great as it was 20 years ago, it just isn't reflected in the attendance numbers.

It would also be unfair to blame Indians ownership, which bankrolled the highest payroll in franchise history in 2018.

The “problem,” if you want to call it that, is the core players on the roster, the ones who have anchored this run of three consecutive division titles, are moving into their prime earning years.

This is nobody's fault. But it's reality.

The tricky part for teams trying to win championships in non-major markets, is that you've got to try to win it all before reaching the point at which you can no longer afford the salaries of all the players you need to win that championship. That's where the Indians are now.

Trade Kluber? It sounds insane. It wouldn't look pretty. But for the right return — starting with a young, dynamic outfield bat — you'd have to at least consider it. The rotation would still be a strength, and top prospect Triston McKenzie could make his major league debut sometime in 2019.

Everything could and should be on the table as the Indians, unlike the Yankees, Red Sox and Dodgers, try to get a little bit better — on a budget.

Rosenthal: Nolan Arenado's future in Colorado; the Mariners' path forward; change is in the air; more notes

By Ken Rosenthal Nov 7, 2018 17

Once Bryce Harper and Manny Machado sign their massive free-agent contracts, the Rockies will be left with the daunting task of trying to reach agreement with third baseman Nolan Arenado on a long-term extension.

“These sort of ‘problems’ aren't really problems. They're just part of the business,” Rockies general manager Jeff Bridich said on Tuesday. “It's our job to navigate the situation and hopefully do it with a professional and mutual respect.”

By all accounts, the Rockies maintain an excellent relationship with Arenado and his agents at the Wasserman Media Group. But in the end, the National League MVP finalist's future in Colorado will be determined by dollars — hundreds of millions of dollars.

Harper and Machado, entering their age 26 seasons, likely will establish new financial standards in free agency. Arenado, if he becomes a free agent a year from now, would be entering his age 29 season. His age alone probably would prevent him from getting as much as Harper and Machado, particularly if he does not hit the open market. But to stay with the Rockies, he surely would want a monster deal.

Over the past four seasons, Arenado has averaged 40 homers and 126 RBIs. His park- and league-adjusted OPS is the same as Machado's during that span, while considerably lower than Harper's. But Arenado, a winner of six straight Gold Gloves, is probably the best defender of the three — Machado is his near-equal when playing third base — and almost certainly the best leader.

A trade of Arenado is not currently under consideration; the Rockies are expected to make a legitimate attempt to keep him, even after their dubious experiences with previous long-term deals for pitcher Mike Hampton (eight years, \$121 million), first baseman Todd Helton (nine years, \$141.5 million) and shortstop Troy Tulowitzki (10 years, \$157.75 million).

The first benchmark for the two sides will be Arenado's arbitration number, which is virtually certain to exceed third baseman Josh Donaldson's \$23 million last season, an arbitration record. MLBTradeRumors.com projects Arenado to receive \$26.1 million, and it's possible he might ask for even more.

Players with five-plus years of service can compare themselves to free agents in arbitration, and by the time the Rockies and Arenado exchange numbers on Jan. 11, Machado's deal likely will be known. As part of the extension talks, the Rockies probably would seek to negotiate a lower salary for Arenado in 2019 and fold it into his new contract.

It seems inconceivable the Rockies would trade Arenado when they are trying to reach the postseason for the third straight year. If they fail to reach an agreement with him before the season starts, they can simply keep him and try again after the season is over.

Only one thing seems certain: The two sides get along too well for matters to turn ugly.

"That (relationship) has been cultured over the years. We expect that to continue as we enter this phase of Nolan's career," Bridich said. "There is no perfect road map to any of this. There hasn't been an expectation of a perfect road map. The biggest expectation is a continued quality of communication among everybody involved."

Mariners "re-imagining" their roster

Mariners general manager Jerry Dipoto had a one-word description for reports that said he was considering tearing down his roster and starting over:

"Dramatized."

Dipoto, like most GMs, will listen to any proposal from a prospective trade partner, but it is doubtful ownership would want him to completely shift course four months after he signed a contract extension.

The Mariners' preference, Dipoto said, is to improve their odds of long-term success without greatly compromising their short-term ability to compete. One way to do that is by flipping veteran assets for younger impact talent, acquiring the next Mitch Haniger rather than trading the current one.

"For the last three years, we've been somewhere between, let's say, the fifth- and seventh-best team in the American League and we have not been able to get over that hump," Dipoto said. "We're viewing this as an opportunity to re-imagine what our roster looks like. We have no intention of tearing down to the studs and building from the ground up.

"I said at the start of the off-season we have too many strong assets to do that. We've got a lot of good players. We do have talent on the roster. Our goal here is to be open-minded and wide-eyed and go into this off-season considering the different ways we can get better, not just for now but for the future."

Catcher Mike Zunino, under control for two more seasons, is among the players the Mariners are discussing in trades, and the Rays are among the clubs pursuing him, according to sources. A trade of Zunino would leave the team almost barren at catcher; the Astros recently claimed Chris Herrmann from the Mariners on waivers, and David Freitas — a waiver claim from the Braves in October 2017 — is the only other catcher on Seattle's 40-man roster.

Dipoto, however, did not sound particularly worried about how he might replace Zunino.

"We'll address whatever the short-term needs are when we get to that point," he said. "We're not committed to moving any one player specifically. We're open to listening on anything. And we've discussed a number of players already with a variety of teams."

Changes everywhere, and more still coming

Over the past four days, Dodgers third-base coach Chris Woodward became the Rangers' manager, while hitting coach Turner Ward left for the same position with the Reds and general manager Farhan Zaidi agreed to become the Giants' president of baseball operations.

Those jobs all must be filled, and even at this relatively late date a number of other teams are scrambling in similar fashion, granting permission for field and front-office staff to interview with other teams, requesting permission to interview other clubs' employees for their own vacancies. Staffing issues do not prevent clubs from conducting their normal off-season business, but they do create additional work for those doing the hiring. Executives describe the process as exhausting, with one going so far on Tuesday to say it might be the one aspect of the job that ultimately forces him to retire.

The increased movement in the industry reflects the expansions of both field staffs and front offices in recent years. The Dodgers, for example, listed nine coaches last season, though only seven are permitted in uniform during games. Meanwhile, the increased availability of data makes it necessary for teams to hire more analysts, and clubs are seeking new edges by adding other staff.

This year, hiring season might even stretch into December. The Orioles have yet to fill their openings for a president of baseball operations, general manager and manager, and they also must name a new coaching staff and replace a number of employees who are no longer with the club.

Here's Farhan... Now what about Bum?

The future of left-hander Madison Bumgarner is one of the first questions Zaidi will face on Wednesday when he is introduced as the Giants' president of baseball operations. But a trade of Bumgarner still seems unlikely, at least in the short-term — and not simply because of the pitcher's declining velocity and strikeout rate.

The free-agent market is flooded with left-handed starting pitchers, from Patrick Corbin to Dallas Keuchel to J.A. Happ; Hyun-Jin Ryu to Yusei Kikuchi to Wade Miley. The demand for Bumgarner almost certainly would be greater at the non-waiver deadline, and he presumably will be healthier than he was in the past two seasons, increasing his chances of success leading to July 31.

One rival executive questions whether the Giants possess the "intestinal fortitude" to rebuild the way they should. The awarding of a five-year contract to Zaidi — while perhaps necessary to pry him away from the Dodgers — would seem to indicate ownership's willingness to be patient. But however the team proceeds, it's probably too soon to trade Bumgarner.

Around the horn

*Here's an intriguing thought, courtesy of an industry source: Astros bench coach Joe Espada, who interviewed for managing positions with the Twins, Blue Jays, Angels and Rangers over the past month, ultimately might replace Don Mattingly, whose contract with the Marlins expires after the 2019 season.

Espada, a native of Puerto Rico, is not only bi-lingual, but also has ties to both the Marlins and their two top team executives — CEO Derek Jeter and vice-president of scouting and player development Gary Denbo, who previously worked for the Yankees.

Espada, 43, was a minor-league coach with the Marlins from 2006 to '09 and the major-league club's third-base coach from '10 to '13. He joined the Yankees as a special assistant in '14 and became third-base coach in '15.

*As the Orioles continue to operate without a lead executive, farm director Brian Graham and director of baseball operations Tripp Norton are representing the team at the GM Meetings. According to a source, executive VP John Angelos, the son of owner Peter Angelos, decided vice-president of baseball operations Brady Anderson would not be part of the Orioles' contingent. Anderson's role in the next front office remains a major question going forward.

Graham and Norton are trying to conduct business as usual, meeting with clubs, seeking a shortstop in both free agency and trade. Unlike in recent years, the Orioles offered new contracts to employees they wanted to retain before their old deals expired on Oct. 31. The one notable exception was amateur scouting director Gary Rajsich, whose fate likely will be determined by the new lead executive.

*The Rays are a team to watch, in more ways than one.

While some both inside and outside the organization believe the team over-achieved by finishing 90-72, one rival GM says the Rays' depth of young talent in the majors and minors bodes well for their future.

The Rays, according to sources, also possess more payroll flexibility than in years past, making them a possible landing spot for a significant right-handed hitting free agent such as designated hitter Nelson Cruz or third baseman Josh Donaldson.

*Free-agent right-hander Edwin Jackson has played for 13 teams, but is it possible he finally might find some stability in Oakland?

The Athletics are interested in re-signing Jackson, according to sources. Jackson, who joined the A's in June after exercising an opt-out clause with the Nationals, had a 3.33 ERA for Oakland in 17 starts.

Rosenthal: Cardinals' plans do not include Harper; the high price for an Indians starter; more notes

By Ken Rosenthal 7h ago 2

The theory is not illogical: If the Cardinals were willing to take on Giancarlo Stanton's contract last offseason, they should be ready to spend \$300 million-plus on Bryce Harper as a free agent.

Their fans are clamoring for such a move. Some in the media are as well. But the Cardinals, according to major-league sources, are not as interested in Harper as those on the outside want them to be. At least not at the moment.

The standard caveats apply — clubs frequently mask their intentions in the offseason, and shifting markets often change a team's plans. The Cardinals, though, currently are more focused on a corner infielder than an outfielder, and also want to bolster their left-handed relief, sources said.

The infielder might be either a first baseman or a third baseman, with Matt Carpenter capable of playing either position. Manny Machado is not believed to be a free-agent target, but either Josh Donaldson or Mike Moustakas might be. A trade for the Diamondbacks' Paul Goldschmidt would be another possibility.

Goldschmidt would cost the Cardinals prospects, but the team is deep in young pitching and the acquisition price should not be oppressive, considering he will be a free agent at the end of next season. A contract extension for Goldschmidt, who will earn \$14.5 million in 2019, also would be less expensive than a monster deal for Harper, considering the DBacks' star would hit the open market at 32.

Harper certainly would fit the Cardinals, but he reportedly turned down a 10-year, \$300 million contract from the Nationals at the end of last season, and almost certainly wants to beat the records for highest average annual salary (Zack Greinke, \$34.4 million) and total guarantee (Stanton, \$325 million). The Cardinals instead could acquire say, Goldschmidt and Andrew Miller or Zach Britton for a whole lot less, and remain in a more flexible position.

As for the outfield, the Cardinals are considerably deeper than they were during their pursuit of Stanton a year ago. The team acquired Marcell Ozuna after failing to land Stanton, and two young outfielders emerged over the course of the season — Harrison Bader, who projects as the long-term center fielder, and Tyler O'Neill, who produced an .803 OPS in his first 142 major-league plate appearances.

Ozuna is entering his free-agent year, but the Cardinals still owe Dexter Fowler \$43.5 million over the next three seasons. The defensively challenged José Martínez also remains in the picture, though maybe not for long. Either way, the Cardinals will not be short on outfielders.

The infield presents a greater range of options — first base, third and even shortstop are in play, with the possibility of Paul DeJong moving from short to third. The Cardinals, who have missed the playoffs three straight years for the first time since 1997 to '99, know they must get an impact hitter. But barring a change in direction, it will be a surprise if that hitter is Harper.

The high price for an Indians starter

Want Indians right-hander Corey Kluber? Think about offering a package similar to what the Pirates gave up for Chris Archer or the Red Sox gave up for Chris Sale.

Kluber has three years, \$40.5 million remaining on his contract. Sale had three years, \$38 million remaining when the Red Sox acquired him from the White Sox in Dec. 2016. Archer had three-plus years and \$29.5 million remaining when the Pirates acquired him from the Rays last July 31.

While Kluber is the most expensive of that group, he also is the most accomplished, a Cy Young finalist in three of the past five seasons and a winner twice. Thus, the Indians might want to exceed the Yoan Moncada-Michael Kopech-plus return for Sale, and the Tyler Glasnow-Austin Meadows-Shane Bieber return for Archer.

Not surprisingly, sources say the Indians are getting "hit hard" with trade inquiries for Kluber and their two other available starting pitchers — right-handers Trevor Bauer and Carlos Carrasco, both of whom are under control for two more seasons, as opposed to Kluber's three.

The narrower window of control means the price for either Bauer or Carrasco might be lower than it is for Kluber. But in Bauer's case, it might not be much lower; he was on a Cy Young track before he suffered a stress fracture in his right fibula on Aug. 11, and is only 27, while Kluber is 32.

Kluber has worked 1,136 2/3 innings the past five years, the most of any pitcher in the majors, including regular season and postseason. He faded in each of the past two postseasons, perhaps due to physical issues, but he is a tireless worker who stays in excellent shape. The Indians point to his resurgence in the 2018 regular season as proof that his struggles in the '17 Division Series against the Yankees were only temporary.

Rival clubs say the Indians rarely come off their desired price in trade discussions, so it's possible they will not trade any of their starters this offseason. They always can try again at the non-waiver deadline, knowing righty Danny Salazar might be ready by then after missing all of last season due to shoulder issues.

Whatever they do, the Indians again will be prohibitive favorites to win the AL Central. They are open to trading a starter only because of their payroll limitations and roster needs, most notably in the outfield. Such a deal would be more painful if it actually jeopardized their chances of winning the division.

Reality with Realmuto

Marlins president of baseball operations Michael Hill lights up talking about how the team drafted J.T. Realmuto, converted him to a catcher and then developed him into an All-Star.

Realmuto caught only one game at Carl Albert H.S. in Midwest City., Ok., Hill said. A Marlins scout, Steve Taylor, attended that game and liked what he saw. The Marlins then drafted Realmuto with the 104th overall selection in the 2010 draft.

Of course, Christian Yelich, Giancarlo Stanton and Marcell Ozuna also were homegrown Marlins, and the team traded all three last offseason. Realmuto's agent, Jeff Berry of CAA, is pressing for a trade, just as he did a year ago. But the Marlins still are talking about keeping Realmuto and trying to sign him long-term.

Now is not the time to make such an offer to Realmuto — Berry recently told MLB Network Radio his client would not sign an extension with the club. But the Marlins believe their young pitching is good enough to persuade Realmuto over his final two seasons of control that the team is heading in the right direction.

The Marlins view right-handers José Ureña, Sandy Alcantara and Pablo Lopez as championship-caliber starters. Right-hander Jorge Guzman has at least mid-rotation potential, and righties Nick Neidert and Zac Gallen could be bottom-of-the-rotation types. All but Ureña were acquired in trades: Alcantara and Gallen came for Ozuna, Lopez for David Phelps, Guzman for Stanton and Neidert for Dee Gordon.

Reds ready to deal?

The Reds, in search of starting pitching, might be priced out of the market for high-end free agents such as Patrick Corbin and Dallas Keuchel. But a trade of prospects for a veteran starter is possible, and two players entering their free-agent years —second baseman Scooter Gennett and center fielder Billy Hamilton — also could be moved.

According to sources, owner Bob Castellini finally is willing to approve a deal of Hamilton, whom the Reds resisted trading in the past in part because Castellini perceived him as a fan favorite. Hamilton would be difficult to replace internally — the Reds might need to sign a center fielder — but a player with a .298 career on-base percentage should never have been untouchable.

Top prospect Nick Senzel, who underwent season-ending surgery to repair a torn tendon in his right index finger in late June, would be a possible replacement for Gennett, and maybe even Hamilton in center.

Something else to watch with Cincinnati: The impact of new pitching coach Derek Johnson on the ability of the Reds to attract free-agent pitchers. Left-hander Wade Miley, who pitched for Johnson last season with the Brewers, might be one possibility.

Not just about Manny in Philly

The Phillies are considered the favorites to sign Manny Machado, and they also figure to explore the deep free-agent market for left-handed starting pitchers. But the team, according to sources, also is in touch with the agents for virtually every dominant back-end reliever — Craig Kimbrel, as first reported by MLB.com's Jon Morosi, as well as Zach Britton and Andrew Miller.

Britton, like Machado, is familiar to Phillies executives, a number of whom previously worked for the Orioles, Britton's original team. The Phillies do not lack talent in their bullpen, but an established late-inning type would provide stability and reduce the pressure on younger relievers.

"We're looking for areas where we can move the needle and find an upgrade," general manager Matt Klentak told reporters Wednesday. "If there's a backend reliever that's a good fit for our roster and is willing to come on what we deem to be a reasonable term and contract then we're going to explore that.

"I'm not committed to adding a player in any one particular area. But we're committed to exploring everything and finding the players that make the most sense for us. So we're going to talk to impact relievers this offseason. I don't know if we'll sign one, but we're going to explore that because that might be a fit that makes sense for us."

Around the horn

*The Dodgers, who did not replace vice president of baseball operations Alex Anthopoulos after the Braves named him GM last offseason, also might not replace general manager Farhan Zaidi, who on Tuesday was named the Giants' president of baseball operations.

Both executives were significant losses, but the Dodgers maintain a deep roster of front-office talent. President of baseball operations Andrew Friedman had a similar stable when he was with Tampa Bay, and from that group emerged Erik Neander and Chaim Bloom, the leaders of the Rays' current braintrust.

Friedman told reporters that for now senior VP of baseball operations Josh Byrnes, director of baseball development and scouting Alex Slater and director of player development Brandon Gomes would help assume some of Zaidi's responsibilities.

*Josh Harrison, who became a free agent when the Pirates declined his \$10.5 million option, looms as an alternative to Marwin González, the leading super-utility man on the open market.

González, 29, is two years younger than Harrison, and also a switch-hitter. But both players make sense for all kinds of clubs.

Harrison could be a more versatile version of Neil Walker for the Yankees, playing second while Gleyber Torres fills in at short as Didi Gregorius recovers from Tommy John surgery, then filling in at other positions.

The Astros are another possibility for Harrison if they lose González. And while the Reds are more focused on pitching, Harrison is from Cincinnati and would become a fit if the team traded Gennett.

*One published report linked the Braves to Craig Kimbrel, but the team's priorities are a corner outfielder, a second catcher and an extra outfielder, sources said. The Braves only would enter the picture for Kimbrel if his price dropped, which is unlikely.

The Nationals, even after trading for Kyle Barraclough and signing Trevor Rosenthal, might further enhance their bullpen with another free-agent reliever, particularly if they fail to sign Bryce Harper. But the Nats, like the Braves, first will pursue other upgrades, most notably starting pitching.