

Ramirez finishes 3rd in AL MVP Award race

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- With a handful of games remaining in the first half of the 2018 season, Indians infielder Jose Ramirez let it be known he had decided against participating in the Home Run Derby. Then, he belted five homers in the six games leading up to the All-Star break.

That summed up Ramirez last season. He could turn any game into a must-see event.

AL MVP Award voting

Mookie Betts, BOS	28	2				410	
Mike Trout, LAA	1	24	2	1	2	265	
Jose Ramirez, CLE			1	10	11	3	208
J.D. Martinez, BOS		1	2	8	5	5	198
Alex Bregman, HOU			1	4	10	9	192
Name, team	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	Pts.	• Complete point totals

"I'm not surprised by anything that is happening with my career," Ramirez said. "I've always been like that, since I was a little kid, always doing things that no one was expecting of me."

On Thursday night, Ramirez finished third in voting for the American League Most Valuable Player Award behind Mookie Betts of the Red Sox and runner-up Mike Trout of the Angels. It marked the second straight year in which Ramirez -- a dynamic switch-hitting infielder -- placed third in voting for the AL's top accolade.

That was more of a surprise in 2017. This year, Ramirez made it clear the previous year was no fluke.

"You know, it's funny," manager Terry Francona said. "You guys always ask me, when guys are young, 'What are they going to turn into?' And you don't know. I mean, you'd like to think you watch him and you pay attention, but is the guy going to hit for average? Is the guy going to hit for power? Is he going to do both?"

"Or, is he going to turn into this? He's a monster. He's getting better."

Betts was deserving of the AL MVP Award after posting a 10.4 WAR (via FanGraphs) for the 108-win Red Sox. The right fielder hit .346/.438/.640 with 32 homers, 80 RBIs, 129 runs and 30 steals, and he received 28 first-place votes. Trout (one first-place vote) was also worthy of being second in the voting. The Angels superstar posted 9.8 WAR with a .312/.460/.628 slash line, along with 39 homers, 79 RBIs, 101 runs and 24 steals.

Ramirez was third in the AL -- behind only Betts and Trout -- with an 8.0 WAR. That marked the highest in a single season for an Indians hitter since 1953 (Al Rosen, 9.1) and was tied for the 12th-highest showing in franchise history. Ramirez received one second-place vote and 10 third-place votes, while also garnering votes from fourth through seventh. He ended with 208 points, trailing Betts (410) and Trout (265). Ramirez, who had a home in the Tribe's lineup as the No. 3 hitter, ended his campaign with 39 home runs, 38 doubles and 34 stolen bases. He joined Grady Sizemore (2008) and Joe Carter (1987) as the only Indians players to have at least 30 homers and 30 steals in a season. Ramirez did not stop there, though.

Ramirez -- the club's third baseman at the start of the season and its second baseman at the end -- also piled up 105 RBIs, 106 walks and 110 runs scored. In the process, he joined Barry Bonds (1992, '95-'97), Jeff Bagwell ('97, '99) and Bobby Abreu (2001, '04) as the only players in MLB history to have at least 30 homers, 30 steals, 100 RBIs, 100 runs and 100 walks in a single season.

Those numbers take on a different look when also considering the two-month slump that dogged Ramirez down the stretch.

Over his final 50 games, Ramirez hit .202 with a .724 OPS, dragging his overall rate statistics down and hurting his stock in the MVP race. Opposing pitchers moved away from giving Ramirez -- one of the best fastball hitters in baseball -- heaters to feast on throughout August. Then, Ramirez struggled to find his mechanical rhythm in September and into the postseason.

"He got himself into a predicament, and he couldn't get himself out of it," Francona said at the end of the season. "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."

That did not stop Ramirez from finishing with some staggering numbers.

Over the past two years combined, Ramirez has hit .294/.380/.567 overall with a Major League-leading 94 doubles and 172 extra-base hits. His 14.6 WAR in that span ranks third behind only Trout (16.7) and Betts (15.7). In 309 games during that span, Ramirez has piled up 10 triples, 51 steals, 68 home runs, 188 RBIs, 217 runs and more walks (158) than strikeouts (149).

"You're not sure he has any business being as good as he is," Francona said. "And yet, he is. And he finds ways to keep getting better. His numbers are fantastic, but it's not just the numbers. He also does the little things."

Kluber finishes third in AL Cy Young voting

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- Corey Kluber did not capture the American League Cy Young Award for his work this past season. That distinction now belongs to left-hander Blake Snell, whose brilliant performance for the Rays was well-deserving of the annual accolade unveiled Wednesday night.

What Kluber did in 2018 -- a season rewarded with a third-place finish in balloting by the Baseball Writers' Association of America -- further cemented his place as one of the greatest pitchers in Cleveland history.

The franchise record book is filled with dominant arms, from Addie Joss, Bob Feller and Sudden Sam McDowell, to Luis Tiant, CC Sabathia and Cliff Lee. Even Cy Young himself graced a mound in Cleveland. After authoring another outstanding campaign, Kluber continued to climb Cleveland's historic ranks, finishing in the top three of AL Cy Young Award balloting for the fourth time in five years.

AL Cy Young Award voting

Name, team	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	Pts.
Blake Snell, TB	17	11	2			169
Justin Verlander, HOU		13	13	3	1	154
Corey Kluber, CLE		4	12	7	5	71
Chris Sale, BOS		2	8	12	3	59
Gerrit Cole, HOU			3	4	9	26
Trevor Bauer, CLE			1	3	4	13
Blake Treinen, OAK				1	3	4
Edwin Diaz, SEA					4	4

"He's one of the very best," Indians manager Terry Francona said earlier this year. "What was it, five years ago when he won his first Cy Young Award? I remember the one thing I said was, 'He hasn't done it over and over yet,' because he was young. Now, he's done it over and over and over, and it's every bit as impressive."

Snell won the 2018 AL Cy Young Award with 17 first-place votes, followed by Houston's Justin Verlander (13 first-place votes) and Kluber, who finished 20-7 with a 2.89 ERA. Fellow Indians starter Trevor Bauer, a leading contender for the award before a fluke right foot injury sidelined him for six weeks down the stretch, finished sixth in the voting after going 12-6 with a 2.21 ERA and 221 strikeouts in 175 1/3 innings (28 appearances).

Kluber, a Cy Young winner in 2014 and '17, finished the season with an AL-best 215 innings. The right-hander joined Snell (21-5, 1.89 ERA) as the only pitchers in the Majors to reach 20 wins, with Kluber becoming the first Tribe pitcher to achieve the milestone since 2008 (Lee). Kluber was the first Indians rightly to reach 20 wins since Gaylord Perry did so in 1974.

Over his 33 starts, Kluber also piled up 222 strikeouts against 34 walks. The right-hander's rate of 1.4 walks per nine innings was the lowest in the AL -- helped by 46 1/3 consecutive walk-free frames between May and June.

Dating back to 2014, Kluber has gone 83-45 with a 2.85 ERA in 160 games, racking up 1,228 strikeouts against 223 walks in 1,091 1/3 innings. The Tribe ace reached at least 200 innings and 200 strikeouts in each of those five campaigns, the first pitcher in club history to do so. Kluber also had a 2.84 FIP, 1.02 WHIP and 17 complete games in that time period.

Kluber ranks third in Indians history in career strikeouts (1,423), trailing only Feller (2,581) and McDowell (2,159). Kluber is the best in Cleveland history (min. 1,000 innings) in strikeouts per nine innings (9.8) and winning percentage (.636) and ranks second in WHIP. Dating back to 1950, his 3.09 ERA ranks fourth overall among Tribe pitchers.

Because he finished in the top five in AL Cy Young voting again this year, Kluber's salary for 2019 increases to \$17 million. The value of his two team options also increase to \$17.5 million in '20 and \$18 million in '21. Due in part to that escalating salary, Kluber's name has been floated in trade rumblings early this offseason.

It should be noted that, if Kluber were to be dealt, his new team would be required to decide on the team options within three days of the conclusion of the 2019 World Series. If Kluber is traded in '20, the '21 option would become a vesting option based upon at least 160 innings in '20 with no disabled list stint at the end of the season.

Chris Antonetti, the Indians' president of baseball operations, said it is hard to gauge whether the volume of conversations to date this offseason has been greater than at this point in past years.

"I think what I would reiterate," Antonetti said, "is that I think the conversations have reaffirmed for us that we have a lot of players on our roster and throughout our organization that are of interest to other teams. And I think what that allows us to do is have a lot of dialogue with other teams about potential opportunities for us to move forward as an organization and get better."

Tribe lands Moroff, Luplow in 5-player swap

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- Given the many questions hovering over the Indians' outfield, one goal this winter for the club is to introduce an assortment of potential answers. Cleveland took a step in that direction on Wednesday by making a five-player trade with the Pirates.

The Indians acquired infielder Max Moroff and outfielder Jordan Luplow from Pittsburgh in exchange for utility man Erik Gonzalez and a pair of 19-year-old pitching prospects. Right-handers Tahnaj Thomas (No. 30 on the Indians' Top 30 prospects list per MLB Pipeline) and Dante Mendoza will head to the Pirates' farm system as part of the deal.

Luplow has logged Major League time in each of the past two seasons with Pittsburgh, but he has spent most of that time at Triple-A Indianapolis. It is not hard to see how the right-handed-hitting corner outfielder -- who has one Minor League option remaining -- might fit within Cleveland's outfield puzzle.

"Jordan is a right-handed-hitting outfielder with almost a year of Major League experience," said Chris Antonetti, the Indians' president of baseball operations. "He's capable of playing all three outfield spots. He's spent most of the time in left and right, but we also believe he has the ability to play center field. He complements our roster really well."

As things currently stand, the Indians are heavy on lefty-swinging outfielders. With veteran center fielder Leonys Martin re-signed for 2019, a healthy Tyler Naquin would project to be a versus-righties option in right field. Luplow, who boasted an .891 OPS against left-handers at Triple-A in 2018, could compete for at-bats as a platoon partner with Naquin. The Tribe's new addition could also offer complementary depth in left.

In two years at Triple-A, the 25-year-old Luplow has hit .300 with 15 homers, 32 doubles, 68 RBIs and an .857 OPS in 132 games. He logged 13 outfield assists between MLB and the Minors in '18, but his offensive numbers in the big leagues have yet to match his production with Indianapolis. Last season, Luplow hit .185 (.631 OPS) in 37 games with the Pirates, and he has a .194 (.644 OPS) showing in 64 career MLB games.

The 25-year-old Moroff, who is out of Minor League options, gives the Indians a candidate for a utility role now that Gonzalez is no longer in the picture. In parts of three seasons with Pittsburgh, the switch-hitter has hit .193 with a .625 OPS in 84 games, while logging innings all around the infield. Moroff is a middle infielder by trade, but he has experience at third base, too.

"In Max, it's an infielder that's a very good defender at second base and third base. He's also played shortstop," Antonetti said. "Very good instincts and has had some success offensively. We're looking forward to both guys joining the organization, and I think both of them can help us moving forward."

Gonzalez (out of options) was a highly touted shortstop prospect while ascending Cleveland's Minor League ladder, but he was blocked by star shortstop Francisco Lindor. Gonzalez gave the Indians a plus defender for second, short and third, and got experience at first base and in the outfield. Looking ahead to 2019, Gonzalez would have fought for at-bats again given the presence of Lindor, Jose Ramirez and potentially Yandy Diaz around the Tribe's infield.

"That was a tough thing for us," Antonetti said, of the struggle to find Gonzalez at-bats in the Majors. "As our roster has taken shape over the past few seasons, we have not had an opportunity for him to play regularly. We feel this will give Erik an opportunity to play more with Pittsburgh and continue his career and potentially blossom into the everyday player we think he can be."

The 27-year-old Gonzalez is a career .263 hitter with five homers, 16 doubles, 27 RBIs and a .681 OPS in 162 games. He turned in a .273/.314/.397 slash line in 744 career Minor League games before sticking in Cleveland. Last year, Gonzalez hit .265 (.676 OPS) in 136 at-bats over 81 games.

Arguably his most memorable moment with the Indians came on Sept. 7, 2017, when Gonzalez belted two home runs against the White Sox in win No. 15 within Cleveland's historic 22-game winning streak.

Jordan Luplow: What the right-handed outfielder brings to the Cleveland Indians

By Joe Noga, cleveland.com | Posted November 15, 2018 at 10:28 AM | Updated November 15, 2018 at 11:09 AM

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Jordan Luplow is joining the Cleveland Indians after the Tribe acquired the 25-year-old outfielder along with infielder Max Moroff in a trade with the Pittsburgh Pirates on Wednesday.

In parts of two seasons with Pittsburgh, Luplow hit .194 with six home runs and 18 RBI while appearing in 64 games. He projects as a corner outfielder, though Indians president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti believes Luplow can also play center if needed.

For the Indians, who sent utility infielder Erik Gonzalez and a pair of young minor-league pitchers to the Pirates, the move provides depth for an outfield that still has several questions entering 2019.

Michael Brantley is nearly certain to leave in free agency, and the team's remaining outfield options on the 40-man roster include left-handed hitters Tyler Naquin, Leonys Martin and switch hitter Greg Allen.

Luplow will likely be relied upon to provide depth on the corners and contribute in platoon situations against left-handed pitching.

"Jordan fits our roster really well and does complement the group of guys we currently have," Antonetti said.

Below is a look at what Luplow brings to the Indians, and what fans can expect in 2019.

Know your enemy

Luplow was selected by the Pirates in the third round (100th overall) of the 2014 MLB draft out of Fresno State. While with the Bulldogs, Luplow was named the Mountain West Conference Player of the Year in 2014 and was a college teammate of New York Yankees outfielder Aaron Judge during his freshman and sophomore seasons.

Bucs' top minor leaguer in 2017

Luplow spent most of 2017 splitting time between Altoona (Class AA) and Indianapolis. He was Pittsburgh's minor league player of the year for 2017 as he hit 16 home runs and drove in 37 while batting .287 for the Curve before being promoted to Indianapolis on June 30. At the time of his promotion, he was fifth in the Eastern League in home runs and was a mid-season All-Star.

Under team control

Luplow is likely to take over the right-handed platoon role held by Brandon Guyer for the last three years with the Tribe. (Justin Berl, Getty Images)

Under team control

Luplow exceeded rookie limits in 2018 and has 112 days of major-league service time. He has one club option remaining and is not yet eligible for arbitration. The Indians have control over his contract status through 2024.

After making his big-league debut July 28, 2017 against San Diego, Luplow shuttled between Class AAA Indianapolis and Pittsburgh four times between the end of 2017 and all of 2018.

When he gets on base, it's usually extras

Luplow hit just .194 with the Pirates, but 42 percent of his 33 hits went for extra bases (four doubles, four triples, six homers). Fangraphs and Baseball prospectus project him with slugging percentages somewhere between .422 and .443 next season.

Above-average outfield arm

Luplow was a third baseman at Buchanan HS in Clovis, Calif., but when he got to Fresno State, injuries forced the Bulldogs to move him to an outfield spot.

He briefly earned a spot as the starting third baseman in 2015 for the Pirates' Class A club in West Virginia, but a sore shoulder caused him to miss the start of the season.

He's going to have to change his number

In 64 big-league games with the Pirates, Luplow has worn jersey No. 47. But in Cleveland, No. 47 is already claimed by another California native, Trevor Bauer.

On Corey Kluber and the changing face of pitching and the Cy Young Award: Tribe Take

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

CLEVELAND, Ohio – Wins, innings pitched and strikeouts used to define starting pitchers. Not so much anymore.

Corey Kluber won 20 games for the first time in his career this year for the Indians. He led the American League with 215 innings pitched and struck out over 200 batters for the fifth straight year. He finished a distant third in the AL Cy Young voting announced Thursday night.

In the National League, Washington's Max Scherzer struck out an MLB-leading 300 batters – just the fifth time it has been done since 2000 – and lost the Cy Young to Jacob deGrom of the Mets by a landslide. DeGrom won 10 games this year.

Pitching wins have been taking a beating for a long time in baseball's analytically driven age. The win includes too many variables to let it decide the degree of accomplishment a pitcher achieves during a season.

Based on what forces guide a baseball when it leaves a pitcher's hand, there is logic there. But shouldn't the fact that a starting pitcher, at some point in a game, almost always reaches a crossroads. He can make a pitch in a critical situation to keep his team in a good spot. Or he can make a bad pitch in that same situation that results in an early exit or at the very least a successful inning for the opposition. That is an old argument that was lost a long time ago. But can analytics have it both ways?

What if Blake Snell, who won the AL Cy Young this year for Tampa Bay, had not won 21 games? Would he have still been the choice of the Baseball Writers' Association of America over Houston's Justin Verlander and Kluber?

There is no disputing Snell's AL-leading 1.89 ERA. But he threw 34 1/3 fewer innings than Kluber. Granted Snell still struck out 221 batters, one fewer than Kluber, in a much shorter time span.

Verlander threw 214 innings, 33 1/3 more than Snell. He struck 290 batters, 69 more than Snell. But Snell, who spent time on the disabled list, won the Cy Young in a close decision, 169-154, over Houston's ace. Snell received 17 first place votes, 11 for second and two third-place votes. Verlander received 13 first-place votes, 13 second place, three third place and one fourth place.

Kluber finished with 71 points, without a single first-place vote.

Snell's 180 2/3 innings are the fewest ever by a Cy Young winning starting pitcher in a full season. When Seattle's Felix Hernandez won with 13 wins in 2010, there were cries of heresy among baseball's old-school thinkers. But at least he threw 249 2/3 innings. So where would Snell have finished without those 21 wins?

Kluber was going for his third Cy Young Award. He won it in 2014 and 2017. No Indians pitcher has ever been this closely tied to the award. Look at his timeline: 2014 first place, 2015 ninth, 2016 third, 2017 first, 2018 third. In those five years, even when Kluber lost 16 games in 2015, he delivered. He's won 18 or more games in four of the five seasons. He's pitched 200 innings in five straight years and struck out 200 or more batters in five straight years.

DeGrom, pitching for a bad Mets team, led the big leagues with a 1.70 ERA. He never allowed more than four earned runs in a game. His ERA+ (league average is 100) was an NL high 216. He threw 217 innings, averaging 11.2 strikeouts and 1.98 walks per nine innings.

But his 10 wins were the fewest ever by a Cy Young starting pitcher who worked a complete season.

DeGrom received 29 of a possible 30 first-place votes from the writers. The other vote was for second place. Scherzer was trying to win his third straight Cy Young. With an NL leading 18 wins and an MLB high in innings and strikeouts, Mad Max had to like his chances.

But he was wrong.

Boston's Mookie Betts, Milwaukee's Christian Yelich runaway MVP winners; Cleveland Indians Jose Ramirez finishes third

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.comphoynes@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Nobody could touch Mookie Betts and Christian Yelich when it came to the MVP awards in the American and National leagues.

Boston's Betts won the AL award with 28 of a possible 30 first-place votes, while Yelich won the NL award with 29 first-place votes from the Baseball Writers Association of America. The awards were announced on Thursday night on MLB Network.

Indians third baseman Jose Ramirez finished third in the AL voting for the second straight year. Teammates Francisco Lindor and Trevor Bauer received votes as well. Lindor finished sixth with 169 points and Bauer finished tied for 22nd with one 10th place vote.

Betts won with 410 points followed by 265 for Mike Trout. The Angels outfielder received one first-place vote, 24 second-place votes, one third and two fourth places.

Ramirez finished with 208 votes including one second-place vote, 10 thirds, 11 fourths, three fifths, four sixths and one seventh. Ramirez hit .270 (156-for-578) with 39 homers and 105 RBI. He became the third 30-30 man in team history, while scoring 110 runs and drawing 106 walks compared to 80 strikeouts.

If not for a 24-for-166 slump at the end of the season, Ramirez could have really put some heat on Betts and Trout. Betts, winner of the 10th MVP award in Boston history, led the big leagues with a .346 (180-for-520) average. He hit 32 homers with 80 RBI. Like Ramirez, he did 30-30, while tying Lindor for the MLB lead with 129 runs. Trout hit .312 with 39 homers and 79 RBI. He scored 101 runs and led the big leagues with a 1.088 OPS and a .460 on base percentage.

Betts, Trout, Ramirez and Lindor were among the AL players named on all 30 ballots. Boston, besides Betts, was well represented with J.D. Martinez, Xander Bogaerts and Chris Sale receiving votes. Martinez finished fourth and captured the one remaining first-place vote..

Yelich won the MVL in his first year with the Brewers. They acquired him in a trade with Miami last winter. He hit .326 to win the NL batting title along with 36 homers and 110 RBI. He led the NL with a .598 slugging percentage and a 1.000 OPS. It's the fourth time a Brewer has won the MVP. Ryan Braun won it in 2011 and Robin Yount was honored in 1982 and 1989 when Milwaukee played in the AL.

After it was announced that Yelich had won, he was interviewed on MLB Network. Asked who was at his MVP party at his home in California, Yelich said one of the guests was Browns quarterback Baker Mayfield.

Chicago shortstop Javier Baez finished second. He hit .290 with 34 homers and an NL-leading 111 RBI. Colorado third baseman Nolan Arenado hit .297 with an NL-leading 38 homers and 110 RBI to finish third.

Cleveland Indians' Ruben Niebla finalist for Texas Rangers' pitching coach job

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.comphoynes@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Ruben Niebla, one of the secret ingredients to the success Indians' pitchers have enjoyed over the last several years, could be leaving the organization.

Niebla, 46, is a finalist to be the pitching coach for the Texas Rangers. The Rangers, who fired manager Jeff Bannister on Sept. 21, hired Chris Woodward as their new manager on Nov. 2. On Wednesday, they announced the hiring of five coaches. The pitching coach and bullpen coach are the only vacancies yet to be filled.

For the last six seasons, Niebla has been the Indians' minor league pitching coordinator. He was the Tribe's interim pitching coach in 2012 after Scott Radinsky was fired and just completed his 18th season with the organization.

Niebla has played a key role in the careers of several Tribe pitchers as they worked their way through the minor-league system. He helped two-time Cy Young winner Corey Kluber rework his mechanics after he came to Cleveland in a trade from San Diego in 2010. Besides looking under Kluber's hood, he suggested that he might want to try throwing a two-seam fastball. It has become Kluber's money pitch.

When the Indians acquired Mike Clevinger from the Angels in 2014, he was coming off Tommy John surgery on his right elbow. Niebla helped him recreate himself.

""When I came over here, I wasn't some 98-mph throwing 19-year-old like I was when I got drafted," said Clevinger, after throwing six scoreless innings against the Tigers to clinch the Tribe's third straight AL Central title on Sept. 15. "I was older, throwing slower, my mechanics were out of whack coming off Tommy John surgery.

"And they invested the time. I mean, countless of hours of me, Ruben and other guys down there in Arizona on the backfields without a ball. Just figuring things out. It's paying dividends now, but they do that throughout the organization. I think it's huge and I can tell you from one organization to others, it's not like that everywhere. That's why I really appreciate everything everyone does behind the doors here." Clevinger just finished a 13-8 season in which he posted a 3.02 ERA and reached 200 innings and 200 strikeouts (207) for the first time in his career.

It's hard to name a pitcher on the big-league staff that Niebla hasn't helped. Niebla was a pitching coach at various minor league levels for the Indians from 2001 until being named interim big-league pitching coach in 2012. He's been the minor league pitching coordinator since 2013.

Niebla pitched professionally for six seasons in the minors with Montreal, the Dodgers and in some independent leagues. He has a degree in Kinesiology and Physical Education from Azusa Pacific University, where he played college ball.

Mets right-hander Jacob deGrom wins NL Cy Young followed by Washington's Max Scherzer and Philadelphia's Aaron Nola

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.comphoynes@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Mets right-hander Jacob deGrom was the runaway winner of the 2018 NL Cy Young award on Thursday night by vote of the Baseball Writers Association of America. DeGrom won just 10 games, the fewest ever by a Cy Young winning starter pitcher in a full season.

Washington's Max Scherzer and Philadelphia's Aaron Nolan finished second and third, respectively.

Degrom, 10-9 with a MLB-leading 1.70 ERA, received 29 of a possible 30 first-place first. He received one second place. Scherzer, who led the big leagues with 300 strikeouts, received one first place vote and 29 second-place votes. Nola received 27 third-place votes. All three pitchers were named on every ballot.

Playing for a Mets team that lost 85 games, deGrom put together a dominant season. His 1.70 ERA was the sixth lowest by a Cy Young winning starter pitcher. Bob Gibson leads the way at 1.12.

The Mets averaged 3.5 runs in deGrom's 32 starts. In his third start of the season, he allowed four earned runs. Over his last 29 starts, he never allowed more than three in a game.

He threw 217 innings, struck out 269 batters and walked 46.

Scherzer, going for his third straight Cy Young, went 18-7 with a 2.53 ERA in 33 starts. He led the big leagues with 220 2/3 innings and 300 strikeouts. Nola went 17-6 with a 2.37 ERA in 33 starts. He struck out 224 in 212 1/3 innings and walked 58.

Tampa Bay's Blake Snell wins AL Cy Young; Houston's Justin Verlander, Cleveland Indians' Corey Kluber round out top three finishers

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.comphoynes@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Indians right-hander Corey Kluber won 20 games for the first time in his career this year, but it wasn't enough to secure his third AL Cy Young Award.

Tampa Bay lefty Blake Snell won the award followed by Houston's Justin Verlander and Kluber. Trevor Bauer, Kluber's teammate, finished sixth in voting by the Baseball Writers Association of America.

Snell went 21-5 with a 1.89 ERA. He made 31 starts and struck out 221 batters in 180 2/3 innings. Verlander went 16-9 with a 2.52 ERA in 34 games. He pitched 214 innings and led the AL with 290 strikeouts.

Kluber won the Cy Young in 2014 and 2017. This year he went 20-7 with a 2.89 ERA. He led the AL with 215 innings and struck out 222 batters.

Snell won the award with 169 points, including 17 first-place votes, 11 second place and two third place. Verlander was second with 154 points, including 13 first-place votes, 13 second place, three third place and one fourth place. Kluber received 71 points, including four second-place votes, 12 third place, seven fourth place and five fifth place.

Cleveland Indians send Erik Gonzalez to Pittsburgh Pirates in five-player trade

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.comphoynes@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The first trade the Indians have made in what could prove to be a busy offseason was more about quantity than quality.

They sent utility man Erik Gonzalez and two pitching prospects to the Pirates for outfielder Jordan Luplow and infielder Max Moroff. Gonzalez and right-handers Tahnaj Thomas and Dante Mendoza are headed to Pittsburgh.

Luplow, 25, was the Pirates' third-round pick in 2014. He has appeared in 64 games in the big leagues. Moroff has bounced between the Pirates and Class AAA Indianapolis for the last three years. He's appeared in 84 MLB games.

Former Tribe outfielder Al Luplow is Jordan's great uncle. Al Luplow played for the Indians from 1961 through 1965.

The Indians need to add talent in the outfield following the free agent losses of Michael Brantley, Melky Cabrera and Rajai Davis. Incumbents such as Bradley Zimmer and Tyler Naquin are recovering from surgery. So the addition of Luplow makes sense.

"He's a right-handed hitting outfielder with almost a year of major league experience," said Chris Antonetti, Indians president of baseball operations. "He's capable of playing all three outfield spots. He's spent most of his time in left and right and we also believe he has the ability to play center field.

"He complements our roster really well as a right-handed hitting outfielder who is capable of helping us at the major league level."

Antonetti said the Indians would continue to try and strengthen the outfield and bullpen, their primary areas of need this winter.

"It's something we'll continue to explore this offseason -- building our alternatives at the major league level and the depth beyond that," said Antonetti. "As we sit here today, the outfield and bullpen are places we'll look to get deeper at."

Luplow is a .194 (33-for-170) hitter with six homers and 18 RBI for the Pirates. It's unclear how he'll fit into manager Terry Francona's platoon system because Luplow is hitting .198 against righties and .188 against lefties as a big leaguer. He was the Pirates' Minor League Player of the Year in 2017 and has hit 59 homers in his minor league career. In 2018 he recorded a .891 OPS against lefties at Triple-A. Moroff, 25, might be a candidate to fill Gonzalez's utility role. In his brief time with the Pirates, he's played 45 games at second, 22 at shortstop and six at third base in parts three seasons. The switch-hitting Moroff hit .186 (11-for-55) with three homers and nine RBI with Pittsburgh this year.

"Max is a very good defender at second and third base and has also played some short," said Antonetti. "He has very good instincts and has had some success offensively."

Luplow has one minor league option left. Moroff is out of options.

Gonzalez, 27, has spent 10 seasons in the Indians system. He played 81 games with the Tribe this year, hitting .265 with one homer and 16 RBI. He's a natural shortstop, but with Francisco Lindor playing short and Jose Ramirez and Jason Kipnis at second base, he wasn't able to get regular playing time.

"We've have multiple conversations with Erik (about his situation)," said Antonetti. "He's done so many things for the organization. He's played every position for us on the field except catch at one point or another. As our roster has taken shape over the course of the last few seasons we have not had an opportunity for him to play regularly."

"We feel this will give Erik an opportunity to play more in Pittsburgh and blossom into the everyday player we feel he can be."

Thomas, 19, and Medoza pitched for the Indians in the Arizona Rookie League this year. Thomas, a non-drafted free agent from the Bahamas, struck out 27 and walked 10 in 19 2/3 innings. He posted a 4.58 ERA in eight games, including six starts. This was his second year with the Indians.

Medoza, 19, went 2-2 with 4.58 ERA in 10 games, including three starts for Arizona. He struck out 37 and walked 20 in 37 1/3 innings. The Indians selected the 6-5 Mendoza in the 12th round of the 2017 draft out of Torrance (Calif.) High School.

The Indians' 40-man roster stands at 35.

Oakland's Bob Melvin, Atlanta's Brian Snitker win 2018 Manager of the Year awards in AL, NL

By Joe Noga, cleveland.comjnoga@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio - Bob Melvin and Brian Snitker are the Baseball Writers' Association of America's managers of the year for 2018.

Melvin won the American League version of the award for the third time in his career, guiding the Athletics to a wild-card berth one year after they lost 87 games and finished last in their division. Melvin led a remarkable turnaround despite starting the season with the lowest opening day payroll (\$62.6 million) of any MLB franchise.

The A's finished behind Houston in the AL West to claim the second wild card spot with 97 wins before losing to New York at Yankee Stadium. In voting by BBWAA members, Melvin finished with 121 points (18 first-place votes) followed by Boston's Alex Cora with 79 points (seven first-place votes) and Tampa Bay's Kevin Cash with 57 points (five first-place vote).

Melvin, who first won the award in 2007 with Arizona and again in 2012 with Oakland, becomes the second Athletics manager to claim the honor twice with the club. Tony LaRussa won in 1992 and 1988. LaRussa also won with St. Louis (2002) and the White Sox (1983). Melvin joins a select group of only eight managers to win the award three times.

Houston skipper A.J. Hinch finished fourth with 11 points and Yankees first-year manager Aaron Boone was fifth with two points. Indians manager Terry Francona, a two-time winner, did not receive any votes.

Snitker won in the National League after leading Atlanta from 90 losses in 2017 to 90 wins this year and the East Division title, eight games ahead of Washington. Under Snitker, Atlanta spent 115 days in first place and never experienced anything longer than a four-game losing streak.

Craig Counsel of the Brewers and Bud Black of the Rockies finished second and third in the voting. Snitker accumulated 116 points (17 first-place votes) followed by Counsel with 99 (11 first-place votes) and Black 41 points (one first-place vote). Cubs manager Joe Maddon received one first-place vote and finished fifth behind St. Louis manager Mike Shildt. It's the second-consecutive year Black has finished third in voting.

Two BBWAA voters from each big-league city vote on the organization's awards. Voting takes place before the start of the postseason.

How belief in Shane Bieber helps Indians entertain interest in their veteran starters

By T.J. Zuppe Nov 15, 2018 4

As Game 3 of the ALDS painfully made its slow and inevitable spiral down the drain, Terry Francona's thoughts briefly drifted away from the crumbling walls of the Indians' pitching dam and focused on the young hurler they'd lined up to pitch a possible Game 4.

Shane Bieber, his rookie righty, was set to start against the Astros. But as the realities of a sweep began to sink in, Francona considered sending Bieber out to the bullpen to prepare to pitch the final inning.

The manager declined to act on those thoughts, but not due to any lack of belief in his young pitcher.

Francona later said it would've been "good for him to face a couple of hitters." That's fair. Bieber crossed many items off his list of firsts in 2018 — his most impressive, holding his own against the eventual world champs at Fenway Park in August — and his first postseason inning, regardless of the outcome, would have carried some weight. Or perhaps that's just how Francona justified the soft spot he was willing to entertain for Bieber in the face of their impending apocalypse.

"Maybe I'm getting old," he said with an unavoidable grin.

Throughout the year and into October, Francona stressed that Bieber's standing on the roster was a reflection of their faith in the right-hander's ability. Then again, it's not unusual for a team to say kind words about their players, particularly young ones. It means a heck of a lot more to back up those thoughts with actions.

The Indians are listening to outside interest in their talented starters, that much we know. On the surface, that fact isn't a departure from the past several years. Teams have been curious about the Tribe's starting pitching price tag in recent offseasons, and to this point, no club has proved willing to pay it.

However, with key areas to address and limited financial flexibility, dealing from an area of perceived strength could serve as one of the most creative ways to fortify an imperfect roster. The need to fill some critical holes and the lack of many dominant starting options in free agency seems to give those whispers far more traction this winter.

But Bieber's presence also fills a large part of that equation.

Instead of preparing to face the reigning champions, Bieber spent the hours after the frustrating playoff exit packing his locker and saying his goodbyes. His only preparations were to join his family, who had made the trek from California in anticipation of a playoff debut that never came.

"Next year?"

Bieber smiled and nodded to conclude a brief postgame exchange with The Athletic.

Truthfully, if Trevor Bauer hadn't taken a comebacker to the right leg in August or the Indians' leaky bullpen had offered more confidence in each of the first two series losses against the Astros, Bieber might not have been tasked with the potential assignment. In a perfect world, the rookie righty would have served as a middle-inning safety net, Bauer would have joined Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco and Mike Clevinger in the playoff rotation and the three-headed monster of Andrew Miller, Cody Allen and Brad Hand would have given the opposition nightmares.

But their world was anything but perfect.

Despite those realities, Francona never voiced any concern over putting Bieber in that position. There was never any false bravado as he explained his faith in the 23-year-old pitcher. Even without the any sort of real alternative, Francona sold it as if the righty were more than capable of handling the situation, and the only disappointment seemingly stemmed from an inability to later see him rise to the challenge.

Now, with their swift playoff exit in the rearview and an interesting offseason starting to unfold, the organization continues to display a similar confidence in Bieber — even if they haven't voiced it directly.

Sure, it's over simplifying to say his performance alone in 2018 allows them to shop one of their veteran starters. There are more factors at play than just their faith in his ability.

But let's not forget the Indians could have used Bieber as trade bait to fetch a significant piece at the trade deadline. They didn't. And if they were to pull the trigger on a Kluber, Carrasco or Bauer trade this winter, they'd be saying they were more than comfortable with Bieber filling some level of the performance they'd be losing.

That says a lot about their belief in the pitcher he's capable of becoming — probably more than their words alone could reveal. And, in turn, it's that belief that has helped them consider all options.

Of course, his rise through the Tribe's ranks proves just how much can unfold within a year. After all, it was just 14 months ago that Bieber took the field to Rebelution's "Attention Span," not in a game setting, but under the umbrella of the club's prospect development program at Progressive Field.

By June of this year, that same song was pumping through his home park's speakers, no longer serving as a means to prepare the young hurler for his eventual debut, but actually providing the audio backdrop that preceded each of his big-league outings in Cleveland.

He went from watching each of the club's past two postseasons at his home in California — the first coming after he was drafted in the fourth round of the 2016 draft — to being part of the actual roster for their third consecutive trip to the playoffs.

Members of the organization will tell you that didn't happen by accident.

"Part of what gave us the comfort in continuing to promote him ... even though he was an unfinished product, was because of (his) routines," general manager Mike Chernoff said. "We knew we could rely on this guy to do everything to prepare and to improve."

The Indians believed that Bieber, armed with impeccable command, a 92-93 mph fastball and a developing arsenal of secondary pitchers, would eventually impact the majors in 2018. They believed it so much, in fact, they refused to bring him around big-league camp this past spring for fear of being lobbied to keep him.

They were right.

Ultimately, Bieber would jump two levels before tossing 114 2/3 innings in the majors this past year. His 4.55 ERA left some room for improvement, but below the hood, there were even more encouraging signs.

His 3.23 FIP (fielding independent pitching) placed him 17th among starters with at least 110 innings, ranking just below Kluber and ahead of Clevinger. His walk rate of 4.7 percent was the 12th lowest in baseball, and his strikeout minus walk rate (an imperfect but quick way to measure success) placed him 23rd in the majors.

It wasn't always perfect, but that's a pretty good baseline to establish.

"By all accounts, he came to us before he was ready," Francona said. "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."

And it's that changeup that might serve as the logical next step in his development.

As you can see below, Bieber's fastball was his primary offering this past year. The changeup, on the other hand, was nothing more than an occasional weapon of choice, only once ever approaching double-digit usage in any game.

Year	Fastball	Curve	Slider	Change
2018	57.38%	16.04%	22.70%	3.88%

His slider and curve became the pitches used to rack up whiff totals and generate glove-side lateral movement. But the continued development of the changeup might help play up the fastball by giving him another pitch that drifts arm-side with similar horizontal movement to the four-seamer but falls lower with 5-6 mph of difference in velocity.

Simply (as Bauer proved this year by implementing his new slider), the more ways he can carve the plate and offer different looks to the hitter, the less they'll be able to decipher his attack plan. And the more comfortable he gets using his secondary stuff, the more lethal he'll likely become.

Ultimately, it's quite probable the Indians won't trade any of their pitching and they'll enter 2019 with one of the league's deepest and most talented pitching staffs. If that's the worst-case scenario, maybe things aren't quite as dire as they seem.

But if a club this winter gets desperate and is willing to pay the Tribe's lofty prices — not only helping to offer payroll flexibility but also infusing the organization with some younger talent — the Indians can entertain and engage that interest more legitimately than in years past due to the presence of their "exciting" young hurler.

"He's a keeper," Francona said. "He's easy to talk about."

Jose Ramirez finishes third, Francisco Lindor sixth in AL MVP voting

By Ryan Lewis

For the second consecutive season, Indians infielder Jose Ramirez has finished third in American League MVP voting.

The official result was announced by the Baseball Writers' Association of America on Thursday night. Boston Red Sox outfielder Mookie Betts was named league MVP by a wide margin (28 of 30 first-place votes) ahead of Los Angeles Angels outfielder Mike Trout. Ramirez finished third with one second-place vote, 10 third-place votes and 208 points overall.

Ramirez, now a back-to-back MVP finalist, finished in the top five in the AL in slugging (.552), OPS (.939), home runs (39), RBI (105) and runs scored (110), the latter three all career highs. With 34 stolen bases, he also became just the third player in Indians history to reach the 30-30 club, joining Joe Carter (1987) and Grady Sizemore (2008). Ramirez also became only the 25th player in baseball history with a 30-30-100-100 (home runs, stolen bases, runs scored, RBI) season.

Francisco Lindor finished sixth in the MVP voting with 169 points, trailing the three finalists, the Red Sox's J.D. Martinez and the Houston Astros' Alex Bregman. Lindor hit .277 with an .871 OPS and set career highs with 38 home runs, 25 stolen bases, 92 RBI and 129 runs scored (which tied for the major-league lead). He also became the first shortstop in baseball history with at least 35 home runs, 40 doubles and 20 stolen bases.

Indians deal Erik Gonzalez, others in five-player deal with Pittsburgh Pirates; Corey Kluber third in AL Cy Young voting

By Ryan Lewis

The Indians completed a five-player trade with the Pittsburgh Pirates on Wednesday, dealing utility infielder Erik Gonzalez and right-handed pitchers Tahnaj Thomas and Dante Mendoza in exchange for outfielder Jordan Luplow and infielder Max Moroff.

Luplow, 25, logged 190 plate appearances over the last two seasons with the Pirates, hitting .185 with a .631 OPS. He hit .287 with an .829 OPS at Triple-A last season and against lefties posted an .891 OPS. He's primarily played left and right field but the Indians have indicated he could also be an option in center.

Luplow gives the Indians another candidate in the outfield, which easily is the club's biggest need heading into the offseason, although he doesn't have much of a track record. He's also an option to partially fill the void left by Brandon Guyer, should he sign elsewhere, as a right-handed outfielder. The Indians turned down Guyer's \$3 million club option for the 2019 season in October.

The Indians outfield was left with Leonys Martin, Greg Allen, Tyler Naquin and potentially Jason Kipnis as options after Guyer, Michael Brantley, Lonnie Chisenhall, Melky Cabrera and Rajai Davis all became free agents. Bradley Zimmer is recovering from shoulder surgery and could miss at least a sizable portion of the 2019 season. Oscar Mercado, acquired from the St. Louis Cardinals last season, is also potentially in the mix and is on the 40-man roster.

The outfield will continue to be a focus for the Indians front office.

"That's something we'll continue to explore this offseason in building our alternatives at the major-league level and the depth beyond that," president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti said. "As we sit here today, the outfield and bullpen are places where we'll continue to look for opportunities to get deeper there. But, we do think Jordan fits our roster really well and does complement the group of guys we currently have."

Moroff, 25, can act as a switch-hitting utility infielder. In 209 plate appearances spread over three seasons for the Pirates, he's hit .186 with a .640 OPS.

The Indians dealt Gonzalez, a talented utility infielder, to address their roster needs instead of keeping an asset blocked from playing time by Francisco Lindor and Jose Ramirez.

"Yeah, that was a tough thing for us," Antonetti said. "We've had multiple conversations with Erik about it. He's done so many things to impact the organization in his time with us, from the time he signed. He's played every position on the field I think other than catcher at one point or another. But, as our roster has taken shape over the course of the past few seasons, we have not had an opportunity for him to play regularly." Cy Young voting

The Indians had two of the top six finishers in voting for the 2018 American League Cy Young Award.

The Tampa Bay Rays' Blake Snell (17 first-place votes, 169 total points) edged the Houston Astros' Justin Verlander (13 first-place votes, 154 points) in a close race, with the Indians' Corey Kluber third with four second-place votes and 71 points overall. The Indians' Trevor Bauer was sixth with 13 total points, following the Boston Red Sox's Chris Sale and the Astros' Gerrit Cole.

Kluber put together his first 20-win season and posted a 2.89 ERA and 3.12 FIP to go with 222 strikeouts in 215 innings. Bauer had a career season with a 2.21 ERA, 2.44 FIP and 221 strikeouts, and had it not been for a fluke injury that cost him roughly a month, likely would have challenged Snell and Verlander for the award.

AFL Report: Wrapping up the season with standouts from around the league

By Emily Waldon 5m ago

Almost as quickly as it arrived, the Arizona Fall League will come to an end this weekend.

Split between two divisions, the league has played host to six teams of roughly 180 players from all 30 major-league clubs.

The Peoria Javelinas, consisting of prospects from the Braves, Brewers, Padres, Mariners and Rays have already clinched a place in the championship game slated for Saturday, Nov. 17. The Javelinas lead the league in home runs, RBI, OBP%, SLG% and OPS through 27 games, sitting second overall in runs, hits, triples, and batting average. They'll be facing the Salt River Rafters, home club to prospects from the Diamondbacks, Rockies, Marlins, Twins and Nationals. Salt River sits atop the league in hits, batting average and stolen bases, and was second only to Peoria in runs scored.

With this being the final week of the AFL, we're taking a look at the players who showed some of the most impressive work with their respective clubs. For the players, these last weeks have been an opportunity to polish what skills they already have, and for their parent clubs, it's been an opportunity to observe their progress in a comfortable climate.

Glendale Desert Dogs

Player of the Fall: Ryan McKenna, CF, Orioles

61 AB, .344/.474/.590, 21 H, 16 R, 6 2B, 3 3B, 1 HR, 9 RBI

Runner-up: Yu Chang, SS, Indians

After introducing himself during the regular season with a career-best .315 batting average between High-A and Double-A, Ryan McKenna carried his quiet success story into his work this fall.

The 21-year-old can work corner to corner of the field with enough line-drive power to do some damage. Posting multiple four-hit games, the outfielder proved contact was no issue. McKenna's ability to barrel the ball, despite below-average natural power, has positioned McKenna to be a top name to watch in Baltimore's pipeline in 2019.

Rosenthal: Digging into Harper's defensive slide; Keuchel is more reliable than dominant; Syndergaard to Padres?

By Ken Rosenthal 11m ago 1

Not surprisingly, agent Scott Boras has an explanation for the sharp decline in Bryce Harper's defensive metrics during the 2018 season.

The explanation derives from another of Boras' free-agent clients, third baseman Mike Moustakas.

Moustakas' ratings at third base took a major dip in 2017, when he was coming off a season in which he appeared in only 27 games because of a torn ACL in his right knee. But once Moustakas' leg was fully recovered, he rebounded defensively in 2018.

Boras envisions Harper following the same pattern, saying the outfielder's difficulties last season stemmed from the hyperextended left knee that sidelined him from Aug. 13 to Sept. 26, 2017.

"His legs were flat-out tired," Boras said. "It was the same thing with Moose. The rehab time in one offseason sometimes is not enough. Look at Moose's defensive metrics at third base. They're now all plus-plus. In '17, they weren't there. Everyone goes, 'It's his body type.' No, he had a leg injury."

Boras then referenced the defensive runs saved metric (DRS).

"These plus-minus things, when it's plus-plus-plus all the way through, and then you have a leg injury and it's minus the next year, it always goes back to the plus," the agent said.

Moustakas, 30, combined for plus-five defensive runs saved in 2015 and 2016, then fell to minus-eight in 2017 before recovering to plus-two in 2018. And while Moustakas is far from a fast runner, Statcast showed that he also gained the most sprint speed of any qualifying player in the majors from 2017 to 2018, reflecting his improved conditioning and health.

Harper, 26, was plus-nine in defensive runs saved in 2015, minus-three in 2016 and plus-four in 2017 before falling to minus-26 in 2018. His arm also went from good to among the worst in the game, according to Sports Info Solutions.

Teams interested in Harper must decide how much credence they put in Boras' argument, and how much it affects their valuation of the player. The Nationals evidently were undeterred, making an offer to retain Harper on the final day of the season, albeit one they knew he was almost certain to refuse – 10 years, \$300 million, according to the Washington Post.

Playing 477 1/3 innings in center field, along with 860 2/3 in right, added to Harper's physical burden. Remaining in right would ease the wear and tear on his legs, as would spending occasional time at first base and, if he signed with an American League team, DH.

A move to first also would make Harper seemingly more attractive to the Yankees, who are uncertain at that spot but stacked in the outfield. Boras said he raised the possibility of such a position change with Harper long before he became a free agent.

"Bryce and I had the discussion on working at first base two years ago," Boras said. "He was a catcher for years prior to signing with the Nationals, so first base is very comfortable for him as he can make the infield skill throws."

"This was done years in advance of free agency and had nothing to do with the Yankees' outfield situation. The versatility of Bryce is value-added to any team. He has a history of playing all three outfield positions and has caught (if an emergency catcher is needed)."

Harper took occasional groundballs and throws at first during spring-training drills and did sporadic early work at the position during the regular season, particularly when Ryan Zimmerman and Matt Adams were injured, a Nationals source said.

'The soft-contact genius of his era'

Hyperbole is a Boras specialty, but he isn't necessarily exaggerating when he calls his top free-agent pitcher, left-hander Dallas Keuchel, "the soft-contact genius of his era" and "the greatest groundball pitcher in the game."

Over the past seven seasons, the entirety of Keuchel's career, his 26.9 percent soft-contact rate ranks first among pitchers with 1,000 innings. His 59.6 groundball rate ranks first as well.

Boras also makes the point that Keuchel's statistics between his age-26 and age-30 seasons were comparable to Tom Glavine's and superior to Andy Pettitte's.

PLAYER	ERA	IP	K/9	BB/9	ERA+
Keuchel	3.28	950 1/3	7.4	2.9	121
Glavine	3.16	1063 2/3	5.9	3.2	130
Pettitte	4.17	948 IP	6.2	3.1	110

If there's a negative with Keuchel, who turns 31 on New Year's Day, it's that his command isn't quite as good as his stuff and style might suggest. His 2015 Cy Young season aside, he's more reliable than dominant — not that reliable is a bad thing.

Syndergaard again in Padres' sights

Syndergaard, 26, is under control for three more seasons and projected to earn \$5.9 million through arbitration in 2019, according to MLBTradeRumors.com. The Mets' willingness to trade him is not known; the team's public position is that it wants to build around its starting pitching, not break it apart.

The Padres, however, represent a potentially appealing trade partner. Baseball America rates their farm system as the best in the game, and a trade of Syndergaard for multiple prospects would enable the Mets to address a variety of needs.

The likelihood that the Mets secure long-term deals with Syndergaard and National League Cy Young Award winner Jacob deGrom seems slim, so it probably will behoove them to at least explore the trade market for one or the other.

DeGrom, 30, who is under control for two more seasons, almost certainly would be the Mets' preference to retain. He is homegrown (the Mets acquired Syndergaard in a trade from the Blue Jays in December 2012), a more accomplished pitcher and more beloved by teammates and fans.

New Mets GM Brodie Van Wagenen, when he was deGrom's agent at CAA, said the team needed to either sign deGrom long-term or trade him. Van Wagenen now is in position to act on his words. DeGrom and Syndergaard are still represented by CAA.

Managerial merry-go-round ... on hold

The delay in the Dodgers' effort to sign manager Dave Roberts to an extension is not cause for alarm, sources say. Roberts is vacationing in Italy, and the Dodgers are busy trying to find a replacement for free-agent catcher Yasmani Grandal, not to mention a new third-base coach, at least one hitting coach and possibly an executive to replace GM Farhan Zaidi, who left to become president of baseball operations for the Giants.

The Dodgers already have exercised Roberts' option for 2019, so it's not as if they face time pressure. Roberts also need not worry, knowing that if the talks somehow collapse, other jobs are all but certain to open over the next 12 months.

The Cubs' Joe Maddon, Giants' Bruce Bochy and Marlins' Don Mattingly are entering the final years of contracts. The Mets' Mickey Callaway must prove himself to a new GM. The Phillies' Gabe Kapler, Mariners' Scott Servais, Nationals' Dave Martinez and Padres' Andy Green are among the other managers who might fall under scrutiny, depending on how their clubs fare.

A number of high-profile former managers remain available — Joe Girardi, John Farrell, Buck Showalter, John Gibbons. But of the five managers hired this offseason, only one, the Angels' Brad Ausmus, had previous major-league experience.

The Orioles' job remains open.

Around the horn

- The Rangers' two-year agreement with free-agent catcher Jeff Mathis might seem curious, given that Mathis turns 36 on March 31 and batted only .200 with a .544 OPS in 218 plate appearances for the D-Backs last season. But teams covet Mathis for his defense, as detailed by Sports Info Solutions.

Mathis appeared in only 69 games last season, yet he still led all catchers with 17 defensive runs saved. He had the highest pitch-blocking success rate and also ranked among the leaders in pitch framing.

Rangers catchers last season combined for minus-21 defensive runs saved. Only the White Sox, at minus-27, were worse.

- A past connection worth noting as the free-agent market starts to develop: Angels GM Billy Eppler was part of the Yankees' front office when New York signed left-handed reliever Andrew Miller to a four-year, \$36 million free-agent contract in December 2014.

Miller, who turns 34 in May, is again a free agent, and clubs are examining his medical records, knowing he went on the disabled list on three occasions with knee, shoulder and hamstring issues last season, with patellar tendinitis in his right knee being the most nagging.

The Angels need pitching of all kinds, yet it's possible they will trade right-hander Blake Parker, who led the team with 14 saves last season, if they get a deal they like.

- In 2014, only seven teams were known to employ the "file-and-trial" approach to salary arbitration, in which clubs treat the figure exchange date as a hard deadline, going straight to a hearing if no deal is reached.

The number of teams employing the strategy has steadily increased in the years since, and sources say the union anticipates that all 30 clubs will use it this offseason, potentially leading to an increased number of hearings.

The clubs believe the "file-and-trial" system encourages settlements, often at more favorable terms than they might have negotiated otherwise. But 22 cases went to hearings last year, the most in at least 25 years, a source said.

- The departure of Mariners third-base coach Scott Brosius, who is leaving to pursue other opportunities, means only two coaches remain from manager Scott Servais' original staff in 2016 — bench coach Manny Acta and first-base coach Chris Prieto.

Bullpen coach Mike Hampton resigned in July 2017. Bench coach Tim Laker and first-base coach Casey Candaele were fired after the 2017 season. Pitching coach Mel Stottlemire Jr. was not retained after this season. Hitting coach Edgar Martinez stepped down and became an organizational hitting coach.

Perry Hill and Tim Laker reportedly are finalizing contracts to join Servais' staff in 2019.

Indians trade INF Gonzalez to Pirates in 5-player swap

The Associated Press

CLEVELAND (AP) -- The Indians traded one of their extra pieces. They're keeping their bigger ones - for now.

Cleveland began what could be a busy offseason on Wednesday by dealing versatile infielder Erik Gonzalez to the Pittsburgh Pirates as part of a five-player swap.

The AL Central champions sent the 27-year-old Gonzalez, who appeared in 81 games for the Indians last season, along with minor league right-handers Tahnaj Thomas and Dante Mendoza to the Pirates for outfielder Jordan Luplow and infielder Max Moroff.

Gonzalez batted .265 with one homer and 16 RBIs last season for Cleveland, which signed the Dominican native in 2009. And while he filled a valuable utility role, he was not going to crack the starting lineup behind All-Stars Francisco Lindor and Jose Ramirez.

"That was a tough thing for us," Indians president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti said. "We've had multiple conversations with Erik about it. He's done so many things to impact the organization in his time with us, from the time he signed. He's played every position on the field I think other than catcher at one point or another. But, as our roster has taken shape over the course of the past few seasons, we have not had an opportunity for him to play regularly.

"So, we feel this will give Erik an opportunity to play more with Pittsburgh and continue his career and potentially blossom into the everyday player we think he can be."

The negligible move gives the Indians needed depth in the outfield, and it could be the first of many deals this winter.

Cleveland has not dismissed speculation it may be willing to trade prominent players, including ace Corey Kluber and right-hander Carlos Carrasco. Antonetti said it's difficult to measure whether the team has seen an increase in teams wanting to do business with the Indians.

"I think what I would reiterate is that I think the conversations have reaffirmed for us that we have a lot of players on our roster and throughout our organization that are of interest to other teams," he said. "And I think what that allows us to do is have a lot of dialogue with other teams about potential opportunities for us to move forward as an organization and get better."

The 25-year-old Luplow is one of those opportunities. Cleveland's outfield was decimated by injuries last season, and the team is not expected to re-sign Michael Brantley as a free agent.

Luplow appeared in 64 games over the past two seasons with the Pirates, who named him their top minor league player in 2017.

"He's capable of playing all three outfield spots," Antonetti said. "He's spent most of the time in left and right, but we also believe he has the ability to play center field. He complements our roster really well as a right-handed-hitting outfielder that we think is capable of helping us at the major league level."

Moroff has split the last three seasons between Triple-A Indianapolis and Pittsburgh, appearing in 26 games for the Pirates in 2018.

Antonetti dealing young players - especially pitchers - like Thomas and Mendoza is difficult, but sometimes necessary.

"Two young pitchers out in Arizona that we like, that have some upside," he said. "Obviously, they're a little ways away from the major Leagues, being both 19 years old. So, guys that definitely have some potential to continue to grow and develop and develop into major league pitchers. But, for us to acquire Max and Jordan, we thought it was a worthwhile deal for us to make, because they're two guys that can help our Major League team here in the near future."

For The Cleveland Indians: A Most Compelling Off-Season

Jim Ingraham SportsMoney (Forbes)

Corey Kluber didn't win the American League Cy Young Award on Wednesday, but he was in the hunt. For the last 70 years the Cleveland Indians haven't won the World Series, but in recent years they have been in the hunt.

However, even with his non-win this year, Kluber has been better at winning Cy Young Awards (two) than his team has been at winning the World Series (none since 1948). That's the dilemma now for Indians officials: if their team can't win a World Series with arguably the best pitcher in the league over the last five years, what's Plan B?

Do the Indians keep trying to win it all with Kluber? Or do they use him to acquire some pieces that could help them win it all? Team officials know what the famously consistent Kluber brings to the table. That's why everything will be on the table, in evaluating what direction the team will take this off-season.

Indians president Chris Antonetti and General Manager Mike Chernoff said as much after the Indians were swept in three games by the Houston Astros in this year's Division Series. Cleveland's two top baseball decision makers said the team would try to "get creative" in re-shaping the roster for 2019.

Using Kluber as a trade chip would be about as creative as it gets. The veteran right-hander, who will turn 33 shortly after opening day next year, has finished in the top three in the Cy Young balloting in four of the last five years, winning the award in 2014 and 2017. In 2018 he won 20 games, led the American League with 215 innings pitched, and finished third in the Cy Young voting, behind Tampa Bay's Blake Snell and Houston's Justin Verlander.

The Indians have shown they are not averse to trading Cy Young Award winners. In 2008 the Indians traded 2007 Cy Young Award winner CC Sabathia to Milwaukee. In 2009 they traded 2008 Cy Young Award winner Cliff Lee to Philadelphia. However, both of those trades were for packages of prospects, with an eye towards the future.

This Indians team's future is now. Cleveland isn't rebuilding, it's reloading. Reloading by unloading a two-time Cy Young Award winner might be risky business for a franchise whose window of opportunity is directly tied to the ticking clock on superstar shortstop Francisco Lindor's march towards free agency.

Or is it? The argument could be made that it's specifically because each new season brings the Indians one year closer to Lindor's exit, that the team should, if not sell out, at least "get creative" _ very creative _ in trying to win now. That's where they are now. And that's why this could be a very interesting baseball winter in Cleveland.

Lindor can become a free agent after the 2021 season. He's eligible for arbitration for the first time. That should result in his salary, which was \$623,000 in 2018, jumping to an estimated \$10 million in 2019. The Indians will take periodic runs at trying to sign him to a long-term contract, but rare is the player of Lindor's stature who succumbs to such financial wooing, once the free agent carrot appears on the horizon.

The elephant in the room, of course, is always the Indians' payroll restrictions. The ballclub's \$135 million payroll in 2018 was the highest in franchise history.

They do have some key players, with pricey salaries, coming off the books, with the expected loss of free agent outfielder Michael Brantley, relievers Andrew Miller and Cody Allen, and third baseman Josh Donaldson. But that found money will be lost to the raises due returning players on multi-year deals, plus anticipated increases for arbitration-eligible players.

Then there's the eminently expendable Jason Kipnis, whose batting average and OPS have declined for three consecutive years. He'll turn 32 in April, and he's lost his second base job to MVP finalist Jose Ramirez. Yet in 2019, the last year of his contract, Kipnis will be the Indians' third highest-paid player, at \$14.6 million. Indians officials will not only accept all inquiries on Kipnis, they'll probably try to coax them.

Kluber's 2019 salary is \$17 million, up \$7 million from 2018, and the Indians hold team options for \$17.5 in 2020 and \$18 million in 2021, which, for a Cy Young Award-caliber pitcher, makes him a bargain.

Nevertheless, if Antonetti and Chernoff were of a mind to "get creative" regarding their ace, who with one more Cy Young season would likely punch his ticket to Cooperstown, the return would have to be enormous, centered on a twenty-something middle-of-the-order outfield bat, plus a productive, dependable reliever, and an elite, near major league-ready position player prospect.

Leverage? Antonetti and Chernoff have it. For them, it's win-win. They either get exactly what they want, or they bring back a four-time Cy Young finalist, two-time winner, on a club-friendly contract, and hope the planets finally align in 2019:

That Kluber wins his third Cy Young Award, and the Indians win their first World Series since the Truman administration.