



Washington Nationals

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Article #1

A scandal once upended the Nationals in the Dominican Republic. Today, the well runs deep.

By Jorge Castillo – Washington Post (1/29/18)

BOCA CHICA, Dominican Republic — A framed lineup card from a game between the Nationals and New York Mets in September hangs inside Washington's baseball academy here, by the entrance to the administrative office. The dreadful Mets won as the playoff-bound Nationals were counting down the days to October. The result was trivial.

But the Nationals' starting lineup that Friday night in New York City was not trivial, at least not to the organization's international scouting department. Four of Washington's starters signed with the franchise as teenagers out of the Dominican Republic. Another hailed from Venezuela. Another Dominican signee was on the bench. After the game, the six players autographed the lineup card by their names and it was mailed to this outpost on the southern coast of the Dominican Republic.

"I framed it immediately," Alex Rodriguez, the Nationals' Dominican academy administrator, said this month.

The memento was nearly a decade in the making. For years, the Nationals faced a severe disadvantage in procuring talent from the Dominican Republic, the leading producer of major leaguers outside the United States, after a scandal forced an overhaul of their Dominican operations in 2009.

Today, the franchise's farm system is stocked with promising Dominican talent at every level. Five of the Nationals' consensus top 10 prospects are Dominican. Victor Robles and Juan Soto, two Dominican outfielders, are Nos. 1 and 2. Robles is a top 10 prospect across baseball. Soto could reach that level soon. Both are projected to become foundational pieces on South Capitol Street — if they're not traded for established big leaguers first.

The influx is the product of a gradual turnaround in a nation oozing with baseball talent, one that the Nationals believe will make continued success in Washington more attainable. It did not come easy.

"I'm not going to tell you it was a honeymoon," said Johnny DiPuglia, the Nationals' vice president of international operations. "Obviously, it wasn't."

Rebuilding from ground up

A complete restoration was required because a federal probe in February 2009 revealed that shortstop Esmailyn "Smiley" Gonzalez, a promising Dominican prospect, was actually Carlos Alvarez and that he was 20 years old, not 16, when the Nationals gave him a then-club-record \$1.4 million signing bonus in 2006. General manager Jim Bowden and Jose Rijo, Bowden's top adviser in Latin America, lost their jobs. The Nationals' presence in the Dominican Republic was left in shambles.

"We needed to start fresh," said Fausto Severino, who was hired in 2009 as an academy administrator in the Dominican Republic. "There was some stuff going on that needed to be addressed."

The revival began when Mike Rizzo, promoted to general manager in the fallout, made DiPuglia one of his first hires. DiPuglia boasted experience in rebounding from scandals in the region; the San Francisco Giants hired him as their assistant international scouting coordinator after a 1997 incident in which several Dominican players accused Luis Rosa, the club's coordinator of Latin American operations, of demanding sexual favors and embezzling signing bonuses and salaries.

The challenge with Washington, DiPuglia quickly realized, was mighty. When he visited the Nationals' headquarters for the first time to watch an instructional league game, he encountered two stupefying complications: The Nationals didn't have the money to pay the umpires, and the team's uniforms weren't ready. The organization eventually cut short the instructional league season.

But the most troubling revelation was ownership required approval for every potential signing, no matter how small the investment. It was a hindering obstacle in a frenzied open market.

"I'm not going to lie to you," DiPuglia said, "there was a couple of times I wanted to resign because it was so difficult."

One of the first priorities was signing younger players. The average age on Washington's Dominican Summer League team in 2009 was over 20 — hoary compared with other organizations. The average dropped to 17½ by the following summer. Securing a bigger budget to offer the best prospects market value, seven-digit signing bonuses followed. That didn't come as quickly.

"We had to get [ownership] to believe that not everybody in Latin America is there to steal money out of their pockets," DiPuglia said.

To convince ownership to allocate more resources, the department needed to discover and develop potential major league-caliber players. They scoured the clearance aisle for prospects and settled on a market inefficiency: slightly older players whose luster dulled within months in the cutthroat market.

Infielder Wilmer Difo was the first big leaguer to emerge from that initial phase after signing for \$20,000 in 2010 at age 18. Then came catcher Pedro Severino (\$55,000 signing bonus in 2011 at age 17), outfielder Rafael Bautista (\$35,000 in 2011 at age 18), catcher Raudy Read (\$130,000 in 2011 at age 17) and right-hander Reynaldo Lopez (signed as a catcher for \$17,000 in 2012 at age 18).

"We've got players that nobody knew about," DiPuglia said, "and made them into big leaguers."

The Nationals rejoined the high-stakes table in 2013 when they gave third baseman Anderson Franco \$900,000. The investment marked a symbolic triumph for DiPuglia's department. But it still did its best work away from the premium price tags; that was the same year they signed Robles for \$225,000, which, it appears, will be remembered as a bargain.

Robles made his major league debut in September, becoming, at age 20, the youngest player to appear in a major league game in 2017. He was the seventh international free agent signed by the Nationals to make his major league debut with the club over the past three seasons. Six were from the Dominican Republic. The Nationals had just five international free agent signings make their debuts with them from 2009 through 2014. Two were Dominican.

There's another wave behind Robles, highlighted by Soto, whom the Nationals signed for \$1.5 million in 2015, surpassing Gonzalez's bonus as the biggest given to a Latin American teenager in club history. Washington splurged further on Dominican teenagers the next year, giving Yasel Antuna \$3.9 million and Luis Garcia \$1.3 million. The infielders impressed in the Gulf Coast League as 17-year-olds last season, both hitting over .300, and are considered two of Washington's top 10 prospects.

Unearthing gems

The raucous group of position players burst out of the 9 a.m. team meeting on the first day of pre-spring training camp at the Nationals' academy this month. Nearly all of them bombarded Taisuke Sato, DiPuglia's assistant, with bear hugs, one by one, at the bottom of the stairs. A light workout was on deck, followed by a heavy lunch of rice, beans and chicken.

The players flocked to the batting cages, where they took turns hitting and teeing up balls for each other as coaches and club officials observed. Among those watching was Modesto Ulloa, a short 62-year-old man wearing a light blue polo tucked into his jeans on this warm, sunny morning.

Ulloa is the most experienced of the Nationals' five scouts in the Dominican Republic. His network throughout the country, one he's cultivated since taking his first scouting job with Japan's Hiroshima Toyo Carp in 1987, has led to his discovery of Robles, Soto and Difo, among others. Buscones — scout-trainer-agents who usually handle Dominican prospects before they sign — call to alert him when a prospect is playing. If it's a pitcher and Ulloa can't make it on time, the buscon waits until Ulloa arrives to put the pitcher on the mound.

"People don't do that for me," joked Fausto Severino, now a crosschecker based in Florida.

A plugged-in resource such as Ulloa is instrumental for a club whose international department remains understaffed compared with most competitors. He often finds obscure players before rivals swoop in, a skill the department prides itself on and one that is required to flourish in a showcase-driven industry.

"We don't go to the auction," DiPuglia said. "We go and find cars that go in the auction later on."

While Washington's international department consists of 12 full-time staff members, other clubs, DiPuglia pointed out, have a few dozen full-time employees dedicated to international scouting.

This month, for example, DiPuglia said the Nationals had four representatives, including him, at a showcase for Venezuelan players in Colombia. He estimated that other organizations deployed as many as 12. Rodriguez, the academy administrator, doubles as the Nationals' Puerto Rico scout, and the club doesn't have one in Mexico.

DiPuglia said he wants to improve operations in Venezuela, add another crosschecker to handle Latin America and hire a U.S.-based bilingual Latino liaison who roves the lower minor leagues to help players from Latin America.

"We're kind of on a skeleton crew," DiPuglia said. "But we always try to stay positive. When we first got here, there would be one or two prospects in that early camp. And now I think we're more predominately Latin American than we are U.S. throughout the organization, which is a good feeling."

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In the Dominican Republic, the academy the Nationals moved into in 2014 is a considerable upgrade from their previous headquarters. The gym is stocked with the proper equipment — some was shipped from the Nationals' previous spring training home in Viera, Fla. — and the two fields are meticulously manicured. But they don't own the facility — they're leasing from former major leaguer Junior Noboa — and it lags behind most other clubs' amenities.

The Nationals have flourished anyway. The lineup card from that forgettable September game hanging in the academy's administrative office, alongside spring training portraits of each international free agent signing to reach the majors as a National since 2009, is proof. It was presented to the instructional league team last fall to serve as inspiration, to show the players that, yes, they can become big leaguers in a Nationals uniform.

The thought was nearly unfathomable less than a decade ago. The Nationals now expect it.

Article #2

Meet Juan Soto, Nationals' next great slugging hope who 'you'd want to marry your daughter'

By Jorge Castillo – Washington Post (2/7/18)

BOCA CHICA, Dominican Republic — Modesto Ulloa usually doesn't work on Sundays, but he reports to a ballpark if someone he trusts calls insisting there is a player he must see. He doesn't like to say no. Maybe he'll find a star. There's always a chance. So a few years ago the Washington Nationals' most experienced scout in the Dominican Republic arrived on a Sunday to watch a left-handed pitcher top out at 82 mph over three innings. The performance piqued Ulloa's interest. He decided to stay for a second game even though he knew the lefty wouldn't pitch again.

At some point during that second game, a hitter smashed a line drive to right-center field, where the center fielder smoothly ran over for the catch — so smoothly Ulloa had to ask those around him for the youngster's name. It was Juan Soto, the left-handed pitcher from the first game, they told him. He's a good hitter, too, they said.

"So I stayed and saw three at-bats," Ulloa said recently in Spanish. "He got three hits. From then on, I never left him alone."

Soto isn't a pitcher anymore. He is a 19-year-old hit machine the Nationals signed for a then-club record \$1.5 million bonus in July 2015 in hopes that he would eventually assume a corner outfield spot in Washington. Two full seasons into his professional career — despite appearing in just 83 games and none above Class A Hagerstown — Soto appears to be on a path to the big leagues because his hitting ability, scouts and officials insist, is extraordinary.

“He’s probably our best hitter in the minor leagues that we have right now,” Nationals Vice President of International Operations Johnny DiPuglia said.

Soto’s primary obstacle since signing has been staying healthy. A fractured ankle and surgery on his right hand limited him to just 32 games between Hagerstown and the Gulf Coast League last season. He produced when he played — he batted .351 with a .919 on-base-plus-slugging percentage across the two levels — but played in just nine games after May 2.

“Last year was a year filled with experiences,” Soto said recently in Spanish. “A lot of laughter, tears, a little bit of everything. I felt, at first, bad because I wanted to help my team and continue moving forward after my great start. But that was the way God wanted it to happen and that’s what I had to deal with.”

Soto’s blend of skill and misfortune has produced a wide range of spots on baseball’s annual prospect rankings lists. Three major lists have been revealed over the past month, and each has a different take on Soto’s place among baseball’s top minor leaguers; Baseball America ranked him No. 56, MLB.com slotted him No. 29, and Baseball Prospectus had him at No. 22.

“If he plays a full year, I think there’s going to be surprising things coming out of that guy,” DiPuglia said. “He’s very mature. One of the most mature young Latin players I’ve ever been around as far as spending his money, what he does for a plan, how he approaches the game. . . . He loves the game. He has an advanced [strike] zone knowledge and he’s the kind of kid you’d want to marry your daughter. He’s just a great kid. And he can hit. He’s an outstanding hitter. So I think if he plays a full year, I think this guy really goes up the charts.”

The Nationals, of course, have their own evaluation system, and they hold Soto, their consensus No. 2 prospect behind Victor Robles, in high regard — so much that they have refused to make him available to the Miami Marlins as part of a trade package for catcher J.T. Realmuto. The Nationals envision Soto as a middle-of-the-order run producer from the left side, which the club may need after Bryce Harper and Daniel Murphy become free agents next winter. Soto played mostly right field in 2017, but DiPuglia said he believes he will settle in left field in the majors.

“Right now the area I want to improve most on is my defense,” Soto said. “I’d like to improve my speed so I can be a better outfielder. I’d like to develop more as a fielder so I’m not just limited to right field and can play left field easily.”

As for a player comparison, DiPuglia pointed to a left-handed corner outfielder who starred for the New York Yankees during their dynasty in the 1990s.

“People think I’m crazy when I say this, but he reminds me a lot of Paul O’Neill,” DiPuglia said. “When I say Paul O’Neill, people, the hair on their arms doesn’t stand up, but Paul O’Neill had a hell of a career. . . . Something about him reminds me of Paul O’Neill. Maybe he’ll be better than him. But if he turns out to be Paul O’Neill, I’ll be happy.”

The Nationals are years away from finding out. Maybe it doesn’t happen; most prospects never pan out as envisioned. But club officials steadfastly believe Soto will become an impactful big leaguer if he can stay on the field and develop. They believe Ulloa found a star that Sunday afternoon.

Article #3

Finding his own voice: To become Nationals manager, Dave Martinez had to step out of Joe Maddon's shadow

By Chelsea Janes – Washington Post (2/8/18)

In August 1996, Dave Martinez was an everyday outfielder for the Chicago White Sox hitting .318, hardly a dispensable asset. But that didn't keep the 5-foot-10, 160-pound Martinez from tangling with the team's biggest star — both in stature and notoriety.

Late in a weekday matinee at Yankee Stadium, Frank Thomas stormed off the field and into the dugout, hollering about whatever injustice that was threatening to get him ejected. Thomas, elected into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 2014, was always yelling about something. This time, third baseman Robin Ventura couldn't take it.

Fists formed. A confrontation brewed. Then, legend has it, in charged Martinez.

"Next thing you know, [Thomas] snapped at me," Martinez said of the man known as "The Big Hurt." "I was like, 'Nope. Uh uh.' We both went to the ground."

Accounts of the outcome vary, but most include Martinez subduing all 6-feet-5, 240 pounds of Thomas in time to spare Ventura.

The peacemaker that afternoon is now the Washington Nationals' rookie manager, and he opens his first spring training with his new club next week in West Palm Beach, Fla. When asked who the Nationals should expect, the answers from those who know him best are so repetitive they seem rehearsed. They're also well illustrated by that mismatch with Thomas.

"Don't let that friendly exterior fool you," Nationals General Manager Mike Rizzo said. "He's no choir boy."

Those who played with him and those who watched him coach at Joe Maddon's side for the past decade describe Martinez as a genuinely friendly guy with a magnetic personality — and an undeniable edge. They said Martinez is fearless, not just in the sense that he backs down from no one, but also in his willingness to stand up to those close to him.

"Dave Martinez was always, always, trying to be in the middle just for the good of the team," said Ozzie Guillen, a former manager who is now an ESPN Deportes analyst. "He's a tough guy. He'll fight anybody. On the other hand, he would invite everyone to his party. That's the kind of guy he is."

Martinez became Maddon's most trusted dugout adviser — and one of the most talked-about managerial prospects in the game — over seven seasons with the Tampa Bay Rays and three with the Chicago Cubs because of a unique ability to relate to players. After all, telling opponents they are wrong is one thing. Delivering tough messages to teammates — or, as a coach, to one's own, potentially high-profile players — is another.

“The thing I’ve always liked about [Martinez] is he’s never been afraid to have difficult conversations,” said Maddon, the Cubs manager. “It doesn’t mean yelling or screaming. It just means being straight up with guys. . . . He’s not worried about hurting somebody’s feelings or saying the wrong thing. He’s just attempting to do the right thing and make sure it works.”

Dave Martinez, left, spent 10 seasons in the dugout with Joe Maddon, right. “He’s never been afraid to have difficult conversations,” Maddon says of Martinez. “It doesn’t mean yelling or screaming. It just means being straight up with guys.”

A partnership spanning decades

As a manager, Martinez is an unknown commodity. At 53, he has never managed in the minors. He has never managed at all.

Maddon had his eye on Martinez for two decades before their partnership began. He first chased him down in 1983 when Martinez was playing in instructional league. Martinez was 19, and his play spoke louder than he did.

He was fresh off an uncomfortable stint in Puerto Rican winter ball. Though born to Puerto Rican parents in Brooklyn, Martinez didn’t grow up speaking Spanish, other than occasionally with his grandmother. When he was 12, his father sent him to live with an uncle in Florida so he could play baseball year round, but he never quite picked up the language. This was a surprise to Cubs staff when he arrived at winter league. The veterans never let him live it down.

“I like the way you play,” Martinez said he remembers Maddon saying. He all but shrugged it off, not thinking much of the compliment.

Almost 25 years later, a half-decade after Martinez’s playing career had ended, Maddon asked him to be a guest instructor at Rays spring training in 2006. Andrew Friedman, the team’s GM at the time, noticed Martinez’s impact immediately.

“Because he’s able to create a strong relationship, it also allows him to be able to have tough conversations with players. He’s one of the best I’ve ever been around at being able to do that,” Friedman said. “Guys appreciate and know that he’s coming down on them with the best of intentions.”

Within two years, Martinez was the Rays’ full-time bench coach, by which time he spoke Spanish fluently — though not perfectly. He asked Latino players to speak to him in English while he spoke to them in Spanish, to help both of their language skills.

While most credit Maddon with the quirky clubhouse traditions his teams are known for, Maddon credits Martinez. As the empathy and fearless authenticity Martinez showed as a player began to emerge in his coaching, Maddon decided to “let him loose.” Martinez introduced a postgame disco ball to the Rays’ clubhouse, one he and Maddon later transferred to the Cubs. He brought in some sort of neon sign — Maddon couldn’t recall which — that Martinez would allow the team to light up after wins. First baseman James Loney would play his saxophone in an impromptu band Martinez facilitated. As usual, he was undaunted by cacophony.

Little rattles Martinez. When the Cubs trailed the Cleveland Indians in Game 5 of the 2016 World Series, on the brink of watching a dominant season disintegrate at the most painful moment, Martinez turned to those near him in the dugout and wondered aloud, “When was the last time we lost three straight games?”

The question reminded many Cubs players that they were built to overcome adversity. They held on to win that game, and then two more, to claim the franchise’s first World Series since 1908.

Given Martinez’s reputation as a force for clubhouse cohesion, speculation about his future began swirling as early as five years ago. That he would get a major league managerial job felt like a foregone conclusion. But time after time, interview after interview, Martinez saw others land jobs he thought were going to him. Even Friedman, his former general manager, hired a different rookie manager, Dave Roberts, when the Los Angeles Dodgers needed new blood.

“Every team is different, every team is a little unique in how they go about the process. It can change, even from year to year,” Friedman said. “For Davey, I think it was more bad luck than anything, just in the timing aspect.”

Then, in October, the Nationals parted ways with Dusty Baker. Then came the phone call and a trip to Washington. Then came congratulations from all corners of the game — including a tweet from former teammate Wade Boggs, whom Martinez hadn’t talked to in some time, that nearly broke the news of his hiring.

“I knew it was going to happen,” Friedman said of Martinez eventually getting his shot. “He certainly deserves it, and more importantly, I think he’s going to be really good at it.”

Martinez’s clubhouse toughness and touch finally yielded him a manager’s job.

“And,” Maddon added, “it all began with one disco ball in Tampa Bay.”

“When they ask me what are you going to do different, I’m going to spend a lot more time communicating,” Martinez said of managing in Washington. (John McDonnell/The Washington Post)
Out of Maddon’s shadow

“So he’s Dave now in Washington?” Maddon asked, when reached to chat about the man who stood next to him in the dugout for 10 seasons. From Rizzo to Maddon to people around the game, everyone seems to lean more toward “Davey.” Martinez said he doesn’t mind either. Like everything with Martinez and the Nationals, they’ll have to feel things out.

Whatever his players will call him, Martinez inherits an opinionated and veteran Nationals clubhouse eager to finally break through. That clubhouse now lacks its gatekeeper, Jayson Werth, who is almost certain to play elsewhere this season (he remains unsigned). It still includes discerning stars such as Max Scherzer and of course, Bryce Harper, who is said to love the Martinez hire.

But the question will linger until Martinez answers it: What is he without Maddon?

For starters, he likes to drink a glass of wine after a game, bike to the park when possible, try new foods, and dress well. He has four children, one of whom is named Jagger — not after Mick, but after a soap

opera star. His youngest, a daughter, is in college. His eldest is 29. Martinez wears glasses, but not too often in public if he can help it. Glasses are Maddon's trademark.

As for Martinez the manager, no one knows quite what the Nationals are getting. Guillen's best guess is that Martinez is something of a Rizzo-like hybrid, an "old school baseball man" open to new-school analytic tricks, if not defined by them. He is no analytics expert, but he wants to hear from those who are, which is one reason the Nationals hired him.

Martinez is not a smooth-talker, not a natural in situations that require it, and according to people familiar with his interviews over the years, he wasn't always willing to assert his own contributions, not wanting to take away from Maddon. When the Nationals interviewed him for their managerial vacancy in 2013, Rizzo heard more about what "we" — Martinez and Maddon — were doing than what Martinez himself might do. Rizzo and ownership, the Lerner family, decided on Matt Williams instead.

Related

A scandal once upended the Nationals in the Dominican Republic. Today, the well runs deep.

Meet Juan Soto, Nationals' next great slugging hope who 'you'd want to marry your daughter'

After Hurricane Maria, things remain far from normal for Puerto Ricans. But they do have baseball. But when Rizzo called Martinez in the days after Baker's departure, he sensed something had changed.

He brought Martinez to dinner with the Lerner family. They didn't interview for long. Even Martinez's sons, David and Dalton, said they could tell something was different this time. A day or so later, Rizzo made the call.

"I thought, 'Hallelujah,'" Martinez said. "... I really felt it was time."

The difference, Rizzo said later, was that Martinez seems to know exactly who he is now. This time, he seemed more confident in what he had achieved, more willing to talk about the contributions he made to the Cubs' dynamic — less deferential, more willing to stand up for himself.

"Eventually, you find your voice. You become more certain of what you say and how you say it," Maddon said. "And when you do that, obviously, whoever you're talking to says, 'Hey, this guy is really forceful and believes what he's saying, and I kind of believe what he's saying, too.'"

Martinez promises the same quirky clubhouse, the same breakfast-on-the-field kinship he honed with the Cubs. He vows the same energy and positivity that drew players to him, and the same straightforwardness that earned their respect. But he also promises to do things his way.

"When they ask me what are you going to do different, I'm going to spend a lot more time communicating," Martinez said. "Joe gets a lot of messages across through the media. Whereas, I'll get my messages across by actually having one-on-one conversations."

When he visited Nationals Park for the first time as manager, clubhouse staff showed him to his office and asked what he wanted it to look like. In that moment, his new reality hit. He didn't know what to say. Finally, he told them he only needed a chair or two.

"I won't be in here very much," Martinez said. "I'm going to be out and about. I can't sit still. I love being around the guys, and I don't see myself ever changing."

While those in the Nationals organization and around the game are waiting to see who exactly Martinez the manager will be, the man himself has learned to trust who he has always been. Even if that means jumping into the middle of things.

Article #4

Why Kintzler chose to set up in D.C. instead of closing elsewhere

By Mark Zuckerman – MASN Sports (2/14/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - On the heels of a 29-save season, an All-Star appearance and some high-profile outings in the Nationals bullpen from August through October, Brandon Kintzler figured he'd have plenty of suitors this winter, not to mention a contract commensurate with those signed by many other prominent relievers.

In the end, perhaps suffering from advanced metrics that don't love him as much as relievers who strike out more batters, Kintzler settled for a deal to return to the Nats that guarantees him \$5 million in 2018, with a \$5 million player option or a \$10 million club option for 2019.

Not necessarily the money he was hoping for, but in the end, he can't complain about signing a contract in mid-December, not when so many other free agents remain unsigned in mid-February.

"I mean, if my name's not Wade Davis, it's a stressful market," he said. "I thought I would have done a lot better. I thought there would be more teams that wanted me. I don't know, these computer programs everyone uses, I guess ... fantasy baseball. It wasn't great. But I'm glad we got it done then. I wouldn't want to be out there right now. That's a stressful situation."

Fourteen years in professional baseball, with a couple of independent league stints mixed in there, has changed Kintzler's mindset about the industry. Earlier in his career, he might have waited out the winter, expecting a better offer to come. But when the Nationals came calling with that offer, and a chance to rejoin a bullpen that became an integral part of the club by season's end, he didn't have to think too much before signing on the dotted line.

"Great team, great clubhouse, great chance to win," he said. "I didn't want to have to go to spring training and try to get to know everybody again. I just got done being traded and learned everyone's name. I didn't want to do it again. For a chance to be in this organization for two years, hopefully, it was a no-brainer for me."

Because he had racked up 45 saves for the Twins over the previous two seasons, Kintzler did receive offers from a few other clubs in search of a closer. In D.C., he'll continue to pitch the seventh inning, in front of Ryan Madson and Sean Doolittle.

He chose to return to the lower-profile role, but in a better overall situation than the others could offer.

"It was tough," he said. "But I felt like I had done it. I didn't need it. I've already closed. I guess if I'd never closed before and I had a chance to do it, I might've done it. But for a chance, at my age, to play on a World Series contender, and still in a prominent role, that's good enough for me. I got to be an All-Star as a closer. I don't need to do it again. If it happens, it happens. But I didn't need to chase it."

Kintzler, like Madson and Doolittle, comes to camp knowing from the outset what's expected of him. He's not competing for a job, not trying to impress anyone who isn't already impressed by him.

That allows the 33-year-old to approach this spring differently than he has previous springs with other teams.

"It means if you have a bad outing in spring training, you're not stressed out about it," he said. "I feel like for the last eight years in spring training, I was living and dying with every outing, just to try to get a job or a role. ... Here, hopefully you just leave the field healthy and just get your work in and get ready to leave. I definitely feel a lot less stress walking into the clubhouse."

Article #5

Slimmed-down Wieters plans to bounce back

By Jamal Collier – MLB.com (2/14/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. -- A year ago, Matt Wieters arrived to Nationals camp under much different circumstances. He had signed with Washington about a week after Spring Training started, after months of offseason speculation. That late start combined with a wrist injury he suffered during the winter put him behind schedule, and some members of the organization believe it played a factor into his difficult first season with the Nats.

Wieters' approach changed this winter. After he exercised his player option to return to Washington, he spent the offseason transforming his diet and increasing the intensity of his workout routine. He arrived to camp weighing 224 pounds after finishing the season at 238 pounds, a transformation that caused a team official to remark how Wieters looked five years younger.

The Nationals are hoping this more normal routine and weight loss translates to a turnaround for Wieters. They are banking on a bounce-back season from him at catcher after he struggled to the worst season of his career in 2017.

"I feel as good health-wise as I've ever felt going into Spring Training," Wieters said Wednesday as pitchers and catchers reported to camp. "You can never know if it translates to results or not, but I'm just glad I felt better this offseason and feel better this spring than I did last spring."

Wieters began his career in Baltimore, at about 225 pounds, but progressed to playing at a heavier weight as he grew stronger. He decided to cut weight this offseason, something he hopes will make him more agile behind the plate and increase the range of motion in his swing.

While Wieters continued to work on his body this offseason, speculation has swirled about the Nationals' plans at catcher. They inquired about Marlins catcher J.T. Realmuto, and were considered the favorites to land him. They introduced plans to reduce Wieters' playing time and play his backup more frequently. The Nats brought options to camp they would be comfortable giving an increased role to as backup catcher. Wieters saw the reports, but he denied those rumors were the motivation for his improved conditioning.

"I've seen it all, because I've just kept waiting to see where guys sign and who's going to go where, and it just seems like my name's on the docket more than anything else," Wieters said. "But I don't like to take too much to where that's my sole motivation to come here in good shape.

"I wanted to come here in good shape, because I felt like it was something that could help my career and help this team. I'm going to do everything I can to be the best player I can and let other people decide on the moves I don't have control over."

For now, Washington is content with entering the season with Wieters as its starting catcher. He is just 31 years old, and the Nationals believe he can contribute if his playing time is managed properly.

At the same time, the Nats have been no stranger to additions to their team during Spring Training when they believe they find improvement, such as signing Wieters late last year. Perhaps thanks to this new diet and workout routine, the Nats won't have to explore those possibilities and Wieters will prove that he can still play a role in the team's success.

"I would joke with the Baltimore trainer, I always said, 'Hey, next season.' He'd say, 'This is a joke. Everybody says next season they'll be in the best shape of their life,'" Wieters said. "But really, from the eating habits I've put into my diet, I do feel better than I have felt before."

Article #6

Eaton says opening day return is "easily attainable"

By Mark Zuckerman – MASN Sports (2/14/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - Adam Eaton arrived in Florida, family in tow, on Jan. 19. There weren't many others around The Ballpark of the Palm Beaches at that ridiculously early date. But when you've spent nine months rehabbing from a torn ACL and the entire winter cooped up inside your snowed-in Michigan home, there's no reporting date that's too early.

"I needed the warm weather," Eaton said, referring not only to his own physical needs, but the needs of his soon-to-be 2-year-old son Brayden.

Suffice it to say, Eaton is getting antsy. He hasn't faced a live pitcher since April 28, the night he tore up his left knee trying to beat out a grounder to short, and he knows his long wait is nearly over.

Though there still remain a few hurdles to cross, most notably advanced movements like quick cuts in different directions, the energetic outfielder expects to be a full participant in Nationals camp this spring and be leading off in Cincinnati on March 29.

“We still have quite a bit of time until opening day, and that’s been our focus,” he said. “Unless something unforeseen happens, I think that’s easily attainable.”

Eaton has crossed a host of key items off his rehab checklist since his reconstructive surgery. He actually started taking swings as early as June, and he could be seen running in the Nationals outfield in September. There was a chance, however remote, that he would have been able to play had the Nats reached the World Series.

At this point, he’s really just putting the finishing touches on the whole process. But these last touches are vitally important, not simply for the physical test they provide but the mental one, as well. He needs to be able to run the bases and slide in a game situation without thinking about his knee. He needs to chase down an extra-base hit in the left field corner, plant and uncork a throw to the infield. And he needs to see a live pitch thrown at him for the first time in a long time.

But he expects all that to feel like riding a bike after a long layoff. There will be a brief adjustment period, but it shouldn’t be long before it all feels normal again. In the meantime, he’s appreciating all the little things that come with running at full speed again, things he never appreciated before.

“Feeling the breeze in my hair, it’s awesome,” he said. “Oh, my goodness. I know it sounds crazy. But when you don’t run (for months) ...”

Eaton knows his knee still won’t feel entirely normal for some time after he begins playing on a daily basis again. It will require extra work.

“I’ve heard anything,” he said. “I’ve heard, ‘You’ll feel good by the All-Star break’ (or) ‘You’ll feel good by next year.’ ‘You’ll feel this and this.’ I think what I’ve heard is it’s manageable right about now, to go do what you need to do. ... And they keep saying months in, it’ll just click, and all of a sudden it won’t be a thing that will hinder your performance.”

The shift to left field, with Gold Glove finalist Michael A. Taylor having now taken over in center, should help reduce some wear and tear on Eaton’s leg.

“I think Michael Taylor’s more than accomplished in center,” Eaton said. “That dude plays a heck of a center field. I am a man, and I will say that he can probably play a better center field than I can at this point, with my leg especially. If I’m managing, I’d stick (me) in left.”

But will there be any tangible effect on Eaton’s game from the injury? Plenty of baseball players have returned from ACL tears and picked up right where they left off, but not all of them played the game the way Eaton has (at times with reckless abandon) through most of his career.

To hear the 29-year-old describe it, though, a calculated alteration had already been made a few seasons back when he still played for the White Sox.

“You know what, I think my style of play was kind of going to this anyways,” he said “If you looked at me early in my career, I really played with my hair on fire. Running into walls. Doing really stupid stuff. And then

the second year in Chicago, I kind of started to slow things down, be more methodical. I think this is only going to rush this process, which is good. I think I can be very efficient at a slower pace.”

Article #7

On eve of a new season, Wieters has no time for the past

By Thom Loverro – Washington Times (2/14/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, FLA. — Matt Wieters' strength is his faith. Last February, after the catcher was a last-minute free agent signing engineered by agent Scott Boras with the Washington Nationals, he said he believed God wanted him to play in Washington.

He needed all of that faith this winter to live with what happened in Game 5 of last October's National League Division Series against the Chicago Cubs.

There was a lot that went wrong for the Nationals in that deciding game. It was a team meltdown. But Wieters' fifth-inning contribution was a big part of it — with two outs and down 5-4 (after blowing a 4-1 lead), letting strike three on Javier Baez from Max Scherzer get by him and then throwing the ball out to left field to try to get Baez at first, allowing Addison Russell to score. If that wasn't enough, there was the probability that Baez hit Wieters in the side of the helmet with his backswing — meaning the strike should have been called and the ball declared dead.

The Cubs would go on to win 9-8 and advance to the National League Championship Series to face the Los Angeles Dodgers. The Nationals would fail to get beyond the division series for the fourth time in six years. And manager Dusty Baker, who led the team to two NL East division titles, was fired.

That's a lot of explaining to do, even for God.

“I had to forgive myself,” Wieters said, standing in the Nationals clubhouse at their spring training complex for the first day of pitcher and catcher workouts on Wednesday. “I had to forgive a lot of different things, but it really wasn't that hard to me. With my faith I've been forgiven for so many different things already.

“It's not how I would have liked for it to end obviously,” he said. “If you're not doing what the (Houston) Astros did (win the World Series — the Astros just happen to share the their spring training complex with the Nationals), it's not how you want it to end. But holding on to bad things is never going to help you get to your goal anyway so I moved on from whatever happened in Game Five and was excited about this year. As soon as the last World Series pitch was over I was focused on this year.”

There was a lot to forget about for Wieters.

The former Baltimore Orioles catcher failed to live up to the expectations of the contract Boras shoved down the Nationals' throat — two years, \$20 million — courtesy of Ted Lerner. Wieters batted just .225, with 10 home runs and 52 RBI, in 123 games behind the plate and was sub par defensively.

On Wednesday, the 31-year-old Wieters — who suffered a severe cut to his left wrist at home last November — said his offseason this year should prepare him for a better 2018.

“I don’t ever want to say something like that affects the on-field because I always feel like the mental side, you should always be able to push through,” he said. “I did not have the strength last year that I had before because of the wrist injury and I was excited to get back to a full workout this offseason.

“I feel as good health-wise as I’ve ever felt going into spring training,” said Wieters, who, at 224 pounds, weighs about 14 pounds less than at the end of last season. “I would joke with the Baltimore trainer, I always said, ‘Hey, next season.’ He’d say, ‘This is a joke. Everybody says next season they’ll be in the best shape of your life.’ But really from the eating habits I’ve put into my diet, I do feel better than I have felt before.”

Here’s what also may have helped his focus — his team looking for a replacement. It’s been reported that the Nationals have had trade talks with the Miami Marlins for catcher J.T. Realmuto, though the Marlins’ asking price of Washington’s top prospect Victor Robles may have stopped that deal dead in its tracks.

“I’ve just kept waiting to see where guys sign and who’s going to go where and it just seems like my name’s on the docket more than anything else,” Wieters said. “I wanted to come here in good shape because I felt like it was something that could help my career and help this team. So like I said, I’m going to do everything I can to be the best player I can and let other people decide on the moves I don’t have control over.”

Matt Wieters has learned to accept the things he can’t control. He got a hard reminder about it last fall.

Article #8

Staying grounded: Victor Robles is the Nationals’ future, but his loyalty to his Dominican roots hasn’t wavered

By Jorge Castillo – Washington Post (2/15/18)

SANTO DOMINGO ESTE, Dominican Republic

Victor Robles led the way to the one-room apartment on the corner of Calle 8 and Calle 17, behind a food stand called Cafetería Estela. A rush of memories followed.

Inside that dark and dank 10-foot-by-10-foot space, he had to picture the bunk bed in one corner where all three of them slept — Robles and his mother on the bottom bed, his brother on the top — but most everything else was the same. The small bathroom and closet separated by curtains. The door on the side leading to an alleyway. The smell of fried food lingering from the adjacent room.

“We come from a humble family,” Robles said in Spanish. “I saw my mom suffer a lot, and that was one of the things that motivated me.”

When Robles returned one recent morning, he was a 20-year-old man — a husband and a budding baseball star. He had with him his family and his new wife, Diannelis, whom he married a few months after he became the youngest player to appear in the major leagues in the 2017 season, last September.

He wore his Washington Nationals playoff jersey, a crisp white pair of Jordan XIII's and glistening gold jewelry. A stout 6-foot center fielder with a radiant smile, he's on the cusp of stardom in a foreign land, a future Nationals building block other organizations covet and one who could diminish the sting should Bryce Harper depart in free agency next winter. But, here, he's still one of them.

He mingled with friends and family and acquaintances, doling out hugs, kisses and handshakes. Stardom may be around the corner, but to everyone here he's still that skinny boy with the unrelenting energy who washed cars to pay to play baseball when he wasn't playing baseball.

"The best of it all is he hasn't changed," his father, also named Victor Robles, said in Spanish. "He's always low-profile and humble. He's always friendly with his friends. He hasn't changed. He's stayed real."

A cousin lives in that tiny room now. Robles may not have changed, but his fortunes have. Standing there, he could vividly recall his mother raising two boys in 100 square feet, but life was different when he headed out the door. His mother's new house, the one Victor bought for her, was just a quick drive and a world away.

A project worth investing in

Joel Manzanillo wanted to make his point crystal clear so he summoned a slender boy, one of the 20 teenagers he trains, away from the pack.

"Montero, come over here," Manzanillo called out in Spanish. "Stand right there."

The boy abruptly stopped what he was doing and shyly walked over to a spot behind the rusty fence as instructed. The boy is 14 or, as people in Dominican baseball circles quantify a prospect's time on Earth, two years away from being eligible to sign with a Major League Baseball team.

"He was like that boy almost," Manzanillo said, pointing to the teenager. "A little bit stronger. . . ."

"He was incredible. He had ability with fire — and with the desire to be a baseball player."

Manzanillo was reminiscing about Robles, the best player he's ever trained since he began grooming teenagers at this run-down baseball diamond in Urbanización Italia in 2000. Robles showed up when he was 13, though his athletic pursuit began years earlier on the street playing la plaquita, a Dominican cricket-style game consisting of two teams of two players, two bases (usually just empty cans or bottles), two bats (often just sticks) and a small ball (sometimes just a bottle cap).

"He was good," Robles's brother, Cristofer, said in Spanish. "He attacked all the time. And from there, people said, 'Have him play baseball! Have him play baseball! That boy can play!'"

Robles's parents divorced when he was young, but his father remained in his life, and he said both made the sacrifices necessary for him to begin playing organized baseball when he was 9. His favorite player was former Boston Red Sox designated hitter David Ortiz. He saw Ortiz on television and liked the hulking slugger's swagger — how he carried himself on and off the field, how he interacted with his teammates. He began calling himself David Ortiz pequeño — little David Ortiz.

But Robles didn't resemble a little David Ortiz. When he arrived to play under Manzanillo, the trainer put him at shortstop — and quickly realized he didn't fit there because Robles couldn't control his body.

"He was too fast," Manzanillo said. "He couldn't stop to get the groundballs. So, I said, 'Let's move you.' He was like, 'No! Don't move me.' I thought, let's make it easy. You can go between shortstop and outfield. But that was so I could make the change. I convinced him that way. He switched between shortstop and outfield, shortstop and outfield. Until, after two months, he only wanted to be an outfielder. He converted in two months."

The difference between Robles and his peers, Manzanillo insists, was his intelligence. Yes, he had standout raw ability, but he retained information instantly. By the time Robles was 15, Manzanillo said, he was a finished product, ready for a fat bonus from a big league club.

It was around then that Modesto Ulloa, the Nationals' lead scout in the Dominican Republic, first saw the lively teenager. Ulloa remembered Robles was skinny, so skinny he resembled a horse jockey more than a baseball player. But he saw the vigor and desire. He reminded Ulloa of Sammy Sosa before Sosa bulked up and became a prolific home run hitter. Ulloa knew Sosa well. Robles had that spark. He just needed seasoning.

"He was raw, raw," Ulloa said in Spanish. "Everything he did was like, I don't know, a crazy person. But he did it. He was a horse without brakes."

Ulloa badly wanted to sign Robles. The obstacle was convincing the team. A couple months before he was eligible, Robles moved to an academy a few hours away, one that had the resources Manzanillo couldn't provide, for his finishing touches. Ulloa followed, and the Nationals eventually brought him to their academy for a tryout. Club officials remember Robles trying to throw the ball so hard that he'd instead spike it into the ground a few feet in front of him.

When balls were hit over his head, "he wanted to climb the wall to get the ball," Ulloa said. "We were practicing at a field with a wall, not a fence. It was concrete. We were worried he was going to kill himself."

Robles's camp sought an \$800,000 signing bonus. The Nationals rebuffed, unconvinced that Robles was worth anything close to that, and Ulloa grew desperate. He fought for Robles, pleading his case to Johnny DiPuglia, the Nationals' vice president of international operations. He threatened to resign. Rumor has it that he was so stressed, he barely ate anything for three days.

“If it wasn’t for [Ulloa], the Nationals wouldn’t have signed me,” Robles said. “They didn’t want me because they said I was too electric. But Modesto said he prefers electric and taking some back than having someone who isn’t electric and needing to give him energy. Because you can’t give a person energy.”

Robles’s price eventually dropped to \$225,000, and, in part to appease Ulloa, DiPuglia approved the expense. Robles was the second-most expensive international player the Nationals signed that year — they gave \$900,000 to third baseman Anderson Franco, who was considered the better prospect. Franco, also 20, hasn’t advanced beyond Class A. Robles was considered a project, one that required refining more than most.

“He was crude, but he was a Home Depot toolshed,” DiPuglia said. “He had every tool you wanted. He just had so much energy that he had trouble focusing. You always had to tone him down. That was my concern. But Modesto was very adamant.”

‘He left but he’s stayed with us’

To Héctor Manuel Marte, Victor Robles was always a baseball player. It’s why Robles worked for him in the first place. Baseball never interested Marte, but he heard about Robles’s talents in the neighborhood and when Robles would show up at Chavita Car Wash, down the street from his grandmother’s house, to earn money for baseball expenses.

Robles said he began working 10-hour weekend days when he was 12, washing around 20 cars a day on average. He would usually get a 30 percent cut — 50 percent on a good day — and save up to pay the 800 Dominican pesos (around \$18) to sign up for a baseball season. His mother bought him a pair of cleats every few years, but he had to borrow gloves from teammates. He didn’t get his own glove until Frankie de la Cruz, a former big leaguer who often visited Manzanillo, gave him one. Robles was 15.

Kids in his neighborhood don’t have to worry about those resources anymore. Robles goes to the ballpark in Urbanización Italia during the offseason with equipment to donate. Montero, the thin teenager who reminded Manzanillo of Robles, was wearing a pair of Adidas cleats with “VR” stitched on the heel.

“Everything they have is his,” Manzanillo said. “He left, but he’s stayed with us, and he comes and helps the kids. He’s the best, and if he stays like that, humble, God is going to take him to where he can go.”

The hype was real when Robles arrived in Washington last September as the best homegrown Dominican prospect in Nationals history, drawing comparisons to former National League MVP Andrew McCutchen as he became a consensus top-10 prospect across baseball. He proceeded to meet the lofty expectations, needing just 13 games at the highest level to convince his bosses he deserved a spot on the playoff roster.

“He’s going to be a force for us in the very near future,” Nationals General Manager Mike Rizzo said.

Robles has curbed that tenacious energy some, though not completely. He wouldn’t be Victor Robles without it. So when he appeared in the Nationals’ clubhouse for the first time, after ripping through the organization’s farm system in 3 1/2 seasons, it came with him. He said teammates and coaches sometimes

laughed, thinking he was crazy, but the energy stuck — even after he was tagged out sliding past third base attempting to stretch his first career hit into a triple.

“I told him don’t change on me,” Manzanillo said. “Stay like that. Have that be your rhythm all the time. The worst would be letting the gringos stop you.”

A group of family members and friends watched his first career hit at a sports bar back home. They erupted when they saw Robles lash a curveball off the right-center field wall and dash like a madman around the bases a couple thousand miles away at Nationals Park. To them, he was still the spunky, skinny kid from el barrio. He was still one of them.

“It fills everybody here with pride,” Marcia Brito said in Spanish of her son, who’s expected to begin the 2018 season with Class AAA Syracuse to play every day. “He’s achieved what he’s always wanted.”

Brito’s unabashed motherly delight is strewn all over her living room. Robles’s South Atlantic League all-star jersey hangs in the middle of one wall. Photos and newspaper clippings from his rapid rise as the Nationals’ top prospect surround it. There’s a shrine to him in one corner — an end table with two framed photos, two candles and a vase with blue flowers. Behind the vase is Cristofer’s eighth-grade diploma. Nearly everything else in the room commemorates Victor’s exploits as a professional baseball player.

Robles bought her that yellow house just over two years ago. It’s modest. It’s not a penthouse atop a luxury apartment building or a mansion tucked away in a gated community. It has three bedrooms with a spacious front patio. It’s in the same neighborhood he was raised, a short walk from the baseball field where he honed his craft as a preteen and a five-minute drive from the dark and dank 10-by-10 room.

It’s everything his mother ever wanted and more.

Article #9

Max Scherzer needs to end season as dominant as he begins

By Thom Loverro – Washington Times (2/15/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, FLA. — It was the first team workout of spring training for the Washington Nationals — a voluntary one, pitchers and catchers — but Max Scherzer was in midseason form.

He stood on the mound and barked out orders to catcher Miguel Montero about pitches, situations. “Keep the glove right there,” he yelled, and then fired a fastball right at the target.

This went on for maybe 20 or 25 minutes — about twice what you would normally expect from an early spring training bullpen session. And nearly every pitch — he threw 60 — was thrown with intensity and intention, in typical Max Scherzer style.

On Feb. 15, it was a must-watch baseball performance, and everyone around in a Nationals uniform stopped and watched.

"It's just my normal routine of how I get ready for the season," he said. "For me, I like to get on the mound, feel some fatigue and work through it. I see the benefits of that by the end of spring training."

He said it was the fifth bullpen session he's thrown. "I'd be really shocked if the other starters haven't thrown five bullpens. You go across the league, most starters have thrown four or five bullpens. I don't think there is anything new about that. I don't think it's anything new."

I doubt if many — maybe any — pitchers around the league have thrown a bullpen session yet like the one we saw at West Palm Beach Thursday.

There was nothing normal about it. It was a definitive opening statement from the three-time Cy Young award winner.

It's closing statements that have plagued Scherzer.

He nearly nailed one last October when, in Game 5 of the National League Division Series against the Chicago Cubs, the ace starter entered the game in relief in the fifth inning with a 4-3 lead and quickly got Chicago's two most dangerous hitters, Kris Bryant and Anthony Rizzo, out.

But Willson Contreras reached on an infield single, Ben Zobrist singled to left and Addison Russell doubled down the left field line, scoring two runs and giving Chicago a 5-4 lead. Then, after going 2-0 on Jason Heyward, the Nationals gave him an intentional walk. Scherzer, clinging now to a one-run lead, had two strikes on Javier Baez when catcher Matt Wieters let strike three get by, Baez reached first safely and Wieters throw went into left field, allowing Russell to score for a 6-4 Cubs lead, a game Chicago would go on to win 9-8 and eliminate Washington once again from advancing to the NL Championship Series.

There was nothing normal about that Scherzer performance, either.

"You still reflect on what happened in 2017 in a bitter way," he said. "I don't think that ever changes. I've had some gut-punching losses throughout my whole career. I've never been part of a team that has won a World Series. So every single year I've experienced some kind of gut punch at the end."

He's right. Scherzer, 33, has taken some body blows in the postseason — a 4-5 record in 16 appearances, including some memorable meltdowns. In Game 6 of the 2011 American League Championship Series against the Texas Rangers, Scherzer allowed six runs in 2 1/3 innings on the mound for Detroit in a 15-5 loss. In Game 1 of the 2014 AL Division Series against Baltimore, Scherzer gave up five runs in 7 1/3 innings in a 12-2 defeat.

"You just have to take it, learn from it and keep evolving as a pitcher" said Scherzer, coming off his second straight NL Cy Young season with a 16-6 record and 268 strikeouts. "I'm excited that hopefully I can stay healthy and see what I can accomplish in 2018."

He likes his team's chances to get back to the postseason. "We can play with anybody," Scherzer said. "We've got pitching, hitting relief pitching. We've got young guys, old guys. We got a very good major league baseball club."

I think Scherzer has evolved enough as a pitcher. All that is left is avoiding the body blows.

Article #10

Montero glad to reunite with Rizzo, Martinez, Scherzer in D.C.

By Mark Zuckerman – MASN Sports (2/16/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - Miguel Montero had plenty of reasons to sign with the Nationals earlier this month. This was an offer to compete for playing time on an expected contender. He played for Davey Martinez the last three seasons in Chicago. He was signed by the Diamondbacks out of Venezuela by Mike Rizzo way back in 2001. He used to catch Max Scherzer in Arizona, too.

“And I don’t have to try to throw out Trea Turner anymore,” Montero said with a laugh. “He’s on my team.”

OK, so maybe that wasn’t the biggest reason Montero chose the Nats. But it didn’t hurt that he won’t have to worry about the speedy shortstop who stole four bases off him last June at Nationals Park, a game that included seven total steals and eventually led to the Cubs designating Montero (who was critical of Jake Arrieta and Chicago’s pitching staff) for assignment.

Defense isn’t Montero’s calling card, but the Nationals inked him to a minor league contract because they think his left-handed bat could be valuable and allow fellow catcher Matt Wieters to take more regular days off this season.

Montero isn’t assured of anything - general manager Mike Rizzo said he’ll compete with Pedro Severino for the No. 2 catching job - and for now he’s not stressing over what potential role he might have with his new club.

“I’ve still got to make the team,” he said. “I don’t want to go that far ahead. I just want to try to get myself in the best shape as possible and put myself in a position to compete. And if I make the team, great. That’s the goal. But so far, the priority is just be the best that you can be, so you can make the team.”

A two-time All-Star with the Diamondbacks and then a key part of the Cubs’ resurgence in 2015-16, Montero struggled through a difficult 2017 season. He hit .286 with an .805 OPS in 44 games as Willson Contreras’ backup in Chicago, but labored behind the plate and rubbed some people the wrong way with his too-honest interviews. He wound up getting traded to the Blue Jays, where he hit a paltry .138 with a .489 OPS in 32 games.

“It was a rough year,” he said. “But it wasn’t bad. It was all right. You can’t live in the past. You’ve got to move on. And I’m a guy that I never live in the past. I just live today and I figure it out tomorrow.”

The Nationals are hoping the 34-year-old can enjoy a bounceback season; his contract isn’t guaranteed, but if he makes the opening day roster, he’ll have a \$1.3 million salary with a chance to earn up to \$1.7 million in incentives.

Montero is hoping to perform this spring at a level that convinces the club he’s worth keeping at that salary.

“This life is a lot of ups and downs,” he said. “A lot of times you fail more than you succeed. And you learn from it. It is what it is. I’m in a better place right now. I actually thought last year I had a chance to come here. It didn’t happen. But I’m here now.”

Article #11

Martinez offers a glimpse into his method on first workout day

By Mark Zuckerman – MASN Sports (2/16/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - Davey Martinez walked into his first press conference of the spring, sat down in front of a microphone and addressed the room full of reporters.

“I have to say, I’m tired,” he sighed.

Tired? At 12:30 p.m.? On Day One of spring training?

“Well, I’ve been here since 5:30,” he said. “I get up every day at 5. Can’t slow the brain down. I’ve got a lot to think about, you know. Pretty good team.”

Yes, it is. And rarely has any first-time manager ever been handed the keys to an expensive car like this.

This may have been the official first day of pitchers and catchers workouts outside The Ballpark of the Palm Beaches, but unofficially there has been plenty going on here for a week or two. Martinez has presided over it all, getting to know the 61 players who are in big league camp, plus coaches, trainers, club executives and everyone else who plays a role in these proceedings.

On one hand, this is an entirely new experience for the 53-year-old former outfielder and bench coach. On the other hand, there has been a comforting familiarity to it all for this baseball lifer who has had plenty of time to prepare for this moment.

Martinez was asked what has surprised him the most about the job since he was hired 3 1/2 months ago.

“Absolutely nothing,” he insisted. “Really. The biggest thing is I have all this energy when I wake up, and my brain just constantly goes. You’re thinking about Max Scherzer and (Stephen) Strasburg and Gio (Gonzalez) and (Tanner) Roark and (Bryce) Harper and (Anthony) Rendon, those guys in your lineup. And you go: ‘Wow!’ I’m just get excited to go to the ballpark and watch these guys perform every day.”

Many had been wondering what a Davey Martinez-managed camp would be like. Would he take all his cues from Joe Maddon, the manager he worked under the last 10 years? Would he put his own personal stamp on it?

Here’s what we’ve gleaned so far: Martinez sets the tone from the get-go with his morning “Circle of Trust” meeting on the agility field just outside the clubhouse. He wants players to be loose and enjoy themselves and allows music to be played (chosen each day by a different member of the team) during the workout. And he wants everyone to get their work done in an efficient manner and then get out of there.

This morning's session began at 9:30 a.m. Some pitchers already were walking back into the clubhouse by 10:45 a.m. Everyone had wrapped up by 11 a.m.

This was by design, and it will continue.

"Yes, absolutely," Martinez said. "It's quality, not quantity. What people don't see is that they're in the gym at 7:30 in the morning. A lot of these guys condition early. They're coming in and getting their treatment with the trainer and doing all kinds of stuff before they even get on the field. So we just want to get their work in, good quality work, quick, get them out and let them enjoy their day."

Players, especially veterans, appreciate the vibe the new manager is setting. But even those that have known Martinez for a while remain curious how he'll deal with all the various situations that arise over time.

"He's a pretty laid back guy," said catcher Miguel Montero, who played for Martinez the last three seasons in Chicago. "I'll be interested to see, because remember, I had him as a coach. When they're a coach, they're one thing. And when they're a manager, they're a little different. They're the boss now, so they've got to change things around for them to be successful as well. From my experience, he's a great guy. ... We've just got to go out there and win a championship so everything looks nice."

Ah, yes, the real task at hand around here. The Nationals won 95 games and a division title in 2016. Then they won 97 games and another division title in 2017. Yet they made a managerial and coaching staff change because they don't believe that was good enough.

The pressure on Martinez and his players is real. All of them will be evaluated not on what they do from February through September but what they do in October.

And the new skipper isn't afraid to ignore the elephant in the room.

"I've said this before: We're here to play the last game of the World Series and win," he said. "That's going to be the message we send. And they get it."

Article #12

Martinez dips into Dusty Baker's human resources playbook

By Thom Loverro – Washington Times (2/16/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, FLA. | On Thursday, new Washington Nationals manager Dave Martinez met with the 'Circle of Trust' at their spring training complex. Friday, he met with the circle of mistrust.

Martinez met with the media officially for the first time this spring, on the second day of pitcher and catcher workouts and the third day since the club's reporting date.

Then again, there wasn't a whole lot to talk about. This is, for the most part, the same Nationals team that won 97 games last year.

It's still hard to believe that the manager who led that team to those 97 wins —Dusty Baker — is gone, replaced by a rookie skipper in Martinez, who would be hailed as a great manager if he can match those victories.

The former Chicago Cubs bench coach met with reporters after Friday's workout. There were no stories about Bill Walsh or Jimi Hendrix. No, Dave Martinez is simply a well-liked and respected baseball man, and it will never be about him.

You get the feeling that it will always be about the players.

"The biggest thing I have is all this energy when I wake up and my brain is constantly going," the 53-year-old said. "You're thinking about Max Scherzer and Gio (Gonzalez) and (Stephen) Strasburg and (Tanner) Roark and (Bryce) Harper and (Anthony) Rendon and those guys, a lineup, wow, I get excited about just coming to the ballpark and watch these guys perform every day.

"I try not to think about lineups too much," Martinez said. "I think about the players and what I can do that particular day to help one of them. My job is to help get these guys ready and be the best they can be."

Don't worry. Martinez didn't forget his marching orders from the Lerner family — speaking a World Series championship into existence.

"It's all about communication, culture and competing every day," he said. "Like I said before, we're here to play in the last game of the World Series and win. That's going to be the message we send, and they get it."

This is such a strange set of circumstances. No manager communicated better than Baker, who went out of his way to get to know his players personally.

"When I had a meeting with our coaches, my big thing with them was there is no negativity," Martinez said. "I don't care what a guy can't do. Tell me what a guy can do and let's make the best of that. If we can do that, all the perceived things he can't do seem to go away."

Baker's language was all about being positive. We are talking about two managers who use the same human resources playbook.

This is different from the previous Washington managerial changes. Davey Johnson appeared to lose energy and interest in his second season, so he was replaced with the untested "Marine," the law and order manager Matt Williams.

When he lost control of the clubhouse, he was replaced by Baker, the manager with the velvet gloves.

This time? What's is the difference that Martinez will bring to this team?

It's not fair, to everyone involved.

Martinez earned his place in the managerial line, a 16-year veteran player who lost out on numerous managing jobs before finally getting his shot here in Washington.

And he may not have to bring anything different. He may just get lucky and, for once, be the manager who has these Nationals players perform in big postseason moments, instead of folding like lawn chairs.

"I know we are going to compete every day at the highest level," Martinez said. "These guys are good, they've been good for the last couple of years. All winter long I heard about this hump they need to get over. I think we need to get to the hump first. My message is clear. To stay in the here and now and worry about today. If we do that, we'll be in good shape."

I'd say trust Martinez, but then we're not part of that circle.

"I know there have been a lot of rumbles about the 'Circle of Trust,'" he said. "It's all about us. Stras said it best, you have to be in the circle."

There's a city about 1,000 miles north of West Palm Beach that hopes the circle can help break the cycle of missed championship opportunities. That is Dave Martinez's job.

Article #13

Kelley healthy again and hoping to return to 2016 form

By Mark Zuckerman – MASN Sports (2/17/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - Ask Shawn Kelley about 2017 and the veteran reliever will talk about how much he enjoyed watching his Nationals teammates play well but how frustrated he was personally to not have contributed much to that success. There were injuries to his neck, back and elbow, and there were some brutal appearances on the mound that led to a 7.27 ERA and an astounding 12 home runs surrendered in only 26 innings.

"I'm just glad it's 2018," he said with a smile.

Kelley is able to smile right now because his arm feels strong. He can't say for certain if it will continue to feel that way through the rigors of a long season. But he and the Nationals are hopeful that the stem cell injection he received in October allows his twice-reconstructed elbow to hold together for one more season and allows him to rediscover the form that made him one of baseball's best relievers in 2015 and 2016.

That stem cell procedure was recommended and ultimately performed by doctors over a surgical procedure to remove the bone chips that are floating in Kelley's elbow. Given how much that elbow has endured during the course of an 11-year professional career - most notably two Tommy John surgeries - this was deemed the less risky move.

One more surgery on that elbow and Kelley, who turns 34 in April, knows he's probably cooked.

"We explored all our options, but that was what we came down with," he said. "And I feel good now, so for now, it seems like it was the right decision."

Kelley and the Nationals have been encouraged by the results so far. He began throwing shortly after New Year's Day and immediately felt a difference.

"Usually, when I start throwing in January, I kind of feel a lot of stuff breaking up in there, a lot of stuff that kind of just sat all offseason," he said. "But I felt really good. The guy that I throw with most in the offseason said: 'Your extension looks better than it did in the last few years.'"

Time will tell if that feeling persists, and if it translates into better results on the mound. Whether it was a byproduct of his health or simple poor execution of pitches, Kelley was highly ineffective last season. He couldn't consistently command his best pitch: a slider. Opponents didn't record many hits off it - they batted only .179 - but he threw it for a strike only 64 percent of the time and saw his strikeout rate on that pitch cut in half.

That freed up batters to sit on Kelley's fastball, and they proceeded to crush that pitch to the tune of a .323 average and 1.174 OPS.

Better health, Kelley believes, should lead to better quality sliders, which should lead to fewer hitters sitting on his fastball, which should lead to better results. Now he just needs to figure out how to maintain his health through a long season.

"Whatever I need to do in the training room," he said. "Whatever I need to do in the weight room. Whatever I need to do conditioning-wise for the rest of my body. If I can just stay in the state that I am right now, and maintain that all season like I did in '16, I have all the confidence in the world that it'll be a great year and I'll be able to help out a lot with these other guys."

The Nationals are counting on it. Though they bring back their top three relievers from the end of last season, they did lose Matt Albers to free agency and haven't added anyone new yet to take that role. The club hopes one or both of Kelley and Koda Glover (who likewise was injured through much of 2017) will step up and assume that key role and become a trusted right-hander in manager Davey Martinez's bullpen.

Kelley appreciates the confidence the organization, led by general manager Mike Rizzo, has shown in him, dating all the way to the end of last season when things had reached a low point.

"We had a good talk, and Rizzo said: 'Look, the only thing I want you to do is whatever procedure we decide to do, stem cell or whatever, is to get healthy. Come to spring training ready to go, because we need you in the long run,'" Kelley recalled. "So we had that conversation, so I knew he was counting on me. ... I'm happy, I'm healthy and trying to do what I did in '16."

Article #14

Mindful of future, Gio ready to roll in 2018

By Jamal Collier – MLB.com (2/17/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. -- Gio Gonzalez arrived to Washington in 2012, the same year the Nationals became postseason contenders. He has progressed from ace to a solid and reliable starter, so perhaps

that is why his contributions to this entire run of success -- four division titles in six seasons -- have gone underrated.

Since the start of the 2012 season, only two players have produced a higher Wins Above Replacement total for the Nationals than Gonzalez's 21.2 -- Bryce Harper (27.7) and Stephen Strasburg (24.7).

As Gonzalez prepares for his seventh season with the Nationals, he is considering the idea that this could be his last year in Washington. His contract will expire after the year, and he is set to become a free agent for the first time in his career.

"I've been here for seven years. To me, this is home," Gonzalez said. "That being said, I have to do my part."

Gonzalez said he did not have any conversations with the Nationals this winter about a contract extension; he knows his future is uncertain. He will turn 33 in September with a fastball velocity that averaged around 89.9 mph in 2017 and a strikeout percentage that has been virtually the same for three seasons (22.3 percent in 2015, 22.4 in '16 and 22.7 in '17) even as strikeouts have increased throughout the Majors.

However, Gonzalez is also coming off one of the most productive seasons of his career. He threw 201 innings, his first time eclipsing the 200 mark since 2011 when he was the A's, and posted a 2.96 ERA and a 3.3 WAR. Even if some of his peripherals, such as a 3.93 FIP, project some regression, he was effective for the Nats a year ago.

"It shows I still got it," he said. "That's a good feeling to know that you can still go out there and play with the best of them."

But the prospects of free agency are not particularly enticing these days. Gonzalez was shocked as he listed the names and examined the resumes of some free agents who remain unsigned. For someone who could enter the open market for the first time at age 33, to see players still without teams is a little discouraging.

"I'm just hoping it works itself out," Gonzalez said. "I'm a small voice in a big world. I'm just trying to be optimistic and hope for the best. To see these guys get a team, it would make you feel a little more comfortable, a little more safe."

But first, Gonzalez must face what could be his final season with the Nationals.

He feels like he has grown up in this organization, which he has been a part of since the team acquired him from Oakland after the 2011 season. There have been few players who have lived in the middle of the heartbreak of the Nats' playoff losses like Gonzalez has. Twice, he has been the starting pitcher for Game 5 of the National League Division Series and both times -- in 2012 and 17 -- the Nationals lost the elimination game at Nationals Park.

October's 9-8 loss to the Cubs stung Gonzalez. He lasted just three innings and surrendered three runs that game during a performance that lingered with him in the offseason.

"It was hard to turn the page," he said. "I wanted to get back [on the mound]. I had to literally clear my head for a while. I just had to get out. I was really down. There was a little moment where I didn't want to be talked to. I didn't want to deal with anybody. It was just very emotional. I wish I could have done a lot more."

Gonzalez surrounded himself with family this offseason and increased the intensity of his offseason workouts to hit Spring Training running. After watching Gonzalez's bullpen session Saturday, Nationals manager Dave Martinez said his curveball looked as sharp as he would expect it to be in July.

"When I came in here, I came to Spring Training like I want to enjoy it more, because you never know, this could be my last," Gonzalez said. "I mean, who knows. I could be the guy sitting on the sidelines waiting. So that's why I want to enjoy it."

Article #15

Secure in closer's role, Doolittle now trying to add to his arsenal

By Mark Zuckerman – MASN Sports (2/17/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - Sean Doolittle will be the Nationals closer to open the season. That declaration, made this afternoon by new manager Davey Martinez, did not constitute earth-shattering news. Given the way Doolittle performed late last season, and given the current makeup of the Nats bullpen, that was a foregone conclusion.

The more notable development this season for Doolittle would involve not when he pitches but what he pitches.

After firmly establishing himself as a top-notch reliever who relies almost exclusively on his fastball, Doolittle is hoping to become a more complete pitcher this year. He already began weaving more changeups into his repertoire last season; now he's hoping to incorporate more sliders.

"People think just because I throw a ton of fastballs, maybe I'm just stubborn," the lefty said. "But I try really hard to develop the secondary stuff, because it could make me so much more efficient."

Doolittle threw 100 percent fastballs in eight of his 30 appearances with the Nationals. He threw 90 percent or more fastballs in another six appearances. And when he did deviate, he usually turned to his changeup. Doolittle threw a slider in only eight games with the Nats.

He said, though, that he intended to try to work more on both of his secondary pitches during the offseason. And he arrived here in Florida this month feeling as confident in his slider as he perhaps has ever been.

Some of that is the result of some new grips he has worked on, with some advice from new pitching coach Derek Lilliquist. Some of it, though, is the result of meteorology. Seriously.

Having spent every previous spring of his professional career pitching at the Athletics complex in Phoenix, Doolittle is for the first time now training in Florida. And the difference in humidity and elevation has helped him feel better about his breaking ball.

“A lot of guys say they have trouble with their breaking stuff in spring training (in Arizona),” he said. “I would throw it a lot in games, and I never really could get good feedback on it where I felt confident taking it into the regular season. I always felt like it was this work-in-progress. Maybe here with a little humidity in the air, being at sea level, maybe I’m starting to get a better feel for it. The early results are encouraging.”

Doolittle threw several sliders this morning during his bullpen session and was pleased with the results. He intends to keep working on it and try to incorporate more of them into his actual game appearances beginning next week.

With that, though, comes a caveat for anyone who pays only cursory attention to Grapefruit League games: Don’t try to evaluate Doolittle based on his overall spring performance, or certainly not his ERA. He has much different priorities this year.

“Yeah, this is a disclaimer: I’m working on some things,” he said with a laugh. “In past spring trainings, I’ve done a lot of work on back fields, to try to work on that stuff and take my lumps behind the scenes. But by the end of spring training, the last couple outings I tend to treat like normal games to gear up for the season. But yeah, I’m at a spot in my career where I have a chance to continue to develop, and that’s what spring training is all about.”

Indeed, Doolittle has never found himself in a more comfortable position entering spring training. He’s not competing for a roster spot. He’s not even competing for a role within the bullpen. He already knows he’ll be pitching the ninth inning, so nobody with the Nationals is going to be making decisions on him this spring based on how many runs or hits he gives up.

“He’s good,” new manager Davey Martinez said. “He’s got closer mentality. I’ll tell you now, he’s our closer. Right now, he’s got a good fastball. He’s got a live arm, and he likes to throw it. And for me, it’s letting those guys be who they are. He knows how to get guys out.”

And this year, he hopes to be getting more guys out with something other than a fastball.

Article #16

Eaton says lower gear may be key to playing better, lasting longer

By Thom Loverro – Washington Times (2/17/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, FLA. — Adam Eaton was known for playing the game of baseball with his hair on fire — the cliché used to describe a player who approaches the game with uncontrollable energy and enthusiasm.

They love that in baseball. Washington Nationals general manager Mike Rizzo loved it when he traded two of the organization’s top pitching prospects —Reynaldo Lopez and Lucas Giolito — to the Chicago White Sox for Eaton in December 2016.

“He plays with an edge,” Rizzo said about Eaton after the deal. “He’s playing 100 miles an hour with his hair on fire.”

No more. A torn knee ligament and nine months of recovery will go a long way to put that fire out.

Washington fans never really had a chance to see that energy and enthusiasm. Eaton tore ligaments in his left knee trying to beat out a grounder to short against the New York Mets in an April 28 game at Nationals Park and was out for the rest of the year.

Now, he is ready to return — but he's not the same player. He believes we'll see a smarter, better version of Adam Eaton.

"If you looked at me early in my career, I really played with my hair on fire, running into walls, really stupid stuff," he said. "Then in my second year in Chicago I kind of tried to slow things down, be more methodical. I think this will only rush that process, which is good.

"I think I can be very efficient at a slower pace," said Eaton, 29, who expects to be in the starting lineup for the March 29 opening game in Cincinnati.

"Not slow as in not running fast, but slow as in, there's a ball hit 15 steps to my right and I can get to it a little slower and be fine, instead of running over there and getting in front of it and then throwing a freaking scud missile to second base when I can just really just get it in. That mentality will help me out. I see it as giving longevity to my career, I think it will slow things down. It will help me play smarter. I'll have to be smarter.

"It will be fun," Eaton said. "You guys haven't seen me healthy in a long time."

When Eaton was healthy before, he was fun to watch — a good defensive outfielder who batted .290 with a .362 on base percentage and 265 runs scored in three seasons with the White Sox, after being traded by the Arizona Diamondbacks. He was supposed to be a big part of the Nationals 2017 team — as a leadoff hitter and center fielder.

He should be a big part of the 2018 Nationals squad — again as a leadoff hitter, but this time in left field. Eaton has crowned Michael Taylor, who got his chance to play last year after Eaton was hurt, as the center fielder for this team.

"I think Michael Taylor is more than accomplished in center," Eaton said. "He plays a heck of a center field. I am a man and I will say he can probably play a better center field than me at this point with my leg. If I am managing, stick me in left, but I can play all three. I am comfortable in all three. Hopefully that is a value for me.

Wherever he (manager Dave Martinez) sees fit to want me, but Michael is more than a qualified center fielder," he said. "I think by any stretch he is top three in the big leagues, and I don't think I am talking out of turn to say that."

It will be an impressive outfield — Eaton in left, Taylor in center and Bryce Harper in right.

"I think you are talking about one of the great defensive outfields in the National League and maybe all of baseball," Rizzo said. "You've got three guys who are capable of playing center field, a Gold Glove finalist

(Taylor) in center, Eaton was regarded as a corner outfielder as one of the best in the business, and Harper can play center field. They have great range and angles and once they get comfortable playing with each other they'll be terrific. And I think you've got three of the quality throwing arms in all of baseball."

Rizzo is not worried that a more mature, cautious Eaton will take the edge off the game that the general manager fell in love with. "You see it with a lot of guys who play hard and fast and as they move forward in their careers," he said.

"They learn to play the marathon that is the season. You don't lose your DNA as a player. I think you naturally learn to control your aggression and pick your spots. I don't believe he will switch from being the very aggressive player that he is. Experience helps in that situation, and I don't expect him to approach the game any different. He's going to have that aggressive style and play extremely hard."

Hard, but smart — and hopefully, for a long time.

"I'm just a little older this year," said Eaton, who is under contract with the Nationals for the next two seasons, with team options for 2020 and 2021. "I think it is a good thing, I hope to be old in this game and I hope this can help me evolve into that kind of player where I can take care of my body ahead of injury."

Article #17

Bryan Harper, Bryce's older brother, out to make a name for himself with Nationals

By Jorge Castillo – Washington Post (2/18/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Just before 10 a.m. Sunday, a player rushed over to Field 2 on the Washington Nationals' side of the Ballpark of the Palm Beaches. He jogged alone, his spikes pounding the sidewalk. A boy stood nearby behind a fence, observing the start of the Nationals' final workout before position players report for spring training. He couldn't believe his eyes when he saw Harper spelled out on the back of the player's red jersey.

"I just saw Harper!" the young boy called out.

"That's not Bryce," a man responded. "That's his brother."

"What?" the boy said, confused. "No way."

Such is the baseball life of Bryan Harper, Bryce's older brother and a reliever competing to establish his own name at the sport's highest level. While Bryce became one of the majors' brightest stars in a near instant, Bryan, 28, is in his first big-league camp this spring after five on the minor league side. He's seeking to resurrect his career following Tommy John surgery.

"Just being on the mound, just being back out there, is so much fun," Harper said. "It had been so long."

Taken in the 30th round of the 2011 draft — after being drafted twice before — the 6-foot-5 left-hander spent five full seasons steadily progressing through Washington's farm system. In 2016, after posting a

1.50 ERA with Harrisburg, he ascended to Class AAA Syracuse and compiled a 2.95 ERA in 20 games. He was on the big leagues' doorstep.

Then, on Aug. 6, he fired a fastball against Scranton/Wilkes-Barre that didn't feel right. He threw another pitch to get out of the inning, but something was wrong. He tried throwing when he returned the next day, but it was too painful. An MRI later revealed a torn ulnar collateral ligament. He initially tried the rehab route and received a platelet-rich plasma injection, but decided to undergo Tommy John surgery. His 2016 season was over. His 2017 season was over before it began.

"When that happens, you just got to kind of sit back and just look at it and accept it," Harper said. "There's nothing you can do about it. It's your body. Your body just literally quit on you."

Harper resumed throwing five months after the procedure last April. By August, he was throwing bullpens and simulated games. He kept in constant communication with his brother throughout. The two would communicate between Bryan's morning workouts and Bryce's games at night, Bryan keeping him updated on his progress and milestones before watching the Nationals play.

"I was watching every night and I actually learned a lot," Bryan Harper said. "It wasn't even watching him. It was watching Max [Scherzer] and [Stephen Strasburg] and watching those guys pitch, seeing what they do and picking up things."

Harper started his offseason work in December — earlier than usual — and was throwing bullpens again by the third week of January. He has thrown two bullpens since reporting to camp and has been encouraged by his ability to bounce back the day after the sessions.

"Excellent. His arm strength's good, and his command is getting better," Nationals pitching coach Derek Lilliquist said. "He's got a nice breaking ball. His fastball's got some good shape to it. We've just got to get him into games and get him comfortable."

Harper is one of several relievers vying for a couple spots in Washington's bullpen. The competition is steep on the left side; besides closer Sean Doolittle, Sammy Solis, Enny Romero, and Matt Grace played roles for the Nationals last year and figure to have the leg up on the rest of the bunch.

Excluding Bryce's brief rehab assignment with Class AA Harrisburg in 2014, this is the first time the brothers will share a clubhouse since they played in junior college together in 2010. As kids, they dreamed of playing in the big leagues together. This season may be their last chance, at least in Washington, with Bryce Harper's looming free agency. But now, after 214 2/3 innings across 168 games for six affiliates and an inopportune setback, Bryan Harper just wants to reach the summit and make a name for himself.

"The biggest goal," Harper said, "is just to make the big leagues."

Article #18

The Nationals' new pitching coach Derek Lilliquist is getting to know his very good staff

By Jorge Castillo – Washington Post (2/19/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — On Sunday, the final day before Nationals position players reported to spring training, Manager Dave Martinez, pitching coach Derek Lilliquist and bullpen coach Henry Blanco held the last of their individual meetings with pitchers. They talked about strengths and weaknesses with each player. They inquired about their goals and routines, making sure they were doing what they needed to.

The sessions were particularly important for Lilliquist, who has spent the past couple weeks getting to know his pitching staff. What has he found out?

“Probably the best group in terms of staff that I’ve been a part [of] at this point in spring training,” Lilliquist said.

Lilliquist, who turns 52 on Tuesday, is overseeing a staff with few question marks. There’s competition for the fifth spot in the rotation and a couple vacant spots in the bullpen. That’s it. Besides that, the Nationals have a formidable quartet in the starting rotation and three quality relievers at the back end of the bullpen.

It is far from the tumult that enveloped the Nationals’ pitching staff last season, when Max Scherzer’s fractured knuckle had him throwing three-fingered fastballs, Stephen Strasburg was coming off a concerning elbow injury, Tanner Roark was preparing for the World Baseball Classic and there wasn’t a bona fide closer on the roster.

Lilliquist has inherited a much more stable situation topped by two of the top three finishers in last year’s National League Cy Young race. Max Scherzer, the reigning two-time-defending winner, began his spring with a couple 60-pitch bullpen sessions. Stephen Strasburg, last season’s third-place finisher, has gone about his business in a more efficient manner, a continuation of the adjustment he made to cut pitches when possible last season. When it comes to the two veteran aces, Lilliquist emphasized he is taking a hands-off approach.

“They have their routines, and I’m just here to facilitate,” Lilliquist said. “I’m here for them. They have everything they need. Go get them. They’re veterans. They know what they need.”

For Scherzer, Lilliquist will have more of an impact later in the year.

“It doesn’t affect me until the middle of the season, until we’re really diving into the scouting reports,” Scherzer said of the pitching coach change. “Understanding what he sees about hitters and what I see about hitters and coming together, making it work. How you prepare for young guys, how you prepare for veterans. Basically, who’s right.”

But others have already tapped into Lilliquist as a resource. Relief pitcher Brandon Kintzler, said he talked about his sinker with Lilliquist, a sinker expert. They spoke the same language. Kintzler came away encouraged by the possibilities.

"He's very detailed," Martinez said. "He's passionate about what he does, and he's passionate about every pitcher. So he's got something for every pitcher individually, and also some key points as a group. He's built this relationship already with the pitchers. I can see them conversing, working on different things. It's fun to watch."

Article #19

Another Harper tries to make name for himself

By Jamal Collier – MLB.com (2/19/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. -- It's as if Bryan Harper has been soaking it all in through these first few days of what is his first full Major League camp. He has spent his time in the Nationals clubhouse, keeping mostly to himself, watching and observing.

"It's been exciting," Harper said. "When you come to a new locker room you always just want to blend in. Not bring too much attention to yourself."

Of course, blending in is not an easy task for someone who is 6-foot-5 and carries the same last name as the Nationals' biggest star, Bryce. Finally healthy after undergoing Tommy John surgery late in the 2016 season, the elder Harper was re-signed by the Nationals this winter and invited to big league Spring Training for the first time in his career.

Harper, a 28-year-old left-handed reliever, had been pushing his way toward a potential spot in the Majors before his injury. In 2016, he posted a 2.18 ERA in 40 appearances and could have been a candidate for a September callup. Then, he was sidelined for the entire 2017 season, rehabbing.

"A grind. It was a grind," Harper said. "I felt like it made me better, not just health-wise but mentally. Because you got to be mentally tough to get through surgeries."

Harper has thrown two bullpen sessions since camp officially began and said he feels great. He has been encouraged by the way his arm has responded the day after throwing.

"His arm strength's good and his command is getting better," pitching coach Derek Lilliquist said. "He's got a nice breaking ball. His fastball's got some good shape to it. We've just got to get him into games and get him comfortable."

Harper is perhaps a long shot to make the Nationals' Opening Day bullpen. Aside from closer Sean Doolittle, Harper is behind Sammy Solis, Enny Romero and Matt Grace on the left-handed reliever depth

chart. But there could be some opportunity for him to crack this roster. Solis has had trouble staying healthy, and Romero and Grace have battled consistency.

As Bryce prepares for what could be his final season in Washington before his highly anticipated free agency, Bryan has the chance to make the Nats' Major League roster and play on the same team with his younger brother -- something they both dreamed about growing up.

The two brothers are close to each other and talk almost daily during the season. But they have taken very different paths to this point. They were drafted a year apart, with Bryce going first overall in 2010 and then beginning his rapid ascent through the Nats organization. Bryan's path has been a little less direct ever since he was selected in the 30th round of the 2011 Draft.

"We are a lot different," Bryan said. "I'm a left-handed pitcher. He's the outfielder and hitter. We're completely opposite guys."

The two Harpers last shared a field together during Bryce's Minor League rehab stint with Double-A Harrisburg in 2015 and last played on the same team while they were at the College of Southern Nevada in 2010. At some point this spring, they are likely to do so again, and perhaps they will soon in the Majors.

"I think the biggest goal is just to make the big leagues," Bryan said. "Obviously playing with Bryce is a positive, but I've got some other really good friends in here that are like brothers. Spencer Kieboom -- I was in his wedding. That's huge for me, too. It's going to be an exciting year, hopefully I can help this team win."

Article #20

Strasburg, Harper fueled rebirth of baseball in D.C.

By Thom Loverro – Washington Times (2/20/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, FLA. — When did all things begin to seem possible for the Washington Nationals? Before the days when four National League East division titles felt painful? You know, before the hump?

It was the month of June, in 2009 and 2010, when the future seemed limitless, when Washington's baseball was finally connected to greatness and glory.

Stephen Strasburg was greatness. Bryce Harper was glory.

"I remember the first time I saw him play," Strasburg said. "He had just turned 15. He was playing on this travel team I had played before I went to college. I was staying in my grandmother's old house right down the road. The coach said, 'Come on over.' He was there playing. He was pretty good. That was well before I knew we were going to be teammates."

They would be more than teammates, though. These were the two building blocks on which championship baseball in Washington would be constructed, the two number one back-to-back draft picks in all of baseball, two of the most heralded young stars of their time.

Now — six years after they first took the field together — it appears that this may be the final year of the Nationals' tag team of dreams and their last chance together to fulfill what at one time seemed to be their destiny, with Harper in the final year of his contract and likely heading for free agency. Harper, 25, met with the media Monday and declared questions about his future beyond 2018 are off limits. So that leaves his teammates to ponder a future without Harper — and few are more connected to Harper by circumstances than the 29-year-old Strasburg, though they are not particularly close.

“For the most part we do our own thing here,” Strasburg said. “There is a little bit of an age gap. I’ve always been a fan of Bryce. Our wives get along. And obviously we have the same agent (Scott Boras). I think for the most part, especially now that I have kids ... I’m sure Bryce will someday have kids, too that’s a big difference, I don’t really have a lot of free time and stuff. He is in Vegas. I’m in San Diego. I played with a lot of older guys from Vegas who know Bryce. We have a lot of mutual friends.

Personality-wise, they couldn’t be more different. Strasburg is quiet, reserved and avoids the limelight. Harper is a showman who has embraced the attention ever since he was on the cover of Sports Illustrated when he was 16.

But they will forever be connected in the history of Washington baseball.

Strasburg, drafted No. 1 in 2009, made his historic major league debut on June 8, 2010: a 14-strikeout, two-run performance before a national audience against the Pittsburgh Pirates.

One day earlier, the Nationals had drafted Harper.

But it wouldn’t be until Harper made his major league debut on April 28, 2012, in Los Angeles against the Dodgers that the dual foundation of Nationals baseball would finally be on the same major league roster.

“Everything started at that point,” Strasburg said. “Yeah, I think the numbers are there, wins and losses purely, everything changed, with 2012 being our first real year together. They get Gio (Gonzalez). They had signed Jay Dub (Jayson Werth) the year before. Bryce came up a month and a half in.”

As the Nationals marched to their first NL East division crown, the road ahead with these two young stars seemed destined to be lined with championships. But a lot has gotten in the way since. This was the year of the Strasburg Tommy John recovery, which kept him out of the division series against St. Louis. Finally, when the two would play together in the division series against San Francisco in 2014, Strasburg got just one start and lost the opener to Jake Peavy, while Harper had a big series, with three home runs and four RBI in the four-game loss.

They would not play together in the 2015 division series against Los Angeles. Strasburg was on the disabled list with right elbow soreness. Harper struggled all season and into the postseason, with four hits in 17 at bats against the Dodgers. Then came last year’s bizarre series loss to the Cubs. In two starts, Strasburg was outstanding, allowing just two runs and six hits over 14 innings in two starts, while striking out 22. Harper, coming off a knee injury, struggled again, with just four hits in 19 at bats.

Now it may be coming to an end.

"I think he (Harper) likes it here," Strasburg said. "I think he likes the clubhouse. But that's not everything. You have to think about your family and what's best for your family. I'm not going to fault him one way or the other. He's going to make the best decision for his family and that's the most important thing."

Perhaps nothing illustrates the differences between the two than the paths they chose. Strasburg told Boras, who is known for bringing his clients to free agency, that he wanted to stay in Washington and signed a seven-year, \$175 million contract extension in 2016.

Seeing the opportunities that may await Harper — who could possibly be a \$500 million free agent — does Strasburg have any regrets?

"I'm still happy with the decision, absolutely," said Strasburg, who is entering his ninth season in Washington with 184 starts, an 84-51 record and a 3.07 career ERA. "I enjoy this clubhouse. I enjoy my teammates. When you commit to the teammates and the core group of guys and you're going to make that commitment, that's great. But that was a decision I made at that time — to have the chance to win for many years. So we'll see what happens there."

If it does happen, it will probably be without his fellow cornerstone Washington Nationals franchise No. 1.

Article #21

Murphy still limited but primed for Opening Day

By Jamal Collier – MLB.com (2/20/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. -- Daniel Murphy acknowledged it might sound a bit crazy before he said it, but if he has trouble sleeping, he visualizes at-bats. There are few players in the game who enjoy hitting as much as Murphy, and he is constantly talking about hitting, watching at-bats and studying analytics.

So it has been difficult for Murphy to spend the past few months not being able to hit, limited as he recovers from the debridement and microfracture surgery he underwent on his right knee at the end of the season. On Tuesday, Nationals position players participated in their first full-squad workouts, which included live batting practice. Murphy was not able to participate.

His baseball activities are limited for now: fielding grounders from his knees, playing a little bit of catch and running on the treadmill with about 60 percent weight-bearing on his knee. Although it's hard for him to contain his excitement, he's happy with his progress so far and understands he must be patient with the rehab process.

"You see these guys bouncing around and playing, you want to participate and be playing with your teammates," Murphy said. "But I think it's the understanding of when the training staff lets me go and it's time to play, you only want to come off the DL once. I don't want to start playing games and then have to stop."

Murphy showed up to the Nationals WinterFest event in December on crutches but is walking around just fine now. He still feels some slight discomfort in his knee but has full range of motion.

The Nationals have been optimistic throughout Murphy's rehab that he will be ready for Opening Day. Last week, manager Dave Martinez said Murphy is still on target to meet that goal. Murphy still has a long way to go, but the Nats do not seem to be concerned that he does not have time to hit that goal.

"I'm more concerned about rushing him and him not being fully ready," Martinez said. "When we get him back, we don't want him to go back on the DL, we want to get him back for the whole season."

The number of baseball players who have undergone a surgery similar to Murphy's is limited, but one of them is Justin Turner of the Dodgers, Murphy's friend and former teammate, who rehabbed from the same injury in 2013. The two spoke during the offseason and Murphy was encouraged by the similarities in their rehab benchmarks.

"Each one's always going to be different," Murphy said. "I'm more asking him what it looks like, what he experienced, more in the future. Because where I am currently is really not going to change too much. So kind of what to expect is what we've talked about."

Washington has plans to slowly incorporate Murphy into Spring Training games with hopes of preparing him to start the season on time, for the final season of his contract with the Nationals. For now, his focus is on getting healthy again. Once that is done, he can go back to focusing on hitting.

Article #22

Nats hitters excited to jump aboard Long's launch angle train

By Mark Zuckerman – MASN Sports (2/21/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - It takes less than three minutes listening to Kevin Long talk about hitting to fully understand this guy is operating on a different level from mere mortals.

Want to know what the batting average on all ground balls put into play is? Long knows (.220).

Want to know the average distance from the side of the rubber that a right-hander releases his pitch versus the average distance for a lefty? Long knows (2 feet vs. 2 1/2 feet.)

Want to know about launch angles and hitting planes and how to avoid getting "too steep?" Long knows all that, too.

And players love to soak up every single bit of wisdom the Nationals' new hitting coach has to offer.

"We speak the same language," Daniel Murphy said. "We always talk in the same language. I mean, I stole his entire language, so I have no choice but to speak his language."

There is no one on the planet Murphy credits more for helping him transform from a good major league hitter into an elite major league hitter than Long, who previously served as his hitting coach with the Mets. And Long has a long list of success stories under his tutelage over the course of 14 seasons coaching both of New York's ballclubs.

Who helped Curtis Granderson become a power hitter? Kevin Long. Who helped Justin Turner grow from utility man to MVP-caliber slugger? Kevin Long.

"He's really good," Nationals manager Davey Martinez said.

Martinez and Long actually were competing for the same job last fall, each given an opportunity to interview with the Nationals front office to replace Dusty Baker. Martinez ultimately got the manager's job, but Long (who had been let go along with the rest of the Mets staff at the end of the regular season) immediately was offered the hitting coach position.

Long didn't need to take much time before accepting the offer.

"I knew from being in the opposing dugout what this offense presents," he said. "There's a lot of damage involved in the offense. There's a lot of speed. There's just quality throughout, 1 through 9. It's a great lineup. And then you throw in the bench, this is a great bench as well. To say I'm excited is an understatement."

And to say Nationals hitters are excited is just as much of an understatement.

Several players already have talked about tweaks Long has helped them make that they believe will have significant positive ramifications. Matt Wieters is believing in his swing again and feeling "pretty sexy about what he's doing," according to Long. Howie Kendrick (a career .291 hitter) thinks he might be able to become even more productive. Matt Adams is, as Long described it, "a little giddy right now" after learning some of the same techniques that allowed Granderson to become a top power hitter a decade ago.

What makes Long, a 51-year-old former outfielder in the Royals farm system who never reached the majors, one of the top hitting minds in the sport today? It's his comprehensive understanding of the mechanics of the swing, combined with an encyclopedic knowledge of every player's stats and tendencies, combined with a simple philosophy he recognized years ago that now is all the rage across baseball: Always try to hit the ball in the air, not on the ground.

"Here's the deal: At the major league level, if you hit a ground ball, you're a .220 hitter," Long said. "That's a fact. I'm not just coming up with this number. So if that's the case, is that what we're looking for, .220 hitters? No."

Long has been at the forefront of the "launch angle" revolution that has consumed the sport the last few seasons. The concept is simple: Hit the ball at the appropriate angle in relation to a straight line parallel to the field - the ideal angle is about 25 percent - and it's going to travel a long distance and most likely not be caught.

But there's much more to Long's philosophy. He preaches the importance of the "swing plane," making sure the bat is traveling on the same plane that a particular pitch is approaching it at, leading to better contact. He wants batters to view a pitch from the proper angle, aligning their bodies to match up with the pitcher's release point.

Above all else, Long understands that every hitter is different. He may have general philosophies that apply to everyone, but he makes sure to cater to each hitter's needs.

"I think he does a really good job of understanding the individual player offensively, what he does well, what he may need to work on and focusing on his strengths and how pitchers are trying to attack," Murphy said. "The easiest way to describe it is: He gets you ready for that day's at-bats to be the most productive you can. Whether you feel like you're ready to go, or you feel terrible or you feel great, he's going to make you feel like a killer when you step into the box."

Article #23

Contract official, Benoit tries to fit right in with Nats bullpen

By Mark Zuckerman – MASN Sports (2/21/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - Joaquín Benoit has played for good teams and bad teams. He has appeared in 20 postseason games (three of those in the World Series) and he's played out the string in September for clubs that were going nowhere.

Now 40, with far fewer days ahead of him than behind him, Benoit's priorities have changed. When looking for a job this winter and spring, he sought only two things: a major league contract and a chance to win. That made the Nationals, who officially announced the right-hander's signing to a one-year, \$1 million contract today, an ideal destination.

"Look around," Benoit said, scanning a clubhouse featuring All-Stars, award-winners and proven big leaguers left and right. "This is the team. This is not about going to a place and being miserable. This is about going to a place and being comfortable and having a chance to go to the playoffs and contribute."

To clear a spot on the 40-man roster for Benoit, the Nats placed Joe Ross (who won't be ready to return from Tommy John surgery until July at the earliest) on the 60-day disabled list.

Though the Nationals haven't flat-out said Benoit is assured of a spot in the opening day bullpen, it seems like close a sure thing at this point, especially after Koda Glover reported to camp with a recurrence of the shoulder pain that plagued him most of last season.

Ryan Madson and Brandon Kintzler are locked into their setup roles, and Shawn Kelley will make the club if he's healthy, but there's no other right-hander in camp with a track record like Benoit, who is positioned to fill one of the remaining bullpen roles.

Benoit was among the most reliable relievers in baseball from 2010-16, posting a 2.40 ERA, 0.977 WHIP and 43 saves in 439 total appearances with the Rays, Tigers, Padres, Mariners and Blue Jays. But after signing a \$7.5 million contract with the Phillies last season, he struggled to maintain those results.

Pitching out of a Phillies bullpen with an ever-changing carousel of closers, Benoit had a 4.07 ERA in 44 games. Things bottomed out following a July 31 trade to Pittsburgh, where he was roughed up for nine runs and 11 hits in 8 1/3 innings and appeared in only one game after Aug. 21 due to personal reasons.

Benoit was vague about the circumstances surrounding the abrupt conclusion to his 2017 season, but he made it clear his mind wasn't entirely on baseball.

"I will say I don't normally talk about things like that, but there was a lot of personal stuff going on last year," he said. "I can't blame that, because the game is played the same way for hundreds of years. But it was a lot of things on my mind. Like I said, I don't like to make excuses, but things didn't go the way I planned or the way I wanted them to go. Stuff that happens."

Beneath the surface of his subpar numbers, though, were encouraging signs. For one, Benoit's fastball velocity (94.8 mph, according to FanGraphs) was the highest of his career. His peripheral stats, meanwhile, suggested he was a victim of some bad luck.

Benoit is confident he still has the stuff to get big league hitters out.

"I would say I'm blessed to a point that I've been consistent in my velocity from my (2009 shoulder) surgery until now," he said. "Which is something that you don't really expect from anybody, even if you wanted to. But with me, I don't even know. I would say I've got God's touch."

Benoit was throwing on his own in the Dominican Republic before getting the call from the Nationals to come to West Palm Beach over the weekend for a workout. Since agreeing to his \$1 million deal on Monday, he has eased right in with the rest of the pitching staff, participating fully in drills and already throwing off the mound.

Now he just hopes to rediscover his earlier form over an entire season with the ninth employer of his career.

"I'm going to do my best," he said. "I'm really confident, and I'm happy to be here. The atmosphere here is unbelievable, and you're seeing a team that is possible to be in the World Series. This is a great team. If you see the starting rotation, the bullpen, the hitters ... what can go wrong?"

Article #24

Rendon seeking simplicity as recipe for success

By Jamal Collier – MLB.com (2/21/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. -- Anthony Rendon says he kept his offseason routine the same, which undersells a couple of major changes that took place during the winter: He got married in late November; he volunteered his time with the non-profit organization Rebuilding Together to help rebuild a home in Houston devastated after Hurricane Harvey; and the most notable change Nationals fans will be able to see this year -- he cut his hair for the first time since the middle of 2016.

"Oh, man, it was just too long," Rendon said. "It was too much to maintain. I either got to put product in it or I got to wear a hat. So I was kind over it. It was too curly."

Other than the change in appearance, Rendon had every reason to want to keep everything the same after the best season of his career in 2017. He hit .301/.403/.533 with 25 home runs and 100 RBIs, both career-highs, and Fangraphs lists him at 6.9 Wins Above Replacement. As strikeout rates rise in the Majors, Rendon was the rare player who had more walks (84) than strikeouts (82). He also finished as a finalist for the Gold Glove Award. That all earned him a sixth place finish in the crowded race for the National League Most Valuable Player.

Rendon attributed his success to a slight change in philosophy. He is not a complete disciple of the proverbial fly ball revolution, but he focused on driving the ball more frequently a year ago and hitting it in the air a little more. He hit 63.7 percent of his batted balls last year at a launch angle of 10 degrees or higher, which is basically the start of the line drive angle, a slight uptick from 59.8 percent in 2016. And a greater share of those hard hit balls (95 mph exit velocity or better) were in the air last season (60.9 percent) than the year prior (54.9 percent).

Those changes, however slight, helped produce the best season of his career.

"Rendon is ... he's a magician," hitting coach Kevin Long said. "He's fun to watch. He was one of the hitters that when he was up to bat, I sat there and I marveled. He's quiet, he puts himself in a good position, he's always on time. It looks effortless. His mechanics are flawless, he's in line. He's balanced. He just does a lot of things right.

"I'm leaving him alone. He's one guy that I'm not going to be able to help too much. What he does is special."

So the Nationals are hopeful that Rendon can continue that success. He is still in the prime of his career with two years remaining on his contract before free agency. Washington had some initial discussions with Rendon's agent, Scott Boras, this offseason while the two sides negotiated Rendon's arbitration contract, but the conversations did not get very far. Still, Rendon has said he is open to remaining with the organization long term.

It's not surprising, considering Rendon has spent his entire career in the Nats' organization and enjoys feeling comfortable. Perhaps he would prefer to keep things routine, just like how he feels his offseason went.

"It was the same thing," Rendon said. "We worked out in the morning, golfed in the afternoon, laid on my couch. I didn't really do too much. I try to keep it simple."

Article #25

In Martinez, echoes of some of the game's best skippers

By Thom Loverro – Washington Times (2/22/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, FLA. — Few rookie baseball managers have had as much on-the-job training, from so many mentors, as new Washington Nationals manager Dave Martinez.

He is most identified with Chicago Cubs manager Joe Maddon, with whom he spent 10 years as a coach in Chicago and Tampa. But Martinez, over the course of a 16-year career, took notes and learned lessons from at least 10 different managers, with a few interims mixed in — including Hall of Fame skippers.

In the current episode of my "Cigars & Curveballs" podcast, hosted here on The Washington Times website and available on iTunes, Google Play, the reVolver network and other platforms, Martinez, 53, sat down with me at the Nationals spring training complex and reflected on his memories and lessons from those 10 managers.

Martinez broke in with the Cubs in 1986, and his first major league manager was someone who is primarily connected with the New York Yankees — Gene “Stick” Michael:

“The day I got called up to the big leagues they had a meeting. Jamie Moyer and I had to sit outside and wait for this meeting to get over in the clubhouse. We didn’t know what was going on. First thing that goes through your mind is, these guys don’t want us here. They came out and got us. It happened to be that they ended up firing Jim Frey. Then they had an interim manager, and two days later Stick became my manager.

“Gene was a baseball man. He came from the Billy Martin era. He was tough but appreciated the game and hard work. One thing that really stands out to me is that he was very honest. He would tell you exactly what he was thinking. He wasn’t going to beat around the bush. You always appreciate that. That’s one thing he taught me. He was a good, good baseball man.”

In 1988, Martinez would head north of the border to play in Montreal for Buck Rodgers:

“Buck was awesome. I got traded there and I walked into his office and he pretty much told me, ‘I love to platoon guys and you’re going to be platooning right now with Otis Nixon. You’ll get a chance to play quite a bit because you’re a left-handed hitter. Otis is a switch hitter, but we like him better hitting from the right side. That’s the way I do things. I like playing everybody.’

“I was good with it. He was strictly a platoon guy. That’s the way he liked to manage, and it was good. Once again, you knew what he was all about. I loved playing in Montreal. I enjoyed the city very much.”

In 1992, Martinez landed in Cincinnati and played for one of his most memorable managers, Lou Piniella:

“Very colorful. He was a very heartfelt manager. He cared about you, he sometimes wore that. When you were struggling, you could tell he felt bad about you struggling and he would try everything he could to help you.

“He came in one day and had dress pants on and dress shoes and he said, ‘I had a dream about you. Come with me, and bring your bat.’ So we go out there and he’s in his dress slacks and dress shoes and he’s flipping me balls. He said, ‘I had a dream you could hit home runs.’ He showed me what I should be doing, and I started doing it, but I didn’t hit very many home runs (Martinez had 91 career home runs in 5,795 at-bats). I said, if he had a dream about it, I might as well try it.”

Ironically, the following season Martinez played with the San Francisco Giants for the manager he replaced here in Washington — Dusty Baker:

“Awesome. A player’s manager. He’s a good man. It speaks for himself, he’s done it for so many years. I used to go fishing with him on our days off. He loved fishing. He’s a friend. He wanted you to have fun. We had fun and we had some pretty good teams out there.”

In 1995, Martinez joined that unique club of players who wore both Chicago uniforms, joining the White Sox. His manager was Terry Bevington, who had the reputation of being a tough guy:

“He was the nicest guy. I had him as a third base coach. Great third base coach. Then when he became manager, he tried to portray himself like that (tough guy). But always very respectful. We had a lot of characters on that team, so he felt he had to be that way to keep control of the team.

“When I was over there, he called me in the office and said, ‘I’m going to give you a chance to play.’ I didn’t get a chance to play much there in the beginning. He said, ‘You’re a good baseball guy, you play the game the right way.’ I hit .307 that year. I appreciate him for seeing that I did care about the game and did play the game the right way.”

Martinez became an original Tampa Bay Devil Ray, playing for the expansion franchise in 1998. The man with the unfortunate job of managing an expansion team was former pitching coach Larry Rothschild:

“It was a learning curve. I loved Larry. A good baseball man. Very knowledgeable. Obviously knew a lot about pitching. Very soft spoken. A really good man. I still talk to him.”

Then, in 2000, Martinez played for three different teams – the Cubs again, the Texas Rangers and Toronto Blue Jays – and played for three different managers in Don Baylor, Johnny Oates and Jim Fregosi. Oates died in 2004 of a brain tumor. Fregosi passed away in 2014 of a stroke, while Baylor died in August of multiple myeloma.

Martinez was emotional when talking about Baylor and Fregosi:

“Don Baylor was very quiet. Very soft spoken but what a great man. Cared about everybody. Wanted to do the right thing for everyone, not just for the game. But for people. And Jim Fregosi was ... I knew Jim for a long time and respected him from the bottom of my heart. He once told me that he thought I would be a good manager.

Martinez finished his playing career in 2001 by playing for and learning from one of the best – in Atlanta for Hall of Fame skipper Bobby Cox:

“I was getting a little older and wondering what I wanted to do when I was done. Do I want to coach? I had no idea. Why not watch the man who has been to the playoffs time and time again? I talked to him quite a bit, learned how he treated pitchers, his role players.

“He told me...in the outfield we had B.J Surhoff, Andruw Jones, Brian Jordan. I come in there and I think I’m the fourth outfielder. He says, ‘Hey, Marty, I want you to know that you’re coming in here as the fourth outfielder, but you’re going to get to play a lot. Don’t think you are going to sit there for a week and not get an at-bat. Role players are just as important as everyday players. You guys get put in big moments. I want to make sure you are well prepared and when that time comes you’ve already had your at bats.’

“I played two, three, four times a week and came off the bench as a pinch-hitter. But I was ready to go. I was always fresh and didn’t sit for 10 or 12 days in a row. That always stuck in my mind. Over the course of a season, those everyday guys get tired and they need a break. The conversations I had with the guy, how positive he was every day. He never said anything negative to a player.”

Listen to what Dave Martinez says when he talks about his philosophy managing the Washington Nationals. You can hear the lessons from this long list of managers who prepared him for this moment.

Article #26

For Kendrick, decision to return to D.C. was “easy”

By Mark Zuckerman – MASN Sports (2/24/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - There are certain points in a ballplayer's career when priorities change. Early on, he simply wants to establish himself as big league regular. Then it's about cashing in and setting himself and his family up financially for life.

And then, once all the rest has been accomplished, comes the final priority for a veteran who has enjoyed personal success but perhaps is lacking one major accomplishment on his resume: A shot at a ring.

Howie Kendrick has had a fine career in baseball. He established himself as an everyday second baseman for the Angels a decade ago. He twice cashed in with a \$33.5 million extension with the Angels in 2012 and then a \$20 million contract with the Dodgers in 2016.

But despite seven separate trips to the postseason, Kendrick has yet to find himself playing in late October. Which is why, after getting a taste of the possibilities in Washington during the second half of the 2017 season, he desperately wanted to re-sign with the Nationals this winter and make another run at that elusive ring before he runs out of time.

Even if it meant accepting a modest two-year, \$7 million deal and (if everyone else is healthy) a spot on the bench, not the daily lineup.

“I've been an everyday player, went about my business and had fun playing the game,” he said. “Made the playoffs a lot. Had fun with the Angels, the Dodgers and coming over here last year. So it's been really fun. And I look at it like, I don't have too many more years left. So I want to enjoy it. ... I loved it here. So it was an easy decision for me.”

And an easy decision for the Nationals, who locked Kendrick up in January and ensured a potentially big hole in their roster would be filled by a player uniquely suited to help them.

“He was an important get for us,” general manager Mike Rizzo said. “He was one of the guys we really identified as a guy that we really wanted and really needed. He just fit perfectly.”

Indeed, when the Nationals acquired Kendrick from the Phillies last July for minor league left-hander McKenzie Mills, he seemed like a perfect fit. At the time, the club needed a right-handed bat who could start in left field while Jayson Werth and others were on the disabled list but also play infield if needed and be comfortable pinch-hitting when not in the lineup.

Kendrick remains just as valuable now as he was last summer, though at the moment the Nationals need him more at second base while Daniel Murphy recovers from offseason knee surgery than in the outfield.

“When we were trying to find alternatives, there were alternatives but they weren't as perfectly formed as Howie Kendrick was,” Rizzo said. “His skill-set. His ability to play every day and come off the bench. He can play multiple positions. And then you have the extra additive skill-set that he's a leader in the clubhouse and really in the short stint here turned into one of the leaders here. That was just kind of icing on his performance skill-set. He was such a player that carries that kind of respect factor with him.”

Though Kendrick has played the majority of his games the last two years in the outfield, he is at heart a second baseman. And with Murphy still rehabbing, he's been getting the vast majority of his reps so far this spring at second base, including a start in Friday's Grapefruit League opener.

The 34-year-old still feels most comfortable when playing his natural position.

"I've been playing infield since I was 5 years old, so it's something that it's a little easier for me, more natural," he said. "Going into the outfield, I have fun with it, but I want to be consistent and want to make the routine plays and just do my part out there. I know I transitioned to the outfield, so I'm not trying to be this superstar outfielder. I'm trying to be a routine player, making routine plays and do my job to help the team win."

Kendrick's calling card - let's be honest here - has been and will continue to be at the plate. A career .291 hitter with a .334 on-base percentage, he was especially productive last season, batting .315 and reaching base at a .368 clip over 334 total plate appearances.

The Nationals knew Kendrick could hit when they picked him up. What they learned about him last summer and fall, though, was that he brought more to the table.

"He's awesome," new manager Davey Martinez said. "I can't say enough about him. His leadership in the clubhouse, and the fact that he can do so many things and hit anywhere in the lineup and never complain ... it's a good guy to have around. He's going to help us win a lot of games. For sure."

Which, as Kendrick himself pointed out, is the real priority at this stage of his career.

Article #27

Simplifying windup and timing, Roark hopes for better results

By Mark Zuckerman – MASN Sports (2/24/18)

JUPITER, Fla. - In his quest to correct what ailed him in 2017 and recapture the form that made him one of baseball's most effective starters prior to that, Tanner Roark has a simple plan: Simplify.

Simplify his mechanics. Simplify his timing. Simplify his windup. And simplify his thought process when he's on the mound.

"I was just in my head, just thinking too much," Roark said in explaining his struggles last season. "And when you think, you suck."

While a line like that might be worthy of a segment of "Jack Handey's Deep Thoughts" it does serve a purpose for Roark. When things didn't go well for him early in 2017, he tried to compensate by racking his brain in search of an answer.

Along the way, he found himself spending more time thinking about what he was doing than simply doing what came naturally to him. So this spring he's trying to eliminate all the clutter in his mind and just pitch the way he always has.

“You go out there, and you know what you need to do and you focus on the things you need to do,” he said. “Most of the time, it’s just the small little things that you need to do that’ll fix everything else, and you don’t need to change anything.”

Roark tried it all out this afternoon in his spring debut, and the results were encouraging. He tossed two scoreless innings against the Marlins, striking out the side in the bottom of the second.

“He was good,” manager Davey Martinez said. “He kept the ball down, threw strikes. He got his work in. He was really good.”

The back-to-back-to-back strikeouts in the second inning were the highlight of Roark’s abbreviated outing. He caught Eric Campbell, Tomas Telis and Monte Harrison looking, all of them with two-seam fastballs.

That bread-and-butter pitch, so critical to Roark’s success, eluded him too often last season. He particularly struggled to put away hitters with two strikes, among the biggest reasons his ERA ballooned from 2.83 the previous year to 4.67.

Roark blames poor timing for his struggles locating the two-seamer. Given his across-the-body delivery, one small glitch in his mechanics can throw everything out of whack.

“It’s either I’m going too fast to the plate, or my arm is not getting up quick enough,” he said. “So sometimes you’ve got to tell yourself get your arm going, just deliberately slow down your windup.”

In a further attempt to simplify things and perhaps help him get in a better position to deliver quality pitches with more consistency, Roark is trying out a simplified windup this spring. Instead of rocking back and to the side with his left leg before kicking and dealing, he’s keeping that front leg in front of the rubber and only slightly stepping before kicking and dealing.

Asked who came up with that idea, Roark pointed to himself.

“I mean, I’ve seen people do it,” he said. “Pitchers do it. But I wanted to try it and see how it felt. And simple is always better. ... That’s why I did it. I tried it and I like it.”

Article #28

For Howie Kendrick, return to Nationals is about more than just numbers

By Jorge Castillo – Washington Post (2/24/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Howie Kendrick had one more business matter to tend to after re-signing with the Washington Nationals last month. In the brief time between becoming a free agent at the end of last season and agreeing to terms for a return, his No. 4 was snatched. Dave Martinez claimed it for his first managerial stint. So Kendrick called him to discuss the situation — and he told Martinez to keep it.

That left Kendrick in search of another numeric identity. He wore No. 47 for his entire major league career before joining the Nationals last season, but Gio Gonzalez had dibs on it. He decided he wanted something lower. And keeping with the manager theme, he eventually chose No. 12 — former manager Dusty Baker’s digits.

“It kind of worked out,” Kendrick said.

When Nationals General Manager Mike Rizzo surveyed the free agent market for someone to replace Kendrick, he didn't find anyone who quite matched his value at the right price. Rizzo said the other options didn't have the combination of skill, versatility, and everyday playing experience Kendrick provides.

[For the Nats, the question is who will take the fifth?]

"He's a leader in the clubhouse and really in the short stint here turned into one of the leaders here," Rizzo said. "That was just kind of icing on his performance skill set. He was such a player that carries that kind of respect factor with him."

As a free agent, Kendrick, 34, encountered a market callous to his demographic as a solid veteran in the latter part of his career — even one who batted .315 with an .844 on-base-plus-slugging percentage in 91 games last season. After signing a one-year deal with the Philadelphia Phillies in the 2016-17 offseason, Kendrick sought a two-year pact to avoid another round of uncertainty next offseason.

Eventually, Kendrick and the Nationals concluded committing to each other was the best move and agreed a two-year contract worth \$7 million in mid-January. Kendrick called returning to Washington as a backup for another potential playoff run an easy decision.

"There wasn't a lot of chatter, to be honest with you," said Kendrick, who batted .293 with an .837 OPS in 52 games with Washington. "... The Nationals were the one team that came to the table like, 'Hey, we want you back, this is what we're willing to offer you.' ... The market's not that great right now."

Ultimately, Kendrick will solidify the bench as he did when he was acquired from the Philadelphia Phillies in July. But there's a chance he begins his 13th major league season as an everyday player again if Daniel Murphy isn't cleared to return from microfracture knee surgery by Opening Day.

On Friday, Rizzo reiterated the team is optimistic Murphy, who underwent the surgery on Oct. 20, will be ready in time. But if he isn't, Kendrick and Wilmer Difo are the choices to fill in until Murphy is ready. Kendrick participated in team defensive drills during the week at second base and started there in Friday's Grapefruit League opener while Difo has been at shortstop. Martinez, however, warned not to read into the early developments.

"Based on information, I'd like to see them both at times play," Martinez said. "Murphy's progressing well, we've still got a long way to go. If Murphy's not ready, Kendrick, Difo, [Adrian] Sanchez — I kind of like him too — those guys are in the mix."

Kendrick has played more games at second base — 1,127 — than anywhere else in his career, but he's spent more time in the outfield — specifically left field — over the past two seasons. Last year, he appeared in right field for the first time in his career and played first base in four games. But second base, he said on Friday, is still where he's most comfortable. He's played there since he was 5 years old. It's natural for him. The number, though, is new.

Article #29

Scherzer the head of the class among aces

By Mike Lupica – MLB.com (2/25/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. -- His name is John Graham, and there may have been kids happier to be at The Ballpark of the Palm Beaches on this day than he was. But probably not. Graham, who is 56, suffered a stroke last March, and was diagnosed with prostate cancer after that. He says that when he was first starting to get better, his goal was no more complicated than Spring Training baseball: Being well enough to go back and be at a ballpark like this.

"I thought about days like this," he said. "I thought about the chance to watch somebody like Max Scherzer pitch."

I asked him if he knew Scherzer might be pitching when he bought tickets for the first Sunday of Spring Training games here, Nationals against the Braves. He smiled and shook his head.

"I have a friend in the ticket office," he said. "He told me who was starting for the Nats." Graham nods at his wife sitting next to him. "When she got home from teaching yoga, I told her, 'We're going to the ballpark.' She said, 'We were just there two days ago.' I said, 'That was two days ago. One of the best pitchers in the world is pitching today.'"

He was talking about Scherzer -- and maybe Scherzer isn't merely one of the best pitchers in the world. He is possibly the best -- winning two Cy Young Awards in a row, and three in five years. We talk about Clayton Kershaw all the time. We also saw what Scherzer's old teammate, Justin Verlander, did for the Astros. There are other aces, though not as many as you think. Chris Sale of the Red Sox is one. Jake Arrieta, currently unemployed, has better numbers over the past five years than you might think.

But when you add it all up, it is not so hard to make the case that the ace of all the aces in baseball right now is Max Scherzer of the Washington Nationals.

"When the Nats got him from Detroit, I thought he was just some guy they had who wasn't Verlander," Graham said. "Boy, was I wrong."

Scherzer, great as he is, was absolutely in Verlander's shadow when they were both with the Tigers. He didn't start one of the first two games of the Nats' playoff series against the Cubs last season because he was recovering from a hamstring injury. So Scherzer only got one postseason start in the same October in which Verlander really did look like as much of an ace as he had ever been in his life in pitching a complete game against the Yankees in Game 6 of the American League Championship Series -- with the Astros down in the series, three games to two.

But when you look at his total body of work over the past five regular seasons and factor in those three Cy Young Awards, you can see why it isn't much of a challenge to say Scherzer is first among equals. Even if there aren't all that many equals.

Here are some stats from Matt Kelly at MLB.com:

ERA

1. Kershaw: 1.95
2. Greinke: 2.83
3. Arrieta: 2.86
4. Scherzer: 2.87

5. Sale: 3.01
6. Verlander: 3.56

Strikeout-to-walk ratio (K/BB)

1. Kershaw: 6.9
2. Sale: 5.8
3. Scherzer: 5.0
4. Greinke: 4.2
5. Verlander: 3.2
6. Arrieta: 3.1

Strikeout rate

1. Scherzer: 30.6 percent
2. Kershaw: 30.4 percent
3. Sale: 30.0 percent
4. Arrieta: 24.7 percent
5. Greinke: 23.5 percent
6. Verlander: 23.4 percent

Batting average against

1. Kershaw: .197
2. Arrieta: .204
3. Scherzer: .205
4. Sale: .221
5. Greinke: .230
6. Verlander: .238

OPS against

1. Kershaw: .529
2. Arrieta: .595
3. Scherzer: .608
4. Sale: .624
5. Greinke: .639
6. Verlander: .678

Innings pitched

1. Scherzer: 1,092 1/3
2. Sale: 1,038
3. Verlander: 991 1/3
4. Kershaw: 991
5. Greinke: 963 2/3
6. Arrieta: 826 2/3

Wins

1. Scherzer: 89
2. Kershaw: 83
3. Greinke: 81

4. Sale: 70
5. Arrieta: 69
6. Verlander: 64

Home runs allowed

1. Arrieta: 63
2. Kershaw: 66
3. Greinke: 94
4. Verlander: 107
5. Sale: 110
6. Scherzer: 116

Scherzer has given up more home runs than the other guys, yes he has. Here it is, see if you can hit it. He gave up a monster on Sunday afternoon in West Palm Beach to the second batter he faced, Dansby Swanson, who hit one over everything in left field until it landed in front of the Astros' "World Champion" sign out there. But he struck out Austin Riley, swinging, to end the first and struck out two more guys in the second. It was clear to see -- even in this small sampling, even on the first Sunday of spring games, with beer vendors yelling "Dilly Dilly" as they tried to sell Bud Light and fans like John Graham ridiculously happy to be here -- that you could have taken Scherzer's slider, in particular, from this first Sunday of spring games all the way to Opening Day.

Kershaw has a Hollywood stage, and such a famous baseball platform, in Los Angeles with the Dodgers. Verlander isn't just a champion now, he has his own profile raised by having a famous model wife like Kate Upton. The Dodgers wouldn't trade Kershaw for anybody. The Astros wouldn't trade Verlander for anybody. But Scherzer, at least so far in Washington, has more than been one of the great free-agent pitching acquisitions of all time -- even if the Nationals paid \$210 million over seven years to get him.

Now three years into that deal, the 33-year-old is 51-25 in 98 starts for Washington, with an earned run average of 2.76, never making fewer than 30 starts. He has pitched a no-hitter. He has struck out 20 in a game. Now, his first Spring Training start of 2018. On the last Sunday in February, Scherzer already looked like he was ready for the last Thursday in March, which is when the Nationals will open their regular season in Cincinnati.

Scherzer's Sunday ended in the top of the second, when he struck out Dustin Peterson. Seven batters, three strikeouts, goodbye. He was walking off as soon as the ball was in the catcher's glove.

In the shade behind third base, John Graham smiled. Like a kid.

"The best," he said.

He was either talking about Scherzer. Or the day. Or both.

Article #30

Kevin Long, the Nationals' new hitting coach, can make a great lineup even better

By Thomas Boswell – Washington Post (2/25/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, FLA. — Besides Manager Dave Martinez, the Washington Nationals' biggest offseason addition may prove to be touted hitting coach Kevin Long, the guru of launch angle who helped Daniel Murphy transform himself from a good hitter into a star in 2015.

When the New York Mets fired Terry Collins as manager after last season, the 51-year-old Long was on the open market — for an instant. Nationals General Manager Mike Rizzo pounced, offering him a three-year contract. Months of grinning have followed.

"I'm super excited," Nationals outfielder Bryce Harper said. "When I heard, I was like, 'Wow, that's a great asset for us.' I didn't even think his name would come up at all."

Under Long, hitters study angles and planes, spin rates and heat charts, cognitive training and chase rates, and they develop swing mechanics that will improve launch angle. In the end, Murphy claims, "Kevin will make you feel like a killer."

When managers get fired, the cream of their coaching staff is often poached during the limbo days of a managerial search. The Nats didn't just subtract manager Dusty Baker; they also lost pitching coach Mike Maddux, one of the best, to the St. Louis Cardinals. But when the Mets fired Collins, the Nats grabbed Long.

In the past 11 years, Long became known as a cutting-edge coach who long ago taught theories that modern analytics now approve. In his first year with the Yankees, New York scored the most runs by a Bronx team since 1937. Two years later, they won the 2009 World Series. In his first year with the Mets, they reached the World Series.

Now Long inherits an offense that already was excellent under former hitting coach Rick Schu, leading the National League in slugging in 2017 while scoring the third-most runs in the league. The Nats hope Long's insights complement the work Schu already did.

In the past two years, Murphy, the hitting evangelical, has praised Long to his teammates a thousand times. Murphy even lobbied ownership to heist Long from the Mets. At the first hitters' meeting last week, Murphy said to his mates, "Now you're in trouble. Now you got two of us." Then the second baseman asked Long, "Can I talk?"

"No, not today," answered Long, who chuckled recalling the moment.

"Murph doesn't want to hit one groundball [ever]. He'll go crazy," Long said of his friend and disciple. Murphy will remind lamp posts that grounders produce a .220 batting average and only 7 percent of them go for extra-base hits. For a hitter, salvation (and cash) are found in the sky.

"When Murph's thinking 'air,' he's thinking 'to the moon!'" Long said. "He's got to understand that every individual doesn't think like he thinks."

After spending the offseason watching "thousands of swings" by every Nationals player, Long hit the ground preaching — but different ideas to different hitters. His first project may be catcher Matt Wieters, who hit .225 last year and .143 in the postseason.

"We are well on our way to get him where he needs to be. Made a lot of improvement . . . some adjustments. He feels pretty sexy about what he's doing," said Long, whose idea of joy is a 4½-hour meeting — all on hitting.

Wieters, who went 2 for 2 with a two-run homer in a 9-3 Grapefruit League win over the Atlanta Braves on Sunday, hit .190 after June 16 last year with bat speed so slow he looked as if he were swinging underwater. Washed up or just bad mechanics? Long, who might justify his entire contract if he got Wieters back to his decent career on-base-plus-slugging percentage of .726, thinks the latter.

“Matt wasn’t using his lower half,” Long said, “and he’s starting to do that. He’s excited.”

Is shortstop Trea Turner the terror of 2016 or the merely pretty good hitter of 2017? Long has some ideas. Turner — and coaches — always have debated whether he should use his speed to beat out groundball hits then steal bases or utilize his power to aim for 60 extra-base hits. Why not do both — but in opposite directions?

In the 2016 playoffs, the Los Angeles Dodgers got a book on Turner that others have copied, including the Chicago Cubs in the 2017 playoffs. Turner tends to hit flyouts to right field when he is pitched hard-and-away. Long hopes Turner will use his natural line drive approach for power to left field but use the ground more to the opposite field. If Adam Eaton bats leadoff with Turner behind him, Turner will get more at-bats with “the hole open” on the right side for groundball hits. “That’s sometimes a pretty easy way to get a hit,” Turner conceded last week.

What about Harper, whose best coach always has been his father? Will Long get in the middle and mess him up after a 1.008-OPS year?

No way, vows Long, who spotted subtle changes the Harpers had made to Bryce’s swing in the offseason. “I told Bryce, ‘Call your dad and tell him how much you love him.’ Because he did a tremendous job,” Long said. The coach would appreciate being in the Harper-Harper loop but knows he will never do more than jot notes in the margins of the Harper thesis.

Even Murphy could improve, in Long’s view, if he reduced his “chase rate” at pitches out of the strike zone and drew more walks, like Joey Votto. Then Murphy also might rise toward the very top of the hallowed OPS chain.

Only one Nationals hitter probably will remain under a bell jar: Anthony Rendon. “He’s got it. He’s a magician. We sat there and marveled at him,” Long said of a Mets dugout that watched Rendon’s 17 RBI in 17 games against the New York in 2017.

“He’s quiet, always on time, looks effortless. His mechanics are flawless, in line, balanced,” Long said. Last year, Rendon even moved closer to the plate. Using his quick hands to smash inside pitches, he now commands the entire zone. “I’m leaving him alone,” Long said. “He’s one guy I’m not going to be able to help too much.”

Spring training is for optimism bordering on delusion. The Nats get that feeling talking hitting with Long. But the sentiment is mutual. “To say I’m excited,” he said, “is an understatement.” So let’s have a 4½ -hour meeting to discuss it.

Send Murphy for the black coffee.

Article #31

Max Scherzer doesn’t think he’s reached his peak: ‘I may be better in 2018’

By Jorge Castillo – Washington Post (2/25/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — There will come a time when Max Scherzer will reach his peak, and the inevitable downhill slide that eventually conquers all professional athletes, Hall of Fame-caliber or not, will emerge to sap his powers. He just doesn't think he is there yet. Not after consecutive Cy Young Awards. Not after five straight seasons of 200-plus innings. Not after leading the National League in strikeouts each of the past two years.

"I don't know," Scherzer said. "I may be better in 2018."

How? Well, Scherzer won't divulge those details, afraid word will spread through the media to opposing clubhouses. But he is certain there are areas for growth. Five months shy of his 34th birthday, he believes the peak hasn't been reached.

Scherzer's quest for improvement and a third consecutive Cy Young unofficially officially began at 1:05 p.m. Sunday at the Ballpark of the Palm Beaches, when he slung a fastball by the Atlanta Braves' Ronald Acuña, the consensus top prospect in baseball, for strike one. After getting Acuña to ground out up the middle into an infield shift, Scherzer missed his spot with a 1-0 fastball and Dansby Swanson swatted it over the wall. He wasn't fretting over it.

"That's good," Scherzer said. "Get those solo shots out of the way now. You can hit as many home runs as you want in spring training."

Swanson's long ball was the only damage inflicted in Scherzer's two innings in the Nationals' 9-3 win. He threw just 23 pitches. He struck out three and didn't issue a walk. He pounded the strike zone with his entire repertoire, and his fastball sat at 93 mph, according to the television broadcast's radar gun. He emerged satisfied. Manager Dave Martinez, after getting his first in-game glimpse of Scherzer in the same uniform, called Scherzer's performance "awesome."

"You really have no adrenaline whatsoever here in a spring start for the first one out," Scherzer said. "So I was able to at least put a foundation of establishing off-speed in the zone and working off of that."

Scherzer reported to spring training eons ahead of where he was a year ago, when he didn't throw his first bullpen session until the first week of March because of a stress fracture in the bottom knuckle of his right ring finger. It was a perplexing nuisance. He was forced to withdraw from the World Baseball Classic. It put his status for the start of the season in doubt and forced him to tinker with a three-fingered fastball to build arm strength. Alarms were ringing. Scherzer proceeded to win his third Cy Young in five seasons anyway. This spring, Scherzer arrived healthy after a couple of minor injuries, including repeated neck stiffness and a hamstring tweak in his final regular season start, nagged him in 2017.

"My mood's better," said Scherzer, who became a father in November. "Even my wife could tell you. She said it's been nice having you healthy in an offseason."

If there was any doubt about his health, Scherzer dispelled it with an intense 60-pitch bullpen a day after reporting to camp. Trademark grunts were included. He insisted the strenuous session, though unusual for most pitchers at that early stage, is typical for him when not dealing with an injury. It was the first time Martinez watched his ace throw off a mound since taking the job. He came away marveling at Scherzer, whom he recently compared to Randy Johnson, though he has already picked up on Scherzer's ways.

“Max himself is unusual,” the rookie manager noted.

One of Scherzer’s idiosyncrasies, according to catcher Matt Wieters, is his ability to absorb new information and apply it when necessary. Wieters said Scherzer seeks data from anyone willing to share any, from the club’s video coordinators, coaches and other players. He looks for swing-and-miss numbers, pitch-take tendencies and power zones. And he does it more than most others.

“He’s one of the more actively pursuing pitchers on the information that I’ve ever been around,” Wieters said. “It’s not like blind trust. He knows what he wants, and he can implement it in his game.”

For now, the focus is on staying healthy and building up arm strength for Opening Day. Scherzer admitted feeling a little fatigued after warming up in the bullpen. It was fewer than two dozen pitches after that, but he expects to be sore in the morning. However, fatigue early in the spring, he insisted, is a good thing. He would prefer to pitch out of the stretch more, but he threw all his pitches in the zone and worked ahead in the count.

Sunday, therefore, was a success. It was, he believes, the beginning of an ascent to another level.

“In my mind, the peak is higher,” Scherzer said. “You can see it however you want. I know what’s on my mind.”

Article #32

Martinez wants Turner to keep running, even in front of Harper

By Mark Zuckerman – MASN Sports (2/25/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - Given his association with analytics, it’s easy to assume Davey Martinez isn’t a big proponent of the stolen base. The Cubs stole only 62 bases last season, fourth-fewest in the National League.

Then again, the Cubs didn’t have Trea Turner. Which changes the whole ballgame.

Over his last 162 big league games, Turner has swiped 76 bases. Martinez isn’t about to tell one of the fastest players in the sport to ease off the gas pedal. Even if he doesn’t regularly hit leadoff this season. And even if Bryce Harper is batting directly behind him.

“I told him: ‘If you hit second, leadoff, wherever you hit in the lineup, it doesn’t change anything,’ ” the Nationals’ new manager said. “I want him to be aggressive on the bases. And he knows that. We had a great conversation and I told him: ‘Hey, you’re going to steal. As a hitter behind you, I’d much rather have you on second base than at first base.’ I said: ‘We’ve got to be conscious of the situations of the game.’ And that’s something that we’ll talk about throughout spring training.”

With Adam Eaton (and his .363 on-base percentage since 2014) set to be the Nationals’ regular leadoff man, Turner is most likely going to find himself batting second. He’s perfectly comfortable with that, pointing out that he most often hit second or third in college and the minors.

But Harper’s presence behind him might make Turner think twice about running too much. If the theory is not to leave first base open and entice opponents to intentionally walk your best hitter, wouldn’t Turner be better served just staying on first base and letting Harper do his thing?

Not really, according to Martinez.

Given the depth of talent in the heart of the Nationals lineup, Martinez isn't worried about Harper getting walked. With Anthony Rendon, Daniel Murphy and Ryan Zimmerman potentially batting 4-5-6, the Nats don't expect to be stranding Turner on the bases too much.

"Absolutely, and that's the point," Martinez said. "Do I want Bryce to swing the bat? Of course. Will he get frustrated? No. We've had that conversation, too, that he'd rather (Turner) be on second base to drive in a run. A base hit drives in a run. So they're all good. They all understand."

Turner will be one of a few Nationals who have the green light to steal bases, joined by Michael A. Taylor, Brian Goodwin and Eaton (if his surgically repaired knee feels well). But even those who aren't among the speediest players on the roster will be encouraged to try to take extra bases when given an opportunity. It's a major point of emphasis for Martinez.

"My biggest model for them as baserunners is: How can we get to third base with less than two outs?" the manager said. "Yesterday, you watch (Wilmer) Difo go first to third on a ball that he probably shouldn't have. But that's the way I want them to play the game. Especially down here. I told them: 'I'll never criticize you going first to third in spring training, ever. Because I want to see how many times you can make it.'"

The same applies to runners who have an opportunity to round third. Bob Henley is the only member of Dusty Baker's 2017 coaching staff who was retained to be on Martinez's staff, and though the third base coach has been criticized at times for his aggressive approach, the new manager doesn't want "Sendley" to change his ways at all.

"Coming in this past winter, Bobby, decision-making at third base has been really good," Martinez said. "I know that, so I want him to be aggressive. And you know what, I told the baserunners, we had this conversation: He's just there to really stop you. You got to go. He's only there to stop you."

Article #33

MARTINEZ LEAVES SHADOWS FOR LEAD SEAT

By Todd Dybas – The Sports Capitol (2/25/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Nationals third base coach Bob Henley was not wasting his moment when centered in the Circle of Trust. His voice is usually filled with a clear southern twang. That he's from "L.A", lower Alabama, is among his stock jokes. Though there was no evidence of his accent when he yelled while surrounded by onlooking players.

He was an unbridled man who gesticulated and wailed in the center of the circle under the Florida sun. His face was lathered in sunscreen for safety, so much so he had near-ghost qualities while he recounted a baseball tale that was part Melville, part southern lore and other parts no one was too sure about.

The power of his story was clear. Several players stepped back to laugh. Applause followed at its end when the Circle of Trust, manager Davey Martinez's new, daily, 9:30 a.m. staple at spring training, broke.

The circle is among the new elements under the Nationals' fourth manager in seven seasons. Music during workouts is new. Throw-in Henley blowing an air horn from a lookout between the four workout fields when

it's time to start or change a drill as an addition. And, a lot of delegation. Martinez leaned on a bat outside of a pitcher-catcher relationship meeting last week. He didn't speak. Matt Wieters did. Max Scherzer did. Martinez watched from the outer edge.

To get here, finally in charge of a team, Martinez had to change his tact. He had to find a way to shake a shadow. What he was doing before managerial job interviews was enough to provide him those conversations. What he said during them was not enough to land one. He was often relying on the pedigree of his mentor, Joe Maddon, to make the difference. Turns out, he was leaning too hard on the merits of his former boss when he, alone, would have been sufficient.

"After going through so many interviews, I felt really confident this time around," Martinez told The Sports Capitol. "I talked more about what I can do to help the Nats win as opposed to what Joe and I had done over the years. I think that seemed to put me over the edge. Joe's my mentor. We've done a lot of good things together, we've created a lot of good culture. When I look back, I did a lot of that stuff. I thought it was time that I'm trying to get the job, not Joe Maddon. So, I went this time and talked more about what I can do to help the Nats win. [Mike] Rizzo said, 'Hey, you're ready. It was good to hear that this was about you and not about what you and Joe do.' That's why he hired me."

Now here, Martinez can make all the jovial changes he wants. But, he is aware of the managerial turnover at this organization. It brings them in and spits them out at a rate that has caused players to lose track of how many have occupied the corner office. He also knows the reason for that. Team ownership has reached the point where there is only one acceptable outcome: win the World Series. That stance makes Martinez's maiden season pressure-filled and unique in a circle, square or diamond.

So much of this is based in Tampa. It's where Maddon hired Martinez as bench coach, beginning their path toward untraditional management and, considering it was the Rays, untraditional results.

While there, Martinez would catch rides to Tropicana Field each day with third base coach Tom Foley. There is a simple reason for that: "I don't like driving," Martinez said.

They rolled down I-275 in Foley's truck talking about baseball, life, whatever. Martinez liked it because was in the passenger seat and not alone. Foley thought the conversation was a fair trade for the transportation.

"It beats sitting in the car by yourself and listening to the same song over and over again," Martinez said.

"He had a vehicle," Foley said. "He was just too lazy to drive."

Martinez's future in Tampa seemed to have a natural path after the organization's staff squeezed dollars out of ownership pennies. Maddon massaged 90 or more wins out of the Rays in five of his nine seasons. His second season was the reckoning: Tampa won 97 games and made it to the World Series. The Rays were last in payroll that season. Tampa Bay never rose above 21st in payroll during Maddon's tenure. They spent little to win big.

Maddon left for the Chicago Cubs, discarding his past payroll problem, after the 2014 season. Martinez interviewed to replace him. He was not hired, beginning a series of interviews, including one in Washington, that would not land him a managerial job before the Nationals' ownership countered Rizzo's desire to retain Dusty Baker, and instead opened the position, then selected Martinez.

"I have the utmost respect for Tampa Bay, and the people there," Martinez said. "We did some pretty good things there and I worked with some pretty good players. I watched them mature in front of my eyes. I had

good relationships with them, so, I have no ill feelings about them. I have no ill feelings about why they didn't hire me. I just looked at, 'Hey, you know what, it's not the time right now. Keep doing what I do.' I've always said I'm really good at what I do. Keep doing the interviews. Somebody will give me a job one day. If it doesn't happen, it is what it is. But, I've always felt like I was ready to manage and hopefully I would get the opportunity to manage."

Maddon brought Martinez to Chicago and increased his responsibilities. He was often charged with handling uncomfortable conversations. Not good cop, bad cop, but Martinez was intervening a step before the brewing issue percolated into the manager's office.

Martinez is trying to find ailments, solutions and future problems in those talks. He prefers exchanges on the side to grandstanding in a group. In the offseason, he anticipated having three team meetings all season. The first came during the opening full-squad workout Feb. 21. That leaves two for the next eight months.

Conversation may be regaining its currency in the game. Maddon argued at the Winter Meetings that the information he was among the pioneers to use has become pervasive. One team may be better at it than another, but equal access to information has reached all 30 teams. That means dissemination of the information is a new skill for a manager.

"For me, it's all about how you present the information to players and others," Martinez said. "A lot of players, they like the information, but they want to know why you came up with that. So, you've got to have a reason. When I get information, I've got to know why that is, and explain it to me so that I can make sense of it and help explain it to the coaches and the players. To me, that's the bottom line. When you can start doing that, and having these communications and open it up for dialogue, they buy-in and they start using it."

Martinez makes the same presentation when talking about extracting information from players. Is something wrong at home? Is something wrong in the clubhouse? Is he sitting on an injury and not saying? If any of those things are true, he has to drag the word out, have an exchange, get them to believe he is on their side. Doing that as principal instead of vice principal is a complication he plans to navigate with directness.

"I'm very hands on," Martinez said. "And I never see myself not ever being available for the players. It's not who I am. One thing I know about myself, regardless [if I am] the bench coach or the manager, I won't change who I am. I build relationships with players and I want them to come to me whenever there is a situation. I want them to feel like, 'Hey, you might not like what I am going to tell you right now, but if you think about it in maybe today, tomorrow, a week, whatever, you'll appreciate that I was honest and I'll have this conversation to help you and help the team.'"

His in-game responsibilities also grew in Chicago. Martinez would manage the game along with Maddon. They worked in a tactical way that appealed to Rizzo and the Lerner family. Rizzo mentioned "creative and "analytical" in his opening statement when Martinez was introduced.

He said those words again in secondary interviews. They worked with dual emphasis as jabs at the departed Baker and suggestions of why this guy, this time, will be different.

Martinez was running numbers a month after that puffed-up introduction. He wanted to know what the math said about Trea Turner bunting. His new hitting coach, Kevin Long, is inherently against hitting the ball on

the ground because the numbers show a spike in failure rate when that occurs. Doing it on purpose, with touch, only seems to amplify Long's argument. So, Martinez wanted to know how they should apply the idea to the blink-fast Turner.

"People always assume that because you can run really fast, you should bunt more," Martinez said. "That's the assumption, right? When you think about it, we ran the numbers with Turner. Let's figure out why he should bunt. Turner's a pretty good hitter. He's going to hit 20-25 home runs. Do we really want him to go up there and think about bunting? Or do we want him to think about just staying in the middle of the field and hitting doubles and maybe more or less getting on base a little bit more? Those are the things that we need to be thinking about. Right now, we're running these numbers and trying to figure out what's the best for him, then, from there, what's the best for the team. Should he bunt leading off an inning, depending on the game? Should he bunt late in games? Trying to see what's the best for him and the club.

"I don't even like pitchers bunting. Will we do it? Yeah, of course. Some of the pitchers, the guy can swing the bat. I'd rather see them swing the bat."

The ideas are not mind-blowing. At least not in 2018. And, Martinez has already shown some traditional tendencies. He named Sean Doolittle the closer. He expects to use Brandon Kintzler and Ryan Madson in their seventh- and eighth-inning roles, respectively. Adam Eaton will lead off.

The middle of the lineup, the middle of games may be where he uses a different approach. Maddon said last season that handedness doesn't matter when hitters are the level of Daniel Murphy and Bryce Harper. Theories like that could put lefties or righties back-to-back in the lineup. Martinez could use reverse-splits as a guide more often than past Washington managers. He could challenge Los Angeles manager Dave Roberts for the league lead in pitching changes.

There also may be hi-jinks on the road. Martinez was coy when asked what the team will be wearing aboard planes.

"Remains to be seen," he said with a laugh.

At the least, he walks into this job with his mentor convinced of his ability.

"Davey is ready," Maddon told reporters at the Winter Meetings. "He's ready. He's very good at what he does. He's going to be a very good in-game manager. We talked a lot during the course of the games. He's also a very good instructor. He's a very good outfield instructor. He can help with the hitting.

"It's just Davey's time."

Martinez will be Bryce Harper's fourth manager in seven seasons. Ryan Zimmerman, who has been here from the beginning, will be playing for his seventh full-time manager since 2005. Anthony Rendon had lost count when mentioning his managers in spring training. Turnover has become shrug-worthy in the clubhouse.

Length of contract has been a complication. Jim Riggleman wanted an extension. So did Baker. One walked because he did not receive it. The other was strung along until the utmost end, then discarded. The Nationals had also been burned working the opposite way. They picked up Matt Williams' option early. Then, they had to fire him and absorb it. Regardless, the top-step turnstile at Nationals Park has been cemented as a concern in the league. Martinez was aware.

“You don’t necessarily know what transpires,” Martinez said. “But when you’re trying to look in, what I know by getting the job is I know how passionate the Lerner’s are, Rizzo, the organization, about winning. I look back and they’ve had pretty good managers. All I want to do is build on what they’ve done. Granted they didn’t go far in the postseason, but they’ve won a lot of games. It’s there. The pieces are there. I just hope to get a little bit more out of each player to get us to the ultimate goal and that’s to win the championship.”

He satisfied both sides in separate meetings. Martinez met with Rizzo at swanky seafood restaurant Ocean Prime in Tampa. They talked baseball. Rizzo’s base remains in scouting. Martinez, 53, has been in Major League Baseball since his June debut in 1986. He was 21. There were years of travel, outs and moments to discuss.

“The thing that struck me as the most impressive thing about him, on one hand, he’s a 16-year veteran, grizzled and grinded his way through 16 years in the big leagues,” Rizzo said. “But, he’s such an articulate, intelligent, analytically-based thinker that it’s just like the best of both worlds. The creativity that has been shown in both of the organizations that he’s been to and the cultures that developed there, people in the know have told me he is largely responsible for both of those.”

Martinez flew to Washington to meet with the Lerner’s a few days after dining with Rizzo. He, the Lerner family, and the Cohens — Debra and Edward, who are among the principal ownership group — had dinner. Martinez characterized that discussion as more varied. Then, a phone call.

“They called me and said that they wanted me to manage the Nationals,” Martinez said. “Here I am.”

The same people sat at his opening press conference. Rizzo was alongside him in front of the crowd. The owners sat in the front row, observing, applauding, looming. They had already moved onto the same message, one Martinez rolled head-long into prior to “Davey Martinez” being slid in place of “Dusty Baker” outside the far office at the end of the hall in West Palm Beach, before mornings with the Circle of Trust, ahead of a pitch being thrown.

“The expectations are to play the last game of the World Series and win it, no doubt,” Martinez said. “Our focus is to stay in the moment, win the first game of 162, then move on. I want these guys to know we’re here to win. That’s the bottom line. But how do we do that? Stay in the moment and compete every day at the highest level. And to open the communication — I don’t want those guys to shy away from it. I don’t want them to hear about Game 5 anymore and not making this and that, because they’re good. That’s gone. Our job moving forward IS to get to the World Series and win. It needs to be addressed and they need to know [to] not be afraid of it. It’s there. And, if we do what we’re capable of doing, why not us? Why can’t it be us?”

With that, Martinez asked what everyone in the District has been wondering.

Article #34

FEWER GAMES, POUNDS EXPECTED TO HELP WIETERS

By Todd Dybas – The Sports Capitol (2/25/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Hope and math will go another round this spring at the Nationals’ spring training complex in West Palm Beach, Florida. Mainly, they will be anchored in a tussle focused on starting catcher Matt Wieters.

He played like a tiring man trekking down a mountain last season, just hoping his legs would carry him to the end. After signing with the Nationals late in spring training — in yet another gift exchange with uber-agent Scott Boras — Wieters was moved into the starting spot. His offseason work was limited. His spring training preparation was truncated. And, his position was the most grueling.

That mix led to a dismal season at the plate. Wieters' OPS-plus was 63, the worst of his career by a significant margin, trouncing his previous low of 89 in 2016. His decline since 2015 has been rapid and pronounced. Wieters' OPS-plus that season was 101. It has dipped each season since.

"I look at everything as the season we got to where we wanted to get to and we played on a great team that was a winning team," Wieters said. "It just didn't go the way we wanted to in the playoffs."

The Nationals will argue part of his decline can be attributed to overuse. Wieters caught 123 games last season. They would like that number to drop by 20 or so this season. They just have to figure out the path to get there.

Gone is Jose Lobaton. His humor and role as helmet-taker-off guy following a home run will be missed. But, whoever replaces him, will have a clear chance to play more often and provide better work. Like Wieters, he had his worst season last year.

The options are buoyant Pedro Severino or — surprise — Miguel Montero.

Montero's signing at the start of February showed what his former bench coach, Davey Martinez, thought of him. Martinez, who prides himself on personal conversation, recounted a story in December about Montero to The Sports Capitol. When he saw Montero quiet, he knew something was off.

He used it as an example of how he handles players that are emotional. If he sees them down, he knows something is wrong. Martinez said that he doesn't want players to differ from who they are, whether emotional or reticent. Montero's emotions led to him being traded out of Chicago after he publicly criticized Cubs starter Jake Arrieta.

Montero could be a fit for the Nationals. Wieters' key weakness is Montero's strength. From the left side, Wieters hit .221 with a .619 OPS last season. Montero, a left-handed hitting two-time all-star, has a career .781 OPS against right handed pitching. That gives Martinez numerous chances to sit Wieters in favor of Montero, should he become the backup. To do so, Montero will have to hold off Pedro Severino.

At this point last season, Severino seemed to have a chance at the backup spot. Lobaton was back, but at a low cost, and Severino had been part of the postseason roster because of Wilson Ramos' late-season knee injury. Instead, Severino was sent to Triple-A Syracuse where he joined almost everyone on the roster in having a poor season. He hit .242 — almost 30 points lower than the season before — and never pushed his way into a situation that was desperate for help. The caveat is that he was just 23 at the time.

The Nationals believe a reduction in weight and usage will help Wieters deliver better results. His Baltimore days of 20-plus home runs and an OPS-plus above 100 are gone. What they are desperate to avoid is having their starting catcher be 21st in OPS out of the 22 catchers who caught more than 100 games last season.

"Every year at the end of the year no matter what happens, I go in seeing what I can improve, I can do better on," Wieters said. "I thought eating habits and getting back to a weight I can play at was something

that was a very attainable goal and something I felt like would help me this year and I was excited to see how that goes.”

Wieters has already made mechanical changes with new hitting coach Kevin Long. Their philosophies were in sync — for the most part — since Wieters is a speed-challenged hitter who already wanted to avoid ground balls. Long, and prized pupil Daniel Murphy, is maniacal about getting the ball in the air. Wieters was already into that.

The early change has come in basis for Wieters’ swing. Wieters, who will turn 32 in May, relied on his hands at the plate. He “crossed-over” when he swung, to use his term. Long has pushed him to use his legs more. His early spring workouts are based in that. As are his swing load and drive. The effervescent Long said the changes had Wieters “feeling sexy” about where his swing was already. Wieters is a more reserved sole. He supplied a more placid explanation of what is happening.

“We’ve traced everything back to the legs and being able to stay inline, being able to drive with the backside,” Wieters said. “Throughout my career, I’ve been a hitter who crossed over and uses his hands to hit. It’s been a way I felt comfortable. But, I think I’m at a point in my career where I feel it is a good time to really try and break some of the habits I’ve kind of created for myself and see what that adjustment turns into.

“Just being able to get into my legs more, some of the swing mechanical faults I had before have kind of corrected themselves. It’s a lot of work. It can be a little bit taxing on the lower body. But, the good thing is I know the staff here, so I don’t have to put as much of my physical energy into catching the pitchers. I can do a lot more verbally. Especially early in camp, I’ve tried to put that time into the hitting side, which I’ve really enjoyed.”

He needed it. The Nationals need it. The opening upside is that Wieters, and whomever backs him up, have only one direction to go.

Article #35

Erick Fedde, in first live action since August, makes his pitch — with velocity — for spot in Nationals’ rotation

By Jorge Castillo – Washington Post (2/26/18)

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — Erick Fedde knew something was wrong. His right forearm was hurting before his start against the New York Mets last August, but the pain intensified during the outing, producing a precipitous drop in velocity.

Fedde wasn’t too alarmed, and evidently the Washington Nationals’ coaching staff wasn’t either, allowing him to log six innings despite knowing of the soreness beforehand. Fedde figured the pain in his forearm was somewhat normal at the end of a long regular season. Then he was informed doctors also would examine his elbow.

“That was when I had a little bit of a panic attack,” Fedde recalled.

An MRI exam revealed a healthy elbow. It actually looked fantastic, Fedde was told, the kind of news that soothes nerves for a pitcher three years removed from Tommy John surgery. Nonetheless, Fedde was shut

down because of a forearm flexor strain, a disappointing conclusion for one of the top pitching prospects in baseball, but he was healthy by the end of the regular season. After a typical winter's work, he reported to spring training this month healthy and eyeing the final spot in the Nationals' starting rotati

"We do want to make sure that we're careful," Nationals Manager Dave Martinez said. "The most important thing in spring training for me is everybody leaves here healthy. Just want him to go out there and get his work done."

On Monday, Fedde, a day after his 25th birthday, stepped on a mound for his first live action since that start last August to begin his case for the vacancy. He allowed one run on four hits and a walk in two innings against an Atlanta Braves lineup that resembled the one projected for Opening Day. Two of the hits, including a two-out hit that led to the run scored, were groundballs through an infield shift. The lean right-hander tallied one strikeout, one walk and 38 pitches — 23 for strikes. The Nationals lost the game, 2-1.

If radar guns at Disney-themed spring training sites are to be trusted, Fedde's fastball ranged from 93 to 96 mph, which would be an encouraging return to the velocity that made him the Nationals' top pitching prospect last year after Lucas Giolito and Reynaldo Lopez were traded as part of the deal that brought Adam Eaton to Washington.

"I'll take it as a pretty mediocre outing," Fedde said. "I felt really good. I felt like my stuff was ahead of even where I wanted to be. Just I think I got a little anxious and hurried. Maybe put myself in a bad spot in the second inning. Overall, pretty happy."

A.J. Cole and Edwin Jackson are Fedde's main competition for the fifth starter spot. And that's if the Nationals don't sign one of the three established big league free agent starters still available: Jake Arrieta, Lance Lynn and Alex Cobb. Club officials have said Cole is the internal favorite because he impressed them down the stretch last season. Cole also doesn't have a minor league option remaining, which means the Nationals could lose him to another team if he doesn't make the Opening Day roster.

But Fedde has the higher upside, the kind of potential that prompted the Nationals to convert him to reliever midseason last year in hopes he could reach the majors more quickly. Fedde made his first relief appearance May 16. By July, the experiment was aborted after 16 relief appearances for Class AA Harrisburg and Class AAA Syracuse. He made his major league debut at the end of the month, as a starter, against the Colorado Rockies.

"I tried to take it really openly," Fedde said. "I understood the team was trying to get me to the big leagues. So how can I be upset about that? But, yeah, it was different. I had never been in the bullpen."

Fedde wound up starting three games in the majors, posting a 9.39 ERA, 15 strikeouts and eight walks in 15 1/3 innings before he was shut down. He said he learned a few lessons, namely mistakes are punished at a higher rate and attacking batters' weaknesses is paramount.

"I learned more in those three starts than I learned in my whole life," Fedde said.

He was encouraged by the progress his change-up made last season but thought his slider, historically his best secondary offering, regressed. A priority this spring is to recapture that pitch, and he said he has talked to Stephen Strasburg about it. He was pleased with his slider Monday. He threw it for strikes early in the count and generated a few outs with it. Most importantly, he emerged completely healthy. There was nothing to panic about. He is himself again.

Article #36

Boca's Taylor Gushue gets taste of first spring training in 'backyard'

By Samuel Howard – Palm Beach Post (2/26/18)

WEST PALM BEACH

As a teenager, Taylor Gushue would make the trip from his family's Boca Raton home to Park Vista High to practice with the county's traveling Police Athletic League baseball team.

This winter, the 24-year-old catcher drove about 15 miles further north to another Palm Beach County ballpark. This time, he reported as a non-roster invitee to the Washington Nationals spring training facility at the FITTEAM Ballpark of the Palm Beaches.

Invited to his first spring training with a major league team, Gushue said it paid off to be a local. A couple weeks before pitchers and catchers were due to report in mid-February, Gushue started working with some pitchers, including three-time Cy Young winner Max Scherzer, former All-Star Sean Doolittle and A.J. Cole.

"I was the first guy they were calling for to catch some bullpens for guys. ... That was good to get my feet wet before camp actually started," the alum of Broward County's Calvary Christian Academy said.

In the weeks since, Gushue said he's focused on sharpening his skills, particularly during behind-the-plate drills from bullpen coach Henry Blanco.

Aside from working on his footwork, manager Dave Martinez said Gushue is aiming to improve his arm strength.

On offense, the switch-hitting Gushue shows a lot of promise, Martinez said.

"He can hit," Martinez said. "He's got, you know, power from both sides."

Gushue, whose 18 home runs led the Class A (advanced) Potomac Nationals last season, connected for his first spring training hit Saturday on a ground ball up the middle.

"It felt great," Gushue said. "It was everything I hoped for."

He's trying to stay relaxed and have fun, but Gushue said his goal is to prove his worth to the Nationals' staff while finding ways to improve. Some of those improvements will come away the field, Gushue said. He's embracing a team culture that preaches the importance of working hard.

"Their work ethic is incredible," Gushue said of Nationals players. "I mean, everything they do has a purpose. And you know, if I could take one thing away, I mean it's just everything I do has to have, you know, purpose behind it."

Gushue, the Pittsburgh Pirates' fourth-round pick in the 2014 draft out of the University of Florida, is entering just his second full season in the Washington organization.

He never thought his path to the majors would take him back through his home county, where Gushue has fond memories of practicing at Park Vista and playing tournaments in Jupiter.

Gushue said he “couldn’t ask for anything more” than being able to play baseball close to home.

“It’s funny how that stuff works out, you know,” Gushue said. “I got drafted by the Pirates and played with them a couple years and had some great years over there with some great people. And then get traded over here (in September 2016) and next thing I know, like, I’m playing baseball in my backyard.”

Article #37

Trea Turner is working to become a difference-maker for the Nationals again

By Jorge Castillo – Washington Post (2/27/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Washington Nationals Manager Dave Martinez claims there “wasn’t really a book” on Trea Turner, no one strategy the Chicago Cubs, Martinez’s previous employer, utilized to attack the shortstop when they encountered the Nationals in the National League Division Series last October. The previous time the Cubs had seen Turner, he stole seven bases in three games. Martinez, then the Cubs’ bench coach, said they just wanted to avoid letting him get on base at all costs.

“When he gets on base,” Martinez said, “he causes all kinds of issues.”

The Cubs didn’t have to worry much about Turner’s base running in the five-game series. Turner went 3 for 21 with two walks and seven strikeouts. He went hitless in the first three games and stole his only base in Game 5. The Nationals’ sparkplug was neutralized for the second consecutive postseason, a frustrating conclusion to a frustrating sophomore campaign that began with a pothole. Heading into 2018, Turner is aiming to recapture his rookie form.

When Turner was promoted to the big league stage for good in 2016, expectations typical of a top prospect arrived with him. He was, after all, the Nationals’ shortstop of the future, a top-of-the-order bat with elite speed to put at the top of the batting order. But it was difficult to foresee him instantly becoming one of the best players in the National League and finishing second in the NL rookie of the year race after not playing every day until the end of July. Even for him.

“I don’t think me or anybody expected ’16 to go as well as it did,” Turner said. “So to me, I think, it was just like, “Wow, I can do more than I think I can.””

Which perhaps made his production in 2017 more frustrating than for the typical 23-year-old shortstop in his first full major league season. Making the switch back to shortstop after finishing 2016 in center field, Turner was on the 10-day disabled list with a strained hamstring less than a week into the season. It took until a week in late June for Turner to finally break out over a sustained stretch. He went 5 for 5 one day against the Cincinnati Reds. He stole eight bases and walked more than he struck out over the seven games — a small sample size but encouraging nonetheless.

Then, on June 30, after terrorizing the Cubs for four days, Turner was plunked on the right wrist by a 96-mph fastball by Pedro Strop in the ninth inning of the series finale. The wrist fractured. Turner wasn’t back in Washington’s lineup for two months. After batting .342 with a .937 on-base-plus-slugging percentage in 324 plate appearances in 2016, Turner batted .284 with a .789 OPS in 447 plate appearances in 2017.

Around the absences — and perhaps because of them — Turner said he developed bad mechanical habits in the batter's box. He found himself in a different hitting position than in 2016. Replicating that season's production, as a result, was unlikely. He has worked this spring with hitting coach Kevin Long to restore his 2016 form.

Long, a leading launch-angle enthusiast, is convinced Turner is a line-drive hitter because his swing is "very on plane" with the baseball. The problem last season, therefore, wasn't his swing. Long thinks it was his approach. The man credited with shepherding Daniel Murphy's midcareer transformation wants Turner to hit the ball on the ground more to the right side while lifting the ball to his pull side.

"That's what I did [in 2016]," the 24-year-old Turner said. "When they threw me away, I took my hit, the single or maybe in the gap for extra bases. But then when they pounded me in, I could hit it out of the park that way. I'm not necessarily going to just flick the ball to right field and hit a homer. I really have to drive it, which I can do, but I have to take a great swing on a good pitch. For me, if I can take my hits that way, it's fine with me."

The difference was notable. Turner's line-drive rate dropped from 25.5 to 14.8 percent, his groundball rate jumped from 43.1 to 51.7 percent, and his hard-hit ball rate sank from 34.8 to 26.7 percent. The result? A nose-dive in BABIP, batting average on balls in play, from a staggering .388 to .329. Luck is a factor in BABIP, but the differences in batted balls impacted Turner's production.

Furthermore, Turner said teams pitched him differently last year than in 2016. Two years ago, Turner said, opponents fed him a steady diet of fastballs because they didn't want to give him a free base. Last season, he encountered a more diverse pitch selection. Turner explained the difference is laying off pitches to put himself in favorable counts more often.

"When you prove you can hit, you get tough pitches to hit," Turner said. "And then you got to prove you can take them. And when you prove you can take them, they'll give you pitches to hit. It's back and forth, back and forth."

Turner began last season in the No. 2 spot in the order but jumped to the leadoff spot when Adam Eaton tore his anterior cruciate ligament in late April. As a leadoff batter over the past two years, Turner often hit ahead of the departed Jayson Werth, one of the most patient hitters in baseball. Werth's tendency to work deep into counts afforded Turner rampant opportunities to steal bases.

This season, Turner will bat second again with Eaton's anticipated return, usually hitting in front of Bryce Harper. Turner said they have already had conversations about possible situations they could encounter.

"I've always told everybody that hits behind me, swing at whatever you want because if you hit the ball in the gap, I'll score," Turner said. "I don't care that much about stolen bases. So when I steal and a guy fouls a pitch off, for me it's not that frustrating. I've always tried to make that a priority to the guys behind me. At the same time, I'm still going to try to be aggressive, but I have to know when to be aggressive on what guys do and don't like."

Martinez insisted Turner will have the green light on the base paths again. The manager wants his club to run the bases aggressively, and that starts with one of the fastest players in baseball. Turner needed just 98 games to swipe 46 bags on 54 chances after compiling 33 steals in 73 games in 2016. He smirked when asked how many bases he could have stolen if he avoided the disabled list.

"I don't know," he said. "Twenty more maybe? I don't know. I just want to be healthy this year."

As his manager knows: When he gets on base, he's a problem.

Article #38

Durable as ever, Gonzalez starts seventh year in D.C. on right foot

By Mark Zuckerman – MASN Sports (2/27/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - The good news: Gio Gonzalez looked a lot like his 2017 version in his first inning of 2018. The bad news: That meant the Nationals left-hander was pitching out of the stretch with runners on base, forced to battle his way out of a jam.

At this point, the Nats know that's simply what they're going to get from Gonzalez, who managed to walk the tightrope all last season and emerge unscathed the vast majority of the time.

"He knows for him it's (important) to avoid that big inning and just work on strikes," new manager Davey Martinez said. "The way to do that is just limit damage. If a guy gets on, just don't worry about it. Just limit the damage. Know you've got seven guys behind you that can catch the ball. And he did good."

Gonzalez's first competitive inning of the spring was straight out of his longstanding playbook. The Marlins' Magneuris Sierra led off with a single to left, forcing Gonzalez to immediately start working out of the stretch. He got Miguel Rojas to fly out, then watched as second baseman Howie Kendrick made a diving stop of Justin Bour's sharp grounder.

When Cameron Maybin walked, Gonzalez found himself in a two-out jam ... which he promptly escaped when he got Tomas Telis to send a soft liner toward shortstop to end the inning with a zero on the board.

"I felt good," said Gonzalez, who cruised through a 1-2-3 top of the second and departed having thrown 27 pitches (16 strikes). "The ball was coming out of my hand pretty good. The first inning was just trying to get a timing rhythm going again. The second inning was going after hitters."

If you followed Gonzalez last season at all, you know the drill. He was among baseball's best at escaping jams; opponents hit only .175 against him with runners in scoring position, the fourth-lowest average in the majors, despite ranking in the middle of the pack for plate appearances in that kind of situation.

It's probably too much to ask at this stage of his career for Gonzalez to get significantly better at putting runners on base in the first place, but the Nationals do believe he can continue to be successful when facing the pressure of a tight spot. The key: Maintaining an upbeat tempo and not slowing to a crawl when things get rough.

"I told him I want him to work quick, so he doesn't think," Martinez said. "And he was great (today)."

Now in his seventh (and likely final) season with the Nationals, his 11th big league season overall, Gonzalez has firmly established who he is. He may never be consistently effective enough to anchor a rotation, but does consistently take the ball and give his team a chance.

Consider this doozy of a stat: Since 2010, only seven major league pitchers have started at least 250 games. During that span, Gonzalez owns a 3.41 ERA. Only two others have been better: Max Scherzer (3.22) and Justin Verlander (3.24).

Durability is an awfully valuable trait in today's game, and it's going to help Gonzalez earn a nice contract next winter when his awfully team-friendly deal with the Nationals - they'll end up paying him a modest \$65.5 million over seven seasons - finally expires.

There's no particular secret to Gonzalez's durability, but he has learned as he has gotten older - he's now 32 - how to devote more time to arm and body maintenance.

"You do spend a little more time in the training room getting loose," he said. "That's also being a little wiser and not thinking you're 22 years old anymore. You've got to get that extra stretch or that extra 30 minutes in of whatever you did before in the past. I'd like to think my mind and body still feels like it's 22 years old. But I speak for myself when I say I have to get a little more loose and stretched a little better."

Gonzalez will spend the next month continuing that process. He'll take the ball every fifth day and build up his pitch count. And he'll spend the other four days keeping his arm in shape, so he's able to take the mound on day five.

Nobody's challenging him for a spot in the rotation. He'll slot right back in the middle of the pitching order, behind Scherzer and Stephen Strasburg, ahead of Tanner Roark and whoever ends up as the No. 5 starter.

He's not the best pitcher in baseball. But for six seasons in D.C., he's been there every time the Nationals needed him to be there. And he doesn't expect that change in his seventh season wearing a curly W cap.

"I think the most important thing is just to stay healthy," he said. "That's the most important for me. If I can stay healthy, that gives me a chance go out there and do what I can do on the mound."

Article #39

Versatile Kendrick happy to be back with Nationals

By David Driver – Washington Times (2/28/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, FLA. |Howie Kendrick was playing for the Philadelphia Phillies last summer when a member of the front office told him he would be dealt before the late July trade deadline.

The Phillies came through on that promise.

Kendrick, the well-traveled veteran, was dealt to the Washington Nationals on July 28.

"Being able to come here last year meant a lot. We were winning, but not as much" with the Phillies, said Kendrick, 34.

Kendrick came from a Phillies team that ended the season 66-96, while the Nationals won 31 more games than that and captured a division title for the second year in a row.

Washington lost in five games to the Chicago Cubs in the National League Division Series. After that, Kendrick became a free agent. But he signed a two-year deal with the Nationals and general manager Mike Rizzo in January.

“To go to the postseason meant a lot,” Kendrick said. “Having the chance to play for Dusty (Baker) was a dream come true. I feel in love with being here. This offseason, it was a place I wanted to come back to. (Rizzo) made it happen.”

Baker was let go after last season and replaced by Dave Martinez, a former bench coach with the Chicago Cubs.

“Davey is awesome. I have known him for years. He had been with (Cubs manager) Joe (Maddon) for a long time,” said Kendrick, who broke into the majors with the Angels in 2006.

Kendrick saw action mostly in left field for the Nationals in 2017, but he expects to play a lot of second base this season, especially if regular second baseman Daniel Murphy, who had knee surgery in October, isn't ready for Opening Day on March 29 in Cincinnati.

A versatile right-handed hitter, Kendrick has played second base in 1,127 games. Kendrick has played in the 184 games in the outfield, with 182 of those in left. The Florida native is a career .291 hitter in 1435 games. Kendrick hit .340 for the Phillies last year and .293 in 52 games with Washington.

“I will play some infield this year. I already know that. Being able to help the team win is the biggest thing. I did it last year,” he said. “I feel a lot more comfortable with it now. I feel this year I will be even better at it. As a team and a front office, they have a lot of confidence in me.”

He appeared in the postseason with the Angels from 2007-09 and 2014, with the Dodgers from 2015-16 and with the Nationals last season.

“Coming up in 2006 with the Angels, we didn't make the postseason and it was an eye opener,” he said. “After that we made it a few years in a row. When you have a team that is consistent and you can do things the right way, you can start winning, even make the World Series.”

Washington catcher Matt Wieters played against Kendrick for years and finally got to be his teammate last season.

“I was always thought he was one of the most underrated players in the big leagues,” Wieters said. “He gives a manager so much flexibility.”

But Kendrick is quick to deflect his status as an underrated star.

“I would never say that about myself. I don't even think that. I just go out and play,” he said. “You know what? I am not going to complain about that (lack of attention). I am just going to go about my business.”

Kendrick was able to work out this past offseason in Arizona with Kevin Long, the new hitting coach for the Nationals. Long grew up in Phoenix and went to high school with Kendrick's brother-in-law.

And Martinez, in his first managerial gig, is glad to have Kendrick.

“I can't say enough about him,” Martinez told reporters. “He's going to help us win a lot of games.”

Article #40

Suspended for PEDs last season, prospect Jefry Rodriguez enjoys first Nationals camp

By Jorge Castillo – Washington Post (3/1/18)

JUPITER, Fla. — Jefry Rodriguez thought the worst when he heard the news. The unassuming Washington Nationals prospect was sure his professional career wouldn't recover from testing positive for a performance-enhancing substance. He thought the 80-game suspension would become a de facto lifetime ban because of, he claims, an innocent mistake.

"I thought everything was over," Rodriguez said in Spanish.

The announcement came in May, just as he was enjoying his best stretch as a professional with Class A Hagerstown. The lanky, 6-foot-5 right-hander had a 3.51 ERA in seven starts before he was shelved. He went home to the Dominican Republic to stay in shape until he was called to the Nationals' facility in West Palm Beach, Fla.

He was even better when he returned in August, posting a 2.81 ERA in five appearances, including three starts. He was then summoned to Washington to pitch to Nationals batters for live batting practice. He struck out all six he faced.

"I returned more ready," said the 24-year-old Rodriguez, who signed with the Nationals for \$75,000 in 2012. "Better than before."

Rodriguez talked Tuesday inside the Nationals' clubhouse at the Ballpark of the Palm Beaches. He was — again to his surprise — placed on Washington's 40-man roster in November and, therefore, is in his first big league camp. He doubles as a member of the Nationals' rising crop of Dominican-born homegrown talents and one of a few pitching prospects with elite stuff the Nationals have close to the majors.

"He's going to be really, really good," Manager Dave Martinez said. "He's got a power fastball. The amazing thing is that he throws a two-seamer at 97, 98 mph, which is pretty impressive. He's young. He's learning how to pitch. But he's going to be really, really good."

Rodriguez made his second appearance of the spring in Washington's 3-1 loss to the Marlins on Wednesday. It was eventful. He threw 30 pitches, collected a strikeout and issued two walks but held Miami without a hit or run in the inning. It was an appropriate outing for an electric hurler still searching for consistent command of the strike zone.

Rodriguez said he has learned in his two weeks in camp, picking up pointers from those around him. But he still hasn't spoken much to the veterans on the pitching staff.

"I haven't found that confidence yet to approach them," he said.

That confidence should come with time, and another full season of experience.

Article #41

Kevin Long is the Nats' hitting coach. Son Jaron is a pitcher. They're rooming with Mom.

By Jorge Castillo – Washington Post (3/3/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Last month, Kevin and Marcey Long stopped by the Ballpark of the Palm Beaches to drop off Kevin's belongings for his first spring training as the Washington Nationals' hitting coach. Before they left, Kevin asked Marcey if she wanted to see their son's locker in the clubhouse. Then it hit her. They really were all there together, at least for a couple of months.

"It brought tears to my eyes thinking about it," Marcey Long said. "Here they are. Same team. Same jersey. Same everything. It was pretty cool."

After establishing his reputation as one of the sport's premier hitting gurus and launch angle proponents in New York with the Yankees and Mets the past 11 seasons, Kevin Long interviewed with the Mets and Nationals for their managerial positions. The 51-year-old was the runner-up both times. He decided to come on board with the Nationals as hitting coach anyway.

Jaron Long, a 26-year-old right-handed pitcher, began his career in the Yankees organization when his father was still the big league club's hitting coach. He reached Class AAA with New York before joining the Nationals following the 2015 season. This spring is his first in a big league camp.

"I think I've earned the right to be separate from him," Jaron Long said. "At the same time, it's obvious that people are going to connect us. But I was over here before him. I told him, 'Hey, you're coming over to my territory.'"

Jaron made his spring debut in the Nationals' Grapefruit League opener on Feb. 23. That would have been memorable on its own, but there was more significance to the milestone. While his father spent springs, summers and the occasional fall with the Yankees, Jaron grew up back home in Arizona. The distance and schedules made it impossible for Kevin to watch Jaron play in high school. Jaron played summer ball in New York, but games were on the weekends, and the major league grind doesn't cease on Saturdays and Sundays. So Kevin had to wait until Jaron reached college to watch him pitch in person. Before this spring, Kevin had seen his son pitch four times in a game — in his entire life.

Jaron vividly remembers the first time he pitched with his dad in the stands. The date was Feb. 17, 2012. He was a sophomore at Ohio State making his Division I debut after a one-year stint at Chandler-Gilbert Community College in Arizona. It was against the University of South Florida in St. Petersburg, Fla., and Joe Girardi, the Yankees' manager at the time, let Kevin leave work in Tampa early to attend. Jaron plunked the first batter he faced but regrouped to allow one run in 3 2/3 innings.

Nearly six years to the day later, Kevin Long finally watched his son pitch in a professional game against the Houston Astros at the Ballpark of the Palm Beaches. Marcey Long was in the crowd with a group of friends from New York. They told her she seemed so calm.

"It was more like, 'This is surreal,' " Marcey said. " 'Is this really happening?' "

Kevin Long wasn't as cool in the dugout.

“I was a little antsy,” Kevin Long said. “My heart was racing a little bit. It was a little different there. ... Watching him pitch was exciting but a little nerve-racking.”

That appearance began like the one in St. Petersburg, with Jaron, who prides himself on his command, hitting a batter. He then allowed a two-run home run. But he settled in for an otherwise smooth two-inning spring debut. He pitched again four days later, retiring the side with a strikeout against the Miami Marlins. He is scheduled to make his third appearance on Sunday against the Mets.

“It’s funny because Jaron said he wasn’t nervous for that first outing,” Marcey Long said. “But I’ve watched him pitch and with the first couple batters, I was like, ‘What? Who is this kid? He looks nervous to me.’ ”

Jaron earned the invite to big league spring training after compiling a 3.61 ERA in 164 1/3 innings across 27 outings, including 26 starts, for Class AA Harrisburg and Class AAA Syracuse last season. Marcey tries to watch all of Jaron’s starts during the season in person. Kevin must settle for grainy footage when available.

“It’s a lot better in person,” he noted.

One may wonder how Jaron Long is a pitcher when he had one of the world’s foremost experts on hitting baseballs at his disposal. He began pitching in high school. In his only season of junior college, he was both a middle infielder and pitcher. But Ohio State only wanted him as a pitcher. Marcey said Kevin encouraged Jaron to focus on pitching because he thought he’d have a better chance to reach the majors on the mound.

But Jaron admits there was more to it. He said he probably took his father for granted growing up. Maybe it was teenage rebellion. He always liked to hit, but he would gravitate to the pitching side when he spent his summers as a Yankees batbo

“We share baseball, but sometimes it’s harder to listen to him when it comes to hitting than it should be, honestly,” Jaron Long said. “It’s one of those things. It’s your dad. You just think differently.”

This isn’t the first spring training the Longs have spent in proximity. Last year, with the Nationals moving to West Palm Beach from Viera and the Mets 45 minutes north in Port St. Lucie, the family spent ample time together. Marcey split her days between watching Mets games and going to the Nationals’ minor league side for Jaron’s outings. They would get dinner some nights.

But it’s different this year. The three of them are living together. Marcey doesn’t have to split her time between camps; she can be both a baseball wife and baseball mom any given day. Family dinners, incomplete for so many years during baseball season, are more frequent. And every few days, a father gets to watch his son pitch.

“It’s special. It does mean a lot,” Kevin said. “As a dad, it makes you proud.”

Article #42

Free agent signee Matt Adams is happy to be with Nationals: ‘He’s a little giddy right now’

By Jorge Castillo – Washington Post (3/4/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Matt Adams didn't want to extend his first foray into free agency longer than necessary. He didn't want to take any chances. He could do without the stress. As a result, his demands were relatively simple. He wanted to play for a team expected to contend for a World Series, and he wanted to work in a great clubhouse. Culture was important.

So when the Washington Nationals came calling, he reached out to Chris Heisey, a former Nationals outfielder. Heisey talked up his old organization, and Adams was convinced. He agreed to a one-year contract in mid-December worth \$4 million, with another \$500,000 in possible incentives, as his peers languished in a cold free agent world.

"A pitch really wasn't needed," Adams said. "I heard nothing but great things about how they go about their business."

The deal was initially met with some confusion from observers who assumed Adams would have more suitors fresh off belting 20 home runs with an .841 on-base-plus-slugging percentage in 367 plate appearances last season. Not only was Adams committing to a one-year deal at a salary recent history indicated was relatively cheap for a 29-year-old with his slugging ability, but he was committing to a team that already employed Ryan Zimmerman, an established starting first baseman coming off a resurgent all-star season. Adams signed the dotted line knowing he would play every day only if there was an injury.

But over the next couple of months, as a slow-moving free agent market treated power-hitting first basemen as marginal pieces, the decision transitioned from premature to prescient. While Adams found his home before the new year, a few peers only recently sealed jobs.

Last week, the Kansas City Royals signed Lucas Duda, whose 113 Weighted Runs Created Plus last season was just better than Adams's 112, to a one-year contract worth \$3.5 million. The salary can climb another \$1.3 million with incentives. On Friday, Adam Lind, the player Adams is essentially replacing as Washington's left-handed-hitting backup first baseman and emergency left fielder, signed a minor league deal with the New York Yankees. He was added as a depth piece and isn't projected to make the Opening Day roster. And so it goes for a 34-year-old slugger limited with the glove but coming off a season in which he compiled 14 home runs with an .875 OPS and was one of baseball's best pinch hitters.

"I'm just glad that we got him," Nationals Manager Dave Martinez said of Adams. "He's a great addition. To have a guy like that who cannot only come off the bench but potentially can play every day" is valuable.

Like Lind, Adams mashes right-handed pitching and is well below league average against left-handers. Last season, Adams hit 17 of his 20 home runs, batted .295 and posted an .896 OPS off righties in 304 plate appearances with the St. Louis Cardinals and Atlanta Braves. Lefties held him to a .180 batting average and .583 OPS in 63 plate appearances. The sample size, while not a full season's slate, is representative of his career splits. The striking disparity is strange considering the most memorable moment of Adams's career: crushing a curveball from Clayton Kershaw, one of the greatest left-handed pitchers in baseball history, for a go-ahead three-run home run in Game 4 of the 2014 National League Division Series.

To channel that swing more consistently, Nationals hitting coach Kevin Long and assistant hitting coach Joe Dillon have worked with Adams on picking up left-handed pitching better. Long said the improvement starts with shifting his feet to create a better line of vision. Adams's stance, Long determined, was too closed off against southpaws. It was the same diagnosis Long made on Curtis Granderson when Long was

with the Yankees and Granderson joined the team before the 2010 season. Granderson hit 16 homers off left-handers in 2011 after finishing with just four a season earlier.

“He’s a little giddy right now,” Long said of Adams before games started this spring. “We’re going to have to keep him humble because he’s not humble right now, and I hope it stays that way.”

The next layer in Adams’s makeover has been having him face lefty curveballs and sliders from a machine in the cage. To make the simulation more difficult, Adams moves a few feet closer to the machine with each breaking pitch and then back to the original spot 60 feet 6 inches away. He sees the pitches from different slots.

“This is a whole new world for me,” Adams said.

Adams hasn’t had many opportunities to carry his work into live games because he missed a week with a significant blister on his right heel. He said the blister developed because he wore one pair of socks instead of his usual two pairs. By the time he noticed, it already ripped open.

“You live and you learn,” Adams acknowledged.

He returned Sunday for his third game of the spring. He didn’t face a lefty but went 3 for 3 with a triple — blister and all — against right-handers Alex Wilson and Drew VerHagen in Washington’s 6-2 split-squad win over the Detroit Tigers.

“Don’t peak too early,” Zimmerman cracked to Adams in the clubhouse after he exited the game.

In addition to backing Zimmerman up at first base, Adams will see time in left field this spring in case he is needed there during the season, Martinez said. Adams had never played in the outfield until the final two weeks of spring training a year ago. With Matt Carpenter cemented at first base, the Cardinals were determined to find Adams at-bats. They decided his offensive ability outweighed the inexperience. Adams ended up starting five games in left field for St. Louis before he was traded to Atlanta to play first base until Freddie Freeman returned.

It was an endless pursuit to find Adams a spot in the field to get him in the batter’s box. This year, the search may be more difficult. Martinez has insisted he will find consistent playing time for his bench players, but there are only so many opportunities. Adams is fine with it. It’s what he signed up for.

Article #43

Nationals closer Sean Doolittle is more than just his fastball

By Chelsea Janes – Washington Post (3/4/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Florida — Sean Doolittle threw two sliders and a couple change-ups Saturday afternoon, choices that wouldn’t earn much notice with most major league pitchers, but constitutes a significant development for the Nationals’ closer.

Doolittle rarely throws sliders. He seldom throws his change-up. In fact, over the last five seasons, only three relievers have thrown a greater percentage of fastballs than he has — Orioles closer Zach Britton, Dodgers closer Kenley Jansen, and Rockies lefty Jake McGee. Britton and Jansen have accumulated the eighth-most and second-most saves in baseball during that half-decade. Closers can thrive with just a

fastball. This offseason, and now this spring, Doolittle renewed a career-long, concerted effort to add legitimate off-speed pitches to his mix.

“It’s definitely been a point of emphasis,” Doolittle said. “I think in the two outings I’ve had, I’ve thrown more sliders to righties than I think I have in my whole career. ... The change-up has continued to progress from where it was last year; that’s a pitch I felt comfortable with over the second half of last season.”

Britton built his career on a devastating sinking fastball. Jansen relies on a heavy cutter. Doolittle relies on pure heat, located with pinpoint accuracy, delivered with enough deception to add a few perceived miles per hour to every pitch he delivers.

As with Britton and Jansen, Doolittle enters every game with a predictable game plan: set hitters up with fastballs they can’t square, put them away with fastballs up they can’t reach. He seizes on hitters’ tendencies to overswing late in games, to sit on fastballs and try to hit them a mile. But because he doesn’t have Britton’s sink or Jansen’s jam-you-up cut, if he misses, movement doesn’t save him. As Dusty Baker always used to say when discussing Doolittle’s weaknesses, “beware the fastball-hitting right-hander.” Emphasizing the slider should help Doolittle combat just that type of late-game menace.

Doolittle has always felt comfortable throwing his slider to left-handed hitters. It moves away from them. He can get swings and misses out of the zone. As long as he buries it low or starts it on the plate and runs it off it, no left-handed hitter will be able to do much damage against it. But against right-handers, Doolittle never gained the same confidence in the pitch. He often threw that slider toward a right-handed hitter’s back foot, or ran it down into the dirt, changing eye level but never forcing a right-hander to give the pitch much consideration. Saturday, the two sliders he threw to right-handed hitters carried more purpose. Marwin Gonzalez popped one of them up; Carlos Correa watched his, then struck out a few pitches later.

Doolittle polled the locker room about his slider. He asked his teammates and coaches how he should throw it. He tinkered with grips over the first few weeks of spring and settled on a cut fastball grip that would give him more of a power slider to bear in on righties. Then he abandoned that grip in favor of a more traditional breaking-ball grip, which he now combines with an attacking mind-set he honed while tinkering physically. The result, on display Saturday, is a low-80s slider with significant break that Doolittle feels he can throw to righties with the same attacking intentions he would a fastball.

“Where before I was thinking: ‘Where can I put [the slider] where I won’t get hurt?’ ... Now when he puts it down, I’m more willing to attack the strike zone with it,” Doolittle said. “I want them to swing at it, because I think I can get good quality contact [for me] maybe early in the count.”

Doolittle threw 16 pitches in his scoreless inning Saturday, which ended with that strikeout of Correa in which he used both the slider and change to keep the Astros’ superstar off-balance. But the left-hander’s vision for throwing more sliders and change-ups doesn’t necessarily include more strikeouts of right-handed hitters. Instead, he dreams it will allow him to orchestrate fewer strikeouts, thereby increasing his efficiency.

“Maybe I don’t have to throw two or three fastballs to set up the high fastball for the potential strikeout. Maybe I can get a groundball on a change-up in the second pitch of an at-bat,” Doolittle said. “Yeah, I’ve had some injury history, but maybe over the course of the season, if I can keep my pitch count to 12, 15 per inning, that goes a long way.”

The 31-year-old missed time with shoulder trouble last year and has a history of similar issues forcing him to the disabled list. Manger Dave Martinez has Ryan Madson and Brandon Kintzler to close on days when Doolittle needs a break. The Nationals probably don't need to overwork him early in the season. Still, weak contact early in counts could reduce the number of pitches Doolittle has to throw and could reduce the number of high-stress fastballs he needs to throw to big right-handed hitters in key spots.

All of this remains theoretical. Doolittle cannot afford to combine an attack-first mind-set with a half-ready breaking ball during the fire of regular season ninth innings. He rarely has margin for error. So each time he lands a few sliders or executes a few change-ups this spring, it represents progress. A few more weeks of good results, and Doolittle could enter the regular season with a broader arsenal than before. A few struggles, and he probably won't have time to hone those pitches during the regular season, which could mean reverting to that fastball — which hasn't exactly failed him yet.

Still, the whole league knows Doolittle's soft spot — "Beware the fastball-hitting righty." Doolittle's goal this spring is to establish his secondary stuff enough to make right-handers wary of a slider-tossing lefty.

Article #44

Excited Soto gets his first chance to play in front of coaches

By Mark Zuckerman – MASN Sports (3/5/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - Juan Soto's exuberance, possibly over-exuberance, was understandable. Here was a 19-year-old prospect standing in the batter's box in a major league Grapefruit League game for the first time, pinch-hitting for Howie Kendrick in the bottom of the sixth of Sunday's game against the Tigers.

So when Soto nearly swung out of his shoes a couple of times while striking out against 22-year-old right-hander Gerson Moreno, those in the park with big league experience weren't surprised.

Manager Davey Martinez's message for the kid when he walked back to the Nationals dugout? "Hey, welcome to the big leagues. Keep swinging."

Nobody on the Nats coaching staff was going to make any hard evaluations of Soto off this spring training debut. They simply wanted an opportunity to see him in person for the first time, and a split-squad day (when several players are called up from minor league camp to play in reserve) was the perfect opportunity for it.

Soto admitted it was hard to temper his excitement in that first at-bat.

"It was a little difficult," he said via interpreter Octavio Martinez. "I tried to do a little too much in my first at-bat, and the nerves kind of took over in the first at-bat."

Soto, who replaced Bryce Harper in right field, settled down after that. He came up to bat again in the ninth and grounded out to second. By the end of the day, he had more appreciation for the difference between the competition level he has faced to date and this.

“The biggest thing, I think, is the experience that you see out there,” he said. “It seems like the ballplayers know what they’re doing, what their purpose is, and they get the job done. They’re trying to execute some things. They do a better job of doing that than they do in the minors. And that’s what’s more noticeable.”

If everything goes according to the Nationals’ plan, Soto will be a mainstay not only in major league camp but in the major leagues someday soon. Victor Robles may be on the cusp of playing outfield every day in Washington, but many in the organization believe Soto actually will be the better hitter once he arrives a year or two later.

Signed in 2015 as a teenager out of the Dominican Republic for what was at the time a club-record \$1.5 million signing bonus, Soto has played in only 83 minor league games over the last two seasons due to injury, including a fractured ankle last year. But his overall numbers in rookie ball and low Single-A - a .362/.418/.535 slash line - have been more than enough to impress onlookers and elevate him into elite-prospect status.

“He’s going to be a good one, you can tell,” Martinez said. “He’s got good mannerisms. The bat speed’s really good. So, very exciting. Everybody talks about this window (for the Nationals to win closing) and I see nothing but good young players for the future. I’m excited about it.”

Soto figures to open the season at high Single-A Potomac, where the Nationals hope he stays healthy and is able to play through a full minor league season for the first time.

And they fully plan for him to continue to work his way up the organizational ladder. Despite attempts by other clubs this winter to acquire Soto in one of several trade proposals, general manager Mike Rizzo has refused to deal him, putting him in the same no-trade category as Robles.

Soto couldn’t help but follow what took place this winter and emerge feeling even better about himself.

“This organization does a great job with its prospects,” he said. “You learn a lot. It’s a great team to play for. And just the way they go about things and the emotion, it’s a great atmosphere. And I was very glad that they value me, but more so that I’m still here, because it’s a great team to play for.”

Article #45

Tanner Roark is changing his mechanics

By Chelsea Janes – Washington Post (3/5/18)

JUPITER, Fla. — The 2017 season left Tanner Roark frustrated. His results didn’t mimic those he was used to as a starter. He didn’t get to pitch in the National League Division Series. So he went home to his family and thought about it, just him — “me, myself,” he said. He decided he needed to change.

Roark used to stand on the rubber and face the hitter when no one was on base. He would turn and lean and reach back before delivering, a process that worked rather well for him for his first two seasons as a starter. He won 15 games as a first-time, full-time starter in 2014. He won 16 when he returned to the rotation in 2016. His ERA was 2.85 in 2014, 2.83 in 2016, the numerical definition of consistent.

But he never found consistency last season. His ERA was two full runs higher and he never seemed comfortable, physically or mentally, despite saying over and over again in postgame interviews that he “felt

good” despite results. His manager admitted the World Baseball Classic’s early grind probably contributed to an up-and-down season that eventually left him without an inning of work in the NLDS. Roark admitted he was overthinking all year.

“There was just a lot going on. You know, life,” Roark said. “Learn from it. Get better.”

As he threw four scoreless innings in his third spring training outing Monday, Roark had very little going on at all. He allowed one hit. His stuff looked strong, well-located, repeatedly reliable. And as in all three of those starts now, he didn’t square up to the hitter when the bases were clear. Instead, he stood with his back foot on the rubber, as he might in the stretch, came set, and stepped laterally back with his front foot — like Noah Syndergaard or David Price, for example — before loading over the rubber and pushing forward. In other words, he is using a modified (and simplified) windup, not quite as stark a change as Stephen Strasburg made in throwing only from the stretch, but substantial nonetheless.

“It feels simple, what I want out of mechanics. If you have a tendency to think too much sometimes, sometimes you get stuck in a rut or you’re struggling a little bit and you keep overthinking and it just adds, adds, adds,” Roark said. “Sometimes simplifying mechanics can simplify easy fixes.”

Spring training statistics sometimes foretell regular season statistics. Usually, they do not. So who knows what it means that Roark has yet to allow a run and has averaged a strikeout per inning in eight innings? For a man who had not even rejoined Nationals camp by this time last year, it feels like a good sign. The Nationals need Roark. Quietly, he is the linchpin of this vaunted rotation, the durable and dependable one who flies under the radar and, until last year, always seemed to overperform. With a healthy and right Roark behind Max Scherzer and Strasburg, the Nationals have one of the best 1-2-3 starting punches in baseball, a powerful force for October. Without him, they must rely on Gio Gonzalez, who is remarkably consistent in his annual numbers but not from day to day. Without Roark, the Nationals would probably need another front-line starter.

Perhaps they will still chase one. Jake Arrieta, Alex Cobb, Lance Lynn and others are still available. Those rumors have swirled all winter. The Nationals will almost certainly chase another starter after this season, when Gonzalez becomes a free agent. Roark, 31, is under team control for two more seasons, meaning the Nationals could pair him with Scherzer and Strasburg for at least that long. If he is the pitcher he was in 2014 and 2016, that trio could help prop open this team’s National League East window.

All of that comes later, of course. So far, Roark has looked like Roark again, like the efficient righty with a knack for inducing weak contact, the guy everyone underestimates until he matches them blow for blow. The delivery is different from last year’s, and seems likely to remain so given its early success. He hopes the results are different from last year’s, too.

Article #46

Chris Smith, now in Nats camp, climbed a long, slippery ladder before reaching major leagues

By Chelsea Janes – Washington Post (3/7/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — The guys who pitch the ninth inning on sleepy March afternoons don’t normally pitch the ninth inning on chilly October evenings. And those players who come in when early

March games run long, and most of the stars are long since dressed and gone, don't often emerge as household names.

But they often earn every pitch they throw, and have fought and clawed for the chance to throw them in the first place. Right-handed reliever Chris Smith, who threw a scoreless 1 1/3 innings to finish out the Washington Nationals' 10-5 Grapefruit League loss to the Houston Astros on Tuesday, climbed a baseball ladder slimy with broken promises and teetering on ever-shifting ground. But he climbed all the way to the majors nonetheless.

Smith, 29, has appeared in four major league baseball games and will therefore go down as a big leaguer no matter what happens next. The Nationals' bullpen is a crowded, complicated part of their roster — so he doesn't seem likely to break with the team out of spring training. But his is a story about the power of rejection — or perhaps, more specifically, that rejection need not have much power at all.

Smith didn't have offers out of high school. He was 6 feet tall and “155 pounds soaking wet,” just a Kentucky kid who wanted to play every day. He went to Division II Kentucky Wesleyan, where he played shortstop and center field. When the team was desperate for pitching in his senior year, he closed and made 15 total appearances as a pitcher that season.

When his collegiate career was over, Smith prepared to take the GRE so he could apply to a sports management program at the University of Louisville. His coach at Kentucky Wesleyan told him he thought he had something left in his arm and that he should give professional ball a try. Smith agreed and headed to a 350-player workout put on by the independent Frontier League. He had to pay \$65 to try out. Each team selected two players at the end of the weekend, and those two players weren't even guaranteed roster spots — just a spring training invitation. Smith lasted through one day of cuts, then another. He got drafted. He turned a spring training invite into a regular season roster spot with the Lake Erie Crushers. He gave up a grand slam in his first outing. Coaches told him not to sweat it, that he'd be back out there soon.

“Three days later I got released,” Smith said. “... They said they're bringing in affiliated guys; they don't have time to develop players. I understood. Well, I did, but I didn't.”

He called every team in the Frontier League. He emailed everyone he could think of. Eventually he got a workout with the Evansville Otters.

“I did well. They said, ‘Yeah, we'll be in contact,’” Smith said. “Then they were never in contact.”

He started working at a gym, processing the end of his baseball dream with “meathead workouts” that wouldn't help him much on the mound. Then another Frontier League team, this one in Traverse City, Mich., called him. He made their team, too. He broke camp with them in 2011. He appeared in two games and he struggled.

“They released me after a 16-hour bus trip,” Smith said.

He got a call from a team in the Pecos League, a lower-tier independent league in which some people pay to play. He flew to Alamogordo, N.M. He was handed a contract in the form of the most basic of Word documents and did a double take when he read it would pay him “zero dollars.” Coaches informed Smith he would earn \$50 dollars a week as a reliever or \$70 as a starter. Smith opted to start.

He threw 135 pitches in his first outing. He earned a look with another Frontier League team, this one just outside Pittsburgh. He parlayed success there into a workout with the Tampa Bay Rays. He drove 17 hours on a Friday to work out on a Saturday, then drove right back. A few weeks later, the Rays called him.

“They said, ‘Hey, Chris, we decided not to go your way. Good luck the rest of the season,’” Smith said. “... Click.”

Continued success earned him a chance in the Australian Baseball League, where he struck out 15 batters in a game, a league record. He was talking to an Astros scout at the time who told him the Astros wanted to sign him. Then the scout told him they couldn’t. Somehow, that scout got Smith’s name to the New York Yankees. They did want to sign him. Finally, in 2013, he made affiliated ball. Not long into his first workouts with the Yankees, a stress fracture in his forearm gave way to a full-on break. He missed the entire 2013 season.

The Yankees kept him around, and he posted a 2.98 ERA in his first full affiliated season and a 2.05 ERA in his second. The Yankees released him. His agent knew someone with the Toronto Blue Jays, and they gave him a shot. By September of 2016 he was a legitimate September call-up candidate. He hadn’t planned for that and went on a four-day cruise a few weeks after the season ended. The morning after he returned, his agent called. Something happened. A brawl — with the Yankees, of all teams. Someone got hurt.

“It was [Joaquin] Benoit,” Smith said this week, motioning to a locker a few stalls down from his in the Nationals’ West Palm Beach clubhouse. Benoit had torn his calf in the fight. On September 27, Smith got the big league call. But the Blue Jays were in a pennant race, and he never got to pitch. The Blue Jays kept him around nevertheless and brought him up last summer. On June 27, 2017, in a three-run game in front of what he remembers as a packed stadium, Smith finally reached the top of the ladder.

“I remember them opening up the gate,” Smith said. “... I just remember looking up and seeing 55,000 people there and thinking, this is a long way from Alamogordo, New Mexico.”

Smith was a long way from Alamogordo on Tuesday, as well, when he came in to pitch those 1 1/3 innings in West Palm Beach. A scout in attendance, running down a list of pitchers he had seen in recent days, mentioned Smith as someone who “looked pretty good” — which in scout speak translates to “worth noting.” He throws 95 mph now, though he didn’t always. He looks like any one of the pitchers around him who were talked about in prospect lists or touted out of high school. None of them have been rejected as often as Smith has. He ended up on the same mound as them anyway.

Article #47

Eager Goodwin prepares to be ready when called upon

By Pete Kerzel – MASN Sports (3/7/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - If there’s one guy in the Nationals clubhouse who can empathize with Brian Goodwin’s dilemma, it’s new manager Davey Martinez.

Long before he spent a decade as Joe Maddon’s right-hand man in Tampa Bay and Chicago, Martinez was a major league outfielder fighting for playing time. In his 16 seasons in the bigs, Martinez played in more

than 120 games only nine times. Like most ballplayers, he had to fight to carve out his niche as a regular. Sometimes he was more successful than others.

That's Goodwin in a nutshell, a one-time top prospect at 27 who's finally earned the trust of an organization but who doesn't have a position to call his own. When outfielders were falling with alarming regularity last season, it was Goodwin who was Johnny-on-the-spot, playing in a career-high 74 games in his second major league campaign, showing some pop with his bat to hit 13 homers and utilizing his speed in the outfield on defense and on the basepaths as a weapon.

So it's not far-fetched when Martinez talks with admiration about Goodwin, who is capable of holding his own in all three outfield spots and can be an offensive weapon. His outfield may be set with Adam Eaton in left field, Michael A. Taylor in center field and Bryce Harper in right field, but Martinez sees Goodwin as a valuable commodity, the versatile and productive kind of player no team ever has enough of.

"It's a really good problem to have because he's really good," Martinez said of Goodwin. "We're going to utilize him the best we can. I had a conversation with him and I told him, like I tell everybody, we're going to use all 25 guys on the roster. So you're going to play. You're going to get a chance to play maybe all three outfield positions and pinch-hit, stuff like that. I know what he did last year and I'm looking forward to him doing the same thing this year."

His manager's confidence notwithstanding, Goodwin doesn't feel particularly comfortable as spring training nears its mid-point. When you're used to battling and scraping for everything you've got, there's really no room for complacency or comfort.

"I don't think my role is defined, or ever has been since I've been in camp," Goodwin said. "I come into camp and I feel like I'm trying to earn a spot, trying to find somewhere - a home, where I can play every day, start 162 games and play every day for somebody whether it's here or anywhere. But it all starts on the field, so I just come out and give it my all."

Chances are, unless an injury wrecks the construction of the Nationals outfield, Goodwin will have to make do with the opportunities he's given - as a defensive replacement, as an injury fill-in, as a pinch-runner or pinch-hitter.

And when you fancy yourself a regular without a position, that's sometimes difficult to do.

"You talk to guys who have been there before," Goodwin said. "Fortunately, we're blessed with a veteran locker room and we've got a lot of guys who have been there or are there now. You lean on those guys, just like you'd do with your parents or somebody who's been through similar situations outside of baseball. It's the same thing in here. We try to pick their brains and get their knowledge and rely on them to help us."

A first-round pick (34th overall) in the 2011 First-Year Player Draft out of North Carolina, Goodwin has learned to become a student of the game. When he's not playing, he's watching intently or going over game situations with teammates or coaches. As a bench guy with limited playing options, it's how you learn to get better.

"You follow (the game) a little bit differently," he explained. "You pay attention to pitchers warming up. You pay attention to who's in the bullpen, what part of the lineup we're at, who's coming up. It varies every day and every day it's something new. You try to prepare yourself. You gather all the information and if you

don't use it that day, you store it. When you store it, you try your best not to forget it and just keep adding and building on it so when the time comes, you're ready."

Goodwin quickly became a favorite of former manager Dusty Baker, who trusted a player without significant experience because of how he prepared and carried himself. Martinez hasn't been around the Nationals for very long, but he's seen enough to know Goodwin is the kind of multifaceted player who seems to find a way to contribute when called upon.

Maybe it's because at various stages of his career, Martinez was in Goodwin's shoes.

"Anytime a guy's been through it, you just have a different level of understanding," Goodwin said. "A lot of guys, a lot of managers, they've been around the game for a long time and seen it. But it's always a little different when you've seen it firsthand."

Article #48

New Nat Reynolds embracing his versatility

By Jamal Collier – MLB.com (3/7/18)

JUPITER Fla. -- When he first learned he would have to switch from shortstop, Matt Reynolds admitted he was a little upset. He was still with the Mets organization then and had once been considered their shortstop of the future and a piece of their young core going forward.

"I took it as, 'Hey, you're not good enough to play SS,'" Reynolds said Wednesday morning. "After kind of thinking about it for a few days, I realized that if I go out there and show that I can play third, second, left, center, it makes my value so much higher.

So Reynolds began embracing the idea of eventually becoming a super utility player. He started playing more second base in 2014. By '15, he added third base to his resume. Then in '16, he started playing in the outfield.

That sort of versatility is one of the reasons he was enticing to the Nationals this winter after he was designated for assignment by the Mets. Reynolds has played six different positions in the Majors: all four infield positions -- including second base, where he started during Wednesday's 4-3 loss to the Cardinals -- and both corner-outfield positions. Reynolds even played center field during his time in the Mets' Minor League system.

Already this spring, Reynolds has appeared at four different positions -- shortstop, second base, third base and left field.

"I asked him if he could catch, but he said, 'No,'" Nats manager Dave Martinez said with a laugh. "At every position, he's really good."

Entering this spring, Reynolds had spent his entire six-year professional career in the Mets' organization since being drafted by New York in the second round in 2012. He was a little surprised when he was designated for assignment, but he also considered the possibility that a move might be made after New York signed Adrian Gonzalez, Jose Reyes and Todd Frazier to go along with incumbents Wilmer Flores and T.J. Rivera, producing a glut of infielders.

Arriving to West Palm Beach, Fla., for Spring Training with the Nats felt weird and different at first, Reynolds said, but just as he grew into the utility role, he feels much more comfortable around his new team about a month into camp.

And with the Nats, Reynolds has found a model to emulate in Howie Kendrick, whom the Nats re-signed to a two-year deal this offseason to be one of their first reserve options off the bench.

"He's the kind of player that I want to be," Reynolds said. "You can put him anywhere and he's going to be a quality player at any of those positions, so I kind of use him as a guy to look up to and follow around."

Reynolds does have a chance of breaking camp with the Nationals, especially if second baseman Daniel Murphy begins the season on the disabled list. That would likely slide Kendrick in as the primary second baseman, leaving Reynolds to fill Kendrick's role on the bench. It's one of the perks being a utility player has provided Reynolds: Being able to fill in on so many different positions has opened up different chances.

"Especially if I go out there and play them well," Reynolds said, "there's been so many more opportunities for me to get called up and for me to stay up. I view it as a good thing to be able to play all of these positions."

Article #49

After losing feeling in his hand last season, Sammy Solis is ready to pitch for late-inning duties

By Chelsea Janes – Washington Post (3/7/18)

JUPITER, Fla. — After the Washington Nationals' 4-3 loss to the St. Louis Cardinals on Wednesday afternoon, Sammy Solis stood in the tiny tunnel outside the visitor's clubhouse at Roger Dean Stadium, pulling resistance bands back over his shoulders with his head on a swivel.

This was not the best time for Solis to be so engaged, as teammates and children and Nationals staff were shuffling in and out, packing up to head home. But Solis, who had allowed the go-ahead run in a lengthy eighth inning, can't afford to wait. He has battled injury trouble before and lost May and June of last season to a nerve problem that stole feeling from his pitching hand at the most inopportune moments.

"I'm just being super proactive because I have to be just to make sure this thing is shut down and never comes back," Solis said. "It's funny because it took us all season; it wasn't actually stemming in my elbow, it was stemming in my neck."

Solis's lengthy disabled list stint alleviated most of the symptoms of what he believed at the time was a nerve problem in his elbow. That the symptoms lifted was as encouraging as the fact that they reemerged down the stretch was troubling. Solis had Tommy John surgery in 2012. Anything remotely uncomfortable around that elbow presents cause for concern.

But after the season, after three outings in the National League Division Series during which he was still worried about that elbow, Solis went to see a specialist in Arizona — not a doctor, exactly, but more of "a naturopath," he said. A family friend had seen this woman for bad back trouble and suddenly seen it dissipate.

“She was like, ‘Oh, yeah, it’s nothing to do with your elbow.’ She was like feeling my body heat and was like, ‘Oh, no, it’s coming from up near your neck here,’” Solis said. “It was a little weird, but it actually worked out great. The first couple sessions, I was like, ‘I don’t know if this is doing anything.’ Then it started going away.”

So now the 29-year-old is fully healthy, which is crucial because he is the only left-hander in the mix for the Opening Day bullpen that has options remaining. For years, the Nationals have considered Solis both an injury risk and a rare talent — a hard-throwing left-handed reliever with a vast starter’s arsenal. For years, injuries and inconsistency have left him nearer the roster bubble than anyone would like to admit. With Enny Romero, Matt Grace and perhaps even Tim Collins, among others, in the mix for a left-handed spot in the bullpen, Solis cannot afford to struggle, as he is the only one of the group that can be sent down. The Nationals would risk losing Grace or Romero to waivers if they tried to send them down, but could hold onto Solis by keeping him in Syracuse.

“Nothing’s ever guaranteed. There’s always a bump in the road in spring for someone. We’re not too far into this thing. We have a few more weeks left. We’ll see what happens,” Solis said. “But all I can say is we have some good lefties. We have a lot to pick from right now. It’s encouraging to have that many and that much talent to pick from. We’ll see what the coaches decide to run with when the season gets here.”

Again, to paint Solis as on any kind of bubble might be drastic. One of his greatest assets is his ability to get right-handed hitters out, as well as left-handers. He has held right-handers to a .228 batting average in his career and lefties a .244. Wednesday, he faced all right-handed hitters as he allowed a run on two hits. Results don’t matter much these days. The run Brandon Kintzler allowed, for example, shouldn’t be cause for trouble. Max Scherzer’s four strong innings should only be considered a sign that he is on track. Even the way the Nationals used Solis against five righties shouldn’t raise too many eyebrows — that was just his inning. Later, Manager Dave Martinez indicated, “We’re working on a few things against lefties,” but didn’t clarify further.

For now, Solis’s main objective is not to impress or blow anyone away this spring. It is to stay healthy, to keep that nerve problem at bay and to rebuild himself into the reliable late-inning option he has been, off and on, for much of the last three seasons.

Notes:

Scherzer threw four innings in which he allowed one run on one hit — a home run to Greg Garcia. He struck out four and walked a batter. Scherzer said afterward that he was happy with the outing, in which he touched 96 and felt out his curveball in unconventional counts. He is on track.

Bryce Harper doubled in three at-bats as the designated hitter. Victor Robles doubled home a run.

Article #50

If there’s life after Harper, Rendon is a big reason why

By Thom Loverro – Washington Times (3/7/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, FLA. | You’ll sometimes hear baseball observers say of a great hitter, “He’s worth the price of admission for batting practice.”

You could say the same about Anthony Rendon taking ground balls before a game.

The Washington Nationals third baseman is like a dancer, his feet moving quickly, the glove snatching the hard grounder and the rifle throw to first. Coaches and teammates marveled at him in warmups before Tuesday's exhibition game against the Houston Astros.

It's infield practice, seemingly one of the most boring exercises in baseball, but Rendon is must-watch when he is on the field. And at the plate.

He'd rather you didn't though.

In his introductory press conference this spring when he threatened to leave the room if anyone asked him about his future in Washington, Bryce Harper had an honest, if arrogant, Bryce Harper moment when he told reporters, "If I stay healthy, I can be one of the best players in the game."

So can Anthony Rendon.

The Nationals have two of them — candidates for best player in the game. They need to keep one — and that one appears to be Rendon, who next season will be where Harper is this year, entering the final year of his Nationals contract.

Harper and Rendon have a lot in common — besides sharing the same agent in Scott Boras.

But there are also key differences.

Harper likes the limelight. He likes attention. He has seemingly been destined for his upcoming free agency — possibly a \$500 million player — since he was drafted by Washington in 2010.

Rendon, 27, Washington's first-round pick in 2011 out of Rice University, would just as soon play in an empty stadium. He would prefer not to be the center of attention.

As his career progresses, that has become harder to do.

In 147 games last year, Rendon batted .301 with 41 doubles, 25 home runs and 100 RBI. He won the National League Silver Slugger award for third basemen when he batted .287 with 111 runs scored, 39 doubles, 21 home runs and 83 RBI in 2014, and was named NL Comeback Player of the Year in 2016 when, after missing 82 games the year before from a knee injury and a strained oblique muscle, batted .270 with 91 runs scored, 38 doubles, 20 home runs and 85 RBI.

He finished fifth in NL Most Valuable Player voting in 2014, and sixth last season.

"He is one of the quiet players and one of the best in the game," manager Dave Martinez said.

The Nationals are well-equipped moving forward if Harper leaves at the end of this season and signs elsewhere. You would be looking at an outfield of Adam Eaton, Michael Taylor and top prospect Victor Robles, with Brian Goodwin mixed in. There is life after Bryce Harper, even if Washington faces another tough free agency in 2019, with Rendon.

That departure, should it happen, might be much harder to live with. But the Nationals likely have a far better chance of keeping Rendon than they ever have had for Harper.

Rendon is more like another Boras client, Stephen Strasburg. Neither player craves the spotlight like Harper does.

During the Nationals Fan Fest in December, Rendon said he was willing to listen to talk about a contract extension. At the start of camp, though, he felt his words were taken out of context — though it's not clear how.

"You made it all seem like, 'Oh, you want a contract right now,'" Rendon said. "And I think what I was talking about was, 'Yeah, I'm open to listen to it.' It's kind of like if anybody wants a promotion, you're obviously going to want to hear about it, you're not going to want to just ignore it. But hey, I'm not going to be like, 'Hey, I want my extension now.' I'm open to hear about it."

This new media-friendly version of Anthony Rendon is going to need some work.

The organization made a smart move by connecting the Texas native to their work at the Nationals Youth Baseball Academy. Rendon is on the board of directors and has been very active in his support of their youth baseball and education programs. His ties to the community are deep.

Sporting a new, shorter haircut, he's appeared more relaxed this spring and more willing to accept the inevitability that people will want to talk about him, write about him — and watch him play.

"I'm thinking with my new haircut, I'm professional now," he joked with reporters at the start of spring training. "I'm trying to show everybody to take me seriously. So maybe I'll get more All-Star votes."

With the All-Star Game in Washington this season, it would be a special moment to add to the legacy of Anthony Rendon as a Washington National — hopefully, a long and continuing legacy.

Article #51

Cerebral Scherzer trying to stay a step ahead of hitters

By Pete Kerzel – MASN Sports (3/7/18)

JUPITER, Fla. - Max Scherzer often makes his craft look so effortless that it's easy to forget that he's part of a perpetual thinking man's exercise that requires a pitcher to constantly adjust and readjust both plan of attack and expectations.

So, after winning back-to-back Cy Young Awards, here was the Nationals ace using an innocuous spring training start to try to integrate a few new wrinkles into his repertoire, just in case the hitters have caught up to him and think they've figured him out.

After spinning four innings of one-hit ball at the Cardinals, walking one and striking out four, Scherzer waxed poetic on the cat-and-mouse game that colors each one-on-one battle that comprises an outing.

"I absolutely love it," he said. "You keep getting into this game and keep facing guys over and over and over. They really start keying on all your tendencies, especially in the division. So to keep getting those guys out in the division - and there's some good hitters in our division - you constantly have to be evolving, finding new ways to get better."

The Cardinals were his practice fodder today, an outing that lasted 55 pitches and saw Scherzer spot in a few more curveballs than he usually does. Beyond that, Scherzer wasn't letting on to what he was trying to do with his third Grapefruit League start, which ended in a 4-3 Cardinals victory.

"There's things I am (working on), but you gotta use your StatCast to figure out what I'm doing," he said.

One thing he wasn't doing was giving in on a full count. When Greg Garcia worked the count to 3-2 in the second, Scherzer challenged him with a 96 mph fastball and lost. Garcia hammered the heater over the wall in right-center, tying the game at 1-1.

"I really wanted to see where my curveball was at, so I threw some extra curveballs today," Scherzer said. "I like where that was at. I fell behind some hitters today, too many 2-0 counts. But only one walk and attacked the zone. I'd rather give up the home run than walk somebody, so go ahead and hit the home run now in spring on a 3-2 count."

Garcia's homer was one of three balls the Cards hit to the outfield; fly balls to center by Tommy Pham and to left by Andrew Knizner in the third were the others. Scherzer got two ground balls and a couple of popups to finish an outing that looked more like midseason form than the first week of March.

"Every time you watch him pitch, he has a game plan, whether it's in spring training or in the bullpen," manager Davey Martinez said. "He's always got a game plan, he's always working on something. He looked really good. He's gotta be fun to watch."

Last offseason, a stress fracture in his right ring finger had Scherzer a bit behind the other pitchers in camp, yet he still found time to refine his cutter and even went to a three-fingered grip so he could throw his fastball without any pain while the injury healed.

"You always have to reinvent yourself and keep evolving as a pitcher," Scherzer said. "Every single year, you have to come up with new ways to get guys out because everybody's game planning against you, looking at everything you do, coming up with every little pattern that you throw. With the data they have now, the line between good and bad is shrinking every single year. You constantly have to try to be evolving and be ahead of the hitters, come up with new pitches and new ways to attack guys, so you're always one step ahead."

What better time to try new things out than in spring training, when even those attempts that don't go as planned amount to a mulligan once the season begins?

"It's only because I've had enough failure and had success in the same right that the experience has taught me I got to have more," Scherzer said. "I need a curveball, I need a cutter if I want to be able to navigate these lineups multiple times through. That's what I've found. That's where I've had success to keep evolving. Nothing's different for 2018."

Article #52

For versatile Difo, helping Nats is his top priority

By Pete Kerzel – MASN Sports (3/8/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - As far as Wilmer Difo is concerned, the more work, the better.

If microfracture surgery delays the start to Daniel Murphy's season, Difo is happy to play second base for the Nationals as long as he's needed. If shortstop Trea Turner or third baseman Anthony Rendon need a day off, Difo's ready to fill in. He'll grab a bat and pinch-hit or use his legs to make a difference as a pinch-runner.

"I'm a player that likes to work hard, and the more work I get, the better I feel," Difo said through interpreter Octavio Martinez. "I feel like if I stay consistent with the work ethic I have, the results will be on the field and show - and they have been showing so far. I feel like if I get distracted and lose track of my work ethic and not work as much, you can also see the results on the field, which won't be what I want. So as long as I stay positive and do what I'm supposed to do - what I've been doing my whole career and working hard - the results will show."

The Nationals have long been intrigued by the blend of offense and speed possessed by Difo, who was signed in 2011 as an undrafted free agent out of his native Dominican Republic. Last season was a breakout for the 25-year-old, who set career highs in runs (47), hits (90), doubles (10), triples (four), homers (five), RBIs (21), walks (24) and stolen bases (10).

When Turner went down with a broken wrist, Difo got regular reps at shortstop. In 74 games as a starter last year, Difo slashed .286/.331/.401, erasing some of the doubts that come with youth and inexperience.

It's hard for young players used to playing regularly to adjust to life on the bench, where skills erode and timing gets ruined. How did Difo adjust to his role so quickly?

"I think the biggest key is just being prepared mentally and having a good routine, staying ready both defensively and offensively," he said. "Obviously, offensively it's tough because if you're not playing every day, sometimes your timing's not there and you feel a little lost."

Like most players, Difo was able to establish a routine and rhythm when he was regularly in the lineup.

"I feel like I'm one of those players who does better playing every day," he said. "I just get a better feel for the game, so the key thing with me is trying to keep my routine down, keep working on the offensive side and the defensive side. Prepare properly and stay mentally ready for the game."

So far this spring, he's played second base, shortstop and third base, as new manager Davey Martinez prepares him for one of two eventualities: filling in for Murphy if his recovery slows or being the Nats' utility infielder off the bench if everyone's healthy.

"He's got a lot of energy," Martinez said of Difo. "He's a very good player. He can play practically anywhere on the field, really - except catch. I asked him if he could catch, he said no. But he's really good."

Difo is a ball of energy on the field, whether he's livening up infield drills with animated chatter or engaging teammates around the batting cage. The wide grin is as much a part of his equipment as the bat or gloves he carries with him.

"I have a lot of fun on the baseball field," he said. "I don't consider it a job, I consider it a game. I'm having fun out here and I always try to stay positive with that."

Martinez wants to get Difo some time in the outfield this spring, furthering the plan started last year when then-manager Dusty Baker wondered if he could turn Difo into a super utility player capable of manning different positions a few games a week to give regulars a breather.

One mention of the possibility of playing the outfield and Difo immediately embraced the idea.

“That’s the goal of anybody here in this room: to make sure you see your name in the lineup,” he said.

“Wherever it’s at, I’m open to any way I can help the team. The biggest thing is seeing that lineup and being prepared for it. I feel comfortable out in the outfield, so that’s not a problem for me. Wherever they want to put me, feel I’m useful and can help the team out, as long as my name’s on there, I could care less.”

Article #53

To have Stephen Strasburg sharp when it matters most, Nats may ease off when it means less

By Chelsea Janes – Washington Post (3/8/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Stephen Strasburg just chuckled as Gio Gonzalez wandered around with a boombox slung over his shoulder Thursday afternoon, a few hours before Strasburg was scheduled to pitch against the Mets. The right-hander doesn’t laugh much on start days during the regular season, doesn’t allow himself the luxury. But here, in the early days of March, when he feels strong and healthy and he can control every variable, Strasburg’s stoicism dissipates.

“I’m really trying to use spring training more as what it is — spring training,” Strasburg said. “It’s hard because I’m a really impatient person.”

The Nationals could decide to force some patience on Strasburg, who enters this season with eight disabled list stints in his eight-year career. Nothing is certain, but they have at least considered finding ways to occasionally skip Strasburg and will monitor his workload in a way they might not for other starters.

“We’re looking at some options, especially early on because of all the days off we have,” Nationals Manager Dave Martinez said. “But [Strasburg’s] in a good place right now. He’s throwing well and he’s throwing great. We’ll see how it goes, we’ll see how spring training goes, and see where he’s at.”

With four more off-days built into the schedule this season by the new collective bargaining agreement, and two of them during the first two weeks of the season, Nationals’ decision-makers see an early opportunity to manipulate their pitching staff. They have a history of doing so. Last season, they left Joe Ross in Syracuse for the first few weeks of the season because off-days rendered a fifth starter unnecessary.

“The off-days are nice. You like to try to keep everybody involved,” pitching coach Derek Lilliquist said. “But in the big picture, you want your best guys going all the time. It’ll be an interesting discussion moving forward with the off-days what we do.”

Strasburg has not looked like a man that needs protecting this spring. He threw 3 1/3 innings Thursday against the Mets in his second Grapefruit League outing. He betrayed frustration at close calls and a few wild pitches that bounced away from Miguel Montero. He tinkered with his two-seamer and slider, pitches he doesn’t throw much that he says nevertheless improve his more reliable pitches.

He threw 63 pitches, 39 for strikes, and struck out five. The stadium radar gun clocked him at 99 once and 97 regularly. The physical aspects of the outing point to strength and stamina for Strasburg, who finished last season healthy and began spring training without injury concern. The mental aspects reveal the part of him that has never changed, the intolerance for imperfection, the desire to have everything go just right — admirable aspirations he admits he has had to learn to temper.

"I'm not taking it easy by any means," Strasburg said. "... as far as what I'm sequencing and stuff, every year I just try to get better. Some things work. Some things don't. I usually end up going back to what I've always done because it's always been fairly successful. But now is the time to play with things and see if you can incorporate more things in your game."

Strasburg has used the same tinker-when-possible approach to staying healthy. Slowly but surely, tweak by tweak, he has built himself a routine he thinks maximizes his talent. He is one of the more dominant pitchers in baseball when healthy. And he believes that dogged adherence to routine will keep him healthy enough to dominate.

"He's a very detailed person," Lilliquist said. "He likes the structure, which is fine."

Strasburg was always a detail-oriented type. But after tearing his pronator tendon in 2016, Strasburg made an even greater commitment to his between-starts preparation, relying on it heavily to ensure his continued health. When he couldn't maintain that routine while at the All-Star Game last year, he felt things slide out of sync. He experienced nerve trouble in his forearm. He landed on the disabled list. A year after deciding to sit out the All-Star Game in San Diego, he considered it a mistake to subject himself to its unpredictable rigors in Miami.

He is unwilling to compromise when it comes to treatment and his workouts. After years of injuries, he believes he knows how to stiff-arm them now. The Nationals trust that he has learned that, too.

"The kid gloves are off. They've been off for several years," Nationals General Manager Mike Rizzo said. "He'll take the ball every fifth day. He'll be in the rotation. There's no stipulations or modifications for him right now."

Rizzo did admit that off-days will allow him and the on-field staff to manage workloads "strategically," but said all five starters are on a regular program. Lilliquist admitted that he is well aware of Strasburg's injuries, but also of his capabilities.

"You know the history and you do and you don't [think about him differently]," Lilliquist said. "But you think he's recovered well and you want him to give us what a number two guy does."

Mostly, the Nationals want Strasburg to deliver the performances they have grown accustomed to when it matters most. They have considered that might mean holding him back when it matters less, and after years of analyzing injuries and his routine, he has considered exactly what he needs to give them more.

Article #54

Despite numbers crunch, Solís believes he belongs in Nats bullpen

By Peter Kerzel – MASN Sports (3/9/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - Sammy Solís understands why people discount him when configuring their versions of the bullpen the Nationals will take north for their March 29 season opener in Cincinnati.

After the way the left-hander pitched last season - taking steps back in games pitched, innings, ERA and WHIP as he battled injury and inconsistency from the get-go - Solís knows he has to both prove himself and earn the trust of new manager Davey Martinez.

"Last season was ups and downs, a lot more downs than ups for me," he said. "I want to make sure we don't have that again."

Solís posted a 1-0 record and career-worst marks in ERA (5.88) and WHIP (1.346) in a season wrecked by 10 weeks on the disabled list with a confusing left elbow problem and a demotion to Triple-A Syracuse for two weeks in July.

"Trying to pitch in games without feeling in half of my hand, that was tough," Solís said. "And trying to justify being on the team. They optioned me down and I couldn't even be mad at that point because I deserved it. At that point, my arm wasn't bouncing back and when you're not helping the team, you're hurting the team."

But Solís was hurting, period. What was first diagnosed as elbow inflammation in mid-April, then reclassified as nerve inflammation in his left elbow, really had nothing to do with his elbow at all. But it took twice-weekly sessions with an Arizona-based naturopath specializing in nerve pain and damage to get to the root of the problem.

"She really helped me calm it down and we found out it wasn't really stemming from my elbow at all, which was what we thought," he said. "It was stemming from my neck. That was encouraging. ... It wasn't really a nerve blockage, it was just being choked off by a few strained muscles in my neck. Once we found that out, it was kind of smooth sailing."

Solís is hoping he can take what he learned about how to deal with the strained neck muscles in the offseason and combine it with the second half that showed some promise: 20 outings cover 18 2/3 innings that produced a 2.41 ERA and 0.857 WHIP, numbers more in line with his first two major league campaigns.

But as soon as he figured out his health issues, a new concern cropped up, one that the southpaw largely has no control over. After closer Sean Doolittle, the Nationals are expected to carry two more left-handers in their seven-man bullpen and there are three lefties battling for those spots - Solís, Matt Grace and Enny Romero.

But Grace and Romero are out of options, meaning the Nationals would have to pass through waivers (and risk them being claimed by another club) to be sent to the minors. Solís, on the other hand, has one option remaining, meaning the Nats can move him freely between the majors and minors.

"There aren't too many spots in there, but it's not my job to work out how we're going to do that," Solís said. "It's my job to be prepared and be ready when the phone rings down there. We'll see how it pans out."

Complicating matters is the close friendship between Grace and Solís, who are rooming together this spring.

"We're different pitchers," Solís explained. "It doesn't come down to us competing with each other. We're competing for a bullpen spot. Grace is a sinkerballer, a 92-93 (mph) guy who gets ground balls. I'm more of a power pitcher who can go multiple innings. Those are two completely separate positions. We'll see what they need. Honestly, I can't say as far as what I think they'll need or what I think we have. Obviously, we have a strong back end of the bullpen, but there's some room to improve in the middle relief and setup roles."

Now healthy, Solís is determined to claim one of the 'pen spots. Having a remaining option is the furthest thing from his mind.

"I don't think I have to prove anything," he said. "I think they're well aware of what I can do when I'm healthy and 100 percent. To me, when I'm 100 percent, I belong in that bullpen and expect to be in that bullpen. I'll leave the rest up to them."

Article #55

Health, Not Stuff, is Kelley's Concern

By Todd Dybas – The Sports Capitol (3/9/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Shawn Kelley was met by a flood of observers when he walked off the mound after throwing his first live batting practice session of spring training. Everything appeared to still be attached. He had not grimaced or shook his arm. And yet, Kelley immediately fielded the same question from several people: "How do you feel?"

Kelley understands that as he heads into his age-34 season with two Tommy John surgeries in his past, this is how it will be. He has felt numbness in his hand multiple times before. It happened again last year. He is getting older while loose particles do a dance in his elbow. And, it's not just the surgeries. He had back and neck problems last season and prior.

The right-hander accepted this situation years ago after he had his second Tommy John surgery in 2010. It was an odd one. Instead of using a fresh, third ligament in his right elbow, doctors chose to shave the replacement one then reinsert it. Kelley felt everything after that was a bonus. He's thrown 297 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings since.

This, his final season of a three-year deal with the Nationals, is also a bonus. Last season was the first time Kelley became fed up with his physical situation. He had back, neck and arm problems at separate times. His outings were distortions of his past. His ERA rocketed to 8.62. Kelley wasn't right because of his physical problems. It bothered him.

"Last year, coming down to the end of the year when my back and my neck were feeling better and I just wasn't able to get — from the time off — get back into season-form, so to speak, that's probably the first time I got a little frustrated and I think that probably had to do with why I didn't finish the year," Kelley told The Sports Capitol. "I ended up getting shut down. There really wasn't much I could do. It was killing me. It was causing numbness in my hand. Something had to be done.

"I got back to the approach I had all the years after [the second surgery]. Just kind of that I'm playing with house money, so to speak. That's how I felt when I came back from the second Tommy John, when I finally made it back to the big leagues. I remember being like, 'It might be a day, maybe a year, maybe more. I'm going to try to enjoy every moment of it. Stay positive.' And, yeah, I've got to do a little bit extra than the average guy in the training room and getting older doesn't help that either. But, that's what I'm dealt. I can cry about it and go home or I can put in the extra time to work and do the extra treatments and get out there and pitch as good as I can."

Kelley's shutdown was extended during the offseason. He usually throws a football around or plays catch while fall turns to winter. He does something just to keep his arm from going dormant. He was told no form of throwing this offseason was allowed until the calendar flipped.

“From the stem-cell injection that we did, they wanted me to go about two or three months without really putting any strain on that joint,” Kelley said.

He also did not groom the hair on his face or head during this time. It ran off on its own, making Kelley look like a man just emerging from the woods after waiting out the apocalypse. Kelley had a shaved face and head when he played for the Yankees. He and Tanner Roark look plain unruly this spring.

Kelley worked on his lower body when restricted from throwing. He was able to move to upper-body exercises in December. Kelley is pursuing maximum stabilization. He has had back problems multiple times in the past, including last year.

But, it’s the elbow, always the elbow, that has to be managed.

“I can’t remember when I wasn’t [dealing with it],” Kelley said.

The construction of the Nationals’ bullpen provides him a chance at effectiveness in 2018. Kelley’s workload, even if healthy, should be low. Brandon Kintzler, Ryan Madson and Sean Doolittle are back to stack the final three innings between them. That pushes Kelley more toward the middle innings — think entering for two outs in the sixth when a starter struggles — than the back of the game. He is an expensive option for such a partial role. Kelley is making \$5.5 million this year in the final season of a rare three-year deal for a reliever, especially one who is not the closer.

Last season’s misery makes it easy to forget Kelley’s high strikeout rate (10.5 per nine for his career) forged by his fastball and slider. From 2015-16, Kelley averaged 55 innings and 72 strikeouts. His ERA was 2.55, WHIP 0.99 and ERA-plus 158. All powerful numbers. Even a modest down tick in those numbers when healthy would make Kelley a weapon in the middle innings. However, his availability is anything but certain.

“I know if I’m healthy, it will be like 2015 and ’16 and if I’m not, it will be like last year,” Kelley said.

Article #56

Brandon Kintzler is an impromptu Nationals pitching coach, and even Max Scherzer is listening

By Chelsea Janes – Washington Post (3/11/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — The Washington Nationals clubhouse was nearly empty Sunday morning, save for a few players sprawled on red chairs before the game, as Erick Fedde stood in front of Brandon Kintzler’s locker, perched as if he were on the pitching rubber.

Over and over, he practiced his delivery, from standing on his back leg to following through as if throwing a ball straight into Anthony Rendon’s locker a few yards away. Each time, Kintzler would observe his form, point to something, then see what Fedde had to say. Over and over, they would repeat the process, a budding pitcher and his volunteer pitching coach working on drive and mechanics.

Bright stars and loud personalities pack the Nationals clubhouse, which is loaded with more familiar names and faces than Kintzler’s. But subtly, the 33-year-old reliever has emerged as a valued piece of the chemistry puzzle, a veteran as eager to share his thoughts as his teammates are to hear them — if not occasionally more eager than they are.

In the Nationals clubhouse, where Shawn Kelley creates T-shirts as fast as his teammates create memories worth immortalizing, influence can be measured by whether one's face ends up printed on 100 percent cotton. Kintzler's likeness was on dark gray T-shirts within weeks of his arrival at last year's deadline, a picture of him sprinkling salt. To a man, his teammates call him "salty," a nod to his willingness to express critical opinions.

"He's all salt," Max Scherzer said with a smirk. "He's filling my J-Dub [Jayson Werth] void. He's not afraid to show his frustrations or opinions over anything."

Kintzler has opinions about many things and an uncommon willingness to share them, two qualities that do not often combine to form a beloved teammate. For example, most players offering unsolicited critiques to ultracompetitive three-time Cy Young Award winners such as Scherzer would not find their advice particularly well-received. But when asked about Kintzler's suggestions, Scherzer sighed.

"He makes some good points," Scherzer said. "There's some things I think he's opened my eyes to that I think I can add into my program. He's on to something."

For a man as calculated as Scherzer to concede that, especially to a teammate as new to him as Kintzler, speaks to the credibility of the reliever's criticism. Kintzler can be bold with his ideas because he has spent months researching and implementing them. He has had arm trouble and underwent surgery for a torn tendon in his left knee after the 2014 season. He didn't recover well. He didn't reestablish himself until he joined the Minnesota Twins in 2016.

Then, last year in spring training, Kintzler started feeling symptoms of patellar tendinitis in his other knee. Twins trainers worked on him, but he didn't improve. He took pain medication to mask the pain but couldn't eradicate it.

"I was like, nope, I don't want to do this again. So I need to figure out exactly why this happened," Kintzler said. He started mining the Internet for answers and came across a teaser video from a self-help fitness company started by the founder of one of the earliest CrossFit Gyms in San Francisco. He signed up, paying the monthly fee for a subscription to its videos.

"Then I started watching all the patella tendinitis videos, trying to find what was the cause," Kintzler said. "And it all started with the feet and ankles."

Slowly but surely, Kintzler started amassing enough information to address his own tendinitis trouble, then establish a maintenance routine to prevent it from recurring. Through the videos, he learned about the importance of big toe mobility — in simplest terms, the ability to move one's big toe separate from the others — and its effect on the gluteal muscles so many pitchers use to generate power.

He began putting a lacrosse ball under his big toe to increase its mobility, to make sure he engaged his feet — and by extension, the larger muscles of his legs — more effectively. Even as he pitches now, Kintzler thinks about pushing off his big toe until the last possible moment.

"Obviously everything works from the ground up. So when I had a knee injury, my ankles and my feet were extremely tight," Kintzler said. "If they don't absorb the impact, the impact goes upstream. It goes up to your hips. I learned a lot about it, so I spread it around the clubhouse when I can."

When Sean Doolittle started feeling tendinitis in his knee last year, Kintzler passed along advice.

“Now [Doolittle]’s getting supple,” said Kintzler, who has a hat from the fitness company in his locker and wore its gear around often enough that teammates started asking him about it. Joe Ross always had what he described as “bad feet,” so when Kintzler arrived with suggestions about toe mobility, he listened. Now he wears toe spacers in his cleats and when he trains.

“It puts them in the right spot so you use your ankle correctly, and my balance gets a lot better,” Ross said. “I’m trying to get to the point where I don’t need them.”

Stephen Strasburg, who has spoken extensively about the kinetic chain and the lessons he’s learned the hard way about how leg injuries can affect his arm, spoke to Kintzler about the program, too.

“It’s great to be able to acquire some knowledge from him like that, about how your body works — if I’m feeling tight there, this is probably why, and how I can treat it,” Strasburg said. “. . . I’m more along the lines of, hey, if it’s not going to hurt me, I’m going to try it.”

Strasburg did go on a 34-inning scoreless streak shortly after Kintzler’s arrival last season. Then again, as evidenced by the kinetic chain, causation can be complicated.

Sammy Solis joked that he sometimes has to tell Kintzler to “stay over there” during workouts. Manager Dave Martinez called the veteran “a quiet instigator.” But for all the jokes about his “salt,” and all the teasing about his many opinions, Scherzer and many other Nationals texted Kintzler when he was deciding where to sign this winter, pleading with him to return. Now Kintzler and Scherzer are throwing partners, playing daily games of catch that would probably be a pitching student’s delight — if they were at all suitable for public consumption.

“We’re not afraid to say, ‘Hey, that was a dog crap slider,’ or ‘What were you thinking here?’ ” Scherzer said. “That’s how we are. We’d rather just have each other lay it on the line. We aren’t sensitive.”

Scherzer is helping Kintzler improve his slider. Kintzler is helping Scherzer improve . . . well, Scherzer is too secretive to say. But few baseball minds can challenge Scherzer’s enough to penetrate it. No suggestions earn genuine consideration without careful vetting. Kintzler, impromptu pitching coach, unheralded workout guru, has passed his stringent test.

Article #57

Forgettable debut helped Adams on path to positive impression

By Peter Kerzel – MASN Sports (3/12/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - Exit interviews are often a formality, but right-hander Austin L. Adams used an end-of-season chat with former Nationals pitching coach Mike Maddux as a springboard from an up-and-down debut season in the major leagues to an offseason chocked full of the kind of work necessary to show he’s a good pitcher.

“My last talk with Mike Maddux, he kind of sat me down and he really wanted me to understand that I have tremendous stuff,” Adams said. “There’s life on your fastball, you have a really good breaking ball. So you need to understand this, that you can be used as a weapon at this level. You’re not young, but don’t get caught up at being a rookie (at 26) at this level. You have everything that people who succeed at this level have.”

Nationals-bag-bat-dugout-sidebar.jpg Adams can be excused if self-doubt crept in and muddled what should have been a major career achievement: finally reaching the big leagues with the Nationals in July after six seasons in the minors. Washington summoned him to fortify the bullpen in the first series after the All-Star break, and then skipper Dusty Baker talked about how he liked the righty's big arm and fastball, but was hoping for a good, low-leverage situation for Adams to get his feet wet in the majors.

Adams didn't have to wait long. In the second game of a four-game series in Cincinnati, Baker called his number for the eighth inning with the Nats ahead 10-0. But what should have been a memorable moment suddenly turned into anything but. An error, a walk, a wild pitch and a hit batter loaded the bases for Scooter Gennett, who walked to force in a run. Adams then allowed a run-scoring single by Eugenio Suárez, and was relieved by Oliver Pérez.

Adams retreated shell-shocked to the bench with an infinite ERA. He gave up a run on two hits and two walks in his next outing in Milwaukee after being called up in September. But his incalculable ERA only went down to 18.00. Looking back on his debut, Adams admits things quickly got away from him.

"To say that didn't stick with me a little longer than other bad outings I've had in the minor leagues would be lying," he said. "That stuck with me for quite a while - but it also helped me a lot. My weaknesses were so magnified at that level. As soon as I got back down to Syracuse, (pitching coach) Bob Milacki and (manager) Billy Gardner (Jr.) really hit it hard on, how do we make sure this doesn't happen again? No. 1, how do I do well enough (in Syracuse) that I get an opportunity to get called up in September and No. 2, how do I make sure when I get called up that this doesn't happen again? We looked at video and a lot of things. The one in Milwaukee wasn't so good, but it seemed like every single outing after that it was getting better and better and better."

September finished with four scoreless outings by Adams, who looked a lot more like the power pitcher the Nationals acquired from the Angels in the Danny Espinosa deal than the guy who set the stage for the Reds to turn a 10-run deficit into a 10-7 squeaker. But the bad taste in his mouth from his debut didn't dissipate quickly.

"There was a part of overthinking - am I good enough to be here? - and doubts like that. I don't know about other guys here, but confidence level is something that I've struggled with a lot of the time, and just being with (Nationals director of mental conditioning) Mark Campbell, that's helped me a lot here. Yeah, it was something that stuck with me for a while."

But Maddux's October chat put Adams on the right track, and Adams went ahead with his usual demanding offseason regimen, hoping it would allow him to continue his September success into spring training. In four Grapefruit League games, he's allowed one hit in 3 2/3 innings with one walk and seven strikeouts.

"Pretty much every offseason, I take a week off from throwing and lifting, and then I get right back to it," Adams said. "I don't like taking a lot of time off because I feel like then you have to start getting your body back into shape. I'd rather just stay in throwing shape - I'm not pitching or anything. But look at my numbers, my obvious weakness is I walk too many guys, so how do we make sure that continues to go down? And it has."

But now he has a new manager to impress in Davey Martinez.

"Us in this business, we have to make an impression every single year," Adams said. "It's a new year. So you're either getting better or getting worse. If you're just resting on your past works, that can only help you

for so long, but eventually it catches up to you. Regardless if it's Davey or it was Dusty back here, it's always proving what you did in the offseason to improve."

This spring, he's sponged everything he can from veterans in the Nationals clubhouse - particularly ace Max Scherzer, closer Sean Doolittle, and setup men Brandon Kintzler and Ryan Madson - about throwing a better two-seam fastball. Hard throwers that can throw a fastball don't have long baseball lives in the majors; hard throwers who can use a two-seamer or a changeup and give hitters more possibilities to consider are much harder to hit.

"What I really want to hammer down is getting a really good two-seam to work, almost as a changeup to lefties, and then if I can also get a changeup as well, that's the ultimate goal," Adams said. "So it's not a one-trick pony out there."

Adams has made another offseason change, adding his middle initial - "L" for Lance - to his official name. That's more because of practicality rather than vanity. There's another Austin Adams - Austin David Adams, a former Indians reliever who is now in the Angels system. The two players have been confused for some time now by fans and media members who search a name on Baseball-Reference.com and wind up at the wrong player's page. A similar situation spurred Michael A. Taylor to add his middle initial a couple of years ago to limit confusion with a similarly named outfielder.

"How many could there be? But there's two," he said. "So I just tried to make it easy for (the media). And my wife - she gets frustrated and my family gets frustrated when someone puts the wrong information on (the TV). Back in the day, in the Cal League in 2014, I probably got one or two of his cards a day. I won't sign them, though. I tweeted him, but he never tweeted back at me, unfortunately. Last year was pretty confusing, me coming from the Angels and then he signed with the Angels. The 'L' was to help everyone out."

Adams' spring is doing a good job of making sure the Nationals brass remembers who he is. And though he faces an uphill climb to force his way into a bullpen crowded with veterans, Adams hopes his performance and work ethic help make things difficult for the decision-makers who will craft the 25-man roster that comes north.

He may not have a clear path to that goal at this point, but a lot of things can happen in the next two and a half weeks. One minor injury could have a trickle-down effect and open the door for Adams.

"You want to be ready, but at the same time, I'm trying to go out there and win a job," Adams said. "I want to make Davey and (pitching coach Derek) Lilliquist and (general manager Mike) Rizzo - whoever's making those decisions - I want them to give them the hardest decision they have to make."

Article #58

Robles, Soto give Nats OF tandem to dream on

By Jon Paul Morosi – MLB.com (3/12/18)

LAKELAND, Fla. -- Victor Robles and Juan Soto were born in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, a little more than one year apart. They rank among the top 30 prospects in baseball, according to MLB Pipeline -- Robles at No. 6, Soto at No. 29. They were signed by the same Nationals scout, Modesto Ulloa.

Three times this spring, Robles and Soto have appeared for the Nationals in the same Grapefruit League game. Monday's 5-4 win over the Tigers was the latest. Robles went 0-for-3 but made a sublime shoestring catch in right field. Soto replaced him in right and drove in two runs, with a double and bases-loaded walk.

Afterward, Robles was asked how often he and Soto daydream about playing alongside one another at Nationals Park -- Robles in center, Soto in one of the corners.

"We've always talked about it," Robles said through interpreter Octavio Martinez. "We've always said, 'In three or four years, if we keep doing our thing, we'll be up there together, side by side.' We do talk about that a lot."

They may not have to wait that long, Robles is told.

He smiled.

"I hope so," he said, in perfect English.

The anticipation surrounding Robles, 20, and Soto, 19, is a welcome counterbalance for the uncertainty among Nationals fans regarding Bryce Harper's potential free agency following this season. In one sense, Robles has arrived already: He played in 13 regular-season games for the Nationals last year and two more in the postseason.

Thus Robles became the youngest position player to appear in at least two games in a single postseason since Harper and Manny Machado in 2012.

How "nervous" was Robles during the National League Division Series?

"That's one of those words I don't use in my vocabulary too often," he replied. "I don't believe in that. I feel like it's one of those words that can backfire on you. I don't think too much about it. I just go out, try to perform and help my team win any way I can."

Clearly, he's confident. And Nationals general manager Mike Rizzo said Robles is calmer than he was one year ago, too.

"After being a [20-year-old] on the playoff roster, the game doesn't move as fast for him anymore," Rizzo said in a Monday telephone interview. "His skill set is immense. He's fairly refined for his age and his time in pro baseball. He seems like one of those guys who has a slow heartbeat that really takes his time and is not overwhelmed by the atmosphere."

Rizzo described Robles as "a special defender, a Gold Glove-type center fielder." Yet there's a good chance Robles will begin the regular season at Triple-A Syracuse. The Nationals believe outfielders Adam Eaton and Michael A. Taylor will recover from their injuries in time to make the Opening Day lineup, and the team doesn't want Robles to lose developmental time by playing part-time in the Majors.

"He'd have to be playing every day," Rizzo said. "He's going to play every day somewhere. If circumstances happen -- through injuries or that type of thing -- where he could play every day, we wouldn't feel bad about bringing him to the big leagues. But he's going to play somewhere, whether that's the big leagues or Triple-A."

Asked if he understands the value in returning to the Minors, Robles said, "I see it as a move the team has to make. That's their decision. I don't control any of that or have a say in it. All I can control is how I perform: Keep playing hard, keep playing well and prove to them I belong up here."

Rizzo said Soto could handle the Class A Advanced level to begin the season, but he will "probably" start at Class A Hagerstown because of an injury-shortened 2017 season. Soto was much more polished than a typical 19-year-old in Monday's two plate appearances. Nationals manager Dave Martinez said he was more impressed by Soto's run-producing walk in the ninth inning than his double the inning before.

"I really was," Martinez said. "That's a big moment. He was laying off tough pitches. That's pretty impressive."

Relearning the rules

Dave Martinez took away one positive from starter Edwin Jackson's turbulent third inning on Monday: He was able to see how Jackson and catcher Pedro Severino negotiated a high-stress inning without relying on multiple mound visits, in accordance with new MLB rules.

"We've talked about that -- when to go, when not to go," Martinez said. "It's going to change the game. You actually get to learn more about pitchers this way. You watch them work out of jams on their own."

Murphy on track

Rizzo said he's "cautiously optimistic" that second baseman Daniel Murphy will be in the Nationals' Opening Day lineup. Murphy, 32, took on-field batting practice on Monday at Ballpark of the Palm Beaches for a second consecutive day. Murphy has yet to play a game this spring after undergoing right knee microfracture surgery in October.

Up next

Harper, Trea Turner and Anthony Rendon are among the Nationals regulars expected to be in the lineup for Tuesday's 7:05 p.m. ET meeting with a split Mets squad at FITTEAM Ballpark of the Palm Beaches. Ace Max Scherzer will face Zack Wheeler in a game airing on MLB.TV as well as MASN locally and MLB Network nationally.

Article #59

Fifteen years in, Nationals pitcher Edwin Jackson still trying to extend his journey

By Jorge Castillo – Washington Post (3/13/18)

When you pitch for 12 organizations across a decade-and-a-half, like Edwin Jackson, you figure out how the professional baseball world operates. In his 15-year path from teenage super-prospect to respected veteran, Jackson learned the business is unforgiving and only grows colder with age. So he just seeks honesty in business dealings. No backtracking. No sugarcoating. He thinks he found that in the Nationals' front office, which factored into his decision to re-sign with Washington over the winter.

"They're going to keep it straight with you," Jackson said recently at his locker in West Palm Beach, Fla. "That's the biggest thing you can ask for: an organization to keep it real with you and let you know where you stand."

This is where the 34-year-old Jackson stands on March 13: in competition for the final spot in the Nationals' rotation with A.J. Cole and Erick Fedde, though that is subject to change should the team acquire a starting pitcher. If it doesn't, however, club officials have repeated that Cole, who doesn't have a minor league option remaining, is the front-runner for the vacancy, meaning Jackson will likely start the season with Class AAA Syracuse. Jackson would have to accept the assignment because he can't opt out of his minor league contract until June 1.

"It's not necessarily the ideal situation for me," Jackson said on Tuesday after his third start of the spring. "But if that's what happens, I guess I have to deal with that when it comes."

Last offseason, Jackson waited and waited for an offer he deemed acceptable. The strategy backfired. He spent spring training on his own in Arizona, throwing bullpen sessions instead of competing for a spot on a major league roster. He went unsigned until accepting a minor league offer from the Orioles after Opening Day. He pitched for Baltimore's AAA affiliate and appeared in two games for the Orioles before he was designated for assignment.

He then signed a minor league deal with the Nationals in June, five years removed from helping Washington reach the postseason for the first time in club history, and posted a 0.44 ERA in five outings before getting another call to the majors.

Jackson's second stint in Washington was a tale of two extremes. In his first eight starts, he pitched to a 2.94 ERA. In the next four, he compiled a 12.38 ERA. He allowed two runs across six innings in his final outing. He attributed the swoon to his delayed start.

"I had a little downfall where it would normally be right before the all-star break," Jackson said. "It happened to be at the end of the season just because I had the late start. It was unfortunate, but for the most part I came in and helped the team when we needed it most — when it was down starters and needed innings to get to September, to the end."

Jackson returned to the Nationals even as speculation that they'd potentially sign a free agent pitcher to fill that open rotation slot swirled. Those chances took a hit over the past week with Lance Lynn and Jake Arrieta finally moving off the market. Other options, including Alex Cobb, remain, but the Nationals are more likely to begin the season with their current options than a week ago.

"He gets it," Nationals Manager Dave Martinez said of Jackson. "He knows he has to try to make the team. But he's done well."

Jackson has made his case by pitching to a 3.00 ERA in three spring outings. On Tuesday, he made the three-hour trip to Lakeland — another sign of where he stands in the pecking order — and surrendered one run on three hits and two walks over three innings against the Tigers. His stuff — and that fastball in the mid-90s — is still there. The focus, as always, has been on avoiding command lapses, which kept Jackson from reaching his potential and sticking with one franchise for long.

"Right now my biggest thing is make 'em put the ball in play," Jackson said. "Coming into today, outside today's game, walks have been down. I've been making people put the ball in play. That's my biggest thing. If I can be aggressive around the strike zone and stay in pitcher's counts and stay aggressive around the plate to let the defense work, I'll take my chances."

Most players maintain spring training competition doesn't change matters, but Jackson admitted competing for a spot is "different." Results this early could matter. Familiarity helps. While his teammates, for the most part, have spent the past few weeks getting acquainted with their overhauled coaching staff, most of the faces weren't new to Jackson. He worked with Martinez and first base coach Tim Bogar in 2008 when they were with the Rays, and with pitching coach Derek Lilliquist in 2011 when they were with the Cardinals. It's another perk of Jackson's travels. He's sure there's more to his journey.

"I'm 34 and I've been around a while," Jackson said. "I still got something in the tank, though, man. I still got a lot in the tank, I feel like. I'll continue to grind until the end."

Article #60

As Nationals reassign Bryan Harper, could Bryce's brother still break into majors this season?

By Chelsea Janes – Washington Post (3/14/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — No one expected Bryan Harper, brother of Washington Nationals superstar Bryce Harper, to crack the Nationals' Opening Day roster. That he played well enough to earn an invite to major league spring training, about 15 months after undergoing Tommy John surgery on his elbow, was the real achievement of his spring.

"Oh yeah, I appreciated it," Bryan Harper said. "When you get something taken away from you for 18 months, it's quite frustrating."

The 28-year-old was so near the majors when the injury occurred, on the cusp of a September call-up that most people thought of as a chance for Bryce Harper to play with his brother — but, in reality, would have been the culmination of the elder Harper's own long and grueling baseball journey.

The Nationals reassigned him to minor league camp Tuesday night, meaning he will not make the Opening Day roster. But he showed enough to renew his quest for a call-up sometime soon, even as he remains in the process of rebuilding arm strength, as opposed to honing his stuff.

"From where he was last year to now, to come here in camp and pitch in the big leagues, he did great," Nationals Manager Dave Martinez said. "I know he was excited about it. He'll build from that. I told him, 'Build the arm strength. Get stronger. But you're going to be fine.' He gained a lot of confidence in camp, and that's good to see."

Martinez's stance on Harper's future was firm: If he stays healthy, he is a legitimate contender for a big league spot. His two-seamer plays at the highest levels. His slider is good enough to complement it. Currently, Harper still has a horde of lefties ahead of him on the organizational depth chart. But if he rebuilds, he can climb.

"The biggest thing is his health," Martinez said. "... If he continues to do what he does and build, I don't see why [he can't contend for a big league spot]."

Harper's last outing came Monday against the Detroit Tigers when he allowed a homer as he earned his first save of the spring. He finished with a 5.40 ERA in five outings and innings pitched, and allowed opposing hitters a .286 batting average against — numbers with which he wasn't happy, but tried to be patient.

“They say the command is the last [to come after surgery], and I think that’s what I’m going through right now,” Harper said. “Not just pure command, but the mechanics of getting everything linked up.”

As he wrestled with the long process of rebuilding habits, his teammates — many of whom have undergone Tommy John surgery, too — told him to take it slow, reminded him “you’re good,” and told him to “keep doing your thing.”

“It’s good to hear that from other people,” Harper said, “but I’m my own worst critic.”

Now, he will continue rebuilding in minor league camp, where Nationals staff will likely be more forgiving of Harper than he is of himself, where results matter far less, where he can allow himself time to reestablish routine. He was not the only reliever to head back to the minors Tuesday evening. Wander Suero and Jaron Long went, too, meaning the Nationals have 15 pitchers left in camp contending for seven or eight bullpen spots. Five of them — Sean Doolittle, Ryan Madson, Brandon Kintzler, Shawn Kelley and Joaquin Benoit — are guaranteed money and likely big league spots. They will be joined by two lefties, from the pool of Sammy Solis, Enny Romero, Matt Grace and Tim Collins.

Lefty Tommy Milone will start Thursday, and does not seem likely to stick in the bullpen over any of the rest. Right-handers Trevor Gott and Austin Adams have both impressed this spring, but have options and will start in Class AAA Syracuse if necessary. Surprising right-hander Chris Smith and lefty Ismael Guillon also remain in camp, having impressed decision-makers enough to earn a longer look than others. With two weeks until Opening Day, the Nationals are whittling their bullpen into shape.

Harper will not be a part of it, at least at first. But he is back and building, and as his brother commands the baseball world’s attention this season, Bryan Harper will be resuming his own major league dream.

Article #61

Joe Dillon, the ‘best assistant in baseball,’ has brought a novel approach to the Nationals

By Jorge Castillo – Washington Post (3/13/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — A few weeks ago, as he explained how he fosters relationships with players, Washington Nationals hitting coach Kevin Long abruptly shifted topics to Joe Dillon and his innovative techniques.

“This guy’s amazing,” Long said. “I’ve got the best assistant in baseball.”

Long, for all his groundbreaking expertise and success, has been learning from Dillon, the Nationals’ assistant hitting coach, over the past several weeks. Dillon has brought revolutionary methods to the batting cage, methods even Long hadn’t incorporated in his lauded work with the New York Yankees and Mets. Rather than the standard half-speed drills, the banal soft tossing and tee work, Dillon is a proponent of creating game-like conditions outside of actual games. The concept is standard across sports. It’s novel in baseball.

“We’re the only sport in the world that doesn’t train at game-speed,” Dillon noted.

Dillon, 42, is a baseball lifer born of conventional methods. He reached the major leagues for his hitting ability using conventional methods and began his coaching career teaching conventional methods. That all changed two years ago because of a discussion between two scientists in Nashville.

Sometime after the 2014 NFL draft, Scott Wylie and Brandon Ally, two faculty members in Vanderbilt's neurology and neurological surgery department and former college athletes, had a conversation in a hallway one day about how draft prospects were evaluated. They realized the measurables discussed were nearly all physical. There were 40-yard dash times to determine speed, three-cone drill results to assess quickness and bench press reps to gauge strength.

Cognitive skills, however, were always deemed immeasurable, blanketed with vague terms. Players possessed great or poor instincts. They played faster or slower than their speed. They processed information quickly or deliberately. Nothing concrete. No hard data. All determined by the naked eye. The two scientists, whose work in neighboring labs focused on more serious matters, spotted an opportunity to evolve from conceptual work on diseases to the application realm.

"We've got ways to quantify that," they determined, according to Wylie.

Nearly four years later, Wylie, a former college baseball player, and Ally, a former track athlete at Tennessee, are co-founders of SportsSense, a Nashville-based company that seeks to quantify what was previously thought unquantifiable in evaluating athletes: the set of cognitive skills brains utilize to perform split-second decisions. In 2016, the company, which has hired four employees, nabbed an SEC football team as its first client — Wylie declined to specify partners in a telephone conversation. The clientele has since expanded to several college football teams, some Division I baseball and golf programs, two NFL franchises and five MLB organizations. Plans for basketball, hockey and other sports are in the works.

"We bring cognitive principles and they apply it," said Wylie, who now serves on the University of Louisville faculty along with Ally. "It's taking the guesswork out of understanding what players are seeing."

Dillon happened to join one of the MLB clients two years ago when he became the Miami Marlins' minor league hitting coordinator. There, he met Paul Phillips, then the hitting coach for Miami's Class AAA affiliate. Before joining the Marlins, Phillips, a former major leaguer, was on Lipscomb University's coaching staff. The Nashville school was, by chance, SportSense's first foray into baseball.

Phillips brought the methods to the Marlins and converted Dillon. Working with SportsSense, which entered an official partnership with the Marlins, profiles were created for each interested player based on information derived from their tendencies — chase rate, contact rate in the strike zone, etc. Dillon took that data and built specific drills based on the findings on a trial-and-error basis to improve their cognitive skills.

"Everybody's brains are wired differently," Wylie said. "Some athletes can just see things faster. They can recognize, identify what they're seeing faster than others. Some guys got great control of their impulses, they can shut down their impulses faster. Other guys take longer. It's a tug of war for time between the pitcher and the hitter. The cognitive system contributes to the advantages and disadvantages."

Dillon pointed to Isaac Galloway, a center fielder in the Marlins' farm system, as an example of the program's effectiveness. After batting .254 with 10 home runs and a .686 on-base-plus-slugging percentage across 129 games in Class AAA as a 26-year-old in 2016, Galloway batted .280 with a .909 OPS and seven home runs in 26 games at Class AAA during an injury-plagued 2017 campaign. Wylie, however, admitted the evidence of improvements is more anecdotal than scientific at this point.

This spring, Dillon had specific pitching machines, ones that can offer different types of pitches at various planes and angles, sent to the Nationals' facility in West Palm Beach. With the machines, he puts players through voluntary drills designed to push their brains beyond their comfort zones. The key to the exercises,

Dillon emphasized, is the batter doesn't swing at every pitch like they're accustomed to during a standard pregame batting practice session.

"If you think traditionally how we train, it's swing, swing, swing, and then they go tell you to be patient in the game," Dillon said. "So we'll work on saying, 'No.' There's a process to saying, 'Don't swing,' just like there's a process that says, 'Swing.'"

In one drill, utility man Matt Reynolds explained, there are four plates in front of each other. The machine is set up to spit fastballs at the average big league speed and release point. The hitter starts at the plate 60 feet 6 inches away and moves up after each pitch — whether he swings or not — and back down to the original plate. Reynolds said he moves up and back four times during a session. The point is to distort the brain. Each time the batter moves up, the perceived velocity increases by 10 mph. Reynolds had never done drills like that before.

"When you first step in, you're like, 'Damn, this is throwing hard,' " Reynolds said. "And then you get up to the very front plate and you're like, 'All right. [Shoot]. This is way too hard.' And then you work your way back and get to the back plate and you're like, 'This isn't throwing as hard as I thought it was anymore.' And you're actually early now. So it's really slowing the ball down with your eyes. It's a lot of vision work and mental process."

While Reynolds said he'd been seeing only fastballs in drills with Dillon, Matt Adams, a powerful slugger whose kryptonite since breaking into the majors has been left-handed pitching, explained his drills have also included breaking balls from left-handed slots.

"This is a whole new world for me," Adams said. "Everybody says that this game is more mental than anything because everybody's got the physical tools to play this game. I think just being able to train your mind to have a better strike zone, pick up pitches better, I think that's going to be huge."

Trea Turner also said he's worked with Dillon. Ryan Zimmerman recently said he hadn't yet, but he planned to. Dillon's methods aren't for everyone, though, at least not yet. Bryce Harper, for example, said he doesn't plan on incorporating the drills into his routine. Of course, Harper seems to have his cognitive skills in the batter's box in order.

Wylie envisions a future in which cognitive drills will become the norm and clubs will incorporate cognitive data into the predictive analytic models they're already using to construct rosters. For now, the Nationals don't have an official partnership with SportsSense, though it's on the table. Instead, Dillon is spreading the word every day in the cage, pushing batters and their brains to the brink, and perhaps giving the Nationals a head start in what could be the next frontier in baseball's never-ending quest for an edge.

Article #62

Bryce Harper isn't getting \$400 million, and the Nationals' title window 'just got bigger'

By Thomas Boswell – Washington Post (3/14/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — The 10-year, \$400 million Bryce Harper contract that everybody has been speculating about for years — that's dead.

Over the next year, we will find out just how deeply it's buried under the rubble of MLB's collapsing free agent salary structure. Is his new price more like \$300 million for eight years or perhaps \$250 million, if he's lucky, for seven years?

My answer, after covering every MLB labor battle since 1976, the year of the first free agent, is that when the pendulum of baseball economics swings, it swings further than anybody anticipates.

Whatever the number of years and dollars you think Harper, Manny Machado, Josh Donaldson and Craig Kimbrel will be offered next winter, start slashing them. The shock waves of this salary tsunami have barely reached shore. When their full force is appreciated, fans will reevaluate their teams in a new light.

That will require much digestion and analysis, one team at a time. But in Washington, even the Nationals' own players shake their heads in disbelief as they acknowledge that all five of their important players who are in their walk years — Harper, Daniel Murphy, Gio Gonzalez, Matt Wieters and Ryan Madson — will face radically different and probably lowered prospects.

While that may not be good for their teammates' wallets, this new economic order should benefit the Nats as a whole. Just as \$70 million will drop off the Nats' payroll after 2018, the price of high-level talent is plummeting.

Suddenly, the Nats' chances of keeping Harper improve. But so do their options for moving away from Harper and instead focusing on long-term deals with stars such as Anthony Rendon and Trea Turner while still having payroll room to invest in prime free agents next winter. If the Nats don't capitalize on this seismic shift to keep their title window wide open through 2021, then they have blown it.

"I don't think you'll ever seen another [Giancarlo] Stanton contract — for anybody," one Nat said of that 13-year, \$325 million deal.

From analyzing the recent contracts of a range of free agents, I think that almost all teams now believe that if they acquire a top free agent such as Harper, they will have to give up compensation — in draft picks and lost international bonus pool money — that is worth at least \$50 million and perhaps more like \$75 million.

I will explain the math later. But Harper, Machado and the rest of the class of 2019 now probably have anchors tied to them. The only team that can sign them and not pay this huge compensation is their current team. The Nats and Orioles will start with a large advantage over rich competitors in keeping their own stars. How large? We will analyze that later.

In this radically new market, the Nats have two options. So far, they have treated Harper as they did Stephen Strasburg, basically waiting to hear whether he wanted to talk about a stay-in-D.C. extension. Now, in a cheaper market and with their rivals disadvantaged, they might decide to get aggressive.

Or since they already have so many outfielders under team control — Adam Eaton, Michael A. Taylor, Victor Robles, Juan Soto and Brian Goodwin — the Nats may look at "today's prices" and focus on locking up Rendon, who is free after 2019, or the other young players they value highest.

Unless Harper becomes earnest in pursuing the Nats, as Strasburg did, I suspect that Washington will follow the second option. The tide has shifted. It's neither good nor bad. It's just change. All over MLB, teams have the leverage and the optionality. I expect to be shocked. A year from now, if there is no fervent pursuit by the Nats and with at least seven other glitzy free agents glutting a limited market of teams with

both money and a will to win, Harper may indeed “reset the MLB market” but at a lower level than has been imagined.

Maybe not. Over the next year, we will see whether my reading on this is approximately correct. Ryan Zimmerman disagrees: “Harp is a lot different than anybody in this year’s free agent class. What applies to him then may not be at all like what we’re seeing now.”

Harper has taken the reasonable position, like Strasburg and Max Scherzer in the past, that he won’t talk at all about 2019 in 2018.

But everybody else is talking. Last week, Mike Moustakas, whom FanGraphs estimated would get a five-year, \$85 million contract, came crawling back to his old team, Kansas City, for a pay cut — \$6.5 million for one year.

“Moustakas hit 38 homers last year. He broke a Royals team home run record — in that [big] park — that had stood for like 25 years,” Murphy said, almost in disbelief.

This week, Jake Arrieta, represented by Scott Boras, whose clients include Moustakas and Harper, signed a similarly stunning contract with the Phillies. Several months ago, Boras compared Arrieta’s value to that of Scherzer (seven years, \$210 million). Even if that was bargaining, \$150 million or perhaps the \$126 million for six years that the Cubs gave Yu Darvish looked sensible for Arrieta. For pitchers, especially past 30, total guaranteed dollars are almost all that matters.

Arrieta signed for \$75 million over three years. Where is that extra \$50-million-or-more safely in his hand? Does he ever get another big deal at 35?

What prevented 29 teams, including the Nats, from offering a former Cy Young winner a bigger deal? Why didn’t Moustakas get anything?

One partial explanation, a half-dozen are “tanking” to rebuild or to pocket cash rather than compete. “No, try 15 teams aren’t trying to win,” a Nats vet said.

But the main reason for the salary plunge is the huge value teams place on the compensation that they must give up if they sign a top free agent who has rejected a qualifying offer (\$17.4 million last year).

“We were more and more amazed as the winter went on — right up to Moustakas,” said one of the Nats’ top decision-makers, who did not want to be quoted for fear of . . . you fill in the blank.

Is it possible that part of this implosion is collusion by owners, like their sins in 1985-87 when MLB settled with its players for \$280 million in damages?

“I lived that,” said Nats assistant general manager Bob Boone, who was then one of the players determined, by an arbitrator, to be a victim of collusion. “It took 10 more years for me to get the check — with annual interest,” he added with a chuckle.

“This time, I see a natural market correction,” said Boone, who, as management now, might be expected to say that. But Boone, one of the staunchest union men as a player, has a long history of being bluntly honest.

“Young players are valued far higher now. Players past 30 are valued much less,” said Boone, a Stanford graduate.

Analytics prove players peak younger than previously thought. Testing for PEDs and amphetamines has stopped older players from cheating to stay young. So the valuation gap has widened at warp speed.

If the Nats had signed Arrieta, Lance Lynn or Alex Cobb as a free agent, they would have given up second- and fifth-round picks in the June draft, as well as \$1 million in international bonus money. “Fans don’t understand all the value in those picks and bonus money,” Nats principal owner Mark Lerner said Tuesday.

But the Lerner’s understand. In a few years, the Nats’ starting lineup may include outfielders Robles, 20, and Soto, 19, as well as Wilmer Difo and catcher Pedro Severino. A key piece in the 2016 trade for Eaton was 100-mph prospect Reynaldo Lopez. Those five Dominican players were all signed by the Nats for less than \$400,000 in international bonus money.

Could the ultimate value of all those internationals, plus draft picks that might pan out as well as a second-rounder like Jordan Zimmermann, provide the Nats with \$50 million to \$75 million in value — my guesstimate earlier — during their young, inexpensive 20s?

Probably. It just took MLB a long time to figure it out. And the union didn’t.

The events of the past few months and even weeks have implications that radiate in all directions. Suddenly, the window for Scherzer and Strasburg to remain a Nats tandem almost certainly extends through 2021. Why? Strasburg’s not going to opt out of his contract after 2019 or 2020. In this market? His current \$175 million deal now looks like one of the last bonanzas.

“There goes a lucky guy. He deserves every cent. But there won’t be many more contracts like that, maybe none for pitchers,” one veteran Nat said as Strasburg walked past. “Everybody talks about ‘windows.’ Ours just got bigger.”

Consider Gonzalez, presumed to be going, going, gone after 2018 because some team would offer him a multiyear contract the Nats would be unwise to match. Not anymore. Gonzalez suddenly profiles like Lynn, who settled for one year and \$12 million.

Suddenly, almost nothing is unthinkable. Teams that theorize outside the box — or realize that the old box has been blown up — can flourish the next few years. The game may go back into labor pain, but happy teams still will go to those World Series.

Several franchises will be positioned to prosper. But the Nats need to grasp that they should be one of them.

Article #63

Nationals pitcher Strasburg gets familiar with new catcher

By David Driver – Washington Times (3/15/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, FLA – A few days ago Nationals pitcher Stephen Strasburg just sat down to talk with two of his catchers: Matt Wieters and Miguel Montero.

It was a fairly standard conversation, as Strasburg said he “wanted to be on the same page” with his catchers.

While Wieters and Strasburg worked together last season, Montero is new to the Nationals.

The veteran catcher is in spring training with the Nationals as a non-roster player and has a good chance to be the backup this year to Wieters.

“It has been good. I faced him a few times as an opponent,” Strasburg said of Montero. “He works really hard.”

Another person who could fill that role is Pedro Severino, 24, who appeared in 17 games last season with the Nationals.

Montero was with the Cubs last year but was let go by the club in June after a game in Washington in which the Nationals stole seven bases against Chicago. Montero blamed pitcher Jake Arrieta for the steals, and the next day the Cubs designated Montero for assignment.

Strasburg, instead of facing the Houston Astros on Thursday in a spring training game, pitched on a back field at the spring training complex in West Palm Beach. He said he threw about 75 pitches over five innings and faced just right-handed batters.

“Trying to simulate any sort of game, really,” Strasburg said of his outing.

Article #64

Victor Robles gets to the clubhouse early. He might get to the majors the same way.

By Thomas Boswell – Washington Post (3/16/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — The one thing that strikes you about Victor Robles is his speed, his genuine smile, his powerful arm, his confident presence at age 20, his ability to adjust to windblown flies instantly, his fearlessness in proximity to fastballs and walls, his diving catches, his work ethic and his gap-to-gap line-drive power.

Oh, sorry, is that more than one thing?

Also, his role model is fellow Dominican David Ortiz because “he has great passion on the field. But see how humble he stays off it. I look up to him.”

That’s the problem with Robles. Just because he may be a nanosecond faster than Trea Turner, because his on-base-plus-slugging percentages last year at Potomac (high Class A), Harrisburg (AA) and the top-prospect Arizona Fall League were a deliciously monotonous .872, .883 and .877 and because he looked comfortable in a brief September call-up to the majors (.795), folks tend to get carried away.

Anyone who doesn’t call Robles a top-five prospect gets drummed out of the rate-a-phenom industry (even though such experts have positively identified “the next Willie Mays” more than 100 times, yet there still has been only one).

Adding to this problem of accurate honest perception, the Nationals, in trade negotiations over the past two years, consistently give the impression that they would not deal Robles for Your Whole Team.

Some scouts even compare Robles to Andrew McCutchen, the Pirates center fielder who from 2013 to 2015 finished third, first and third for National League MVP. Those with restraint say Lorenzo Cain.

Nationals General Manager Mike Rizzo, who has not made a mistaken projection on his best prospects, contributes to this intolerable situation by refusing to say, "Stop that." Instead, he said, "I don't compare him to McCutchen. I just say he's Robles." This sounds reasonable, except that when he's asked to elaborate, Rizzo looks at you as if you have the IQ of a spaniel and says, "He's really good."

Then Rizzo won't say any more except, perhaps, "As advertised." When a lifelong scout who is the son of a lifelong scout won't talk about his prospect, it means he's scared. He doesn't want to breathe on the kid.

Because I can't find anyone who will do Robles the favor of limiting expectations, I will try — a little. Besides all that praise in the first graph, one other thing strikes me: Robles, who has spent just about a month in Class AA ball, probably could use a half-season in Class AAA. All he sees here in spring training is breaking balls, change-ups and a few fastballs to brush him back. He doesn't look overmatched. But he deserves a few hundred at-bats, not a few dozen, to adjust to the great delineator among quick-twitch hitters: learning to handle junk.

In 2012, Davey Johnson was asked how good Bryce Harper would be, and he said, "The pitchers tell you. He's 19, and they're already working him tougher than anybody on my team. They pitch him like Babe Ruth."

"That's how they're pitching Robles, too," new Nats Manager Dave Martinez said of his future center fielder, who is 9 for 41 here with three doubles, a homer, six RBI and several amazing defensive plays, though he has a tendency to be tempted by pitches early in the count and make quick outs.

"They have been pitching me a little bit difficult," Robles said through an interpreter. "And it is a compliment because they are respecting me."

Robles has gotten a rare chance to play every day because outfielders Adam Eaton and Michael A. Taylor haven't been ready to play — until now. Both will be in the Nats' lineup Saturday. Barely 10 days from Opening Day, they will need all the work they can get to prepare for the season. With Harper in right and Howie Kendrick and Brian Goodwin in bench roles, there's no room for Robles — yet.

Once he comes up, he will stay up. And he will play every day — for years.

"It's an opportunity," Robles said of all his playing time this spring and the off-chance of making the Opening Day roster if injuries struck. "If I get it, then I'm going to take advantage of it. If they do give it to me, then they are giving me the confidence to play, and I'll try to show what I can do."

Whether Robles's time as a full-time Washington fixture starts soon; in June, shortly after his 21st birthday; or not until next year, the sense of anticipation surrounds him. The MLB consensus is that Robles will not be brought up until a date in June that would be late enough to delay his free agency by a year until after the 2024 season.

Perhaps Martinez has the clearest view. No one knows how well Robles will hit early in his career. Projecting 20-year-old prospects precisely makes lunar landings look simple. So Martinez tells Robles,

“There are two constants: defense and running the bases. If you do those two things, you can always help the team.”

That defense already has stunned the Nats in spring training.

“He gets such a fast first step. And he adjusts so fast,” Martinez said. “One liner dove and hooked at the last second. He stopped on a dot, changed direction, caught it and almost doubled a runner off first base. You can’t teach instincts.”

You also can’t teach baseball temperament. But Robles seems to have that, too. Sean Doolittle, whose locker is near Robles’s, said, “He gets here early.” All rookies are watched for their habits as well as their talent.

“Victor sees the game like a veteran. He came up with men on second and third base. He got a fastball away,” said Martinez, who knows how much Robles loves to hunt fastballs and must have wanted to crush that one. “He just lined it to right for two runs,” Martinez said, imitating a casual flick of the wrists.

“He watches. All the time, his eyes are on the field,” added the manager, whom Robles calls “Chief.” “The good players see the details.”

Only one trait may hinder Robles: his almost scary fearlessness. His indifference to being hit by pitches — at a rate in the minors that would break records if repeated in the majors — has given him clubhouse standing as a leader among younger Nats. His respect for walls is also minimal. In the Dominican, they say that “you hit your way off the island.” Robles has taken that a step further. He’s willing to be hit or hit a wall to get where he wants to go.

“I’m not going to change. Some players get hit a few times, and they start fearing the baseball a little bit. But so far, I’m not afraid,” said Robles, who crowds the plate and even dives in a bit as he attacks. “I know I’m going to get hit. That’s part of the game.”

Don Baylor and Frank Robinson survived hundreds of drillings. And the 6-foot, 190-pound Robles is bigger up close than he seems from the stands. Maybe he can, too.

“There is an art to getting hit and not getting hurt,” Rizzo said, demonstrating how to twist so the ball hits the back of your arm or shoulder, not your wrist or forearm. It hurts just as much, but nothing breaks. “He’s learning.”

Learning fast.

Someday, not far away, a blur of a ballplayer will arrive in Nationals Park, playing with passion but reminding himself he is “just a regular person,” not a star.

“So far, I’m on a good path,” Robles said in a deep, quiet, measured voice. “I hope to stay that way.”

Article #65

An emotional blur of a day for Adam Eaton

By Mark Zuckerman – MASN Sports (3/17/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - There were smiles and knowing glances all morning from teammates and other well-wishers. There was an expanded, 90-minute warmup session. Then four adventurous innings in left field that included a couple of tough plays complicated by the wind. And, of course, two at-bats against major league pitchers, the second of which ended with a celebratory trip around the bases and an acknowledgement of the 10 family members watching (and, in some cases, crying) from the stands.

Suffice it to say, there was a lot for Adam Eaton to process at the end of his first big league game since he tore the ACL in his left knee nearly 11 months ago.

"Today's been kind of a blur," the Nationals outfielder said. "But it's a big step for all of us."

In truth, what Eaton did today wasn't all that different from what he had done several times in the last few weeks on minor league fields outside FITTEAM Ballpark of the Palm Beaches. He had taken 50-60 at-bats, in his estimation, and had homered multiple times. He had run the bases, sliding when necessary. And he had played the field.

And yet this was a significant difference, not because of what Eaton actually did but because of the setting he did it in.

"It's been a long time since I've been in a game of that nature, even spring training," he said. "To be able to do it and check off those boxes was big. It was a big day overall, everywhere. The home run, yes. But defensively to be able to do that, and to run the bases as well, stand on my feet for four innings was big. Like I said, a lot of boxes checked off."

None bigger than Eaton's third-inning blast to right-center off an 0-1 pitch from Mets right-hander Rafael Montero, a solo homer that left the crowd of 6,652 roaring and teammates busting the chops of a guy who normally bats leadoff but was placed in the third position on manager Davey Martinez's lineup card today.

"I started laughing," Martinez said. "I can hear everybody screaming in the dugout: 'No. 3 hitter!' But he looked really good. I was very happy and excited for him. He waited a long time to get back on the field, and he looked great."

It was indeed a long wait for Eaton, who since suffering his gruesome injury trying to beat out a grounder on April 28 had been left to watch the vast majority of the 2017 season from the outside, then ease his way back in this spring while teammates were full-go from the day they arrived in Florida.

That would be no easy task for anybody, but especially for the always antsy Eaton.

"Yes, I hear him in there. I know he's driving the trainers crazy," said Michael A. Taylor, who made his own return today after missing two weeks with a mild right side tweak. "They're ready for him to get back out there. But it's good. I think that's why he's feeling so good and why he's gotten back so quickly and as strong as he is right now."

It wasn't a blemish-free performance by Eaton, who understandably looked a little tentative on a couple of tough plays he faced in left field. But he's got 12 more days to work out the kinks and get more comfortable in all aspects of the game before he faces the biggest test of all: opening day in front of 40,000 fans in Cincinnati.

"These guys (the trainers) are magicians with the history of people that have had knee injuries or whatever it is," Eaton said. "They know exactly how much time we need. They know exactly what they can fit in a

certain amount of time to meet goals and be ready for opening day. So it's going to ramp up quick, and we're going to be flying."

Eaton might as well have been flying in the bottom of the third this afternoon when he rounded the bases and then motioned to his family in the stands. His young son was there. So was his wife, who is due to give birth to the couple's second son in May.

That's when it hit everyone just what today meant.

"There wasn't a dry eye," Eaton said. "It's been a long 10 months-plus, and just to be able to have that hit in general is big for me and my family. And my family here (motioning around the Nationals clubhouse). They're as much my family as my family back home. So, a big day for us."

Article #66

Jeremy Hellickson waited for a phone call all winter. Now he's in Nationals camp.

By Chelsea Janes – Washington Post (3/17/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Like so many other free agents, Jeremy Hellickson sat in quiet agony this winter, waiting for a phone call that never came.

The 30-year-old wasn't one of the most talked-about free agent starters available, but he had played part or all of eight major league seasons, won the 2011 American League rookie of the year award and has been a durable starter in both leagues.

"Being a free agent for the first time, working for seven years to finally get that opportunity, and that's how it goes," Hellickson said. "It wasn't fun. It definitely started to wear on me for the last couple weeks, but it's all worth it now."

The first team to call him, the only team to call him, was the Washington Nationals. Hellickson was working through a normal spring training throwing progression at a makeshift camp set up by his agent, Scott Boras. Since no one had called, he didn't care much who did. But for that call to come from the Nationals, a team he came to know well during two seasons with the Philadelphia Phillies, made the situation a no-brainer.

"When Scott told me the Nationals, I thought, 'That's a perfect situation,'" Hellickson said. "I really haven't been on a team that's been expected to win preseason in four or five years, so it's exciting to get in here and see the guys in here and meet my teammates finally. I can't wait. It's going to be a fun year."

Hellickson flew to West Palm Beach overnight — the first red eye of his life, he said — and was in his No. 58 uniform by the time workouts began Saturday morning. The last National to wear that number regularly was another Phillie-turned-National — Jonathan Papelbon. In stature and demeanor, Hellickson is Papelbon's opposite. Generously listed at 6-foot-1, Hellickson is unassuming and soft-spoken. He didn't make himself known in the Nationals clubhouse right away, though teammates like Miguel Montero headed over to welcome him and ask him where he's from (Iowa) and what he'd been doing before the call (throwing).

As of 10 a.m. Saturday, his minor league deal with the Nationals was not yet official. Manager Dave Martinez wouldn't comment on it. By 10:45, Hellickson was out on the field and warming up for what would

become a 60-pitch bullpen that included four simulated innings. Most Nationals starters have pitched enough this spring that they are throwing five or so innings, about 75 pitches. Hellickson is not far behind.

The Nationals' plan for integrating Hellickson into their spring training plans seems to be wait-and-see. Ideally, he will start one of their two split-squad games next Friday. His track record suggests he will become the leading candidate for the fifth spot in their rotation whenever he has enough stamina for them to assess him fairly.

"It's just a good opportunity with a great team," Hellickson said, when asked for his understanding of his role here. "It's something that I couldn't really pass up. They just wanted me to come in, watch me and then go from there."

Hellickson is 69-69 with a 4.12 ERA across his career. He struggled last season, particularly after the Phillies made an unexpected midseason deal to send him to Baltimore — a trade he admitted "messed with" him a little bit when he tried to live up to new expectations and never stopped trying too hard. He won that rookie of the year award with Martinez as his bench coach in Tampa. Martinez believes Hellickson can still contribute.

"When they asked, I said ... he's got a lot left in the tank," Martinez said. "Good kid. Not a trouble-maker, and we kind of like that. Works his butt off."

Now, he has a fresh start with the Nationals. While some scheduling allows teams to stay away from using their fifth starter early in the season, the Nationals will need one April 3 or 4 in Atlanta, depending on how they decide to schedule Max Scherzer's early-season work. If Hellickson stays on an every-five-days rotation until then, he would be on turn for the exhibition game in Washington and also to pitch April 4, if ready. Then again, A.J. Cole, Edwin Jackson and Erick Fedde also have enough time to line their work up, if needed.

Whatever the exact plan for Hellickson, he is no longer among the many proven starters waiting for that call. He only got one, but that's all it took to find a home competing for a spot with a World Series contender.

Notes:

Matt Adams was originally in the starting lineup for Saturday's game against the New York Mets but was a late scratch with left leg cramps, the Nationals said. The move was purely precautionary, and the trouble is not currently expected to linger.

Allotted 75 pitches with which to work against the Mets, Tanner Roark got through just three innings, hurt by a sloppy second in which he walked three straight batters. Roark's velocity also dipped at times, though he said afterward Saturday was "the best I've felt" all spring. He has now allowed three runs in his past eight innings, though outside of those walks Saturday, he was not hit particularly hard.

Article #67

Mike Rizzo waits on a contract extension from the Nationals, one he's easily earned

By Thomas Boswell – Washington Post (3/18/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — At a Wizards game, you may see Mike Rizzo's bald head as he sits in the crowd of Washington fans. At a Capitals game, if you go for concessions between periods, munched in with the mob, you may bump into Rizzo. "Great atmosphere!" he'll say. On Capitol Hill, you may see him walking the four blocks from his newly bought rowhouse near the Navy Yard toward Nationals Park.

But Rizzo won't be going to South Capitol Street to catch a game. He's there to run the show in his 10th year as general manager and his 12th with the team.

Will Rizzo be walking down that same street to the same job a year from now? The Nationals face no more pivotal question, not even Bryce Harper's future.

In a town where every other GM either has a recent contract extension (the Caps' first-rate Brian MacLellan) or job security that seems eternal, Rizzo, who has performed the best of the bunch, will be a lame duck left dangling in his walk year when the Nats' new season begins in just 11 days.

Kirk Cousins and many others have trundled through this town, making their living off pro sports but never feeling powerfully connected to the city itself despite its huge range of neighborhoods, marble majesty or rainbow diversity. Rizzo is different. He's a transplanted Chicagoan who has fallen hard for D.C. He gets that it's a home town to millions, not just some cheap-shot politician's punchline about "running against Washington."

Of course, falling in love can be very costly. And it may cost Rizzo. The GM has poured his life into the Nats until his fingerprints are on every inch of the organization. Here in spring training, Rizzo tried "to think of one person who's here that I didn't have some part in hiring." He could only come up with a couple.

When your boss knows you love your job and pour in an insane number of hours, including unnecessary ones, just to make the polish shine, when that boss knows you can't be hired away for a few bucks more or by some recruiting flattery, then your own virtues can lead to you being taken for granted.

Many in Washington, and around baseball, think that the answer to a Rizzo contract extension, for several more years, is obvious: Of course.

Some players, especially those who will be Nats for the next several years, are annoyed that it's even an issue. They see a bright future, a strong pipeline of young talent here in spring training and a window to be contenders for the next several years, not just 2018. They know the name of the master builder, too: "Riz."

Three weeks ago, three-time Cy Young award winner Max Scherzer told the Washington Times that it was "up to ownership" to make sure that the Rizzo situation does not "get sideways on us . . . [he has] demonstrated that he is one of the best GMs in the game. . . . Obviously, he has earned his next contract."

The price of reaching an extension is no mystery. The best GMs make \$3 million to \$10 million per year and get contracts for four or five years. Because the Nats have never advanced in the postseason, Rizzo is nowhere near the top, especially in dollars. But after inheriting a 102-loss team in '09, and helping turn it into the second-best regular season team in MLB for the past six years (555 wins), with four NL East titles, he's not at the bottom either.

Further simplifying the issue, those who know Rizzo understand that "years" mean more to him than "money." He wants to stay in D.C. so much that it may hurt his leverage, even though, if he ever left, he'd be someone else's GM, maybe even someone in Baltimore, in hours or days, not weeks or months.

Friends tease Rizzo that the Lerner's will be able to sign him relatively cheaply because he is so close to creating a legacy in D.C. that would define his whole baseball life in glowing terms. Start over somewhere else after so much work?

"You want a statue in front of the ballpark someday," they needle him. My variation on that theme is to remind him that, to date, no team has ever erected a statue to a not-so-tall bald man who only seems to own sneakers and polo shirts.

The Lerner's need to simplify the core questions about Rizzo. If the Nats have a poor season that leaves a bitter aftertaste, like 2013 and 2015, would they fire Rizzo?

Or if the Nats end this year with a first-round playoff exit after a thrilling but exasperating Division Series, like 2012, 2016 and 2017, would they let Rizzo's contract run out, essentially firing him, as they did with Dusty Baker last season?

If the Lerner's would fire their GM in either of those eventualities, then there is no need to do anything right now. If they think 2018 is a litmus test of whether Rizzo is one of the best GMs, if they can't make up their minds about him after watching him for a dozen years in their front office, then just sit on your hands.

But if the Nats dither and dawdle, taking for granted the man who keeps the entire baseball side of their operation glued together, motivated and highly competent, then I think they are nuts. They fail to see the danger of inaction.

Since Rizzo is in the last year of his contract, he is essentially a free agent, just like Harper. That could backfire in a huge way. There is a chance, low probability, but far from zero, that Rizzo would feel so unappreciated that instead of hoping a contract gets done, his private thought would be, "I'm out of here."

Don't say it can't happen. Ex-team president Stan Kasten told friends a year ahead of time that he was leaving D.C. because of frustrations with the Lerner's. He liked them, but he couldn't work for them anymore. The owners were still in the dark just days before he announced his departure. Did Kasten founder without the Nats? Or did he put together the ownership group that bought the Dodgers, beat the Nats in the 2016 playoffs and went to the 2017 World Series?

The difference is that Kasten thought the Lerner's were lucky to have him while Rizzo is deeply grateful. This week the GM said, "The Lerner's gave me this chance [to be GM], when I don't know if any other team in baseball would have."

If the Lerner's intend to keep Rizzo, based on his entire body of work, then they would be best served to do the deal soon. There are no lame-duck shopping malls; but there are lame-duck GMs. No team is helped by having one.

Ted Lerner tends to do his best baseball work on the biggest decisions. He was correct on contracts worth \$100 million to \$210 million on Jayson Werth, Ryan Zimmerman, Stephen Strasburg and Scherzer. But he's left hundreds of other important decisions, such as deals that added Sean Doolittle, Ryan Madson, Brandon Kintzler, and Howie Kendrick last summer, to Rizzo's excellent judgment.

Now, Lerner could lock down one of the best GMs in the game for four or five years for one-tenth of the price that he's paid for a couple of his free agent megadeals. That would qualify as an exceptional return on investment.

It would also continue a complex but extremely productive partnership between Ted Lerner, 92, and Rizzo. I am sure that each appreciates the other, but maybe not quite as much as they should. As one example, many of the Nats stars are represented by agent Scott Boras, hardly an easy fellow to deal with. Yet both Lerner and Rizzo, in different ways, have excellent working relationships with him. Perhaps the elderly Lerner and Rizzo, both blunt, rough-edged, self-made men, complement each other, and need each other more than they realize.

If just a couple of plays in Game 5 in 2012, 2016 or 2017 had gone differently, the entire context of this discussion would be far different. And the last thousand Nats regular season games would be shiny indeed, rather than slightly tarnished.

Baseball has myriad moving parts and mysteries. In sports, it is a perfect example of the saying, if it's not broke, don't fix it.

Don't break the Nationals by trying to fix them.

Article #68

Back where it began, journeyman Milone makes his pitch for roster spot

By David Driver – Washington Times (3/18/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, FLA. — When Tommy Milone was drafted by the Nationals in June 2008, the prospect of pitching for the then-trainwreck of a team in Washington wasn't exactly a major leaguer's dream come true. The club lost 102 games that year, followed by 103 the next.

But by the time the left-handed hurler worked his way up through the minors to make his big league debut with the Nationals in 2011, Washington was playing .500 ball, on the cusp of winning four National League East titles over the next six seasons.

The future was looking up for the franchise and for the 24-year-old lefty. Then Milone was traded away in a deal that brought Gio Gonzalez to the Nationals. Fast forward nearly seven years and several teams later, and Milone is again with the Nationals, trying to make the club as a non-roster invitee to spring training.

Only a few familiar faces remain in the clubhouse from 2011 — namely Ryan Zimmerman and Stephen Strasburg.

"It is great; the welcome when I first showed up was awesome. It is good to see a lot of familiar faces," said Milone, who still knows personnel in the front office and player development. "It is been a lot of fun. It is a great group of guys and I look forward to the season."

Since leaving Washington, Milone, 31, has pitched for Oakland, Minnesota, Milwaukee and the New York Mets. Last season he began the year with the Brewers before joining the Mets on May 7.

Playing for a contender would be a bonus, he said.

"Obviously I am trying to make the team. But at the same time I just want to go out there and be the pitcher that I am and try not to do too much."

For now, that approach has him in the mix as a possible fifth starter.

“Right now he is contending for the fifth spot” in the rotation, manager Dave Martinez said. “He has looked good, real good.”

Others in the competition for the fifth spot in the rotation include young right-hander Erick Fedde, right-hander A.J. Cole and veteran Edwin Jackson, who has pitched for 12 teams.

“I think in the past, right now (at this point), I would have put a lot of pressure on myself,” Milone said of making the team. “This time around I have just accepted the fact I am here to pitch.”

Article #69

Nationals' treasure: Victor Robles is key to the future, with or without Bryce Harper

By Jorge L. Ortiz – USA Today (3/19/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. – Back in 2005, Ryan Zimmerman was the first-ever draft pick of the newly minted Washington Nationals, an All-American from neighboring Virginia expected to steer the franchise through the early years after its move from Montreal.

While his arrival was highly anticipated, he never engendered the kind of hype that now surrounds Victor Robles.

Robles, a multi-talented outfielder from the Dominican Republic who made his major league debut at 20 late last season, has inspired a different kind of fanfare, that reserved for a player so dynamic that the possibilities seem limitless, the proverbial prospect you can dream on.

He also represents something else: Perhaps the most important piece of a Nationals future should they part ways with Bryce Harper.

To this point, Robles has made just 47 plate appearances in the majors, and none at Class AAA. On Tuesday he was optioned to Class AAA Syracuse.

Zimmerman, who broke into the big leagues in September 2005 and is now the team's All-Star first baseman, wishes young players weren't exposed to such scrutiny. He also understands what the fuss is all about.

“The whole five-tool thing everyone talks about, he's got a really good chance to be one of those guys,” Zimmerman said. “When he came up, his plate discipline and strike zone judgment for such a young guy was impressive. I feel like he's ahead of where a lot of guys are at that age, especially at this level.”

Those words are heaven-sent for Nationals fans, who have endured painful first-round exits from the playoffs in four of the last six years and now are bracing for Harper's possible departure after the season as part of an epic free agent class.

Second baseman Daniel Murphy, lefty starter Gio Gonzalez and catcher Matt Wieters can become free agents as well, but Harper's obviously the crown jewel.

Should he move on, Robles' emergence could serve as a consolation prize of sorts. It's not a notion the Nationals want to entertain with the start of the season a little over a week away, but they haven't won four National League East titles since 2012 by getting caught unprepared.

"No one's going to fill Bryce Harper's shoes, but this is a good young player for us and we have a lot of good young players," general manager Mike Rizzo said.

At 6 feet and 190 pounds, Robles doesn't evoke comparisons to the power-hitting Harper, who's three inches taller and 30 pounds heavier. In 496 plate appearances at Class A and AA last year, Robles hit 10 home runs while fashioning an .875 on-base plus slugging percentage.

He's got the profile of a natural center fielder, and his blazing speed and defensive ability prompted the Nationals to include him in last year's postseason roster as a possible late-game fill-in, having ascertained during his 13-game cup of coffee with the big club that Robles wouldn't be awe-struck.

After getting stronger through offseason training, he brings to mind a young Andrew McCutchen. That's a comparison he's happy to draw, since McCutchen and current Pittsburgh Pirate Starling Marte are two of Robles' favorite players.

On the final series of the season, as the youngest player in the big leagues, he realized a dream by opposing them.

"A few years back I would look at guys like (Harper), Jose Reyes and Andrew McCutchen and wonder what it would be like to play on the same field with them," Robles said in Spanish. "In 2017 I was able to play against them and on the same team with Bryce Harper. It made me very proud."

The Nationals, again favored to claim the East title, have a full complement of starting outfielders with the recent return from injuries of left fielder Adam Eaton and center fielder Michael A. Taylor.

Robles will get regular at-bats in the minors, but the spring training exposure allowed the club to better gauge his abilities. He cooled off after a hot start at the plate and batted .188 in 48 at-bats, but the reviews have been positive.

Robles made some eye-popping catches and displayed a strong arm. Manager Davey Martinez likes that even when he was not playing, Robles tried to learn by keeping close tabs on the game from the dugout. Teammates noticed his respectful demeanor.

"If things are not going well for me, I try to be the same teammate, because that's when your teammates really appreciate you," he said. "Whether I'm doing well or not, I try to greet people with a smile and enjoy the game and enjoy life."

A high contact rate – one strikeout every 6.2 plate appearances the last two minor-league seasons – and an evolved eye at the plate have been major reasons why Robles' stock has risen so quickly. He also wants to improve his ability to read pitchers' moves and get jumps when stealing to take better advantage of his speed.

Rizzo relishes the prospect of Robles and shortstop Trea Turner driving opposing defenders batty with their disruptive speed on the basepaths, giving the Nationals an offensive dimension few teams have.

If perhaps not enough to make up for the possibility of losing the 2015 NL MVP in free agency, Robles' presence may at least help fans deal with their fretting over the next several months.

"He's an exciting player and he's anticipated," Rizzo said. "It has no bearing on our decision-making process, but it's good people know of him and speak so highly of him."

Article #70

Finally healthy, Nationals reliever Tim Collins makes pitch for a big league return

By Jorge Castillo – Washington Post (3/19/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Last summer, Tim Collins, after two Tommy John surgeries, two grueling rehabs and three years without throwing a pitch in a competitive baseball game, made his return July 12 with the Nationals' Gulf Coast League affiliate. It was the lowest rung of affiliated minor league baseball, but Collins expected to complete a rapid rise to the majors, where he was sure he belonged, over the next couple months. He was determined. It was his goal. He fell short.

"So, at one point," Collins said, "to me, it was a failure."

Collins ended up pitching in 18 games through Sept. 3 across three levels, none higher than Class AA Harrisburg. He compiled a 7.79 ERA in 17 1/3 innings. He posted 23 strikeouts to 14 walks. In the moment, he considered the return a disappointment. But a couple weeks into the offseason, after digesting the "brutal honesty" he received from Nationals officials, his perspective shifted.

"I grew to appreciate that they kind of took the reins and steadily progressed me along," Collins said. "I always prided myself on being a good self-evaluator. I just wasn't that guy last year."

What Collins, 28, is trying to accomplish — a return to the big leagues after having Tommy John surgery twice — has been done by a small, but growing, group of pitchers. It's just the latest twist in an implausible path for a 5-foot-7 left-hander who signed as an undrafted free agent the summer after graduating high school and ascended through the majors in four years to make his major league debut at 21.

He was reliable immediately when he reached the bigs with the Royals in 2011, becoming a bullpen mainstay. He tallied a 3.54 ERA (117 ERA+) and struck out 9.4 batters per nine innings over 228 appearances in three-plus seasons before his elbow gave out during the 2014 season.

He signed a minor league deal with the Nationals last winter because of their history working with Tommy John recipients. Last spring, he was a limited participant in big league camp as he continued rehabbing following the second procedure, which he underwent in 2016. This spring, after signing another minor league deal with an invitation to spring training and a July 1 opt-out, he's in a crowded competition for one of the final unclaimed spots in Washington's bullpen. And he's making a strong case to stick.

Collins, who has survived two rounds of cuts, has surrendered three runs over 7 1/3 innings in six games. He gave up two of the runs Sunday, which hiked his ERA from 1.42 to 3.68. He has 11 strikeouts and three walks.

"Beyond the stuff part of it we've seen, he's getting closer to where he was," General Manager Mike Rizzo said. "His character and the way he gets after it and his attitude on the mound is really infectious to us. And he's really endeared himself to a lot of his teammates."

Collins said he doesn't believe he's a different pitcher than he was before the surgeries when he's on the mound. The difference lies in his pregame routine. There's more preparation. Stretching is a requirement.

"But once I'm ready and out there, I feel like I'm the same guy [as] pre-Tommy John," Collins said. "Same mentality. I think I feel a little more in tune with my body, if anything, than I was. Before, I would just rear back and throw. I still do that, but I feel like I've taken the time to learn my body a little bit better and stay within myself and still get the most out of my body."

The next step is pitching in games on back-to-back days, which he hasn't done since returning last year. Proving he can handle the quick turnaround would only help his candidacy for one of the two or three bullpen slots seemingly up for grabs, which would complete his improbable comeback.

"I've prepared myself for that the last three years to put myself in position to be successful," Collins said. "So my main goal is to come into camp and make the team. If I don't, hopefully it was because I was outpitched. I think I've prepared myself well enough to come in and pitch well and hopefully make the team."

Article #71

Dialing back the Max: Nationals seek to manage the relentless Scherzer

By Barry Svrluga – Washington Post (3/19/18)

JUPITER, Fla. — On the third pitch of his day, Max Scherzer allowed a triple off the center field wall. To the first batter of the second inning, he coughed up a no-doubter solo homer. Entering his outing Monday, he had walked two men all spring. Monday, he walked the opposing pitcher, then allowed him to score on a three-run bomb off the bat of a Miami Marlin named Derek Dietrich. After five innings, he had given up six runs and three bombs.

"I actually like that I got hit around," Scherzer said afterward, straight-faced. "That was good."

Such proclamations can be made 10 days before the Washington Nationals open the season in Cincinnati with Scherzer — who owns the National League Cy Young Award until someone takes it away — on the mound. He can say that because he had allowed just three hits in his first four outings, over which he had struck out 21 in just 14 innings. He is a pitcher of such stature that he can shake off his manager and say he needed one more inning on a random March Monday in a half-empty ballpark against the lowly Marlins.

"He knows what he needs to do," Manager Dave Martinez said.

What he needed Monday: to get to 90 pitches. What he needs next: 100 more in his final Grapefruit League tuneup. And during the season: That's an evolving discussion, and it'll be interesting to monitor.

"I want to go out there and make 33 starts," Scherzer said. ". . . If I control my job of how I pitch, my job is to go out there and post up every fifth game. That's the only goal for me, what I look at for the season."

Thirty-three, huh? What Scherzer has demonstrated as he enters his fourth season in Washington is there are sometimes competing forces: what he wants to do, and what is best for him and his team, which has championship aspirations. It's remarkable that his name is Max, because that's how he seems to walk through life — giving maximum effort, wanting the maximum number of starts so he can record the maximum number of outs.

About that: Last August, the Nationals placed Scherzer on the disabled list because of a neck issue. It was his first trip to baseball's wasteland in eight years. The injury was minor. The conversation that put him there was monumental. Ask Mike Rizzo, the Nationals general manager, if he remembers it.

"Oof," Rizzo said. "I'll never forget it."

To argue against Scherzer, you better come armed with facts. That's true if it's about an NCAA tournament bracket or baseball's current labor situation or his routine of eating a massive roast beef sandwich before each start. But about pitching? Watch out.

"When you speak to Max about baseball, you have to have coherent arguments and evidence. It's like a friggin' court case," Rizzo said. "Because if he catches you, he'll call," um, cow dung.

Who knows how this year will play out, and whether Scherzer will have some sort of minor tweak again? But Rizzo's argument last August showed Scherzer that he could get his rest and still make 31 starts — enough to stay in contention for the Cy Young Award, which the Nationals knew was important to their ace. But Rizzo also told Scherzer: If you walk into the postseason with less than 200 innings, that would be perfectly fine — and maybe better.

That's not an accident. Scherzer's total last year: 200⅔ innings pitched, his lowest total since 2012. The key is to convince Scherzer that it's okay — not just okay, but preferable — to record fewer outs, to throw fewer pitches, because at this point in his career, the outs to record and pitches to throw that matter come in October.

So keep that nice, round number of innings — 200 — in mind, not just for Scherzer but for Stephen Strasburg, who finished third to Scherzer's first in the Cy Young race last year after throwing all of 175⅓ innings. Scherzer topped 228 innings in each of his first two seasons in Washington. Here's betting he never reaches that total again.

This is a trend, one to maximize relievers and protect starters, and it isn't unique to the Nationals. It also isn't completely because of managers' tendencies to go to a power-pitching, matchup-heavy bullpen early on or to avoid having a starter face a lineup for the third time. All are factors, sure. They're not alone.

"In the new day and age of no assistance with amphetamines and the other stuff, the workload strategy has changed," Rizzo said. "I think that's a fact."

Since 2013, when Scherzer won the first of his three Cy Young Awards when he was still with Detroit, no pitcher has thrown more innings, an average of more than 218 a year. But the days of 240-inning seasons may be over.

Since the turn of this century, there have been 30 seasons in which a pitcher threw at least 240 innings. None have come in the last three years. Last year, Boston's Chris Sale led all of baseball with 214⅓ innings. Five years earlier, a dozen pitchers exceeded that total. Just two years before that, 19 pitchers threw more innings. The Nationals have faced scrutiny for how they protected Strasburg coming off Tommy John surgery in 2012. The truth is, they have been monitoring their pitchers — not to mention how other teams have handled such situations — before and since.

"We've been doing this a long time," Rizzo said.

Scherzer, who will turn 34 in July, is not yet at the midway point of his seven-year, \$210 million contract, so he has more important time ahead than behind. He is coming off a season in which he led the National League in strikeouts (268), walks and hits per inning pitched (a minuscule .902) and batting average against (.176). It's impossible to imagine he will trend up from here.

But what if the Nats are smart in how they manage his effort? Scherzer's preparation won't change. Last week, Rizzo had something about which he needed to talk to Scherzer. He cruised around the Nationals' complex in West Palm Beach. Unable to find him, he went back to his office and made a call to the clubhouse staff. "If you see Max . . ." The staff knew right where to find him: in the video room. By himself. Watching tape. Of how to get out Joey Votto, who happens to be the best hitter on the Cincinnati Reds, who happen to be the Nationals' opponent on Opening Day.

"I don't understand, if you're a young pitcher and Max would allow you, why you are not hanging on his belt loop and just mimicking everything he does," Rizzo said Monday. "Because he gets it. He's an intelligent pitcher. He knows his body. He knows his delivery, because he's made himself know it."

He knows, too, how to prepare for a season. When he came out for that fifth inning Monday, he was no longer happy to get hit around, to work from the stretch. "He pitched with a little meaning," Martinez said.

The result: *strikeout, strikeout, strikeout*. That's the Scherzer the Nationals know, getting an extra inning and crushing the opposition. It's just worth keeping an eye on how often Scherzer gets that extra inning this season, all with an eye on his career — and the Nationals' October fate.

Article #72

The Nationals' overhauled coaching staff is experienced, fiery and very, very loud

By Barry Svrluga – Washington Post (3/19/18)

JUPITER, Fla. — At least twice a morning, maybe more if chaos strikes, Washington Nationals bench coach Chip Hale marches into the clubhouse, unpins one lineup card from the bulletin board in the back and replaces it with another.

In one instance, he tore a lineup card down in frustration. In most instances, he pins up the card, leans in to examine it, and leaves only when he is satisfied that every detail is in order. Even the smallest mistakes irk him, then send him right back to the spreadsheet.

"When I used to do the schedule and a letter was wrong, I'd rip it down," said Hale, former Arizona Diamondbacks manager and Oakland Athletics third base coach, among many other titles. " ... I'd go in there five times before the guys came in the clubhouse."

Such is the attention to detail brought by this overhauled Nationals coaching staff, one that includes three men who have managed in the big leagues, veteran pitching coach Derek Lilliquist, forever-Nationals coach Bob Henley, vaunted hitting coach Kevin Long and Dave Martinez confidant Henry Blanco in the bullpen. They have been energetic and involved, loud and lively, their willingness to listen already as evident as their willingness to mold players who might not seem to need much molding.

"I like the communication. I think everybody's communicating really well," shortstop Trea Turner said. "They're letting us know what they expect of us, how they want to approach things. It's our job to learn it and kind of implement it."

Besides Hale's daily trips into the clubhouse, most of the new Nationals coaches don't make many appearances in there. But they certainly make themselves heard, starting with Hale, whom General Manager Mike Rizzo wanted on staff as much because of his fire as his extensive managerial experience. If Las Vegas were to make odds on the first Nationals coach to be ejected, Hale might challenge Martinez as the favorite.

"In high school, freshman P.E., I'd be yelling [at] people because they weren't playing hard enough in softball or basketball," Hale said. "It used to bother me. I'd be like, 'Come on, let's go!'"

Now the former major league infielder hollers during the most basic infield drills — the ones he leads by hitting groundballs off soft toss, not out of his hand like most coaches.

"That dude loves to hit fungos," third baseman Anthony Rendon said. "... He's into it. I guess it's good when the staff is energized. When they feel like they're having fun, we feed off that."

Henley appears to be having the most fun of anyone. Martinez has, as he put it, "turned Henley loose," leaning on him for high-energy, high-decibel declarations in morning Circle of Trust meetings. Henley has climbed atop a camel, donned a caddie's outfit, acted in skits and provided endless quips softened by the polite southern drawl that has become a staple here.

"It seems in the morning that I read the daily schedule," Henley said. "I go over the schedule in the morning, and sometimes it's just about the schedule, and sometimes it has more activities to it ..."

Henley is the only returning member of Dusty Baker's staff — on which he was the only returning member of Matt Williams's staff. He said he enjoyed working with all three groups and expressed gratitude for the opportunity to work with all three staffs. This one, like those, has a character of its own — though Henley was careful not to say exactly what that is.

Many within the organization believe Baker's coaching staff functioned fine from day to day but could have been constructed to complement the old-school manager better. This time, Rizzo and his rookie manager emphasized energy and experience, hoping to put people around Martinez that could track the details a manager simply doesn't have time to deal with, hoping to put a variety of perspectives at his fingertips. Baker's staff, some of which Baker handpicked, some of which coalesced by front office mandate, consisted of more similar, traditional thinkers.

Henley, Hale and first base coach Tim Bogar all have run spring training camps as part of their duties at previous jobs. They sit in the coaches' room each morning and plan, while Long and Lilliquist focus on their respective units. Long is just as vocal as the others and spends most days in the cage, from before 8 a.m. each day until the game ends each afternoon. Lilliquist is the most understated of the bunch, more steady than perky, more willing to slide into the background while helping a pitching staff loaded with veterans who need more tinkering than molding.

Bogar carries a tiny training glove around from field to field, eager to implement high-energy drills instead of the usual sluggish infield practice. A few days ago, he pulled Wilmer Difo aside to tell him both that he was doing a good job and that he needed to continue to tweak his approach to the bag when taking a throw

from the left side and trying to start a double play. These are the details this staff won't let go, at least not now, when everything is fresh — none of which have been lost to this group this spring.

"Some of the scouting reports and stuff, I feel like you can already see in spring training — Bogar's moved me in certain areas and the ball's hit right at me," Turner said. "It's pretty cool to see that and be on the same page already. Hopefully throughout the year it gets even better."

Veterans fill the Nationals' clubhouse, and they can be difficult to please because of their experience. Max Scherzer's locker is, rather fittingly, right near the entrance, as if all those who enter must pass him first.

Asked about the new coaching staff, Scherzer has been clear. Nothing that happens now indicates the reality of the situation. When things get hard, during some late-summer losing streak, then the Nationals can decide exactly who these coaches are. But in mid-March, this much seems certain: Martinez's new coaching staff will make itself heard — and no spelling mistake will go unfixd for long.

Article #73

After bold, bland and cool, the Nationals' new manager says, let's have fun

By Thomas Boswell – Washington Post (3/28/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — The Washington Nationals have had a brash, audacious manager, Davey Johnson, who said, "World Series or bust." They tried a bland middle manager, Matt Williams, who pasted sampler slogans on the wall. Finally, they hired the coolest manager ever, Dusty Baker, who invented the high-five, had his own vineyard and said if the Nats won the World Series, it would be because it was "already written."

Now, under rookie Manager Dave Martinez, the Nats are going with fun. With bonding. With goofy. With facing your problems at getting over the postseason hump by having coaches ride camels onto the practice field on a Wednesday — "hump day." With the sort of wacky tricks that Martinez watched as a coach under Joe Maddon with the 2008 pennant-winning Tampa Bay Rays and 2016 world champion Chicago Cubs. Except now it's Martinez who is cooking up the pranks and competitions.

Here at the Ballpark of the Palm Beaches, it's Camp Happy for the Nats.

On March 16, this form of group sports psychology had its spring apotheosis as the Nats held a surprise golf contest with the whole team, some of whom had never swung a club, shooting at a blind target 100 yards away over four fences, two sidewalks and a bullpen. Their sight line: a bunch of balloons in the sky.

"Heckling is allowed and encouraged. No silence, please," Nats third base coach Bob Henley, dressed as a Masters caddie, bellowed through a megaphone. "Five teams. Every member of the winning team will have jackets made for them, given at the end of spring training. There is no second place. Everybody else is a loser."

The team, gathered in its daily Circle of Trust, sang "Happy Birthday" to rookie Spencer Kieboom, who got the honor of hitting the first ball. Trick ball: It exploded.

After each shot, players listened for a distant air horn, telling them whether the shot had landed close enough to the bull's eye for one point, two points or the coveted "three horner."

"I can't hit it any sweeter than that," Daniel Murphy said, ball in flight. "I like that launch angle," chirped one teammate. "Good spin rate," said another.

Sean Doolittle tried to figure out whether he was a left-handed or right-handed golfer. Enny Romero whiffed his first two swings. The most awful shots, hopping toward an impenetrable fence 40 yards away, were, of course, given the most sarcastic optimistic shouts of "Gotta go! Get through! Roll out!" or "Hit the cart path!"

Shanks, headed toward about 50 defenseless fans in the kill zone, elicited yells of "Duck!" or "I'll sign your glove." Reliever Brandon Kintzler swung and accidentally threw his club 100 feet over a fence into the bullpen (naturally). Then, knowing no better, he ran directly in front of the range to retrieve his club.

A screaming skull by Reid Brignac ricocheted off a metal post and, in a blink, flew back at the players, where Tanner Roark nonchalantly snagged it barehanded.

After 45 minutes, the score 26-26 between the two best teams, Joe Ross pulled out a clutch "three-horner" to make a winner of Max Scherzer's team.

"They loved it. Max was high-fiving. He likes the hardware," Martinez said. Next year, "maybe hard hats for the fans," the manager added.

Those winners' jackets will say "Masters of the Circle" and, instead of Masters green, the color will be — come on, you know — "camel," Martinez said.

It's all about that Hump.

I enjoy this stuff. When you've tried cocky, intense and hip, why not fun? But I worry about it, too. If the Nats win the World Series, as Sports Illustrated just predicted (again), do I have to cover games next year in a bathrobe and slippers?

While Johnson and Baker told some of the majors' best tall tales, and Williams tried to say nothing but say it civilly, Martinez has now taken the whole Nats culture into the world of "everything is positive" and "positivity" and "optimism" and, basically, everything that Washington fans have learned to distrust for a quarter century.

Plenty of teams in several sports have tried such approaches, but Martinez may push the cheerfulness envelope. Just make sure, when you look inside, it isn't filled with sneezing powder. Even if it is, somehow it will be connected to planting victorious thoughts, getting to know teammates as people or visualizing great success. Recently, the Nats practiced their walk-off home run trots and home plate celebrations. Honest. "Got to be prepared," Martinez said.

In other words, prepared to win.

This approach worked for the Cubs in 2016, when they broke a 108-year title drought. For Maddon and Martinez, together a decade, this isn't a goof. Right or not, it's a philosophy.

Ironically, the team that practices on the opposite side of the same complex, the Houston Astros, really is happy. Their 25-foot-high logo says "2017 World Champions." The Nats have an equally huge logo with their curly "W" but no titles yet. Nonetheless, the Nats plan to act happy until the real thing comes along.

Boomboxes, with tunes picked by a Nat of the day, play loudly during tedious drills or batting practice on back fields. If you don't want to play in exhibition games because, at 34, you have a history of injuries while running the bases or diving for groundballs, then you can skip almost the whole exhibition season like Ryan Zimmerman. He's healthy, happy and playing in "controlled" games against minor leaguers, getting all the at-bats he needs but not flinging himself around.

"If they're tired, sit out an inning. I like that, especially with older guys," Martinez said.

Here, the veterans come close to setting their own training agendas. They get their work finished early during short, intense practices and sometimes leave exhibition games in the sixth inning in a total-lineup substitution. If you're coming back from offseason surgery, like Murphy, the Nats implore you, "Don't rush."

To Martinez's eye, "Matt Wieters looks great. Matt Adams looks unbelievable. I told Trea Turner, don't be afraid to bunt for a hit. For him, a bunt is a triple."

After a 10-0 exhibition loss full of defensive misplays, Martinez said the game was an anomaly in a generally well-played spring. Anyway, regardless of outcomes, he plans to have the same rule after any defeat in the regular season: "Wait 30 minutes, then turn the music on." Win and pump it up right away.

If the Nats fail to win the somewhat tougher National League East this season, or get eliminated in yet another Game 5 in the first round of the playoffs, you are going to hear a lot of camel jokes aimed at Martinez and his team. Dromedary humor will take its place beside, "Where's my ring?"

But spring training offers a kind of (extremely) temporary immunity to cynicism. For now, the Nats get to try to win the exhibition season championship of fun. If it works out, the season will be even more of a kick. If not, more humps and lumps.

Article #74

Gio Gonzalez may be entering his final season as a National, and he wants to make it count

By Jorge Castillo – Washington Post (3/21/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Earlier this month, on one of those Grapefruit League game days that blend together after about a week, Gio Gonzalez unpacked a massive boombox at his locker. It came with shoulder strap so, naturally, after linking it to his phone via Bluetooth, the Washington Nationals left-hander threw the retro sound machine over his shoulder and lugged it around. He connected it to a microphone and had Wilmer Difo perform karaoke to reggaeton in the middle of the clubhouse at the Ballpark of the Palm Beaches. Teammates, clubbies and General Manager Mike Rizzo laughed and rolled their eyes at the unusual sight and thumping bass.

The show, about an hour before first pitch, was evidence of a veteran comfortable in his surroundings. Gonzalez is a proud son of Hialeah, Fla., but Washington has become home. He arrived via blockbuster trade in the prime of his career at 26. Off the field, he started a family and lives in the area year-round. On the field, he is one of just four remaining Nationals to play for each of the club's four playoff teams; he tossed the first Nationals pitch in team playoff history in 2012; and he nearly won the Cy Young Award that same season, which will probably go down as the best of his career. Now, at 32, he is entering his seventh season as a National. With free agency looming this fall, it could also be his final one.

“I would love to have a big year with the team and with everything that’s going around, I would love to do that,” Gonzalez said. “I just got to stay healthy. That’s all I got to do.”

Staying healthy is Gonzalez’s most exceptional ability. Since joining Washington, Gonzalez ranks in the top 20 among baseball’s starting pitchers in starts (tied for eighth) and innings pitched (19th). He has been placed on the disabled list once in his career — in 2014, with shoulder inflammation, and he still managed to make 27 starts that season. While he is perhaps known more, fairly or not, for his laborious outings and playoff troubles than anything else in a Nationals uniform, Gonzalez also quietly became one of baseball’s most durable hurlers in an era when durability from pitchers is gold. For \$53 million over the past six seasons and another \$12 million due in 2018, that gold came at a bargain.

There isn’t a magic formula to the durability, according to Gonzalez. As he explained it, he believes sticking to a routine, which he said includes more stretching but has changed little otherwise over the years, and knowing how far to push himself has allowed for the consistency. But he did credit Livan Hernandez, the first ace in Nationals history, for helping instill the foundation for his endurance.

Gonzalez said he began working out with Hernandez, who led baseball in innings pitched three different seasons, and his older brother, Orlando, in Miami when he was 18. Along with several other ballplayers, they would run hills in the early morning at Tropical Park — the only hilly terrain in South Florida, Gonzalez noted — and Hernandez advised him to begin his offseason throwing program as late as possible. Gonzalez kept that in mind. Fourteen years later, he has made at least 31 starts in seven of his eight full major league seasons.

Instead, Gonzalez’s most significant recent adjustment has transpired between the lines. Once a hard-thrower who could get away with blowing fastballs by hitters, Gonzalez’s average fastball velocity has steadily diminished since his fastball averaged 94.2 mph, according to FanGraphs, in his first season with Washington. But he said it wasn’t until last season, when his fastball average dipped to 90.4 mph, that he began modifying his approach.

“Last year was a huge adjustment point,” Gonzalez said. “Last year I was actually pitching. I wasn’t trying to throw it. I understand that I have to be a pitcher. And that’s what it was. I don’t have to throw hard to get outs, and last year proved it. You just have to locate.”

The renewed approach, which included an increased use of his change-up and curveball, translated to Gonzalez’s best season since his first in Washington. After having his ERA escalate each of the four previous seasons, Gonzalez posted a 2.96 ERA, a career-best 150 ERA+ and a 1.179 WHIP in 201 innings across 32 starts during the 2017 regular season. A 3.54 walk rate, 4.24 xFIP and a minuscule .175 batting average against with runners in scoring position suggest he was the recipient of some good fortune, but results are results and Gonzalez was one of the National League’s best at run prevention last season. The performance culminated in a sixth-place finish in the NL Cy Young race for the newly crafty lefty.

“I don’t know what kind of lefty I am,” Gonzalez said with a chuckle. “I just want to be a healthy lefty, that’s it.”

He was, based on his regular season production, one of the best No. 3 starters in the majors. But he stumbled in the playoffs again, allowing three runs over three innings in Game 5 of the NLDS against the Chicago Cubs last October. The performance — and his impending free agency — left some wondering if the Nationals would acquire a starter to slot in behind Max Scherzer and Stephen Strasburg for this postseason and beyond.

But Washington settled last week for signing Jeremy Hellickson, who occupies a tier below and will compete for the No. 5 spot. For now, Gonzalez will occupy the same role, seeking to duplicate the results from last season in what could be the end at home in Washington.

Article #75

Gonzalez hands on with hometown HS program

By Jamal Collier – MLB.com (3/21/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. -- The room had not been used in years, when it was a workshop room for the now-defunct woodshop class at Hialeah High School. At first viewing, Gio Gonzalez will admit it was not what he was expecting. But Juan Garcia -- the head coach of the Hialeah baseball team -- had a vision of what the room could become.

So, they got to work this past winter to transform that empty, abandoned room into a facility for the Hialeah Thoroughbreds, the high school team where Gonzalez won a state championship in 2001-02.

Now, the room houses a batting cage that can be pushed back to leave enough room for pitchers to throw bullpens off a mound. On rainy days, the coaches can use the facility for practice or conditioning. The players have a secluded locker room area. There are couches for them to relax and watch TV, complete with video game systems and a ping-pong table. There's even a room with two computers for students to work on their homework and a fridge stocked with healthy snacks and protein powder.

With Gonzalez's help in providing time, money and resources, that woodshop room now serves as a one-stop clubhouse and practice facility for the Thoroughbreds.

"What other place would I want to do it?" Gonzalez said. "I was born here, I was raised here. My family, my culture, my blood is here. I love this place. My kids are going to grow up around the area, so to me it's a no-brainer to make this happen."

That's because Gonzalez still has that special connection to his hometown of Hialeah, just outside of downtown Miami. He takes every opportunity to express his pride in the city where he was born and raised -- from the broken glass in his backyard to the hardworking people he came across every day. He owns a house in the area and still spends most of his offseason in the vicinity of Hialeah. The members of the high school team all come up and greet him like an old friend who comes around frequently.

So, when Gonzalez started his "Uncork for a Cause" charity event, which is in its third year, he wanted to help raise money for the baseball program.

"He made this happen in such a short amount of time and that was incredible for me," Garcia said. "It was so much easier for me to work when you have the backup like that so quick. Not only monetary, but with the support, with his ideas and input. It was amazing for me to have him behind me.

"The players see that. If you look around, what other high school has somebody that's so devoted year in and year out to support the program the way he has?"

Just by listening to Gonzalez talk about his high school for a moment, it's evident how much he cares about building his community and school. In the past, he has donated cleats and gloves to the team from his

sponsors at Jordan brand and Wilson, respectively. Gonzalez's father, Max, works as a hitting coach for the program.

It's an all-in effort by Gonzalez when it comes to helping grow the baseball program and get kids excited about baseball in the area. He frequently has brought in former Major Leaguers to the high school, such as the late Jose Fernandez and Lenny Harris. Orioles left-hander Nestor Cortes Jr., who graduated from Hialeah High in 2013, has also remained involved with the program. Earlier during Spring Training, the high school team came to the Nationals' complex in West Palm Beach, where Gonzalez had some of his Nationals teammates stop by and talk to them.

And renovating this facility was only the beginning.

After the high school season is over in May, Gonzalez plans to start overhauling the actual baseball diamond. It's an old field, the same one he played on years ago, which has been ravaged by years of games without a makeover. The dugouts are small, the field has a caged feeling with all its fencing and the infield dirt and mounds are bumpy and uneven.

"You're going to make some plays, but you're going to have a busted nose, lip," a laughing Gonzalez said of the field.

For the next phase, Gonzalez has plans on moving the fences in and trying to even out the field. All to try and create a better environment for the team to play in.

"The whole purpose is to make a ripple effect," Gonzalez said. "If we can start with Hialeah first, I'm sure we can make that wave of change with every school.

"We don't want baseball to die out in Miami and South Florida, we want it to continue."

Article #76

After 'really good spring training,' Nationals option Erick Fedde to minor league camp

By Chelsea Janes – Washington Post (3/22/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Erick Fedde had little chance of cracking the Nationals' Opening Day roster. That he would start the season in Class AAA Syracuse was almost a foregone conclusion, one the Nationals made official Thursday afternoon when they optioned the right-hander to minor league camp.

Fedde threw two scoreless innings in relief Wednesday, but despite his brief bullpen experiment last season, the Nationals see Fedde as a starter, and he needs to get innings. With four days left in spring training, and no room for him in the big league rotation, the Nationals decided to send him back to the minors to allow him to build.

"He's really good," Nationals Manager Dave Martinez said. "Unfortunately we can only carry 25. He's young. We just want to stretch him out and for him to continue to build on spring training. He had a really good spring training."

Fedde made six appearances this spring, two starts, and threw 14 2/3 innings in which he allowed four earned runs. His velocity, which dipped to the low 90s before he eventually finished last season on the disabled list, jumped back into the mid-90s. His fastball showed the sinking life the Nationals loved from the

day they drafted him. His change-up and slider both looked improved. After his last outing, the 25-year-old said, "I can see the guy I know I am," a reference to his rejuvenation after a tough initial big league experience.

"The conversation was very honest," Martinez said. "I told him to just go down there and knock the door down and continue to develop and be good."

Martinez said he saw Fedde's confidence grow this spring, as outing after outing demonstrated his ability to get major league hitters out. Fedde admitted that getting hit around in the majors was not easy for him. General Manager Mike Rizzo has said the Nationals didn't help his cause by moving Fedde from the rotation to the bullpen and back in an effort to control his innings. This year, Fedde will start, and while the Nationals will be careful not to overwork him, they will not hold him to the same kind of innings limit they did last season.

A.J. Cole will almost certainly start the season in the fifth spot in the rotation. Jeremy Hellickson will challenge him and will likely get an opportunity to prove himself as soon as he catches up after his abbreviated spring training. But should injury strike, or should Cole and Hellickson struggle, Fedde will likely get his chance. The Nationals believe he projects to a reliable middle-of-the-rotation starter, and he is nearly ready to assume that position.

Article #77

New hitting coach Kevin Long is ready for launch

By Todd Dybas – The Sports Capitol (3/22/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Kevin Long is out of his seat again, raising his elbow and shifting his hips while talking rapidly. He rose to this frenzied position multiple times during a 30-minute interview at the Nationals' spring training complex with a group of reporters. He revealed himself during that time. He is talkative, bathing in information and able to admit that, yes, his prized pupil Daniel Murphy is a bit odd.

Long sits back down. It doesn't slow the pace of his words or admissions that everyone could be there all day, should they prefer and have the free time. He fields questions about fixing Matt Wieters, and declares Wieters is "feeling sexy" about his swing early in spring. Long believes he can help Bryce Harper. He is also smart enough to know he is new, bringing different thoughts and explanations, and that can be a load for an established group. That's why when Murphy asks if he can speak in one of the initial hitters' meetings he is told no. He would sound just like Long, anyway.

Long speaks of launch angles and digits, swing planes and pitcher release points. He has been among the jolts to a camp populated by camels and a familiar crew. How much that matters will be determined the next six months.

Long left New York for the first time in a decade after signing a three-year deal to be the Nationals' new hitting coach last offseason. He interviewed for the manager's position both with the Mets and Nationals. He was the runner-up in New York. He did not get the job in Washington.

"I was like OK, this runner-up stuff doesn't seem to be working out too well," Long said with a laugh.

Shortly after being informed he would not be the manager, Mike Rizzo told Long he would like him to be the hitting coach. Familiarity with the lineup made Long's decision swift.

Those choices have caused a bit of a stir in the Nationals clubhouse. Long's arrival has assured two things: discussing launch angle will be prominent this season, and there is now another person walking around sounding like Murphy, who is addicted to numbers and swings.

"We speak the same language," Murphy said. "I stole his entire language, so we have no choice but to speak the same language."

That happened while both were with the Mets. It also turned Murphy into Long's most well-known supporter. He argues about the benefits of Long's math-based philosophy that hitting the ball on the ground is bad, in the air is good, with teammates. Murphy encouraged the Nationals to hire Long as the hitting coach. He's plain excited to have a friend-in-lingo lodged in the hitters' meetings again.

"I love Kevin," Murphy said.

Long did not anticipate such a bountiful relationship with Murphy. He was warned in 2015 when the Mets hired him: Murphy will be your biggest challenge. Instead, they hit it off, becoming brothers in launch angle, despisers of the ground ball.

"The easiest way to describe it is he gets you ready for that day's game to be the most productive you can," Murphy said. "Whether you feel like you're ready to go, or you feel terrible or you feel great, he's going to make you feel like a killer when you step in the box."

Murphy also said he visualizes at-bats if he has trouble sleeping during the offseason. This is not normal. Just a note on the synapses in sync here.

The trick this spring is to translate the foundation of their bond to the rest of the Nationals. Ryan Zimmerman remains amused by the cascading of information around him. Anthony Rendon — whom Long said is so good, he's just going to leave him be — rarely watches video. He is not up nights perusing Fangraphs in pursuit of trends the way Murphy is.

"Hearing it from the horse's mouth, where Daniel got it from, it just makes me laugh," Rendon said. "Their lingo that they speak: six balls, seven balls or whatever baseballs they're talking about on the plate. But, it's good. Obviously it helped Daniel out a lot. I know I can learn a lot from K-Long."

Long inherits a team that finished third in the National League in runs last season and has a chance to be better this season. Bryce Harper played 111 games. Trea Turner played 98. Adam Eaton played 23. They should play more.

Long, like Davey Martinez, is concerned about how information is delivered. He watched "thousands" of swings in the offseason before spending spring watching swings in person. Long will compile ideas and notes during his observational time. That way, he's prepared should a player come to him asking for advice.

He noticed changes for Harper. The video Long watched of him showed different mechanics than he was seeing at the start of the season. Like Murphy, Rendon and Zimmerman, dealing with Harper has specific individual parameters. Namely, his father, Ron, also doubles as his lifelong hitting coach.

“They’re good together,” Long said. “So, why wouldn’t I allow that to happen? Why wouldn’t I lean on that communication that they have? I just want to know what they’re working on. When his dad comes, you’ll see me talking to him because I want to pick his brain on what they’re doing. Rather than getting upset that he is working with his son — I would hope that nobody got upset with me talking baseball with my son. I feel like a lot of what I’ve done with my son is the reason he’s here (in minor-league spring training). I think it’s a good thing. I think what they’ve done, obviously is working, ... Is Bryce going to get stuff from me? There’s some things that Bryce and I are going to be able to do to make him a more consistent hitter and better player overall.”

Conversations with Long are likely to include why to hit the ball in the air, the despair of hitting ground balls and how he doesn’t want anyone to change their approach when faced with a heavy shift. Just hit it over the alignment, he said.

The math tells Long that a ball hit on the ground produces a .220 hitter in the major leagues. The fastest way to an OPS boost is through the air (most times). And, he delivers an adage that could serve as a mantra for a hitting camp: “A line drive solves all problems.”

Even in Trea Turner’s case, Long wants fly balls, at least to the pull side. Martinez and Long think Turner can hit 25 home runs. They are not going to waste that “damage” by asking him to hit the ball on the ground because he is fast.

Long said he has found willing listeners in veterans Howie Kendrick, Matt Adams and Matt Wieters. All are in their age-30 season or higher. That’s not usually a time to welcome change, especially for Adams and Kendrick, who performed well last season. But, they have given Long’s advice a chance. Adams wants to hit the ball in the air — and out — as often as possible anyway. Kendrick predominantly hits to the opposite field. Long hopes some changes allow him not to “back up” on the ball so much. Wieters has longed use his hands as his primary hitting weapon. He will rely more on his legs this season.

“If there’s more in there, we’re going to pursue it,” Long said.

Long’s preaching about fly balls has, in part, kicked off a race between hitters and pitchers. Long argues that pitchers were able to overwhelm hitters with velocity three or four years ago. But, now that everyone has multiple people throwing in the high-90s, hitters have adjusted to the speed. That has caused two counters by pitchers: an increase in off-speed pitches and throwing four-seam fastballs higher in the strike zone, if not out of it.

This sends Long into an explanation of “being on plane” with the pitch. Which, in turn, sends him out of his chair. You see, left-handed pitchers throw from about 2 ½ feet outside the far left of the rubber. Way out here. It’s about 2 feet for right-handed pitchers on the other side. That’s 4 ½ feet to cover, he says with arms spread. So, why not be in line with those deliveries?

Long seems to be exasperated by the ease of the concept. He could go on, but time is short. Back in his chair, he is talking about Murphy again. They want to improve his control of the strike zone, meaning they want him to walk more to gain OPS when he is not able to get a pitch in the zone into the air. Long mentions that Murphy, though injured, was in the hitter’s room for 4 ½ hours to talk hitting recently. Since everything else is measured, Long was asked where he puts Murphy on the Normal Human Scale.

“I don’t have a human scale for him,” Long said. “It keeps him up at night. He literally thinks about hitting 24/7.”

Article #78

Miguel Montero on Nationals: Excited to be on team 'that has a chance to win it all'

By Chelsea Janes – Washington Post (3/25/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — From the moment the Nationals signed catcher Miguel Montero in early February, he seemed likely to win a spot on their Opening Day roster. No one would say that, of course. He had to compete like everyone else. But the man who signed him to his first deal, Mike Rizzo, and the man who served as his bench coach in Chicago, Dave Martinez, knew what they were getting. They just wanted to make sure they were getting the guy they thought they were.

Montero didn't blow the Nationals away this spring. He hit .207 with a .540 OPS that didn't quite represent the comfort he showed at the plate. But he earned the respect of a hard-to-please pitching staff, and did enough to show Rizzo, Martinez and everyone else that he's still got something to give.

"I wasn't really competing with anybody. If I was competing with anybody, it was myself, just trying to prove to myself that I still can play," Montero said. "Other than that, it wasn't really pressure. I was just playing and doing my things and letting things work out by themselves. One thing's for sure, if I were going to make it, I was going to go home without regrets. I did all I could. It was a great feeling that I did make it."

Montero is 34 years old and struggled through an up-and-down year split between the Cubs and Blue Jays last season. His Cubs tenure ended in controversy when he called out Jake Arrieta for not holding Nationals runners and was released a day later. The lesser-known chapter of that story is that he and Arrieta remain in touch — and even remain friends.

His Cubs tenure also ended with fairly strong numbers — a .286 average and .805 OPS in 44 games splitting time there last season. Part of that success, he said Sunday morning, came from knowing his role, knowing he would be the backup from day one and adjusting his mentality accordingly. Though he hit only .188 as a pinch hitter, he said he grew more comfortable in that role — one he will practice in the Nationals' final Grapefruit League game Sunday and will likely fill every now and then this season.

"Last year, I think I with the Cubs I was doing pretty good as a pinch hitter last year, and I think it's because I knew I was a backup. I knew I wasn't going to catch in I don't know when. So the only AB I got in the game as a pinch hitter, I tried to take full advantage of," Montero said.

"Before, you think you're catching tomorrow and you're taking a pinch hit today, you're really not quite focused and maybe you waste an AB. Now knowing I'm going to back up Matty [Wieters], I know how to prepare myself better. I have a routine, a workout routine and all these things because the other thing Davey does really well is letting me know days in advance when I'm going to play."

Montero doesn't throw well these days, and other teams will know that. He does frame the ball well, a claim supported by advanced metrics and evaluator anecdotes. This pitching staff is particular, so particular that Max Scherzer and Stephen Strasburg wanted Wieters to catch them so often as they pushed for Cy Young Awards down the stretch that his workload increased beyond where the Nationals wanted it. But Scherzer has always credited Montero with helping him learn to use his change-up when they were in Arizona. Strasburg got work in with Montero this spring. He caught Gio Gonzalez, Tanner Roark and A.J. Cole this spring, too. He is known as a strong communicator, which some might argue is a euphemism for "loud mouth," though he has slid right into the clubhouse culture so far.

“It’s a great pitching staff. The reality is it’s easy to catch these guys. Whatever finger you put down, you know it’s going to be a nasty pitch regardless,” Montero said. ” For a catcher, that’s all you can ask for. You don’t always get that. It’d be nice to have opportunity to catch them through the year.”

He will have that opportunity as long as he keeps hitting and stays healthy. Keeping Montero as Wieters’s backup is more about experience than anything else, and experience helps most in October, when margin for error shrinks. If he can stick around until then, Montero will be a more experienced, proven backup than the Nationals had in Jose Lobaton the past few seasons. He will, at least, be in that role on Opening Day.

Article #79

Adam Eaton’s second chance at a first impression with Nats

By Dave Preston – WTOP (3/26/18)

WASHINGTON — What was the commercial that said, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression?” Adam Eaton may get that chance this April, as the team’s major off-season acquisition from last winter tries to finish what he started in 2017.

Eaton’s arrival last year was almost as much about who the Nats gave up — former first-round picks Lucas Giolito and Dane Dunning, plus prime prospect Reynaldo Lopez. For the record, Giolito and Lopez both went 3-3 last year for the White Sox, while Dunning pitched with Single-A Kannapolis and Winston-Salem (although let’s be honest: Doesn’t Dane Dunning sound like the name of a teen sleuth in Young Adult Fiction?). Eaton simply had one incredible April in Washington (ranking third in the majors in runs scored) before going down with a torn ACL 23 games into the season.

It’s amazing to think that the Nationals still went on to win 97 games minus their leadoff hitter for the vast majority of the season (and don’t forget they were minus replacement leadoff man Trea Turner for 60-plus games due to a broken wrist). Make no mistake — there was a void atop the order minus the player who earned the nickname Mighty Mouse.

Eaton posted a .388 on base percentage (which would have ranked second in MLB) from the leadoff spot while the other Nats’ leadoff hitters combined to hit just .259, the team finishing 19th in the majors in on-base percentage from the top spot in the batting order. Turner, Brian Goodwin and Wilmer Difo each have skills and can shine in the lineup, but none of them were able to duplicate Eaton’s April.

Every good sequel is a little bit different from the original, and that’s the case for Eaton II: Left Field Boogaloo. Michael A. Taylor’s emergence last season in center field means Eaton shifts over to left. There are those who dissect the numbers and analytics, and there are those who rely on the “eye test” when judging defensive players. Both camps regard Eaton as better served in left field.

Last year 12 players saw action in left (including Eaton for three games) and combined to produce one of the worst rates in the majors at that position. Stabilizing a position that is traditionally expected to produce offensively will be key, which is especially true with Daniel Murphy’s recovery from knee surgery, keeping the All-Star second baseman’s bat on the shelf until at least mid-April.

So the guy who is no longer the new kid in town gets a second chance at a first season with his new team that he’s been with for over a year. At least he’ll get a chance to run around in D.C.’s July heat for the first time. Bring some extra Mighty Mouse T-shirts to change into midgame, Adam. And welcome back.

Article #80

Sean Doolittle and Eireann Dolan may be baseball's most 'woke' couple

By Chelsea Janes – Washington Post (3/27/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Sean Doolittle and Eireann Dolan almost wore nearly identical shoes to a photo shoot last week. Most major league players don't argue with their wife over who gets to wear Birkenstocks that day. Most major league players wouldn't have their local paper requesting a photo shoot to accompany a story about their work with Syrian refugees or LGBT pride night or an op-ed they wrote about veterans' issues. Doolittle and Dolan are not most major league couples.

In a sport with a conservative culture defined by tradition and a near-dogmatic acceptance of the social status quo, they have been unafraid to be different, while determined not to be different for different's sake.

Their Twitter banter fostered hordes of loving fans during Doolittle's time in Oakland. Their public stances on political and social issues stood out because so many of Doolittle's colleagues won't go there. Their service in that community and others gave their online personalities real-life clout.

Within weeks of the deal that brought Doolittle to Washington last summer, he and Dolan found a community as receptive to their outspoken online presence as it was to their constant quipping back and forth.

"That was the biggest fear I had with being traded anywhere," Dolan said. "I was like, I'm never going to find a fan base that appreciates my jokes about Sean as much as Oakland did. But the Nationals fans immediately took to both of our styles."

That style includes Dolan's constant jokes about Doolittle's workout routines with five-pound dumbbells, or Doolittle's unabashed nerd-outs over "Star Wars" (his Twitter handle is Obi-Sean Kenobi, and yes, his profile photo is him giving Yoda a piggyback ride). For Dolan, a writer and graduate student studying religion at Fordham University, that style also includes clear support for the Black Lives Matter movement, increased gun control and other political issues.

Doolittle is less public about his opinions, but he does feel responsibility to speak up when he can. For weeks when he arrived in D.C., he wanted to lay low, stay away from anything polarizing, just establish himself. But when violence erupted at a white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, the University of Virginia alumnus felt he had to say something. He knows his time as a major leaguer will be brief, and that the platform it gives him won't last, either.

He chooses his battles carefully. When something happens that frustrates him, Doolittle tries to wait and let emerging details prove themselves as facts first. If he still feels moved to tweet, he types out his drafts and has Dolan read them. Sometimes he steps away from them for a while and revisits them before sending. Sometimes he doesn't send them at all.

Doolittle takes care because major league clubhouses have long been considered bastions of social and political conservatism. If they are changing, if the mind-set of a younger generation is trending more toward the socially active habits of their peers in the NBA and NFL, no one will speak up to say so. If there is a prevailing ideology in baseball clubhouses, it is to keep one's ideology to himself. Don't ask, don't tell, and don't mess up the clubhouse vibe.

“I used to care a lot about what other people thought — like teammates,” Doolittle said. “But then, I feel like in this atmosphere and in general, if people can tell that you’re being genuine — if this is something you really care about, if this is something you know a lot about — people will respect that.”

When asked about the fact that some of his teammates might not think the same way he does about political or social issues and activism, Doolittle chuckled at the understatement. But he said the big issues that never seem to leave the spotlight in the real world rarely come up in the baseball bubble.

“It’s not like we’re shagging batting practice talking about immigration policy or what just happened with the FBI director,” Doolittle said. “Here, it’s a different environment, I think.”

Because of that environment, and because of the sensitivity of Major League Baseball teams to alienating any of their fans, Doolittle and Dolan have been discerning in choosing off-field causes — not just on social media but also in terms of activism. Doolittle and Dolan are from military families. Dolan’s mother came out to her when Dolan was in high school. They have taken on causes to which they have personal connections, such as veterans’ issues or LGBT rights and inclusion.

Early in Doolittle’s career, they became dedicated supporters of Operation Finally Home, which builds houses for wounded veterans and their families. Doolittle and Dolan started a registry to help furnish two such houses in Northern California, promising signed A’s gear to those who donated. Within weeks, fans had filled every cabinet and drawer with the necessities for the recipients.

“I think that was the first time we realized we had the ability to move the needle on something,” Dolan said.

When the Athletics received backlash for scheduling an LGBT Pride Night in the spring of 2015, Doolittle and Dolan raised enough money to buy 900 tickets — tickets they donated to local LGBT youth groups. They organized a Thanksgiving meal for Syrian refugees in Chicago, one at which the mayor of Chicago and his aldermen served as greeters and waiters.

“I know a lot of athletes might not want to promote a lot of causes because sometimes it seems a little self-indulgent,” Dolan said. “It’s like, why don’t you just pay for it?”

But she and Doolittle — with whom she eloped last October — prioritize engagement and mobilizing communities for causes, not just writing checks. They also prioritize understanding their causes. When they wrote an op-ed for *Sports Illustrated* about the need to fund mental health resources for discharged veterans, they took 10 briefings on the subject, from groups including the Brookings Institution, the Human Rights Campaign and the Cato Institute. They have yet to choose an initiative in D.C., though they have been looking and researching a few ideas, unwilling to just leap without looking.

“I think people can see the amount of work Eireann and I put into it, the amount of time we spend making sure we do it responsibly, that we’re not just being opportunistic — that we’re doing it in a way that other people have a chance to get involved so we’re not just, like, yelling into the void and retweeting things,” Doolittle said. “. . . I’m not just an athlete doing something for likes on social media.”

But those likes come anyway. Doolittle has more than 76,000 followers on Twitter. Dolan has more than 33,000. Fans request to take pictures with them. One young fan who found them last week asked if they would adopt her. Some of their tweets are directed at causes. Many of them are directed at each other.

“It just humanizes us, and it’s a sport that really doesn’t lend itself well to humanizing the labor,” Dolan said. “There’s no margin for error. At a certain point if you can’t do it, it doesn’t matter how much your wife makes fun of you on Twitter, or what your dog looks like. Fans are not going to have a lot of patience.”

Fittingly, Doolittle and Dolan met on Twitter, a story they recalled fondly last week on the patio behind the Nationals’ complex. Dolan was friends with Doolittle’s teammate Brandon McCarthy. Doolittle would reply to their tweets now and then, not thinking much of it. After weeks of public replies, Dolan sent him a puzzling message — “Why are you funny?”

“I was mad he was funny, because I don’t like when people are good at two different things,” Dolan said. “You should be good at baseball or you should be good at being funny online. He was both, and I was like, ‘Oh, I don’t care for this at all. You need to pick a side.’”

Because he wouldn’t pick just baseball, they ended up on the same side in the end.

Article #81

Enjoy the ride, because these Nationals may be as good as they’re going to get

By Thomas Boswell – Washington Post (3/28/18)

It’s easy to miss the point. But with the Washington Nationals, we shouldn’t. The team that opens its season Thursday may be the best since baseball returned to Washington. Also, in an era of powerhouse teams, the Nats have a chance to win 100 games and perhaps the World Series, too. Because five key players, including Bryce Harper, may be free agents after this season, it may be years, or decades, before the Nats have the potential to be this good again.

You noticed that horrifying word “potential,” so different from “reality.” The mention of other superb teams also may make you think of the champion Houston Astros who play in the same spring training complex as the Nats — a reminder to stay humble. You mutter, “Dodgers, Yankees, Cubs, Indians and Red Sox, too.”

Things can go wrong for the Nats. They have a rookie manager and the memory of four first-round knockouts in the past six Octobers. They have never played their best when it mattered the most. In three losses in Game 5s of division series, the Nats have made plenty of blunders that scream “choke,” including several last year. Pressure proof, they’re not. Their rotation lacks a proven fifth starter, and the back end of their bullpen, while excellent, has arm-misery history.

However, for a reality check — good reality, not bad — cast your mind back just five months. At the end of 2017, the Nats dreamed about finally getting their best possible roster healthy in time for the playoffs. That would be the best of all Nats teams in this period of 95, 96, 97 and 98 wins. What a club that would be!

It never quite happened. Max Scherzer and Harper weren’t quite themselves. Scherzer nursed a hamstring pull from his last tuneup start. Harper had only five games to get into shape after more than six weeks out with a knee injury. Talk about rotten timing. Both had good playoff moments. But Scherzer gave up four runs in one relief inning to lose Game 5, and Harper hit .211 for the postseason.

There was no “next series” for the Nats, when their three-time Cy Young Award winner and their 2015 MVP might have been at their best.

Would that best possible Nats roster ever get its chance again?

Sit up straight. Finally, the Nats are in (almost) one healthy piece. Except for Daniel Murphy, still not quite back from knee surgery, the Nats now have the roster they hoped to have last October as they head to Opening Day.

In fact, it may be a bit better. Adam Eaton, one of the more valuable all-around players in MLB from 2014 to 2016, is back in left field, batting leadoff and hitting .313 in Florida after missing 139 games last year.

No one will be surprised if the Astros, who have added Gerrit Cole to their rotation, or the Yankees, who traded for Giancarlo Stanton, or the Indians, who won 22 straight games late last season, represent the AL in the World Series. And the Red Sox added slugger J.D. Martinez (45 homers).

In the NL, the same pennant hopes apply to the Dodgers, who led MLB in wins last year with 104, and the Cubs, who have rebuilt their rotation on the fly so that it now features Jon Lester, Yu Darvish, Kyle Hendricks and Jose Quintana.

But if Washington isn't fascinated by its team, and doesn't plan to enjoy the Nats to the fullest, regardless of their eventual fate, then it's a pure waste of fun. As a fan, you feel like you wait forever to see a team like this. It's here.

Nobody in MLB has a better tandem of star starting pitchers than Scherzer, who is a no-hit or 20-strikeout threat whenever he starts, and Stephen Strasburg, who, over the past three years, has learned how to pitch to game situations, rise to occasions and be a winner. The Nats have won 52 of his past 65 starts. Strasburg has also removed the last iota of doubt that he can dominate in the postseason. Behind these stars are vets Gio Gonzalez and Tanner Roark, a combined 134-93 with a 3.46 ERA as Nats. Try to find any third-fourth starter combo to match that.

It may be many a year before the Nats have an infield to match Anthony Rendon (25 homers, 100 RBI, .301 batting average last year), Ryan Zimmerman (36, 108, .303), Murphy (.334 the past two years) and Trea Turner (.304 career). Watch now because Murphy will probably be gone as a free agent next year. Few teams have as fast or strong-armed an outfield as Harper, Michael A. Taylor and Eaton, all of whom have been big league center fielders.

The bullpen firm of Sean Doolittle, Ryan Madson and Brandon Kintzler had a 2.50 ERA in 77 appearances last year after they were acquired by General Manager Mike Rizzo near the trade deadline. All have been closers. The addition of this trio is the reason that the 2018 Nats may have a higher ceiling than any of their predecessors. The bench, with Howie Kendrick (.291 career), Matt Adams (20 homers last year), Brian Goodwin, utility energizer Wilmer Difo and two-time all-star Miguel Montero as a backup catcher is the most versatile, best-hitting set of reserves the Nats have had.

Look at the list. That is 19 Nats who are either stars or standouts relative to the roles they are asked to play. It doesn't include a four-time all-star in catcher Matt Wieters, who is trying for a bounce-back year and hit well in spring training. Or elite outfield prospect Victor Robles, 20, who may be up to stay at some point this season. Reliever Trevor Gott had a 0.00 ERA in Florida, and Sammy Solis also pitched well.

Have we forgotten anything? Oh, yes, the manager, Dave Martinez.

It's sometimes said of Dusty Baker that he was the best manager in MLB for 21 hours a day, and he wasn't too bad the other three hours, during the game, either. But Nats ownership, and some of the club's baseball people, too, wanted to see if they could feel enthusiastic about their manager for all 24 hours.

With Martinez, here come the analytics information, all at once, ready or not — starting Thursday. If it works, that is another reason that these may be the best Nats of this era.

Most people try not to let the inevitability of death diminish their enjoyment of life. Only Woody Allen characters brood on mortality, and spoil their appetites, when presented with a seven-course gourmet meal. Yet sports fans, including some in D.C., don't apply this obvious truth to their enjoyment of their teams.

The Nats may have injuries and misery this season, fuss among themselves or doubt the manager. They may not even win the NL East. All those nasty things have happened to highly touted Nats teams in just the last three years.

Imagining failure requires no talent. Amassing enough talent to force us to imagine great success as a new season opens, that is an accomplishment. As spring training ends, and the nerves start dancing again, the Nats have done it.

Article #82

Bryce Harper steps into the storm

By Chelsea Janes – Washington Post (3/28/18)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla.

One Sunday morning a few years ago, in the well-worn clubhouse at Turner Field, Bryce Harper sat on the edge of the black leather rolling chair at his locker and looked around the near-empty room.

“What if I just went and became a firefighter in Huntington Beach?” Harper asked, to no one in particular. Nobody answered him.

What would they say if they had? Everyone knows the man heralded as the most transcendent baseball talent of a generation since he was a teenager, the one who lived up to the hype and somehow fostered more — the guy destined for a contract worth hundreds of millions of dollars — can't just up and leave it all behind.

Harper never said anything like that again, at least not when reporters were around. But who, subjected to scrutiny and pressure and funneled into one destiny since adolescence, wouldn't see the appeal of a world touched only by sunlight, free of the spotlight? Who, presented with a life in which his every move is analyzed, and every talent monetized, wouldn't wonder about a simpler existence now and then?

“I don't want to really think about that. This is what I was born to do,” Harper said this week. “. . . That crosses everybody's mind — maybe I wanted to do this or do that. But I enjoy being a baseball player. I wouldn't trade it for the world.”

This might be the most scrutinized season of Harper's career, of the life he believes he was born to lead, the one that affords him far fewer choices than it might seem. He will be a free agent after this season, one of a handful of Hall of Fame-type talents available to the highest bidder.

An MVP-caliber season could secure him a record deal. A disappointing season could lead to a disappointing one, or at least not the history-making contract most assumed he would get until this most

recent winter of free agent discontent. The 25-year-old has asked that no reporters inquire about his intentions for the future, hoping to limit his exposure to those stresses. But team executives around the game, TV analysts and others will spend all season wondering and waiting. Harper's grandmother used to tell him there were two things he should never talk about — politics and his salary. Harper avoids the former with relative ease. Others talk about the latter for him.

For years, those emotionally invested in Harper's future have analyzed every word, hunting for some insight into where he might go. All winter, most of those organizations who might financially invest in his future eschewed spending, leading some to wonder exactly what kind of market will exist for his services. All season, others will remind him much is at stake with every swing.

Meanwhile, a man will sit in the middle of it all, balancing the need to perform with the reality of the biggest decision he has ever gotten to make. The swirl of attention that has always followed him will only swirl faster, and he won't be able to escape it.

Bryce Harper is financially secure for life. He is married with a healthy family. He gets all the perks of fame, showered in gifts and free meals from those who endorse him and those who hope to endorse him. But for all the bravado some see in him still, Harper is also human. This season, and all that comes with it, will test him.

"I think the thing that surprises you is that while he embraces the spotlight he gets, it may not be what he wants. He just wants to play baseball," catcher Matt Wieters said. ". . . That's the big surprise. From the outside, he looks like a guy who wants all the attention and wants everything. He deals with it because he has to, because he has that kind of talent."

Putting in the work

If he didn't have that once-in-a-generation swing, or that cannon of a right arm — in other words, if he weren't born for baseball — Harper really would want to be a firefighter.

"It's like four days on, two days off," Harper said. "It'd be fun."

"Fun" is an interesting part of Harper's story, one introduced to the narrative when he declared his mission to "Make Baseball Fun Again." Two years ago, the slogan was scrawled across hats and he tossed it around in interviews. Slowly, it slid out of use. Making baseball fun again takes a lot of work. Declaring one's mission to make baseball fun again garners a lot of extra attention and criticism.

Harper has always been willing to put in work, though he admits the major league schedule grates him. More than once, he has been critical of late plane flights and long games, and he is as willing to say so in public statements about Major League Baseball's scheduling policies as he is to teammates in the clubhouse.

He has posted Instagram pictures of what he thinks is an overcrowded Nationals charter plane. He wanted a few more days off than he got in recent years. He rarely smiles around the clubhouse, more businesslike than boyish — but willing to conduct his business, no lazier for the wear and success of six big league seasons, according to those who see him daily.

During one 2017 slump, Harper didn't return from the dugout until a half-hour after a night game ended, his hands red with dye from his batting gloves, the strain of hundreds of swings, or both. Though he has

always been something of his own hitting coach, advised closely by his father, Ron, Harper is not one to shut out feedback, either.

“The thing that’s really been cool about Bryce has been his down-to-earth attitude, watching him with [hitting coach] Kevin [Long], watching him on the bench with his teammates getting ready for at-bats, realizing that he is not even close in his own mind to a finished product,” said bench coach Chip Hale, who had only ever seen Harper from across the field.

“ . . . A lot of times, players, you watch them and they’re happy. They’re happy with their performance. This guy’s never happy. You’re not sure, when guys are that talented. He’s always listening and he’s been very humble.”

Harper is growing less willing to deal with unnecessary attention, and slowly and subtly he has started to avoid it when possible. Some stars flash fake smiles and spew jokes to please the crowd, but Harper seems unwilling to pander anymore. He speaks quietly to reporters if he speaks at all, repeating canned phrases about doing his best that end interviews without divulging anything important.

Harper turns down more interviews than he takes, and he declines requests from those inside and outside the organization — like, for example, attending Nationals WinterFest — when he sees fit. Teammates constantly ask Harper to sign things for friends, and opposing players constantly ask for memorabilia. Any time a teammate brings a visitor to work, that visitor inevitably wants to meet Harper, who inevitably takes the time to do so. But no one gets pulled in as many directions as often as he does, even with the organization’s best efforts to protect him.

Harper is not a vocal leader in that clubhouse, not a larger-than-life presence — or even a larger-than-most presence these days. Max Scherzer, Daniel Murphy and others are the molders of minds there. Gio Gonzalez is the jokester. Shawn Kelley is the jovial one. Trea Turner and Anthony Rendon are the best buddies and locker neighbors. Sean Doolittle is the intellectual. When Harper leads, he does so with key hits and big plays — just a remarkably talented guy who, like so many of his colleagues, is always eager to get home to his family.

“I feel like I’ve always wanted to try to get away from the field and just relax and be away as much as I can, I guess,” Harper said. “. . . But also, I know when I come to the field I have to strap it on and be Bryce.”

‘I sure enjoy watching you play baseball’

“Being Bryce” means something different than it used to when he was the precocious, polarizing kid who would speak his mind. It means something different in part because of his relative reticence. It also means something different because of what he has achieved.

Whether he has accomplished more as a player than expected or less varies by the judge, but the fact of the matter is he has done more as a player by age 25 than almost anyone in major league history.

Only 17 players have hit 150 home runs, driven in at least 400 runs and played in at least 750 games by 25 as Harper has. Only four of those players have walked more often — three Hall of Famers and Mike Trout. He has accumulated 27.7 FanGraphs Wins Above Replacement since he started playing regularly in 2012, the 10th most in the majors in that span.

Because of injuries, he has played in 45 fewer games than anyone ahead of him. Trout leads all players with 53.7 WAR, though Josh Donaldson is second with 37.1 WAR in 817 games. If Harper had been

healthier, he likely would rank in the top five. He is younger than all nine players ahead of him on that list which, combined with his general marketability as an edgier star in a rather polite baseball generation, is the reason so many expect Harper's free agent deal to break records.

Until this winter's unprecedented free agent spending freeze, almost everyone in the industry expected Harper to earn a contract far exceeding the 13-year deal worth \$325 million the Miami Marlins gave Giancarlo Stanton in November 2014. Nothing seems certain now, though with a strong season, Harper should have no trouble finding an average annual value of well above \$30 million.

Exactly how far the Nationals are willing to go in pursuit remains to be seen, though a few things are clear already.

For one, they do not believe in committing a quarter or fifth of their payroll to one player. They will clear \$80 million in payroll this winter, dipping their committed money to somewhere around \$140 million, including arbitration players.

Second, they do not want to exceed the collective bargaining tax threshold for a third consecutive year, meaning any commitments they make cannot lift their payroll to the \$200 million range like it is this season.

Given how much payroll they clear in soon-to-be free agents such as Harper, Murphy, Gonzalez, Ryan Madson, Kelley and others, signing Harper would not necessarily push them over that threshold. But it would limit their ability to sign other players.

But third, the Nationals — as represented by General Manager Mike Rizzo — love Harper the player. They would like to keep him around. They have no problem with him. Rizzo would defend Harper to the end, and expects Harper would do the same. Those who have watched him grow feel similarly.

"I tell him every couple of weeks or so," said third base coach Bob Henley, who has been with the organization since Harper's first day, "I sure enjoy watching you play baseball."

For all the attention, for all the questions, for all the noise he used to make and all the quiet he now tries to create, playing baseball is still what Harper does, what he has always done, and what he will do until he can't do it anymore.

He might not do it in Washington much longer. But whatever he does this season, wherever he plays baseball next, Harper will be caught in a chaos few others can understand, one in which he has grown up, one that has smoothed his edges and tested his patience — one from which he cannot, and would not, ever escape.