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Reds spending during free agency doesn't make sense, for now

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It's not collusion. It's analytics.

Every baseball operations department has math majors punching numbers. The numbers spent on free agency don't always add up to great results.

That's why more than 100 free agents are on the market when they should be packing for spring training. After all, pitchers and catchers report Wednesday.

The lack of movement on the free agent market, as you might imagine, has not sat well with the players union. Players Association Executive Director Tony Clark issued the following statement Tuesday:

"Pitchers and catchers will report to camps in Florida and Arizona in one week. A record number of talented free agents remain unemployed in an industry where revenues and franchise values are at record highs.

"Spring training has always been associated with hope for a new season. This year a significant number of teams are engaged in a race to the bottom. This conduct is a fundamental breach of the trust between a team and its fans and threatens the very integrity of our game."

That doesn't bode well for lasting labor peace. But players waiting for million-dollar contacts aren't going to evoke a lot of sympathy from John Q. Fan.

I don't know about all teams, but I don't see anything sinister going on with the Reds. The Reds are trying to do what the Chicago Cubs and Houston Astros did to win the last two World Series.

Will it work? It's impossible to say. But it's hard to argue that signing a free agent or two this offseason would hasten the process.

Disclaimer here: I've argued all along that adding Lance Lynn or Alex Cobb would help the Reds make a jump in the win total. Would it make them a contender? Almost certainly not.

But this is a critical year in the retooling process. Another 90-loss season is going to test fans, who have been very patient so far. The Reds know that.

"We've struggled to be competitive since the second half of 2014," said manager Bryan Price in January. "That's a fair amount of time to ask our fan base to wait. I think they're going to see a lot of improvement as far as wins and losses. They need to see that."

Lynn or Cobb would go a long way toward assuring that. But when I suggested such a signing during a panel discussion with other scribes, everyone else disagreed.

Logic says going with the young is the way to go. President of Baseball Operations Dick Williams believes that. He's worked hard to keep the Reds on The Plan.

Despite the record revenues and values Clark cited, teams like the Reds and Pirates are in a tough spot. The Reds built a core that put together a good run from 2010 to 2013. But in order to draw the fan base to pay to keep that core together, the Reds needed to win big – a National League pennant or a World Series. When they took a step back in 2013 with the flameout and the Wild Card loss, the deal was done.

A rebuild was coming. You could argue the Reds started the process too slowly. You could argue that the contracts they gave out in the halcyon days of 2012 slowed the process further.

But you can't argue that the rebuild was unnecessary.

If the Reds had won 86 or 87 games last year, it would make sense to sign a Lynn or Cobb or even Jake Arrieta. But it's hard to go from 94 losses to contention.

So the Reds added a couple of bargain-basement bullpen pieces, rather than spend real money on free agents. If this year goes well, I could see them spending in 2019.

"I like our team and I think we're going to be competitive," Williams said. "A lot of it is going to depend on how these guys return from injury and how the young guys step up this year. This year will tell us a lot about where we are in the cycle."

Again, nothing sinister in that.

SPRING IS HERE: Well, at least for those of us lucky enough to be going to Goodyear. The player I'm looking most forward to seeing is Nick Senzel.

Senzel was the best player the Reds had in the minors last year. The fact that he played better after the promotion to Double-A is impressive. Senzel, 22, has skill that is rare in the Reds' system. He's athletic, he gets on base and he's got gap-to-gap pop.

What the Reds do long-term with Eugenio Suarez and Scooter Gennett will have a lot to say about Senzel's future, but don't discount the outfield. I'm told his speed is similar to Chris Heisey's. Heisey played a serviceable center field.

ROSTER MADNESS: Right-hander Jeff Manship was an interesting minor league signing by the Reds. He put up a 3.12 ERA in 53 games with the Indians in 2016. He spent last year pitching in Korea.

Given the bullpen situation, the more arms the merrier.

DAYTON DAILY NEWS

Hal McCoy: Spring training a happy time, even for teams like the Reds

By Hal McCoy - Contributing Writer

Posted: 1:45 p.m. Saturday, February 10, 2018

Spring training is a happy time for major-league baseball teams, even those with little or no chance of playing postseason games.

The weather usually is superb, there is little or no pressure on the players because statistics don't count and wins or losses are meaningless.

And after working out in early morning through early afternoon there are golf balls to hit and fish to snag.

Spring training begins this week and many publications list 10 to 12 teams with no chance to make the playoffs. The Cincinnati Reds are prominent in that list.

Why? Because the Reds are still in their reconstruction mode, still rebuilding, still waiting for prospects to develop into major leaguers.

That, of course, doesn't fit well with fans who pay large dollars to see their teams, expecting them to at least try to win.

Are the Reds trying? Some media outlets, player agents and the players union actually are accusing several rebuilding teams of tanking — not trying to win.

They are accused of trying to position themselves for high draft picks. The Reds, who have finished last three years in a row in the National League Central, have benefited by getting third baseman Nick Senzel and pitcher/shortstop Hunter Greene in the last two drafts.

In addition, there are more than 100 unsigned free agents available, many top-shelf players who could help teams win. But they are being ignored.

What have the Reds done in the off-season? Well, they lost shortstop Zack Cozart to free agency. They made zero trades. They've signed a couple of mid-level free agent relief pitchers, Jared Hughes and David Hernandez.

What does it mean? The Reds probably will be arguing for last place again, most likely with the Pittsburgh Pirates. The Pirates ostensibly are beginning their own rebuild after they traded their best player, Andrew McCutchen, and their best pitcher, Gerrit Cole.

It was believed the Reds might compete this year with the Milwaukee Brewers, until the Brewers stunned the baseball family by acquiring star outfielders Christian Yelich and Lorenzo Cain. They reportedly also are in the market for a front-line starting pitcher.

Meanwhile, the Reds go to spring training with one major objective and that's to put together a starting rotation from a long gray line of contestants.

Manager Bryan Price says he has his starting rotation in mind, but how can he with so many questions and so many pitchers standing in line.

The names include Homer Bailey, Anthony DeSclafani, Luis Castillo, Sal Romano, Robert Stephenson, Sal Romano, Amir Garrett, Cody Reed, Brandon Finnegan, Jackson Stephens, Tyler Mahle and Michael Lorenzen.

That's 12 names for five spots and some could end up in the bullpen, guys like Reed and Finnegan and Lorenzen.

For various reasons, injuries and tryouts, the Reds used 30 pitchers last year and 16 different starters.

In a perfect world, Bailey and DeSclafani would be at the top of the rotation. But Bailey has had three surgeries the past couple of seasons and DeSclafani missed the entire 2017 season with a pair of injuries.

So they have to enter camp as question marks.

Castillo was the best of the rest and Stephenson finished strong. Finnegan missed most of the season with injuries and wants to be in the rotation, but might be better suited in the bullpen. Lorenzen, one of the bullpen mainstays, wants to return to the rotation and Price said he will be given that opportunity.

Garrett began the 2017 season with a fantastic early run, but the club destroyed his confidence by sending him back to Triple-A to save service time and when he came back he was not close to being what he was before his demotion.

So, finding a five-man rotation among all those developing arms behind Bailey and DeSclafani, if they are healthy, will be a monumental challenge.

Replacing Cozart at shortstop won't be as easy as some might expect. The plan is to insert Jose Peraza at shortstop. After a great September in 2016, Peraza was a disappointment last season both offensively and afield. While he has a strong arm, it often is a scatter-arm and some scouts question his range.

The Reds could move Eugenio Suarez from third base to shortstop and put Senzel at third. Suarez was a shortstop for the Detroit Tigers but the Reds moved him to third base. He was not very good at first, but worked diligently and became above average. The Reds are averse to moving him back to short after he worked so hard to become solid at third. And despite outstanding minor-league success so far, Senzel isn't ready and probably will begin the season at Class AAA Louisville.

The outfield is a bit of a problem Adam Duvall, Billy Hamilton and Scott Schebler are still there, but the Reds know that Jesse Winker is major-league ready.

As the team goes to spring training, the message is that the Reds will employ a four-man outfield. Winker can spell Schebler in right and when Hamilton isn't in center Schebler can move to center and Winker can play right.

But the point of emphasis this spring definitely will be to find a starting rotation — and it won't be easy and it probably will change several times during the early parts of the season due to injuries and ineffectiveness.

Cincinnati Reds 2018 projection: On the upswing, but barely

Marcus Hartman

11:23 a.m. Friday, Feb. 9, 2018

Baseball Prospectus has good news and bad for the Cincinnati Reds.

The site's annual PECOTA projections have the Reds improving over last season but failing to get out of the basement in the National League Central.

The Reds will win 74 games in 2018, which would be six more than last year, but still finish three games behind the Pirates.

The projections have the Cubs winning the division with the Cardinals and Brewers also finishing above .500 after both teams were aggressive in adding talent in the offseason.

For what it's worth, projecting the season for the Reds might be harder than some clubs considering the uncertainty regarding the pitching staff.

While manager Bryan Price has said he expects his rotation to include Luis Castillo, Homer Bailey, Anthony DeSclafani and Brandon Finnegan with a fifth starter to be determined, DeSclafani and Finnegan are both coming off of years mostly lost to injury.

PECOTA expects DeSclafani to make 16 starts with Robert Stephenson and Sal Romano getting 23 apiece.

The projection also includes Jesse Winker getting 60 percent of the playing time in right field and 10 percent in left field with Scott Schebler getting 40 percent of the time in right and 20 percent in left.

How those things actually shake out remains to be seen.

The other projected division winners are the Dodgers, Nationals, Astros, Indians and Yankees.

Transactions

02/09/18

Toronto Blue Jays signed free agent RHP John Axford to a minor league contract and invited him to spring training.

Pittsburgh Pirates signed free agent LF Daniel Nava to a minor league contract and invited him to spring training.

Philadelphia Phillies signed free agent LHP Josh Tols to a minor league contract.

New York Mets designated 3B Matt Reynolds for assignment.
