



# CHICAGO CUBS DAILY CLIPS

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February 12, 2018

- Cubs.com, **Darvish fulfills Theo's desire to add pitching**  
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### **Cubs.com**

Darvish fulfills Theo's desire to add pitching

By Carrie Muskat

MESA, Ariz. -- At the end of last season, Cubs president of baseball operations Theo Epstein acknowledged his team needed more pitching. He even said he was willing to move some of the Cubs' young position players to get it. Losing both Jake Arrieta and John Lackey to free agency created gaping holes in the rotation, with no immediate help available in the system.

Instead, the Cubs were able to hang onto their talented core. The team's pitchers and catchers will hold their first workout on Wednesday. Assuming Yu Darvish passes his physical, he is expected to join the group -- after agreeing to a six-year, \$126 million contract. There were no players on the field Sunday at the Cubs' complex, so no sign of Darvish yet.

"I told him if he comes here, we're going to win a World Series, hopefully," said catcher Chris Gimenez, who caught Darvish with the Rangers and is a non-roster invitee.

Gimenez may have earned a roster spot with his recruiting efforts.

Darvish, 31, would join starters Jon Lester, Kyle Hendricks, Jose Quintana and Tyler Chatwood, giving the Cubs plenty of firepower to defend the National League Central and try to reach the postseason for a fourth straight year.

"He's a top-of-the-rotation guy, he's an ace -- and we have one in Jon Lester already, which is pretty awesome," Gimenez said. "Not too many [teams] are fortunate to have one or two aces."

It's definitely a nice belated birthday present for Cubs manager Joe Maddon, who turned 64 on Thursday.

Darvish is coming off of a 10-12 season with the Rangers and Dodgers, which included a victory in the NL Championship Series over the Cubs on Oct. 17. He held Chicago to one run -- a Kyle Schwarber homer -- in Los Angeles' 6-1 win in Game 3.

But the right-hander struggled in the World Series against the Astros, and was able to retire 10 of the 22 batters he faced in two starts. Last season was Darvish's first full campaign after undergoing Tommy John surgery in March 2015, and he had not pitched more than 150 innings since '13.

"Everything that comes out of his hand looks exactly the same," new Cubs pitching coach Jim Hickey told MLB Network Radio on SiriusXM on Sunday. "They're not similar pitchers, but he reminds me a lot of what Greg Maddux used to do. Every single ball that came out of Greg's hand looked the same -- whether it had a little bit of a rise to it or a little bit of a sink or a bigger break. That's what struck me about Darvish ... that everything is well disguised and the stuff obviously is very, very good, as well."

Darvish has only pitched two games in his career at Wrigley Field -- including the playoff game -- and owns a 2.57 ERA in seven career starts against NL Central teams.

A four-time All-Star, Darvish has a career 3.42 ERA in 131 starts, and averages 11.04 strikeouts per nine innings.

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### **Cubs.com**

Heyward works with new coach Davis on swing

By Carrie Muskat

MESA, Ariz. -- New Cubs hitting coach Chili Davis wanted to call outfielder Jason Heyward this offseason to introduce himself. But as Davis was scrolling down the alphabetical list of names, he mistakenly linked pitcher Kyle Hendricks' name to Heyward's number. Davis left a message, saying, "Hey, are you ready to work?"

"[Hendricks] calls me back and said, 'Yeah, dude, I'm ready to work. I have to work on my offense,'" Davis said Thursday, relaying the story with a laugh. "I said, 'This isn't Jason.' [Hendricks] said, 'No, it's Kyle.'"

Davis did connect with Heyward -- and Hendricks probably had a good laugh about the message -- and it probably won't be the last time the coach mixes up the players. He was the Athletics' hitting coach from 2012-14 and had that job with the Red Sox from 2015-17.

What's key is that Davis gets his message across loud and clear to the Cubs players.

Heyward and Davis have been working out at the Cubs complex in Mesa since before Thanksgiving.

"It's been a very easy transition because he played for a long time," Heyward said of Davis, 58, who played 19 seasons in the big leagues. "He switch-hit, he knows how to talk feel and things like that. Sometimes you may not need to talk about a mechanic thing, sometimes you just need to talk about feel or whatever, and it gets you in the right mindset and things fall into place that way.

"At the end of the day during a season, 162 games, that's what you need more than anything," Heyward said. "You can work mechanics, you can work drills all you want, but the mindset going into that drill is important and the mindset going into each game and at-bat is important."

Heyward, 28, has been working out at the complex before camp officially opens, and he's prepared. He has a backpack outfitted with speakers that connect to his phone so he can play his tunes while hitting or doing sprints. The outfielder and Davis initially met once a week, and then twice a week.

Albert Almora Jr. and Victor Caratini both moved to the Phoenix area this offseason, so Heyward has had others to train with as well as his younger brother Jacob, 22, who was the Giants' 18th-round pick in the 2016 Draft.

Last season, the elder Heyward batted .259, and knew what he wanted to work on in the offseason. He also wanted to get healthy. He was limited to 126 games because of separate injuries to his hands.

"Those aren't the numbers I want," Heyward said of his 2017 stats, "but at the end of the day, going on the [disabled list] twice didn't help me. I know myself as a player, and games played is a big thing for me. When I get my repetition, I can do a lot of good things. I did a lot of good things to help us win on both sides of the ball, but there's more in there because there's more games to be played."

Davis had never talked to Heyward before they finally connected on the phone.

"I came here with no expectations," Davis said. "People have called me and said, 'Hey, you've got Jason. Here's what you may want to try.' I didn't even know him. I'm not going to go off your experience with him, I'm going to build my experience with him.

"He's either going to trust me or he's not," Davis said. "He's a great young man. I met his dad, I met his brother. I like what I see. One thing I can tell you with that kid is that from the month and a half, two months plus that I've been around him, he wants to get better and he'll work to get better. That's all I can ask."

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**Cubs.com**

Morrow ready for spotlight of new role

By Carrie Muskat

MESA, Ariz. -- A year ago, Brandon Morrow was in the Dodgers' camp after signing a Minor League contract. He'd had right shoulder surgery in August 2015, and lost 25 pounds after a nasty bout with valley fever. He finished last season pitching in the World Series for the Dodgers.

Today, the right-hander has a three-year deal with the Cubs and is their new closer. And Morrow has an easy 15-minute commute from his house to the Cubs' Spring Training complex.

The biggest difference for Morrow? He's healthy. In 2015-16 with the Padres, he was limited to 23 games because of his shoulder and the virus.

"Coming in last year, I knew from the first day I picked up a baseball that things would be different," Morrow said Friday.

With the Dodgers, Morrow posted a 2.06 ERA over 43 2/3 innings in 45 games. The Cubs saw too much of the right-hander in the National League Championship Series when he limited them to one hit over 4 2/3 innings in four games.

Because of his postseason work, the Cubs pushed his spring schedule back.

"I've felt great since I picked up a ball the first time [this year]," he said. "I won't throw my first bullpen until the first day of workouts so I'm three or four weeks behind, but [the Dodgers] went four weeks longer than you normally would."

In 14 postseason games, Morrow threw 176 pitches over 13 2/3 innings. In 2016, Cubs closer Aroldis Chapman threw 273 pitches over 15 2/3 innings in 13 games with the Cubs.

"That was something that stuck out to me," Morrow said of the different pitch counts. "It's like I was all season, I was very efficient and close to the leaders in pitches per inning on the low side. I've come a long way in my career.

"That's one of the things I like now is to be able to get in, get out, be effective in the strike zone, no free passes. I was able to limit that pretty good the last few years and I have to just keep building on that. The fact I was able to be so economical with my pitches bodes well for that future. I shouldn't have any sort of [World Series] hangover."

The Cubs liked what they saw, locking Morrow up on Dec. 12.

"The organization speaks for itself, Chicago sells itself," said Morrow, who has pitched as many regular-season games (two) as playoff games at Wrigley Field in his career.

"A lot of people will tell you there's no better place to play," he said. "There wasn't a lot to sell me on. They liked me, and they were aggressive. It's great when they tell you they like you and want you to come here. It was a good process all the way through."

When he did sign, Morrow was told he would be the closer unless Wade Davis returned. Davis is now with the Rockies.

"I was totally fine with that," Morrow said. "I was really very comfortable coming out of the bullpen last year and doing what I was doing. Obviously, to get all the experience in the pressure innings in the playoffs, which I hadn't been in before, and pitching innings that mattered [helped]."

He'd like to get that playoff feeling again. Morrow said Kenley Jansen used to joke that he was "bored" pitching in the ninth inning in August, saying, "Give me October."

That could be Morrow and the Cubs' motto this year, too.

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### **Cubs.com**

Late addition could help finalize Cubs' roster

By Carrie Muskat

MESA, Ariz. -- The only question regarding the Cubs' Opening Day 25-man roster is whether there would be a late addition before the regular season begins. They appeared to find their answer on Saturday, when sources told MLB.com of a six-year agreement with right-hander Yu Darvish.

Aside from that, there aren't any real roster battles, with the exception of who will back up catcher Willson Contreras. The Cubs are expected to carry eight relievers, and with the addition of Darvish, Mike Montgomery might find himself in the bullpen rather than the rotation.

The focus this year will be more social as new hitting coach Chili Davis and pitching coach Jim Hickey get to know the players.

What will the Cubs' 25-man roster look like on Opening Day? Here's an early projection.

**Catcher (2):** During a panel discussion at the Cubs Convention, some of the players talked about their offseason routine. Contreras scoffed at his teammates for late starts. He began his workouts at 5:30 a.m., and after lunch and a nap, would do a second session. Who will back him up? It will be either veteran Chris Gimenez or Victor Caratini. Manager Joe Maddon and Hickey know Gimenez from their time together on the Rays. If he's not with the Cubs, Caratini would get regular time at Triple-A Iowa.

**First base (1):** Only the Reds' Joey Votto started more games at first base than the Cubs' Anthony Rizzo last year. The only issue with Rizzo, 28, is trying to get him to take a day off. Possible backups include Contreras or Ben Zobrist.

**Second base (2):** Zobrist was a Gold Glove Award finalist last year at second base, but Javier Baez will most likely get the majority of starts there. Baez, who started all of the Cubs' postseason games in 2016 at second, posted a .983 fielding percentage in 56 games in '17. He would've had more starts but was needed to fill in at shortstop when Addison Russell was hurt.

**Third base (1):** This will be Kris Bryant's fourth season, and if the infielder has anything to work on, it would be his defense. He led NL third basemen in errors last season with 18.

**Shortstop (1):** Russell was limited to 110 games last season because of a nagging right foot injury, which most likely affected his offense. He batted .239 with 12 homers, a drop after hitting 21 in 2016. Baez is the backup.

**Utility (2):** Ian Happ surprised the Cubs with 24 home runs last season as well as his ability to move from the infield to the outfield with ease. The left-handed option on the bench will be Tommy La Stella, who batted a career-high .288 last season.

Outfield (3): Five-time Gold Glove Award winner Jason Heyward will patrol right field, and Albert Almora Jr. could be the regular in center if he shows he can handle right-handed pitching. The Cubs will likely rotate Kyle Schwarber and Zobrist in left. Happ can play all three positions. A svelte Schwarber needs to avoid the slow start he had last season, which prompted the Cubs to send him to the Minor Leagues in June.

Starting pitching (5): The rotation is exceptional with Darvish joining Jon Lester, Kyle Hendricks, Jose Quintana and Tyler Chatwood. Chatwood is the other new guy after signing a three-year, \$38 million contract this offseason.

Bullpen (8): Maddon does like to use his bullpen, and the Cubs are expected to carry eight relievers. Right-hander Brandon Morrow is the new closer, the fourth in the past four years. The setup men include right-handers Pedro Strop, Carl Edwards Jr., Steve Cishek and Justin Grimm while the lefties include Montgomery, Justin Wilson and Brian Duensing.

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### **Cubs.com**

Dawson embracing return to Cubs

By Bill Ladson

Hall of Famer Andre Dawson wants to end his baseball career as a member of the Cubs, a possibility that exists now that he's back in the organization as an ambassador.

"The opportunity with the Cubs became available and I'm very excited, ecstatic about this chapter in my life," Dawson said in the Newsmakers podcast. "I can honestly say, hopefully when it's said and done, when I retire altogether, it will be as a Chicago Cub."

Dawson's love for the Cubs, and the city, dates back to 1987, when he was a free agent and was so determined to play in Chicago that he offered the Cubs a blank contract proposal.

Dawson battled through knee pain for much of his career and wanted to play on a natural-grass surface like the one at Wrigley Field after years of playing on the less-than-forgiving artificial turf at Olympic Stadium in Montreal.

Dawson's change of venue paid off in his first year with the Cubs when he was named National League Most Valuable Player Award winner and led the league in home runs, RBIs and total bases.

"I was at the halfway point of my career," Dawson said. "I had 10 years in. I couldn't think of a better place. Wrigley Field -- natural playing surface, grass. They have Harry Caray, a national following. I just felt I would fit in with what they were trying to do.

"They were three years removed from postseason play. The fact they were in the National League, I made the determination as a free agent that Chicago would be my first choice."

The Cubs' national following raised Dawson's profile and likely helped him gain Hall of Fame induction in 2010. Dawson's primary ambassador responsibilities likely will be in public and sponsor relations. Given his Hall of Fame credentials, however, he undoubtedly will be a valuable resource for players.



Since joining the Cubs, Dawson has kept his eye on right fielder Jason Heyward, who has struggled at the plate, hitting just .243 since arriving in Chicago in 2016. Dawson noticed that Heyward's approach has changed since he was hit in the face by a pitch from then-Mets left-hander Jonathon Niese in 2013.

"After he was beamed, [Heyward] appeared to be a little bit different in his approach at the plate. I wouldn't say gun shy," Dawson said. "I think what he has to do is just stay fundamentally sound with his approach. He's got to know when and how to make the adjustment as a hitter and know what the pitchers are doing to him. He has the ability. He can't go in and try to consider covering all parts of the plate. He has to understand and realize what his strengths are and kind of make the pitcher adjust to him."

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### **Cubs.com**

Gimenez thrilled to reunite with Darvish

By Anthony Castrovince

Catcher Chris Gimenez, who just a few weeks ago signed with the Cubs, got a call from his agent Saturday congratulating him on Chicago also adding his former Texas batterymate Yu Darvish.

"You two got a combined \$127.3 million," Steve Comte said to Gimenez. "It just so happens that Darvish got \$126 million of it."

When Gimenez agreed to his Minor League deal (his actual salary will be \$1.275 million, assuming the Cubs put him on the Opening Day roster, as suspected) with the Cubs last month, it was not difficult to connect the dots. The Cubs were in the midst of recruiting Darvish at the time, and it is well known in the industry that Gimenez was Darvish's preferred catcher when the two were with the Rangers. Though the Cubs made it clear to Gimenez that they had interest in him regardless of whether they nailed down a Darvish deal and Gimenez implored Darvish to go wherever he felt most comfortable, the pitcher-catcher connection is the icing on top of Darvish's reported six-year commitment to the Cubs.

"I told him if he comes here, we're going to win a World Series, hopefully," Gimenez said. "I said, 'I'll throw in half my salary. But if we win, you have to give it back double.'"

Gimenez was not yet sure if Darvish was going to hold him to that offer, but he can't wait to work with him again.

Darvish will be a fascinating figure with the Cubs, because, on the one hand, the Dodgers' analytical approach that led to changes in his pitch patterns produced some fantastic pre-World Series results. On the other hand, Darvish struggled in two World Series starts against the Astros.

"I heard [the Dodgers] took his breaking ball away from him [Darvish threw just three curveballs in the World Series after throwing the pitch 6 percent of time during the regular season]," Gimenez said. "I can understand, it's not like his slider, but it does effectively set up other pitches. I watched him pitch in the World Series, and it wasn't necessarily him. I know it was him throwing it, and he's the one with the final say in what to throw. It's nobody's fault but his own. But I just think the game plan ... he knows the Astros as well as anybody. So [the result] must be eating him alive."

Sports Illustrated's Tom Verducci had a report quoting an anonymous Astros player that Darvish was tipping his pitches in the World Series.

"You could probably count on one hand how many pitchers in baseball that don't tip their pitches," Gimenez said. "Some are so subtle that guys can't tell, others do it more than others. If they had something on him, they definitely made it work. But guys like that, with pure stuff, you can yell what's coming and they still can't hit it if you're executing."

In terms of pure stuff, Gimenez said the only guy he's caught who is comparable to Darvish is two-time Cy Young winner Corey Kluber.

"He's an ace, and we have one in Jon Lester already, which is pretty awesome," Gimenez said. "Not too many people are fortunate to have one or two aces."

And Gimenez feels pretty fortunate to catch Darvish again.

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### **ESPNChicago.com**

Saving their best pitching move for last, Cubs finally sign Yu Darvish

By Jesse Rogers

CHICAGO -- A depressed free-agent market turned into a boon for the Chicago Cubs after they (finally) signed righty Yu Darvish to a six-year, \$126 million deal Saturday, pending a physical.

It's a move that wasn't necessarily on the Cubs' radar in early November. But with contract offers to free agents around the league decidedly lower than anyone could have predicted, Darvish became possible for a team that had many holes to fill on its pitching staff.

The Cubs were supposed to be about quantity over quality in their shopping this winter, and they followed suit by signing six free-agent pitchers before landing Darvish. The seven free-agent pitchers signed by the Cubs is the second-most by any team to the 2001 Texas Rangers, according to ESPN Stats & Information. But none of those other six contracts were for more than three years, with the largest package going to Tyler Chatwood at just \$38 million. That's nothing compared to the \$126 million they just spent on Darvish, though it's less money than comparable pitchers have gotten in the past. At an outlay of \$21 million per year for Darvish, the Cubs aren't hamstrung going forward.

Darvish can obviously make a big difference in a rotation which includes Jon Lester, Kyle Hendricks, Jose Quintana and Chatwood. Mike Montgomery can return to the role of swingman as opposed to No. 5 starter as the Cubs added rotation depth and an elite arm, all in one move.

Darvish's issues in the postseason aren't to be forgotten, but the Cubs have plenty of time to figure out if tipping his pitches in the World Series was at issue or if he mentally broke down. Either way, they get six months of his nasty slider before they have to worry about October.

"He throws strikes with all his pitches," an NL scout relayed. "He has a good feel to pitch for a power guy with the ability to change speeds."

While overhauling their pitching staff, the Cubs didn't make one significant or even small change to their position-player base, save not re-signing outfielder Jon Jay. They retained all the depth that has made them special over the last few years, while allowing some hitters to mature after a "hangover" season for the entire team. This was the smart move, because a team that once again wants to play more than 162 games will need every part of its young core. The Cubs retain a chance to be special on offense while accumulating enough arms to compete for the pennant again.

And don't forget about the July 31 trade deadline. Over the past two seasons the Cubs have made significant predeadline deals to improve their staff, so if new closer Brandon Morrow doesn't work out or the injury bug hits their starting staff, they still have some recourse before October.

The Cubs proved, even in what was supposed to be a retooling offseason, that they could accomplish something big. They were good before Darvish signed on. His addition is a reminder of who the big boys in the Central Division are and gives the Cubs a leg up on returning to the postseason for a fourth consecutive year.

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### **NBC Sports Chicago**

Cubs choosing Yu Darvish over Jake Arrieta has them sitting shotgun as World Series favorites

By David Kaplan

Saturday's news that the Cubs were signing Yu Darvish now makes the Cubs the team to beat in the National League.

Darvish is the centerpiece of a loaded rotation that is among the two or three best in all of baseball, and his addition sent a message to the Milwaukee Brewers and St. Louis Cardinals that despite their active offseasons the Cubs are still clearly the team to beat in the NL Central.

With a lineup of talented young hitters who still haven't reached their peak and a loaded pitching staff full of depth the Cubs should surpass the 92.5-win projection that Las Vegas recently posted, and they should have a great shot to return to the Fall Classic this October.

The baseball free agent market has been in a holding pattern for the past three months and the Cubs, like the other 29 MLB teams, have been waiting for players to accept much lower offers than most were expecting when they hit the open market at the end of the 2017 season.

The Cubs entered the offseason with two major needs to address: their much-maligned bullpen that struggled in the second half of last season, and their starting rotation that had two openings needing to be filled.

Both Jake Arrieta and John Lackey had expiring contracts, and while Lackey was not expected to continue his career on the mound, Arrieta was looking for the first big deal of his career. A deal that his agent, Scott Boras, openly said they expected to be seven years in length at an average salary of \$30 million or more.

"I don't think a six- or seven-year deal is out of the question," Arrieta said. "I feel very confident I can pitch until I'm 40. I do everything possible to make sure I'm healthy and durable. It could be six or seven more years. Or it could be twelve."

But instead, the Cubs pursued Darvish and made it clear he was their top choice instead of pursuing Arrieta, who they knew well and had reached the pinnacle of baseball with when the Cubs, in part rode his arm to a World Series title in 2016.

So do the Cubs have a better rotation today with Darvish in the fold than they did in 2017 when they had Arrieta and John Lackey? The answer is unequivocally yes, because Darvish is an upgrade from Arrieta as is Tyler Chatwood from Lackey.

Yes, Arrieta has proven that he can succeed on baseball's biggest stage, going 2-0 in the World Series and dominating the Cleveland Indians twice in Cleveland when the Cubs were trailing in the series. Darvish has had some solid postseason success but his awful performance in the 2017 World Series when he was rocked by the Houston Astros twice has left a bad taste in some fans' mouths.

However, Theo Epstein, Jed Hoyer and the rest of the Cubs front office did a deep analytical assessment of Darvish and came away convinced that he would be worth a major financial investment. Their research told them that Darvish possessed the swing-and-miss stuff that plays in pressure-packed moments with a playoff berth on the line. And they are convinced that they can fix his struggles with tipping his pitches that reportedly led to his World Series struggles against the Astros.

Darvish was also very impressed with the Cubs pitching infrastructure that has helped to get the best out of many of their pitchers. Current Cubs starter Kyle Hendricks, who shares an agent with Darvish, has spoken many times about how detailed the Cubs pitching scouting reports and game plans are and how much they have helped him become a successful big league starter.

Arrieta turned his career around when he arrived in Chicago after struggling mightily with the Baltimore Orioles, and he felt the Cubs approach to pitching was a huge part in resurrecting his career after he considered walking away from the sport before he was traded.

But now, Arrieta will have to pitch somewhere else as the Cubs have moved on. They have landed a pitcher in Darvish that Epstein has long wanted to acquire. In fact, the Cubs were the runner-up to the Texas Rangers when Darvish left Japan and came to the US in 2012. Darvish figures to sit atop the Cubs rotation with Jon Lester, Kyle Hendricks, Jose Quintana and Tyler Chatwood manning spots two through five and giving the Cubs perhaps baseball's deepest and most talented starting rotation.

Several seasons ago, as the Cubs were going through the pain of the building process and losing 289 games in three seasons, Tom Ricketts promised Cubs fans that when the time was right to spend big money, the checkbook would be there to support Epstein, Hoyer and their plan.

He has spent and spent big when his front office has asked him to and today he delivered again. And that decision just might have the World Series trophy making a return trip to the Friendly Confines.

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### **NBC Sports Chicago**

Does the addition of Yu Darvish give the Cubs the best rotation in baseball?

By Tony Andracki

The Cubs got their man, breaking the ice-cold thaw of the baseball offseason to bring Yu Darvish into Chicago for the next six seasons.

At the time of the signing, the Cubs held serve as the dealers of the top two starting pitching contracts this winter, committing \$164 million to Darvish and Tyler Chatwood. Those two arms replace Jake Arrieta and John Lackey in the rotation.

That gives the Cubs a rotation (in some order) of:

Jon Lester

Yu Darvish

Kyle Hendricks

Jose Quintana

Tyler Chatwood

Assuming none of those guys are injured, that's the best Opening Day rotation the Cubs have featured in Theo Epstein's tenure in Chicago.

It also may well be the best rotation in baseball entering the 2018 campaign.

Each of the top four starters could be aces on plenty of teams (especially with so many rebuilding squads projected for 2018) while Chatwood could potentially be the best No. 5 starter in the league.

Lester had a disappointing 2017 season as he dealt with a muscle issue in his shoulder and failed to top 200 innings for the first time since 2011. He is 34 already, but he is coming off a fantastic three-year stretch (2014-16) where he went 46-28 with a 2.74 ERA, 1.08 WHIP and roughly a strikeout an inning while finishing in the Top 5 in Cy Young voting twice.

Darvish is one of the top strikeout pitchers in the game while Hendricks and Quintana may be the two most underrated arms in baseball.

If Lester can return to ace form and the Cubs continue their run of remarkable pitching health (admittedly, two big "ifs"), this will be a tough rotation to outperform.

The clear challenger here is the Houston Astros after trading for Gerrit Cole last month:

Justin Verlander

Dallas Keuchel

Gerrit Cole

Charlie Morton

Lance McCullers

Those guys are all studs, though there are some question marks associated with the group.

Morton has revitalized his career and while all signs point to the breakout as legit, there's no guarantee at age 34. Verlander is 35, Keuchel and McCullers have had some health issues and Cole has seen declining numbers of late.

But this is also the same staff that won the World Series last year and then went out and added a guy that went 19-8 with a 2.60 ERA and 202 strikeouts in 2015.

The Los Angeles Dodgers could also be contenders for the crown of MLB's top rotation, especially considering they have the game's best pitcher (Clayton Kershaw) when he's able to stay healthy.

The Dodgers are loaded with a bunch of very good starters but with all the injury question marks, it's hard to pen them higher than third in baseball.

The Nationals had maybe the best regular-season rotation in 2017 and figure to have the most dominant 1-2 punch in baseball with Max Scherzer and Stephen Strasburg. The depth is a bit shaky after that, however.

The Red Sox have potential to be near the top of baseball's rotation power rankings, but they need big rebounds from David Price and Rick Porcello.

The Indians are right there, too, if Danny Salazar stays in Cleveland and finally puts it all together.

The Yankees have a nice Top 3 of Masahiro Tanaka, Luis Severino and Sonny Gray but beyond that, there isn't a starter that strikes fear in an opponent.

If the Mets' young power arms are all healthy at once, watch out. But I'll believe that when I see it.

With pitchers and catchers reporting in just a few days, the Cubs look like the frontrunner in the starting rotation power rankings.

And with that young core of hitters, they're setting their sights on a second World Series in three seasons.

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### **Chicago Tribune**

9 questions for the Cubs heading into spring training

By Mark Gonzales

Despite three consecutive trips to the National League Championship Series, issues hover over the Cubs. Here's a look at nine questions they face entering spring training:

1. Is the rotation deep enough?

The Cubs have yet to acquire a pitcher close to the caliber of free agent Jake Arrieta. Yu Darvish and Alex Cobb remain available, and they've talked with teams such as the Padres regarding young starting pitchers.

If the season were to open today, versatile left-hander Mike Montgomery, Eddie Butler and Alec Mills would be the major candidates for the fifth spot.

2. Will a productive leadoff hitter emerge?

Ben Zobrist? Kyle Schwarber? Kris Bryant? Anthony Rizzo? The Cubs don't seem worried, as they scored 822 runs last season despite Schwarber's struggles, eventually dropping him from that spot. Assuming they don't acquire a leadoff specialist, they'll likely rely on a combination of players seeking to provide the production Dexter Fowler supplied in 2016.

3. Are there enough closer options?

Free-agent signees Brandon Morrow and Steve Cishek had impressive 2017 numbers, but they don't possess the closer credentials of since-departed Wade Davis. Carl Edwards Jr. must show better command of the strike zone than he displayed in the postseason.

#### 4. Can the players adjust to the new coaches?

The switch from John Mallee to Chili Davis at hitting coach means less emphasis on launch angles and more importance placed on situational hitting. The energetic personality and teachings of new third-base and infield coach Brian Butterfield requires some time. Butterfield may be the best in the majors at his duties.

#### 5. Who's in left field?

The Cubs had minus-9 defensive runs saved at that position last year. Without a strikeout-heavy rotation, defense takes on a greater role. Schwarber has slimmed down to help his agility. Ian Happ has been prone to taking curious routes to the ball. Ben Zobrist isn't fast, but he's dependable.

#### 6. Can the Cubs be gentle with Ben?

Zobrist turns 37 on May 26, and he played in only 128 games in 2017 because of wrist and back injuries. Manager Joe Maddon faces the delicate balance of getting Zobrist ready without taxing him. Happ is lined up to receive more playing time to preserve Zobrist's health.

#### 7. Is Maddon's magic still effective?

Visits by mimes, little bears, a sports car, a 1970s van and a disc jockey have been staples of manager Joe Maddon's entertainment during his first three spring trainings. There's more of a sense of urgency this year after the Dodgers humbled the Cubs in the NLCS.

#### 8. Are the Cubs buying more time for Baez?

It appears Javier Baez will serve in the same super-utility role despite producing career highs of 23 home runs and 75 RBIs and playing 26 consecutive errorless games at shortstop in place of the injured Addison Russell.

#### 9. Can Montgomery remain happy?

He has expressed a desire to start amid concerns that switching between the rotation and bullpen might take a toll on his left arm. His concerns are valid, but the Cubs love his versatility. Trading Montgomery as part of a deal for a young starter could solve this issue.

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### **Chicago Tribune**

Tales from spring training never really go away

By Paul Sullivan

Spring training stories always seem to take on a life of their own. They tend to get embellished over the years, but the retellings never get old.

I learned that lesson in high school reading columnist Mike Royko, who spread the tale of Jose Cardenal and the chirping cricket that resulted in one of the strangest injuries imaginable.

Cardenal, a bushy-haired Cubs outfielder in the 1970s, had a difficult time sleeping one night at Cubs camp in Scottsdale because a cricket in his hotel room had kept him awake.

The next day, Cardenal begged out of the lineup with a stuck eyelid.

“That’s right,” Royko wrote. “Other teams have ordinary injuries — sprained ankles, charley horses, broken contracts — but the Cubs have the only sticking eyelid in baseball. It reassures me that the good old days of peace, quiet and helplessness have returned to Wrigley Field at last.”

Cardenal confirmed to me recently that the cricket story was true.

“The cricket was really bothering me,” he said. “We used to stay at a Ramada motel in those years, and they’d open the windows for the maid to clean the room. One day a couple crickets got in the room, and all night long they were chirping. One started in one corner, then another. They were going back and forth.

“The next day I told the manager, (Jim) Marshall, there was no way I could play. He says, ‘Why?’ I told him the crickets kept me awake. Then he told the press, and people thought it was funny.”

Royko thought it was so funny, he mentioned it again in columns over the years. Cardenal soon became a Cubs legend and a favorite of Cubs fans from Michelle Obama to Eddie Vedder. Forty-three years later, the cricket story has stuck to Cardenal like, well, a sticky eyelid.

“Royko loved to write about that,” Cardenal said. “I have that article framed at my home.”

The beauty of spring training is the stories that develop when you least suspect it, reminding everyone back home that real baseball is just around the corner.

There’s nothing inherently interesting in watching players playing catch or taking batting practice, but when someone smashes a car windshield with a home run, as Kyle Schwarber did at Sloan Park in Mesa in 2016, it’s a moment you won’t forget. And while the exhibition games lack intensity because they’re meaningless, anyone who watched Cubs prospects Jorge Soler, Javier Baez and Kris Bryant hit back-to-back-to-back home runs off the Indians’ Trevor Bauer in a 2015 game in Goodyear came away with a memory that lasts a lifetime.

This will be my 24th spring training covering baseball for the Tribune, and the stories are piling up. It seems like yesterday I was interviewing Michael Jordan about his second year in White Sox camp in 1995 in Sarasota, Fla., when the real players were on strike and no one was paying much attention to baseball.

"I get more privacy, except for everyone asking me about the strike stuff," Jordan said. "It's far more relaxing than last year. It's pretty quiet, and I like it that way. Hopefully, it'll stay that way forever."

The next day, Jordan refused to play in the exhibition games with the “Scab Sox” and bolted camp like a scene out of a movie. As Sox minor-leaguers went out to a practice field, a small private jet flew overhead and dipped its wing as the players craned their necks and waved.



"There goes Jordan!" one player yelled. Jordan was on his way back to the Bulls, ultimately leading them to a second three-peat.

No one dominated spring training like Sammy Sosa, who always made a grand entrance to Fitch Park, walking around the small clubhouse asking teammates and reporters: "Did you miss me?"

One of his greatest spring training moments was in 1999 when he decided to bow to fans at HoHoKam Park after homering twice off the Diamondbacks' Todd Stottlemire. It was a gesture he picked up after a winter trip to Japan.

"He looked like a bullfighter out there," Stottlemire said. "Take it back to Japan. ... To bow after a home run? There's no place for that in this game. I don't ever remember Mickey Mantle bowing after a home run."

The next day Sosa agreed to stop bowing after his teammates feared they would get thrown at for his antics.

"Let's play ball," Sosa said. "Stop complaining about everything."

As baseball returns from its long hibernation, those are words to live by.

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### **Chicago Tribune**

Kyle Schwarber calls Cubs' addition of Yu Darvish 'the cherry on top'

By Mark Gonzales

Kyle Schwarber doesn't dwell too much on what Yu Darvish did last season.

So even though Schwarber was one of the few Cubs to solve the marquee free-agent pitcher in the 2017 National League Championship Series, Schwarber senses Darvish will get the freedom to attain the success he and his Cubs teammates envision.

"The guy has so many weapons. I don't know (what happened) when he went to the Dodgers. They might have changed it up a little bit," Schwarber said Sunday, alluding to a recent observation by catcher Chris Gimenez.

"But this guy has five plus pitches. I'm sure we're going to be open to using them all and let him do what he wants to do. Because his stuff is really good."

Schwarber espoused the same thoughts several of his teammates expressed on social media shortly after Darvish agreed to terms Saturday on a six-year, \$126 million contract that includes an opt-out clause after 2019.

Because the Cubs are in a win-now mode, landing Darvish fuels their determination to try to win their second World Series title in three seasons.

"It's awesome," Schwarber said. "It shows they want us to be the best team possible. To add another starting pitcher like (him), it just shows the amount of confidence in our team."

“We’ve got a good thing rolling and we want to keep this going for as long as we can, and adding a guy like that obviously is going to help.”

Schwarber accounted for the Cubs’ lone run in a 6-1 loss to Darvish and the Dodgers in Game 3 of the NLCS at Wrigley Field, a first-pitch cut fastball that he smacked into the left-center bleachers.

Darvish showed plenty of polish in that start, scattering six hits while striking out seven and walking only one in 6 1/3 innings.

“We all know who he is,” said Schwarber, who grounded to first in his next two plate appearances against Darvish. “He’s been a great pitcher in this game for a while. You’ve got to be able to lock in because he has great stuff. You’ve just got to be able to get that pitch over the plate and try not to swing at the strictly ball stuff. And he’s really good at making his pitches look like strikes, and all of a sudden they’re balls.”

Schwarber described the addition of Darvish to a deep rotation as the “cherry on top.” He replaces free agent Jake Arrieta, who played a large role in the Cubs’ 2016 World Series title and three consecutive trips to the NLCS.

“We’re going to miss Jake, and that guy is going to be just fine,” Schwarber said. “He’s going to go out and do his thing. Wherever he lands ... we wish him the best and we’re going to miss him. He’s a great teammate and obviously a great competitor on the mound.

“Being able to have Darvish fill those shoes there, it’s definitely awesome.”

Schwarber said he learned of Darvish’s agreement via Twitter. He called this a “weird” offseason because of the lack of free-agent signings.

He also was curious to get a different, but brief, view of Darvish by catching him.

“I think those days might be done,” said Schwarber, who is 22 months removed from reconstructive knee surgery and played almost exclusively in left field last season, catching only seven innings over four games. “I might wander my way back there and see what it looks like from a catcher’s point of view.”

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### **Chicago Tribune**

Scout on Yu Darvish: Cubs must get him to pitch aggressively

By Mark Gonzales

On perhaps the last tranquil morning at the Cubs’ spring training complex, a few support staff members moved luggage and unloaded boxes Sunday while fewer than a dozen fans awaited the arrival of Yu Darvish behind a fence.

The Cubs are expected to announce the signing of their marquee free agent once he passes a physical, leaving time for speculation and analysis of how he will fare with a franchise aiming to win the World Series for the second time in three seasons.

The six-year, \$126 million commitment, which includes an opt-out clause after 2019, shows the organization’s faith that Darvish will live up to the potential that has existed since he left Japan after the 2011 season for a bigger stage.

His four American League All-Star selections are a snippet of his greatness, but that's tempered by a 3.86 ERA during his last season entering free agency, his major struggles in the 2017 World Series and observations by an unidentified Astros player that Darvish was tipping his pitches.

One international scout who has observed Darvish, 31, since his days pitching for the Nippon Ham Fighters of the Japan Pacific League (2005-11), believes Darvish has plenty to prove.

"He hasn't done 'it' yet," the scout said. "In Japan, he basically was playing with hitters. With the four to six pitches he throws, it looked like Wiffle ball."

That was reflected in a 93-38 record and 1.99 ERA with the Fighters, who received a \$51.7 million posting fee for the right for Darvish to negotiate and sign a six-year, \$60 million contract with the Rangers.

But his obsession with using his large array of pitches has prevented him from fulfilling the dominance many projected.

"His fastball and slider are quality pitches," the scout said. "If the Cubs can convince him to be aggressive, that's my only concern."

According to the Bill James Handbook 2018, Darvish threw his fastball only 52 percent of the time, followed by his slider (25 percent), cut fastball (15 percent), curve (6 percent) and changeup (2 percent).

Despite missing all of 2015 while recovering from Tommy John elbow surgery, Darvish's fastball averaged 94.2 mph — up 1 mph from 2016.

But his ERA swelled from 3.41 to 3.86, including nine starts for the Dodgers after a trade from the Rangers.

The Cubs earned a 3-1 win over Darvish and the Rangers on July 16, 2016, despite Darvish's nine strikeouts in 4 1/3 innings. They got only two hits off Darvish but were able to run up his pitch count to 90 in that short span thanks to four walks.

That was quite a contrast from Game 3 of the 2017 National League Championship Series, in which Darvish scattered six hits, walked one and struck out seven in an 81-pitch, 6 1/3-inning effort.

The balancing act for Darvish and the Cubs will be for him to sustain his dominance while pitching more economically than he has over his past five seasons (with only two career complete games) and making the adjustment to the NL. His ERA is considerably lower against NL teams (3.13 in 24 starts) than against the American League (3.48 in 107 starts).

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### **Chicago Tribune**

For the Cubs to become serious World Series contenders again, it had to be Yu

By David Haugh

Ask Cubs fans how much longer pitcher Jon Lester has left on his contract and almost nobody will know.

Even fewer will care.

After Lester helped the Cubs win the World Series in 2016, it more than justified the team's six-year, \$155 million deal some critics considered a risky investment when the lefty signed in December 2014.

Similar concerns will be expressed after the Cubs agreed to terms Saturday with pitcher Yu Darvish on a six-year, \$126 million contract. That indeed represents a lot of money for a 31-year-old pitcher who has had Tommy John surgery. But when determining what bold move would make them serious World Series contenders again, the Cubs came to the right conclusion.

It had to be Yu.

Darvish completes a Cubs starting rotation that suddenly becomes as deep and talented as any in the National League. If the Cubs win another title in the next couple of seasons with Darvish's help, nobody will worry about the length of the contract or the average annual salary — only the size of the parade crowd along Michigan Avenue.

This is what urgency looks like in professional sports. This is how you sustain success. A Cubs team coming off its third straight National League Championship Series attacked free-agency like a team looking for legitimacy. Chairman Tom Ricketts didn't approach this like a greedy owner afraid of whether he could afford to sign Darvish but rather like a baseball guy concerned about whether he could afford not to and still keep pace with the Dodgers and Nationals. And if you think this takes the Cubs out of the Bryce Harper Sweepstakes next winter, you haven't paid attention to way Ricketts has reached into the family's deep pockets when President Theo Epstein wants a player.

So Ricketts gave the green light and Epstein and general manager Jed Hoyer got their man after traveling to Dallas in December for a three-hour meeting with Darvish that obviously made an impression. They made their pitch to the Japanese pitcher, who chose not to use an interpreter. They waited out a long winter as baseball's hot stove went on the fritz, and they stuck to an offer they can defend in the name of winning. They removed sentiment from the equation by choosing Darvish over Jake Arrieta, a key figure in the transformation of the Cubs. Arrieta forever will occupy a place in the hearts of Cubs fans, but Epstein and Hoyer listened to their heads, which told them Darvish projected as a more elite pitcher over the next five years. Arrieta's decline in velocity and command has been slight but not insignificant enough for the Cubs to ignore. Agent Scott Boras also might not have done Arrieta any favors setting such lofty parameters for negotiations that never really got anywhere.

The Cubs can't discuss Darvish until he passes a physical, but you wonder how their shrewd move of signing his personal catcher with the Rangers affected the pitcher's thinking. Every little bit helps in a move this big. Journeyman catcher Chris Gimenez, a smart, colorful 35-year-old complement to any bench, signed a minor-league deal with the Cubs last month. Gimenez caught Darvish's first major-league shutout in 2014 and his first start after Tommy John surgery in 2016, milestone moments when they developed a trust and rapport.

The Cubs have faith that Darvish's World Series flop was the exception, not the rule. As an Astros player told Sports Illustrated, Darvish — who always pitches out of the stretch — tipped his pitches by the way he moved the ball into his glove from the set position. Tipping pitches is correctable, but the results were permanent: Darvish gave up nine runs in 3 1/3 innings, which included a Game 7 performance he and Dodgers fans would love to forget.

Yet reports say the Dodgers still were one of the teams negotiating with Darvish until the Cubs struck a deal. Every interested team chose to focus on what Darvish did before the Astros cracked his code: He allowed only two runs in 11 1/3 innings in two playoff starts before the World Series.

The Dodgers stayed engaged because they knew from experience that Darvish is a pro with as much polish as panache. After his World Series disaster, Darvish apologized to Dodgers fans. He demonstrated similar maturity dealing with the racially insensitive gesture made by Astros player Yuli Gurriel earlier in the series. In the context of the Cubs, they are getting a player who won't be overwhelmed by the scrutiny that accompanies playing in a major market at Wrigley Field for a team in contention from Day 1.

The Cubs can call themselves a contender again because Darvish completes an upgrade to the overall rotation. They replaced Arrieta and John Lackey with Darvish and right-hander Tyler Chatwood. Not only do the additions make the starting pitching better but they allow versatile lefty Mike Montgomery to remain in the utility role he grudgingly accepts.

At this stage of Darvish's career, he seldom will pitch past the seventh inning, but the Cubs rarely will require it given the depth of their bolstered bullpen. They still might miss closer Wade Davis but veterans Brandon Morrow and Steve Cishek, along with holdover Carl Edwards Jr., offer enough options for pressure situations.

Now more high-pressure, high-profile situations are to come after the Cubs consummated this ideal deal — one with potential short-term rewards that outweigh concerns over the long-term risks.

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### **Chicago Tribune**

Patience pays off in Cubs' pursuit of Yu Darvish

By Paul Sullivan

It wasn't the spring surprise Cubs President Theo Epstein pulled off two years ago with the Dexter Fowler signing.

If only Yu Darvish had waited a few more days, he could've waltzed into spring training unannounced and provided the type of Hollywood story the Cubs seem to crave.

The only real surprise is that Darvish didn't have to take a big discount after waiting until early February to get a deal. Freeze or no freeze, the Cubs got their man, and Darvish got \$126 million over six years, with a chance to make more.

So a slow-speed pursuit that began in mid-December ended with a splash four days before pitchers and catchers report to Mesa, Ariz. Why it took so long to get something done is irrelevant at this point. In the end, the Cubs fulfilled their primary offseason objective — find an ace — and nothing else matters.

Darvish, Jon Lester, Kyle Hendricks, Jose Quintana and Tyler Chatwood form a lock-tight rotation that compares with any in the National League. It should be enough to assure the Cubs a third straight Central Division title, and with a revamped bullpen and most of the same lineup, a second championship in three seasons seems well within reach.

It all depends on whether Darvish does his thing, if new closer Brandon Morrow and set-up man Steve Cishek can safeguard the back end of games, and if Chatwood is as underrated as the Cubs believe.

If all four click, this offseason may be deemed the best of Epstein's tenure in Chicago. If not, well, the window is still open for a few more years. Until Saturday, Epstein's grade was probably a B-minus, namely because the Cubs hadn't addressed their biggest need.

Naturally, even if Yu is Yu and the Cubs do get back to the World Series, reminders of Darvish's woeful outings against the Astros in last year's Series are certain to crop up. But that's something to fret about down the road, not on a day when you're shoveling out a parking space and using old kitchen chairs as placeholders.

With spring training starting Tuesday, the Cubs are calling dibs on the NL pennant.

Kudos to Epstein for making the deal happen, even if he made anxious Cubs fans suffer a bit through the long, cold winter, wondering if they'd get the ace they felt they were entitled to. The Brewers' aggressive moves in January, signing Lorenzo Cain and acquiring Christian Yelich, made the Cubs appear sloth-like, even though they'd signed Morrow, Chatwood and Cishek early and re-signed Brian Duensing.

The Cubs' 2018 payroll is now estimated at \$184 million, which would keep the Cubs under the luxury tax, and they won't lose a draft pick since Darvish was ineligible for a qualifying offer after being traded from the Rangers during the season. Best of all, the Cubs were able to hang onto their young core — Javier Baez, Addison Russell, Kyle Schwarber and Albert Almora Jr. — instead of dealing one or more for a starter, a possibility Epstein hinted at during his post-mortem in October.

Darvish and Jake Arrieta ranked 1-2 on the free-agent market. Epstein had to get one or the other. After a couple of months of radio silence, no one seemed to care anymore whether it was Darvish or Arrieta, as long as it was someone with a track record of excellence.

Mission accomplished.

The signing should begin a rush of free-agent deals, and perhaps end speculation by agents that collusion was to blame for the freeze-out.

Aside from his importance to the Cubs' postseason hopes, Darvish's presence also gives them a marketing boost at home and abroad. Despite missing out on Shohei Ohtani, the Cubs figure to be a big deal in Japan again, though they hope it's not a rerun of the last time they signed a big-name Japanese star to a long-term deal.

When he came to the Cubs after the 2007 season, outfielder Kosuke Fukudome was hyped as the left-handed bat they were lacking in their Division Series sweep at the hands of the Diamondbacks.

A large Japanese media contingent began to follow the Cubs, and manager Lou Piniella accommodated the group in spring training by stepping on a toy goat for a Japanese TV station, signaling Fukudome's arrival would break the Billy Goat curse.

When Fukudome hit a tying, three-run home run in the ninth inning against the Brewers in the season opener at Wrigley Field, it looked like an instant legend was in the making. Fans in the bleachers jumped while waving professionally made signs with Japanese lettering.

The signs were meant to read "It's Gonna Happen," but something got lost in the translation. "It's An Accident" was the literal translation, and as it turned out, Fukudome's opening day heroics were a mere blip in an otherwise disappointing stay in Chicago.

But that was a different time, and a different player. Darvish already has proven himself at the major-league level, and since the Cubs already made it happen in 2016, he won't arrive as the missing link, as Fukudome was deemed to be back in '08.

A decade later, the only souvenir I have left from the Fukudome era is "Say It In Japanese," a pocket translation guide. It didn't have the phrase I was looking for, but a friend in Tokyo sent me a translation that assuredly will be on novelty T-shirts by opening day:

"Hidoku nai youni shiro."

In other words, try not to suck.

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### **Chicago Tribune**

Cubs agree to terms with pitcher Yu Darvish on six-year, \$126 million deal

By Mark Gonzales

The long wait was well worth the pursuit for the Cubs, who agreed to terms Saturday with marquee free-agent pitcher Yu Darvish.

A cold, uncertain winter thawed four days before the team's first workout in Mesa, Ariz., as the Cubs landed a four-time All-Star right-hander with a swing-and-miss repertoire without placing undue stress on their payroll.

Darvish, 31, will be guaranteed \$126 million over the next six seasons with the chance to earn an additional \$24 million in incentives. But his annual average salary of \$21 million is well below what many forecasters projected.

The Cubs have loaded up on pitchers in free agency, with Darvish's signing following those of Tyler Chatwood, Brandon Morrow, Drew Smyly and Steve Cishek in December.

The Cubs made an unsuccessful attempt to land Shohei Ohtani, a 23-year-old pitcher/outfielder phenom from Japan. But they took a deliberate approach with Darvish, who was projected by some to receive as much as \$30 million annually.

The Cubs' concession to Darvish, who missed all of 2015 after Tommy John surgery, was a lengthy contract. The signing is expected to be announced once Darvish passes a physical.

The Twins were among the teams interested in Darvish, who struck out 209 in 186 2/3 innings while going 10-12 with a 3.86 ERA in 31 starts with the Rangers and Dodgers last season. Darvish is 56-42 in five MLB seasons with 1,021 strikeouts in 832 1/3 innings over five major league seasons after pitching in Japan, he was 93-38 with a 1.99 ERA in seven seasons for the Nippon Ham Fighters.

The addition of Darvish allows the Cubs to maintain a strong rotation in the wake of the almost certain departures of free agents Jake Arrieta and John Lackey. The rotation now comprises Darvish, Jon Lester, Kyle Hendricks, Jose Quintana — who began the 2017 season as the White Sox's ace — and Chatwood.

A December meeting between the Cubs and Darvish in Texas was confirmed by Darvish on his increasingly popular Twitter account, and it didn't hurt that the Cubs signed catcher Chris Gimenez to a minor-league contract last month.

Gimenez caught 12 of Darvish's 26 starts with the Rangers in 2014 and played for Cubs manager Joe Maddon and pitching coach Jim Hickey with the Rays in 2012-13.

The Cubs were interested in Darvish before the July 31 trade deadline but had multiple needs. They acquired left-hander Jose Quintana, left-handed reliever Justin Wilson and backup catcher Alex Avila in separate deals during the final 2 1/2 weeks of July.

Darvish, meanwhile was traded minutes before the deadline for three prospects from the talent-rich Dodgers.

The Cubs' high opinion of Darvish was reinforced in Game 3 of the National League Championship Series, when he allowed one run, six hits and a walk with seven strikeouts against the Cubs in 6 1/3 innings.

A source said Darvish's deal includes an opt-out clause, but there will be plenty of incentive for him to help the Cubs return to the World Series. Darvish, who has pitched in three postseasons (2012, 2016-17), allowed five runs in 1 2/3 innings to the Astros in Game 7 of the 2017 World Series.

An unidentified Astros player told Tom Verducci of Sports Illustrated that Darvish was tipping his pitches in Game 3 (when he allowed four runs on six hits in 1 2/3 innings) and Game 7.

But Darvish now has a chance to return to the World Series with a Cubs franchise that has made three consecutive trips to the NLCS and won the 2016 championship.

This is the third time in four offseasons the Cubs have made a major strike in free agency. They signed Lester to a six-year, \$155 million contract before the 2015 season and outfielder Jason Heyward for eight years and \$184 million before 2016.

But the likely departures of Arrieta, John Lackey and Jon Jay, along with Quintana's team-friendly contact, gave the Cubs enough room to sign Darvish and not force them to shave payroll to stay under the luxury tax threshold.

In addition, the Cubs fortified their pitching staff without trading a young position player such as Kyle Schwarber, Ian Happ or Albert Almora Jr.

The Cubs' base salary commitment to 19 players is about \$158 million.

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### **Chicago Sun-Times**

The Yu Darvish Effect: How he fits into Cubs rotation — and shapes the NL debate  
By Steve Greenberg and Gordon Wittenmyer

Have Cubs fans come down from that World Series party yet? No, not the 2016 one. The 2018 one. Is it too soon to create a holiday named for Yu Darvish?

The addition of the dazzling right-hander to a team still squarely in its championship window sure kicked things up a notch. With spring training starting this week, Cubs beat writer Gordon Wittenmyer and columnist Steve Greenberg weighed in on five topics of much conversation.



The Cubs haven't looked this good on paper entering spring training since ...

GREENBERG: Buckle in, lean back and allow me to transport you all the way back to 2016. You know, to when newcomer Jason Heyward had fans ready to chant like they did for Sammy Sosa and bow like they did for Andre Dawson. When John Lackey, Mr. Game 7, was going to put a rotation led by Jake Arrieta — the best pitcher in baseball? — over the top. When Kyle Schwarber was going to hit 30 home runs of the 450-plus-foot variety alone. And don't get me started on those superstar corner infielders.

WITTENMYER: No doubt, that 2016 team went into the season as favorites, but even that team had more questions in the rotation going into the spring (Kyle Hendricks coming off an up-and-down year; Jason Hammel coming off a poor second half and postseason), not to mention a closer management didn't trust. The 2008 team is comparable, but even after adding Kosuke Fukudome to address a left-side hitting deficit, that team wasn't as tested and complete as this one. The Cubs haven't looked as good as this in February since 2004, after adding Greg Maddux to a team that finished five outs short of a World Series. We'll just leave October out of that discussion for now.

Speaking of October, what's the real National League pecking order?

WITTENMYER: Look, let's not get too giggly until at least March. The only thing we know for sure about the top NL teams right now is that nobody has an easier road than the Nationals, who not only are loaded with the likes of Max Scherzer and Bryce Harper but who also reside in the only division in baseball with four teams about as capable of winning the World Series as you. Say hello to the best record in baseball. That doesn't mean the Cubs can't beat them (see 2017), but the Cubs are in the next tier.

GREENBERG: I'm pretty sure this "you" you speak of could win a Nats-less East, so, OK, let's call the Nats the favorites. We're still heading for Cubs-Dodgers Part 3 — the rubber match — in the NLCS. It's too good not to be true. The Dodgers wiped the schoolyard with the Cubs last October. How to stand up to a 100-win bully? By stealing its Darvish and its Brandon Morrow, that's how. Now it's a fair fight. The only question is who gets to take out the Nats (again) in the NLDS ... unless either the Nats or Dodgers steal Arrieta, in which case the Cubs might want to find a good hiding place.

What if the Brewers or Cardinals sign Arrieta?

WITTENMYER: Then heads up. If the Pirates in 2015 or the Indians in 2016 — or the Dodgers in their only NLCS loss last year — thought beating Arrieta in a big game was tough, imagine the angry, bearded kale addict facing the Cubs when they need to beat him with a division on the line. After a winter of slow burn, one of the most competitive pitchers in the game in recent years will have the ultimate chip on his shoulder, making that team a major thorn for the Cubs and threat for the pennant.

GREENBERG: The Snake slithering off to a division rival? I'll sign that petition just for the promise of so much tension and excitement. Unless Arrieta can turn a double play, run down a line shot in the alley and hit .300, it's hard to see him improving the Cardinals' inferior lineup. And aren't the Brewers a Cubs farm team?

Better 2018: Darvish or Arrieta?

GREENBERG: Tough one. If Arrieta reverses his downward trend, we've already seen that he can be as good as anybody. Darvish is no slouch, an All-Star in each of the four seasons when he was good to go in April. Let's go with Darvish. Why? Watch him be better — as he was a year ago — at keeping guys off

the bases. He's always going to be better at punching them out. And the kicker is he threw more innings in 2017.

WITTENMYER: Downward trend? Say what you want, but Arrieta has put together a Cy Young-caliber season against playoff qualifiers alone the last three years: 2.75 ERA, 1.10 WHIP, 210 strikeouts, 13-11 record, 199⅓ innings in 32 starts against baseball's top teams. Darvish, who missed half that time with injury: 5.26 ERA, 1.26 WHIP, 88 strikeouts, 4-9 record in 15 starts against playoff teams. I'll take the guy who was the Cubs' best big-game pitcher since "Three Finger" Brown.

One game, win or go home: Darvish or Jon Lester?

WITTENMYER: Darvish fits nicely near the front of the rotation. But the last pitch this guy threw still hasn't landed — a two-run homer that put his Dodgers in a 5-0 hole in a Game 7 World Series loss. It was the second time in the series that he didn't get out of the third inning. There's a reason Jon Lester has a 2.55 ERA in the playoffs, an NLCS MVP and three rings. Easy choice.

GREENBERG: Oh, it's easy, all right. Go get 'em, Kyle Hendricks.

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### **Chicago Sun-Times**

Yu Darvish deal with Cubs quiets winter noise of uprising by NL Central rivals  
By Gordon Wittenmyer

So much for a new world order in the National League Central.

When the Cubs agreed Saturday to a six-year, \$126 million deal with right-hander Yu Darvish, it not only filled their final rotation opening with the top-ranked free-agent starter on the market, but it also delivered a powerful counterpunch to big moves made by the Cardinals and Brewers earlier in the offseason.

The signing won't cost the Cubs a compensatory draft pick because Darvish was traded during the season in 2017, making him ineligible for a qualifying offer.

The deal, pending a physical, puts Darvish in uniform just ahead of the spring reporting date for Cubs pitchers and catchers Tuesday. It also replaces the Cubs' biggest free-agent loss of the winter, right-hander Jake Arrieta, who remains unsigned but could be the next big domino to fall now that the free-agent dam might have started to break.

Darvish, 31, is a four-time All-Star who is 1½ seasons removed from Tommy John surgery. He's 17-17 with a 3.70 ERA and 10.7 strikeouts per nine innings in 48 starts since missing all of the 2015 season.

Assuming continued health, Darvish — who can opt out of the deal after 2019 — might be the most significant player added in the division during a winter in which the Cardinals traded for Marlins outfielder Marcell Ozuna and the Brewers added outfielders Lorenzo Cain (free agent) and Christian Yelich (trade from Marlins).

Darvish joins left-hander Jose Quintana (trade in July) and right-hander Tyler Chatwood (free-agent signing in December) as newcomers to the Cubs' rotation since the start of last season. The Cubs expect them to be a sizable collective upgrade over Arrieta, right-hander John Lackey and left-hander Brett Anderson.

Including left-hander Jon Lester and right-hander Kyle Hendricks, the Cubs' 2018 rotation features three All-Stars (nine selections among Lester, Darvish and Quintana), an ERA champ (Hendricks) and three pitchers with a combined five top-four Cy Young finishes. All are under club control through 2019.

Darvish's deal, the fourth-largest in team history, puts the Cubs firmly back in the driver's seat in the division, especially after they spent the early part of the offseason deepening their bullpen. Their starting lineup returns intact after scoring the second-most runs in the NL last season.

The Cardinals and Brewers have been trolling the free-agent waters for another starting pitcher, too, and might threaten the Cubs, Nationals and Dodgers in the NL by signing Arrieta. Both have made offers to him.

On a larger scale, the Darvish signing is expected to be the one industry insiders have been waiting for to break a winterlong free-agency freeze that has seen only the relief-pitcher market move at a traditional pace.

Union officials, agents and players have become increasingly vocal in taking shots at Major League Baseball and its teams for engaging in what appears to be lockstep thinking in terms of salary ranges and length-of-contract offers this winter.

Darvish's contract is the largest by both measures after increasing accusations that industry collusion has suppressed the market.

"There's nothing to it," Cubs owner Tom Ricketts recently said of the accusations.

As big as Darvish's contract is, he was projected by many in the fall to get bigger offers, based on comparable players and recent markets.

Cubs president Theo Epstein and general manager Jed Hoyer are part of a chorus of league executives who point to "macroeconomic" issues affecting the market this year, including relatively low luxury-tax payroll thresholds in the new collective-bargaining agreement and a star-studded top of the class next year.

For now, the larger industry effect of the Darvish signing seems to be the one that might play out on the field this summer.

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### **Chicago Sun-Times**

About that Darvish obsession: Breathe — and give ex-Cub Arrieta proper goodbye

By Steve Greenberg

You have to be careful when discussing baseball by the numbers nowadays. Make one false move — such as praising a starting pitcher for his win-loss record — and they'll line up to decry you as a know-nothing, a rube, a relic.

There of course are better, truer ways to measure a pitcher's performance, as a parade of Theo Epstein wannabes let me know Saturday after I tweeted a simple fact: Jake Arrieta and Yu Darvish each lost 24 games over his last three seasons (including 2014 for Darvish, who missed 2015), but Arrieta won twice as many as Darvish in that time — 54 to 27.

It alone doesn't mean Arrieta was the better pitcher in that time (though he was). It certainly doesn't mean Arrieta would have been better going forward for the Cubs, who now have in Darvish a 31-year-old with a dizzying array of pitches and arguably as much pure talent as anyone in the game.

Arrieta was good last season, when he posted a 2.28 ERA after the All-Star break and made 20 road starts, the most by a Cub in 37 years. (He also led the team with 14 wins, but I probably shouldn't mention that.) Yet he wasn't as good as he had been in 2016, which itself wasn't close to the level of all-time-greatness he'd reached in 2015. Arrieta's velocity, control and ability to pitch deep into games became real concerns.

And so, onward — maybe even upward — we go with Darvish, Cubs fans' new obsession. Before he toes the rubber for the first time with the team days from now in Mesa, Arizona, the rest of baseball's top remaining free agents likely will fall like dominos to new teams. Arrieta already is but a memory.

But can we all just take a breath and stop for a second? Let's at least begin to say a proper goodbye to the player who had more to do with the best three-year period in Cubs history than anyone. Your great-great-uncle Amos can come at me if he wants to argue on behalf of early-1900s Cubs, but even he knows no player did more heavy lifting than Arrieta starting in 2015.

Arrieta won more games over the last three seasons than any pitcher in baseball. His 2.71 ERA ranks second, and his .203 opponent average is third-lowest. His 22 wins and 1.77 ERA in 2015 — when he carried the Cubs to the playoffs a year ahead of schedule — earned him a Cy Young. His record 0.75 ERA after the All-Star break that year made him a Bunyanesque legend.

Arrieta is tied with Mordecai "Three Finger" Brown for the franchise lead in postseason victories with five. Three times, he won playoff games when a loss would have ended the Cubs' season. In accomplishing all that, Arrieta changed the nature of what it meant to be a Cub. He represented winning. Around here, especially, that shouldn't be taken lightly.

And he went out on a hell of a note. In Game 4 of the NLCS at Wrigley Field, with the Cubs facing elimination against the Dodgers, Arrieta dug deep for a 111-pitch gem as the Cubs won their only game of the series.

"Hopefully, it's not a goodbye," Arrieta said afterward. "It's a thank you."

When he took the mound throughout the summer of 2015, chest out, beard raging, defeat didn't even seem possible. When he beat the Indians twice in the 2016 World Series, he reminded everyone of where he stood. He led in that way, and the Cubs followed.

It's a goodbye to Arrieta. And a thank you.

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### **Chicago Sun-Times**

Bullpen, lineup already had Cubs talking about another October run as camp opens

By Gordon Wittenmyer

Even before the Cubs landed big-ticket starter Yu Darvish in the final days before spring training, players and staff boasted about their chances to win their third consecutive division title and reach the playoffs for the fourth consecutive season.

A rotation of Darvish, Jon Lester, Kyle Hendricks, Jose Quintana and Tyler Chatwood looks as formidable as any the Cubs have had the last three years on reporting day. Pitchers and catchers arrive Tuesday.

But as Hendricks said well before the Darvish deal, “Regardless, we’ll be ready for another run.”

Why the great optimism beyond the usual upbeat emotion of new baseball life in February?

Two big reasons, at least on paper, that looked potentially formidable pre-Darvish:

First, a revamped and potentially deeper bullpen was designed to play a bigger role, regardless of the rotation’s relative strength. It includes the additions of former closers Brandon Morrow and Steve Cishek and the return of lefty Brian Duensing, and it promises to significantly reduce one of the highest bullpens walk rates in the majors (4.25 per nine innings).

Second, the Cubs return almost intact the group of hitters that finished second to the Rockies in the National League in runs scored, including all of the 20-somethings that make up one of the youngest groups of hitters in the majors.

One of the biggest storylines of the spring could be how those young hitters — Willson Contreras, Javy Baez, Addison Russell, Kyle Schwarber, Kris Bryant, Ian Happ, Albert Almora Jr. — develop with another year of experience and new hitting coach Chili Davis.

Almora, coming off his first full year in the majors, and Happ, who’s entering his first full year, bear watching as the Cubs settle their outfield plans for the start of the season.

Almora, a potential Gold Glove-caliber center fielder, could be an impact player if he hits well enough to earn regular playing time.

Lefty slugger Schwarber could be a difference-maker if he -rebounds from his struggles last year and looks more like he did in the second half of 2017 (.894 OPS, 17 home runs) than he did in the first (.178 average and a demotion).

“It’s super exciting,” said Kris Bryant, the 2015 NL Rookie of the Year and 2016 NL MVP. “So far this year it feels a little weird just because there’s so many changes on the coaching staff, but it’s nice to know that the group of players we’ll have is still kind of the same.

“The core that we’ve had here the last three years is still intact, and that’s nice to know, and they’ll be here for a while.”

One of the biggest differences for that group might be the -mindset this spring after experiencing post-championship fatigue, a slow start to the season and a second-round playoff elimination last year.

“The [2016] World Series is still fresh in our minds,” Bryant said, “but that happened a while ago so now it’s, ‘Do it all over again.’ You can’t use that as an excuse anymore. I don’t like excuses.”

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KEY DATES

Tuesday: Pitchers and catchers report to spring training, Mesa, Arizona

Wednesday: Pitchers' and catchers' first official workouts

Feb. 19: First full-squad workouts

Feb. 23: Cubs' Cactus League opener, at Brewers, 2:05 p.m., Maryvale, Arizona

Feb. 24: Cubs' home spring opener, vs. Rangers, 2:05 p.m., Sloan Park

March 29: Season opener at Marlins, 11:40 a.m.

## NUMBERS GAME

.324 – On-base percentage from the Cubs' leadoff spot in 2017, 11th in the National League (after they ranked first in the majors at .381 in 2016, before Dexter Fowler left for St. Louis as a free agent).

.312 – Kyle Schwarber's on-base percentage in 37 games batting leadoff in 2017 after replacing Fowler at the top of the order to start last season.

822 – Runs scored by the Cubs in 2017, second only to the Rockies (824) in the NL.

2.80 – Career ERA in the ninth inning for newly acquired Brandon Morrow, who's expected to open the season as the Cubs' closer. That's his second-best career ERA for an inning (he's 2.28 in the seventh).

18 – Career saves for Morrow.

8 – Career blown saves for Morrow.

3 – Consecutive seasons the Cubs have reached the league championship series, baseball's longest current streak.

97.3 – Average number of regular-season wins for the Cubs the last three seasons.

## COMINGS

RHP Yu Darvish, RHP Tyler Chatwood, RHP Brandon Morrow, RHP Steve Cishek, LHP Dario Alvarez, LHP Drew Smyly, C Chris Gimenez (minor-league contract), OF Peter Bourjos (minor-league contract), pitching coach Jim Hickey, hitting coach Chili Davis, third-base coach Brian Butterfield, first-base coach Will Venable.

## GOINGS

RHP Jake Arrieta (free agent), RHP John Lackey (free agent), RHP Wade Davis (signed with Rockies), RHP Hector Rondon (signed with Astros), RHP Koji Uehara (free agent), OF Jon Jay (free agent), C Alex Avila (signed with Diamondbacks), C Rene Rivera (signed with Angels), pitching coach Chris Bosio (signed with Tigers), hitting coach John Mallee (signed with Phillies), assistant hitting coach Eric Hinske (signed with Angels), bench coach Dave Martinez (hired as Nationals manager), third-base coach Gary Jones (hired as Phillies Class AAA manager).

## KEY QUESTIONS

Who's the Cubs' 2018 leadoff hitter?

"I really don't know yet, honestly," said manager Joe Maddon, who continues to insist that Kyle Schwarber's struggles last year had nothing to do with starting the season as a .190-hitting leadoff man. Maddon hasn't seemed to rule out using Schwarber there again.

"We'll go to camp, we'll sit down, and we'll try to evaluate everybody as [they look] at that particular moment," said Maddon, whose best option on the roster for most matchups might be Ben Zobrist.

Is Brandon Morrow – who pitched himself out of the closer job in Seattle twice early in his career – really the Cubs' ninth-inning man in 2018?

"We're really confident in Morrow," Epstein said of the right-hander, who emerged as a dominant setup man for the Dodgers in 2017 after years of battling injuries. He was almost perfect in the playoffs against the Cubs. "That's the guy we anticipate in that role and having a great year for us."

Can touted new hitting coach Chili Davis fix what went wrong with Schwarber much of last season and Jason Heyward much of the last two?

Schwarber and Heyward obviously will have the most to say about that, but Davis said during the Cubs Convention that he has focused on, and communicated with, those two hitters more than the others since being hired. The Cubs' hitting roster is largely unchanged since last year, and the team is counting on still-developing young hitters to take a collective step forward this year.

"I've been on three World Series teams as a player, and the common denominator with those three teams was how we approached games day in and day out as an offense," said Davis, who is credited with helping some of the Red Sox' young All-Star hitters develop in recent years. "We just kept applying pressure, applying pressure until eventually the right guy comes up to the plate and the floodgates open."

HE SAID IT

"The whole industry has really been moving at a snail's pace, and sometimes you just have to play along with the pace of play."

– Cubs president Theo Epstein, 3½ weeks after meeting with free-agent pitcher Yu Darvish and four weeks before agreeing to terms with him Saturday

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### **Chicago Sun-Times**

In win-now mode, Cubs do the right thing with Yu Darvish signing

By Rick Morrissey

The message in the Cubs' signing of Yu Darvish is everything: We're going for it now. Not next year. Now. We're not waiting for the Great Free-Agent Bonanza of 2019. Tomorrow isn't promised, and all that.

It's why they gave Darvish a six-year contract, a lengthier deal than they might have deemed prudent but one that secured the pitcher they needed if winning another World Series is the goal.

So a tip of the cap to a franchise that realizes that with massive profits comes a responsibility to go for it in a big way every season. That's all any of us who had been "nudging" the Cubs last week were saying: For the love of God, do something already! If a six-year contract worth \$126 million is what it takes to get the best free-agent pitcher on the market, you do it. You do it if you have reason to think you're a serious contender.

There is no guarantee the Cubs will land Nationals slugger Bryce Harper when he becomes a free agent after this season. He might blow out his knee. He might want to play somewhere else besides the North Side — no, really! You never know what might happen.

What the Cubs did know was that they were missing a starter. They know that Kris Bryant, Anthony Rizzo, Addison Russell, Javy Baez and Willson Contreras are moving into the heart of their careers. They knew that if they signed Darvish, a World Series in 2018 was very doable.

So why waste time fretting about the possibility of exceeding the luxury tax in 2019 for the second year in a row, which would bring penalties affecting draft position? If the Cubs win a championship this season and, through some perfect aligning of planets, still can sign Harper, who cares if their ability to draft would be adversely affected? Harper will be 26 in October and heading into the best part of a long career. And you're worried about draft position?

The Cubs said they would spend money when they became successful, and that's what they're doing. If they make another deep playoff run this season, we'll expect them to spend more next year. The club has become incredibly wealthy, which is to say it has become wealthy off its fans' money.

You go for it when you can. If there's one tenet in sports, it's that. Anything can happen later. It's now that matters.

By the same token, Darvish's elbow might explode in his first start for the Cubs. The signing is a risk on many levels. Jake Arrieta might rediscover his control and fastball for another team. He might rediscover his control and fastball for someone in the Cubs' division. But all signings are risky. I happen to think Darvish is less of a risk than Arrieta. I might be wrong. So might the Cubs. But they might end up being very right, and that's the whole idea here. To swing for the fences.

They're banking on Darvish staying healthy. They're betting on him making life miserable for opposing teams every fifth day, the way Arrieta used to do.

Bringing back a player for sentimental reasons is the type of thing that has brought down many teams in many sports. I don't know if Cubs president Theo Epstein thinks Arrieta is on the downside of his career. But Epstein doesn't have a sentimental bone in his body when it comes to big decisions, even if it concerns a former Cy Young winner. We'll forgive him his soft spot for David Ross, a lesser star.

The Cubs don't want to end up being the 1985 Bears, a one-and-done proposition. They don't want to end up being the Braves of the 1990s. They want to win more than a single championship. Having built through the draft and through trades, they're now in the business of maintaining their excellence. That phase requires money.

Criticize them all you want if you think they overspent for Darvish. But rich teams such as the Cubs can't, by definition, overspend. They indeed can make mistakes. They also can make up for those mistakes by spending more money. It's good to be the king.



For all the talk about the Cubs' championship window being open for the next several years, they have to take advantage of the season that's in front of them now. Take the one-game-at-a-time cliché and broaden it. Concentrate on this one season and worry about next season later.

If Darvish is the pitcher the Cubs hope he is, next season won't have many worries. Only celebrations.

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## **Daily Herald**

5 issues facing the Chicago Cubs heading into spring training

By Bruce Miles

The Cubs no longer have that "World Series hangover" to worry about as spring training prepares to begin.

Nevertheless, manager Joe Maddon wants his team ready from the get-go. The get-go happens Wednesday, when pitchers and catchers hold their first formal workouts in Mesa, Arizona. Position players will work out for the first time on Feb. 19.

While Maddon won't be handing out cans of Red Bull to his players, he came up with a working theme for this spring and beyond during Cubs convention week in January.

"Energy and enthusiasm," he said, referring to not only spring training but carrying through the regular season.

Saturday's agreement with free-agent starting pitcher Yu Darvish should provide an immediate shot of adrenaline.

The Cubs are coming off three straight trips to the National League championship series, including a World Series championship in 2016. The St. Louis Cardinals were the last team to reach the NL title series four straight years (2011-14).

A lackluster start to 2017 -- widely blamed on the "World Series hangover" -- had the Cubs scrambling to win the National League Central and huffing and puffing their way into the postseason.

This year, Maddon wants the Cubs fresh from the start. There's no reason that won't happen, and the Cubs are the favorites of many prognosticators to win the NL Central again.

Even so, this is a team facing several questions and issues. Here are five:

Is Kyle Hendricks the ace?

Heading into spring training, it appears so, but Darvish and Jon Lester will have something to say about that. When Maddon set his postseason rotation, he went with Hendricks as his Game 1 and Game 5 starter against the Washington Nationals in the division series.

Hendricks went 7-5 with a 3.03 ERA last year, and a hand injury limited him to 24 starts. The 28-year-old right-hander appears to be coming into his own. During his MLB career, he is 38-22 with a 2.94 ERA.

Lester is entering the fourth season of his six-year, \$155 million contract. The 34-year-old lefty was 13-8 with a 4.33 ERA last season. In his first three years with the Cubs, he is 43-25 with a 3.33 ERA. He

shouldn't be counted out easily. Darvish is 56-42 with a 3.42 ERA for his career. The Cubs are suddenly deep in starting pitchers again.

Is the rotation deep enough?

It is now.

The Cubs spent all winter trying to replace Jake Arrieta, who remains an unsigned free agent, and John Lackey in the rotation. After a long and icy off-season, the Cubs broke through with Darvish on Saturday, and that changes everything, both for the Cubs and the National League Central.

Early in the off-season, the Cubs signed Tyler Chatwood from Colorado and then went into a holding pattern as the market for top-of-the-line pitchers ground to a halt.

Jose Quintana should feel more comfortable as a Cub heading into spring training after last summer's trade from the White Sox.

Left-handed swing man Mike Montgomery will be stretched out again in spring training, but he's just as likely to return to the bullpen. Eddie Butler, who appeared in 13 games for the Cubs last year, will get another chance this spring, and the Cubs would love for a homegrown pitcher to step up at last. Jen-Ho Tseng and Duane Underwood are on the 40-man roster and will get a look in the Cactus League.

Who leads off?

Here we go again. The Cubs were spoiled for two years with the consistency of leadoff man Dexter Fowler in 2015 and 2016. And 2016 was a bonus year after Fowler fell into the Cubs' laps after a free-agent deal with Baltimore fell through before spring training. Maddon likes to change his lineups almost daily, and Fowler was a constant amid all that shuffling.

Last year, Maddon opened the season with left fielder Kyle Schwarber in the leadoff spot. That didn't work, as Schwarber went .190/.312/.381 at leadoff and earned a short stint at Class AAA Iowa. Maddon attributed Schwarber's struggles not to batting first but to his inexperience. Perhaps to prove his point, Maddon has not ruled out using Schwarber at leadoff this season.

Spring-training games may tell us how it may go when Opening Day arrives. It may turn out to be that the leadoff spot is a shared arrangement that involves Schwarber, Albert Almora Jr. and Ben Zobrist, depending on the matchups.

Who is the closer?

With Wade Davis signing with Colorado after one solid season in Chicago, the Cubs lack a true, big-name closer. For now, they'll go with Brandon Morrow, whom they signed after getting an eyeful vs. the Dodgers in the NLCS.

Morrow, who has 18 saves in his career, went 6-0 with a 2.06 ERA and a WHIP of 0.92 for the Dodgers last year.

Bullpens are the most fickle part of a team, and the bullpen a team begins the season with is never the one at the end.

The Cubs have added veteran right-hander Steve Cishek to the mix, and lefty Brian Duensing is back after quietly have a good season last year.

Another year of maturity and experience should help Carl Edwards Jr., a possible closer of the future. Pedro Strop and Justin Grimm are the right-handed veterans.

Can Heyward get better?

During last month's Cubs convention, new hitting coach Chili Davis said he had spent time with Schwarber and right fielder Jason Heyward.

Heyward also spent a lot of preseason time last year with since-fired hitting coach John Mallee. The results in 2017 were only marginally better than they were in 2016, the first season of Heyward's eight-year, \$184 million contract.

In 2016, Heyward had a line of .230/.306/.325 with 7 homers and 49 RBI. In 2017, it was .259/.326/.389 with 11 homers and 59 RBI.

After the Cubs lost to the Dodgers last fall, Epstein said he wanted to get Heyward back to a 6-win (as in wins above replacement, or WAR), as he was, according to Baseball Reference, in 2014 and 2015. Heyward's two Gold Gloves with the Cubs and his undisputed leadership qualities are valuable, to be sure, but a little more offensive production would help the team and take some of the pressure off the other hitters in the lineup.

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### **Daily Herald**

Rozner: Length of Darvish contract doesn't scare Cubs

By Barry Rozner

With seven being one more than six, the Cubs are guaranteed four more years of Kris Bryant.

With that math firmly in tow, think of it as the "Bryant window," and it might give you some idea of why Theo Epstein was willing to go six years for 31-year-old Yu Darvish, knowing it's unlikely that the Cubs will enjoy the deal on the back end of it.

The Rookie of the Year in 2015 and the MVP in 2016, Bryant is as irreplaceable as any name on the roster, a threat to post MVP numbers every season and a key cog in a powerful lineup.

As long as Bryant is here, and they maintain a reasonable amount of health in the rotation, the Cubs are a threat to reach the World Series every season.

As evidence we offer three straight NLCS appearances.

During the next four years of Bryant, the Cubs have Darvish for all of it, Jon Lester for at least three (fourth-year mutual option), Kyle Hendricks for three and Jose Quintana for three.

That's a pretty strong top four -- as always -- assuming health.

In the field with Bryant, Anthony Rizzo is signed for four more years at an average salary of only \$12 million.

They are also guaranteed four more years of Kyle Schwarber, Addison Russell and Javy Baez, and five more years of Willson Contreras and Albert Almora, if the Cubs choose to retain those players.

Like it or not, they have six more years of Jason Heyward, since he's unlikely to opt out and there's not a great chance they can move that contract.

There's also six more years of Ian Happ.

Add it up and that's four very good starters and nine position players under control for at least the time Bryant is here, with the hope that they may be able to sign Bryant before he reaches free agency at the age of 30.

That's a pretty good spot to be in, not to mention the upcoming free agency of Bryce Harper and Manny Machado at age 26. The Cubs will undoubtedly be interested in both, probably in that order, as will most every team in baseball.

From the beginning of this process, the plan was to reach a place where they would have a chance to reach the postseason every year, and now the Cubs have an opportunity to get to four straight League Championship Series.

In the last 20 years, only the Cards (2011-14) and Yanks (1998-01) have done it, but the signing of Darvish puts the Cubs in a great position.

Since missing the 2015 season after Tommy John surgery, Darvish returned to make 17 starts in 2016 and 31 in 2017.

There is risk, of course, given the miles and injury history, but you can make that argument against virtually any pitcher.

Darvish had an up-and-down 2017 season, with his strikeout rate down and his ERA up, but the 186 innings bodes well for a team that doesn't need Darvish to dominate until the postseason.

Last October for the Dodgers, he threw like an ace against the Diamondbacks and Cubs in the playoffs, before the Astros pounded Darvish twice in the World Series when they caught him tipping pitches.

The Cubs obviously aren't worried about that and if he's merely good during the regular season, the Cubs' rotation just became one of the best in the game.

So, yes, the length of the deal isn't pleasant, but the Cubs paid a premium in years for a cheap annual value (\$21 million a year) that gives them another front-end starter.

If they win another World Series in the next four years, they won't care about whether the contract looks bad at the end.

The math will speak for itself.

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## Daily Herald

Signing Yu Darvish for \$126M puts Cubs in command of NL Central again

By Bruce Miles

A Cubs off-season suddenly turned from a question mark to an exclamation point Saturday.

Major-league sources confirmed that the team has agreed on a six-year deal worth at least \$126 million with right-handed starting pitcher Yu Darvish. The contract was first reported by Ken Rosenthal of The Athletic.

Darvish's deal is pending a physical exam, and Cubs officials were not available to comment on it for that reason.

The 31-year-old Darvish has incentives in the deal that can net him upward of \$150 million.

After signing pitcher Tyler Chatwood early in the off-season, the Cubs and the rest of baseball watched as the winter turned as icy as Chicago's streets, with the free-agent market freezing up.

Darvish and former Cubs ace Jake Arrieta were two of the biggest names on the market, but a typical MLB bidding war failed to develop.

Darvish finished last season with the Los Angeles Dodgers, who were linked to the pitcher this winter, along with the Cubs, Milwaukee Brewers and Minnesota Twins.

In the end, the Cubs won out, and the signing is a likely game-changer in the National League Central as Darvish joins a rotation that features Kyle Hendricks, Jon Lester, Jose Quintana and Tyler Chatwood.

That rotation looks to be the best in the NL Central, and it should be enough to get the Cubs into the postseason for a fourth straight season.

Darvish started 22 games last year for the Texas Rangers, who traded him to the Dodgers at the July 31 nonwaiver deadline. In a combined 31 regular-season starts between the two teams, Darvish was 10-12 with a 3.86 ERA and a WHIP of 1.16. In 186  $\frac{2}{3}$  innings, he walked 58 and struck out 209.

In Game 3 of the National League championship series at Wrigley Field, Darvish beat the Cubs 6-1, working 6  $\frac{1}{3}$  innings and giving up a run. The Dodgers won the series four games to one.

It was a different story in the World Series, won by the Houston Astros. In 2 starts, Darvish was 0-2 with a 21.60 ERA, giving up 8 earned runs in just 3  $\frac{1}{3}$  innings. There were reports that Darvish was tipping his pitches to Astros hitters, a flaw that can be fixed easily by new Cubs pitching coach Jim Hickey.

A native of Habikino, Japan, Darvish was purchased by the Rangers from the Nippon Ham Fighters of the Pacific League in Japan before the 2012 season.

He went 16-9 with a 3.90 ERA in his first season in Major League Baseball. In 2013, he led the American League in strikeouts (277 in 209  $\frac{2}{3}$  innings) while going 13-9.

With the Rangers going nowhere last summer and Darvish facing free agency, Texas dealt him away.

For his big-league career, Darvish is 56-42 with a 3.42 ERA and a WHIP of 1.18. He has struck out 1,021 and walked 307 in 832  $\frac{1}{3}$  innings.

According to FanGraphs, Darvish upped the use of his slider and cutter by about 6 percent each last year over 2016 while decreasing the use of his fastball by about 7.5 percent.

Although the choice for the Cubs seemed to be one between Darvish and Arrieta, recent reports suggested the Cubs had little contact with Arrieta this winter.

Arrieta, who turns 32 on March 6, was 88-56 with a 3.57 ERA, including 68-31 and 2.73 in parts of five seasons with the Cubs.

Agent Scott Boras, who represents Arrieta, pointed out last fall that his client is 2-0 in World Series games for the Cubs and 5-3 with a 3.08 ERA overall in the postseason.

Darvish is 2-4 with a 5.81 ERA in the postseason, but the Cubs will point out that those numbers can improve quickly with just one good playoff and World Series run.

Health had been a question for Darvish. He underwent Tommy John surgery in March 2015, forcing him to miss that entire season. In 2016, he went 7-5 with a 3.41 ERA in 17 starts.

"I've seen a lot of comments from people saying I'm getting close to where I was before the Tommy John surgery and all that stuff," Darvish said during the NLCS last fall. "But really, if you look at me pitch right now, mechanics and the pitch selection approach, I'm a different kind of pitcher. So it's hard for me to compare me right now to before the Tommy John surgery.

"As a pitcher, I always just keep improving. I feel like I'm a better pitcher now than before the Tommy John surgery. But like I said, there is no goal set. So I just want to just keep pitching better and be a better pitcher."

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### **Daily Herald**

Former Cubs catcher starting new chapter as manager of Kane County Cougars  
By Bruce Miles

In 2009, the Cubs called up onetime first-round pick Tyler Colvin from the minor leagues. One of the first people Colvin credited for helping him climb the ladder was a journeyman catcher who had never been drafted.

That catcher was Blake Lalli.

Today, the 34-year-old Lalli is preparing for a new adventure as manager of the Kane County Cougars, the Arizona Diamondbacks' affiliate in the Class A Midwest League.

As an "organization guy" in the minor leagues, Lalli knew his role: Play when called on, help mentor the young players and maybe get an invite to big-league spring training.

Lalli checked all the boxes and then some, which helped pave the way for an eventual career as a coach or manager.

"I always had an interest in it," Lalli said. "Even a long time ago, when I was in college and when I started pro ball, I always kind of had it that one day I wanted to do that. Obviously, when you're playing you're

focused on having a good playing career. It's in the back of your mind, but I've always thought that I would coach one day when I was done."

The Cubs signed Lalli as a nondrafted free agent in May 2006, about a month before they made Colvin their first-round draft pick.

Lalli methodically worked his way up the system, getting an invite to spring training in 2010 and again in 2012.

The call to the big leagues from Class AAA Iowa finally came in May of 2012.

"I was at Panera Bread in Des Moines," Lalli said. "I was with (teammate) Ty Wright, who is a coach in the Cubs system now. I was with him and his dad, and we were getting breakfast. My manager, Dave Bialas, called and said I was going up. It was a big rush because I had to get there by the game that day. It was already like 11 o'clock in the morning, so it was a big rush out."

It also was a big rush emotionally, but Lalli had faith that he would make it someday.

"People will probably think I'm crazy for saying it but I did think it would happen," he said. "That was just kind of my mindset and how I approached it and my work ethic. I know looking it and now being on this side of it, I realized that people probably thought I was crazy for thinking that, but I really did think I had a shot.

"I was very fortunate to make it to the big leagues with the Cubs, and that was obviously a dream come true, and then to be able to do it two more times, with Milwaukee and Atlanta, was incredible."

Lalli played in 6 games for the Cubs in 2012 before he was traded that season to the Oakland organization for catcher Anthony Recker. In 2013, Lalli got into 16 games for the Milwaukee Brewers. He appeared in 10 games for the Atlanta Braves in 2016. After being released by the Braves last year, he joined the Diamondbacks organization, and it was time to write the next chapter in his baseball career.

"When I got released, I just started thinking about what the next step was," he said. "Do I want to keep playing? Is that an option? I just decided it was time to start coaching. I wanted to manage."

For most of Lalli's time in the Cubs system, Oneri Fleita was the director of player development. Fleita wasn't shocked to hear of Lalli's new job.

"It doesn't surprise me in the least," he said. "He was a converted catcher, and he had all the qualities. As you know, a lot of the good managers in the game were catchers. He had the leadership qualities. He had the personality. I don't think he ever met a stranger."

The challenge for all minor-league managers is to balance the desire to win games with the need to develop players.

"I'm very fortunate to be with the Diamondbacks and to work under Mike Bell, who is the player-development guy," Lalli said. "Winning is very important to him. Obviously the No. 1 goal is player development. Everyone knows that. Hopefully, in managing, the relationships I can create with the players and the work that we can do every day together can help develop. I feel that if they develop, we can hopefully win some games along the way."

It was a long road to the majors for Lalli as a player. Although he's just starting his minor-league managerial career, he says he has eyes on the prize of a big-league coaching or managerial career.

"Absolutely, I have those aspirations," he said. "It's kind of like as a player, I feel like, being undrafted, I took care of my business. I worked hard. I did all those things. I got rewarded for them and got to the big leagues. So I feel like, on this end, it's about the player again and focusing on player development and getting the player better. I feel that focusing on all those things and focusing on the player first will maybe help me reach the same goal that I had as a player."

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### **The Athletic**

Risky business: Theo Epstein had to roll the dice on another free agent deal

By Jon Greenberg

In November 2010, Theo Epstein, then the general manager of the Boston Red Sox, attended a meeting for high-level executives to address what had become an organizational problem: low TV ratings.

The meeting with the team-owned New England Sports Network and its consultants revealed that frustrated Red Sox fans wanted "good looking stars and sex symbols," "the games are too long with disappointing outcomes" and "big moves, trades, and messaging in the offseason are important."

That is how the meeting was recounted in "Francona," the illuminating book co-authored by Terry Francona and Dan Shaughnessy.

(It was assumed the fans just wanted more wins. The 2010 Red Sox finished 89-73 and in third place in the AL East.)

In an interview for that book, Epstein said, "They told us we didn't have any marketable players, the team's not exciting enough. We need some sizzle. We need some sexy guys. I was laughing to myself. Talk about the tail wagging the dog. This is like an absurdist comedy."

Epstein added, "That type of shit contributed to the decision in the winter to go for more of a quick fix. Signing [Carl] Crawford and trading for Adrian [Gonzalez] was in direct response to that in a lot of ways. Shame on me for giving in to it, but at some point, the landscape is what it is."

The 2011 Red Sox, of course, were Epstein's last team in Boston. A disaster that sent him to Chicago. (So, uh, thanks NESN consultants.)

Whenever people talk about Epstein's checkered past with free agents, I think about that anecdote.

Did Epstein screw up signing high-priced talent at the end of his tenure in Boston? Yes. Is he self-actualized enough to realize it? Yeah. In public, will he usually offer some kind of contextualized explanation beyond "I screwed up." Absolutely.

Because it's never as simple as "We thought this guy would be better than he was." There are pressures with running a big-market team and perennially chasing a World Series and they cause you to do things, like sign free agents that you know, intellectually, to be not ideal fits, but that, in reality, can be intellectualized.



It's the job of a president or a general manager to make decisions for both the present and the future and hope the former doesn't kill the latter.

That brings us to the news that the Cubs agreed to a deal (pending a physical) with free agent pitcher Yu Darvish for \$126 million over six years. The length of the deal is indicative of the clear realities of free agent negotiations, while the money almost seems like a bargain, even in the current free agent landscape. But it isn't. Not really. Twenty-one million dollars a year, for six years, is still a significant investment for a team with bills to pay.

It's a terrific deal for the present as Darvish was the best free agent starter on the market. If Epstein would've rushed into signing the most marketable player for a reality show, he would've re-signed Jake Arrieta to a fat contract. That they passed on re-upping Arrieta — FanRag Sports' Jon Heyman reported Sunday night the Cubs called him to talk about a deal similar to the one they offered Darvish in case Darvish turned down the Cubs' offer, though I'm pretty sure I know where that info came from — the chiseled validation of their rebuild strategy, tells me Epstein and his staff are digging in a little deeper than they did at the end of their Boston days. Perhaps they knew it was the right time to say goodbye.

(Darvish, though, offers a chance to break into the Japanese market.)

But the Cubs won't know if Darvish was truly the right man for the job until they see how he performs in October. What he did for the Dodgers this past October — the good and the awful — doesn't matter anymore. Arrieta's best year was 2015, but I'm sure he'd just as rather talk about the 2016 postseason. If the Cubs win another World Series and Darvish contributes, the deal was worth it. If they don't, it probably wasn't.

In baseball, you pay for regular-season performance and hope the players pay you back in October.

In truth, the Cubs went into the winter thinking they wouldn't be able to pay either Arrieta or Darvish while staying under the luxury tax line and having the space to go after Bryce Harper next winter.

Darvish became attainable simply because of the coolness of the free agent market. (Arrieta, of course, is still available, and the lack of public offers has surprised the Cubs.) The Cubs had the ability to be patient with their starting pitching needs and wait until the brink of spring training because they already had a playoff-caliber team. If they had to go into the season with Mike Montgomery as a starter, they could have.

In theory, Darvish, with his nasty repertoire of pitches and high strikeout percentage, makes them even more of a World Series contender.

But is everyone too “giggly” over the deal, as Lou Piniella would say? Should we be more doubtful of a 31-year-old pitcher who gives up too many home runs and relies on strikeout stuff? Plenty of Twitter critics are pointing to Darvish's World Series implosion as proof of the Cubs' folly. But of course, that's not the prevailing mood in Chicago.

Skepticism is in rare supply when it comes to the Cubs these days, not since 2015 anyway, when Epstein turned water (Cubs fans' tears) into wine (sparkling wine the players sprayed on themselves).

The length of Darvish's deal isn't important now, and depending on how the money is divvied up, the first few years should fit in perfectly with the team's budget. (Remember, Alfonso Soriano's eight-year, \$136 million deal was backloaded. In the first two years, when the Cubs made the playoffs, he made \$22 million in base salary.)

There's no question Epstein whiffed on signing Crawford in Boston. John Lackey looked bad, but he wound up paying off after Epstein left. Trading Anthony Rizzo for Gonzalez didn't work out either, but hey, at least it set him up to trade for him again in Chicago.

In Chicago, Epstein's judgment has been better, aside from one to-be-determined contract that looks like a major albatross.

Yes, Edwin Jackson's four-year, \$52 million deal was a disaster and you'll hear buck-passing on whose fault that was, but the truth is the front office that was used to throwing around their financial weight in their Boston days was getting antsy and wanted to spend some of Tom Ricketts' money, since they weren't getting much of it in those days. Signing Jackson was spending to spend, and it turned out poorly and taught them a lesson.

Before the 2015 season, the Cubs signed Jon Lester to the first big-money free agent splash of their regime, a six-year \$155 million deal.

After the introductory press conference at Spiaggia on N. Michigan Ave., Epstein sat down with reporters and took on all questions about the length and money of an eye-popping investment for Lester, who would be 31 when he threw his first pitch for the Cubs.

"Historically, nine-figure deals for starting pitchers in their 30s haven't worked out," Epstein said. "So you're looking for ways to make the best bet in an inherently risky endeavor. There are a lot of mitigating factors in there, but I'm not going to say it's without risk, because it's not without risk. Contracts like this always carry risk. Jon, we've been around him since he's 18. So I know exactly what shoulder program he's been on since he was 18. I know how well he's executed that shoulder program, how diligent he was. I know what his MRIs look like.

"He's left-handed, and left-handed pitchers tend to perform better throughout their contracts than right-handed pitchers," Epstein continued. "He's got the right kind of pitch mix that will allow him to age gracefully. He doesn't get hitters out just one way, especially now that his curveball is back in the mix, where he's working both sides of the plate. The cutter is a weapon that ages very well. If you look at Andy Pettitte, he aged extremely well through his 30s. He's a reasonable [comparison]. The second half of Jon Lester's career you want to look like Andy Pettitte."

We'll see what his argument for signing Darvish (who will be 32 in August) is, but I'm guessing he's going to point to Darvish's impressive velocity; his post-Tommy John surgery ascendance; his increased usage of the cutter; his pitch mix; his overall superior talent and more.

While some will complain about the back end of Lester's deal if he ages poorly the next three seasons (his base salary dips down to \$15 million in 2020, from \$22.5 million the next two years), he's out-earned his contract already thanks to his work in the 2016 postseason. Pitching six innings in a must-win Game 5 of the World Series and then three innings of relief in Game 7 was worth how much for the Cubs' brand?

You could say the same for an aging Ben Zobrist and his four-year, \$56 million deal signed before the 2016 season. How much was his Series-winning double worth in Game 7?

Will Darvish have a World Series moment for the Cubs? Even "Ivy," the organization's computer system, can't know that.

It's tough to separate the steak and the sizzle when a big-name free agent signs with a team like the Cubs. What's real and what's them trying to sell a narrative? Epstein is both look-you-in-the-eye forthright and a Harold Hill-like salesman. Jed Hoyer can argue the sky might be green, if you look at it a certain way.

While the Cubs have a sophisticated scouting system that mixes both old-school traditions and new-school modeling and projection software, that doesn't mean they'll always make the right decision. They know this. It's part of their culture. The reason the Cubs front office works is they enjoy having baseball arguments.

I wonder what they say about Heyward behind closed doors.

While I like Heyward, the person, as much as anyone, his superior defensive ability and his clubhouse-winning personality don't quite match his salary. He's in his second winter of an offseason swing makeover and perhaps this one, with new hitting coach Chili Davis, will show dividends. I wouldn't be surprised if he's back hitting like himself. But I'm skeptical.

With Heyward, the Cubs are on the hook for another six years and \$127.5 million, plus a deferred \$20 million signing bonus from 2024-27. Provided, of course, Heyward doesn't take either of the buyouts in his deal. I'm guessing, though, that doesn't happen.

Hey, the rain delay speech was incredible, but maybe not that good.

When the Cubs signed Heyward to a \$184 million deal that already seems ill-considered, the Cubs had their arguments down pat on why it made more sense than one might realize by the numbers.

At Heyward's introductory press conference, I asked Cubs general manager Jed Hoyer how the front office could assess Heyward's true value.

"It's difficult," he said. "Every weighting system, every stats system, weighs it differently. But I think with Jason, he's such a well-rounded player. I think FanGraphs just did a thing that said he's the most complete player in the game, because he does every part of the game well. That makes a huge difference. Joe [Maddon], so many times over the year, said this guy does something every night or does so many things every night to help you win. Whether you're running a ball out in the gap or throwing a guy out or stealing a base or going first to third, whatever it might be."

Hoyer even compared Heyward to Dennis Rodman. It was a hopeful comparison and one, in a way, that turned out to be true in 2016.

"People have talked a lot about the standard way people get compensated and paid in the game and how that's changing," Hoyer said then. "I do think more and more teams, and baseball fans, are looking at the totality of the player's contribution to the game as opposed to simply the offensive contribution. We had generation after generation that was entirely focused on one part of the game and now, more and more, I think it's better for the sport. There is a lot to the run-prevention side of the game too."

While Heyward was billed as some kind of evolutionary baseball player, the truth is he's a wonderful fielder, a great teammate and thus far, a pretty bad hitter. If he improves to the league average this year, it will be a success story.

Heyward's deal is the worst-case scenario for Darvish, assuming good health for the latter.

Rebuilds are all relative. It seemed crazy in 2012 when the Cubs had no assurances of the future. The White Sox rebuild, partly because of the early returns for Chris Sale and Adam Eaton and partly because the Cubs pulled it off already, seems much safer.

But in retrospect, the three years the Cubs spent losing now seems like a minute. That's because the Cubs hit on those big trades and nailed their first-round draft picks. Most rebuilds don't happen like that, nor do they start with blue-chip players turning into big-name prospects like the White Sox.

But the Cubs had to pick a lane and it's funny that despite our cries for expedience and their demands for patience, the Cubs actually did fast-track their rebuild by focusing on mature hitters in the draft and more-developed pitchers in trades, while accumulating assets in their one big international signing splash to later acquire pitching from outside the organization.

And yes, it helped that the Houston Astros drafted Mark Appel instead of Kris Bryant.

Still, the Cubs' inability to develop homegrown pitching is a bug, not a feature of their design. Perhaps the latest batch of drafted pitchers, along with top prospect Adbert Alzolay, will break through. The Cubs are addressing their problems with development, as Sahadev Sharma wrote here.

Criticisms aside, the Cubs have done a pretty good job identifying pitching, if not drafting it. Trading for a young Kyle Hendricks here, acquiring a used Arrieta there, compiling all of the bullpen arms. Trading Eloy Jimenez and Dylan Cease feels like a steep price to pay for Quintana, but his affordability through 2020 allowed them to over-spend on Darvish.

You have to get pitching one way or another, the Cubs just wound up going the expensive route.

But the thing is the Cubs have money to spend, and even with the Heyward deal, enough wiggle room to make a mistake. They don't have top-tier prospects to trade right now. There are only a few currencies in baseball, after all.

Darvish's first three years coincide with Lester's last three, something that doesn't seem accidental.

The Cubs' position player budget has to keep increasing, but the situation's not dire. Kris Bryant, who is making \$10.8 million this season, has three more arbitration years left. Javy Baez, Willson Contreras, Kyle Schwarber all go into their first year of arbitration next year, while Addison Russell goes into his second.

Given their responsibilities and performance, the Cubs are getting bargain prices the next three years. Zobrist's deal runs through 2019.

Around the time Bryant is getting ready for free agency will be the back end of Darvish's deal (should he not opt out before then). By 2022, Epstein might be moving to a beach in Malibu, his second five-year deal with the Cubs having just expired.

By 2020, the Cubs will have their own TV deal and ratings numbers to hit. Let's hope the Cubs learn from history on how not to let the tail wag the dog.

For now, the Darvish deal might be a success, and it might come back to bite the Cubs. But it was there for the making.

You can have all the information in the world at your fingertips and the smartest decision-makers calling the shots, there's always a risk. That's the fun part.

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### **The Athletic**

Kyle Schwarber explains the 'wow' factor Yu Darvish brings to Cubs

By Patrick Mooney

MESA, Ariz. – During Major League Baseball’s numbingly slow winter, Kyle Schwarber felt like he couldn’t go on Twitter without seeing something about Yu Darvish Watch.

But even Schwarber – who became a Chicago legend, World Series hero and Triple-A disappointment within a matter of months/by the age of 24 – experienced a “wow” moment when he found out the Cubs are finalizing a six-year, \$126 million megadeal with Darvish.

“It’s awesome,” Schwarber said late Sunday afternoon in the lobby of the Cubs’ Sloan Park complex. “It shows they want us to be the best team possible. To add another starting pitcher like that, it just shows the amount of confidence they have in this team and the fans and Chicago as a whole.

“We got a good thing rolling and we want to keep this going for as long as we can. Adding a guy like that is obviously going to help.”

Less than 48 hours before pitchers and catchers formally report to Arizona, we already have a clear idea of the 25-man Opening Day roster for March 29 at Marlins Park – and what it will look like again in 2019 and 2020 – because Theo Epstein’s front office built the Cubs in such a methodical way.

In the wake of a frustrating regular season (that still yielded 92 wins) and a lopsided National League Championship Series against Darvish and the Los Angeles Dodgers, Epstein sounded more open than ever to the idea of trading a young core player like Schwarber for pitching.

Now the Cubs project to have a rotation that can match up with anyone, valuable lefty swingman Mike Montgomery in the bullpen, two extra 2018 draft picks (compensation for Wade Davis and eventually Jake Arrieta) and Darvish on a \$21 million average annual value that won’t blow up their luxury-tax calculations for next winter’s Bryce Harper/Manny Machado sweepstakes.

“That’s a hell of a deal,” said an NL official, who also mentioned the potential clubhouse impact, citing the way Darvish graciously handled Yuli Gurriel making a racist gesture during the World Series, defusing the situation with the Houston Astros first baseman.

“A perennial powerhouse pitcher,” Schwarber said. “For him to get added onto the staff that we already got, that’s just a cherry on top.

“I know everyone in the clubhouse is excited. And I sure hope he’s excited, too, to be a part of this.”

This will become a media carnival, the way it did during the highly anticipated 2016 season and World Series encore. Mesa will be a hub for the Japanese reporters not following Shohei Ohtani at the Los Angeles Angels’ facility in Tempe. But Darvish is already used to living in a fishbowl and the Cubs remain a destination that will stand out for next winter’s star-studded class of free agents.

“The atmosphere is awesome,” said new closer Brandon Morrow, who backed up Darvish last year out of the Dodger bullpen. “Wrigley speaks for itself. You’ll have a lot of people tell you there’s no better place to play.”

Schwarber homered off Darvish in the first inning of an NLCS Game 3 at a Wrigley Field that turned quiet last October. But Darvish shut down the Cubs from that moment, pitching into the seventh inning and putting up seven strikeouts against one walk.

The Cubs will focus on that snapshot – a four-time All-Star with more than 2,100 innings of experience in professional baseball – instead of the age (31), Tommy John history and two awful World Series starts.

“The cool thing is just being able to watch him (as) a fan of the game,” Schwarber said. “He’s really good at making his pitches look like strikes, and then all of a sudden they’re balls.

“The guy’s got so many weapons. When he went to the Dodgers, they might have changed it up a little bit. [But] this guy’s got five-plus pitches. And I’m sure that we’re going to be open to using them all – and let him do what he wants to do – because he’s really good.

“We all know who he is. He’s been a great pitcher in this game for a while now.”

It took until the middle of February, but this is what the Cubs do when they see a chance to show the rest of the NL Central who’s boss.

“It was kind of a weird offseason,” Schwarber said. “There’s a lot of good pitchers out there still. You just didn’t know how it was going to go. When that name popped up – Theo’s Theo. He’s the best at what he does and he wants to bring in the best talent. Bringing in Yu Darvish there is a big addition.”

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## **The Athletic**

10 Questions: How could it all go wrong for the 2018 Cubs? (Hint: it's the pitching)

By Sahadev Sharma

What could go wrong?

In the wake of the Yu Darvish agreement, the Cubs are riding high, compiling extra wins in projection algorithms and causing Cubs' fans hearts to flutter more than usual.

But still, what could go wrong? Of all our 10 Questions, this is the most important one.

What could go wrong?

Last season, we learned what could go wrong in the first half. Everything. A 43-45 record and 5 1/2 game deficit in the division at the All-Star break didn’t exactly instill confidence in a World Series repeat. Injuries to Jake Arrieta, Jon Lester, Kyle Hendricks, Willson Contreras and Addison Russell in the second half could have derailed a third-consecutive playoff appearance.

The Jose Quintana trade and some clutch second-half performances saved the 2017 Cubs from disaster, though neither could vault them past the Los Angeles Dodgers in the National League Championship Series.

The Cubs' depth and a potentially explosive offense should help avert any major issues in 2018, but of course, there's still a scenario in which the season turns sideways.

The simplest thing to do when wondering where it all could go wrong is look at the bullpen. Relief pitchers are the most volatile position group on most rosters. I believe the Cubs' bullpen has the possibility to be a strength, but I can't predict it with complete confidence.

It would be easy to point to new closer Brandon Morrow and immediately be concerned. I look at his numbers from last season — a 2.06 ERA with a 29.4 percent strikeout rate and 5.3 percent walk rate in 43 2/3 innings — and his raw stuff and I believe that fits into the closer's role quite nicely. But his injury history jumps out. I try to eliminate injuries in this exercise, but for Morrow, the injuries are more than just a blip. Putting together back-to-back full, healthy seasons isn't something Morrow is known for.

But the Cubs are certainly aware of that. Their bullpen may not have the name recognition of the New York Yankees or Cleveland Indians' groups, but the depth they've built with the unit is strong as far as relievers go. Steve Cishek's and Pedro Strop's consistency should be lauded. Strop has been with the Cubs for four full seasons and has never delivered an ERA above 3 during that time. Cishek's career-worst ERA for a season was the 3.58 he posted in 2015. Of his seven full seasons in the bigs, he's had an ERA below 3.00 five times and he's racked up 25 or more saves in a season three times.

Consistency may not be the first word that comes to mind when we talk about Carl Edwards, Jr., but there are few relievers who are as electric as he is at his best. If new pitching coach Jim Hickey can help Edwards keep his walk rate closer to 10 percent rather than 15, he adds another top-tier closing option if Morrow goes down. If Justin Wilson can find his command as well (he'd had just one full season with a walk rate above 10 percent before his 20.9 percent rate in 17 2/3 innings with the Cubs gave him a 14.1 percent rate in 2017), he's another option to anchor the back of the Cubs bullpen.

The recent success of Brian Duensing and Mike Montgomery bodes well for 2018. But it also speaks to the unpredictability of relievers. After them are Justin Grimm, Dillon Maples and Dario Alvarez.

Perhaps all these names don't bring about suggestions of a super bullpen on the North Side, but I like the composition of this bullpen quite a bit. It has both consistency and impact and the chance for more. I default to a bullpen being what sinks a team, but in this case, I like the depth here and would rather focus on another area that could be what everyone is pointing to if somehow the Cubs fall short of October this season: the starting pitching.

After the signing of Darvish, this suggestion feels a bit silly. But as much as I like the Cubs rotation — I believe they have a chance to be if not the best, among the best in baseball — I can envision it all falling apart there just as easily as I can with the bullpen.

My first question for the group right now is who among the five of Darvish, Jon Lester, Kyle Hendricks, Jose Quintana and Tyler Chatwood would you bank on giving the Cubs 200-plus innings in 2018? Quintana had his string of four-straight 200-inning seasons snapped last year, but he feels like the odds-on favorite to get there among this group. Having done so in eight of the last 10 seasons, Lester would probably be next.

But injuries and some bouts of ineffectiveness limited Lester to just 180 2/3 innings last season. That's a strong number in today's game, so that's hardly a knock on Lester. The 2017 season had just 35 pitchers reach the 180-inning mark. Not including strike-shortened seasons, that's tied for the fewest-ever. The 1953 season had only 35 180-plus inning pitchers as well, but that was a 16-team league and 154-game

schedule. When you remember how starting pitchers are being used in today's game, it's easy to understand how we're talking an entirely different beast here.

Lester will also pitch this season at the age of 34. Since 2000, there are just 95 pitchers (about 5.3 per season) who qualified for the ERA title, were 34 or older and produced an ERA+ of at least 110. However, only eight pitchers were able to accomplish the feat over the last four seasons. Last year, at the age of 33, Lester failed to reach that 110 ERA+ mark for just the second time in his last 10 seasons. If we look at pitchers 34 and older who were able to reach the 200-inning mark and deliver an ERA+ of 110 or better since 2000, we get just 62 pitchers, and only four in the last four seasons.

Last season, there were just 26 pitchers 33 or older who managed to log at least 100 innings, Lester being one of them. Of that group, Lester probably falls in line, or close behind, Justin Verlander and Zack Greinke in terms of pitchers 34 or older most likely to reach 200 innings and post a 110 or better ERA+. The Cubs were willing to invest so much on Lester because they felt he'd age well and he certainly is a candidate to do so. But 2017 leaves us wondering if the final three seasons of Lester's contract with the Cubs will be a steady decline into the back of the Cubs rotation.

For me, Lester feels like the biggest potential variance in the rotation. He could compete for a Cy Young, he could drop off into an aging starter struggling to eat innings or he could be anything in that wide gap in-between. Chatwood is probably next on that scale. We've talked about how the Cubs plan to extract more out of Chatwood and why there is reason to believe he could potentially deliver significant impact to their rotation. But this is a pitcher who has never reached 160 innings in a season and is coming off a season in which he posted a 4.69 ERA. It's hardly a stretch to imagine Chatwood struggling to find his footing after years of pitching in Coors Field dinged his confidence and altered his pitching strategy.

With Hendricks, we have a pitcher with a career 2.94 ERA and just two seasons removed from a third-place Cy Young finish. I expect him to look more like the pitcher who posted a 2.19 ERA in 13 regular-season starts post-injury in 2017, rather than the one who struggled with a 4.09 ERA in his first 11 starts and had a fastball that barely reached the mid-80s. But what if that velocity isn't consistent, the mechanics come and go and the command is spotty? Hendricks has proven he can still get by doing just that, but this is the difference between a top-of-the-rotation starter and one who is barely getting through five innings with multiple runs allowed.

Quintana is about as consistent as they come, but even he is looking to bounce back after a season in which he delivered a career-worst 4.15 ERA and struggled with his command at times after the World Baseball Classic sapped him of his normal spring routine. It feels like right now, Quintana, Darvish (who I see as someone with the ceiling of an ace in 2018 and the floor of a mid-rotation starter for a playoff team) and Hendricks are the safest bets for the Cubs rotation this upcoming season. But there are some real reasons to wonder what it all will look like after 162 games.

And all of the above is assuming health. Any season for any team can easily be derailed if the injury bug hits. That's where depth becomes a factor. Having Montgomery as the sixth starter certainly helps. But as good as Montgomery can look, we're still talking about a pitcher who has a career strikeout rate below 20 percent and walked 10.2 percent of the batters he faced last season. The ground-ball rate of 57.8 percent can certainly make up for those red flags, but those are hardly peripherals that inspire confidence.

After Montgomery, the options are Eddie Butler, Alec Mills and the Cubs' top pitching prospect, Adalberto Alzolay. Yes, it's rare to have eight proven starters to rely on, so this is hardly a criticism of the job Theo Epstein and company have done building pitching depth.



Pretty much every bullpen in baseball could be picked apart and the Cubs are no different. The fickle nature of youth could bite the Cubs offense, but that seemed to happen last season and they were still able to generate 822 runs, second-most in the NL and just two runs behind the Colorado Rockies. But if there's one area I can really see sinking them this season, it's if too many of their starters hit too far below their 50th percentile projection. It's unlikely and certainly not expected, but that's how the 2018 Cubs could be sunk.

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### **The Athletic**

If his cutter and slider are working, Yu Darvish could have a special season

By Sahadev Sharma

When their season ended, the Cubs front office didn't foresee a deal with Yu Darvish to wrap up their offseason spending.

But they also didn't expect that final piece to be added just days before pitchers and catchers are to report in Mesa, Arizona. And they certainly didn't think the price tag would be six years and \$126 million.

So a move that went from unlikely to expected over the course of three months is finally a reality. Anyone who believed the Cubs would go into the season without one more upgrade to their rotation doesn't know Theo Epstein.

"We're not done," Epstein said matter of factly at last month's Cubs Convention. "We have confidence in this group if this is the 25-man that we're taking to spring training. But realistically we'd certainly like to add another pitcher. I like the talent we have right now, but I'd certainly like to add depth. You can do that through depth moves or by adding another real quality pitcher and bolster the depth even more that way. We'd make a move tonight if we could. But it's not there for us. We'll be patient and keep working on it."

The Cubs, like the rest of the baseball world this winter, were certainly patient. This deal is the byproduct of a historically slow offseason. The addition of Darvish creates a domino effect that strengthens multiple units by adding that "real quality pitcher" Epstein spoke of last month. Darvish obviously upgrades the rotation, but he also pushes Mike Montgomery to his familiar swingman role in the bullpen, giving the team potentially three reliable lefties and in Montgomery, one who can be used effectively in various ways.

The Cubs now have their expected five-man rotation of Darvish, Jon Lester, Kyle Hendricks, Jose Quintana and Tyler Chatwood under contract through at least 2021. (assuming Darvish doesn't use the opt-out built into his contract after the 2019 season) Montgomery is around through 2021 as well and a rehabbing Drew Smyly looms as pitching depth for 2019. Should they get to October as expected, a four-man rotation of Darvish, Lester, Hendricks and Quintana, in some order, is as formidable as any team in baseball.

Snagging Darvish at an AAV of just \$21 million also keeps them around \$11 million shy of this season's \$197 million luxury tax threshold, according to Cot's Contracts. That leaves them enough room to not make payroll an excuse from being aggressive at the deadline (if they have the pieces in their system to allow them to be active), nor does it stop them from adding a big name from next winter's highly anticipated free agent class.

Since Darvish was traded midseason last summer and couldn't be tendered a qualifying offer from the Los Angeles Dodgers, this move doesn't cost the Cubs a draft pick like signing Alex Cobb would have. And now that Jake Arrieta is assured of signing elsewhere, the Cubs will have a pick coming their way once that happens.

The Cubs were probably hesitant to go to a sixth year on the deal, but the reality is at \$21 million a year, if they're in a position where they're hamstrung by that money at some point over the next six years, ownership is either being stingy with the budget or Epstein has added far too many onerous contracts to the ledger. But don't fret about years two through six right now. How much will Darvish improve the Cubs in 2018?

At FanGraphs, the projections had the Cubs pegged as a 92-win team (Baseball Prospectus' PECOTA system was a bit less bullish, putting the Cubs at 89 wins). The ZiPS projection system had Mike Montgomery at around 2 WAR for next season as a starter. Darvish, with a projection of 3.9 WAR, gives them a two-win bump in the rotation and then Montgomery would likely give them about a win or so bump over whichever reliever is pushed from the bullpen. That is a significant upgrade.

There are reasons to wonder just how good Darvish can be. There are the two starts Darvish made in the World Series, both 1 2/3 inning clunkers in which he gave up a combined eight earned runs, nine hits and two homers against the 22 batters he faced. But with the Houston Astros confirming that Darvish was tipping his pitches, that becomes less a concern about his skillset and more something the Cubs coaching staff needs to ensure doesn't become an issue again in the future. If they can do that, perhaps the 1.59 ERA with 14 strikeouts and one walk he posted over 11 1/3 innings in his first two playoff starts last October will be the more common occurrence.

Injuries limited him to 144 1/3 innings in 2014 and then Tommy John surgery knocked him out for the entire 2015 season and suppressed his innings total to just 100 1/3 in 2016. He bumped back up to 186 2/3 last season (including a quick DL stint with a back issue) and now approaching nearly three years from going under the knife, Darvish perhaps can get back to the 200 innings he averaged in his first two seasons in the big leagues.

Darvish also looked like a much better pitcher after the trade, likely because of some changes to his pitch usage and sequencing suggested by the Dodgers. As far as his pitch selection went, the primary difference seemed to be with how often Darvish used his cutter. With Los Angeles, Darvish used his cutter against lefties over 80 percent more often and dropped his usage of the pitch against righties by over 60 percent.

The actual results on the cutter didn't change much, opponents actually fared well against the pitch overall, regardless of how often he used it. But this is where sequencing comes into effect. After attacking lefties with his four-seamer on the first pitch 45 percent of the time with the Texas Rangers in the first four months of 2017, Darvish dropped that number to 21 percent with the Dodgers and upped his cutter usage on the first pitch from 17 percent to 49 percent. It's not really about how good the cutter is, but rather when he's using it and how he's setting up opponents for the rest of his arsenal.

With the changes, Darvish's strikeout rate jumped four points to 30.2 percent while his walk rate fell to 6.4 percent over his nine regular season starts with L.A.. It's far from a given that Darvish would be able to hold that type of performance over the course of 30-plus starts. But if he could, he'd be among the elite pitchers in the game. Last season, only three pitchers were able to post a strikeout rate above 30 percent while also delivering a walk rate below the league average for starters of 8.1 percent. Those starters were Chris Sale, Max Scherzer and Corey Kluber, both of last season's Cy Young winners and the

American League runner-up. National League runner-up Clayton Kershaw missed the 30 percent strikeout mark by two-tenths of a percentage point.

Of course, the Dodgers also limited the amount of time Darvish spent on the mound. Over nine starts, Darvish averaged about 5 1/2 innings per outing, about seven-tenths of an inning less per start than what he averaged in his first 22 starts with the Rangers last season. The Dodgers are notoriously conservative with how they use starters. Anyone who watched Dave Roberts handle his staff during the World Series knows how dogmatic they are with these methods.

But regardless of the differences between Darvish with the Rangers and the Dodgers, even with his full season totals, Darvish managed to finish with a 3.5 WAR (according to FanGraphs). That was good for 16th among starting pitchers in baseball, and his 27.6 percent strikeout rate was 12th for starting pitchers. Darvish has the ceiling of an elite pitcher, at least in 2018. His floor, assuming health, is that of an above-average pitcher who would fit into the top three of the Cubs rotation, depending on just how good everyone else around him is performing.

Over his career in the big leagues, Brooks Baseball has credited Darvish with using eight different types of pitches. Of course, he won't be using all of them with regularity in 2018, but it gives the Cubs options when trying to figure out how to maximize his talent. Finding a way to get his slider back to its pre-surgery form could be high on their list. It was one of the more effective pitches in all of baseball in 2013 as Darvish used it to finish off 134 of the 277 batters he struck out that season and helped him post a 32.9 percent strikeout rate, a mark that was over four percentage points better than the closest eligible starter.

The Cubs have countered the Milwaukee Brewers' big additions of Lorenzo Cain and Christian Yelich. They are now solidly among the class of the National League along with the Dodgers and Washington Nationals. They were a contender for the World Series before this move, but doing so solidified that position and allowed for one more failsafe should the unexpected befall the team during the season. It's clear that the addition of Darvish makes the Cubs a better team in 2018. How much better will be determined by how they use him and just how much more talent they can extract from his special and unique right arm.

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### **The Athletic**

Where Mike Montgomery fits with Yu Darvish in a starring role for Cubs

By Patrick Mooney

MESA, Ariz. – Getting bumped to the bullpen for Yu Darvish is different than Brett Anderson taking your job in the rotation – or at least it's hard to argue with the six-year, \$126 million investment the Cubs are making in the star Japanese pitcher.

We don't know Mike Montgomery's initial reaction to the Darvish megadeal. But during a recent conversation at the Cubs' complex that lasted almost 15 minutes, Montgomery made this crystal clear: 1) He wants to win another World Series ring. 2) He understands that he's in no position to make any sort of trade demands. 3) He will prepare to stretch out as a starter and do what's best for the team.

This winter, Montgomery made it known that he wanted a real chance to start – first in a report from The Athletic's Ken Rosenthal and then again in interviews with ESPN and the Chicago Sun-Times – without loudly requesting a trade.

You get the sense that Montgomery didn't want his versatility and resilient left arm to be taken for granted. The swingman has spoken with Cubs president Theo Epstein and new pitching coach Jim Hickey about "being smarter" in "how we might transition that."

"Long-term in my career – what I was doing last year – I just don't know how sustainable that is," Montgomery said after an informal workout last week in Mesa. "From a physical standpoint, it is hard. It took a toll on my body, my arm. Making starts and coming out of the bullpen three days later – and pitching multiple innings out of the bullpen – I don't think it's something that I want to do long-term."

Montgomery accounted for 130 2/3 innings last season and showed his potential during a 14-start audition that began in June. In one of his best outings, he took a no-hitter into the sixth inning against the Tampa Bay Rays on Sept. 19 at Tropicana Field. Three days later, he got four outs in a one-run, 10-inning win over the Milwaukee Brewers at Miller Park.

Montgomery (3.38 overall ERA) established himself as one of the staff's most valuable pitchers (2.4 WAR) – and then looked run down in the playoffs (nine runs, 14 hits allowed in 4 1/3 innings).

"It's kind of balancing my health, in my mind, and being able to help the club," Montgomery said. "They kind of go hand in hand. Because if I'm at my best physically – even if it's a role that I might not want to necessarily be in – it's going to help the team.

"Me at 70, 60 percent – because I'm worn down – is not going to help the team. I think it's looking at it from that angle as well."

The Cubs try to look at everything from all angles and will have answers when pitchers and catchers officially report to Arizona on Tuesday, when Epstein, manager Joe Maddon and general manager Jed Hoyer will hold their welcome-to-camp press conference.

"I was in a role that was not very common in baseball," Montgomery said. "So I think from their end, they might not have known how to handle it. My mentality was: 'I'm going to be ready to pitch at all times.' So I kept saying, 'Yeah, yeah, I can pitch today.' Maybe it's not offering to pitch all the time, to be a little bit smarter for my health and keep me fresher.

"It's an experiment because it's something that's new to all of us, really. I've never really done that in my career. But I've always been a guy that's always said, 'Yeah, I can pitch today.' So I think for me [it's learning] that it's probably not the best to say that all the time."

The reality is that last season, Anderson only lasted until early May, Kyle Hendricks, Jon Lester and John Lackey all spent time on the disabled list, and Jake Arrieta got shut down for most of September with a strained hamstring.

Even with Darvish at the top of the rotation, Montgomery should get opportunities to show how good he can be. Montgomery just wants to be in the loop and have his voice heard when the Cubs are switching him in and out of the bullpen.

"It's just a different animal to kind of tackle," Montgomery said. "You realize: 'Man, it's not as easy as you thought it was going to be.'"

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## The Athletic

How the Cubs landed Yu Darvish and reloaded for another World Series run

By Patrick Mooney

MESA, Ariz. – The Cubs’ Sloan Park complex felt eerily quiet late Saturday morning, the last open weekend before almost six weeks of spring training and the 162-game schedule. The green fields were empty, a couple players walked through the parking lot and a small group of fans stood in the sunshine on the other side of the fence, hoping for autographs.

And then, like a lightning bolt out of the clear blue skies, sources told The Athletic that Yu Darvish had agreed to a six-year, \$126 million contract with the Cubs, guaranteeing Camp Maddon will again be a three-ring circus.

It didn’t matter that the Cubs targeted Darvish years ago, or that the negotiations dragged out for months, or that the star Japanese pitcher had limited options in Major League Baseball’s winter of free-agent discontent. This is still a jaw-dropping moment that will make them a legitimate World Series contender and shape the rest of The Bryzzo Era.

Without Darvish, the Baseball Prospectus PECOTA system already forecast the Cubs to be an 89-win team at a time when almost half of the National League isn’t really trying to win.

With Darvish at the top of a rotation that already includes Jon Lester, Kyle Hendricks, Jose Quintana and Tyler Chatwood — and valuable lefty swingman Mike Montgomery now slotted into the bullpen — the Cubs should win a third straight division title and return that same group again in 2019 and 2020.

This should also quiet any nagging concerns about the Cubs developing homegrown pitchers or matching up with the Los Angeles Dodgers or feeling a little too satisfied with that 2016 World Series title.

Weeks after Theo Epstein took over baseball operations at Clark and Addison and promised to build The Foundation of Sustained Success, the Cubs finished a distant second to the Texas Rangers’ \$51.7 million bid for the right to negotiate with Darvish, who earned All-Star selections in 2012, 2013 and 2014 before undergoing Tommy John surgery on his right elbow in 2015.

The day after the Dodgers eliminated the Cubs from the NL Championship Series last October — Darvish won Game 3 — Epstein sat in a Wrigley Field stadium club for his end-of-season press conference and discussed the possibility of another nine-figure investment in pitching.

“You don’t want to make a living — or make a habit — out of trying to solve your problems with high-priced pitching free agents,” Epstein said, “because over the long run, there’s just so much risk involved. It can really hamstring your organization. But we have a lot of players who have reasonable salaries who contribute an awful lot that might put us in a position to consider it going forward in the future.

“So I wouldn’t rule it out completely, and I wouldn’t rule it in. I would just say it’s not our preferred method. We prefer to make a small deal and find Jake Arrieta, but you can’t do that every year, either. That’s tough.”

So is putting together a megadeal that took until three days before pitchers and catchers report to Arizona for spring training. But chairman Tom Ricketts gives Epstein’s group wide latitude to pursue talent and spend right up to this year’s \$197 million competitive-balance-tax threshold.

The Cubs needed all those young hitters to manage the risk and create even more financial flexibility. Small-market teams that pursued Darvish — like the Milwaukee Brewers and Minnesota Twins — simply don't have the same margin for error.

That surplus allowed the Cubs to ship top prospect Eloy Jimenez to the White Sox in a blockbuster trade last summer. Darvish is the next domino to fall after Quintana, who will earn just under \$31 million across the next three seasons (once his 2019 and 2020 club options are picked up).

"It's really significant when you can acquire a really good player who's got a very reasonable contract," Epstein said last July. "You almost, in your head, start thinking of a slot being created for a second player, perhaps, in free agency that can come along with him that you can then afford because his contract is so manageable.

"You don't look at it as if you've already acquired that player. But in your mind, understanding the limits of the CBT thresholds and everything else that you have to work within, it really does create a ton of options.

"We'll be able to pack more talent on the roster because of his contract. There's no way around it."

That CBT system loomed over the entire offseason as super-teams like the Dodgers and New York Yankees carefully tried to get their payrolls below \$197 million, creating another opening for the Cubs.

The week before Christmas, Epstein, general manager Jed Hoyer, run prevention coordinator Tommy Hottovy and pro scouting director Kyle Evans met with Darvish and his Wasserman representatives at a Four Seasons resort in the Dallas area.

Whether or not anyone raised the idea of tipping pitches in the World Series — Darvish didn't bring a translator so he could challenge himself and work on his English — the Cubs try to sell free agents on the pitching infrastructure that helped turn Arrieta into a Cy Young Award winner and Hendricks into a major league ERA leader.

But the years and dollars would ultimately matter more than the bells and whistles from the scouting/video department or a personal catcher from Texas signed to a minor league deal (Chris Gimenez). And the Cubs wouldn't make an entire evaluation off two bad World Series starts (21.60 ERA) against the Houston Astros.

The Darvish camp's initial reference points — Lester's six-year, \$155 million contract and Stephen Strasburg's seven-year, \$175 million extension with the Washington Nationals — had to drop in the middle of a winter slowdown where the players union is organizing a Florida training camp for all the unsigned free agents.

The stars aligned at a time when the franchise is trying to transform Wrigleyville into a year-round destination and launch its own TV network. Darvish is that kind of magnetic talent, with almost 2 million Twitter followers. The message just sent from the Cubs to the rest of the baseball world: See Yu in October.

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## **The Athletic**

Hot stove is now lit as Cubs, Yu Darvish agree on \$126 million deal

By Jon Greenberg

Where were you when Ken Rosenthal tweeted that the Cubs signed Yu Darvish?

The library with your kids? Walking your dog? Working out?

On a sleepy Saturday in a snow-covered Chicago, the hot stove exploded into 126 million fiery pieces and nothing will ever be the same for the Cubs.

The Cubs finally got their man, signing right-handed pitcher Yu Darvish to a six-year deal worth a guaranteed \$126 million, according to Rosenthal.

The Cubs had been considered the clear favorite for Darvish, despite a late start on courting him. They had the need for a frontline starter and the team to use him as a World Series propellant. The Cubs didn't plan on signing him when free agency began, but as we've learned this winter, plans can go awry.

Like a slew of other teams, the Cubs didn't meet with Darvish until after they realized his initial price tag wasn't going to be met as the free agent market sputtered. Cubs sources disputed earlier reports they were close to a deal — including a tweet from “Barstool Carl” that the two sides were a doctor's physical away from agreement back in late December — noting that while communication lines were open after their meeting, no progress had been made toward a conclusion.

But that's how these things go. A deal can go from limbo to reality in a phone call.

With such little news in a frigid market, Darvish's free agency became something of a baseball serial, with him even chiming in on Twitter.

While six years is longer than the Cubs wanted to go with any pitcher, the annual value of the deal at \$21 million is a minor bargain. The Cubs let Jake Arrieta and John Lackey walk in free agency and signed Tyler Chatwood to a three-year, \$38 million deal. They had the money to sign Darvish, with approximately \$30 million to stay under the luxury tax this season. They won't lose a draft pick for signing him either, as he was ineligible for a qualifying offer.

When the offseason began, it looked like the Cubs, with a minor league system bereft of big names, might have to trade a position player for a starting pitcher. But Theo Epstein managed to hold onto his young hitters while signing two starters.

Are they scrambling at Fortune Magazine to give Epstein another World's Greatest Leader cover?

Aside from the Yankees trading for Giancarlo Stanton, the Cubs are the clear winner of a slow offseason, signing two starting pitchers, a closer in Brandon Morrow and relief help in Steve Cishek and Brian Duensing.

With Darvish joining Jon Lester, Jose Quintana and Kyle Hendricks, the Cubs find themselves vaulted back into favorite status in the National League. Spring training in Mesa, Arizona is about to get a lot busier as the Japanese media and the national reporters will decamp to Sloan Park to take the temperature of the restocked 2016 World Series champions.

Just when I was looking forward to a breezy camp and a half-empty press box in April. Darvish is the biggest Japanese player they've ever signed, which should make for interesting season in a not-remodeled press box.

Darvish's numbers weren't eye-popping last season — a 3.86 ERA in 31 starts with the Texas Rangers and Los Angeles Dodgers — but his 1.163 WHIP was below his career average and his stuff was popping. His four-seam fastball sat around 94 mph (according to Brooks Baseball) with a nasty cutter, a variety of complementary pitches, and when it's working, a freaky slider.

Darvish gave up one run in 6 1/3 innings against the sagging Cubs lineup in the NLCS last season, but got lit up (eight earned runs in 3 1/3 innings over two starts) by the Houston Astros in the World Series, as he was purportedly tipping his pitches.

Pitching coach Jim Hickey can't be complaining about this assignment.

Darvish turns 32 this season, not an ideal age to sign a six-year deal, and one imagines the Cubs had to give him an extra year or two on the deal to break the impasse and get him signed.

That's been one of the stumbling blocks all along in this offseason — teams not willing to add extra years to make the deal for the frontline players.

The money or the years shouldn't matter right now for the Cubs. They had a great opportunity to sign the best starting pitcher on the market and they took it.

Pitchers and catchers report to Sloan Park this week, and now, so does Yu Darvish. The Cubs are back.

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### **The Athletic**

Letters from Camp: Why Brandon Morrow is ready to close for Cubs and bounce back after World Series run with Dodgers

By Patrick Mooney

MESA, Ariz. — “I'm not much of a shit-talker,” Brandon Morrow said with a smile, dismissing any back and forth with the Cubs hitters he dominated during last year's National League Championship Series.

Morrow has seen enough to understand how fleeting a career can be and appreciate the opportunity in front of him now. This is someone with the talent to be a first-round pick of the Seattle Mariners, the stuff to put up a 17-strikeout one-hitter for the Toronto Blue Jays and the resiliency to set up Kenley Jansen with the Los Angeles Dodgers. This is also the same guy who signed a minor-league deal last winter and began his season at Triple-A Oklahoma City.

“Maybe they'll get on me,” Morrow said Friday, “just because I was with the Dodgers and we've been meeting them in the playoffs every year, it seems, for the last few years. If things work out the way it looks like they should, we'll see 'em again.”

It's a long way from low-key workouts at the Sloan Park complex to October — especially for a pitcher who's had trouble staying healthy throughout his career — but the Cubs think Morrow can notch the last out that would get them back to the World Series.

Morrow absolutely shut down the Cubs during the NLCS, giving up one hit across 4 2/3 scoreless innings and striking out seven of the 16 batters he faced. He used that performance to get a two-year, \$21 million contract and a conditional promise that he would be the closer in 2018.



“It was pretty much that will be your role, unless we bring Wade [Davis] back,” Morrow said, referencing the All-Star closer who wound up signing a three-year, \$52 million deal with the Colorado Rockies in late December. “I was totally fine with that, obviously. I had a lot of success setting up for Kenley last year. I closed in the past — way back over a couple years with Seattle — so I have a little bit of experience doing that.

“But there’s been eight years in-between and obviously my experience level has grown throughout all that.”

Once a No. 5 overall pick — Andrew Miller, Clayton Kershaw, Tim Lincecum and Max Scherzer were among the next six selections — Morrow went from Cal-Berkeley to Seattle’s 2007 Opening Day roster in less than a calendar year.

Morrow made 93 starts for Toronto between 2010 and 2014, spending time on the disabled list with a strained left oblique, an entrapped radial nerve in his right forearm and a torn tendon sheath in his right index finger.

Morrow’s reboot with the San Diego Padres slowed when he needed season-ending shoulder surgery in 2015, and then came down with valley fever, which caused him to lose almost 25 pounds as he tried to prepare for the 2016 season.

Given all that medical history, the Cubs are now expecting Morrow, 33, to bounce back from the high-stress experience that saw him pitch in 14 out of 15 playoff games for the Dodgers.

Morrow — who has an offseason home about 15 minutes away from the Cubs’ facility in Mesa — delayed his throwing program by about a month as a precaution. Morrow also looked at how hard manager Joe Maddon pushed Aroldis Chapman during the 2016 World Series run.

“I felt great,” Morrow said. “As far as the workload goes, I was in a lot of games and a lot of back-to-backs, but I didn’t throw that many pitches. From what I saw comparing it to Chapman the year before — who had just as many innings — he threw 100 more pitches than I did in the playoffs.”

Chapman actually threw two more innings (15 2/3) that postseason — while firing 273 pitches to Morrow’s 176 out of the Dodger bullpen.

“That was something that stuck out to me,” Morrow said. “The fact that I was able to be so economical with my pitches bodes well for the future. I hopefully won’t have any sort of hangover. I don’t feel it now, anyway.”

After a World Series Game 7 loss to the Houston Astros, Jansen’s \$80 million contract and a mandate to stay underneath the \$197 million luxury-tax threshold made Morrow a luxury item for the Dodgers, a decision that could ultimately determine the NL pennant.

“Everybody knows the story,” Morrow said. “I kind of priced myself out of where they were going to be at that period. I know that they’ve made some moves, but who knows what would happen if you waited?”

“In hindsight, this market has been crazy, so you never know what happens. But you can’t wait on a team to come and obviously they were in a tough situation with their payroll.”

Morrow doesn't have his Wrigley Field music picked out yet. It will be hard to top Jansen's entrance with "California Love" blasting from the Dodger Stadium sound system. But the Cubs expect the ninth inning to be drama-free.

"Watching Kenley last year, he was like, 'Ah, when are the playoffs starting? I'm bored throwing the ninth in August. Give me October,'" Morrow said. "But having the experience in October last year and throwing all those pressure-filled innings...I've come to a place in my career where I think I can put that all aside and be successful and effective in those innings."

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