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Inbox: Will White Sox take next step in rebuild?

Beat reporter Scott Merkin answers fans' questions

By Scott Merkin / MLB.com / November 7, 2018

CHICAGO -- Here's this week's edition of the White Sox Inbox, with the Hot Stove heating up around the South Siders.

How persuasive can the White Sox be to attract good, effective veteran players to a team that has lost nearly 200 games over the last two seasons? Is there reason to hope for an improved win-loss record in 2019? So far, the Sox are regressing each year in losses. Is at least a .500 season still out of the question? -- Michael, Melbourne, Fla.

White Sox general manager Rick Hahn already has talked about 2019 being a competitive season -- if not one for contention -- so expect the White Sox to make moves in that direction. Remember: Hahn predicted Year 2 of the rebuild being the most difficult before it even began, so the 100 losses clearly aren't ideal but also aren't indicative of overall development within the organization.

Selling free agents like Manny Machado and Bryce Harper, as prime examples, on the team might be the most difficult White Sox task for a pair of players accustomed to winning. But the White Sox can point to the critical mass of young talent assembled, potentially making this team a postseason contender for years to come, and Machado or Harper becoming the face of the franchise. Chicago is not a bad city to have in the background as well.

Any updates on Dane Dunning's rehab?

-- Dennis, Dallas, @Decker98

- Submit an Inbox question

Dunning finished well in instructional league, per White Sox director of player development Chris Getz. The fall work was a good test for his right elbow, and Getz added that Dunning passed with high marks. The White Sox expect a healthy and competitive Dunning, who ranks sixth among White Sox prospects, come Spring Training.

Do you think the Sox will spend big money in free agency this offseason?

-- Kevin, Westmont, Ill., @BarnacleKevin

The White Sox will spend this offseason, with the same meticulous and directed approach they've employed throughout the entire rebuild. The plan appears to be there to make a significant step forward if all stars align.

Rick Renteria made a point of removing and disciplining players for not putting in effort or not running out ground/fly balls. Where do you think the breaking point is as we get better? Will he still remove better players as the team needs the wins more?

-- Daniel, Chicago, @Daniell59980553

Those Renteria rules apply to all players and will apply for years moving forward based on his extension news. As Renteria pointed out in-season, there's some interpretation to be made. But this is the culture he has established along with his coaching staff within the entire organization.

I keep hearing the White Sox will make a run in 2020. Why can't they make a run in '19? What is going to happen in '20 vs. next year?

-- Rod, Lockport, Ill. @hotrodexpress

Rebuilding is an extended process, and while the White Sox never have set a year for planned contention, it's commonly thought to be starting in the 2020-21 window. With the American League Central standing as probably the weakest division in the Majors, a few key moves and continued development from the young players could quickly put the White Sox on the fringe of the mix in '19. Yes, it would be a long, long way to travel from 100 losses, but stranger things have happened.

Do we re-sign James Shields on the cheap?

-- Joe, Milwaukee, @jnez50

I always thought Shields was a possibility to return, and Hahn made comments to reporters recently indicating the right-hander remains in the picture. Shields wants to keep pitching and was probably the most reliable starter on the White Sox staff across the board. People might downplay the mentor factor in the short term, but he has had a positive influence on several younger players.

What was the theme to your Bar Mitzvah?

-- Jon, Deerfield, Ill. @jon_greenberg

I don't remember the theme, but I do remember DePaul beat UCLA to reach its only Final Four on the afternoon of my Bar Mitzvah. We watched the last few minutes at the lounge in the Harvey Holiday Inn. I miss the days when DePaul basketball was a national power.

White Sox patient while eyeing Machado, Harper

By Jon Paul Morosi / MLB.com / November 7, 2018

CARLSBAD, Calif. -- MLB general managers rarely announce the start of a rebuild in public. Rick Hahn did so in 2016.

On Tuesday, Hahn made a much more upbeat declaration.

To explain why that matters, let's start with the history. As Hahn's White Sox stumbled through the summer of 2016, a six-game American League Central lead dissolving into a fourth-place finish, he said the

franchise no longer could afford to remain "mired in mediocrity." Hahn acknowledged he had to be open-minded about different approaches, including a rebuild.

Crucially, Hahn did not put a timetable on the moves -- even though his roster included valuable veterans Chris Sale, Jose Quintana, Adam Eaton, Todd Frazier and David Robertson with the non-waiver Trade Deadline fast approaching.

Hahn was prepared to make moves, but on his timetable, not anyone else's. So when July 31 arrived that year, Hahn made only one trade -- sending reliever Zach Duke to the Cardinals for Charlie Tilson. The big names stayed, although not for much longer.

At the Winter Meetings four months later, Sale was dealt to the Red Sox, and Eaton was sent to the Nationals. Quintana was sent to the Cubs in a stunning crosstown trade during the 2017 All-Star break. Frazier and Robertson were packaged in a trade with the Yankees less than one week after Quintana's departure.

Collectively, the trades netted many of the prospects who have made the White Sox farm system one of baseball's best. In that way, the first chapter of Hahn's plan lasted nearly one calendar year -- from its unveiling in a July 2016 dugout media session to the busy '17 non-waiver Trade Deadline. In the process, Hahn proved to the industry that he was willing to wait patiently for the right moves to fulfill his vision. Phase 2 began Tuesday. And once again, Hahn will be methodical.

As Hahn met with reporters on the first full day of the General Managers Meetings, he made no attempt to temper expectations that the White Sox are prepared to spend on star talent.

Sources told MLB.com earlier this week that the White Sox have interest in free-agent outfielder Bryce Harper and infielder Manny Machado. On Tuesday, sources also said the White Sox will pursue top free-agent starting pitchers, such as Patrick Corbin and J.A. Happ.

The White Sox, with one of the smallest committed payrolls in baseball for 2019, have the capacity to add a \$30 million-per-year player right now. But Hahn won't be pressured into overpaying in order to make that happen, for the same reason that he refused to rush into trades for Sale, Quintana or Eaton more than two years ago.

Now that Hahn has shifted the organization's direction, he'll monitor a number of trends: How winnable is the AL Central now that the recently dominant Indians are beginning to age? How prepared are outfielders Eloy Jimenez and Luis Robert to make near-term impacts in the Majors? And how fairly priced are the All-Star upgrades that we know are coming ... eventually?

As Jose Abreu enters the final year of his contract and Michael Kopech recovers from elbow surgery, the White Sox are looking for a face of the franchise in a way that many other teams are not. Hahn could sign Harper, Machado or Corbin this winter -- or perhaps even two of the three.

And if that doesn't happen in the coming weeks, there's always next season's Trade Deadline ... or the following offseason. For White Sox fans, what matters is that Hahn knows where he wants to drive. If it takes him a year or two to arrive, it will be worth the wait for a team that hasn't won a playoff series since winning the World Series in 2005.

Here's what happened in Wednesday's AFL action

MLB.com / November 7, 2018

Here's a team-by-team breakdown of how all 30 teams' prospects fared in Arizona Fall League action on Wednesday:

• Gameday: Surprise 5, Scottsdale 4 | Mesa 6, Glendale 4 | Peoria 8, Salt River 7

AL East

Blue Jays (Surprise)

Blue Jays No. 4 prospect Nate Pearson (No. 90 overall) turned in his best start of the Fall League. The hard-throwing right-hander spun four perfect frames and struck out five. Vladimir Guerrero Jr. (No. 1 overall) went 0-for-4 but is still hitting .357 in the AFL. Cavan Biggio (No. 9) continued his hot stretch with a hit up the middle in his first at-bat. Biggio went 1-for-3 but has hits in seven of his past eight games. More »

Orioles (Glendale)

Martin Cervenka hit his first Fall League home run while going 1-for-4 with two RBIs and a run scored. Steve Wilkerson went 2-for-5 with a pair of singles, and Tanner Chleborad pitched 1 1/3 innings of scoreless relief.

Rays (Peoria)

Joe McCarthy, Tampa Bay's No. 17 prospect, was the designated hitter and went 2-for-4 with a double and an eighth-inning solo homer, driving in two runs. Left-hander Dalton Moats gave up an unearned run on one hit, walking one and fanning one over two innings.

Red Sox (Mesa)

Red Sox No. 10 prospect Josh Ockimey hit his first AFL home run and went 1-for-3 with two RBIs and a run scored. Bobby Dalbec (No. 6) went 1-for-3 with an RBI, a walk and a run scored. Esteban Quiroz went 3-for-4 with a double, an RBI and a run scored. Darwinzon Hernandez (No. 7) notched his first save of the Fall League, tossing 1 1/3 scoreless innings with three strikeouts.

Yankees (Glendale)

No Yankees prospects played on Wednesday.

AL Central

Indians (Glendale)

Indians No. 6 prospect Yu Chang went 0-for-3 with a pair of walks and a run scored. Connor Marabell went 1-for-4, while Rob Kaminsky allowed one run in one inning of relief.

Royals (Surprise)

Royals No. 2 prospect Khalil Lee had a tough day at the plate, striking out three times and finishing 1-for-4. Meibrys Vilorio also went 1-for-4 and struck out twice. Nick Heath came up big for the Saguaros as he tripled in the ninth and scored the game-winning run on Cole Tucker's walk-off hit. Grant Gavin pitched one inning and gave up one run on two hits.

Tigers (Mesa)

Tigers No. 8 prospect Daz Cameron hit his first home run in the Fall League while going 3-for-4 with two RBIs and two runs scored out of the leadoff spot. Daniel Pinero went 1-for-3 with a walk and a run scored, while Jake Rogers (No. 12) went 0-for-4. John Schreiber allowed one run in an inning of relief. More »

Twins (Salt River)

Second baseman Travis Blankenhorn, Minnesota's No. 18 prospect, was 0-for-5 and is hitting .191 during AFL play. Right fielder Jaylin Davis went 1-for-3 with a single and a walk. Left-hander Devin Smeltzer allowed two runs (one earned) on two hits while walking two in one-third of an inning.

White Sox (Glendale)

White Sox No. 4 prospect Luis Robert (No. 44 overall) hit his second home run of the AFL season, going 1-for-4. Luis Alexander Basabe (Chicago's No. 9) went 1-for-5 from the leadoff spot. Tanner Banks got the start for the Desert Dogs and took the loss, allowing five earned runs in 1 2/3 innings. Zach Thompson pitched two scoreless innings of relief, allowing one hit and striking out three.

AL West

A's (Mesa)

Luis Barrera went 0-for-3, and Sam Sheehan didn't allow a run in two-thirds of an inning in relief, walking two and striking out one.

Angels (Mesa)

Angels No. 12 prospect Jesus Castillo got the start for the Solar Sox and notched his second win of the AFL season. Castillo allowed one earned run on four hits in four innings, walking two and striking out three.

Astros (Scottsdale)

Although right-hander J.B. Bukauskas struggled with his control, issuing five walks in four innings, the Astros' No. 8 prospect once again showed impressive stuff as he paired a 96-98 mph fastball with a hard slider at 86-88 mph. He struck out two and allowed one earned run on three hits, lowering his AFL ERA to 2.61. Abraham Toro scored two of Scottsdale's four runs and is now hitting .315 in the Fall League after a 1-for-3 performance.

Mariners (Peoria)

Mariners No. 2 prospect Evan White went 1-for-5 with a single, an RBI and a run scored. Right-hander Wyatt Mills (No. 9) gave up an unearned run on one hit with one strikeout in the sixth inning, lowering his AFL ERA to 2.08. Ian Miller (No. 20) was 0-for-2 with three walks out of the leadoff spot.

Rangers (Surprise)

A pair of Rangers pitchers threw in relief with very different results. Demarcus Evans picked up his first win of the Fall League season after throwing a scoreless ninth, while Joe Kuzia gave up three runs -- all via a homer from C.J. Hinojosa -- in his inning. Kuzia has given up eight runs (seven earned) in 3 1/3 AFL innings.

NL East

Braves (Peoria)

Braves No. 12 prospect Kyle Muller threw an inning of relief, allowing one hit, walking one and striking out two. Izzy Wilson (No. 23) had a big game, going 2-for-4 with a triple, a home run, two RBIs and two runs scored. Shortstop Ray-Patrick Didder went 1-for-3 with a double and an RBI. Left-hander Adam McCreery followed Muller out of the bullpen, throwing two scoreless innings over which he yielded one hit, walked one and fanned one.

Marlins (Salt River)

Marlins No. 2 prospect Monte Harrison went 1-for-5 with a single and an RBI, while Brian Miller (No. 12) came in as a pinch-runner and did not have a plate appearance. Right-hander Chad Smith could not complete a five-out save, giving up a run on one hit and striking out one over 1 2/3 innings.

Phillies (Scottsdale)

Outfielder Austin Listi singled in his final trip to the plate to finish 1-for-4. Relievers Jonathan Hennigan and Luke Leftwich each tossed a scoreless inning out of the bullpen.

Nationals (Salt River)

Third baseman Jake Noll had a solid day at the plate with three singles and a walk in five trips. He drove in a run and scored a run. Left-hander Ben Braymer gave up a solo homer in the fourth inning but struck out the side.

Mets (Scottsdale)

Mets Nos. 1 and 2 prospect Andres Gimenez and Peter Alonso -- MLB Pipeline's Nos. 55 and 58 overall prospects, respectively -- both went 0-for-3, though Alonso reached once via a walk and also stole his third base in the Fall League. Catcher Ali Sanchez was held hitless in three at-bats but threw out three of four attempted basestealers.

NL Central

Brewers (Peoria)

Milwaukee's No. 1 prospect, Keston Hiura (No. 30 overall), went 1-for-5 with a single and a run scored. He's hitting .342 during AFL play. Right-hander Bubba Derby started for Peoria and was hit hard for five runs on seven hits over three innings. Derby walked two and struck out three.

Cardinals (Surprise)

Conner Greene, the Cardinals' No. 27 prospect, walked one and struck out one in a scoreless inning. While Wednesday's outing was good, the right-hander has struggled in the AFL, giving up nine earned runs in eight innings. Will Latchman, who has also struggled in the Fall League, threw a scoreless inning as well for Surprise. At the plate, Andy Young jump-started the Saguaros' four-run ninth with a two-run homer, his third home run of the AFL. Young, who finished 1-for-2, also drew a pair of walks. Lane Thomas went 1-for-2 and also made a nice running catch in right field.

Cubs (Mesa)

It was a quiet night for Cubs prospects as Nico Hoerner (No. 6) and Trent Giambrone (No. 29) combined to go 0-for-8 with two strikeouts. Bailey Clark and Manuel Rondon each allowed one earned run in an inning of relief.

Pirates (Surprise)

Pirates No. 5 prospect Cole Tucker lifted Surprise to a victory with a one-out walkoff single in the ninth. Tucker, who is hitting .368 in the Fall League, finished 2-for-4 and has put together three straight two-hit games. Will Craig (No. 16) hit his fourth homer of the Fall League to tie the game in the bottom of the ninth, the highlight of his 1-for-4 day.

Reds (Scottsdale)

No. 17 overall prospect Taylor Trammell (Reds' No. 2) went 1-for-4 with a double as the Scorpions' No. 3 hitter, while Shed Long (No. 8) doubled in two trips to the plate before an injury, suffered when he took a Vladimir Guerrero Jr. line drive off his left forearm/wrist and left the game. Right-hander Wyatt Strahan fanned two batters during a clean inning in relief. Alex Powers took the loss after allowing four earned runs on four hits, including two home runs, while recording just one out in the ninth inning.

NL West

D-backs (Salt River)

Shortstop Jazz Chisholm, the D-backs' No. 3 prospect, continued his torrid hitting in AFL play, going 2-for-5 with a double and a solo homer. He's hitting .438 for the AFL season. Arizona's No. 4 prospect, Pavin Smith, served as the designated hitter and went 1-for-4 with a single. Dominic Miroglio (No. 30) was also 1-for-4 with a double, RBI and run scored. Right-hander Tyler Mark pitched a scoreless seventh inning, striking out one.

Dodgers (Glendale)

Jared Walker hit his third home run of the Fall League campaign while going 1-for-3 from the bottom of the order. Dodgers No. 20 prospect Errol Robinson went 2-for-3 with a walk. Cody Thomas went 0-for-3 with a walk. Jordan Sheffield (No. 26) and Andre Scrubb each pitched a perfect inning of relief, with Sheffield notching two strikeouts.

Giants (Scottsdale)

Giants No. 28 prospect C.J. Hinojosa hit a three-run home run to left field after entering the game as a replacement for an injured Shed Long. It was the first AFL homer for Hinojosa, who finished 1-for-2. Heath Quinn (No. 10) went 0-for-3 with two strikeouts but scored a run. Right-hander Melvin Adon struck out a pair during a perfect eighth inning. Adon, the Giants' No. 19 prospect, has racked up 21 strikeouts in 10 2/3 innings out of Scottsdale's bullpen.

Padres (Peoria)

The Padres had three top-30 prospects appear in this game. No. 13 prospect Buddy Reed went 2-for-5 with a solo homer, raising his AFL average to .368. Hudson Potts (No. 23) was 1-for-4 with a double. Austin

Allen (No. 25) had a rough night, going 0-for-5 with three strikeouts, dropping his average during AFL play to .240. More »

Rockies (Salt River)

Colorado's No. 9 prospect, Sam Hilliard, went 1-for-3 with a pair of RBIs and a pair of runs scored. He's hitting .370 in AFL play. No. 11 prospect Tyler Nevin played first base and went 1-for-4 with a walk. Right-hander Ryan Castellani (No. 10) started and gave up four runs on six hits over three innings, walking two and striking out four. Jesus Tinoco (No. 20) went two scoreless frames, yielding only a walk over the fifth and sixth innings.

So much for dreams of Bryce Harper to the White Sox? One national writer says Harper's a lock to go somewhere else

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago / November 7, 2018

CARLSBAD, Calif. — The White Sox are reportedly interested in bringing Bryce Harper to the South Side. But just two days after one national writer set fans buzzing back in Chicago, another might have dashed their dreams, calling Harper a virtual lock to go to the Philadelphia Phillies.

USA Today's Bruce Nightengale wrote Wednesday from the GM Meetings in Southern California that "it's hard to find an executive, scout, or rival agent who doesn't believe that Harper will eventually sign with the Phillies." He outlined the potential suitors, pointing to the Cubs' financial situation, the New York Yankees as a better landing spot for Manny Machado, the Los Angeles Dodgers as uninterested, the San Francisco Giants as "changing course" and the St. Louis Cardinals as not a high-profile enough destination.

No, he did not even mention the White Sox.

Nightengale did mention the Washington Nationals, who reportedly had their 10-year, \$300 million offer rejected by Harper and Scott Boras, Harper's agent who spent about an hour talking about how good his client is at hitting a baseball Wednesday. He's right in that regard, that Harper sure can hit.

But alas, no talk of the White Sox.

If the "changing course" Giants and supposedly low-profile Cardinals have little shot at landing Harper, what shot do the White Sox have? They're in rebuilding mode and despite their Chicago home rarely have enjoyed the same high profile as all the other teams discussed here, if ESPN's annual forgetfulness is any indication.

MLB.com's Jon Morosi was the one who set off this recent rash of "Harper to the White Sox" fever with his report Monday that the South Siders were interested in the guy who's about to get the biggest contract in baseball history. But his argument for why the White Sox would be a legit candidate hinged almost entirely on their having one of the game's lowest payrolls. No mention of the high hurdles they'd have to clear to land Harper, like outbidding some of baseball's biggest spenders and getting Harper to buy into a pitch of planned success over those of win-now guarantees.

Yes, Boras said Wednesday that Harper would be open to hearing from any club, and surely that's true.

"I think Bryce is open to a lot of opportunities, he's listened to a lot of things," Boras said. "I think owners do a great job in forecasting the benefits of their franchise, and many have done a very good job of talking about what they need to improve on. So as we go through this, I think he's going to hear everything from everyone and certainly make an informed decision."

Remember, though, that Boras' job is to get his clients the biggest possible paydays, and he's very good at doing exactly that.

None of this is to say that the White Sox aren't willing to spend big. General manager Rick Hahn has talked repeatedly about the economic flexibility the ongoing rebuilding process has afforded his front office, and

he's spent a year and a half talking about how the White Sox have succeeded at smashing preconceived notions. He's talked about being opportunistic in this much-discussed free-agent market and about being willing to make additions that give the White Sox a better chance at long-term success. It'd be pretty difficult to argue Harper doesn't do that.

But it might not be the right time for any of that to come to fruition. The White Sox are fresh off a 100-loss season, with significant injuries befalling many of their highly rated prospects and perhaps, depending on how things play out, altering the timeline of when the contention window opens on the South Side. The future is undoubtedly bright, but is that all that's necessary — along with the monster contract, of course — to make Harper or someone else of his caliber pick the White Sox over current championship contenders?

The Phillies weren't a playoff team last season, but with Harper added to the already exciting young mix they have at the major league level, they'd be a World Series contender. If the White Sox add Harper to their 2019 roster, are they even a playoff team? There would still need to be player development and/or other moves to take place to get them to elite status. The waiting game has been a hard thing to sell to fans, even if they've done a good job buying in. It seems it'd be a hard thing to sell to one of the game's best players, too.

The White Sox won't be out on Harper until they're out on Harper. But if the Phillies are as much of a slam-dunk destination as Nightengale believes them to be, can anyone else say they were ever in?

Unsurprisingly, Scott Boras (Bryce Harper's agent) is not a fan of rebuilding teams like the White Sox

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago / November 7, 2018

CARLSBAD, Calif. -- Scott Boras sure drew a big crowd Wednesday at the GM Meetings, waves of reporters washing in front of baseball's biggest agent like the waters of the nearby Pacific Ocean.

And much like the ocean, important and enjoyable as it is, Boras delivered what you'd expect.

He didn't exactly rant and rave, but he did admonish, voicing his distaste of the game's rebuilding trend, a trend the White Sox are very much a part of. With complete teardowns yielding championships for teams like the Cubs and Houston Astros -- heck, even the Boston Red Sox spent back-to-back seasons in last place in the AL East not too long ago -- it's no wonder front offices are trying to copy that template. It's also no wonder why Boras would be against such a widespread strategy: It means fewer teams vying to spend big bucks on his clients.

Boras took these rebuilders to task, citing printed-out pages of attendance data, blaming the smaller number of fans moving through the turnstiles on teams' attempts to strip everything away and start over, attempts to build homegrown champions. And though he never mentioned the White Sox by name, he criticized the AL Central as a division with "non-competitive" teams, surely noticing that two of the three teams that lost 100 games this season -- the White Sox and the Kansas City Royals -- reside there.

"One thing we wanted to address is the competitive cancer that's dominated our game, what we saw teams doing that were what ownership felt was positive for the game and positive for the franchise," Boras said. "And some of the information that we've collected is that the fans of baseball have clearly rejected this voluntary approach that owners have made to where they're not competitive. We have 17 teams in baseball where the attendance has declined, 17 out of 30. We had six stadiums where they had the lowest attendance in their stadium's history.

"We have teams that have responded and responded appropriately. The Cleveland Indians have retained their players. The Cleveland Indians have signed free agents. The Cleveland Indians have won their division, they've been in the playoffs regularly. They've done a lot of things right. But the Cleveland Indians are in a division of non-competitive teams. And as a result of that, despite the fact that they are a franchise doing a lot of right things for their fans, they've had a decline in attendance. And the reason is that in their division, the mystery of the game is lost because of non-competitive teams. And we do not have fans

responding to a franchise when a franchise is doing what it should be doing, and because of non-competitiveness throughout the division, they don't show.

"It's gotten so bad that even when divisional clubs come to Minnesota, it's gotten so bad that only one of the Twins shows up."

If only Boras brought along his own drummer for a rimshot after that one.

Surely White Sox fans don't care much to the attendance woes in Cleveland and Minneapolis, but there's no doubt that the 100-loss product on the South Side had its own local impact on the number of fans filing into Guaranteed Rate Field. Boras is right there, that losing teams mean the fans stay at home. It's not a novel concept, but it's perhaps part of the thing that makes this ongoing waiting game so difficult for the White Sox, who ranked 25th out of 30 teams in total attendance in 2018.

Still, it's hard to argue against the approach the White Sox have taken in recent seasons. For so long they did what Boras wanted, attempting to bring in free agents and field a playoff contender with short-term stopgaps. And from 2009 through 2016, it resulted in a grand total of zero playoff berths.

Rick Hahn's front office has stripped things down and started a rebuild so the team's long-term fortunes wouldn't hinge on the fortunes they spend on a small number of players. Instead, they hope to have a deep organization full of players who can power the White Sox to the postseason and win championships for years to come. That's the plan anyway.

And of course Boras knows that. But he's an advocate for his players, and he wants to see them get huge paydays. So of course he's not buying into the White Sox rebuild, or any rebuild for that matter.

But what will make Boras happy is if the White Sox opt to infuse their rebuild by handing out one of the biggest contracts in baseball history. They're reportedly interested in Bryce Harper, one of Boras' clients. But even if they were to back a dump truck of money up to Harper's house and lure him to the South Side, he'd still be part of an ongoing rebuild. Even Harper, as good as he is, likely wouldn't make the White Sox an instant playoff team all by himself.

What would Boras' thoughts on the White Sox rebuild be in that case? If his No. 1 client got the money but had to wait to be a winner?

Rick Hahn lauds the benefits of adding a veteran starter as reports tie White Sox to J.A. Happ

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago / November 7, 2018

CARLSBAD, Calif. — More than one report out of baseball's GM Meetings this week in Southern California have the White Sox in pursuit of free-agent starting pitcher J.A. Happ.

Bruce Levine
@MLBBruceLevine

White Sox very busy checking in on free agent players . Pitching key . Veteran J.A Happ falls into role of productive pitcher with playoff experience and leadership skills. He is one of several players they are working to sign.

11:07 PM - Nov 6, 2018 · Carlsbad, CA

113

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Jon Morosi

✓

@jonmorosi

Sources: #WhiteSox active in starting pitching market, with interest in Patrick Corbin and J.A. Happ, among others. The reason: Reynaldo Lopez is the only current White Sox pitcher who threw 50+ IP this year with a sub-4.00 ERA. @MLB @MLBNetwork

7:21 PM - Nov 6, 2018

837

291 people are talking about this

Twitter Ads info and privacy

The 36-year-old Happ, an Illinois native who attended Northwestern, might not be at the top of fans' wish lists. He's not Patrick Corbin nor Dallas Keuchel, the two big-name free-agent starters on the market. But he does seem to make sense after hearing Rick Hahn rave about what a veteran starting pitcher could bring to the White Sox rotation in 2019.

"We have short-term needs that we can't ignore," Hahn said, referencing the two holes in the team's starting staff heading into next season. "We have to augment the pitching staff, both the rotation as well as the bullpen. Those most likely will come via free agency. There's a chance via trade, but most likely via free agency given the supply of what's out there and given that we do have some economic flexibility.

"So you will see some veterans added, in part to address our short-term needs but also with an eye toward how they can play a role in the clubhouse in mentoring some of our younger guys. There's definitely an important role, one we haven't shied away from being a part of this at some point.

"It would be marvelous if we could be the first team in history to win a World Series with 25 homegrown players. We're realistic. We know there's going to have to be additions from outside the organization, the veterans who can play a role in mentoring the young players certainly have some appeal."

It's a role that James Shields served in during the 2018 campaign, earning rave reviews as a mentor to Lucas Giolito and others. Shields made a big impact off the field and ended up tremendously reliable on it, one of 13 big league pitchers to throw 200 innings.

While Shields is available, a free agent after the White Sox declined his pricey option, perhaps it's Happ who Hahn & Co. hope can serve in a similar capacity.

"Having someone in there who provides a level of stability for the rotation and dependability every fifth day has some appeal that you would allow young players to go through some of the growing pains that are inevitable in their development," Hahn said. "Having someone who can play that veteran, mentor role who can help teach guys whether it's from a game prep standpoint ... or any level of alteration with certain pitches, which is where James had the biggest impact in the minors.

"Having a guy who can play that role has appeal. It's not just what a guy can do between the white lines, it's what a guy can do for you in the clubhouse, is part of this equation."

As for what happens between those lines, Happ was excellent after a midseason trade from the Toronto Blue Jays to the New York Yankees, where he posted a 2.69 ERA in 11 starts. The results weren't nearly as good prior to the trade: a 4.18 ERA in 20 starts with the Jays. But he had an ERA under 4.00 in each of the three seasons prior, playing in Toronto in 2016 and 2017 and splitting time between the Seattle Mariners and Pittsburgh Pirates in 2015.

Last season, he struck out a career-high 193 batters. Perhaps more importantly, he walked only 27, a number worth noting considering the White Sox rotation led baseball in walks in 2018.

While plenty of Twitter-using White Sox fans have their sights on big-ticket items this offseason, Happ is an addition that would fit in more with what the team is doing with their rebuild. He could serve as a short-term fill-in while the White Sox wait for Michael Kopech to recover from Tommy John surgery and for Dylan Cease to complete his development in the minor leagues. If a deal were to be for multiple years, that would

also be sensible, with Happ serving as both a bridge to those younger players and a safety net of sorts should they go through some to-be-expected growing pains on a team looking to contend in 2020.

With Manny Machado rumors flying, White Sox still supportive of Rick Renteria's 'don't quit' philosophies

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago / November 7, 2018

CARLSBAD, Calif. — Manny Machado made waves during the postseason with something that haunts public-relations professionals' nightmares.

After catching heat for not running out a ground ball during the NLCS, Machado, then the Los Angeles Dodgers' shortstop and now one of the most coveted players on the free-agent market, told The Athletic's Ken Rosenthal that he's not "Johnny Hustle" and that busting it down the line on routine ground balls just "isn't my cup of tea."

Maybe those comments made you wince, maybe they didn't. It seems rather unlikely it's going to cost him that much money, with Machado still expected to receive one of the biggest contracts in baseball history for what he can do with a bat and a glove.

But one thing they did do was contrast sharply with the everyday philosophy of White Sox manager Rick Renteria. And considering the White Sox have already been linked to Machado in the early stages of the offseason, you wonder how Machado's stated attitude toward giving 100 percent on every play would factor into a potential pursuit.

Renteria was not at all shy about benching players, youngsters and veterans alike, throughout the season for not running out ground balls, line drives and pop ups. He even sat down Avisail Garcia during a spring training game for not giving it his all on one particular play.

And the White Sox have been completely supportive of the culture Renteria is establishing. They used "Ricky's boys don't quit" as a marketing slogan, and the team wore T-shirts with the No. 27 on them all season, the No. 27 signifying playing hard for all 27 outs. It doesn't get more supportive than handing your manager a contract extension, which general manager Rick Hahn revealed the White Sox did, even though they didn't feel the need to announce it. In other words: The White Sox are totally behind Renteria and everything he's doing as the South Side skipper.

Hahn, who would be the one to try to bring Machado to the South Side if the White Sox interest is as high as the baseball world believes it to be, saw through a question about this exact topic Tuesday during the GM Meetings. But it didn't stop him from once more backing Renteria's actions and the philosophies he's implemented as manager.

"Not going to talk about any individual guys," Hahn said, wise to the fact that "a potential addition" was this writer's hastily crafted code for Manny Machado. "I will say that Ricky has created a culture of accountability in that clubhouse and one that we think is important and going to continue going forward. He's gotten a great deal of buy-in from players that were here from the start as well as the players that we've acquired since then. Buying into that culture is important."

Perhaps that's a declaration of confidence that Machado — or any big name the White Sox might acquire this offseason — would join that buy-in and adhere to Renteria's philosophy. Perhaps it's simply Hahn supporting his manager in a public setting.

Regardless, in the event the White Sox do land Machado, it's going to be something that comes up. Would Renteria bench the team's \$300 million man if he didn't bust it down the first-base line? Or would the \$300 million contract come with the stipulation that Machado better start learning to enjoy this particular cup of tea?

In a league full of non-competitive teams, the White Sox are just doing what's best for them

By James Fegan / The Athletic / November 7, 2018

CARLSBAD, Calif. — Positioned atop a white stone staircase at the Omni La Costa Resort & Spa, Scott Boras delivered an hour-long (at least) session Wednesday in front of roughly 100 reporters. It carried the feel of an address from a Roman senator, which given the speech he came prepared to deliver and his sense for presentation, was probably not lost on the 66-year-old agent.

From this mount, and well before I beat the odds and fired in one quick question about Boras Corp. client Carlos Rodón, Boras described a scourge of falling attendance across more than half the league and drew a straight line to the cause.

“Fans of baseball have clearly rejected this voluntary approach that owners have made where they are not competitive,” Boras said. “We have teams that have responded appropriately. The Cleveland Indians have retained their players. The Cleveland Indians have signed free agents. The Cleveland Indians have won their division. They have been in the playoffs regularly. They’ve done a lot of things right. But the Cleveland Indians are in a division of non-competitive teams and as a result of that, despite the fact that they are a franchise doing a lot of right things for their fans, they’ve had a decline in their attendance. And the reason is, that in their division, the mystery of the game is lost to the non-competitive teams.”

It is not necessary to specify that the White Sox were 26th in road attendance, with fellow AL Central rebuilders Detroit and Kansas City ranking even lower, to discern the crux of Boras’ argument. Rebuilding — setting aside multiple seasons for organizational development at the cost of contending — has become a commonplace strategy across the game. With the league struggling to determine a cause for falling attendance, this is as convincing an argument as any, and with 195 losses in the last two seasons and all the “financial flexibility in the world,” the White Sox are a current poster child for a completely commonplace phenomenon.

Facing a considerably smaller smattering of reporters who inevitably were on hand for Boras’ sermon, Rick Hahn depicted himself as a man entrusted to fulfill a straightforward task: to give the White Sox the best chance to win the World Series. Given that mission, he feels he is set upon the best path available to him, and weighing its role in the fate of the sport at large is not in his job description.

“I really don’t spend a lot of time focused on the overall trend necessarily,” Hahn said. “Our view is we’re going to do the best job we can under the current rules to put ourselves in the best position to win for the long term. If those rules change, we’ll adjust. But to speculate on what may be coming or how we would have to react is not the best use of our energy at this time.”

The White Sox can certainly not be said to have come by the rebuilding path eagerly. A critique of their competitiveness as an organization is better lodged at how willing their ownership was to deploy financial resources when they were trying to win in 2015 and 2016, and will be best measured again by how much they will deploy for the 2020 season and beyond. But last year’s exhaustive teardown — dismantling a roster superior to those the Astros and Cubs rebuilds began with — came after multiple instances through the years of front office members presenting it as the possible best path.

The White Sox saw roughly 1,700 fewer fans per night in 2018 than they did two years prior when they trotted out Chris Sale every fifth day, but Hahn has regularly expressed pleasant surprise with how well the process has been received. Cutting salary to the bone while being praised as a smart and savvy organization seems like it would be appealing to every cost-conscious team owner (which is every owner), but the White Sox are in an odd place to be publicly identified as one of the vanguards of rebuilding, when their involvement is more of a testament to how common and accepted it has become. The rejection of the product that Boras describes is clear to see in attendance numbers, but a lot harder to see in fan response to Eloy Jiménez not getting called up.

Correctly, Boras’s calls for change, and his accompanying elaborate proposal for an incentive system that provides reasons to win even for teams out of playoff contention, was aimed at baseball owners at large, not general managers trying to succeed at their jobs within the parameters they have been provided. And

ultimately, with that group, the argument of “adapt or die” will always be more compelling than “do the right thing for the game.” If attendance really reaches a point of being unpalatable for their bottom line, they will probably institute changes. If it doesn’t, they probably won’t. The romance of a packed house revved up for a meaningful ball game on a late-August night probably won’t be enough to institute a relegation system.

In the same session, Boras addressed the direction of the Philadelphia Phillies. For a team that is only a year or two ahead of the White Sox in its own rebuild, and even more transparent about its ambitions to spend aggressively this offseason — possibly on Boras Corp. client Bryce Harper — after similarly reducing its payroll obligations to a minimum, Boras praised the “winning intent” of Phillies ownership. And in that moment, for a figure who has claimed such a distinct perception as being intractable by the White Sox fan base, which is likely only burnished by Boras publicly identifying them as a source of baseball ills, it could not be more clear what would be needed to flip that perception on its head. They’ll just need to show some “winning intent” of their own.

Everything you need to know about the White Sox: GM meetings edition

By James Fegan / The Athletic / November 7, 2018

CARLSBAD, Calif. — Sifting through a half hour of White Sox general manager Rick Hahn answering questions for a central narrative is sort of my job. But for the sake of letting the reader know as much as I know, let’s run through all the details touched on during the general manager meetings.

Topic #1: The White Sox have immediate needs, but there’s no urgency for a major target

It’s been a source of unusual enthusiasm for White Sox fans that the team is openly acknowledging it has budget room and is in a position to land a big-time player during an offseason where Manny Machado and Bryce Harper are available in free agency. But with 2019 set to be another rebuilding year, Hahn alluded to their big moves for “finishing pieces” coming in free agency or trades over the next year, but not necessarily now. If 2020 is the soonest the Sox’s playoff hopes will be viable, it won’t necessarily matter when in the next year they make their splash.

“One of the things we’re looking to accomplish in addition to creating a critical mass of potentially impact talent is to create some economic flexibility so we would be in the position to add whether it’s via trade or free agency, other impact talent to continue the process that we started,” Hahn said. “We’ve gotten ourselves in a position now where we have minimal commitments going forward. We are able to enjoy that flexibility, whether we use it now, in July, or use it next offseason to augment this group, remains to be seen.”

That’s a longwinded way of saying we currently have a bunch of prospects and a 2019 payroll only slightly higher than the annual average value of Harper or Machado’s respective upcoming deals.

Topic #2: The non-tender deadline looms for Avisail García

The list of players Hahn named as for who should help provide a better on-field product and record next season should not be taken as an exhaustive projection of who will be on the 2019 roster. But it did notably include José Abreu and did not include García, who will need to be tendered an arbitration offer by Nov. 30 or will become a free agent. The matter-of-fact discussion of his future made it clear parting ways is a possibility.

“We’ve been talking about Avi for a long time now and I think we know him as well as anybody about what he’s capable of doing when he’s fully healthy as well as some of the challenges created by the health issues for him,” Hahn said. “With one year currently left of control, we’re having conversations right now about how best to proceed.”

Topic #3: At least one corner of the outfield is carved out for Eloy Jiménez

Given that the White Sox opened themselves to a volley of criticism by holding Jiménez down in the minors all season, it would be astounding to see them turn around and break camp with him on the big league roster in March, which would allow him to accumulate a full year of service time. But Hahn is holding to his claim that defensive development was the reason for keeping Jiménez down by leaving open the possibility of him spending the whole 2019 season in the majors. And if the Opening Day left fielder is someone other than Jiménez, it's clear that player should probably be able to play another position.

"We actually had dinner with him in his family last month in the Dominican, as you know we signed his little brother (Enoy)," Hahn said. "I think right now he's in very good spirits. He looks great. He's working out and been working on his nutrition. I know he's planning to come to camp eager to show everybody what he's capable of doing."

Topic #4: Yoán Moncada should be able to play both second and third base, just in case

Moncada and Nick Madrigal playing the same position was not a reason to avoid the latter with the fourth overall pick in the 2018 draft, but it's something that will eventually need to be accounted for by a team that constantly talks about looking multiple years ahead. Being able to shift their infielders around would also come in handy if the Sox were to add something like a generational talent to the group, or even if just Luis Curbelo or Amado Núñez became major leaguers down the road.

"We've talked to the player, we've talked to scouts, had a lot of good conversations about it," Hahn said. "Fundamentally we like versatility and flexibility in all our players. So in that specific example, Moncada's ability to play third and second, that makes him more valuable to us. Should we eventually make a switch full time, that would be a decision we'd make closer to spring training and announce closer to spring training after the offseason plays out with how we're going to line up."

Topic #5: Matt Davidson is probably not the South Side Shohei Ohtani

White Sox executives never seemed as enthused as the world at large about the idea that a former stud high school pitcher could pick up a ball almost 10 years later and provide semi-regular assistance in a major league bullpen. While they discussed the possibility of pitching with Davidson's representation after the end of the season, that discussion ended with the expectation that he will not be throwing professionally in spring training.

"I think he knows, still, his bread is buttered with the offense he provides," Hahn said. "We've had conversations with Matty, we've had conversations with the agent about what potentially he could do in the future. And who knows, maybe someday that comes to fruition. But right now, the focus is on his offense."

Topic #6: The White Sox are quite pleased with Zack Burdi's rehab

Despite his velocity still being under where it was pre-surgery, now over 15 months after he underwent Tommy John surgery, and despite a shutdown in the Arizona Fall League for general physical fatigue, the White Sox are happy with where the former first-round pick is at in his rehab and feel that any concern is premature and unwarranted. They have been clear about spring training 2019 being the ultimate goal for when he should be back to normal, and ultimately expect Burdi to force the issue for a call-up to the majors with his performance next year.

"He still has relatively few minor league innings under his belt," Hahn said. "I can certainly see him forcing his way into our picture in 2019. When—whether it's early, middle or late—I don't know. Let's see where he's at once he's back throwing in games regularly for us. We still very much believe in his future and are pleased with where he's at in terms of his rehab."

Ian Hamilton, Ryan Burr, José Ruiz, Caleb Frare, Jace Fry, Aaron Bummer were all also mentioned as young relievers that Hahn likes going forward.

Topic #7: Dylan Cease will be on the Michael Kopech plan this coming year, with two notable exceptions

The first exception is that the White Sox do not intend for Cease to tear his ulnar collateral ligament at the end of the 2019 season. The second exception is that while Kopech was intended to pitch through the end of year in the rotation, Cease set a career-high in innings last season with just 124, and the White Sox will likely not allow him to exceed it by more than 40-to-50 innings in 2019, which could mean he's shut down before the end of the major league season. They do expect him to make it to the majors, though, just like Kopech.

"You can't necessarily project him, 'Oh he's going to go throw 180 in the big leagues next year,'" Hahn said. "So that's really the only sense of caution on him. I think it's fair to compare where he is now to where Kopech was a year ago in terms of coming to spring training with the stuff, with everything he's accomplished, with the stuff he has, and the ability to compete at the big league level. It's just a matter of going to start that process and what we can expect once we do."

Topic #8: It sure sounds like they want at least one wise veteran in the rotation

The White Sox need to fill two rotation spots for next season. Since landing two long-term fits for their contention window this offseason is incredibly unlikely, one way they can still support their future is by giving a spot to someone who can serve as a mentor to their still very young pitching staff. James Shields' impact got mentioned specifically, but it's important to remember that there are many old, wise pitchers in the world.

"Having someone who can play that veteran, mentor role who can help teach guys whether it's from a game prep standpoint, or buying into the shift standpoint, or any level of alteration with certain pitches which is where James (Shields) had the biggest impact in the minors," Hahn said. "Having a guy who can play that role has appeal. It's not just what a guy can do between the white lines, it's what a guy can do for you in the clubhouse, is part of this equation."

Stark: What happens when 'bullpenning' madness meets the free-agent starter market?

By Jayson Stark / The Athletic / November 7, 2018

Attention, Gio González, Matt Harvey, Marco Estrada and, frankly, all free-agent starting pitchers not named Patrick Corbin, Dallas Keuchel and Nathan Eovaldi. You might want to read this opus and jot down some notes.

This was the free-agent starting-pitcher market just three years ago:

Kansas City Royals – Sign RHP Ian Kennedy for 5 years, \$70 million, coming off a season of 168 1/3 innings pitched, with an 87 ERA-Plus.

St. Louis Cardinals – Sign RHP Mike Leake for 5 years, \$80 million, coming off a season of 192 innings pitched, with a 106 ERA-Plus.

San Francisco Giants – Sign RHP Jeff Samardzija for 5 years, \$90 million, coming off a season of 214 innings pitched, with a 79 ERA-Plus.

And this was the free-agent starting-pitcher market just two years ago:

Miami Marlins – Sign RHP Edinson Vólquez for 2 years, \$22 million, coming off a season of 189 1/3 innings pitched, with an 80 ERA-Plus.

And finally, this was the free-agent starting-pitcher market last winter:

Lance Lynn, Aníbal Sánchez, Alex Cobb, etc. – Zzzzzzzzz.

Which brings us to this winter and another free-agent starting-pitcher market. You know what's changed since last winter? We'll tell you what's changed:

The starting pitcher has never felt less valued, or less impactful, at any point in the history of baseball. That's what. And we're talking about on the field.

So as Openers roam the earth, as Bullpen Madness tightens its grip on North America's pitching staffs, ask yourself this: Would you want to be a free-agent starter right now?

"In a perfect world, the way teams are lining up," says an executive of one contender, "that shitty fourth or fifth starter is not a thing that teams are going to do anymore."

Not that any team has ever wanted to do that thing, of course, for like the last 50 years. But for, oh, about 49 of those 50 years, they never saw much of an alternative – because, well, somebody had to pitch.

Now, though, that somebody might be a reliever. And if that's the case, the value of the old-fashioned inning-eating league-average starting pitcher (or worse) – on a suddenly liberated free-agent market – might be about to plunge to an all-time low.

We can't be sure about that, naturally, because A) somebody still has to pitch, every darned night, and B) free-agent markets can always take on a life of their own. But we're about to examine that question: Is Bullpen Madness posing a danger to free-agent starting pitchers as we used to know them?

We surveyed executives from progressive, data-driven front offices. We crunched the pertinent numbers. We even spoke with one of the great inning-eaters of his generation, and he'll present a counter-argument of his own. So here we go....

THE FRONT OFFICE VIEW

LESSON NO. 1: WELCOME TO THE LAND OF TOMORROW

First, this important reminder: All 30 teams do not think alike. We may have reached a point where modern sabermetrics is a part of every front office's thinking – but not in the same way. And that message came through loud and clear in these conversations.

In fact, we found just one universal theme that ran through the thinking of every club. You know what teams now care about less than they ever have? What a player used to do. What a player used to be. The numbers a player used to produce, which are splattered on the back of his baseball card or on his baseball-reference page.

What drives almost every decision these days is not rewarding what that player has already done – but projecting what he's about to do.

"The way teams value a player now," says one AL executive, "is so fundamentally different than even 10 or 15 years ago, when Esteban Loaiza turned his magical new cutter into 21 wins [for the 2003 White Sox]."

We promise that will be the last Esteban Loaiza reference in this column. But if you leave his name out of this, you know what the most important word was in that sentence? Value. That's what.

This isn't so much about whether starting pitchers are still employable. This is more a question of the ability of teams to place a fairly precise value – both in on-field production and in dollars – on what those starters are likely worth over the next one, two, three and five years.

LESSON NO. 2: STARTERS AREN'T EXTINCT – YET

There are going to be teams in 2019 that attempt to take bullpening to the next level, whatever the heck that is. The number of teams traveling that road, in fact, may even reach double figures.

"I'm convinced," says an exec of one heavily data-centric team, "that somebody is going to break camp next year with a rotation of four starters and a bullpen day....And that might be a mistake.

"I think bullpenning is a really good answer when you don't have starters," he says. "I don't think it's a good idea in lieu of starters."

So as his team shops for starting-pitching options this winter, "We're not discussing bullpenning or Openers," he says. "We want starters."

That team's big concern is shared by a number of clubs. Bullpenning may be cheaper than traditional starters. Bullpenning might even be more statistically effective, in many ways, than traditional starters. But to bullpen it through the season, you're going to need a gazillion pitchers.

So you'd better find a way to stockpile a couple of dozen usable arms, those teams warn. And a bunch of them had better have minor-league options available, so you can keep cycling them through the big leagues. That can be done – but not by everyone.

Which means that reasonably durable, reasonably dependable starting pitchers are not yet an extinct species. But they're also not looking like a particularly lucrative species.

"If we're talking about a guy who throws 150 innings at a league-average ERA, every team still wants that guy," says another exec. "But are we going to pay \$20 million a year for that guy? Probably not."

LESSON NO. 3: QUALITY – NOT QUANTITY – IS TRENDING

So which free-agent starter would you rather have – Hyun-Jin Ryu (82 1/3 IP, 198 ERA-Plus) or Derek Holland (171 1/3 IP, 109 ERA-Plus)?

OK, how about Nathan Eovaldi (111 IP, 112 ERA-Plus) or James Shields (204 2/3 IP, 93 ERA-Plus)?

Or to ask this another way, which would you rather have – a starter with great stuff in limited looks, or a league-average starter who is likely to chew up the most innings on your staff?

That used to be an easy answer, in an era when pitchers like Ryu and Eovaldi were viewed suspiciously – as "injury-prone" or "guys you can't count on." But all of a sudden, it's not so simple.

All of a sudden, we find ourselves in an age where starters pitch less and less anyway. So in this age, does quality now look more seductive than quantity? Watch a highlight reel of Eovaldi's October, and you can guess the answer.

"The value of pitchers like that is significantly higher in today's game," says one of the execs quoted earlier. "We're not so focused anymore on that guy who is going to get 18 to 21 outs, 32 or 33 days a season. Now we're more focused on: 'Let's get 16 awesome outs, 20 to 25 days a season.'"

What's the value of that in dollars? We can actually estimate that now, thanks to our friends at Fangraphs. They've computed a \$/WAR stat that equates to \$8 million per win (above a replacement-level pitcher). So using that metric, here is how Fangraphs ranks the 2018 dollar value of those four starters we mentioned above:

Eovaldi \$18 million
Holland \$16.4 million
Ryu \$16.3 million
Shields \$6.8 million

So what can we learn from that? A) Shields' 200-plus innings do have value – but not nearly as much as Eovaldi's dominance over a much lighter workload. And B) incredibly, Ryu had roughly the same worth as a guy who pitched twice as many innings – but Holland's volume and dependability were also probably underrated by practically everyone this year.

“Here’s who I think is not affected by the way teams’ thinking has evolved,” says one AL exec. “One, you’re a guy who throws a ton of innings and at least gets some swings and misses. Two, if you don’t do that, then you’re dominant in a smaller number of innings....It’s the value of that guy who gives you 23 starts, 118 innings and a league-average ERA that’s way down, compared to where it was even two years ago. That guy is really affected.”

WHAT THE NUMBERS SAY

The starting-pitching trend lines paint their own picture. How do teams view The Starting Pitcher in 2018, compared with five, 10 or 20 years ago? That portrait looks something like this.

Allow us to present a few numbers that illustrate this decline:

LIST NO. 1: THE 200-INNING CLUB

Number of pitchers working 200+ innings:

2018 – 13*

2017 – 15

2016 – 15

2015 – 28

2014 – 34

2013 – 36

2012 – 31

2011 – 39

2010 – 45

2005 – 50

(* – fewest in any full season in history)

What you need to know: Not so long ago, the average rotation included two starters on every team who threw 200 innings. By this year, 21 of the 30 teams had no pitcher who worked 200 innings. And only three teams – the Astros, Indians and Diamondbacks – had more than one who did it.

LIST NO. 2: THE 162-INNING CLUB

Number of pitchers who threw enough innings (162) to qualify for the ERA title:

2018 – 57*

2017 – 58

2016 – 74

2015 – 78

2014 – 88

2013 – 81

2012 – 88

2011 – 93

2010 – 92

(* – fewest in any full season in history)

What you need to know: Not so long ago, a No. 1, 2 or 3 starter was expected to at least work enough innings to qualify for the ERA title. By this year, you would have had to lower that threshold from 162 innings to 136 to find a figure that three starters per team reached.

LIST NO. 3: THE INNINGS-PER-START CLIFF DIVE

Average innings per start:

2018 – 5.4*

2017 – 5.5

2016 – 5.6

2015 – 5.8

2014 – 6.0

(* – fewest in any full season in history)

What you need to know: For 25 consecutive seasons (1990 through 2014), the average innings logged by a major-league starter essentially never changed – remaining at approximately 6.0 inning per start year after year after year, give or take a minor blip. Then, over the last four years – as third-time-through-the-order data and bullpening abruptly took hold – that average dropped by an incredible 10 percent! We haven't seen the bottom yet. Or even close.

LIST NO. 4: STARTER/RELIEVER WORKLOADS

Innings absorbed by starters, versus relievers, per season:

YEAR	STARTER IP	RELIEVER IP	GAP
2018	26,066.2	17,422.1	8,644.1
2017	26,787.1	16,469.2	10,317.2
2016	27,412.2	15,893.2	11,519.0
2015	28,223.1	15,184.1	13,039.0
2014	28,992.0	14,621.2	14,370.1

What you need to know: Until three years ago, there had never been a season – ever – in which starting pitchers didn't eat up at least twice as many innings as relief pitchers. All of a sudden, that gap has shrunk – by more than 5,000 innings! Will we ever see a day when relievers get more outs per game than starters? We're heading in that direction.

BONUS CHART: WHY LESS FEELS LIKE MORE

Our favorite chart-making cohort, Eno Sarris, cooked up this vivid illustration for us, to show how starting pitchers become more effective the less they pitch.

wOBA allowed by starters, compared with total batters faced:

What you need to know: That orange line shows the steep decline in total batters faced by starting pitchers over the last decade. The blue line is the weighted On Base Average they allow. It clearly demonstrates that as starters face fewer hitters, their performance gets better as a group. What's interesting is that this didn't become so dramatically apparent until the last three seasons – when, as we've seen, starters began spending far less time on the mound than ever before.

WHAT AN INNING-EATER SAYS

We've digested those numbers. We've seen how modern front offices apply that data. What we often forget is that there's a human being on the other end of all that data. So let's let one of baseball's brightest, most passionate pitchers present his side of this story.

James Shields is the perfect man to articulate that story. He began his career in Tampa Bay, long before The Opener was a thing. Because he did, he's "a big believer" in sabermetrics, he says. He also pitched 200 innings (for the White Sox) just last season, and isn't far removed from throwing 200-plus nine years in a row – something only two other right-handed starters in the last 40 years (Greg Maddux and Mike Mussina) can say. And as we mentioned, he's a free agent again this winter, this time at age 37. Here's his take on all of that:

ON WHY INNING-EATERS MATTER: "I still think there's a market for inning-eaters," Shields says. "I think that's what gives teams the flexibility to do whatever they want to do with their staff. Whether they want to have Openers, or out-getters or bullpening, whatever they decide to do, they still need inning-eaters to give them the flexibility to be able to do that. You need to have starters to eat enough innings to take the load off the other guys."

ON WHY 'STARTING PITCHER' IS STILL A BIG JOB: "I feel like your starting-pitching staff is the heartbeat of your team. They set the tone for what kind of series you're going to have, for what kind of game you're

going to have and do you have a chance, every five days, to win that ball game ... Before the last couple of years, I think there were like 10 years in a row where the teams that made the playoffs all had starters that threw something like 900 innings ... So if [if a team tries to win with bullpening and] you take away 300 innings because you only want your starters to go 100-120 innings, you're losing a lot of innings that your relievers would have to cover."

ON WHETHER THIS MARKET WILL VALUE 200 INNINGS: "I can't say much about the market this winter, because it's not really up to me. I can't say much about whether it's going to affect me. Hopefully not, obviously. But I'm a big believer that there should be a market for guys like me. It's about more than just being an innings-eater ... I also believe in intangibles, and what a player brings to a team on the field and off, with character and track record. You look around now at how many [starters] get hurt. A ton of guys are getting hurt. So I don't know the value is of being a guy who pitches those 200 innings. But I definitely think track record is a big part of it."

ON WHETHER ANYONE WILL THROW 200 NINE YEARS IN A ROW AGAIN: "Haha, you never know. Baseball is a great game, but it's a weird game. And that's why I love it. You never know when baseball might come back to that old-school thinking and guys will start [throwing 200 innings] again. But right now, the way it's going, I don't see that happening very often."

WHAT THE MARKET WILL SAY

So as we kick off another free-agent sweepstakes, you know what we think teams are looking for this winter – once you get past the Corbins and Keuchels who represent the top of this market, that is? Don't laugh when you read this. But they're looking for ...

The next Tyler Chatwood!

And no, that doesn't mean they're looking for a guy who can walk 95 hitters in 103 2/3 innings. It means they're looking for (you can all sing along now) "value." They're looking for a guy whose spin rate or out-of-whack 2018 pitch mix is an indicator that there's huge potential value per dollar spent – as opposed to declining value in pitchers whose 2018 numbers look better than they actually were. And they're convinced That Guy is out there.

Maybe that turns out to be a Nate Karns. Or possibly a Jordan Lyles. We'll no doubt find out. But you know who it's highly unlikely to be? Anyone they project to be one of those "shitty fourth or fifth starter" kind of guys. Even if you know their names. Even if they've had long, respectable careers. Because what they used to be is now as meaningless in this sport as how teams used to think.

"Teams have always bet on guys you wouldn't expect," said one of the execs quoted earlier. "Sometimes you win those bets. Sometimes you lose those bets. But here's what's different. Now teams are saying if we're going to lose that bet, we're going to lose it based on information — not on 'this guy used to be good.'"
