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White Sox remain undecided on whether Yoan Moncada will move to third base in 2019

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago / November 11, 2018

The White Sox still haven't made up their minds about where Yoan Moncada will play in 2019.

Not even two years removed from being the top-ranked prospect in baseball, Moncada might be heading for a position switch following his first full season in the majors, from second base to third base. But general manager Rick Hahn said last week at the GM Meetings in Southern California that the team hasn't made the decision to do that quite yet, saying that if it's coming, it'll happen closer to spring training, which makes sense considering the White Sox aren't sure what their roster will look like until after offseason moves are made.

"We have not (made a determination on that yet)," Hahn said. "We've talked to the player, we've talked to scouts, had a lot of good conversations about it. Fundamentally we like versatility and flexibility in all our players. So in that specific example, Moncada's ability to play third and second, that makes him more valuable to us. Should we eventually make a switch full time, that would be a decision we'd make closer to spring training and announce closer to spring training after the offseason plays out with how we're going to line up."

While it might be easy for some fans to see that as a negative following what was undoubtedly a disappointing campaign — in addition to his 217 strikeouts at the plate, his 21 errors were the third most in baseball — Moncada switching positions is likely more because of what the White Sox have coming up through the farm system. The White Sox spent the No. 4 pick in this year's draft on middle infielder Nick Madrigal, who has a reputation as a defensive whiz up the middle. With the White Sox touting Madrigal as "the best all-around player in college baseball" after the draft and with Madrigal playing at three different levels this year in his brief time as a pro, it's not difficult to see the possibility of him shooting through the minor leagues and arriving on the South Side in a relatively short time.

Because of that, the White Sox might be inclined to make room. And moving Moncada to third could help solve another question, as the White Sox have little in the way of long-term options at the hot corner. Jake Burger's pair of Achilles tears earlier this year made his future a mystery. And while White Sox fans enjoy speculating about options from outside the organization like Josh Donaldson (a free agent this offseason)

and Nolan Arenado (a free agent next offseason), it would make plenty of sense for the White Sox to spend at least a year seeing if Moncada can be a homegrown solution there.

It all makes up the puzzle that is this decision for the White Sox this offseason.

“Individually, you want to put the player in the best position to succeed for the long term. Flexibility, versatility of a roster factors into that, as well, to try to give (manager Rick Renteria) the best weapons at his disposal at any given game,” Hahn said. “And then you have to factor in the alternatives that you have and what’s going to put us in the best long-term position to win.”

“If we wind up with having too many premium middle-infield prospects or big league performers, that’s a good problem to have.”

Could the White Sox be Bryce Harper's 'submarine' team?

By Paul Sullivan / Chicago Tribune / November 10, 2018

During his well-attended press briefing at the general managers meetings, agent Scott Boras spoke about the teams that aren’t publicly committed to the Bryce Harper sweepstakes.

Boras gave one of his favorite lines, saying it’s “not a regatta, it’s a submarine race.” In other words, teams that will be in on Harper aren’t necessarily going to announce it to the media and let other teams know their interest.

When informed of Boras’ comment, White Sox GM Rick Hahn laughed.

“That’s our style, you know that,” Hahn said. “We tend to be under the radar. That fits with the submarine, right?”

Right. Hahn later said he had not spoken to Boras at the meetings and declined to address their interest in Harper, who reportedly is hoping to surpass Giancarlo Stanton’s record \$325 million deal.

“I don’t want to go down the path of talking about any free agents or individual players,” Hahn said. “We’ve been in contact with a wide variety of agents and certainly other clubs since we’ve been down here, gathered together as much information as we can, head back to Chicago and circle back over the weekend and next week and hopefully make some progress toward some acquisitions.”

The next day, a photo of Harper’s name and number next to the Sox logo from an LED ribbon inside the United Center went viral. Did that mean the Sox were bringing Harper to town to announce his signing? Was a worker at the UC just trolling Sox fans?

o one could say exactly what was going on, but the Harper sweepstakes will take a while. The idea of Sox Chairman Jerry Reinsdorf shelling out that kind of money for a player represented by longtime nemesis Boras seems far-fetched, as does the notion of Harper signing with a 100-loss team.

But who knows? If the Yankees, Dodgers and Cubs aren’t all-in on Harper, as seems to be the case, perhaps the Sox can be the submarine team.

It’s going to be a long, crazy winter, and people are going to look for clues anywhere they can, even if they make no sense.

White Sox should choose Bryce Harper over Manny Machado for their fantasy team

By Rick Morrissey / Sun-Times / November 11, 2018

White Sox fans are trying to decide which superstar they’d rather have: Bryce Harper or Manny Machado. At any other time, in any other life, those fans would be in serious need of a drug test. A conversation about the Sox, megastars on the market and huge-money contracts? Only if a bong was involved.

But not now. Not with the Sox far enough along in their rebuild and with money to spend to make a run at either player. Amazing. And so much fun in the drear of November.

Harper, the hair-flying, tradition-be-damned, five-tool showstopper, or Machado, the wonderfully talented, black-hat-wearing villain?

Answer: Harper.

If I were Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf — only \$1.4 billion more and I'm there! — I'd want the player guaranteed to pack Guaranteed Rate Field. To ignore that part of the equation is to ignore the issue that has dogged this franchise for years.

Machado is the more consistent player, year to year. Harper is the more compelling player.

Some of their stats are remarkably similar. Machado's 162-game average is .282, 31 home runs and 90 RBI. Harper's is .279, 32 home runs and 91 RBI.

The difference? You can't take your eyes off Harper. The last player who created this much buzz when he walked onto a field — and I apologize, Sox fans — was Sammy Sosa. He would sprint to his spot in right field at Wrigley Field (and elsewhere), blowing kisses to the Cubs' faithful and breathing in their love. When Harper comes to bat or takes the field, he's likewise the center of attention. An African bush elephant could be trotted out to play second base, and it would still be so. But let's not give Joe Maddon any new ideas.

You can't ignore that if you're the White Sox, who are to a sold-out ballpark what Chris Sale is to a 62-inch waist. Their average attendance has been below 30,000 10 consecutive seasons. The last six seasons, it has been below 22,000. It's why one reader suggested that Guaranteed Rate Field, named after a mortgage company, be called Zero Interest Field.

When Harper won the Home Run Derby last season, he tossed his bat in the air as if he had just won the World Series for the Nationals. The made-for-TV competition seemed to be more important to him than it was to anybody else. Is his act too much? All I know is that the guy is a natural showman.

Last season, I saw him tear around the bases on a triple and purposely knock his helmet off his head near second base. My guess, and I think I know a dig-me guy when I see one, is that Harper did it so we could see his flowing mane. My other guess is that everyone watched.

The problem with the born-entertainer line of thinking is that it minimizes Harper's abilities, which are enormous. His career on-base percentage (.388) and slugging percentage (.512) are better than Machado's (.335 and .487). To obsess on his Q rating reduces the Sox' decision, if they'll be lucky enough to get to make one, to a bottom-line question. Harper is excellent, and the Sox are in it to win.

But you can't dismiss the other side of it, the butts-in-the-seats quotient. Machado would bring in fans. Harper would bring in more of them.

Every baseball fan knows who Harper is. He has taken a power washer to the unwritten rules of baseball. He sneers at convention. He's the darling of millennials who question why things have to be the way they are. Baseball needs millennials.

The Sox have a history of signing bad boys, from Albert Belle to A.J. Pierzynski. So Machado, who recently admitted he's not "Johnny Hustle" on the base paths, would fit perfectly. He's not above the occasional dirty play, as he showed several times during the postseason for the Dodgers.

The price tag for either player will be well above the 10-year, \$300 million offer Harper reportedly turned down from the Nationals in September. Is a \$400 million contract out of the question for one or both of the 26-year-old superstars? Probably not. The Phillies seem to be the favorite to land Harper or Machado, but,

and this is what the Sox are counting on, you never know. Maybe one of those players likes the idea of joining a team that's on its way up. And maybe the Sox blow away the competition with a ridiculous offer. If so, I hope it's Harper. I'm rooting for fun.

What's that? You think the Sox will shell out enough money to grab both Harper and Machado? Here's a specimen cup, and there's a bathroom stall. Get busy.

Why the White Sox could be contenders for Harper, Machado

By Scot Gregor / Daily Herald / November 11, 2018

So the Chicago White Sox are rumored to be pursuing free agent Bryce Harper. They are rumored to be after free agent Manny Machado.

Both star talents are expected to eventually agree to contracts that will each dispense more than \$30 million annually, and history says that instantly eliminates the Sox on both fronts.

They do have plenty of money to spend as the rebuild progresses, but the most lucrative contract in White Sox history is the six-year, \$68 million deal Jose Abreu agreed to before the 2014 season.

Going from that to 10 years and \$300 million for either Harper or Machado does not seem remotely plausible, but let's go back to SoxFest in January.

General manager Rick Hahn was asked about the White Sox's willingness to eventually spend big, and his answer was both revealing and defiant.

"I can certainly assure you the resources will be available," Hahn said. "Can I assure you we're going to be able to convert on every target? No. Unfortunately, it's a going to be a robust and competitive market.

"I get that question a lot, and I get it, because it would seem to break with our past practice to be aggressive or be at the top of the market. Maybe the last time this organization did it was probably Albert Belle (five years, \$55 million in 1996), well before my time.

"But I would say over the last 18 months we've sort of busted a lot of the myths about how the White Sox go about their business. There was certainly a lot out there that the Chicago White Sox would never rebuild. Obviously we did. There was a lot written a year ago that we would never make a trade with the Chicago Cubs, even if it made us better. And obviously we did.

"Additionally, people touted that we would never incur a significant tax or penalty in order to sign a player like we did with Luis Robert. Each of those steps along the way reinforced this process and put us closer to being in position to win championships.

"Being competitive in free agency and targeting big-ticket items and hopefully converting on them is going to be the next logical step when the time is right. Anyone who doubts that this organization will break from past perception or past process, I think the evidence is there over the last year that the old standard has fallen apart."

Is the "time right" for the Sox to make a big splash in the free-agent pool? Personally, I think it happens after the 2019 season, but don't sell Hahn and the White Sox short this winter.

- The Sox "secretly" extended Rick Renteria, and I say congratulations to the manager, who turns 57 on Christmas Day.

Renteria has been close to a perfect fit for the White Sox over the past two seasons. Don't pay too much attention to the 129-195 record -- Renteria has been asked to teach more than win.

He has done that, and more of the same is likely coming in 2019.

When the Sox are ready to contend, and 2020 still looks like the year, Renteria will be evaluated on different terms.

- No matter what happens on the free-agent market, it has been a good off-season for the White Sox.

Top pitching prospect Dane Dunning was shut down in late June with a "moderate" elbow sprain, and Tommy John surgery was the initial fear.

Dunning was able to throw in the instructional league with no pain, and he's expected to be ready for spring training.

Zack Burdi wasn't ready to pitch until August after having Tommy John surgery, but he logged 6½ innings with the AZL White Sox and added 4⅔ scoreless innings with 5 strikeouts in the Arizona Fall League.

Top outfield prospect Luis Robert is tearing up the AFL. Heading into Saturday's play, the 21-year-old outfielder was riding a 14-game hitting streak and was ranked second in the league with a .386 batting average.

Limited to 50 games during the regular season due to a pair of thumb injuries, Robert should spend most of 2019 with Class AA Birmingham. If he continues to climb like he is in the AFL, AAA Charlotte is definitely within reach, and Robert should be ready to join the Sox in 2020.

The greatest under-28 free agents of all time, and where Harper and Machado rank

By Cliff Corcoran / The Athletic / November 11, 2018

The free agencies of Manny Machado and Bryce Harper will dominate this offseason, no matter where they sign. That is because both arrived at free agency with a rare combination of youth and accomplishment.

Both are heading into their age-26 season. Both have a handful of All-Star appearances and roughly 30 wins above replacement (Baseball-Reference version) to their credit. Machado has also won a pair of Gold Gloves. Harper has been the National League's Rookie of the Year and Most Valuable Player. Players who are both that accomplished and that young don't hit the open market very often — few players accumulate enough service time at such an early age to qualify as free agents, and those that do often sign extensions with their original teams before they can test the market. Still, the free agencies of Machado and Harper aren't completely without precedent.

The obvious reference point here is Alex Rodriguez, who hit free agency after his age-24 season with four All-Star seasons, four Silver Sluggers, a batting title and a third-place MVP finish already to his credit. However, the free agents comparable to Machado and Harper don't end with A-Rod. Using Baseball-Reference's WAR (bWAR) as a blunt measure of achievement, there was another free agent just within the last three years whose youth and accomplishment at the time of his free agency roughly split the difference between those of Machado and Harper. Expanding the field a bit to include all players who reached free agency by the end of their age-27 season allows us to compile a list of the greatest modern free agents in major-league history as judged by their combination of youth and accomplishment at the time they hit the market. Both Machado and Harper are on that list, but perhaps not exactly where you might expect.

To rank the players on this list, I started with their career bWAR prior to reaching free agency for the first time. For players coming off their age-27 season, I stopped there. However, to credit the younger players for their relative youth, I used a 5/4/3 weighting of their last three seasons (weighing their most recent season five times, the one before that four times, and the one before that three times) to come up with a projection of their first season after free agency. (Remember, we're evaluating these players at the time of their free agency, not evaluating what they did after. This projection method is thus a better reflection of their market value than their actual post-free-agency performance, which was unknown at the time.) I then credited those younger players with seasons of that value up through their age-27 season. So, for example,

if a player coming off his age-25 season projected to be worth 5.0 bWAR the next year, he would be credited with 5.0 each for both his age-26 and -27 seasons, adding 10.0 bWAR to his career total.

Ranking the players by their resulting totals, I came up with the following list of the 13 greatest major-league free agents of all time, based on their youth and accomplishment at the time of their initial free agency. Ages listed below are playing ages for the players' first season following free agency.

13. Rich "Goose" Gossage, RP, 1977
Age: 26
Career bWAR: 15.8
Projected age-27 bWAR: 27.0

Gossage wasn't the fire-breathing, mustachioed closer we think of today when he reached free agency after his age-25 season, but he had made three straight All-Star Games. He hit free agency having posted a 1.74 ERA with 281 strikeouts in 274 2/3 innings over his last two seasons as a full-time reliever (sandwiched around a middling season as a starter), a pair of seasons worth a combined 14.3 bWAR.

The Yankees incumbent fireman, Sparky Lyle, won the Cy Young award in 1977, but owner George Steinbrenner was so impressed by Gossage that he signed the young fireballer to a six-year contract worth \$3.6 million, prompting third baseman Graig Nettles's famous comment that the 33-year-old Lyle had gone "from Cy Young to sayonara." Gossage never quite equaled both the workload and dominance of his '75 and '77 seasons again, but in his six seasons in New York he posted a 2.10 ERA (183 ERA+), finished in the top five in the Cy Young voting three times, grew his famous mustache, and established himself as an iconic fireman and one of the greatest relief pitchers in the game's history. He was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2008.

12. Carlos Beltrán, CF, 2004
Age: 28
Career bWAR: 29.3

The American League's Rookie of the Year in 1999, Beltrán suffered a sophomore slump in 2000 and was arguably underrated during his subsequent years in Kansas City. That all changed when the Royals traded him to the Astros on June 24 of his walk year. Over the next three months, Beltrán hit .258/.367/.559 (135 OPS+) with 23 home runs and 28 steals in 28 attempts to lead Houston past the Giants in the NL wild-card race. He then hit an astonishing .435/.536/1.022 with eight home runs in 56 plate appearances in the postseason.

That performance made Beltrán the belle of the hot stove ball, and he ultimately landed with the Mets on a seven-year, \$119 million contract. Beltrán disappointed in the first year of that deal, something for which some Mets fans never forgave him, but he was outstanding in the next three before leg injuries began to sap his speed and playing time. Still, over those seven seasons, the last two months of which were spent with the Giants after netting New York pitching prospect Zack Wheeler, Beltrán compiled 32.3 bWAR, six All-Star appearances, three Gold Gloves, a pair of Silver Sluggers, a fourth-place MVP finish in 2006, and a .278/.422/.556 batting line in that year's postseason. He, too, should eventually wind up in the Hall of Fame.

11. Bryce Harper, 2018
Age: 26
Career bWAR: 27.4
Projected age-27 bWAR: 32.4

Does this seem too low? Would it still seem too low if I reminded you that Harper was worth just 1.3 bWAR this past season and just 1.5 bWAR in 2016? Or that he has failed to exceed 1.5 bWAR in three of the last five seasons?

What was supposed to be the monster free agency to end all free agencies is instead a confusing mixed bag of impressive accomplishment and confounding underperformance. Harper is a six-time All-Star. He was the NL Rookie of the Year at 19 and the youngest unanimous MVP in major league history at 22. However, the majority of his seven major league seasons have been marked by injury. In his walk year, he posted the second-worst batting average of his career (.249), which undermined his 34 home runs and major league-leading 130 walks, and he was suddenly a significant liability in the field. The batting average might have been bad luck, and the fielding issues might have been due to cautious play, given the proximity of his free agency and unfortunate history with outfield walls, but this was still a disappointing season from a player who, for all his accomplishments, has disappointed more often than not thus far in his major league career.

That Harper still ranks 11th on this list is a reflection of just how talented, and how young, he is. He's still a lock for a nine-figure payday, and a good bet for a record-setting one (unless Machado signs first). However, his 2.5 bWAR projection for his first season after free agency is by far the lowest of the 13 men on this list, which is why some have argued that Harper might be better off signing a one-year deal to reset his value (though, given his injury history, I'd advise against it).

10. CC Sabathia, SP, 2008

Age: 28

Career bWAR: 33.3

Cleveland carefully managed Sabathia's workloads through his age-25 season, only allowing him to exceed 200 innings once. In his age-26 season in 2007, they threw off the reins and Sabathia won the AL Cy Young award. In his walk year in 2008, Sabathia was dealt to Milwaukee on July 7 (netting Michael Brantley, among others), and pitched the Brewers to their first postseason appearance in 26 years, going 11-2 with a 1.65 ERA (255 ERA+) in 17 starts and completing seven games, three of those shutouts. For those efforts, he finished fifth in the NL Cy Young voting and sixth in the NL MVP voting despite spending less than three months in the league. Over those last two seasons prior to his free agency, Sabathia posted a 148 ERA+ over a whopping 494 innings, pitching his team to the postseason both times (though, understandably, appearing tired in the playoffs in both seasons).

All along, Yankees general manager Brian Cashman had his eye on the big lefty, and he signed him to a seven-year, \$161 million contract that December. Sabathia pitched the Yankees to their most recent championship in the first year of that deal and finished in the top four in the AL Cy Young voting in each of his first three years in New York, after which he leveraged his opt-out clause to add two more years and \$50 million to the pact. Age and injury caught up to Sabathia in year five, but after getting sober following the 2015 season, he recovered enough of his prior form to make good on those two bonus years and earn two subsequent one-year deals with the Yankees, who just re-signed him for 2019 for \$8 million. Sabathia, who should surpass 250 career wins in 2019, which he says will be his final season, isn't a slam-dunk for the Hall of Fame, but he should garner serious consideration.

9. Greg Maddux, SP, 1992

Age: 27

Career bWAR: 27.3

Projected age-27 bWAR: 33.5

Greg Maddux wasn't Greg Maddux when he reached free agency after his age-26 season in the fall of 1992, but he was the defending NL Cy Young award winner and had also finished third for the award in 1989. He was also well established as a workhorse, having averaged 251 innings over the previous five seasons, back before that was considered a red flag for a young pitcher. This was clearly a stud emerging as a true ace, but no one knew then that he would finish his career in the conversation about the greatest pitchers of all time.

Clearly the best pitcher on the market that winter, Maddux turned down a richer offer from the still-dysfunctional Yankees to sign with the two-time defending NL champion Braves for \$28 million over five years. All he did after that was win the next three NL Cy Youngs, five Gold Gloves, help pitch the Braves

to their first championship in Atlanta in 1995 and another NL pennant in 1996, and post a 2.13 ERA (197 ERA+) over the life of the contract. That was one of the best pitchers in the history of the game at the absolute peak of his abilities, and it prompted a record-setting, five-year, \$57.5 million extension in late 1997. Maddux would ultimately spend 11 years with the Braves, compiling a staggering 66.3 bWAR and leading the team to 10 division titles. He was inducted into the Hall in 2014.

8. Roberto Alomar, 2B, 1995

Age: 28

Career bWAR: 34.5

Alomar should probably be a spot higher on this list because the 1994 strike cost him playing time, and thus wins above replacement, in both '94 and '95. Still, we'll stick with the numbers he actually compiled. Alomar was one of the foundational stars of the Blue Jays teams that won consecutive championships in 1992 and '93. Entering his free agency, he had made six straight All-Star teams and won five straight Gold Gloves. The only knock against his free agency is that he had regressed slightly in his last two seasons. In '92 and '93, he hit .318/.406/.460 (136 OPS+) and averaged 52 steals per season. In '94 and '95, he hit .303/.368/.450 (112 OPS+) and stole a total of 49 bases in 237 games.

That dip in performance may be why he settled for a mere three-year contract with the Orioles worth \$18 million. He would never get those lost stolen bases back, but his bat made a full recovery in his first two seasons in Baltimore, only for Alomar to again have a down walk year. He was even better in three years in Cleveland, giving him 32.8 bWAR in his first six years after free agency. Alomar fell off dramatically after that, but by then, his place in Cooperstown was already assured.

7. Adrián Beltré, 3B, 2004

Age: 26

Career bWAR: 23.4

Projected age-27 bWAR: 34.8

Promoted to the major leagues at 19, Beltré was undeniably talented, but also often a source of frustration for the Dodgers and their fans. After hitting .290/.360/.475 (114 OPS+) in his age-21 season in 2000, Beltré seemed to regress, hitting .254/.300/.421 (92 OPS+) over the next three years with climbing strikeouts and falling stolen base totals. Then came his age-25 season. That year, his walk year, Beltré hit .334/.388/.629 (163 OPS+) with 200 hits, 121 RBI, 104 runs scored and a major league-best 48 home runs. By then, he had also emerged as an elite defensive third baseman. That combined performance was worth 9.6 bWAR, and only the video-game version of Barry Bonds kept him from that year's NL MVP.

Still, no one was quite sure what to make of Beltré as a free agent. Was that season a breakout or a fluke? Was it a walk-year spike he'd be unable to repeat? Beltré would eventually prove it was no fluke, but that would take six years. In the interim, he served a five-year sentence in Safeco Park on a \$64 million contract with the Mariners. In those five years, he hit a mere .266/.317/.442 (101 OPS+) and was better known for his glove than his bat. Since escaping Safeco, however, he has hit .307/.358/.514 (130 OPS+) over nine seasons from the age of 31 to 39, compiling 3,166 career hits and 477 home runs to stamp his ticket to Cooperstown.

6. Bobby Grich, 2B, 1976

Age: 28

Career bWAR: 36.0

Earl Weaver knew how valuable Bobby Grich's walks were, but few others appreciated them. That, along with a lack of understanding about aging curves, contributed to the degree by which Grich's Orioles teammate Reggie Jackson, who was three years older, overshadowed Grich in the first modern class of free agents in the fall in 1976. Grich did win four straight Gold Gloves prior to hitting the market and was a three-time All-Star and the AL's starting second baseman in 1976, but he was also a career .262 hitter who had never hit 20 home runs or stolen 20 bases. What he did do was get on base at a .372 clip, which helped him post a 127 career OPS+ to that point. Add in some modest pop, a few steals and his elite play in the

field, and he averaged seven wins above replacement per year in his five full seasons prior to his free agency.

The Yankees noticed, but Grich opted to return home to Southern California and took less money (\$1.35 million over five years) to sign with the Angels. The Yankees gave Jackson \$2.96 million for the same period. Grich hurt his back lifting an air conditioner in his first year in Anaheim, while Jackson led the Yankees to their first championship in 15 years, but over that five-year term, Grich was still worth 20.5 bWAR to Jackson's 17.2. Grich led the Angels to their first postseason appearance in 1979, slugging a career-high 30 home runs that year, and led the AL lead with 22 homers, a .543 slugging percentage and a 165 OPS+ in the strike year of 1981. He and Jackson were reunited the following year, when Jackson signed with the Angels, and helped the Halos to two more playoff berths, in 1982 and '86. Grich was the better player in every season that he and the aging Jackson were teammates. Overall, from their free agency through Grich's retirement after the 1986 season, Jackson was worth 20.6 bWAR, while Grich was worth 35.1. Jackson was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1993. A quarter-century later, Grich is still waiting.

5. Tim Lincecum, LF, 1986

Age: 27

Career bWAR: 31.8

Projected Age-27 bWAR: 38.3

All Tim Lincecum did in his age-26 walk year was win the NL batting title with a .334 average, lead the NL in on-base percentage (.413, not that anyone noticed), steal 70 bases in 79 attempts (an 89 percent success rate), win the Silver Slugger and finish sixth in the NL MVP voting despite his Expos finishing fourth in the NL East. That year marked Lincecum's sixth straight All-Star appearance, his sixth straight season with 70 or more steals, and the fourth straight season that he improved his batting average and slugging percentage.

So, when no teams even bothered to bid on him that winter, there could be little doubt that the owners were colluding against free agents. Under the rules governing free agency at the time, Lincecum only had until January 8 to re-sign with the Expos or else he had to either sign elsewhere or sit out until May 1. Feeling a sense of responsibility to set the market, he held out only to be forced to re-sign with Montréal, eventually coming to terms on a three-year, \$4.8 million deal on May 1. The next day, he took the field at Shea Stadium, tripled in his first at-bat, and ultimately went 4-for-5 with a walk, a stolen base, that triple and a grand slam in a 10-inning win over the Mets. He then went on to hit .330/.429/.526 (149 OPS+) on the season with a career-high 18 home runs. Lincecum might have won the NL MVP, and the Expos might have made the playoffs, had Lincecum played that April. Lincecum fell off from that blistering peak the next year, but averaged nearly four wins per season through age 33, was a valuable part-timer for five more seasons after that, and ultimately played until he was 42, winding up, after sufficient reexamination, in the Hall of Fame in 2017.

4. Jason Heyward, RF, 2015

Age: 26

Career bWAR: 29.8

Projected Age-27 bWAR: 40.9

Remember: this is based on what these players accomplished prior to free agency, not what they did after, even though many went on to Hall of Fame-caliber careers. I was a subject of ridicule in the fall of 2015 when I produced calculations that argued that Jason Heyward's projection could justify a \$300 million contract. That seems even more absurd now, in light of his struggles with the Cubs, but that's what the numbers showed. Entering free agency, Heyward was a career .268/.353/.431 (114 OPS+) hitter who was among the most valuable fielders in the game. That huge defensive rating drove his overall value, which included 5.8 bWAR in his age-24 season and 6.6 bWAR in his age-25 walk-year. Given his strong start at the plate as a 20-year-old rookie in 2010, his strong finish at the plate with the Cardinals in 2015 (he hit .306/.375/.455 from May 1 through the end of the season and had a good showing in the postseason), and his youth, there was hope that his bat would improve to compensate for any regression in his fielding.

Instead, the scouts who doubted his swing were proven correct (or got in his head). After signing an eight-year, \$184 million deal with the Cubs, Heyward completely lost his way at the plate. He posted a 68 OPS+

in 2016, a 84 OPS+ in 2017 and a 92 OPS+ in 28. That modest recovery from a brutal first season in Chicago was undermined by his worst year in the field in 2018. Altogether, he has been worth just 5.2 bWAR in his first three seasons with the Cubs, less than the 5.6 bWAR he projected to be worth in 2016 alone, and the Cubs still owe him \$106 million for the next five years, assuming he will decline his opt-out next fall as he did to the one available to him last week.

3. Manny Machado, SS/3B, 2018

Age: 26

Career bWAR: 33.8

Projected Age-27 bWAR: 44.3

Unlike Harper, Machado has played up to his potential thus far in his career. Despite two serious knee injuries early on, he only missed significant time in one season, 2014, and he has not seen his athleticism hindered at all since. He did have a down year in 2017, but that was more of a down first half, as he hit .290/.326/.500 after the All-Star break that year, numbers roughly in line with his career averages (.282/.335/.487). Still, confusion over his position and the quality of his defense does complicate Machado's free agency slightly. A minor league shortstop, Machado was forced to third base when he was called up at the age of 20 in 2012 and quickly emerged as an elite fielder at the hot corner. Anticipating his free agency, he asked to move back to shortstop this year and struggled at the position in Baltimore only to fare far better there after being traded to the Dodgers at the All-Star break. Given Machado's apparent preference to play shortstop, his future value in the field is clouded by uncertainty. Still, it seems the worst-case scenario is that he will be a competent shortstop who rakes, though some of his suitors will surely prefer he go back to being an elite third baseman who rakes.

As for the raking, 2018 was his best season at the plate, with career-highs in all three slash stats and OPS+ (.297/.367/.538, 146 OPS+), and he has hit 33 or more home runs in each of the last five seasons. He's still not a patient hitter, but he's more willing to take a walk than he was in his first two full seasons. The math projects him to be worth 5.2 bWAR in his age-26 season, but he has been a six-win player in four of the last six seasons (I'm counting his 5.7 bWAR this year given his uncharacteristic struggles in the field), so he could very well exceed that projection. However you slice it, he looks like the third-most-desirable free agent in the 42-year history of free agency. Which only leaves . . .

2. Barry Bonds, LF, 1992

Age: 28

Career bWAR: 50.3

In his walk year with the Pirates, Bonds led the majors in on-base percentage and slugging, posted an absurd 204 OPS+ and won the NL MVP. He also won the MVP two years before that, and in the year in between he finished second, leading the NL in OPS+ both years. This was the Barry Bonds that won Gold Gloves in left field (three years running prior to his free agency) and stole a ton of bases (averaging 45 per year at an 80 percent success rate over those same three years). He was the best player in baseball, he was coming off an absurd career year in his age-27 season (.311/.456/.624) and he had already compiled more wins above replacement than Hall of Famers Orlando Cepeda or Ralph Kiner had in their entire careers (though WAR and Cepeda's induction were still many years in the future).

Bonds is why Greg Maddux wasn't the best overall free agent in 1992. Barry landed a record-setting contract with the Giants that December, a six-year, \$43 million pact that was the richest contract, both overall and in terms of average annual value (roughly \$7.3 million) to that point in the game's history. In his debut season with the Giants, Bonds won his third MVP and fourth Gold Glove and compiled the best year of his career prior to 2000, batting .336/.458/.677 (206 OPS+) with 46 home runs and 123 RBI, a 9.9-win season per bWAR. From that year through his age-35 season in 2000, he hit .303/.439/.626 (181 OPS+), averaging 40 home runs, 28 steals, and 7.6 bWAR per season over an eight-year span. Then, starting in his age-36 season in 2001, he broke baseball, but that's another story.

1. Alex Rodriguez, SS, 2000

Age: 25

Career bWAR: 38.1

Projected Age-27 bWAR: 60.4

Rodriguez reached free agency at a younger age than any other player on this list. Despite that, he had a higher career bWAR total upon reaching free agency than anyone on this list other than Bonds, who was three years older (Bonds' bWAR coming out of his age-24 season, for what it's worth, was a "mere" 23.5). In his five full seasons prior to becoming a free agent, Rodriguez hit .315/.381/.575 (143 OPS+), while averaging 37 home runs (topping 40 each of the last three seasons in that run) and 25 stolen bases, including a 40/40 season in 1998. He was also an outstanding defensive shortstop, yet another thing that is true of no other player on this list. Add that all up, and Rodriguez, coming out of his age-24 season, was the greatest prize free agency has ever offered, and it's not particularly close.

Rodriguez famously signed a 10-year, \$252 million contract with the Rangers and owner Tom Hicks that was completely out of touch with the market at the time (the previous record contract was Manny Ramírez's \$160 million deal — worth \$20 million a year — signed earlier the same offseason). However, Rodriguez was so absurdly productive over the course of those 10 years, his age-25 to -34 seasons, that he actually lived up to that payday. In those 10 seasons, Rodriguez hit .299/.394/.577 (150 OPS+), while averaging 42 home runs, 17 steals, and 7.1 wins above replacement per season, winning three AL MVPs, a pair of Gold Gloves and six Silver Sluggers, and compiling 424 home runs and 71.4 bWAR. Along the way, he maneuvered his way to the Yankees, shifted to third base, opted-out and signed a new 10-year deal that broke all of his own salary records, confessed to performance-enhancing drug use, and exorcized his postseason demons by helping Sabathia lead the Yankees to their most recent championship.

Little if any of that could have been predicted when Rodriguez hit the market in November 2000. As for what awaits Harper and Machado, we can only guess. Looking at this list, it's encouraging that Heyward, who is still just 29 and may yet have an Adrián Beltré-like second act up, is the only player who could be considered a bust. Whatever lies in Machado and Harper's futures, those futures look very bright.

Rosenthal: Astros had trade in place for Bryce Harper in July, but Nats' ownership said no

By Ken Rosenthal / The Athletic / November 11, 2018

Baseball is a game of what-ifs and near-misses, both on and off the field.

Here is a what-if that might have changed the course of the 2018 season:

What if the Houston Astros had acquired Bryce Harper at the non-waiver deadline?

The Astros had a trade in place for Harper on July 30, but the deal collapsed when Washington Nationals ownership refused to approve the move, according to major-league sources.

Without Harper, the Astros still finished 103-59, won their second straight AL West title and swept the Cleveland Indians in the Division Series. But in the American League Championship Series, the eventual World Series champion Boston Red Sox defeated the Astros in only five games.

For Harper, the Nationals would have obtained right-hander J.B. Bukauskas, the Astros' No. 8 prospect according to MLB Pipeline.com, and two other minor leaguers, sources said. Catcher Garrett Stubbs, the team's No. 15 prospect, was in play, and the Nationals would have received another, low-level, minor-league pitcher as well.

The package was far better than the compensatory pick the Nationals will receive after the fourth round of the 2019 draft if Harper turns down their qualifying offer on Monday, as expected, and eventually signs with another club.

The Nationals will qualify for the lowest form of draft-pick compensation after joining the Red Sox as one of only two teams to exceed the \$197 million luxury-tax threshold during the 2018 season. While the Sox won the World Series, the Nats finished 82-80, eight games behind the Atlanta Braves in the NL East.

Nats ownership long has been fond of Harper, whom the team selected with the No. 1 pick of the 2010 draft, and might have feared that trading him would harm their relationship with the player and reduce their chances of signing him.

As it turned out, those chances might be diminishing, anyway. Harper, 26, rejected a 10-year, \$300 million offer from the Nats on the final day of the regular season, according to the Washington Post, opting to enter the free-agent market instead.

Nationals general manager Mike Rizzo did not respond to a request for comment. Astros GM Jeff Luhnow declined comment.

Harper would have given the Astros an additional left-handed bat in their lineup, helping compensate for the struggles of right fielder Josh Reddick, who produced only a .690 OPS after the All-Star Game, and the loss of catcher Brian McCann, who was out from July 3 to Sept. 1 following right knee surgery.

After learning they could not land Harper, the Astros put together another trade that would have sent right-hander Francis Martes to the Chicago White Sox for outfielder Avisail García, sources said. That deal failed to come to fruition when the Astros expressed concern over the condition of García's right knee.

García, a right-handed hitter, would play the rest of the season, but batted only .197 with a .631 OPS in the final two months and underwent arthroscopic surgery on his knee on Oct. 2. Martes had Tommy John surgery on Aug. 15, but the White Sox were aware of his condition at the time the deal was discussed, sources said.

The Astros, according to sources, also pursued another right-handed hitter in the days before the non-waiver deadline, believed to be St. Louis Cardinals outfielder Tommy Pham. But that trade, if it indeed was discussed, also failed to materialize, with Pham going to the Tampa Bay Rays instead.

On July 30, the day the Nationals and Astros struck their preliminary agreement on Harper, the Nats were 52-53, 5 1/2 games back in the NL East. The Nats' front office, frustrated by the club's performance, had informed teams that Harper and other veterans were available. But at 10:30 a.m. on July 31, less than six hours before the non-waiver deadline, Rizzo sent the Washington Post a text saying, "Bryce is not going anywhere. I believe in this team."

A trade of right-handed reliever Brandon Kintzler to the Cubs was the Nats' only move that day. The team initially rallied, winning six of seven games. But it then dropped nine of 13, prompting a flurry of deals — second baseman Daniel Murphy to the Chicago Cubs and first baseman Matt Adams to the St. Louis Cardinals on Aug. 21, then left-hander Gio Gonzalez to the Milwaukee Brewers and righty reliever Ryan Madson to the Los Angeles Dodgers on Aug. 31.

The Nats had a second opportunity to move Harper when the Dodgers claimed him on waivers in August, but turned down an offer of outfielder Yasiel Puig, according to the Los Angeles Times.

Bukauskas, the pitcher the Nats would have acquired from the Astros, was the 15th overall pick of the 2017 draft, but missed most of the first three months of last season due to a slipped disc in his thoracic spine. He pitched at five levels after returning, peaking at Double A and producing a 2.14 ERA in 59 innings.

Stubbs, the Astros' minor-league catcher who was discussed, was an eighth-round pick in 2015 who batted .310 with an .836 OPS in 84 games at Triple A last season.
