



Padres Press Clips

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Matt Stairs keeping it simple, positive as latest Padres hitting coach

Kevin Acee, SD Union Tribune, 2/22/18

Travis Jankowski explained the tutelage of new Padres hitting coach Matt Stairs in one easily understandable sentence.

"It's get a good pitch to hit, don't miss it," Jankowski said.

It was an appropriately succinct summation delivered in a matter-of-fact manner that would have made Stairs nod in approval and say, "Damn right."

Stairs, who made a living hitting baseballs with 12 major league teams over 19 seasons, doesn't cloud his players' heads.

"You have to make it simple," Stairs said of his job. "Yeah you can change mechanics. You can change certain guys when they really need help. But all in all, guys in big-league camp are talented. My biggest thing is the mental side of the game and the approach."

In Stairs' vernacular, that means don't chase "bastard pitches" or "give away at-bats" or "give the pitcher the credit he deserves."

It works.

At least it did magnificently in 2017, his only season as an actual hitting coach.

Under his tutelage, the Philadelphia Phillies improved in virtually every category. Primarily, the Phillies jumped from .301 to .315 (29th to 24th) in on-base percentage and from .685 to .723 (30th to 26th) in OPS. That resulted in them scoring 80 more runs (690) in 2017 over '16.

If Stairs can effect anywhere near that kind of change with his latest reclamation project, maybe he'll stick around longer than any of the other eight hitting coaches the Padres have had since moving into Petco Park in 2004.

Stairs takes over as the hitting guru for a team that hasn't done much hitting.

“When you have an on-base percentage of .299,” Stairs said, “that’s terrible.”

The Padres have ranked last in on-base percentage and in the bottom three in OPS for four straight years.

When he showed up at his interview this offseason, he was talking Andy Green’s language. Not surprising, since that is why the Padres went after him, to help further an organizational philosophy that just hasn’t taken hold at the major league level yet.

In addition to his nearly constant reminders to look to hit “gap to gap” and “commit to hitting the baseball,” Stairs has used one damning fact to illustrate where being better at getting on base will result in them being a better team.

Of the Padres’ 189 home runs in 2017, 120 were solo shots.

“No wonder you only scored 500-and-some runs,” Stairs will say, not quite giving the Padres full credit for the MLB-low 604 times they crossed home plate. “Just think, now all of a sudden, maybe if I walked and the guy behind me hit a home run, we wouldn’t have taken one swing for one. It would have gotten maybe two, maybe three. Then the 604 goes to 670, 680.”

The Padres’ 189 homers ranked 22nd in MLB. But their 1.48 runs per home run were second-fewest in the majors, ahead of only the San Francisco Giants.

Improvement in that area is a simple matter of getting on base. The Padres can hit — when they actually make contact with good pitches.

As a team, they struck out 25.2 percent of the time, second-highest ratio in baseball last year. They walked in just 7.7 percent of their plate appearances, the sixth-lowest rate.

So Stairs’ task is getting Hunter Renfroe and Austin Hedges and others to wait for the right pitch in the right place.

“The most important thing is don’t give at-bats away,” Stairs said. “That is the key to being a successful player — limit the at-bats you give away. As in, if you’re looking for a fastball first pitch and you get a change-up and swing at it and hit a weak grounder to first, that’s an at-bat you can never get back.”

Stairs said a low estimate for at-bats given away by an average player is five per week.

“That’s 20 a month, that’s 120 at-bats a year,” Stairs said. “You’re 0-for-120.”

Stairs tracks what he assesses to be wasted at-bats and updates players weekly. That constructive critique is as close as he comes to being negative.

Simplicity is followed closely by positivity among his coaching tenets. Having been a major-league hitter for almost all of two decades, he knows how easy it is to clog a player’s brain with feedback and information. And he knows how difficult it is to be successful consistently over a long season.

You’re far more likely to hear laughter when Stairs is around the cage. And he almost exclusively points out good swings.

“Being a hitting coach is like a bartender you hear a lot of problems every day,” Stairs said. “At the end of the night, you try to give them one little thing to go home with positive.”

Stairs has been working with some Padres in Arizona since mid-January and others for the past few days.

The players say they see and feel the difference in batting practice. Jankowski, for one, is spraying the ball all over the place, truly realizing for the first time how effective that can be.

Friday, spring games start. Stairs called that a “huge” next step in the progression of a new approach for many of the team’s hitters. Games allow results to be contextualized.

“They jump aboard what you preach,” Stairs said. “I’m hunting the fastball. I’m making that guy work twice as hard to get me out as it takes for me to get knocks. That’s the attitude I want for our hitters.”

When the real games start, there will be another task, one for which he is well-suited to impart knowledge.

This idea of not giving away at-bats becomes increasingly difficult as April gives way to May and the season plods along through summer.

“Everyone talks about the hardest thing is to hit a baseball,” Stairs said. “The hardest thing to do is keep your concentration for 162 games, for 550-600 at bats. ... If this team can limit the at-bats it gives away and keep that concentration level — I understand it’s going to be hard — but I guarantee you’re going to see an improvement in that on-base percentage, because guys are going to be 1-for-3 with a walk instead of 1-for-4.”

Sounds pretty simple.

There was no need to ask new Padres shortstop Freddy Galvis about how Stairs helped him to a career-high .309 OBP last season. All that was necessary was to witness their first interaction when Galvis got to camp.

“Gap to gap, limit the at-bats given away,” Galvis said.

To which, Stairs nodded and replied, “You’re damn right.”

As Chargers vibe recedes, Padres see big days ahead in San Diego

Tom Krasovic, SD Union Tribune, 2/23/18

Football was king in San Diego, and the king wore blue and gold, and the king reigned for nearly six decades.

Yes, baseball had moments. There were All-Star games, World Series games, Hall of Fame players. However, the baseball Padres never crowded out the football Chargers for long. The NFL gobbled up too much ground, in San Diego, in the whole country, for the Chargers to stay in the shadows.

“I think the Padres were always No. 2 to the Chargers here,” said longtime San Diego broadcaster Bob Chandler, a San Diego State graduate whose career dates to the early 1960s.

Even after the announcement to relocate, the Chargers continued to cast a shadow over the little Pads. It took the football team six months to clear out of San Diego. By then the Pads were more than halfway through another low-watt season.

Now comes a sea change. For the first time for a full year, the Chargers will be elsewhere than the big-league Pads.

Don't crown the Pads just yet. They've not joined a playoff race in any of the past seven years. They have the National League's worst record over the past 10 years. They've not won a playoff game on San Diego soil since San Diegans voted them a new ballpark in November 1998. Oddsmakers peg the team for under 75 wins this year.

Nor is San Diego entirely there for the taking, even with the Chargers out of the picture. The digital age has shredded the entertainment dollar into small pieces. Young adults are cutting the cord to cable TV, a main connector between the Pads and San Diegans. Baseball has become a three-hour game dominated by outcomes that don't include putting the ball in play.

Let's just say the Pads have a great opportunity within their realm, here and now. They're uniquely situated as the only Major League Baseball franchise of the 30 without a NFL, NBA or NHL team in its market.

Before the Chargers planted themselves in San Diego in 1961, the Pads were a minor league team in the Pacific Coast League. A small Navy town then, San Diego now is the country's eighth-largest city.

Sunny forecast

Pads ownership, which took over in August 2012, says watch out for the team in 2020, give or take a year or two.

The long-term forecast from Peter Seidler, managing partner, is for perennial success like the Pads never have maintained.

"I really expect what we're building now to lead us to 10 years of being in contention for the playoffs. We should make that happen," Seidler said in an interview this week.

The Pads have strung together four winning seasons just once, from the opening of Petco Park in 2004 through 2007.

Seidler defined playoff contention in two parts. Going into baseball seasons, the Pads will be universally viewed as a top-eight team in the 15-member National League. "The second piece of that would be," he said, "you get halfway through the season and you're still there."

The Pads will hit .500 in these 10 at-bats, guesses their lead investor. "I would say this: Five years of being in the playoffs, at least, and maybe three or four other years of being close and maybe not making it, and one year a bunch of weird stuff happens. At least five years where we get in."

Well aware that San Diego's weather is far easier to forecast than a baseball team's fortunes, Seidler fed some slack into the line.

"When I talk about 10 consecutive years of playoff contention," he said, "I know there will be a year or two when we're out of it by the end of August. But, (the perception will be that) we're a still strong enough team or organization, that it was a weird year. Weird things happened."

Chargers 2.0?

What Seidler is describing, the Chargers achieved. And then some.

For the 10 seasons from 2004 through 2013, the Chargers won six playoff berths. Also, they tended to stay relevant when they fell short. In 2010, for instance, when their run of four division-winning seasons ended, they led the league in total offense and defense, only to miss the playoffs due largely to their poor special teams.

In their favor, the Chargers had to get past only three teams to win the West, where the Pads have to surpass four.

Yet, attaining a height Seidler didn't forecast for his team, the Chargers won 60 percent of their games over the 10 years. Perhaps more remarkably, they never reached a Super Bowl and got to only one AFC Championship Game. And for all the on-field relevance within a sport that dominated the American sports landscape, team owner Dean Spanos never emerged as a popular figure in San Diego.

Opportunity – or not?

While it stands to reason that entertainment dollars not spent on football would go to baseball, and vice-versa, a former Chargers executive didn't see the San Diego sports scene as a zero-sum game.

“I believed that a high tide raised all boats,” said Jim Steeg, the team's chief operations officer from 2004 to 2010 and member of the mayoral panel that in 2015 recommended the Mission Valley site for a new Chargers stadium. “I wanted all local teams to do well to build enthusiasm for attending and watching games in the community. This included baseball, colleges, et cetera. I was a Padres season ticket holder.”

Yet Pads owners and executives shed few tears, one guesses, when San Diego voters denied the Chargers a new football stadium downtown in November 2016.

The building would've gone in the East Village, next to Petco Park.

Although the Pads never came out against the Chargers' facility measure, their neutral public stance was rather like a passive-aggressive thumbs down, or at least a finger pointing toward Mission Valley. And if the Pads were in fact opposed to Measure C, the Chargers were understanding of their position.

“They didn’t want us in their hair downtown,” Chargers counsel Mark Fabiani told me last June, while saying he believed the football team’s proposal for Mission Valley had a better chance of success.

At any rate, the Chargers are some 90 miles north, in Orange County, and their absence isn’t making many local hearts grown fonder. Threading the needle on the topic, Seidler sees opportunity for the Pads yet also doesn’t want them to be the only major-sports game in town for decades to come.

“You could debate whether it’s good for business or bad for business to have another professional major sports franchise here, but we are the only one,” he said. “On the one hand we should take advantage of that from a business standpoint. On the other hand, it’s a responsibility (to fare well) from a community standpoint, and I think we do. It doesn’t impact the way we operate our business — but I would rather see another major professional sports franchise in town than not. Just because I think it’s good for the city.

“It creates overall enthusiasm. The football team did what the football team did. We really feel an obligation to bring a winner here.”

Coming off their seventh consecutive losing season and one that ended with the worst run differential in the big leagues, the Pads probably will have to walk before they can run.

Seidler said his optimism begins with a highly ranked farm system that even Pads rivals have told me is legit.

Naturally, ownership is touting its recent high-stakes investments, notably the \$144-million pledge to first baseman Eric Hosmer and the contract extensions awarded last year to General Manager A.J. Preller and manager Andy Green.

The former San Diego Chargers are the much better bet to qualify for the next postseason, but there’s a Pads fan in their midst: Philip Rivers.

When Rivers moved to San Diego in 2004, the Pads were moving into the new ballpark and on the verge of drawing three million fans for the season.

While Rivers still seeks a first Super Bowl, the Pads will look to just get back on the baseball map.

Padres pitcher Wilhelmsen bounced from baseball to bartending — and back

Bryce Miller, SD Union Tribune, 2/22/18

Perched on the front of the chair at his spring training locker, Padres bullpen hopeful Tom Wilhelmsen launches into a spirited defense of his classic approach to ... paper airplane design.

He argues the basic folds used by generations of kids are best, shunning any fancy tinkering with the tail section. He hoists the finished product high enough for a couple of teammates to see, slowly turning it so they can gauge its potential from all angles.

He's not done. In fact, he's just starting.

Wilhelmsen debates the pros and cons of flying it in a full clubhouse with so many lacking eye protection. He discusses how to approach the weather conditions on the other side of the door in wind-whipped Peoria. He applies some of baseball's snappy analytics language, wondering about the craft's "exit velocity."

That's Wilhelmsen, a 34-year-old who can and routinely will turn any conversation into organic entertainment.

This is, after all, a guy who spent almost seven years away from baseball, slinging drinks at a Tiki bar in his native Tucson, Ariz. If he makes the Padres' opening-day roster, he'll bring his nickname The Bartender with him.

That was his life before carving a crazy path back to baseball, a long-haired, tie-dye-wearing dude in Birkenstocks who grooved at Jethro Tull concerts and worked the late shift.

"I was *that* guy," Wilhelmsen said this week. "Oh yeah."

The Brewers drafted Wilhelmsen in the seventh round of the 2002 amateur draft, the 199th player overall. The right-hander pitched his way to a 5-5 record at Single-A Beloit in 2003 before a pair of positive marijuana tests caused Milwaukee to suspend him for the following season.

And that, it seemed, was it for baseball.

So it was off to The Hut, an old metal fabrication plant that once produced bomb casings for World War II. The bar's signature drink was called Fat Man, named after the first atomic weapon.

"I might have forgotten," said Wilhelmsen, when asked to rattle off the ingredients. "Nope, I didn't. Three different flavored rums, Midori, pineapple juice, soda water, Grenadine and a garnish of orange, pineapple, cherry — and a smile."

Fat Man consumption, somewhat predictably, led to plenty of fights.

"You've got to jump right in the middle," Wilhelmsen said of his scuffle-stopping strategy. "You've got to get them outside. I was fortunate enough to never get struck."

The 6-foot-6 frame should have been enough to ward off most bouts of trouble.

In those days, though, Wilhelmsen said he gave off a different vibe.

"Back then, I had the long hair and a tie-dyed shirt so maybe I didn't look like the most threatening guy," he said. "But I certainly wasn't afraid to get in, because that was part of the job."

Life felt like an unmarked map, filled with dizzying destinations but no clear route. He backpacked Europe for a month with his now-wife, bouncing across five countries.

At Oktoberfest in Munich, Wilhelmsen learned one way to score free beers was a good old-fashioned language barrier.

"We walked into a tent, sat down and ordered a beer and a plate of food," he said. "Another couple across from us spoke in German. We didn't understand. We asked if they spoke English and they said, 'Who do you know here?'"

"We're like, 'We don't anybody — we're just here on holiday.' They said, 'This is a private tent.' Everything already was paid for. Right then, our beers and food come and we're thinking, we're the silly Americans who don't know anything.

"We immediately stood up, but they said to enjoy it. They said, just so you know, the smaller tents are for private parties. So we left some money and quickly wrapped up and left."

Wilhelmsen kept wandering. He set out to explore America's national parks for two and a half months by himself, finding his way to Yosemite. One day on the trail he noticed a minor commotion in the bushes.

"I looked up the trail about 75 feet and there's a baby bear," he said. "So immediately it was like, mama's going to be around. So I whipped out the camera in one hand and this itty-bitty, Swiss Army Knife kind of deal, just in case.

"But no blade was longer than my finger. That's what I had."

Eventually, the mother and three cubs sauntered off. And eventually, Wilhelmsen started to rethink his path.

"I think being able step away from (baseball) and not think about it for a while, I was able to start to miss it," he said. "My life was changing and evolving. I didn't know what else I could go do, so I figured I'd give baseball another shot."

Wilhelmsen tried out for an independent-league team in Tucson. When the Brewers learned he was pitching again, they called to remind him that they still owned his rights.

He promised to drive to the team's Maryvale Baseball Park in Phoenix the next day — after pitching one more game and working another shift at the bar.

"In that game, I blew out something in my shoulder," said Wilhelmsen, 34. "I thought for sure my attempt at a comeback was over."

The Mariners called after he was released by the Brewers, offering to help with his rehab. He stepped back on the mound in the second half of 2010 to play A-ball. The next spring, he broke camp with the big club — just a couple of months after his final shift at The Hut.

That sparked seven seasons in the majors, splitting time between Seattle, Texas and Arizona. He stepped away from the game for seven years. He came back for seven years.

The long-shot return has earned Wilhelmsen nearly \$7.7 million, according to Baseball Reference. Along the way, he finished off a six-pitcher no-hitter for the Mariners against the Dodgers in 2012.

“It’s a crazy path,” Padres manager Andy Green said.

Now, Wilhelmsen is trying to latch onto one of the Padres’ final bullpen spots along with a group expected to include Buddy Baumann, Colten Brewer, Carter Capps, Phil Maton and others.

So much has changed for Wilhelmsen, now married with a 5-year-old girl and 3-year-old boy. There are baseballs to throw. There are paper airplanes to build. Someone else needs to pour those Fat Mans.

“In the grand scheme of life, I’ve won,” he said.

Miguel Diaz shining in a major way at Padres camp

Kevin Acee, MLB.com, 2/22/18

Eight different pitchers are slated to throw for the Padres in their spring exhibition opener Friday against the Seattle Mariners.

Of particular interest will be the expected inning worked by Miguel Diaz. The right-hander has impressed early in camp — enough to spark talk he could make the opening day roster.

“He was nasty,” Wil Myers said after standing in against Diaz in batting practice Wednesday. “One of the best live BPs I’ve ever seen.”

Diaz’s fastball was darting, his slider was slippery as usual, and there is consensus among those who watched him that his change-up is vastly improved.

“The change-up is real,” Green said.

Diaz was a Rule 5 draft pick in 2017, meaning he had to stay with the Padres or be subject to waivers. He appeared in 31 games (28 out of the bullpen, 7.34 ERA) last season after having never spent time above Single-A.

It remains likely he returns to the minors for work, especially considering bullpen candidates are plentiful.

“He needs innings,” Green said.

But Green and pitching coach Darren Balsley indicated it is possible — should Diaz replicate his early action in spring games — that he could stick.

Spring arms

Brett Kennedy, a right-hander who went 13-7 with a 3.70 ERA in Double-A last year, will start Friday.

Buddy Baumann, Adam Cimber, Kyle Lloyd, Tom Wilhelmson and T.J. Yardley are among those expected to follow.

Green relishes the chance to see some young arms early in the spring schedule. But as veterans are worked into games and pitchers start to stretch out, his task will become increasingly difficult. There are 38 pitchers in major league camp, including at least a dozen who can be starters in the majors or minors.

“It’s going to be a challenge to get everybody innings,” Green said. “There are so many starting pitchers in camp right now and so many guys competing for spots that you’re not inclined to play them in a backfield game, because use you want to see them in a main game. But we’re going to have to figure out a way to navigate that, because there just logistically are not enough innings for those guys.”

Bubble-blowing Margot embraces 'superstar' status chase

Bryce Miller, SD Union Tribune, 2/23/18

The split second Clayton Richard spun to track the rocket in flight, the screaming baseball absolutely reeked of trouble. It sliced toward the gap in deep right-center — a double, for sure. Maybe a triple.

Pitchers know these things. This was the kind of dagger that destroys innings and ushers the dinged-up, demoralized arm to the showers. This was the mistake; the one that got away. Except, it didn't.

Richard caught a glimpse of an effortless blur named Manny Margot — and something that left him slack-jawed.

“I saw him blow a bubble after four or five steps,” Richard said. “Off the bat you think it's extra bases. Then you see him do that and you're like, ‘Whoa, he's got it.’ He's tracking it, he's blowing a bubble and he got under it fairly easily.”

That's Margot, the smiling, 23-year-old face of the Padres' youth movement. He's more confident by the minute — and stride — down to his symbolic bubble-blowing choice, Big League Chew.

He's the first player to find concrete footing in the Padres' green movement, an organizational about-face that stocked the farm system with about \$90 million in international and draft talent while netting even more young blood like Margot through trades.

When news leaked that the Padres had scooped up Royals first baseman Eric Hosmer and would shuffle veteran Wil Myers to the outfield, everyone questioned who would play the other corner spot. No one, though, wondered who would play center.

That job belongs to Margot, a blossoming standout from a dusty village in the Dominican Republic known only as Kilometer 56, simply because of the nearest roadside marker.

“It's something I've dreamed of since I was a kid, making it here and being in this sort of position,” Margot said this week through an interpreter. “But I don't think you can ever let up. You can't let that get to your head.

“We have a lot of other people coming, so I have to maintain focus.”

If Oakland’s Dustin Fowler isn’t able to capture his spot after late-June knee surgery, Margot will become the youngest starting center fielder in baseball. Projected front-liners at the position in the NL West average 29.5 years old. Baseball-wide, it hovers just north of 27.6.

ESPN’s Top 300 fantasy baseball list ranks no younger, full-time outfielders ahead of Margot. The sabermetric-sleuths at FanGraphs rate his speed index at 70 ... on a scale that goes to 70.

As the Padres aim to turn the corner, many of the franchise’s key pieces will be following Margot’s confident, gum-smacking lead.

“I think last year might have been a little more tense and there might have been a little more pressure,” Margot said. “At the same time, there’s always competition. That doesn’t go away. If you don’t take care of business, it can all change.”

Maturation evolves on the field and off, where Margot prepares to play his first full season as a father to his son named Diamond. That, however, is far from where it started.

In the Dominican, Margot played on a bad-hop field with a sunken car tire anchoring the pitching mound and a random chicken or two roaming the outfield. In a place where it doesn’t take much, smiles come easily.

“It gels the clubhouse together,” Andy Green, the Padres manager, said of Margot’s infectious approach. “He plays to win. He never stops competing. I look at his at-bats and his swing might not be great on a given day, but he never yields.

“As much as I love the smile, I love that too — that tenacity he has when he gets in the batter’s box.”

Green and Margot realize, however, that they’ll need even more from the team’s leadoff hitter. Margot’s .313 on-base percentage in 2017 ranked just sixth on the team.

Margot scored 53 runs last season. Green has challenged him to make it 100. And oh yeah, keep working on that Gold Glove.

“I don’t think it’s impossible,” said Margot, a 5-11, 180-pound right hander. “As a leadoff hitter, I know I have to score runs. Putting that out there as sort of a marker, maybe it’s less than 100 and maybe it’s more, but having that as a marker is good.”

Bubble-blowing good?

Richard’s a believer.

“Just look at the pride he takes in his defense,” Richard said. “Sometimes, that’s one of the last things to come along in a player’s development. Right out of the gate, he wants to be the best center fielder out there. That’s pretty special.”

The best, as they say and Green hinted at this week, seems yet to come.

“He breaks in on the ball as well as anybody I’ve seen,” Green said. “I think he’s just scratching the surface of his potential in center field. He was very solid last year. The push will be to be spectacular.”

At the end of last season, Margot said in a Union-Tribune interview that he wanted to be a “superstar.” Most players, especially younger ones clawing to gain big-league traction, avoid that type of self-assigned pressure.

Margot embraces it.

“If you’re ever going to achieve things, you have to think big,” he said. “So I’m not going to retract that word. I stand firm by it. I have the potential to be that type of player. I know I have to continue to work, but I have a commitment to turn myself into that type of player.

“Right now, I’m not changing that word, because I believe it.”

Then he smiled.

No bubble necessary.

Padres roster options could lead to dark horses

A.J. Cassavell, SD Union Tribune, 2/22/18

PEORIA, Ariz. -- The Padres' Cactus League slate opens Friday against Seattle, with 67 players set to take aim at a place on the Opening Day roster.

In reality, most of that roster is probably already set. But 10 or so jobs will be up for grabs this spring, and the battles for those coveted roster spots should feature plenty of competition.

Every year, an under-the-radar player (or two) emerges to secure one of those places. With that in mind, here's a look at a few dark-horse candidates to make the Padres' roster out of Spring Training.

Tyson Ross

Two years ago, Ross was the Padres' Opening Day starter, coming off three consecutive excellent seasons with the team. He wouldn't make it any further than that opener against the Dodgers, however. Ross sustained a shoulder injury, and he hasn't pitched for San Diego since.

After signing with Texas last offseason -- and continuing to struggle with injuries there -- Ross is back in San Diego on a Minor League deal. It's early in camp, but the Padres have raved about the freeness in his pitching motion. Manager Andy Green said his delivery is "every bit as good" as it was during his All-Star campaign in 2014.

If Ross can regain at least some of his old form, there's opportunity available in the Padres' rotation. At least one spot is wide open, and potentially as many as three. Ross may have struggled last season, but he wasn't afforded a full offseason to recover. This year, he says he's fresh, and he's eyeing a bounce-back. The Padres will give him the chance to do so.

Christian Villanueva

Villanueva finds himself in a roster crunch in a crowded Padres infield. Behind Chase Headley at third base, he could be the odd man out, mainly because he lacks the positional versatility that could help the Friars.

But Green left the door open for Villanueva last week, when he noted that the club might not carry a backup for Freddy Galvis at short. (Galvis played 162 games last season, and the Padres could use his durability to their advantage.)

That might just clear room for Villanueva. San Diego could use a power threat off the bench, and Villanueva is coming off a 20-homer campaign at Triple-A El Paso before hitting four more after a September callup. By now, Villanueva has proven his worth in the Minors. There would be little benefit to keeping him there. It's merely a matter of opportunity.

Franchy Cordero

As much as the Padres like Cordero, it's hard to envision him making the Opening Day roster with the club as currently constructed. That said, there's a very real possibility that the Padres

look to move one of their outfielders in the wake of the Eric Hosmer signing. If they do, Cordero could find himself squarely in the outfield mix.

An elite defender, Cordero can play all three outfield spots, which makes him a versatile option as a replacement. And as the outfield's only left-handed hitter, he could see some time spelling the starters against tough right-handed pitchers.

Of course, Cordero could probably benefit from a bit more Minor League seasoning, having struck out at a 44 percent clip following his callup last year. But he raked in the Dominican Winter League, batting .323 and earning MVP honors. If he continues to mash against big league pitching this spring, he might force the Padres' hand.

Kyle McGrath

The Padres' bullpen is undeniably a bit right-hand heavy. Lefty Brad Hand will open the season as closer, but after him, the four most prominent setup men -- Craig Stammen, Kirby Yates, Phil Maton and Kaz Makita -- throw from the right side.

McGrath will face competition for a place as a lefty in the bullpen. Buddy Baumann is an early favorite, and if Matt Strahm doesn't make the rotation, he'd probably fall to the bullpen as well. But McGrath was very sharp in his brief big league stint last year. He posted a 2.84 ERA and a 1.05 WHIP over 17 appearances. Left-handed hitters batted .167 without an extra-base hit against him.

As it stands, about 10 relievers are currently battling for approximately three spots. McGrath could certainly win one of those spots with an impressive spring.

Diaz transitioning back to starting role

Cassavell, MLB.com, 2/22/18

PEORIA, Ariz. -- If the Padres wanted Miguel Diaz to pitch in relief, the 23-year-old flame-thrower would have a decent shot at working his way into the big league bullpen.

But the Friars didn't select Diaz from Milwaukee in the 2016 Rule 5 Draft with the long-term vision that he'd be a reliever. He combines an upper-90s fastball with two impactful (yet still raw) offspeed pitches. The Padres think Diaz is worth more in the long run if he's a part of their rotation.

That's just fine with Diaz, who makes his spring debut Friday when the Padres open their Cactus League slate against Seattle. Diaz will pitch that game in relief (with an excess of starters in camp who also need innings). But make no mistake, the Padres will extend Diaz on a starter's progression.

"Last year was a little difficult for me, because I had never been a reliever," Diaz said. "The biggest thing for me has been just getting back that starter's routine and going through that five-day routine. I've prepared for that coming into this Spring Training. I ran more. I was in the gym and thinking in terms of endurance."

Diaz posted a 7.34 ERA in 31 appearances last season, three of which came as a starter. His struggles were probably predictable, after making the jump from Class A Advanced straight to the Majors. Per stipulations of the Rule 5 Draft, Diaz needed to stay on the big league roster an entire season or be returned to his former club.

In one sense, Diaz missed out on a year of development in the Minors as a starting pitcher. But neither he nor the Padres view it that way. Instead, Diaz has critical big league experience that other young pitchers do not.

Diaz is almost certain to begin the 2018 season in the Minor Leagues, possibly with Double-A San Antonio. And there are plenty of Major League lessons he can apply there.

"It's about the experience I was able to get last year," Diaz said. "But I did come into this Spring Training more focused on throwing my pitches for strikes and getting to know how to attack hitters differently -- what to throw in certain counts, how to use pitch sequencing. That's what I've been working on, and I'm going to continue to do so."

Kennedy starts Friday

The Padres have mapped out their pitching plans for this weekend's slate of games, with righthander Brett Kennedy getting the ball for Friday's lid-lifter. Tyson Ross will follow Saturday, and Bryan Mitchell will start Sunday.

Kennedy posted a 3.70 ERA for San Antonio last season, with 134 strikeouts in 141 innings. Also slated to pitch Friday are Diaz, Kyle Lloyd, Buddy Baumann and Tom Wilhelmsen.

On Saturday, the Padres will turn back the clock a bit, sending Ross and Chris Young to the hill. Both were All-Stars at one point in San Diego, and they're eyeing a career renaissance in 2018.

Jankowski making early adjustments

After missing four months in 2017 with a broken bone in his right foot, Travis Jankowski has turned a few heads early in camp. He's slated to compete for the backup center-field job alongside Matt Szczur and Franchy Cordero.

"I really like where Travis Jankowski's swing is right now," manager Andy Green said. "He came in a month early and he's been working with [new hitting coach] Matt Stairs since mid-to-late January, and there's been real changes to his swing. There's nobody who defends the field better and, honestly, nobody who runs the bases better than him. So if that bat comes around, he becomes a really, really exciting player for us."

Jankowski will start in center field Friday. Other position players expected to suit up include Carlos Asuaje, Hunter Renfroe and Cory Spangenberg.

Rea, Erlin throw live batting practice

It's been a long road back for Robbie Erlin and Colin Rea since their 2016 Tommy John surgeries. But the two rotation hopefuls are closing in on a full return.

Both Erlin and Rea faced live hitters for the first time this spring on Thursday. They're on a progression that's slightly slower than the rest of the club's hurlers. But they remain serious rotation candidates and should get enough innings to prove themselves.

The Peoria Sports Complex is familiar ground for both. Rea and Erlin spent the bulk of the 2017 season at the Padres' complex. Erlin even pitched during instructional games, while Rea threw two live sessions. Both were shut down mid-autumn, the idea being that they could approach the winter like a normal offseason.

Q&A with new Padres hitting coach Matt Stairs: ‘I was a student of the game’

Dennis Lin, *The Athletic*, 2/22/18

PEORIA, Ariz. — Matt Stairs put on a uniform again in 2017, moving from the broadcast booth to the dugout, where he oversaw measurable progress by the Philadelphia Phillies’ offense. Now, the former Padres player is back as San Diego’s hitting coach, drawing on lessons he gathered over a 19-year major league career.

Stairs’ own education, he says, remains ongoing. In the meantime, he appears to have more than enough to impart to another young offense. Veteran additions such as Eric Hosmer and Chase Headley should boost a lineup that reached base less than 30 percent of the time last season. Stairs, the Padres’ ninth hitting coach since Petco Park opened, still faces a formidable challenge.

In these early, hopeful days of spring, he looks and sounds undaunted. In an interview with *The Athletic*, Stairs addressed his background, philosophy and passion for teaching. In addition to working with major leaguers, he has volunteered as a youth hockey coach for more than a decade. He’s currently an assistant coach at his alma mater, Fredericton High in New Brunswick, Canada.

When did you start thinking about coaching as a career path?

Matt Stairs: I think it happened probably around the start of 2007. I was with the Blue Jays, having a good relationship with guys, going in the batting cage with guys, being on the same page as the hitting coach; ‘08 (with the Phillies) was probably really the first year. Jayson Werth changed his stance completely (working with Stairs). Working with (Shane) Victorino, those guys, Ryan Howard. That’s probably when it started. I retired. I was kind of surprised with myself when I got into broadcasting. But I think the more I did broadcasting, the more I knew, with the knowledge I had hitting-wise, I should be able to help some older guys and especially younger guys on the mental side of hitting and their approaches. Probably in ‘16 I knew it was time to get on the field. It worked out in ‘17 and now I’m here.

We’re seeing more managers with limited managing or coaching experience in the majors. You played longer than most, but do you see more people following a similar route and becoming major league hitting coaches relatively quickly?

Stairs: I think you’re seeing it. I think you’re seeing just the way the game’s changed, the style of play. Some of the things we see players consistently make outs on and not making the adjustment, and knowing that if you give some insight, we can help them get over those mistakes they continue making. They’re continuing to give at-bats away or not having a game plan. A lot of guys that get up here, they’re all studs. They’re all very good hitters. Now it’s just a matter of us getting them to repeat that great swing over and over and over. I was a student of the game. When

I watched the game, I *watched* the game. I learned from (Mark) McGwire how to become a stubborn hitter and not give at-bats away and keep the concentration level. I think you're starting to see some older players that are getting involved, because they know how special these kids are talent-wise.

You mentioned Mark McGwire, your former teammate in Oakland (and now the Padres' bench coach). Who were some of your bigger influences as you developed your hitting philosophy?

Stairs: It was Jay Ward, a guy that was with me with the Expos. He helped me out a lot. José Tolentino was a guy I played against in Mexico. He taught me certain things, and I ended up beating him for the hitting title that year (*laughs*). You take something small from all of your hitting coaches, and you build off it. Just watching the game, watching guys' approach, watching their mental side of the game, watching how they don't swing at the pitcher's pitch, how important it is to become a patient hitter. The 700-some ballplayers I played with, I probably watched half of them hit, and I had 19 hitting coaches. So I had a little bit of knowledge from all of them, and I put it into one bundle and kept it simple.

You've talked about being a stubborn hitter and not giving at-bats away. Is that the best way to summarize your hitting philosophy in a few words?

Stairs: Absolutely. Has to be. If I have a game plan every day, if I stick with my game plan, it means I'm a stubborn hitter. I'm hitting off the fastball, and I'm hitting off the fastball with a certain location. I'm not going to try to cover both sides of the plate. It's too hard these days, guys throw too hard. Besides, you don't have the ability to do damage on the inside pitch and the ability to do damage on the outside pitch. You need to pick one of them. If you don't get one, you battle. There's a pretty good chance you're going to get a chance to hit a good pitch or a mistake pitch. Giving at-bats away, to me, is the biggest thing I notice in baseball, and it's from being a fastball hitter, swinging at the first-pitch changeup and doing a rollover.

It all goes back to being a stubborn hitter and being a gap-to-gap guy. It's all the same area, but it's different phrases. If I think about giving five at-bats away per week and 20 per month, now all of a sudden it's 120 at-bats that I start the season off giving away. You've got to battle pretty hard, don't ya? You cut that in half, keep the concentration level. Everybody talks about hitting being the hardest thing to do, getting a hit or hitting a slider, hitting a good fastball — no. The hardest thing in baseball is keeping the concentration level for 162 games. It's 580, 600 at-bats. That's the toughest thing.

How do you drill that into guys? Just talking about it all the time?

Stairs: Just keep on reminding them. Being that pain in the ass where you say, "Boys, it doesn't matter what the score is. We continue to work and not give at-bats away." Sammy Sosa never gave at-bats away. Mark McGwire never gave at-bats away. Because their focus was so dedicated to what they wanted to do, what they wanted to become, what kind of player they drove to be. We

talked about it today. We said, “Go back and watch McGwire’s at-bats.” You didn’t see him dinking around, laughing, giggling and stuff. He stepped out, took a deep breath, got back in the batter’s box. He was prepared. And that’s what our job is as coaches, is to keep reminding these guys. Doesn’t matter what the score is. You hit a 450-foot home run. Is that enough? Yes. Then don’t over-swing. That’s just what you have to do nowadays. You have to. Because it’s very easy to hit a home run your first at-bat and say, “Oo, I’m gonna get two today!” Next thing you know, you’re 1 for 4 with three strikeouts. You go from having a very good day to an OK day. That’s an area we work on, and I’m a firm believer in it.

Where do you stand on newer data like launch angle and exit velocity, and how do you incorporate and translate that information for hitters?

Stairs: I’m big on it. I really am. Guys that have low launch angles, a couple things are going to happen with it. They’re going to lose the barrel and not control it properly and hit weak balls to the right side. We thought about it back in the day as “I’m going to destroy the second baseman and shortstop with a line drive.” That’s my job. I’m going to put the ball through his glove. That’s the direction we’re swinging through. If that was the case and we did the proper swing, we end up launching the ball right for the proper launch angle. And with that approach, the ball’s coming off 100-plus miles an hour every time, because that was the philosophy of how to create backspin.

I don’t think it was taught to guys enough when it first started coming out. They thought the launch angle meant I need to uppercut or I need to drop my backside and swing up. Which causes you to either hit more ground balls or have a launch angle above 50 degrees. We try to drive it into these guys’ heads. I love the group I’m around, the minor league guys and the coaching staff, because we all believe the same thing. The proper way to create proper launch angle and exit velocity is to have that proper approach of driving the baseball through an infielder. That’s how we create backspin.

When you talk to hitters, are you bringing up “launch angle” and “exit velocity” in conversation?

Stairs: You have to talk about, first of all, squaring the ball up. If you square the ball up properly, you’re going to have a great launch angle. I don’t say, “Hey, I need to have you at this launch angle.” We do talk about it, because it’s very important in baseball. Proper launch angle is going to create high exit velocity, so that’s an area where you don’t need to talk about it. Unless a guy’s exit velocity is averaging about 84 miles an hour and now you know there’s a problem.

We still drive it into their heads. I’ll have targets in cages, I’ll have fun with it. I’ll have targets at home where I’ll put them up and say this is the perfect launch angle. If you can create repeating that swing and driving the ball in that area these targets are, that’s the approach we want. Have the machine set up behind you. Visuals are great for players. They really are. They think, “Oh, that’s a great launch angle.” No, that’s about 35 degrees. So to have some fun with it, that’s why I

hit all the time with the guys. I love getting in there and explaining to them the proper technique to create the nice backspin and launch angle, which will give you the proper exit velocity.

Did you have targets put up in the cage in Philadelphia?

Stairs: No, the cage was a little different in Philly. We actually had an area at the back of the cage where that was where we wanted to aim for. So if we knew we were below it, it was still a good swing. You just didn't square it up properly enough. If you hit in front of it, you knew you were under it. It's just a matter of driving the ball. I like to have targets, strings, whatever. Whatever helps these guys understand the proper technique of launch angle.

Any plans for targets in the cage at Petco Park?

Stairs: God, yeah. It's visuals. We've been talking about it, and that's one thing I'd like to put up there. How we do it, I don't know. We can figure out a way. With technology nowadays, if we figured out launch angles and all that stuff, we can figure out how to put targets up.

You still coach hockey in the offseason. How does that influence your coaching style for baseball?

Stairs: Communication. Being positive. You have to be positive with high school kids. You have to communicate. I don't say a lot, but when I do speak it means something for the young kids in an area I grew up in. But I think the biggest thing is the communication skills that I have. I'm not a negative person. I don't have a negative bone in my body. I'm a very positive person. I can take an 0-for-4 with three Ks and do something positive with it. And that's the deal with the kids and players. For major league players, when you go home, have something positive. Yeah, you might've gone 0 for 4, but you saw 26 pitches today. Those are positives.

How many offseasons have you spent coaching hockey?

Stairs: Thirteen. I was full-time until I started broadcasting, and I stepped down as the head coach and became an assistant coach/ambassador/whatever. . . . It starts as soon as the season's over. You go home, hockey tryouts start, we start mid-October training and practicing, and (Friday) night we start our first round of the playoffs. (Stairs will cheer Fredericton High from Arizona.)

You know how I got into it? When I lived in Maine, my good friend's kid went to a private school. They asked me to come out and be a celebrity guest. And when I finished practice, they were like, Damn, you know what you're talking about. I went on and took over the bench and did all the line changes and power plays and penalty-kill systems and stuff. I spent four years there, I went to the school where my daughters went, and then moved back to Canada six years ago and helped take that program back.

It sounds like something you're really passionate about.

Stairs: I love coaching, because you learn something every day. Doesn't matter if you're a coach. You're still learning stuff. You learn from players, you learn from other coaches, you learn from other players from different teams, you learn stuff from (McGwire). (Padres assistant hitting coach Johnny Washington) every day gives me something. There's no perfect coach. There isn't. We're still learning, we're creating stuff, but the thing with the hockey and the baseball, it's all the positive vibes. I don't think I'm a mental coach, because I'm not. But I think I do a pretty good job of keeping guys focused. Because I am that pain in the ass where I'll keep reminding you. You have to.

Chase Headley returns to Spring Training as a Padre

KALYN MCMACKIN, FOX 5, 2/21/18

PEORIA, Ariz. – Each year, Spring Training welcomes new and old faces and for the Padres, a familiar face returns to third base.

Chase Headley was traded in December back to San Diego after spending three and a half years as a Yankee.

He admits returning to Spring Training in Peoria felt like *déjà vu*.

“To be honest, it was a little strange coming back in the clubhouse,” said Headley. “You know you never really expect to come back but it’s been great. A lot of the same staff are here, a lot of new players, a couple of guys that I’ve played with but it’s exciting. I’ve had some great times in San Diego and I’m looking forward to hopefully a few more.”

The 33-year-old is among the oldest players on the team and fellow veteran Chris Young credits Headley’s longevity in the game to his work ethic.

“Chase is a great teammate,” said Young. “He’s a great guy, he’s a very cerebral player, knows how to play the game and very attentive, very smart. Hitter, runner, third baseman, he’s just a solid all-around player and a good guy as well.”

Younger players admit admiring Headley comes easily because of his character.

“Really what I’m trying to do right now is just get to know guys and let them know I’m here for them, I care about them and when the opportunity arises to give them some information that they know it’s coming from the right place.”

“The leadership and wisdom is unbelievable,” said Padres outfielder Travis Jankowski. “I was talking with Headley a little bit, just picking his brain about just Spring Training and the season and just getting through and all that and staying healthy and man, he’s like an encyclopedia.”

Headley spent the first seven and half years of his career in San Diego but his future with the organization remains uncertain. With the possibility of another trade looming, he says he plans to make the most of his time here.

“There’s a lot of ability in here and a lot of potential and we’ve got to find a way to speed that up a little bit,” said Headley. “I don’t know how long I’ll be here so I’m not interested in going through a year where we’re not trying to compete so that’s going to be my message to the guys and I think in talking to other guys they expect to play well as well.”

That renewed expectation is one fans hope to see play out this season.