

Indians not planning to make coaching changes

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- Indians manager Terry Francona does not plan on making any changes to his coaching staff in the wake of his team's brief stint on the October stage.

During an hour-long sit-down with reporters on Wednesday at Progressive Field, Francona said dismissing any of his coaches would be a reactionary move to three poor games against the Astros in the American League Division Series. The manager, along with president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti, emphasized that their focus was on the season's body of work.

"That's a reaction," Francona said of making any changes to his staff. "That, to me, is a very reactionary move. It's a small sample. And it hurt like crazy losing, yet we were probably in the upper tier in just about every offensive category."

Specifically, the Indians' offense has been the focal point of criticism after the team's second straight subpar performance in the ALDS. Last year, Cleveland's lineup hit .171 with a .550 OPS as a team in the five-game loss to the Yankees in the first round of the playoffs. This time, the Indians hit .144 with a .418 OPS in the three-game sweep at the hands of Houston.

On the season, though, the Indians ranked third in the Majors with 818 runs scored, while ranking fourth overall in weighted on-base average (.330), fourth in OPS (.766), sixth in home runs (216) and tied for sixth in weighted runs created plus (105). Cleveland's strikeout rate as an offense (18.9 percent) was also the best in baseball in the regular season.

Francona said those numbers -- not the showing in the ALDS -- go a long way in continuing to support the work done behind the scenes by hitting coach Ty Van Burkleo.

"Are you going on the disappointment of the series or on the whole body of work?" Francona said.

Beyond Van Burkleo, Cleveland's coaching staff consists of bench coach Brad Mills, pitching coach Carl Willis, bullpen coach Scott Atchison, assistant hitting coach Victor Rodriguez, first-base coach Sandy Alomar Jr. and third-base coach Mike Sarbaugh, along with MLB coaches Mark Budzinski and Brian Sweeney. Barring any external job opportunities, the Indians plan on retaining the entire staff.

"I do think some guys will be interviewed," Francona said. "And I think they're pretty good, so there's a chance we lose people. But, not by choice."

Worth noting

- The Indians have two team options to consider this winter. Cleveland's \$9.75 million team option on starter Carlos Carrasco is a lock to be exercised, but the club will also have to weigh whether to pick up the \$3 million option (or pay a \$250,000 buyout) on outfielder Brandon Guyer. The Indians must make a decision five days after the conclusion of the World Series.

"It's something we have to work through," Antonetti said. "We really appreciated Brandon's contributions in the time he's been here. He made a huge impact when he came over in 2016, not only in the second half, but on the postseason run. Unfortunately, he's had some health issues that he's had to work through over the course of the last couple seasons."

- Right-hander Danny Salazar (right shoulder surgery in July) could begin a throwing program by November, according to Antonetti. The Indians plan on building up Salazar as a starting pitching option during Spring Training, but the team has not ruled out putting him in the bullpen mix, given the club's offseason need for relief help.

"We'll try to condition him as a starter at the outset," Antonetti said, "and then see what our team needs are and see how Danny responds to the different throwing loads."

- Outfielder Leonys Martin will be eligible for arbitration this winter, along with Cody Anderson, Brandon Barnes, Trevor Bauer, Nick Goody, Francisco Lindor, Neil Ramirez and Salazar. Martin is still recovering from the serious bacterial infection that ended his season in August, but the Indians are optimistic that the veteran outfielder will be ready for Spring Training.

"As a starting point, we expect him to be back at full health next year," Antonetti said. "Exactly where that fits in, we'll have to work through that. He's arbitration eligible again this season for the last time. We'll have to just make an assessment of how that fits within the construct of the rest of our team."

- More injury updates from Antonetti: Anderson (right elbow) should have a normal offseason leading up to Spring Training. ... Goody (right elbow surgery) is still a "few weeks" away from being cleared to throw. ... Outfielder Bradley Zimmer (right shoulder surgery) could be cleared to throw in November, hit in December and the hope is he will be available for "the majority" of the 2019 season.

"We know we'll have to make some difficult decisions and reconstruct the roster in a different way."

Outside the main interview room in the bowels of Progressive Field, a quote from Bill Veeck is on display across the red, white and blue cinder block wall along the stadium's main tunnel.

"There are only two seasons... winter and baseball."

Tuesday was the first official day of winter for the Indians. On Wednesday, manager Terry Francona, president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti and general manager Mike Chernoff met with local writers to discuss this past season, the quick playoff exit and the offseason ahead.

Here are the highlights of the wide-ranging, hour-long Q&A.

Q: What are the emotions like in the aftermath of losing this year, compared to the past two Octobers?

ANTONETTI: "They're all different. They all hurt. We set out to start the year to try and win the World Series and that didn't happen. And so, regardless of how that comes to an end, it's painful and this year is no different. It hurts a lot."

FRANCONA: "You know, it's hard to compare, because what's fresh always seems like [it hurts] the most. Like Chris said, when you set out for a goal and you come up short, it stings, so you have emotion for a while and that goes away after a little bit. And then you try to get a perspective of, 'Where are we?' Legitimately, 'What can we do better?' Because, if you make decisions when you're emotional, then you blow the whole place up and that's not healthy."

CHERNOFF: "The only thing I'll add to it, and it's the same feelings, but it's always abrupt, too. Even in Game 7 in the World Series, it felt abrupt—when you're just going as fast as you can and as hard as you can and it just ends. That's part of what is so painful about it."

Q: How do you balance looking into what you could've done better in the ALDS with the noise of results within such a small sample?

ANTONETTI: "So I think as what Tito was saying, it's really important to separate the feelings from the process. The feelings hurt a lot. It's disappointment, it's frustration, it's a lot of things. But, what we need to do, and what we always do, is we always reflect back organizationally and think about, 'What were the things within our control?' And, 'What can we do better?' We do that at the end of every season and this season will be no different. So, we'll spend some time over the course... it's already started, in fact. We've had exit interviews with players. We've got feedback from staff. And we'll do our own internal assessment and we'll reach out to others and get those reflections back from it and try to learn from it. What are things that we can do better as an organization and improve upon for next year?"

Q: What's the latest update on Bradley Zimmer?

ANTONETTI: "He's doing well. He's been in Arizona rehabbing. He will start his throwing progression in November and his hitting progression in December."

Q: Will he be ready for Spring Training?

ANTONETTI: "Too early to say a precise timeline, but we do expect him to be able to play for the majority of next year. Exactly when that will be will be determined by how he reaches each of those checkpoints, but he's still on track."

Q: I think if you ask the Astros, they'd say that Oakland's run this season helped push them. Do you think you guys were hurt by the fact that you were never really pushed in the AL Central?

ANTONETTI: "Yeah, we've asked ourselves similar questions. It's funny, because if I were to replay the conversation from last year, it would be the opposite: 'Did you guys push too hard for too long?' Right? I'm not sure there's a magic answer there. I think there might be a perception that our guys didn't compete or weren't as intense, but I'm not sure that was actually the case. We went out and competed and tried to win. The guys that were on the field tried to win every game they could and tried to do their best in every plate appearance that they had or every time they got the ball on the mound. So, it's something that's a question that we can keep asking ourselves, but I'm not sure there's a magic answer to it."

FRANCONA: "I was almost going to say the same thing, because last year was, 'Did you guys push too hard and leave it during the year?' What I've after all these years realized, when you win you're smart and when you lose you're dumb. That's kind of the way it is and you have one chance to do it, so you do it to the best of your ability and you have the confidence to come answer the questions and move on. But also, move on trying to learn from what you didn't do good enough."

Q: Did you learn something from this experience? Or is it too early to say?

FRANCONA: "Well, it's been 24 hours so we haven't [had time to dive too deep into it]. I mean, right after, we usually sit down and go, 'OK, what can we do better?' We had a lot of exit meetings yesterday. I mean, 10–12, so that's an important part of the process. [Michael] Brantley and [Josh] Tomlin and [Brandon] Guyer. Cody Allen. Andrew Miller. So, I think you always learn something when you talk to each player."

Q: What do you think happened to Jose Ramirez down the stretch and in the playoffs?

FRANCONA: "He got himself into a predicament and he couldn't get himself out of it. It's hard to figure out, because a guy can be that good, that dominant and then he just couldn't get [back on track]. He kept peeling off balls. Even when he got pitches to hit, he kind of peeled off. And he knew it and he watched video and he just couldn't get the feeling of staying through the ball."

ANTONETTI: "I'll maybe add that the timing of that obviously was unfortunate, with Jose's struggles. But that's not atypical for hitters. I remember the conversations with Jim Thome when he got off to tough starts in April or May, and there was a question of whether or not we were going to bench him or not play him anymore."

(Antonetti turns to Francona)

ANTONETTI: "Remember the conversations you had with David Ortiz? 'When are you going to stop playing David Ortiz?' And he went out had, what, five more years? So, the timing of it was unfortunate, but hitters struggle. Guys go through periods of time when they are not performing at their best."

Q: But that month-and-a-half slump killed you guys...

FRANCONA: "What do you mean it killed us? We won the division by 15 games."

Q: It really hurt your offense, especially in the playoffs...

FRANCONA: "I would say that [Gerrit] Cole and [Justin] Verlander had something to do with that."

Q: Could there be changes to the coaching staff? Does someone need to be held accountable here?

FRANCONA: "For us winning the division for the third year in a row?"

Q: Should the hitting coach be looked at for the lineup's struggles in the ALDS for the second year in a row?

FRANCONA: "I think that's a reaction. ... That to me is a very reactionary move. It's a small sample. And it hurt like crazy losing, yet we were probably in the upper tier in just about every offensive category."

ANTONETTI: "We scored more runs than the Astros, right?"

CHERNOFF: "Yeah, we were third in the [MLB] in runs scored."

FRANCONA: "So let me ask you a question. When you say that, are you going on the disappointment of the series or on the whole body of work?"

Q: On the body of work...

FRANCONA: "OK, well then [Ramirez] is going to be third in the league in MVP voting. Do you still want to get rid of somebody?"

Q: Is it not a reflection of the hitting coach that Ramirez couldn't make the adjustment in the last six weeks?

FRANCONA: "I think it's every bit as much of a reflection that a kid that we thought might be a utility player is going to be second or third or fourth in the league in MVP voting. I think VanBo [hitting coach Ty Van Burkleo] is every bit as much to put the onus on for that also."

Q: Why didn't Ramirez make the adjustments needed?

FRANCONA: "Do you really think he wasn't trying to make adjustments?"

Q: That's how it looks in the eyes of fans...

FRANCONA: "If we did everything fans wanted us to do... That's why they're fans. I think that's a little almost disrespectful. I don't go into somebody else's work and tell them how to do things. Sometimes in this game, you have people, and people struggle. And you'd like it not to be that way, but that's just the way it is."

ANTONETTI: "So I think a big part of this just comes down to timing. Think back to 2017, the beginning of the season with Corey Kluber. Were people were saying, 'Oh my God, what's wrong with the pitching coach?' We went through a month and a half where I think his ERA was over 5, and he went on to win the Cy Young. Jose struggled for a similar amount of time, just at a different point in the season. But, when you look at the body of work, he's going to finish in the Top-5 in the MVP. So yeah, did he go through unfortunate timing with when he struggled? Of course, and he worked really hard to get out of it. He just wasn't able to by the end of the season."

Q: So, just to clarify, barring opportunities that might come up from other teams, you plan on retaining the entire coaching staff?

FRANCONA: "Yeah. I do think some guys will be interviewed. And I think they're pretty good, so there's a chance we lose people. But, not by choice."

Q: You guys stand to lose both Andrew Miller and Cody Allen in free agency. How important will it be to address the bullpen this offseason, and how challenging was it to navigate through the bullpen issues this year?

ANTONETTI: "That's something we'll have to assess. I think we have nine Major League free agents that will impact all aspects of the team from our pitching staff to our position players. We'll have to take some time in the coming weeks to figure out how we build our team moving forward. We know we'll have to make some difficult decisions and reconstruct the roster in a different way."

FRANCONA: "We talk every day. Not knowing is a really difficult thing. And there were a lot of unknowns, which was different for this bullpen. So, it was challenging. And on top of that, some of these guys are free agents to boot. We're going to have our work cut out for us putting

together a bullpen that we think where we can get us where we want to go. It doesn't mean we can't do it. In fact, it's going to be fun trying to do it. But, we know we have some work to do."

Q: Do you think the fact that he was facing free agency had any impact on Allen's season? Do you think he thought about that?

FRANCONA: "I think it's human nature. Guys think about it. I don't ever remember seeing him out of sorts. I think Cody was one of the guys that we always look to. He cares about the right things. He knows the difference between right and wrong. Pretty solid team guy. I think it's human nature that you think about those things. I don't think it got him out of whack."

Q: Do the bullpen issues stand out more than anything else from this season?

FRANCONA: "I would say that, if you're short somewhere, over the course of a long year, it's going to show itself. It might not show itself in a short sample, but over the course of 162, it will. That's just the way our game is."

Q: It seemed like you guys tried everything to fix it...

FRANCONA: "You try not to throw [expletive] against the wall, because that doesn't work. Or, it might work once, but it could of sends up alarm bell with the players. When we got Oliver [Perez], it really helped to settle down our bullpen, because right after that [really rough stretch] it was Oliver, it was [Brad] Hand, it was [Adam] Cimber. That really helped. And Neil [Ramirez] got on a real good run for that month. So that kind of settled things down."

Q: You have the entire rotation returning in 2019, but how much does it help to have seen the progress made this year by Trevor Bauer and Mike Clevinger?

ANTONETTI: "Yeah, I think as we look forward... I mean, obviously, we're sitting here today, we're disappointed that we didn't have the results we wanted this year. But, as we look at where we are moving forward, we still feel like we're in a really good spot organizationally. We're going to have two guys that are going to be in the top-five of the MVP voting, or the top seven of the MVP voting, which I'd imagine there are a lot of teams who would trade that position. I mean, we're going to have four guys that are in the top 10 of the American League Cy Young. So, that's a great foundation to start any offseason. And the strides that Trevor made and Clev made were some of the highlights of our season. And both guys deserve a lot of credit for that."

Q: You guys have a lot of money coming off the books through free agents, but a lot of that will be offset by raises through arbitration and other contracts. But, will you have more financial flexibility this offseason compared to last offseason?

ANTONETTI: "I don't know exactly where we'll be [payroll wise]. Obviously, we're going to be taking the next few weeks to work through that with ownership. But, the one thing we do know is that whatever payroll may be coming off the books with the free agents we may be losing, we're going to need just as much, if not more, to retain the guys through arbitration raises and increases in guaranteed contracts. So, we had a franchise-record payroll this year just to retain those guys that are under contract. We'll likely necessitate a payroll even above where we are right now, even before we add anyone externally."

Q: From an organizational standpoint, was this season a step forward? Did you stay the same? How do you assess the growth of the franchise this year?

ANTONETTI: "I feel like we're in a really healthy spot with where we are as an organization right now. We will be faced with some really difficult decisions, but the reason we're having those difficult decisions is because we have a lot of really good players on our team that are returning, and some of whom will now earn a lot more than they earned last year. We have a very healthy Minor League system. I think we continue to work and build an organizational culture that's established winning as being foundational element there, which is an important thing. And it's taken a while for us to get to that point. So, I feel like we're in a very healthy spot moving forward. It's hard to assess in the aftermath of losing the way we did exactly how that compares and whether or not it's a step forward or the same, but I feel really good about where we are and where we're headed."

Q: You decided to bet on Michael Brantley last winter. How rewarding was it to see him have the year he had and to see that gamble pay off?

ANTONETTI: "I couldn't be any happier for Michael. We talk about what it means to be a good teammate and be a great competitor and a great leader—Michael embodies all of those things. So, when we sat here last offseason talking about that difficult decision, we bet on a lot of those things. And we felt that even if Michael didn't come back to full health, he could still have a meaningful impact on our team. And what we were able to see this is year is through Michael's hard work, all of the hours and hours he spent trying to get back healthy and his determination to come back and perform at a high level, he was able to go on and be a huge part of our team, play a ton and perform at a really high level. And I think that speaks directly to Michael's worth ethic. He had a huge impact on our team. As we told him when we met with him yesterday, he and a couple other guys helped re-establish for us what it means to be a great teammate. Because, it's always easy to be a good teammate when things are going well, but no matter what adversity Michael or Josh Tomlin or Cody Allen ever experienced over the past few years, they we're just as good a teammate if not a better teammate when they were personally struggling than they were when things were going well. I think that speaks to their character and who they are as people."

Q: How challenging will the decision on Qualifying Offers be with guys like Brantley, Allen and Miller?

ANTONETTI: "Very. Very challenging."

ANTONETTI: "I tried to be succinct. I was long-winded before, so I'll try to make up for that by being succinct. No, very challenging."

Q: Allen and Miller had their struggles this year, so does that make it more difficult to work through that process?

ANTONETTI: "Very."

(laughter)

ANTONETTI: "There's a host of factors that we'll have to weigh. Obviously their performance this year, their track record of performance, what we anticipate what the market might be, what our financial position might be. There are a lot of things that will go into those decisions. We'll take the next few weeks to work through that."

Q: How creative do you have to be on the trade front or in free agency?

ANTONETTI: "One of the things we challenge ourselves every offseason is to try to be creative and not look at things in any one lane. Really, we try to be very purposeful about soliciting creative, out-of-the-box ideas just to make sure we're considering all avenues to put our organization in a better position moving forward. We'll be doing that here over the next few months to try to figure out what that might be."

Q: What's the latest on Danny Salazar, Cody Anderson and Nick Goody?

ANTONETTI: "They're all doing well. Danny is expected to resume throwing at some point in November. Cody Anderson finished the year healthy and we expect him to have a normal offseason and a normal Spring Training. Nick Goody is a few weeks post-surgery. He's still a few weeks away from starting any sort of throwing."

Q: Will Jose Ramirez stay at second base next year?

ANTONETTI: "We haven't really gotten too far into [that sort of thing]."

FRANCONA: "It's a little too [early for that]. Obviously, depending on what our roster looks like, he could do either/or. I think he's proven that he's really good defensively at both positions."

Q: How do you assess the Josh Donaldson acquisition now?

ANTONETTI: "Hard to say. At the time we acquired him, we were focused on the postseason. I think Josh did everything he could to prepare himself and get his body in a position to be ready to compete in October. The returns on that work was great. Obviously, he—like a lot of our other guys—didn't have a great series offensively in the postseason. It's a risk we knew we were taking at the time. But, it's a chance we would take again."

FRANCONA: "You could probably fire Chris."

Q: The outfield seems to be in a state of flux going into the offseason...

ANTONETTI: "That's an area that we will have to spend a lot of time addressing. Some of it depends on how we align our returning players. Also, obviously, it will be impacted by substantial departures."

Q: How's Tyler Naquin doing?

ANTONETTI: "He's progressed well. He finished the season healthy and actually got back to baseball activities. He participated in our intrasquad game. He played in that. He'll come into Spring Training ready to go."

FRANCONA: "Nake did a great job. Sometimes when you're in Arizona, you can feel kind of out of sight, out of mind. He not only came back quickly and healthy, he was swinging the bat so well. It was so obvious that he had put so much time into what he was doing. We were really proud of him for his efforts. And that doesn't show up in a box score, but he did a really good job."

Q: As you plan for next year, do you view Leonys Martin as an option to be the starting center fielder? He's still recovering, but how do you view his place on the roster?

ANTONETTI: "As a starting point, we expect him to be back at full health next year. Exactly where that fits in, we'll have to work through that. He's arbitration eligible again this season for the last time. We'll have to just make an assessment of how that fits within the construct of the rest of our team."

Q: Did the things you worried most about come to fruition in the playoffs?

FRANCONA: "I think that's fair. If you're inconsistent, it's probably fair that some of those inconsistencies rear their head, even in a short series. And I think they did. I think that's fair."

Q: Had the ALDS gone five games, would you have considered starting Carlos Carrasco?

FRANCONA: "No, we wanted Carlos to be in the bullpen for Game 4. That's my answer."

Q: Kluber had the injection in his knee around the All-Star break. Did that knee hold up the rest of the year for him?

FRANCONA: "We had a real good exit meeting with him yesterday. His health, he feels like he's in a way better place now than he was at the end of last year. I'm saying this about a guy who threw 200 innings—you're going to feel a little beat up. But, he's in a real good spot. He was just having a hard time taking his mechanics from his dry work and his bullpen into the game, take that intensity, and he was getting out of whack a little bit. And he knew it. And he was frustrated, because he felt so good in his work on the side, yet when the game started it was like, 'more is better,' and it would lead to pitches being flat. What it comes back to is you're human. We've seen him so good that when he's not that good, you think something's got to be wrong with him. He's healthy. He's just... he's human."

Q: What did you think of the strides Bauer made behind the scenes, not just on the mound?

FRANCONA: "I think if you look back six years to now... because, when you're with him every day, sometimes things come up and you get aggravated, or he gets aggravated. But, if you look back six years to where he is now, it's probably light years. I think he's more comfortable in his own skin. He's always going to say things that he may have to come back the next day and say, 'Oh, I didn't mean [it the way it sounded].' That's just Trev."

Q: It seems like he'd like to pitch every single game...

FRANCONA: "Well, I think he probably could. We also have an obligation, too. We want guys to have a long career and make a lot of money. We have an obligation to protect them, sometimes even from themselves."

Q: Do you think the Astros are just that much better than your team?

FRANCONA: "I don't know if I quite know how to [answer that]. They won [103] games. We won 91. I think their division was better. So, over the course of a long season, they were better than us. That doesn't mean you can't win a short series. Their two starting pitchers we faced the first two days were virtually unhittable. You can frame questions any way you want, and I don't blame you, it's part of why we're here. If you kind of simplify it, we got three hits off of their first two pitchers, and I actually thought we had a pretty good approach. We didn't chase much. If we'd have chased, we might not have gotten any hits. We were pretty disciplined in the zone. Their stuff was off-the-charts good. You can talk about intangibles, you can talk about analytics. Analytically, those first two guys are really good. That makes you look a lot smarter."

Q: During the season, your team was such a good fastball-hitting team. Did it surprise you that the Astros came right at your hitters with fastballs?

FRANCONA: "No, because if I could throw 99... 99 is pretty good. Up above your barrel. And then every once in a while, they'd throw, like they threw Kip a 3-2 breaking ball, just locked him up. We take it really hard when it happens, but when you can sit back and look at it, those were two pretty special performances."

Q: You said a year ago that it was "open season for second guess" when you guys watched the 2-0 lead on the Yankees slip away. This year, did it feel like no matter what you did, you just got beat?

FRANCONA: "I think you always feel like you... you try to do what you can. If you look at the numbers of the series, we got beat up. We hung in every game for six innings. That's not our goal, but my point is, you try to compete no matter what is going on. You try to figure out a way to win, and you do the best you can. You get to a point in the game, what they did was better than what we were doing. When they would go to their bullpen, they had a lot of answers. When we went, we didn't have a lot of answers. I don't mean to throw it on the bullpen, because I don't feel that way. I think you win and lose as a team, and if you're not complete, good teams will expose that."

Q: You didn't necessarily get to use him in the way you hoped, but what did you think of Bauer's willingness to accept that role?

FRANCONA: "We had to kind of work through that a little bit. I think in his perfect world, he would have pitched in all five games. I tried to tell him, in my perfect world, he was going to also. It was unfortunate that he got hit by that line drive, because he was on a trajectory—it was such a special season. I had to remind him a couple of times, 'Hey man, I didn't hit you with that line drive. That was somebody else.' That was how much we appreciated his pitching. He has turned himself into one of the best pitchers in the game, and we know that, we appreciate it."

Q: You said there would've been no hesitancy to hand the ball to Shane Bieber had you reached Game 4. You didn't get to, but what can you say about what he did for you guys this season?

FRANCONA: "I almost sent him out to the bullpen in the ninth [in Game 3], because I wanted him to throw a couple pitches. That's why we got Greg Allen an at-bat. Maybe I'm getting old. I thought it was, just thought it would be good for him to just face a couple of hitters. We're so proud of him as an organization. He's what you're looking for. He's a smart kid, he's poised. When things don't go his way, the next day he's out there working. By all accounts, he came to us before he was ready. His secondary stuff wasn't the finished product. From day one, he worked on his changeup, and slowly but surely, you saw him as he went, he started getting guys out with that changeup. But it's coming. He is a keeper. He's easy to talk about."

Q: In talking to the player development people, they said Bieber was preparing like a Major Leaguer from A-ball on up. How much do you hope other Minor Leaguers saw that process? That, it isn't just about performance.

CHERNOFF: "There's no doubt about it. I mean, all the way through the system, he flew through the system. Part of what gave us the comfort in continuing to promote him—and like Tito said, even though he was an unfinished product—getting him to the big leagues was because of those routines. We knew we could rely on this guy to do everything to prepare and to improve."

Q: How would you assess Jason Kipnis' season?

FRANCONA: "You know, I think even by his own admission, the first four months was really frustrating for him. Saying that, he had a knack of driving in runs. I mean, you look at his batting average and it's lower than what it's been for his career. All his other numbers were kind of in line with what they've been. But, like I said, I think by his own admission, him hovering around .180, .200, that's not him. And it was hard for him."

Q: What's his future here?

FRANCONA: "Well, like some of the other guys—like Josey or Yandy—I think some of that depends on where we're at. We know he can play second. We know he can play center. My guess is he could hand left field just fine. But, we would need to see where we're at and what our needs are. So, to say that today, it doesn't make sense."

Q: Whether it was moving down in the lineup, changing positions or dealing with trade rumors, what did you think of how Kipnis handled all those external obstacles this year?

ANTONETTI: "I think it would've been easy for Kip to, as Tito was saying, he could've just packed it in, after those first couple months, looked up and said, 'Hey, this is not going to be my year,' or, 'I'm not really finding a way to help the team,' and moped about it. Instead, he found a way to find a way to contribute in the second half. Also, a big part of that was his willingness to do what was best for the team. From the very first conversation I had with him—I think it was towards the end of June—about potential acquisitions, his response every time was, 'Hey, if it's best for the team, I'm more than happy to do it.' I think he tried to carry that forward throughout the course of the season."

Q: Do you think there could be a hangover effect for players after losing in the first round?

FRANCONA: "I think what you've got to remember—well, you don't have to—but I think what I try to remember is what guys say five minutes after a heartbreaking series, I think you have to kind of use a filter there. Because, sometimes there can either be emotional, sometimes some guys are probably bored or want to get away. We try not to base our decisions... I think what I'm trying to say is we try to feel about the players with their body of work and everything that we see probably 13–14 hours a day, as opposed to maybe what's said five minutes after a series."

Q: Over the years, it seems like your players have become good at turning the page quickly. Do you feel that way?

FRANCONA: "I think as a general rule, this group has done an unbelievable job of knowing the difference between right and wrong. And we appreciate that a lot. I know I have a lot."

Q: After the loss, Kipnis said you guys were out-scouted, out-pitched, out-coached. What did you make of that?

FRANCONA: "I actually talked to him about that. And I think sometimes, when it's public, I can understand why you'd ask. But, I'd like to keep my conversation with him private. But, I'm comfortable that we had it."

Q: What'd you make of Yonder Alonso's season?

FRANCONA: "You know what? He [ranked third among AL] first basemen in RBIs. I think he probably did what we signed him to do. Hit the ball out of the ballpark, drive in some runs. I think he'll be better next year for being here for a year and seeing how we do things. He wasn't accustomed to trying to go first to third—things that we really believe in. I think he'll do some off those things better next year."

Q: Do you think Greg Allen made strides offensively this year?

FRANCONA: "Yeah. I mean, shoot, the first time early in the season, he was kind of getting beat up. Then, we went and got Leonys because of it. Leonys goes down and Greg—like, right in front of our eyes—was getting better. That's hard to do at the Major League level. He made a lot of strides. It was really, really a bright spot to see him do that in the middle of August. That's hard to do."

Q: You can't really quantify this, but what kind of impact can it make when a player starts to feel like he belongs?

FRANCONA: "It's like they appear bigger and stronger even though they're the same build. I'm telling you, you'll see. Bieber will come to Spring Training next year and he will know where to go to go to the food room, where to go... He knows everybody. And he'll probably be bigger and stronger, but he'll have that air about him, the confidence, because he's been here. It happens with guys. It's really fun to watch with guys."

Q: At the Trade Deadline, having guys who could play multiple spots like Ramirez and Kipnis allowed you to cast a wide net. How much will that help your offseason planning? A guy like Yandy Diaz, too, can play both corners.

CHERNOFF: "Yeah, first of all, it's a huge positive, I think. It can definitely make things a little bit more complex and challenging, because it's not like there's just one hole to plug and you fill that hole and suddenly everything's figured out. I think you can move the pieces in a lot of different directions, but at the same time, to us, that's a huge positive, because we can be much more creative in the team-building process."

FRANCONA: "On that note, what Yandy showed in a small sample offensively, it's something that we need to think through, because I think we all feel like he's got a chance to be pretty special offensively. Where does that fit on a team? Is it first? Is it third? Is it sometimes DHing? We have that role pretty much filled, but we're going to have to think through that one."

Q: How hard was it to deal with the Leonys Martin situation this year?

ANTONETTI: "We have to deal with a lot in the course of our jobs. Nothing immediately comes to mind that was more difficult for us to work through. That was someone's life at stake and he was really close to not being here anymore. It quickly puts into perspective a lot of the other things you try to navigate day-to-day. Not that those things aren't important, but when you have a situation like that develop, it hits you really hard. We're so thankful. We said multiple times for the incredible care that he got from everyone at the Cleveland Clinic and everyone in the organization, to put him in a better spot. Thankfully, he should be fine moving forward."

Q: In the past, you had veteran leaders in the clubhouse like Jason Giambi and Mike Napoli. Were other players able to step up in that way this year?

FRANCONA: "Yeah. I think, like I said, I think our group knows the difference between right and wrong. I think every so often, you'll have somebody come through like a Giambi or a Napoli, and you take advantage of it. I think quietly we had guys in their own right that were so special. Guys like Tomlin and Brantley are pretty special people. You want those guys to have their voices heard in the clubhouse. They are special. They don't have to just be the best players. It's just how they handle... Chris made a point when we were talking to Tomlin the other day, about it's easy when you're going good. This was a tough year for J.T. But, he never wavered in how he conducted himself, putting the team first. Boy, that's pretty impressive."

Q: Chris, do you view that attitude as a reflection of Tito's approach to managing?

ANTONETTI: "Yeah. Absolutely. It's a reflection of Tito, but it goes beyond playing the game the right way. There is no better teammate than Tito. You hear him talk about always putting other people first, thinking about others, the team before yourself. Tito lives that every day. When he's communicating that message to players, it's authentic. Not only is he talking the talking, he's walking the walk."

Q: Did you see Francisco Lindor take on more of a leadership role this year?

FRANCONA: "Frankie, I have to remind myself sometimes of his age, because he's so advanced in so many things on the field, just the way he carries himself. Sometimes what you see isn't what there is. With Frankie, it is. That smile... he loves playing baseball. I kid with you guys all the time, if I had his tools, I would, too. But he's very competitive, he cares about the right things, and we're really glad that he's ours, because he's so special. Saying that, I think Josey is right there next to him. We've all talked about his September. It was tough, it was frustrating and it hurt us. But he's right there next to him. He's a special kid. He can't always convey it, because he doesn't speak English as good as Frankie. But man, he is a special young man. He's one of the best players in the game. And he's ours."

Q: Has there been any progress on extension talks with Lindor?

ANTONETTI: "On the contract front, that's something that we refrain from getting into specifics on any guy. I think it's safe to say we want Frankie to be here for a very long time."

Q: Given the needs in the bullpen, could Danny Salazar be in that mix? Or, will you build him up as a starter and then have the bullpen as an possibility later on?

ANTONETTI: "He could be. We'll try to condition him as a starter at the outset and then see what our team needs are and see how Danny responds to the different throwing loads."

Q: Does the same apply to Cody Anderson?

ANTONETTI: "I think so."

FRANCONA: "I think we always want to condition them to be starters, because you can always go to the bullpen. But, I mean, shoot, heck yeah. We'll see how things go, but we want to condition them as starters."

Q: If Salazar is healthy, is it intriguing to think of what he could do as a reliever?

FRANCONA: "I fall back on, if a guy is good, his innings are going to help us win, regardless of where he ends up pitching. If he's a good pitcher, we'll all be happy to figure that out. That will be a heck of a lot more fun than sending him to Arizona for rehab."

Q: Will either of those guys be restricted in Spring Training?

FRANCONA: "Cody? My guess is we're going to use common sense. The kid had Tommy John, but he was already pitching in games at the end of August and September. He's going to have a fairly normal offseason, and he would go into camp, yeah, with my guess is no restrictions."

ANTONETTI: "Danny is in a little bit of a different spot. He's continuing to rehab this offseason, so we'll learn more about his readiness for full participation in spring training as we get closer to November and December."

Q: We saw Naquin at the end of this season. With Lonnie Chisenhall, obviously he's going to be a free agent, but where's he at health-wise going into the offseason?

ANTONETTI: "He got a clean bill of health at the end of the year. We got to that point, unfortunately, where he was ready to build up to game activities, and we just didn't have games for him to play. But, he'll go into the offseason ready to go and I'd imagine no restrictions going into Spring Training next year."

Q: How frustrating were the last two years with Chisenhall? When he was on the field, he was really productive...

ANTONETTI: "Really frustrating, for him, that he continued to have recurrence of a lot of those same issues that kept him from being on the field. And that made it really tough for him. So, certainly we share that frustration—not as much as him—but we certainly wanted him back out on the field, contributing to help our team win. When he was out there, he did a good job."

Q: What did you think of what you saw out of Adam Cimber?

FRANCONA: "I don't think we saw the best of Adam, yet. He came from a situation where he was pitching full innings. He was allowed to get out of his own jams. He came here and, because we had three and—sometimes four—lefties, it kind of made sense to go to the lefties. I think he's gonna be a really valued member of our bullpen. The things that we do know about him, he'll grow into pitching full innings—kind of like Joe Smith did when he came up. He's going to help us a ton. I think when he first came, he tried to do a little too much, which young guys can do sometimes. I don't think that's the worst trait in somebody. But when it starts next year, he'll be one of our mainstays."

Q: How good was it to see Tyler Olson improve down the stretch?

FRANCONA: "When you see him command the baseball and get people out, you can tell that it's not smoke and mirrors, and there's a reason he's having success. And you can kind of project it out over a season, like, 'OK, he can help us.'"

Q: You have to make a decision on a \$3 million team option on Brandon Guyer. Could he figure into the plans still?

ANTONETTI: "It's something we have to work through. We have a handful of decisions and the decision on Brandon's option is one of them. We have to make that decision by five days after the conclusion of the World Series, so we'll do it then. I think we really appreciated Brandon's contributions in the time he's been here. He made a huge impact when he came over in 2016, not only in the second half, but on the postseason run. Unfortunately, he's had some health issues that he's had to work through over the course of the last couple seasons and he hasn't always played at full strength. But when he's been healthy, he's done a good job, and I think we started to see that a little bit in the second half."

Q: It seems like all those hit-by-pitches don't even faze him...

FRANCONA: "I think he does, he just doesn't always show it."

ANTONETTI: "If you saw what his body looked like after... There was a stretch last year when he got hit by four pitches in five days, or something like that, and he was full welts all over his body that would debilitate most of us, and somehow he toughed it out."

FRANCONA: "I think his hand, thumb, whatever, at times, bothered him more than he ever let on. We went home for the All-Star break and he had that rest and he came out of the chute really swinging it. At times, it was hard for him to continue that. Sometimes it looked like he had a golf ball on it. We were like, 'Man, how is he doing this?' I think we knew it, but he's a really tough kid."

Q: What'd you think of Jon Edwards' showing down the stretch? Did he show you guys something?

FRANCONA: "Yeah. The only reason we didn't put him on the playoff roster was because we thought it was unfair to his future. He was coming back from Tommy John, so he basically had about a year of throwing. The thing I told him when he came up was, 'Hey, you probably won't pitch as much as you'd like, because we don't want to hurt you.' So then, it would be kind of disingenuous to put him on a playoff roster, the most stressful innings of his career. That was a long, convoluted way of saying we really like this kid, and I think, with a normal offseason, he's going to come back next year and play a huge part in our bullpen."

Q: Going into the season, I think Roberto Perez thought he was going to catch a lot more than he did. Obviously, Yan Gomes' play warranted your approach, but what was your message to Perez throughout the year?

FRANCONA: "Sometimes you can't tell somebody what they want to hear. A couple times, I told him, 'Roberto, if you were me, what would you do?' He said, 'I'd play Gomer.' I get it. He wants to play every day. You can't have two. I still think, even though it may frustrate one or both of them, at times, as an organization, as a team, we're better off having him, because how many times does a catcher get nicked up or things happen? I do think 'Berto's a better hitter than he showed. I think the second half, he was better, not to the point where his batting average was really going to reflect it a lot, but he's better than that."

Q: And what did you think of the steadiness shown on Gomes' part this year?

FRANCONA: "In my opinion, it was his most consistent year, by far, since we've had him. He never fluctuated between .240-.270 the entire year, and he had always been so streaky. Even some of the games when he didn't have hits... Against Cole and Verlander, who are typically guys who would probably be tough against him, he had some really good at-bats."

After playoff exit, Tribe faces contract decisions

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- The October chill has yet to hit Cleveland and yet the Indians' season has come to a close. On Wednesday afternoon, Corey Kluber climbed the stairs to the players' parking lot and left Progressive Field. Trevor Bauer sat inside an elevator lobby, taking a phone call before his own exit.

Inside an interview room off the ballpark's main tunnel, manager Terry Francona took a seat at a table with general manager Mike Chernoff to his right and Chris Antonetti, the team's president of baseball operations, on his left. It's not where they wanted to be on Wednesday. This was supposed to be an off-day during the American League Division Series or a day to prepare for the postseason's next round.

"We set out to start the year to try and win the World Series," Antonetti said. "That didn't happen. And so, regardless of how that comes to an end, it's painful, and this year is no different. It hurts a lot."

The Indians were just dealt a three-game sweep in the ALDS in overwhelming fashion by the Astros, who are vying for their second straight World Series crown. Cleveland, on the other hand, is facing its 70th straight offseason without a title to celebrate. And this winter will be a critical one in the Tribe's effort to sustain its current window of realistic contention.

• Five biggest questions facing the Indians this offseason

For the third consecutive year, the Indians captured the AL Central crown, doing so this time with a star-heavy roster led by AL Most Valuable Player contenders (Francisco Lindor and Jose Ramirez) and AL Cy Young candidates (Bauer and Kluber). For all the good, though, there were plenty of question marks -- the bullpen being a main concern -- heading into the ALDS.

Francona was asked if the team's primary worries came to fruition in the three-game sweep.

"I think that's fair," Francona said. "If you're inconsistent, it's probably fair that some of those inconsistencies rear their head, even in a short series. And I think they did."

During the three-game ALDS, the Indians were outscored by the Astros, 21-6. Houston launched eight home runs, compared to two (both by Lindor) for Cleveland. The Tribe's bullpen posted a 11.70 ERA in 10 innings, while the Astros' relief corps spun a 0.93 ERA in 9 2/3 innings behind strong starting pitching. Overall, Houston's lineup posted a 1.037 OPS, while Cleveland had a .418 OPS as a team.

A year ago, when the Indians saw their 2-0 lead vanish in the team's ALDS exit against the Yankees, Francona said it was "open season for second-guessing." This time around, while the Tribe's decision-makers will examine the preparation and results and search for things that could have been done better, Francona felt this was a case of the Astros flat-out beating the Indians.

Specifically, Francona cited the overpowering outings by Justin Verlander and Gerrit Cole in Game 1 and Game 2, respectively.

"Their two starting pitchers we faced the first two days were virtually unhittable," Francona said. "You can frame questions any way you want, and I don't blame you. It's part of why we're here. If you kind of simplify it, we got three hits off of their first two pitchers. ... Their stuff was off-the-charts good."

"You can talk about intangibles. You can talk about analytics. Analytically, those first two guys are really good."

Throughout Wednesday, Francona and the front-office leaders held exit meetings with a lot of Cleveland's players. That includes a significant group that will be eligible for free agency this winter. All-Star left fielder Michael Brantley, relievers Andrew Miller and Cody Allen and third baseman Josh Donaldson are among the nine players poised to hit the open market.

Because he was traded to Cleveland this season, Donaldson will not be eligible for a one-year, \$17.9 million qualifying offer. The Indians will, however, need to weigh whether it is worth extending that type of one-year pact to Brantley, Miller or Allen with the idea of potentially netting Draft pick compensation. Antonetti called those "very challenging" decisions as the team maps out its plans for 2019 and beyond. Complicating matters for Cleveland, which ended with a franchise-record payroll north of \$140 million, is that the money coming off the books via free agents will be offset by raises through arbitration and guaranteed contracts. Lindor, specifically, could challenge the first-year arbitration record (\$10.85 million) set by Cubs star Kris Bryant a year ago. In total, the Indians could see more than \$35 million added to the payroll through raises in 19.

"I don't know exactly where we'll be," Antonetti said of the 2019 payroll ceiling. "Obviously, we're going to take the next few weeks to work through that with ownership. The one thing we do know is, whatever payroll might be coming off the books with the free agents we may be losing, we're going to need just as much, if not more, to retain the guys through arbitration raises and increases in guaranteed contracts." The Antonetti-led front office has a knack for creativity, and that will likely be required again in order to address the multiple roster questions.

While Cleveland can return with its talented rotation intact and with Lindor and Ramirez anchoring the lineup, there will be uncertainty at all three outfield spots and a major need for bullpen reinforcements. Given the state of the AL Central, the Indians will likely remain the favorites to

claim the division crown once again. That said, the club's goal is to end Cleveland's 70-year World Series drought, not to be content with division titles.

"I think we're in a really healthy spot with where we are as an organization right now," Antonetti said. "We will be faced with some really difficult decisions, but the reason we're having those difficult decisions is we have a lot of really good players on our team that are returning, some of whom will earn a lot more than they earned last year. We have a very healthy Minor League system.

"I think we continue to work and build an organizational culture that's established winning as being a foundational element there, which is an important thing. It's taken a while to get to that point. So, I feel like we're in a very healthy spot moving forward."

5 biggest questions Tribe faces heading into '19

By Anthony Castrovince MLB.com @castrovince

CLEVELAND -- It was sunny and 85 degrees the last two days at Progressive Field -- conditions that felt cruel at a time when, in the bowels of the building, they were packing up the baseball season. The clubhouse staff was busy cleaning up and cleaning out the clubhouse, players had their exit interviews with management, and the ticket office was issuing refunds for un-played playoff baseball.

When a season ends on terms other than your own, it's always brutal, but that's particularly the case in a place where they have spent six months -- 12 months, really -- anticipating October, only to have it erased in less than 80 hours.

And so there are questions facing the Indians as they head into winter much earlier than they anticipated. Here are the five biggest ones:

1. Who or what is to blame for another quick October exit?

The hot takes about manager Terry Francona are widespread on the city streets right now, as fan frustration over the last two postseason exits is bubbling over. As understandable as that frustration may be, equally understandable is the Indians' preferred path of seeing the big picture.

The Tribe's .562 winning percentage under Francona is second only to the Dodgers' .581 mark in that six-season span. The team has won three straight division titles for the first time since its renaissance in the 1990s. Stability has been a strength, and, while there were disastrous results in three games against the Astros in the American League Division Series, there are no indications that Cleveland will make an immediate move to its coaching staff. That includes hitting coach Ty Van Burkleo, who will not be let go to appease fans angered by the club's .144 average in three October games.

"That's a reactionary move," Francona said during a downtrodden session with the local media Wednesday. "[The ALDS showing] hurt like crazy, but we were in the upper tier in just about every offensive category."

Could Francona have managed the ALDS differently? Trevor Bauer's unusual role -- converted from would-be Cy Young candidate to everyday relief option because of a late-season leg fracture -- might have given some of us license to dream up inventive ways of deploying him in Games 1, 2 and 3, but, ultimately, Bauer didn't pitch particularly well, and nobody in the bullpen did. Actually, the 11.70 ERA (13 earned runs in 10 innings) compiled by Tribe relievers in this series was the highest any team got from its relief crew in the last 20 postseasons (technically, the 2016 Mets had a 13.50 relief ERA, but that was only in a single-game Wild Card round).

Combine that with the ineptitude of the offense, and there were no magic buttons to deploy. The Indians were beaten in every facet of the game. And maybe, considering the Astros won 12 more games this season in a much tougher division and had a plus-263 run differential to the Indians' plus-170 mark, that shouldn't have been surprising.

"If you're inconsistent," said Francona, "Some of those inconsistencies will rear their head [in the postseason]."

2. So is the Tribe's window closing?

It is, and it isn't. Even in the biggest markets with the boldest of payrolls, windows of contention around a particular core of players evolve over time, and none of them stay open forever. As a function of market and revenues, the Indians' margin for error has always been smaller than it is elsewhere, and some upcoming financial crunches (more on that in a second) will make that margin all the slimmer come 2019.

With that said, the entirety of the Tribe's elite rotation -- Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco, Bauer, Mike Clevinger and Shane Bieber -- as well as lineup linchpins Francisco Lindor, Jose Ramirez and Edwin Encarnacion and relief ace Brad Hand are all on board for 2019. That's a lot to work with. And only the most outlandish of off-seasons from the likes of the Twins, White Sox, Royals or Tigers would prevent the Tribe from entering next season as the prohibitive favorite in the AL Central.

So, the weak division that helped sustain the Indians in '18, will in all likelihood be an asset again in '19. But, there is much work to be done with this roster for this club to be truly World Series-caliber again.

3. How different will the roster look next year?

Quite a bit. Again, many of the assets that have elevated the Indians to a spot among the AL elite the last few seasons will return, and a great rotation can pave over a lot of sins. But much of the more-than-\$40 million coming off the books via the Indians' eight notable free agents (Josh Donaldson, Michael Brantley, Andrew Miller, Cody Allen, Rajai Davis, Oliver Perez, Lonnie Chisenhall and Melky Cabrera) will be offset by roughly \$17 million in raises built into guaranteed contracts (including option years for Carrasco and Brandon Guyer) and the elevated arbitration value of Bauer (projected by MLBTradeRumors.com to be worth \$11.6 million in his second round of arbitration after making \$6.5

million this year) and Lindor (projected to be worth \$10.2 million, which would fall just shy of Kris Bryant's \$10.8 million record for a first-time arb-eligible player).

So even if the Indians were to maintain their franchise-record Opening Day payroll of about \$135 million from 2018 (and that might be a stretch after a downturn in attendance and a quick playoff exit), they're not going to be winning any bidding wars. They're going to have to get creative (they tried to trade Jason Kipnis a year ago and could potentially try again) in addressing holes, while Leonys Martin (who suffered a life-threatening infection shortly after his non-waiver Trade Deadline arrival) and Yandy Diaz will figure prominently into their planning.

"We try to be very purposeful about soliciting creative, out-of-the-box ideas, just to make sure we're considering all avenues to put our organization in a better position moving forward," Indians president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti said.

4. What the heck happened to Ramirez?

Especially given the potential departure of Brantley, Ramirez's importance to this lineup cannot be overstated. That makes his fall from grace in the midst of what had been an MVP-caliber year all the more troubling. In the last seven weeks of the season, including an 0-for-11 Division Series, Ramirez contributed the lowest OPS (.546) of any Major League qualifier. In all likelihood, some combination of opponent adjustment (more breaking balls, fewer fastballs), pressing and fatigue caught up with him.

"He got himself into a predicament, and he couldn't get himself out of it," Francona said. "Even when he got pitches to hit, he kind of peeled off, and he knew it. He watched video, and he just couldn't get the feeling of staying through the ball."

Even the greatest hitters go through slumps. Unfortunately, the timing of Ramirez's slump means he'll enter 2019 questioned for his fall as often, or even more, than he's celebrated for his 30/30 accomplishment.

5. What about the bullpen?

It was the story of the 2018 season, and not in a good way. The Indians didn't address the 'pen last winter with the free-agent departures of Bryan Shaw and Joe Smith, and that bit them when Allen and Miller regressed due to mechanical and injury issues. The team had to give up its top prospect, switch-hitting catcher Francisco Mejia, to get two controllable 'pen pieces from the Padres in Hand and Adam Cimber, both of whom will have an elevation in role and stature with Miller and Allen both potentially wearing new uniforms next season.

For all the work and thought that the Indians put into the bullpen over the course of the '18 season, to say it didn't deliver in the Division Series sweep is an understatement. The Indians will have to find affordable upside options in free agency, and there's a chance rehabbing starters Danny Salazar (who is expected to begin his throwing progression in November after shoulder surgery) and/or Cody Anderson could become 'pen options next spring.

Has Trevor Bauer become the most important pitcher on the Cleveland Indians' staff?

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

CLEVELAND, Ohio - The Indians have played eight postseason games in the last two years and Trevor Bauer has pitched in five. It's staggering to think how much responsibility they've given him.

Last year he started Games 1 and 4 against the Yankees in the ALDS. He pitched Game 4 on three days' rest and it went poorly, but the Indians obviously knew something wasn't right with Corey Kluber.

This year Bauer, coming back from a stress fracture in his right leg, started the ALDS in the bullpen because the Indians knew it was their weakest link. Manager Terry Francona said it was not an easy sell.

"We had to kind of work through that a little bit," said Francona in Wednesday's end-of-the-season press conference. "I think in his perfect world, he would have pitched in all five games. I tried to tell him in my perfect world he was going to also."

Bauer's season was derailed by a Jose Abreu line drive on Aug. 11 that hit him above the right ankle and put him on the disabled list for the first time in his career. He did not take it well.

"I had to remind him a couple of times, 'Hey, man, I didn't hit you with that line drive,'" said Francona. "That was somebody else. That's how much we appreciate his pitching. He's turned himself into one of the best pitchers in the game."

Bauer appeared in all three games against Houston in this year's ALDS. He pitched a mop up inning in Game 1. Francona waited a tad too late to get him into a 3-1 loss in Game 2. Finally, in Game 3, Bauer entered the game in a perfect situation with the Indians leading, 2-1, in the sixth inning. He worked a scoreless sixth, but lost his control and the game in the seventh when he made two errors and allowed three runs on four hits in one-third of an inning.

It was the second straight year the Indians put a starter in the bullpen for the postseason thinking he'd be a weapon. Last year it was Mike Clevinger. This year it was Bauer. The results have been spotty at best.

No. 2: Indians didn't move needle with Donaldson trade

The Indians knew they were taking a gamble when they traded for Josh Donaldson on Aug. 31. They didn't gain a whole lot, except to find out Donaldson can play the heck out of third base. But they acquired him to hit, which he didn't do.

Donaldson, after missing three months of the season with a calf injury, was going through spring training in September and in the ALDS. Spring training against Houston's pitching staff ... now that would explain his .091 (1-for-11) ALDS batting average.

When the Indians made the trade, baseball executives outside the organization said the best part of the deal was letting Jose Ramirez play his natural position at second base. But Ramirez never looked comfortable there. His most memorable play after the move came in Game 2 of the ALDS when he turned a 5-4-3 double play against Jose Altuve. It was a great turn, but it started when he tripped over second base. Who would have thought Jason Kipnis would have looked more comfortable in center field than Ramirez did at second?

No.3: Francona, Kipnis talk over "out-scouted, out-coached" remark

After Monday's embarrassing 11-3 loss, Kipnis said the Indians were outplayed in every phase of the game. He added that they were outscouted and outcoached to a certain extent as well.

That must have hit a nerve because Francona said he talked to Kipnis about that remark. He did not tell reporters what the conversation entailed, but before the start of the ALDS Francona said the Indians were well-prepared thanks to the work of Dave Malpass and Tom Wiedenbauer, among others, on breaking down the Astros. Malpass and Wiedenbauer are special assistants to Chris Antonetti and Mike Chernoff.

Then again, the Indians were out-hit .327 to .144 and outscored, 21-6. Kipnis, meanwhile, took a 1-for-9. So maybe the Astros' spies were better than the Tribe's.

No. 4: Tribe coaches, executives could be on the move

Francona said he would not be surprised if some of his coaches are interviewed/hired for one of several managerial vacancies. Bench coach Brad Mills is said to be on the Twins' interview list as is first base coach Sandy Alomar and John McDonald, a minor-league instructor. Derek Falvey, former Tribe executive, is the chief baseball officer for the Twins.

The Twins, Blue Jays, Rangers, Reds and Angels are looking for managers. Chernoff has reportedly talked to the Mets about their vacant GM job. Chernoff just completed his 15th year with the Indians and is second in command to Antonetti.

No. 5. What to do with options on Carrasco, Guyer?

The Indians hold club options on Carlos Carrasco and Brandon Guyer for 2019. Carrasco's option is worth \$9 million, while Guyer's is \$3 million. Carrasco, who has won 35 games in the last two years, should be a no-brainer. The oft-injured Guyer is another question, even though the Indians are seriously thin in the outfield.

"It's something we have to work through," said Antonetti, regarding Guyer. "We have a handful of decisions and the decision on Brandon's option is one of them."

The Indians have until five days after the World Series to make a decision on Carrasco and Guyer's options.

No. 6: Indians' foundation remains the starting rotation

The Indians could lose as many as nine free agents this winter, but the fact that they are expected to return their entire starting rotation should position them well to win a fourth straight AL Central title.

Kluber, Carrasco, Bauer, Clevinger and Shane Bieber give the Indians a good starting point.

"We didn't have the results we wanted this year, but as we look at where we are moving forward, we still feel like we're in a really good spot organizationally," said Antonetti. "We're going to have two guys in the top five to top seven of the MVP voting (Francisco Lindor, Jose Ramirez). We're going to have four guys that are in the top 10 in the AL Cy Young balloting (Kluber, Bauer, Carrasco and Clevinger). That's a great foundation to start any offseason."

Cleveland Indians: Leaving a lousy last impression -- Terry Pluto

By Terry Pluto, The Plain Dealer terrypluto2003@yahoo.com

CLEVELAND -- When it comes to sports, you not only have one chance to make a first impression...

You also have one chance to make a last impression in any given season.

That's why what happened to the Tribe in the playoffs is so discouraging.

If the Indians had been swept by Houston in a bunch of 3-2 games with a few extra innings thrown in, I'd feel better about the team.

But the Astros demolished the Tribe in the first round of the best-of-5 American League Division Series. The Indians were outscored, 21-6. They scored 2-1-3 runs over three games.

Starters Carlos Carrasco and Mike Clevinger along with shortstop Francisco Lindor (2 HR) are excused from this discussion.

But just about everyone else in Wahoo red, white and blue delivered performances that were mediocre at best, and often downright miserable.

BULLPEN DISASTER

Maybe part of it was that Andrew Miller was never fully able to overcome his variety of injuries (shoulder, knee, hamstring). And part of it was Cody Allen never being able to find his curveball or his confidence.

As for Trevor Bauer in the bullpen, that desperation move backfired.

I still think of Bauer making two throwing errors in one inning.
Or Miller delivering a pitch in Houston that went BEHIND a hitter.

Or Allen giving up as many runs (6) as the Indians scored in all three games. And Allen pitched only one total inning.

FALLING APART

The Indians actually had a 2-1 lead after five innings in Game 3, and they ended up losing 11-3.

The last few innings were sloppy, careless baseball.

The Tribe played the same way in Game 5 of the 2017 season against New York. They were eliminated from the ALDS by a 5-2 count, making three errors in the process.

They made three more errors in the elimination game against Houston.

The Indians pride themselves in having good guys who "play the right way." That generally is the case.

But the collapses at the end of the playoffs in the last two years are disturbing. By the end of both seasons, the players looked mentally defeated.

The Indians have now lost their last six playoff games.

The Indians can argue otherwise, but just look at the tapes of Game 5 in 2017 and Game 3 in 2018.

They were nothing like the 2016 undermanned Tribe, who forced the Cubs into extra innings before losing Game 7 of World Series. The final score of that game was 8-7.

CHANGES NEEDED

The Indians are likely to lose Michael Brantley, Lonnie Chisenhall, Josh Donaldson, Josh Tomlin, Miller and Allen. There are other less prominent free agents such as Melky Cabrera and Oliver Perez also headed to the market.

Of that group, I'd love to keep Brantley. But I expect him to be enticed away by a lucrative long-term deal elsewhere.

I can't name the last time the Indians had a significant player reach free agency, then re-sign with the Tribe.

If they reach open market, they are gone.

But the bullpen needs nearly a complete overhaul. Brad Hand can be the closer. Perhaps Adam Cimber can help.

But something is very wrong with Miller and Allen.

Relievers are so inconsistent. Bryan Shaw (\$27 million, 3 years with Colorado) and Joe Smith (\$15 million, 2 years with Houston) left the Tribe last year -- yet didn't pitch well enough to make the playoff rosters for their respective teams.

Houston was the superior team. Clevinger implied the Indians didn't do a good job with their analytic preparation for the playoffs. That came from Jason Lloyd of The Athletic.

No idea if that's true.

I do know analytics had nothing to do with throwing strikes, catching the ball and playing sound fundamental baseball.

The personality of the team was a bit strange all season. It's as if they spent six months awaiting the playoffs. September felt like spring training.

Key veterans Edwin Encarnacion, Jose Ramirez, Josh Donaldson, Jason Kipnis and Yonder Alonso combined for 3-for-47 at the plate!

The Indians had three extra-base hits: Lindor's two homers, a Yandy Diaz double.

It was just an odd, unfocused year for a team with some flaws that were dramatically exposed in the playoffs. That should lead to a long off-season of soul searching for a talented team that underachieved.

Jose Ramirez's long slump won't cost Cleveland Indians' hitting coaches their jobs

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.comphoynes@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio - Manager Terry Francona and the front office says there will be no changes in the Indians' hitting coaches despite a long slump by All-Star third baseman Jose Ramirez that culminated in him going 0-for-11 in the ALDS as the Indians were swept by Houston.

Ramirez, expected to finish in the top five of the AL MVP voting for the second straight year, hit .166 (24-for-145) with three homers and 16 RBI from Aug. 14 through the end of the season. The slump dropped his average from .305 to .270 and probably cost him a chance at winning the MVP award.

In the team's annual end-of-the-season press conference on Wednesday, Francona was asked what happened to Ramirez.

"He got himself into a predicament and he couldn't get himself out of it," said Francona. "It's hard to figure out because a guy can be that good, that dominant and then just couldn't get (going). He kept peeling off balls even when he got pitches to hit, he kind of peeled off. He knew it and watched video and he just couldn't get the feeling of staying through the ball."

Chris Antonetti, president of baseball operations, added, "I'll maybe add that the timing of that obviously was unfortunate, with Jose's struggles, but that's not atypical for hitter. I remember the conversations with Jim Thome when he got off to tough starts in April and May and there was a question of whether or not we were going to bench him and not play him anymore.

"Remember the conversations (Francona) had with David Ortiz (in Boston), when are you going to stop playing David Ortiz? Then he went out and had five more years. So, the timing was unfortunate, but hitters struggle. Guys go through periods of time when they are not performing at their best."

Francona was told that Ramirez's performance over the last month and half of the regular season "killed" the Indians.

"What do you mean killed us?" said Francona. "We won the division by 13 games."

He was asked about Ramirez's performance in the postseason.

"I would say that (Gerrit) Cole and (Justin) Verlander (Houston's starters in the first two games of the ALDS) had something to do with that," said Francona.

Francona was asked if hitting coaches Ty Van Burkleo or Victor Rodriguez should be held responsible for Ramirez's performance.

"I think that's a reaction," said Francona. "That to me is a very reactionary move. It's a small sample and it hurt like crazy losing. Yet, we were probably in the upper tier in just about every offensive category."

Francona asked if the question was based on disappointment with the postseason or Ramirez's body of work for the season.

"The body of work," was the response.

"OK, well then he's going to be third in the league in MVP voting," said Francona. "Do you still want to get rid of somebody?"

Francona was asked, "Is it a reflection on the hitting coach that he wasn't able to get Ramirez straightened out?"

"I think it's every bit as much of a reflection that a kid that we thought might be a utility player is going to be second or third or fourth in the league in MVP voting," said Francona. "I think VanBo (Van Burkleo) is every bit as much to put the onus on for that also."

In the regular season, the Indians finished second in the AL in batting average, third in runs, second in hits, fifth in doubles, fourth in home runs, fifth in walks, fourth in slugging percentage and third in on-base percentage.

In the ALDS, they were out-hit .327 to .144, outscored 21-6 and outhomered 8-2. During the regular season the Indians struck out the fewest times in the AL, they struck out 30 times in three games.

In 2017, when the Indians blew a 2-0 lead in the ALDS against the Yankees, they hit .171 as a team and were outscored, 21-18. The Yankees hit .201 as a team.

Ramirez hit .270 (156-for-578) with 38 doubles, 39 homers and 105 RBI in 157 games in the regular season. He stole 34 bases to become just the third 30-30 man in franchise history. After the All-Star break, he hit .218 (48-for-226) with 10 homers and 35 RBI. Over the last two years, Ramirez is 2-for-31 with one RBI in the ALDS.

Yes, the Cleveland Indians are still playing baseball, but it's in the AFL not the ALDS

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.comphoynes@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio - Tuesday would have been a great day to play Game 4 of the ALDS at Progressive Field. The weather was perfect, almost too hot.

That possibility ended when the Indians lost to Houston on Monday, 11-3, as the Astros completed a three-game sweep. Still, there were members of the Indians' organization playing baseball on Tuesday. It was just a long way from the postseason.

The Glendale Desert Dogs, with seven minor leaguers from the Indians on its roster, played the Peoria Javelinas on opening day in the Arizona Fall League. They lost, 8-7, but outfielder Connors Marabell, drafted in the 25th round in 2015, went 3-for-5 with two RBI.

Indians pitchers on Glendale's roster include right-handers Justin Garza, Jared Robinson and Dalbert Siri and lefty Rob Kaminsky. Rigo Beltran, the Indians pitching coach at Class AA Akron, will serve as Glendale's pitching coach. Tribe position players include catcher Li-Jen Chu, infielder Yu Chang and Marabell.

Chang, who was in spring training with the big-league club this past season, hit .256 (117-for-457) with 13 homers and 62 RBI in 127 games in his first year at Class AAA Columbus. He played 94 games at shortstop, 23 at third and nine at second, while striking out 144 times.

Marabell hit .296 (102-for-345) with 23 doubles, 11 homers and 64 RBI in 89 games at Akron. He was promoted to Columbus where he hit .214 (25-for-117) with two homers and nine RBI in 31 games.

Chu spent most of this season at Class A Lynchburg where he hit .278 (82-for-295) with 20 doubles, eight homers and 45 RBI in 81 games. He appeared in 16 games at Akron and two at Columbus.

Siri went 1-5 with 15 saves and a 2.45 ERA in 42 games at Lynchburg. He struck out 71 and walked 29 in 47 2/3 innings.

Robinson, an 11th round pick in 2014, went 5-3 with a 2.65 ERA in 29 starts at Lynchburg. He struck out 56 and walked 21 in 51 innings.

Kaminsky, the Cardinals No. 1 pick in 2013, moved to the bullpen at Akron and went 1-1 with a 3.08 ERA and four saves in 23 appearances. He struck out 22 and walked 18 in 26 1/3 innings.

Garza, an eighth-round pick in 2015, went 5-6 with a 3.71 ERA in 16 starts at Lynchburg. He struck out 69 and walked 22 in 68 innings. There are several former Indians managing or coaching in the AFL. Former Tribe catcher Lou Marson is managing the Mesa Solar Sox. Don "The Rock" Schulze is his pitching coach. Shelley Duncan is Salt River's hitting coach, while Dave Burba is their pitching coach.

Teams send their better prospects to the AFL to continue their path toward the big leagues. The season runs through Nov. 17.

Let the money season begin: Cleveland Indians' Francisco Lindor, Trevor Bauer in for big arbitration raises

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.comphoynes@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio - The postseason ended for the Indians on Monday in an embarrassing 11-3 loss to the Astros at Progressive Field. As soon as that season ended, another season began.

Call this the money season and the star players will be owner Paul Dolan and executives Chris Antonetti and Mike Chernoff. They have several impending free agents to make decisions on.

Then there is Francisco Lindor and Trevor Bauer and the arbitration process. Lindor will be eligible for the first time this winter. Bauer will be taking his third bite of the arbitration apple.

MLBtraderumors.com released its projections for what every eligible player will earn in arbitration this winter. Lindor, to say the least, is in for a big raise.

He made \$623,200 this season, just above the major league minimum of \$545,000. He is projected to earn \$10.2 million for the 2019 season. Bauer, who in a rare move took the Indians to arbitration last offseason and beat them, is projected to earn \$11.6 million. His arbitration victory this season paid him \$6.525 million.

The Indians have tried several times to sign both players to multiyear deals without success. A couple of springs ago, they made Lindor an extension offer that was close to \$100 million, but he turned it down. They have not made much headway since.

In Bauer's case, he's on record as saying he'd like to play his whole career on one-year contracts. Perhaps having this season interrupted by a stress fracture in his right leg will convince him that a career can be a fragile thing, but that's something only Bauer can answer.

Last winter Kris Bryant of the Cubs avoided arbitration by signing a one-year \$10.85 million deal. It's a record for a player in his first year of eligibility. Bryant was the NL Rookie of the Year in 2015 and the NL MVP in 2016.

While Bryant became eligible for arbitration after 457 games, Lindor needed 547 games. He's a three-time All-Star who finished second in the AL Rookie of the Year voting in 2015. In 2016 and 2017, Lindor finished ninth and fifth, respectively, in AL MVP voting and should finish in the top 10 against this year.

Along with his career statistics -- .288 (665-for-2,306), 377 runs, 138 doubles, 98 homers, 310 RBI, 90 steals and a .837 OPS - Lindor and his agent could make a compelling argument if they went the distance in their arbitration case.

Bauer was in contention for the AL Cy Young award when he was hit by a line drive above the right ankle on Aug. 11 by Jose Abreu. He came back to make three appearances at the end of the regular season before pitching out of the bullpen in the ALDS.

He ended the regular season at 12-6 with a 2.21 ERA and one save in 175 1/3 innings. He was one of four Tribe pitchers to strikeout 200 or more batters in one year.

The Indians control Bauer through 2020 and Lindor through 2021.

Here are the other Indians eligible for arbitration and what they're expected to earn: Danny Salazar \$5 million, Leonys Martin \$2.8 million, Neil Ramirez \$1.3 million, Cody Anderson \$900,000, Brandon Barnes \$800,000 and Nick Goody \$700,000. Salazar missed the entire season with a

right shoulder injury, Martin played six games for the Indians after being acquired from the Tigers before his season ended because of a bacterial infection. Anderson has been sidelined since the spring of 2017 because of Tommy John surgery on his right elbow. Goody made just 12 appearances this year before needing surgery on his right elbow.

When the World Series ends, these Indians will become free agents: Michael Brantley, Cody Allen, Andrew Miller, Lonnie Chisenhall, Josh Tomlin, Rajai Davis, Melky Cabrera, Oliver Perez and Josh Donaldson. If the Indians don't bring any of them back, they'll be shedding an estimated \$46 million in salary.

Tribe minor leaguers Alexi Ogando and Evan Marshall have already filed for free agency.

The Indians hold club options for 2019 on 17-game winner Carlos Carrasco and outfielder Brandon Guyer. Carrasco's option is worth \$9 million and it's a no-brainer it will be exercised. Guyer's option is worth \$3 million, but that could be questionable because he had a hard time staying healthy this year.

Marla Ridenour: Jason Kipnis' eyebrow-raising criticism of Indians could be rooted in Astros' analytical superiority

By Marla Ridenour

CLEVELAND — When Jason Kipnis uttered what sounded like scathing criticism of the Indians on Monday after another season ended sooner than expected, it was enough for one teammate listening nearby to raise an eyebrow and tap the foot of another who sat next to him.

"It just seems from top to bottom we were outscouted, outhit, outpitched, outcoached a little bit," Kipnis said after the Houston Astros wrapped up a sweep in the American League Division Series with an 11-3 victory. "They really did just a fantastic job over there of being ready and prepared before the series. I don't think we were underprepared — they just went out and executed and played the way you need to play to win."

One of the best soundbites from a disappointed and subdued clubhouse, Kipnis' words were heard on radio and television, seen in print and online. Apparently there was something to them, because during a 51-minute postmortem Wednesday at Progressive Field, Indians manager Terry Francona said he addressed the comments with Kipnis, presumably during their exit interview.

"When it's public, I can understand why you'd ask," Francona said. "But I'd like to keep my conversation with him private. But I'm comfortable that we had it."

Just the fact that Francona and Kipnis had the conversation would seem to indicate that Kipnis touched a nerve. After working as an analyst for ESPN before he signed on with the Indians in 2013, Francona rarely issues what was essentially a no-comment, although in this case it is understandable, because it was a talk behind closed doors.

Reading between the lines on what Kipnis meant is another matter.

Was he still upset about being forced to move from second base to the outfield after the Indians traded for third baseman Josh Donaldson on Aug. 31, shifting Jose Ramirez to second?

Did Kipnis believe he was taking too much of the blame for the team's postseason flop after he hit .111 against the Astros, while Ramirez went hitless, Donaldson batted .091 and Edwin Encarnacion .100?

Were there issues about players left on the bench, like Rajai Davis (0-for-20 lifetime against Game 3 starter Dallas Keuchel) or Greg Allen (0-for-3 vs. Keuchel)? There was little to second-guess in the short series save for Francona lifting Carlos Carrasco after 5 1/3 innings in Game 2, and that seemed defensible since the Astros were starting to hit the ball hard, albeit right at people.

Kipnis is a team guy, once dubbed the "heart and soul" of the Indians by former manager Mike Hargrove, so it's hard to believe those were the issues that prompted his comments.

More likely it is Kipnis' frustration that the Indians organization, a farm system for Major League Baseball executives, could not compete with the Astros because of the latter's superior scouting and analytics.

As the Tribe's Game 3 starter, Mike Clevinger observed afterward: "We kind of had our backs against the wall before this started when it came to the analytical side. They just had some really good arms and a good lineup to back it up."

Baseball insiders believe the Astros are the best organization in the league in terms of analytics and scouting, although the Indians still rank among the top 10. Unfortunately for the Tribe, some above them are also the highest-ranking payroll teams.

Called up from Triple-A in 2011, Kipnis has been around long enough to be disturbed by the fact that others are passing the Indians by in terms of preparation, going so far as to use multiple high-speed cameras to film every play, according to The Athletic. Trevor Bauer, a devotee of such technology in the offseason, could be pushing for the Indians to dive deeper into that side of the game, and he might be gaining support among his teammates.

The Indians saw an opponent celebrate on their home field for the third consecutive year, the Astros joining the Cubs (2016 World Series) and Yankees (2017 ALDS). Clevinger and Kipnis sound like they're convinced the defending champion Astros had the edge before the series because of their detailed study of the Indians' tendencies and weaknesses.

Indians' front office preparing for challenging offseason

By Ryan Lewis

CLEVELAND — The Indians' front office has had to be creative with its financial resources for a long time while trying to shape a championship caliber roster without the kind of financial flexibility teams in larger markets enjoy.

This upcoming winter might be their biggest challenge yet.

The Indians have a number of key players on the roster eligible for free agency, which wasn't the case the last few years, at least to this degree. Michael Brantley, Andrew Miller and Cody Allen are all free to walk away to new teams, and they would be the most difficult — or impossible — to replace externally. Other free agents include Josh Tomlin and Lonnie Chisenhall.

Brantley, Miller and Allen all finding new homes would bring a lot of salary relief to the books compared to last year, when those three combined to make more than \$31 million. Add in Tomlin and Chisenhall's salaries, and that number tops \$40 million in savings.

All if not most of that will be wiped out by raises for several players on the roster either through arbitration or their current long-term deals, though. MLBTradeRumors.com projects the Indians could have to shell out more than \$33 in arbitration cases, with most of that going to Francisco Lindor and Trevor Bauer, if nobody is non-tendered.

Meanwhile, roughly \$17 million will be added to the books through contract raises, barring a trade.

So, suddenly, the Indians are searching for about \$10 million, and they still have a number of roster spots to address.

"I don't know exactly where we'll be," Indians president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti said when asked about the club's financial flexibility. "Obviously, we're going to take the next few weeks to work through that with ownership.

"The one thing we do know is whatever payroll might be coming off the books with the free agents we may be losing, we're going to need just as much if not more to retain the guys through arbitration raises and increases in guaranteed contracts. We had a franchise record payroll this year just to retain those guys that are under contract. It would be a payroll even above where we are right now even before we add anyone externally."

The Indians have long operated under constraints such as needing to find values on the open market. This offseason is no different. They are well-versed in the arts of value-shopping in the baseball world, which will be put to the test in a few weeks.

"One of the things we challenge ourselves every offseason is to try to be creative and not look at things in any one lane," Antonetti said. "Really, we try to be very purposeful about soliciting creative, out-of-the-box ideas just to make sure we're considering all avenues to put our organization in a better position moving forward. We'll be doing that here over the next few months to try to figure out what that might be."

Unfortunately, this isn't the best time to go bargain shopping to such a degree. The Indians are World Series contenders and should remain that way for at least the next two seasons as currently constructed. They should also easily have control of the American League Central Division the next two seasons, and probably could just about punch their tickets to October right now.

How the Indians address their outfield and bullpen are the two biggest question marks on the roster. But beginning the winter with a starting rotation of Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco, Trevor Bauer and Mike Clevinger with an infield that boasts Francisco Lindor and Jose Ramirez is something Antonetti sees as one of the better starting points in the American League.

"Obviously we're sitting here today, we're disappointed," Antonetti said. "We didn't have the results we wanted this year, but as we look at where we are moving forward, we still feel like we're in a really good spot organizationally. We're going to have two guys that are going to be in the top five of the MVP voting, the top seven in the MVP voting, which I imagine a lot of teams would trade that position with us. We're going to have four guys that are in the top 10 of the American League Cy Young, so that's a great foundation to start any offseason."

Indians feel pain of another short October run

By Ryan Lewis

CLEVELAND — For the third consecutive year, the Indians watched another team celebrate on their field. Three postseason trips, and three times the Indians had to feel the pain of an unwanted ending.

The 2016 run to the World Series came with a bitter end, but it also featured a large dose of pride for a team that proved the baseball world wrong and pushed its limits to the very edge. Last year's American League Division Series collapse to the New York Yankees was rife with disappointment and left a bad taste in the mouths of all those in the clubhouse.

This one was, more simply, over almost before it got started. The Houston Astros ran through the Indians in so many ways, sweeping them out of the postseason.

"They're all different. They all hurt," Indians president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti said on Wednesday. "We set out to start the year to try and win the World Series, and that didn't happen. And so regardless of how that comes to an end, it's painful, and this year is no different. It hurts a lot."

"It's always abrupt, too," general manager Mike Chernoff added. "Even in Game 7 in the World Series it felt abrupt when you're just going as fast as you can and as hard as you can and it just ends. That's part of what is so painful about it."

The Indians were left with a quiet clubhouse and a lot of packing to do as the Astros advanced to the American League Championship Series to play the Boston Red Sox. There exists a great deal of frustration in another year in which they didn't get it done. But as the club holds exit

meetings with players, time is needed before any decisions are made. Deciding someone's future within a cloud of disappointment can be counterproductive.

"You know, it's hard to compare [the last three postseason exits] because what's fresh always seems like the most," manager Terry Francona said. "Like Chris said, when you set out for a goal and you come up short, it stings. So you have emotion for a while and that goes away after a little bit and then you try to get a perspective of, 'Where are we? Legitimately what can we do better?' Because if you make decisions when you're emotional, then you blow the whole place up, and that's not healthy."

In many ways, the Indians were overpowered by the defending World Series champions. The lineup hit .144 (13-for-90) in the series, as Astros starters Justin Verlander, Gerrit Cole and Dallas Keuchel — three current or former Cy Young-caliber pitchers — mowed through one of the best lineups in the American League.

Indians ace Corey Kluber, meanwhile, was roughed up in Game 1. Andrew Miller and Trevor Bauer were knocked around for key hits in Game 3. Jose Ramirez was silenced at the plate. And thanks to a few self-inflicted miscues by the Indians, the Astros poured it on in Game 3, leaving a previously raucous Progressive Field sounding like a library in the later innings.

What's left, then, is a proverbial punch to the gut and a long winter of tough decisions.

Indians upbeat despite potentially losing 10 free agents

By Jeff Schudel JSchudel@News-Herald.com @JSProlInsider on Twitter 15 hrs ago Comments

There are holes in the outfield, holes in the bullpen and one giant-sized hole in the collective hearts of the Indians after being swept out of the ALDS by the Houston Astros.

About 48 hours after the Astros sent the Indians packing by pounding them, 11-3, in Game 3 on Oct. 8 at Progressive Field, team president Chris Antonetti, general manager Mike Chernoff and manager Terry Francona conducted a wake/season wrap-up in the same building. They held a similar news conference a year ago after the Indians were knocked out of the ALDS by the Yankees after jumping out to a 2-0 in the series.

The Indians have lost six straight playoff games and nine of their last 11.

"They're all different. They all hurt," Antonetti said. "We set out to try and win the World Series and that didn't happen, and so regardless of how that comes to an end, it's painful and this year is no different. It hurts a lot."

Ten players — four pitchers, four outfielders and two infielders — are eligible for free agency next month. The bullpen is getting hit hard; Andrew Miller, Cody Allen and Oliver Perez plus starter Josh Tomlin will have the chance to cash in with another team. Miller, and especially Allen, were unreliable in 2018.

"Not knowing is a really difficult thing," Francona said. "And there was a lot of unknowns, which was different for this bullpen. So it was challenging. And on top of that, some of these guys are free agents to boot."

"We're going to have our work cut out for us putting together a bullpen that we think can get us where we want to go. Doesn't mean we can't do it. In fact it's going to be fun trying to do it, but we know we have some work to do."

Outfielders Michael Brantley, Lonnie Chisenhall, Rajai Davis and Melky Cabrera will be free agents. Third baseman Josh Donaldson and second baseman Adam Rosales (he played in only 13 games) are the infielders heading to free agency.

All eligible players become free agents at 9 a.m. the morning after the World Series ends. That starts a five-day period of making qualifying offers. Non-contracted players can start signing with another team at the end of that five-day period.

Don't hold your breath on many, or possibly any, of the major free agents returning to the Indians. The Indians' 2018 total payroll of \$142,804,703 was the highest on franchise history and 14th highest in all of baseball. A large chunk of that amount would come off the books if none of the free agents is re-signed, but that does not mean the Tribe will be able to go on a shopping spree when free agency begins.

"The one thing we do know is whatever payroll might be coming off the books with the free agents we may be losing, we're going to need just as much if not more to retain the guys through arbitration raises and increases in guaranteed contracts," Antonetti said. "It would be a payroll even above where we are right now even before we add anyone externally."

It was not all gloom and doom in the final media session with the Indians' brain trust before all will gather again for TribeFest in January. Just the opposite, actually.

The Indians have won the AL Central Division championship three straight times, and, despite the expected November defections, they should be favored to repeat in 2019. The challenge for Antonetti, Chernoff and Francona is taking the next three steps to earn Cleveland its first World Series championship since 1948. The Indians have the longest drought in Major League Baseball.

"I think we're in a really healthy spot with where we are as an organization right now," Antonetti said. "We will be faced with some really difficult decisions, but the reason we're having those difficult decisions is we have a lot of really good players on our team that are returning, some of whom will earn a lot more than they did (in 2018)."

"We have a very healthy minor league system. I think we continue to work on build an organizational culture that's established winning as being a foundational outlet there, which is an important thing. It's taken a while to get to that point. So I feel like we're in a very healthy spot moving forward."

TRIBE NOTES Not good enough: Indians built to contend for World Series titles but keep falling short

Tom Withers | The Associated PressPublished on Oct. 10, 2018 | Updated 6:43 a. m.

CLEVELAND — For the third year in a row, the unmistakable aroma of champagne wafted into the hallway outside the visitor's clubhouse following the final game at Progressive Field.

On the Cleveland side, the smell was sour.

The Indians were built for one goal: to win their first World Series since 1948. Yet after cruising to a third straight AL Central title, they couldn't get past the first round.

October rejects again.

"We had a good year," said pitcher Trevor Bauer, whose shift from the starting rotation to the bullpen for the postseason maybe best summed up Cleveland's unsatisfying, disjointed season. "We definitely could have gone further. We had a lot of talent here and it didn't go our way."

Nothing went Cleveland's way. But beyond being swept by the impressive Houston Astros, who were superior at every level, the Indians barely put up a fight.

Postseason pushovers.

The Indians were so close in 2016, when they took the Chicago Cubs into extra innings in Game 7 of the World Series.

Now they've lost six straight playoff games since opening a 2-0 lead in last year's ALDS against the Yankees.

"This isn't the way we drew it up," reliever Andrew Miller said. "This is 25, 40 guys that have plans of winning the World Series. It obviously didn't go our way."

Other than All-Star shortstop Francisco Lindor, who batted .364 and homered twice, the top of Cleveland's lineup bordered on embarrassing. Michael Brantley, Jose Ramirez, Edwin Encarnacion and Josh Donaldson hit a combined .095 (4-of-42) with two RBIs, zero extra-base hits and 12 strikeouts.

It's the second straight postseason flop for Ramirez, who was an MVP candidate until he faded down the stretch. He's now 2-for-31 in two playoff appearances, an alarming trend he'll have to wait a year at least to address.

Following Monday's loss, Ramirez had to be coaxed to speak with reporters by Encarnacion before delivering answers as futile as his swings.

"I didn't perform to how I wanted to," he said through a translator. "But these are things that happen in baseball."

Cleveland's pitching wasn't much better. Ace Corey Kluber had his second straight puzzling postseason as the 20-game winner didn't look like himself in Game 1. The bullpen, a mess for months, completely collapsed in Game 3 after Bauer's two throwing errors in the seventh inning opened the flood gates for Houston's 11-3 rout.

There are numerous reasons why the Indians aren't moving on, but the team's failure to address the bullpen's issues, which began when Bryan Shaw and Joe Smith weren't re-signed last winter, is at the top of the list.

Because Miller, Cody Allen and Co. couldn't be counted on, manager Terry Francona moved Bauer, arguably the team's best starter who was on his way to a possible Cy Young when a line drive broke his leg in August, into a relief role.

The decision backfired, and while it's easy to second-guess Francona following the Indians' early exit, Bauer wasn't comfortable in his role.

"Unfortunate that I got hit with the line drive, kind of disrupted the flow for me personally," Bauer said. "Personally, a lot of bitterness about that. And as a team, I think that we have a good group of core players here, so there's a lot of hope for the future."

Looking ahead, the Indians should stay atop their division. But that's no longer enough.

Cleveland will return one of baseball's best starting staffs in Kluber, Bauer, Carlos Carrasco and Mike Clevinger, the first foursome in baseball history to reach 200 strikeouts apiece. The bullpen, though, will likely look different with Miller, Allen and Oliver Perez eligible for free agency.

Allen is the team's career leader in saves, but his ERA bloated to a career-worst 4.70 this season and his struggles — and impending free agency — led to the Indians trading top prospect Francisco Mejia to San Diego for lefty Brad Hand, who may take over as Cleveland's closer in 2019.

With Lindor and Ramirez under contract through 2021 and Encarnacion under control until 2020, the Indians' core remains at championship level. Brantley, Donaldson, Melky Cabrera, Lonnie Chisenhall and Rajai Davis are all expected to be on the free-agent market, so Cleveland could have a different look at several positions next season.

As his teammates shared somber yet heartfelt hugs after Monday's loss, Brantley stood near his corner locker and spoke quietly with Josh Tomlin, the team's longest-tenured player. Tomlin didn't make the postseason roster and surely won't return.

For years, Brantley and Tomlin have represented the Indians' heart and soul — two selfless, dedicated role models for the team's younger players.

Brantley's inspirational comeback from an injury-shortened 2017 season may pressure the Indians to re-sign him. He'll be 32 in May, but there aren't many better outfielders in the game and fewer mean as much to their team as Brantley does to the Indians.

When the Indians' finally surrendered in Game 3, with orange-clad Houston fans outnumbering Cleveland, Brantley's mind turned to his future — and the real possibility of leaving.

"I've got a lot of thinking to do," he said. "I've got my family to talk to. I've got these guys in this room to still talk to. Then, we'll go from there. You never know what's going to happen in the offseason."

For the Indians, this postseason felt more predictable.

Ingraham: The Indians clearly need an offseason makeover

Jim Ingraham | The Chronicle-Telegram Published on Oct. 11, 2018 | Updated 6:43 a. m.

What we have here is a Mount Rushmore starting rotation, surrounded by an avalanche of question marks in the outfield and bullpen.

That's the Indians' starting point for the offseason, which so rudely arrived Monday, following the demise of their late, lamented 2018 season, which expired, un-resuscitated, the victim of a three-game hit-skip by a runaway Houston Astros bandwagon.

Wednesday served as calling hours, minus the organ music, as Indians officials invited the media, and their questions, not only about the deceased season but about how they expect to pick up the pieces and re-load for next year, after their failure — in this, the 70th anniversary of Cleveland's last World Series title — to end Major League Baseball's longest, most painful championship drought.

Yes, Cleveland, they feel your pain, as well as your slings and arrows.

"When you win," said manager Terry Francona, cutting right to the chase, "you're smart. When you lose, you're dumb."

Said team president Chris Antonetti, whose team again emerged trophy-less from a third straight year of October hardball: "They're all different. But they all hurt. It hurts a lot."

What won't happen, Antonetti, Francona and general manager Mike Chernoff assured the masses, is any knee-jerk reaction to what was an embarrassingly uncompetitive Division Series vs. Houston.

"If you make decisions when you're emotional, you can blow the whole place up, which isn't helpful," Francona said.

"It's important to separate your feelings from the process," Antonetti said. "It hurts a lot. But we have to think about what can we do better?"

Tweaking the roster won't be easy. The franchise had a team-record opening day payroll of \$135 million in 2018, so don't expect free agents Bryce Harper or Manny Machado to be limo-ing their way through the door this winter. The list of Indians players who will become free agents after the World Series includes two-thirds of the starting postseason outfield — Michael Brantley and Melky Cabrera — and the team's three best relief pitchers — Andrew Miller, Cody Allen and Oliver Perez — plus starting third baseman Josh Donaldson.

Other free agents include outfielders Rajai Davis, Lonnie Chisenhall and pitcher Josh Tomlin.

On the other hand, that Cadillac starting rotation of Corey Kluber, Trevor Bauer, Carlos Carrasco, Mike Clevinger and Shane Bieber isn't going anywhere. And forgotten man Danny Salazar — an All-Star in 2016, a ghost the last two years — is expected back from basically a season and a half lost to injuries.

But as the Indians found out this year, a five-star rotation doesn't amount to a hill of beans in October, if your position player stars don't play like stars, and your injury-wracked, slump-ridden bullpen resembles a bus terminal at 3 o'clock in the morning, whenever the dugout dials 911.

Playing in Major League Baseball's flophouse division, the AL Central, doesn't help, either — but good luck trying to fix that problem. Being the biggest dog in a bad litter is no way to prepare the Indians for the pit bulls they face in October.

"That's something we've asked ourselves," Antonetti said, "but I'm not sure there is a magic answer."

No there isn't.

The Indians also played in the flyweight AL Central in 2016 when they won 94 games, cruised through September to a comfortable division title, then took the Cubs to the 11th inning in Game 7 of the World Series.

"Last year it was, 'Did you push too hard (during the 22-game winning streak) during the regular season?'" said Francona, in the response to the death- In this particular case, Francona tends to subscribe to the tip-your-cap school of thought.

"Houston's starters in the first two games (Justin Verlander and Gerrit Cole) were virtually unhittable," he said. "Their stuff was off the charts."

Meanwhile, Kluber went from unflappable to flappable, to beatable.

"He had a hard time taking his mechanics from warming up in the bullpen to the mound. His pitches were flat," Francona said. "We've seen him be so good for so long that when he's not good everyone thinks there's something wrong with him."

Nothing was wrong with Jose Ramirez, except for everything. He was 0-for-11 vs. the Astros, and in the last two years has a postseason batting average of .065 (2-for-31).

"The timing was unfortunate, but sometimes hitters struggle," Antonetti said.

Front offices sometimes struggle, too. The Indians' have a well-deserved reputation as a first-rate front office, but this offseason, given the context of two consecutive postseason collapses, and three in a row without winning it all, will be the biggest challenge yet for this group.

"At certain points during the (Houston) games, what they had was better than what we had," Francona said. "If you're not a complete team, the good teams will exploit that."

Consider the Indians exploited.

Consider them also the ongoing Exhibit A for the most overused cliché in the business.

Wait till next year.