



WHITE SOX HEADLINES OF JANUARY 7, 2019

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How much money will it take to get Bryce Harper or Manny Machado to come to the White Sox?

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago | January 4, 2019

How much money will Bryce Harper and Manny Machado get? More pressingly, perhaps, for South Side baseball fans: How much money will it take to get either Harper or Machado to come play for the White Sox?

USA Today's Bob Nightengale reported Thursday that the White Sox have already made an offer to Machado, adding that they're more engaged on him than Harper at the moment, not entirely a surprise considering Machado is expected to make his decision before Harper's. Nightengale also said the White Sox have yet to make Harper a contract offer while staying in "constant contact" with the biggest name on the free-agent market. (But they're perhaps not behind schedule there, as the Philadelphia Phillies are just now sitting down with Harper for the first time after meeting with only his agent, Scott Boras, during the Winter Meetings. The White Sox twice met with Harper in Las Vegas, once early in the offseason and again during the Winter Meetings.)

Nightengale expanded on his initial tweet in a more detailed written piece and had a couple more nuggets to add, chiefly that the White Sox offer is "a serious offer, likely closer to \$200 million than \$300 million, but not enough to sway Machado to board a flight from Miami to Chicago for a press conference."

So what can we infer from that? Nightengale's details followed Wednesday's contradictory reports from ESPN's Jeff Passan and The Score's Bruce Levine, the former saying the White Sox were willing to guarantee a 10-year deal to Harper and the latter saying the White Sox wouldn't go past seven years with either Harper or Machado.

Unless the market for these two 26-year-old superstars has decreased to a point undreamt of when the offseason began, an offer to Machado worth "closer to \$200 million than \$300 million" probably isn't 10 years long. Remember that both of these guys were expected to get record-breaking deals when they started free agency, perhaps joining Giancarlo Stanton as baseball's only \$300 million men or Mike Trout, Zack Greinke, David Price and Miguel Cabrera as guys making \$30 million a year.

But the New York Yankees and Los Angeles Dodgers haven't seemed willing to make a decade-long offer, perhaps because they hold the leverage of these guys wanting to play for them, something Nightengale wrote Thursday, saying that "if Machado had his wish, and the offers were relatively close, friends believe he'd choose the New York Yankees" and that "if Harper had his choice, with the offers being close, friends believe he'd pick the Los Angeles Dodgers."

Those preferences could mean the White Sox and the Philadelphia Phillies, like the South Siders in on both mega free agents, would have to come to the table with huge contract offers. Again, that would be a logical assumption, as neither team can guarantee the immediate World Series contention the Yankees (100 wins last season) and the Dodgers (back-to-back NL pennants) can.

So what would a Yankees offer to Machado look like? And connecting dots that the White Sox offer could look something in the ballpark of seven years (off Levine's suggestion that it's as high as they'll go) and \$210 million (off Nightengale's "closer to \$200 million than \$300 million" info and enough to make Machado a \$30 million-a-year player), one wonders if it's enough to sway Machado from his long-held desire to play in The Bronx. Of course, "closer to \$200 million than \$300 million" could also mean as high as \$249,999,999, and only three contracts in baseball history have been worth more than that. It'd give Machado an average salary of well more than \$35 million, the highest in baseball history.

The White Sox might find themselves "relatively close" to the Dodgers in the competition for Harper, that is if they don't want to go past seven years and if the Dodgers have no interest in a gigantic, decade-long pact. That could give an edge to the Phillies, who have vowed to spend "stupid" this winter. Maybe they end up the only team willing to hand out the richest contract in baseball history. For the White Sox to do that and not go past seven years, the contract would have to pay Harper an average salary of nearly \$47 million.

But Harper, according to Levine, has already received multiple 10-year offers, though there's no indication of which teams made those offers or if those offers have even been made by multiple teams. Remember the Washington Nationals' 10-year, \$300 million offer that Harper reportedly rejected? Apparently that hasn't been their only offer.

#Nationals last offer to Bryce Harper was actually "much more than the \$300m being reported by the media" according to a source. Apparently, The 10-year \$300m offer was actually just the team's 1st offer to Harper.

And with the Nationals still having meetings with Harper, including one as recent as right before Christmas, according to the Washington Post, that team is not at all out of the running. But they'll likely have to give him more than \$300 million. Any team bidding for Harper's services probably will.

So will the White Sox — who have an incredible amount of financial flexibility and pretty much no long-term financial commitments to speak of, a big part of the reason they're in these derbies in the first place — make offers that take them out of the "relatively close" range and create separation between themselves and the teams these players seemingly prefer?

Don't expect a decision anytime soon, at least not both of them. One more line from Nightengale: "All we really know is that this wait could be a doozy. Maybe even into spring training."

Oh boy.

As other suitors up activity, White Sox labeled a 'long shot' for Bryce Harper

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago | January 4, 2019

The Philadelphia Phillies are reportedly setting up a face-to-face meeting with Bryce Harper. The Washington Nationals' owner reportedly sat down with Harper for five hours right before Christmas. And suddenly the White Sox are a "long shot" to win the biggest sweepstakes of the offseason.

That's a nice summation of Jon Heyman's latest check-in on the Harper saga, which doesn't seem to have an end in sight.

Phillies are in process of setting up a face to face meeting with Bryce Harper, as @JSalisburyNBCS 1st reported. Rival Nats are obviously interested in retaining Harper. Chisox seem like a long shot for Harper at moment, but mystery team(s) always possible.

The biggest name on the free-agent market has reportedly received multiple 10-year contract offers. Whether those came from multiple teams and whether the White Sox would even consider such an offer seems to be up for debate. Within a span of a few hours on Wednesday, they were reported to be willing to guarantee a 10-year deal to Harper and unwilling to go beyond seven years for either Harper or fellow mega free agent Manny Machado.

But what should we make of this new idea that the White Sox are a "long shot" in the Harper derby?

On one hand, it makes a bit of sense, especially if the team really isn't willing to offer a contract longer than seven years. The Nationals reportedly had their 10-year, \$300 million offer rejected, and they've since upped that offer, according to The Athletic's Jim Bowden. A seven-year deal wouldn't be as rich as a 10-year contract, one would assume, even if it potentially carried a higher annual salary.

Harper reportedly prefers the Los Angeles Dodgers, who seemingly angled for a run at him with their big trade with the Cincinnati Reds, clearing players from their crowded outfield and money from their books. And the White Sox have always had the challenge of getting players to buy into plans of future success as opposed to joining up with an immediate contender. The Dodgers fit that description, the winners of the last two National League pennants, as do the Nationals, despite their history of underachieving, much of it with Harper on the roster. The New York Yankees, the supposedly preferred team of Machado, could be the preseason World Series favorite, even without Machado on board.

But on the other hand, the White Sox sudden classification as a "long shot" could also be a reaction to the latest activity.

The Phillies might be planning their face-to-face meeting with Harper, but that's only because they didn't sit down with him, just agent Scott Boras, when in Harper's hometown for the Winter Meetings last month. The Nationals are meeting with Harper with hopes of bringing him back, sure, but they had an initial offer rejected and it was owner Mark Lerner who said this just two weeks before the reported five-hour sit down: "I don't really expect him to come back at this point. I think they've decided to move on." A smokescreen? Perhaps.

But is that recent movement by the Phillies and Nationals all that has boxed the White Sox out of the discussion? After all, why would the White Sox — who are reportedly "more engaged" on Machado than Harper, not all that shocking considering Machado is expected to make his decision first — need to do any more selling after supposedly twice meeting with Harper in Las Vegas? There was the early-in-the-offseason meeting there that reportedly featured Hall of Famer Jim Thome, and there was another one that reportedly took place during the Winter Meetings. Maybe Harper didn't express much interest in being the centerpiece of the final phase of the rebuilding process. Or maybe he liked the idea and has all the information he needs from the South Siders at the moment.

It's not ridiculous to speculate that the White Sox might have done all their work on the Harper front already and that the Phillies, known to be behind schedule a bit, and Nationals, who've already been rejected at least once, are playing catch-up.

But, as we've been reminded of every few hours this offseason, there's a lot of moving parts in both the Harper and Machado sagas. With a new report thrown on top of the last one on a daily basis, it's hard to say that anyone besides Harper, Machado, Boras, Machado's agent Dan Lozano and the teams involved know what's going on.

In other words, stay tuned.

Using the Yonder Alonso trade to understand DRC+, and vice versa

By James Fegan / The Athletic | January 4, 2019

With all due respect to Cliff Corcoran and his commendable efforts to look into how and why new advanced metrics become popular and others do not, there's one factor that can jumpstart popularity that he did not mention: when stats tell us what we want to hear.

For the most part, Baseball Prospectus' new hitting metric — Deserved Runs Created (presented as DRC+) — does not do a lot of that when assessing the last year of White Sox offense. Presented similarly to wRC+ and OPS+, where a player with a 100 DRC+ is a league average hitter, 110 is 10 percent better than average and 90 is 10 percent worse, DRC+ posits that the 2018 Sox had two above-average hitters who played regularly, and that they traded one of them to Seattle at the end of November.

It's disappointing — since wRC+ presented Daniel Palka and Matt Davidson as above-average and Yoán Moncada as fairly close, and DRC+ disagrees — but not surprising when understanding what DRC+ values. It presents itself as a more reliable, stable and predictive metric for measuring offense than others because it places more emphasis on stable outcomes like strikeouts and walks. Relatedly, the White Sox had the highest strikeout rate in baseball last season and avoided the worst walk rate by a hundredth of a percentage point, so even some of their offensive success stories look hard to duplicate without substantial improvement. Not only does DRC+ reflect that, but indicates they're not just aesthetic flaws, but structural issues that must be improved for this offense to step forward.

Enter Yonder Alonso.

The 31-year-old first baseman, coming off a season with a .250/.317/.421 batting line (a below-average 97 wRC+), is hardly the cure to all the White Sox's offensive ills. But Alonso's relative strengths are a counterbalance to what the this team's offense has lacked.

"Yonder's offensive profile certainly was part of his appeal," Rick Hahn in an email. "The 2018 club certainly had its issues (with) plate discipline and putting the ball in play, and as we transition to an offense that is stronger in both of those categories, having a veteran around who not only is stronger in those areas but a hard worker and a positive influence on young players made a great deal of sense for where we are as a club."

Obviously the desired scenario for the Sox is that Alonso reverts back to his 2017 form, when he hit .266/.365/.501 (133 wRC+) and was an All-Star. But Alonso's 8.9 percent walk rate and 21.4 strikeout rate in 2018 (both slightly better than average) coupled with 20-plus home run power provides a stable base for a productive hitter, which is reflected in a 106 DRC+ — a slightly above-average mark in what was seen as a down year.

Jonathan Judge, one of the primary architects of DRC+, said in an email that "DRC+ finds him below average in doubles and triples production, but above average in his SO/walks run contributions, his singles contributions, and solidly above average in his home run contributions. Whether that combo is sufficient to justify the position he plays is another question."

The White Sox certainly decided it justified replacing what they had in-house, having already committed to a timeshare between Alonso and José Abreu (2018's other above-average White Sox hitter per DRC+) at first base and designated hitter, which would displace the Palka-Davidson platoon. Davidson was non-tendered rather than given the multi-million raise in arbitration he would be due as a Super Two, and Palka will be pushed back to the outfield to find playing time.

On the surface, it was an odd move, since the Sox had to give up prospect Alex Call and pay Alonso's \$8 million salary to displace a pair that bashed 47 home runs, and both outperformed Alonso by wRC+ in 2018 (Palka 109, and Davidson 104). But that duo also struck out in a combined 33.6 percent of their plate appearances, making them unreliable for getting on base even with Davidson's improved walk rate. Without the speed to rack up extra-base hits at a high rate or the contact to get singles, their one avenue for providing above-average production came through the home run ball. Palka (99 DRC+) was more electrifying than Davidson (94 DRC+) in that regard and has the benefit of being able to play the outfield, but they're close enough to wonder what would happen if their salary situations were switched. They're also

both far enough behind Alonso where the deal makes a lot more sense through DRC+, if it still stops short of thrilling.

A bullish view of Palka throughout the 2018 season would cite his high average exit velocity, which was the 16th-highest in baseball last year. Because the quality of his contact was so high, it would suggest he could produce more than is typically expected from a hitter who doesn't take many walks and strikes out a lot. While Judge says exit velocity is not factored into DRC+'s expansive mixed modeling — which factors in quality of competition and overhauls how ballpark factors are weighed — he says it has not been an issue in the accuracy of the metric. In this sense, DRC+ already effectively acknowledges Palka's propensity for hitting the ball hard by giving him credit for not creating outs on balls in play (which would come from weak contact) and heavily factoring in his home run pop.

“By virtue of putting so few balls in play, (Palka) actually gains back a lot of the run value he otherwise would be giving up through the strikeouts, and the home runs are sufficiently valuable that it offsets a lot of the other negatives in the other types of hits he does not get,” Judge said. “I think focusing on exit velocity in and of itself is a rather limited view. The question is the tradeoff between his events and whether it is a net positive or negative. DRC+ sees it as a fairly even trade; the problem with the low OBP, of course, is that it is going to be a very volatile profile with a lot of non-production in between the bombs.”

Like Davidson, Palka walked more in the minors than he did in his major league debut, so a plate discipline jump in Year 2 is possible, and he clearly has more ability to actualize his power in games than initial scouting reports suggested. While DRC+ has graded out as more predictive than wRC+ or OPS+, Judge would still recommend looking at actual projections as the best way to get a view of what a player will do next year. Fittingly, most projections would predict Moncada will improve next year due to his minor league dominance, even if his DRC+ (87) suggests that his massive strikeout rate means he was worse in 2018 than his already middling triple slash numbers would suggest.

Both of them seemingly have a longer path to becoming productive members of the lineup than Alonso, whose stable plate discipline gave him as high of a DRC+ as any returning member of the Sox, albeit still not one that makes it easy to see him as a middle-of-the-order presence on a contending team. Manny Machado's 143 DRC+ is probably easier to envision batting third in a playoff game.