

Buster Olney's top 10 teams: Are the Astros and Dodgers still baseball's best?

Buster Olney

Postseason performances have outsize value in Major League Baseball, and this is why David Freese shares emotional space with Bob Gibson in St. Louis, why several generations of New Englanders can deftly imitate Carlton Fisk's frantic wave of a baseball, and why Kirk Gibson is better known for a fist pump than for his lifetime average.

The executives who run front offices should divorce themselves from that romanticism of October and November results, and instead be wedded to the large sample size, before those nights when Brad Peacock and Charlie Morton were the best pitchers in baseball. And for the sake of ranking the best teams, we should probably do that too, giving greater weight to what was accomplished April through September.

With that in mind, here are the top 10 teams, based on the input of evaluators, with help from ESPN researchers Mark Simon, Paul Hembekides and Sarah Langs. It's subject to change before the start of spring training, of course, with so many veteran free agents still unsigned.

1. Cleveland Indians

It's important to remember a couple things about the Indians:

(1) When the regular season ended, before anybody knew that Corey Kluber would pitch hurt against the Yankees, Cleveland was regarded as the favorite to roll through the postseason, after compiling a 22-game win streak that stretched over the better part of a month.

(2) Among all contending teams, the Indians again appear to have the easiest road into the playoffs because most of their division is rebuilding -- the Tigers, the White Sox and the Royals.

So while it's true the Indians lost really important bullpen pieces in Bryan Shaw and Joe Smith and solid hitters in Carlos Santana and Jay Bruce, Cleveland is still the safest bet to get to October -- with Francisco Lindor, Jose Ramirez, Kluber, Carlos Carrasco, Andrew Miller, et al. It's a great team in a division that may be noncompetitive. The Indians have been relatively quiet this winter so far, but they're still in the market for a right-handed hitting outfielder or super utility man -- Eduardo Nunez might be the perfect fit -- and a right-handed reliever.

From Sarah Langs of ESPN Stats & Information: The Indians generated 33.3 WAR from their pitchers in 2017 -- the second-highest total from any pitching staff ever (2011 Phillies, 37.3).

2. Los Angeles Dodgers

The Dodgers were baseball's best team for most of last summer and came within one game of winning the World Series, and while the ghosts of 1988 -- the Dodgers' last championship team -- still hover over the franchise, no one could rationally cast 2017 as a failure. The Dodgers got younger, with the ascendance of Cody Bellinger and the emergence of 27-year-old Chris Taylor, they got better, and they have the deepest roster in baseball. The great X-factor will continue to be the health of ace Clayton Kershaw, because their rotation looks very different without him.

3. Houston Astros

A rival evaluator followed the Astros through most of October last year, preparing scouting reports for his own team, and he walked away believing that Houston's lineup has more athleticism -- more pure talent -- than any lineup he has seen in the last decade. Jose Altuve, George Springer, Carlos Correa, Alex Bregman could all be top-three talents at their respective positions, and the others around them are all solid, productive players.

Houston owner Jim Crane, a driving force behind the acquisition of Justin Verlander in August, told reporters earlier this week that his team is pushing for a frontline starting pitcher. They've talked with Yu Darvish, and as of Thursday, executives involved in the Gerrit Cole discussions still believe that Houston could be the front-runner to get the Pittsburgh right-hander -- and he may really be needed. Dallas Keuchel is coming back from a foot injury, amid some uncertainty about his status. If he's good to go, then a rotation of Keuchel, Justin Verlander, Cole, Lance McCullers Jr. and Charlie Morton would be awesome; if not, Houston would still have a more than solid group of starters, in front of a good bullpen.

From Langs: The Astros racked up 39.8 WAR from position players in 2017; that's the sixth-most ever by a World Series champ, and most since the 1976 Reds produced 43.7 WAR from position players.

4. Washington Nationals

The rotation is fronted by two of the best pitchers in baseball, and the dynamic lineup could be even better now that Adam Eaton is back from his season-ending knee injury and Trea Turner and Michael Taylor are a year older. Most importantly, the Nationals seem to have their bullpen in order -- maybe the best group of relievers in Mike Rizzo's time as general manager, with Sean Doolittle, Ryan Madson, Brandon Kintzler, Koda Glover, Shawn Kelley, et al.

5. New York Yankees

The Yankees still need to identify starters at half of their infield spots, and general manager Brian Cashman acknowledged Thursday that his team remains in the running for Darvish -- perhaps as a long shot, because of self-imposed payroll limitations. But even with those gaps in the roster, the Yankees still have the best and deepest bullpen in the majors, and they have a lineup with Aaron Judge, Giancarlo Stanton and Gary Sanchez. The Yankees fell one win short of reaching the World Series last fall and have the firepower to take the next step.

6. Chicago Cubs

The Cubs seem well-positioned in the starting pitcher musical chairs and are involved in conversations for Darvish, free-agent Alex Cobb and others; they need one more veteran for their rotation, and they should get one. They're betting on Brandon Morrow to take over at closer, after his powerful 2017 season for the Dodgers, and they're bringing back just about everyone in their position-player group -- including the slimmed-down Kyle Schwarber, and shortstop Addison Russell, who seems poised for a rebound from a rough season.

7. Boston Red Sox

Their work is incomplete this winter, as they wait for J.D. Martinez to decide whether he's going to become their No. 1 power source, but the Red Sox already have a lot of weapons, from Chris Sale to Craig Kimbrel to Mookie Betts. Their outfield defense is excellent, their bullpen should be pretty good, and Rafael Devers demonstrated, in his two-month audition process, that he has the skill to be an elite power hitter in the big leagues.

But the Red Sox missed David Ortiz more than they expected, and Martinez is needed.

8. St. Louis Cardinals

Among the NL teams that failed to reach the postseason in 2017, the Cardinals may have done more problem-solving this offseason than any other. After St. Louis tried unsuccessfully to convince Giancarlo Stanton to accept a trade, they moved on and dealt for young slugger Marcell Ozuna. They added starting pitcher Miles Mikolas, who went 14-8 with a 2.25 ERA in 27 starts in Japan last season with the Yomiuri Giants. He last pitched in the majors in 2014 for the Texas Rangers, with a 6.44 ERA in 10 starts that season. They also added reliever Luke Gregerson and sorted through some of their outfield congestion, moving Tommy Pham to center and Dexter Fowler to right field.

9. Los Angeles Angels

Shohei Ohtani's decision to pick the Angels seemed to spur the team into even more action, to help with the roster depth around Mike Trout. They traded for Ian Kinsler to play second, signed Zack Cozart to play third and added another excellent defensive catcher in Rene Rivera, a perfect complement to Martin Maldonado. Most importantly, their rotation could be better and deeper (and healthier) than it has been in years, with Garrett Richards, Andrew Heaney, Tyler Skaggs, Ohtani and Matt Shoemaker among others.

10. Arizona Diamondbacks

The Diamondbacks took a big step forward last year, particularly lefty Robbie Ray, and any team stacked with Paul Goldschmidt, A.J. Pollock and Jake Lamb is going to be dangerous. But they're coping with some really difficult choices to make in the next couple of years because of their payroll limitations: It looks like J.D. Martinez will move on, after he carried the team with an MVP-caliber performance down the stretch last year, and in the next two years, Pollock and then Goldschmidt will be free agents.

Best of the rest

- Seattle Mariners: Dee Gordon takes over in center field, and if he meets their expectations, the Mariners could have a dynamic offense. But as Seattle works to end its playoff drought, the health of James Paxton and Felix Hernandez could be most critical.
- Milwaukee Brewers: The Brewers jumped to 86 wins last season and were on the cusp of a wild-card berth. They'll have to overcome the loss of ace Jimmy Nelson to a shoulder injury for most (or all) of 2018, but they have padded their bullpen depth.
- Minnesota Twins: Like the Indians, they could take advantage of a weak division -- with a young and talented group of position players.

Mejia adds versatility to repertoire in offseason

Indians' top prospect shows willingness to shift between home plate, hot corner

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- Francisco Mejia did not head to the Arizona Fall League to become a third baseman, but he was open to trying his hand at the position. The Indians asked the young catcher to work at the hot corner with the idea of introducing some versatility to his game, and Mejia did not see the harm in expanding his skill set.

According to MLB Pipeline, Mejia is currently ranked as the best catching prospect in the Majors, the top prospect in the Indians' system and the 14th-best prospect overall in baseball. He got a taste of the big leagues last season with Cleveland and, following the third-base experiment in the AFL, Mejia is preparing for an important Spring Training with the Tribe.

"I worked a lot and I've gotten more used to it," Mejia said of third base, while attending MLB's Rookie Career Development Program earlier this month. "But, it's not exactly my position, because I've been a catcher since I was a kid. I am willing to [play some third], because if it's to help the team, I'll do it."

That willingness on Mejia's part was good to see for an Indians team that loves versatility among its players. Mejia is knocking on the big leagues' door, but Cleveland has a pair of veteran catchers in Roberto Perez and Yan Gomes, who have built a strong rapport with the team's talented pitching staff. For a contending club like Cleveland, that situation makes working a rookie like Mejia into the picture more complicated.

Right now, the Indians' infield projects to have Jason Kipnis at second base and All-Star Jose Ramirez at third, so it is not like the hot corner is Mejia's for the taking. But, if the young switch-hitter is deemed offensively capable of handling himself in the Majors at some point this year, having him able to play more than one position might help the Indians put all the puzzle pieces together.

"One thing we know," Chris Antonetti, the Indians' president of baseball operations, said recently, "is he's a really good catcher right now and he made a lot of great progress defensively. Over the course of the last six months, he took a step toward increasing his versatility, so that's a big positive. Francisco deserves a lot of credit, not only for what he did in the Fall League, but over the course of the season, with how much he focused on his defense and the progress he made there."

Mejia, 22, only appeared in 11 games for the Indians last season, but enjoyed a standout showing with Double-A Akron. In 92 games in the Minors, the catcher turned in a .297/.346/.490 slash line with 14 home runs, 21 doubles, 52 RBIs, 52 runs scored and seven stolen bases. Mejia also threw out 30 percent of would-be basestealers.

The .835 OPS that Mejia posted in 2017 followed a breakout showing in '16, when he had an .896 OPS between Class A Lake County and Class A Advanced Lynchburg and made national headlines with a 50-game hitting streak. That performance, which vaulted Mejia up the prospect rankings, came after he had a .670 OPS in '15 for Lake County.

"It's been about the focus and focusing on the game," Mejia said. "When I finished the season in 2015, I went to the Dominican for a short time and came back to do a program that the [Indians] set up for me. I stayed with the team more than in the Dominican. The focus and the help of the coaches and new manager helped me a lot. I talked about a lot of things with the pitching coach.

"Also, I practiced a lot in the Dominican, seeing a lot of games there, too. I learned a lot in the winter league. I didn't play, but I was on the bench. That helped me a lot to see that in this game, it's not just you. There are a lot of people behind you waiting to take your job."

Now, Mejia is behind Perez and Gomes, trying to find his way to the big leagues.

"I think it's just getting to Spring Training and giving it my best," Mejia said, "showing [the team] that I have what it takes to play, all of that."

McAllister avoids arbitration with 1-year deal

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- Given the losses absorbed by the Indians' bullpen this offseason, Zach McAllister could see a heightened role for the club this year. On Thursday, Cleveland locked the big right-hander in with a one-year contract to avoid the arbitration process.

One day after the Tribe avoided arbitration with closer Cody Allen, McAllister reached an agreement with the team on a one-year pact worth \$2.45 million, MLB.com confirmed. Including Allen's deal -- worth a reported \$10.575 million -- Cleveland has more than \$23 million invested in four relievers (Andrew Miller, Dan Otero and McAllister being the others) for the upcoming campaign.

Otero, 32, and McAllister, 30, could see their respective roles increase in the 2018 season due to the departure of both setup man Bryan Shaw and sidearmer Joe Smith in free agency this offseason. Shaw signed a three-year deal with the Rockies, while Smith penned his name on a two-year contract with the Astros.

The agreements with Allen and McAllister have reduced Cleveland's arbitration cases down to three: Trevor Bauer, Lonnie Chisenhall and Danny Salazar. Friday represents the deadline for teams to exchange proposed salary figures with any unsigned arbitration-eligible players. Each winter, the Indians try to sign their arbitration candidates prior to taking that step.

A team can sign its arbitration-eligible players at any point leading up to their scheduled hearing (held between Jan. 29 and Feb. 16 this year).

McAllister found a home in Cleveland's bullpen over the past three years after breaking into the big leagues as a starting pitcher with the club. Over that three-year span, the big righty has logged a 2.99 ERA with 204 strikeouts against 67 walks in 183 1/3 innings (164 games). In parts of seven seasons with the Indians, McAllister has a 3.92 ERA in 236 outings (68 starts).

Last season, McAllister posted a 2.61 ERA with 66 strikeouts against 21 walks in 62 innings, which came with 50 appearances. He held right-handed batters to a .189 average and .535 OPS, compared to a .293 (.843 OPS) showing against lefties. For his career, though, McAllister has relatively even splits against righties (.265 average and .732 OPS) and lefties (.263 average and .747 OPS).

Indians avoid arbitration with Zach McAllister; Rumored Jason Kipnis to New York Mets trade falls short **by Ryan Lewis**

The Indians on Thursday avoided arbitration with relief pitcher Zach McAllister, agreeing to terms on a one-year, \$2.45 million deal.

McAllister is in his last year of arbitration eligibility. He, Cody Allen and Andrew Miller are all currently eligible for free agency after the 2018 season, putting the future of the Indians' bullpen at risk.

McAllister had the best season of his career in 2017, posting a 2.61 ERA and 1.194 WHIP—both career bests for a single season—to go with a 9.6 K/9 rate.

The Indians came to an agreement with Allen on Wednesday, signing him to a one-year, \$10.575 deal to avoid arbitration. Three arbitration-eligible players remain, including Danny Salazar, Trevor Bauer and Lonnie Chisenhall. The filing deadline for both sides to exchange figures is Friday.

Allen, Miller, Dan Otero, Nick Goody, McAllister and Tyler Olson figure to make up the first six spots in the 2018 bullpen.

The trade that wasn't

The New York Mets reportedly signed Jay Bruce to a three-year, \$39 million deal this week. According to Jon Heyman of FanRag Sports, the Mets also nearly acquired Jason Kipnis via a trade.

According to Heyman, some on both sides thought the deal was done, but it was nixed by "someone at the top," possibly due to a money issue.

Kipnis is owed a base salary of \$13.5 million in 2018 and \$14.5 million in 2019. His deal also includes a club option for 2020 valued at \$16.5 million with a \$2.5 million buyout. Those figures are certainly cutting into Kipnis' value on the trade market. His 2017 season, in which he struggled with injuries for most of the year and finished with 0.7 fWAR, isn't boosting his stock, either. Though in 2015 and 2016, Kipnis put together seasons of 4.8 fWAR and 4.9 fWAR, respectively.

If Kipnis isn't traded, the Indians have indicated that he'll likely head back to second base, though that is also dependent on their injury situation once Opening Day arrives.

Bruce not returning, even at a somewhat discounted price, and Kipnis being on the trade block could have as much to do with next winter as anything, when the Indians could have a difficult time retaining several key assets—Miller and Allen included. Simultaneously, over the next few seasons, the Indians could be dealing with increased arbitration figures to several players, including Francisco Lindor, as well as increased salaries to players currently holding long-term deals, most notably Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco, Kipnis, Jose Ramirez, Yan Gomes and Roberto Perez.

For a team that had seen a steep increase in player payroll in recent years, those future commitments could be a strain on their financial situation and the potential moves they can make.

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Cleveland Indians, Zach McAllister avoid arbitration on 1-year, \$2.45 million deal

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

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The Indians' list of possible arbitration hearings keeps dwindling.

They reached a one-year deal with Zach McAllister on Thursday worth \$2.45 million to avoid arbitration. On Wednesday night, they agreed to a one-year deal with closer Cody Allen worth \$10.575 million.

Right-handers Trevor Bauer and Danny Salazar and outfielder Lonnie Chisenhall are still eligible for arbitration. Players and teams will exchange numbers on Friday.

McAllister, who made \$1.825 million last year, went 2-2 with a 2.61 ERA. He struck out 66 batters and walked 21 in 62 innings, allowing eight homers. Relievers McAllister, Dan Otero and Nick Goody were left off the AL Division Series roster.

In the last three years, McAllister has become a valuable part of the bullpen. He's made 50 or more appearances every season with no fewer than 54 strikeouts, and has been especially effective against right-handers. Last season they hit .189 (24-for-127) with three homers against the 6-6, 240-pound McAllister.

The bullpen is in a state of transition after losing Bryan Shaw, Joe Smith and Boone Logan to free agency this winter. Whether or not that means a change in roles for McAllister remains to be seen.

The transition is expected to continue at the end of 2018 with McAllister, Allen and lefty Andrew Miller eligible for free agency.

The Indians acquired McAllister from the Yankees on Aug. 20, 2010 for Austin Kearns. He moved from the rotation to the bullpen on a full-time basis in 2015.

How does a 90-win, 2018 AL Central championship Cleveland Indians team sound to you?

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.comphoynes@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio - The Indians aren't going to win 100 games this year. One of the reasons why revealed itself Wednesday night when closer Cody Allen avoided arbitration by signing a one-year deal worth \$10.575 million with the Indians, while free agent Jay Bruce walked away to sign a three-year, \$39 million deal with the Mets.

The rising cost of the Indians' roster -- including players eligible for the arbitration such as Allen, and those on multiyear deals such as Corey Kluber, Andrew Miller, Carlos Carrasco, Michael Brantley, Yan Gomes, Jason Kipnis, Jose Ramirez, Edwin Encarnacion and Josh Tomlin -- have made retaining or signing this winter's crop of free agents difficult.

Paying those players alone, the organization believes, will increase the payroll by \$25 million to \$30 million this year.

The Indians set a franchise record with a \$124 million payroll last year. It will go up this year.

There has been a free-agent exodus from Cleveland this winter. Bruce returned to the Mets, Carlos Santana signed with the Phillies, Bryan Shaw with the Rockies, Joe Smith with the Astros and Boone Logan with the Brewers. Tribe free agents Austin Jackson and Craig Breslow are still on the market, but they are not expected to return.

This is not a good thing for the Indians. The loss of Bruce, Smith and Logan will sting, but won't leave scars. Bruce and Smith were rentals, stretch-drive acquisitions. Logan was a surprise signing in February that didn't take. He injured his left shoulder and didn't pitch in the second half as rookie Tyler Olson took over his role.

The losses of Santana and Shaw are different. They were foundation players and will not be easily replaced.

The Indians knew they had to do something to replace Santana at first base, so they signed Yonder Alonso to a two-year, \$16 million deal. Chris Antonetti, Indians president of baseball operations, said that basically emptied his free-agent bank account for the winter.

As for replacing Shaw, the AL ironman reliever, it looks like they're going to try and do it with numbers. The competition in the bullpen will be stiff this spring. There is also a chance a bargain-priced reliever could come their way considering how many free agents are still unsigned.

The 2017 Indians did one thing that has rarely happened since they were founded in 1901. They did another thing that has never happened.

First, they became the third team in franchise history win 100 or more games. Second, they became the only team in AL history to win 22 straight games. Aaron Boone, former ESPN announcer and now rookie manager of the Yankees, called them a team without a weakness.

It was great fun. A killer rotation led by a two-time Cy Young winner in Kluber. A bullpen that led the AL in ERA. Switch-hitting All-Star infielders in Francisco Lindor and Ramirez, who combined to hit 62 homers. They won the AL Central by 17 games, but after all that celebration they were knocked out of the postseason in the first round by the Yankees. People inside and outside the organization are still recovering from the disappointment.

This year will be different. While last year's team was an "all-in venture," there will be fewer bells and whistles this season. Yet, if the Indians win the AL Central - as they're favored to do for the third straight year - with 90 wins and get another crack at the postseason, would there be reason to complain?

The Indians have had five straight winning seasons under manager Terry Francona. They play in a beautiful refurbished ballpark. Their roster is loaded with engaging and talented players. What's more, they're playing in a division where the other four teams are in various stages of rebuilding. They are no longer about playing competitive baseball, they are about reaching the postseason and having success there.

It's impossible for a big-league team to say "wake me up in October." The demands of a 162-game schedule will not allow for that. But the Indians have reached the point that every team strives to reach: They are contenders before the first pitch of the season is thrown.

The losses of Shaw, Santana, Smith and Bruce will hurt. But the Kluber led-rotation is back in full force. Miller and Allen still reside in the bullpen. Gomes and Roberto Perez are sound behind the plate. Providing Jason Kipnis can stay healthy in his return to second base, the infield is solid.

The same cannot be said in the outfield -- where Brantley, Lonnie Chisenhall, Brandon Guyer and Bradley Zimmer are coming off injuries. But things could be worse.

Antonetti and the rest of the front office work hard at keeping key elements of their roster intact. To do that, they have to look around the corner and over the horizon. The Indians had seven free agents this winter in Santana, Shaw, Smith, Bruce, Logan, Jackson and Breslow. They have not re-signed any of them.

But if they hadn't extended the contracts of certain players when they did, Brantley, Kipnis, Carlos Carrasco and Tomlin would be part of that free-agent class as well. That kind of loss would have left a mark.

Seven Reasons Why the Free Agent Market Is So Incredibly Slow

Sports Illustrated Tom Verducci

Welcome to "Stare-down Week." That's how one general manager characterized this week as baseball gets midway through the third month of one of the deadest free agent markets this side of the collusion years.

"It's to the point now where both sides are staring each other down this week," the GM said, referring to teams and agents. "Over the holidays, for the first time I can recall, people just weren't calling. Things are usually quiet then, but it just shut down because up until then it was more quiet than usual. Now I feel like by the end of this week or early next week, it's time for somebody to blink."

Said one veteran agent, "It's not like there haven't been discussions. Clubs have talked about money and years—everything but actual, aggressive offers. In some cases players are waiting for the market [at their position] to be set, but that still hasn't happened for many of them."

What's going on? Start with the so-so quality of this free agent class—nobody big enough to generate an early auction atmosphere. And drawing long-term trends from this market is dangerous because of the expected spending frenzy that's coming 10 months from now.

You still might see as many as four \$100 million contracts this winter: to Yu Darvish, Jake Arrieta, J.D. Martinez and Eric Hosmer. But with almost one month before camps open, this officially is a slow market for free agents. The middle class of free agents—waiting for the market to be defined, but still holding out for multi-year riches—seems especially imperiled as the clock ticks to the opening of camps.

One of the players in that class who blinked this week was Jay Bruce, who took a three-year, \$39 million offer from the Mets. Bruce, 30, (.254, 36 HR, 101 RBI) was this year's version of 30-year-old Jason Bay (.267-36-119) eight years ago or 31-year-old Nick Swisher (.272-24-93) five years ago. In this market, where 30-home run hitters are easily found, Bruce fell far short of the four-year guarantees for Bay (\$66 million) and Swisher (\$56 million).

In the meantime, here are the reasons why this free agent market has been so slow:

1. The 2016 Collective Bargaining Agreement

In the last round of CBA negotiations the players won on quality of life issues such as extra seats on spring training buses, clubhouse chefs, scheduling and extra days off, but lost on economic issues, such as the Competitive Balance Tax. The CBT, which imposes a "luxury tax" on payrolls that exceed a defined threshold, has become a soft cap that is hardening.

While revenues were skyrocketing, the 2016 CBA barely raised the threshold (this year, for instance, it's \$197 million, or only 4% greater than what it was four years ago) and increased penalties (surtaxes and a draft position penalty for the most extreme offenders).

The CBT alone has kept the Dodgers and Yankees out of major free agent bidding. Agents can't even use them as leverage. Both teams have a business plan driven by staying under the threshold this year in order to re-set their tax rate in 2019 from 50% of the overage to 20%—a potential annual savings of about \$12 million just on a potential Bryce Harper signing.

Over the past decade, the rise in the CBT threshold (32%) has not nearly kept pace with the rises in the average salary (52%) or revenues (67%). "The [cap] effect is real—very real," said one agent. "It's something that needs a very hard look next time around."

2. The 2018 Free Agent Class

Harper, Manny Machado, Josh Donaldson, Charlie Blackmon, Andrew Miller, Craig Kimbrel, A.J. Pollack, Daniel Murphy, Cody Allen and Andrew McCutchen are all eligible for free agency after this season. Clayton Kershaw and David Price could join them if they exercise opt-out clauses. Keeping payroll flexibility for Free Agent Armageddon is the smart play.

"This year you might have one or two teams over the [luxury tax] threshold—if that," said one executive. "Next year you might see a dozen teams over the threshold."

3. The Baseball.

The apparently livelier baseball, introduced in the final two months of 2015, has so dramatically increased the number of home runs as to devalue them on the open market. From 2014 to 2017 home runs increased 46%. Why pay a premium for them when there are plenty of prospects or bargain veterans with a launch-angle swing guru who are 25-homer guys waiting to happen?

Power is a cheap commodity because of the supply. In 2014, only 27 players hit 25 homers—less than one per team. Last year there were 74 players who hit 25 homers, including 15 who didn't even have enough plate appearances to qualify for the batting title.

This free agent market began with 10 players who hit 25 homers. Seven of them are corner infielders: Logan Morrison, Mike Moustakas, Lucas Duda, Mark Reynolds, Yonder Alonso, Todd Frazier and Eric Hosmer. Alonso is the only one signed, and he took a two-year, \$16 million deal—

less than the Giants gave Aubrey Huff eight years ago. (First basemen Mitch Moreland, at two years, \$13 million with Boston, and Matt Adams, one year, \$4 million with Washington, are corner hitters who also signed bargains in the crowded market.)

"Maybe he saw the handwriting on the wall with all of these corner infielders on the market and jumped," one GM said of Alonso. "But maybe it winds up looking pretty good by spring training with this glut out there."

4. The Scott Boras Factor

The agent controls much of the top of the market, including Martinez, Hosmer, Arrieta and Moustakas, and Boras typically does well with slow-playing free agency. Chris Davis, Prince Fielder and Max Scherzer, for instance, all signed between Jan. 21–26. He'll be just fine.

One executive, however, pointed out two changes in this marketplace: it remains saturated with available players in January, and the rise of intellect and power in baseball operations departments has narrowed Boras' well-paved path of dealing directly with ownership on mega-deals. Boras, the executive said, viewed general managers from certain clubs as "middle managers" and preferred to woo owners such as Tom Hicks, Ted Lerner and the late Mike Ilitch with direct sales pitches on intangibles and business-related enhanced values of his players. Now more power, especially in regards to defining player value, is concentrated with analytically savvy general managers and presidents of baseball operations who are less prone to emotional or vanity buys.

5. The Rise of Bullpens

Only one type of player has benefited from this free agent market: relievers. That should not be a surprise for a game that keeps giving more and more work to more and more relievers. But don't be fooled: teams have stopped giving four-year deals to middle and set-up relievers (as they did for Darren O'Day and Brett Cecil), and the cost of relievers is cheap.

"It's an easy expenditure," said one GM about why teams jumped out early for relievers. "The dollars don't have much impact at all on the luxury tax."

The flip side is that the emphasis on bullpens has de-emphasized starting pitchers. The Rockies, for instance, paid three well-worn relievers \$35 million a year rather than chase Darvish or Arrieta.

Nothing is stranger in this market than the lack of buzz on Darvish and Arrieta. Both pitchers compare favorably to Jon Lester when Lester hit the market three years ago:

Previous Four Seasons Heading into Free Agency

Arrieta and Darvish, however, have been received in free agency wildly different than was Lester. Half a dozen teams jumped on Lester immediately, with the Giants, Red Sox and Cubs especially wining and dining him. Lester's agents actually slow-played free agency to wait until the winter meetings to finalize his deal with the Cubs: \$155 million over six years.

That year and the next (2014–15) saw a run on free agent starting pitchers—13 of them signed contracts of at least four years, including James Shields, Brandon McCarthy, Mike Leake, Jordan Zimmermann and Wei-Yin Chen. Since then? No free agent starting pitcher has signed a contract of four or more years.

Now we have a baseball world in which teams pitch their starters with more rest and take them out earlier than ever before. And proof that it works (as long as you have a deep inventory of pitchers): the Dodgers won the NL pennant by having their starters face the fewest hitters a third time around—marking the second straight year they were successful by getting their starters out quicker than any team in baseball.

6. The Empty Middle Lane

It's become mostly a bifurcated game: teams are either all-in as far as World Series aspirations or all-out. That's not "tanking." That's smart business sense. Nothing drives spending now more than where a team is on the winning curve, and teams that don't have a chance to win the World Series scale back to rebuild rather than cling to false hope. The success of the Royals (though it was a long rebuild), Cubs and Astros give credibility to such plans so fan bases that once clamored for short-term fixes can accept a rebuild.

This industry-wide vision, according to one executive, has wrought a going-for-it upper tier of "10 to 12 clubs" (several of whom have clamped down on spending because of the CBT) and "eight to 10 teams" who are not in buying mode because of rebuilds.

"The thing about the few teams in the middle ground, who might have money to spend, is that they are teams that generally are conservative in nature," the executive said, referring to teams such as Milwaukee, Minnesota and Pittsburgh.

7. Flexibility

The elite players will get paid, even in a slow market, but a better understanding of value by front offices is keeping clubs from committing years to fungible-type players. Here are some of the free agents who scored contracts of four or more years in 2012 or 2013: Melvin Upton Jr., Josh Hamilton, Michael Bourn, Edwin Jackson, Nick Swisher, Matt Garza, Ubaldo Jimenez, Ricky Nolasco, Curtis Granderson and Omar Infante.

You can always find mistakes on long-term deals. But the buzzword in the game now is “flexibility”—in terms of roster usage (players who play multiple positions or have options remaining) and payroll (both at the trading deadline and future seasons). It’s one thing to give a star like Robinson Cano a 10-year deal. It’s quite another to commit four years to Infante, who gave Kansas City in those four years 298 games, eight homers and a .238/.269/.328 slash line, making him the worst Royal ever at getting on base with so many games with the club.

This market is likely to be the worst in at least a decade as far as players fetching deals of four years or more:

Rosenthal: D-Backs persistently pursuing Machado; where will Kipnis play?; Mets' next move; more notes

By Ken Rosenthal 9 hours ago

I won’t believe the Baltimore Orioles are trading Manny Machado until I hear an official announcement. Reaching an agreement on players would be the first step. Securing the approval of Orioles owner Peter Angelos would be the second. Any suitor that successfully navigates both of those baseball labyrinths should be awarded not only Machado but also a Nobel Prize.

The Arizona Diamondbacks, though, remain engaged with the Orioles on Machado, the most persistent of the teams interested, according to major league sources. No trade appears close, but for the D-Backs, Machado would be a fascinating addition, possibly the right move at the right time for a franchise ready to win now.

The D-Backs’ best position players are in their primes—first baseman Paul Goldschmidt and center fielder A.J. Pollock are both 30, and third baseman Jake Lamb is 27. If a deal is made Machado, 25, would take over as the team’s shortstop, with Ketel Marte possibly moving to second base and Chris Owings playing more as an outfielder in a super-utility role. (D-Backs second baseman Brandon Drury is one of the Arizona players under discussion in a Machado trade, sources say.)

Such a group, however, would not be assured of staying together long-term. Machado is eligible for free agency after this season, as are Pollock and D-Backs left-hander Patrick Corbin. Goldschmidt is eligible after 2019, Lamb after ‘20. And a different kind of clock is ticking for right-hander Zack Greinke, who is signed through ‘21 but at 34 is at the outer edge of his prime.

But the state of the D-Backs’ biggest rival, the Los Angeles Dodgers, is another incentive for Arizona to think big. The Dodgers, in trying to stay under the \$197 million tax threshold, might field their weakest club this season or the next several years. Weak is a relative term for a team that won 104 games last season—11 more than the D-Backs—and advanced to Game 7 of the World Series. But if the Dodgers get under the threshold, they will re-set their luxury-tax penalty to the minimum rate, enabling them to spend more freely next off-season on the great free-agent class of 2018-19.

Teams exchange arbitration figures with players on Friday, and Machado’s number figures to be in the \$16 million range. One year of Machado at that price is more logical for the D-Backs than say, six years of free-agent outfielder J.D. Martinez at \$25 million or more per season. The problem for the D-Backs is that their farm system is not considered strong; left-hander Anthony Banda, whose performance regressed at Triple A and in the majors last season, is another player under discussion in the Machado talks, sources say.

The D-Backs obviously want to protect the prospects they have, but perhaps they would extend for Machado, knowing they could make him a qualifying offer and receive a pick after the first round in the near-certain scenario that he signed with another club for \$50 million or more. If the D-Backs somehow fell out of contention, they could trade Machado along with Pollock and Corbin at the non-waiver deadline, and start restocking that way.

Many in the industry are skeptical the Orioles will even move Machado, but Opening Day is still 2 1/2 months away. The O’s know they are not going to re-sign Machado. Things might turn uncomfortable if they take him to arbitration and even more uncomfortable if they do not grant him his wish to play shortstop. A trade still makes sense, and the D-Backs are trying to make one work. In the words of one source, “they won’t go away.”

Kipnis at second... or somewhere else?

The Cleveland Plain-Dealer reported last week that Jason Kipnis is expected to return to second base this season, but manager Terry Francona was not ready to commit to that plan when he appeared on MLB Network’s “Hot Stove” on Wednesday.

“Well, I’m not sure we have fully come to that decision,” Francona said. “I kind of told him the last time I talked to him that my obligation was to kind of tell him as quickly as we can out of fairness to him, to put him in the position where he can get ready for the year.

“If I kind of put a gun to my head, I thought he would end up being our second baseman, but you want to wait until the roster is settled before you just cement something like that. But I do think the odds are leaning in that direction and he’s played it before and he’s been an All-Star at that position.”

A better solution for the Indians would be to trade Kipnis, who is guaranteed \$30.5 million over the final two years of his contract, including a \$2.5 million buyout after the 2019 season. Such a move would enable the Indians to keep Jose Ramirez at second rather than move him back to third, and clear money for a right-handed hitter and bullpen help.

Considering their financial constraints, the Indians left themselves open to criticism when they exercised left fielder Michael Brantley's \$11.5 million option—Brantley has appeared in only 101 games the past two seasons due to injuries and might miss the start of this season after undergoing surgery on his right ankle.

Jay Bruce, who agreed to a three-year, \$39 million free-agent contract with the Mets on Wednesday night, will earn less than Brantley in 2018—\$10 million. Bruce, as the Indians learned after acquiring him from the Mets last August, is less proficient than Brantley at getting on base, but a more powerful left-handed hitter. He is also far more durable, averaging 151 games over the past eight seasons.

Mets' next move: second base?

After bringing back Bruce, the Mets are placing a greater priority on upgrading second base than third, according to major league sources. Their options at second, though, might be dwindling—they failed to acquire Ian Kinsler from the Detroit Tigers last month, and Jon Heyman of FanRag Sports indicated in a report on Thursday that ownership quashed a potential deal for Kipnis.

Talks for the Pittsburgh Pirates' Josh Harrison do not appear to be progressing. Free agent Eduardo Nunez would bring needed athleticism if the Mets were willing to trust him at second, but he likely would need to lower his financial expectations. Free agent Neil Walker turned down a reported three-year extension in the \$40 million range from the Mets last spring, and the Milwaukee Brewers are among the other teams interested in him. Also, if the Mets added Walker on top of Bruce, they essentially would return the same team that won 70 games last season.

The Mets also want to find additional bullpen help, and sources indicate they are not terribly intrigued with the top available free agents at third—Mike Moustakas and Todd Frazier. The Mets, however, are considering a reunion with free-agent first baseman Lucas Duda, in part because of his on-base skills. Duda, 31, has a career .340 OBP, but also would give the Mets yet another plodder on the bases.

Around the horn

Information compiled from major league sources:

*Not so fast on the idea that free-agent closer Greg Holland will continue the trend of Scott Boras clients who sign with the Washington Nationals.

The Nats' front office considers Holland too risky on a multi-year deal and is likely to wait out the market for a lesser right-handed reliever. The Nats, at this moment, also are not active in the starting-pitching market. But as we've seen before, their off-season plans—depending upon the whims of ownership—are subject to change.

*The Milwaukee Brewers are maintaining their interest in free-agent center fielder Lorenzo Cain while continuing to explore a number of trade and free-agent possibilities.

Signing Cain would almost certainly be accompanied by the Brewers packaging an outfielder, possibly Brett Phillips, for either pitching or second-base help—or both, depending upon who else they included in the deal.

To go further outside the box, consider this: Once top prospect Lewis Brinson is ready, the Brewers against left-handed pitching could go with an outfield of Brinson in center, Cain in left and Domingo Santana in right, with Ryan Braun moving to first.

Actually, that might be too outside-the-box: Braun has never played first base as a professional.

*The Los Angeles Angels do not appear to be aggressive in the starting-pitching market, but they probably should be based on the recent track records of their returning starters and newcomer Shohei Ohtani.

With the departure of free agent Ricky Nolasco, the Angels' top returning "workhorse" is J.C. Ramirez, who threw 147 1/3 innings last season and could return to the bullpen. Garrett Richards, Andrew Heaney, Matt Shoemaker and Tyler Skaggs all threw 85 innings or fewer, and Nick Tropeano missed the entire season recovering from Tommy John surgery.

Parker Bridwell threw 121 innings in a breakout season, but the Angels cannot count on him repeating his 3.64 ERA when his fielding-independent pitching mark was 4.82. And Ohtani, in his first major league season, will need to be monitored carefully, particularly if he is also used as a hitter. Ohtani threw only 25 1/3 innings last season due to an ankle injury, and his career high is 160 2/3 innings in 2015.