



SF Giants Press Clips Sunday, March 11, 2018

San Francisco Chronicle

Giants struck early on Evan Longoria, but Mike Moustakas wound up being cheaper John Shea

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — It's tough to feel sorry for a guy making *only* \$6.5 million, but **Mike Moustakas** got burned by baseball's curious economic system and had to settle for the relatively low salary despite being worth far more.

Or maybe he burned himself.

The Giants preferred not to go the free-agent route for a third baseman and traded for **Evan Longoria** on Dec. 20, back when it was believed Moustakas would get far more than \$6.5 million, for which the Royals re-signed him last week.

Longoria will make \$13.5 million this year and is due \$86 million through 2022, some of which the Rays are paying.

Moustakas, 29, is younger and had a far better 2017 season, hitting .272 with 38 homers, a .314 on-base percentage and .521 slugging percentage. Longoria, 32, hit .261 with 20 homers and a slash line of .261/.313/.424.

What does it mean? It means free agency no longer is the desirable wonderland it once was. MLB Trade Rumors predicts free-agent contracts and suggested Moustakas would get a five-

year, \$85 million deal. It also predicted \$100 million over four years for **Jake Arrieta**, who's still out of work.

Those players have something in common, and not just that their agent is **Scott Boras**. Both were given qualifying offers by their 2017 teams and, like most everyone who receives them, rejected them.

Because draft-pick compensation accompanies players receiving qualifying offers, their value on the open market decreases, which is unfair to the player who earned the privileges of free agency and then gets punished.

It was a major blunder by the players' union to permit the qualifying-offer stipulations in the collective bargaining agreement, and it'll certainly be addressed in talks for the next contract, along with the luxury tax threshold that has become a virtual salary cap. But the labor deal runs through the 2021 season.

The Giants were far less interested in free agents who received qualifying offers because they didn't want to lose any draft picks, especially because they'll be selecting so high in every round. It was easy to cross Moustakas off their list.

By comparison, **J.D. Martinez** (another Boras client and the only free agent with more homers than Moustakas) was not eligible to receive a qualifying offer because he was traded during last season, and he got a five-year, \$110 million contract from the Red Sox.

It's no wonder the Giants had interest in Martinez but not Moustakas, even though either could have filled a big hole.

Moustakas could have accepted the \$17.4 million qualifying offer. He could have looked more seriously at multiyear offers early in the offseason, if there were any. But it's hard to blame the player or agent when historically a player of his type is offered a much larger contract.

The good news for Moustakas is he can't be given a qualifying offer after this season, so he can be a free agent again with no strings attached. But he'll be a year older with no promise the free-agent market would better benefit him.

Lincecum the reliever: One of the reasons **Tim Lincecum** is a better fit with the Rangers than Dodgers — beyond his sentiments that wearing Dodger blue would be “betraying my heart” — is the opportunity in the Texas bullpen.

The Rangers posted the third-worst ERA in the majors last season, posted the second-fewest saves and don’t have a legitimate closer. Not that Lincecum will have that role, but there are jobs for the taking.

“I pitched out of the bullpen a number of times in my life so it’s nothing new to me, and I obviously did it at the major-league level,” said Lincecum, whose 2012 Giants wouldn’t have won the World Series without his dynamic relief work.

Lincecum concluded relieving was preferred to starting because “the more often I threw, the better off it was, especially the last six months.” He threw off a bullpen mound Saturday for the second time as a Ranger and will throw back-to-back days Tuesday and Wednesday before it’s determined when he’ll get into his first spring training game.

What about closing? The Rangers have several options, including **Alex Claudio** and **Matt Bush**, but no one clear cut.

“I feel I could do that,” Lincecum said. “I did it in the Cape (Cod League) and in college levels. It’s different, but I think I could tap into that mentality.”

Moore on Righetti: After a bad year for the Giants’ pitching staff — no one was quite as bad as **Matt Moore**, who went 6-15 with a 5.52 ERA — pitching coach **Dave Righetti** lost his job and was replaced by **Curt Young**.

“I don’t know if it’s surprising, right?” said Moore, now a Ranger. “Which area did we stink in last year? A lot of areas. But pitching was one I dragged us down. (**Madison**) **Bumgarner** being hurt, guys not having the years we were expecting to have.

“Someone’s got to roll. I hated to see that happen because I do feel responsible for certain things like that, and knowing that had I been better, that might not have been the case. I wish him the best of luck. Hopefully, we’ll see him again.”

Double take: Adjusting to A’s third base coach **Matt Williams** in green and gold and Young in

orange and black will take a while. Williams spent 10 seasons in a Giants uniform but not nearly as long as Young spent in an A's uniform.

That would be 23 years, which is tops on the Oakland charts and includes time as a pitcher and pitching coach. It's far longer than runners-up **Dave Duncan**, **Mike Gallego** and **Dave McKay**, each with a combined 15 years.

Rickey Henderson is next with 14, tied with **Tony La Russa**.

San Francisco Chronicle
Giants' Jeff Samardzija experimenting with new pitches
Henry Schulman

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — **Jeff Samardzija** is turning Japanese, at least in pitch repertoire, in his never-ending quest to force hitters off his fastball.

Japanese pitchers usually lack major-league velocity, so they compensate with a kitchen-sink approach featuring all manner of pitches and speeds.

Samardzija already employs three fastballs — four-seamer, two-seamer, cutter — a curveball, slider and split-finger change.

This spring, Samardzija is trying a new grip on his curveball to give it more bite and change the spin to make it harder to recognize. He also is toying with a straight change to complement the splitter. A straight change is easier to throw for strikes, so Samardzija can employ it early in the count. The dirt-seeking splitter is more of an out pitch.

Asked to tally how many pitch variations he actually might have in his third season with the Giants, he said, "With grips and things like that, it's really unlimited on the way you feel. There's eight, nine, 10 different ways you can do things. Work them all in there. It's fun."

Samardzija can still bring 95 mph and took a huge leap in 2017 by raising his strikeouts while significantly curtailing walks. But he still allowed 30 homers in 32 starts and his ERA rose by more than half a point over 2016. So, he clearly needs a bigger edge.

“People are sitting fastball on me,” he said. “For me to have another pitch to change speeds and make the fastball a little more effective is going to be huge for us, and to get some cheap outs for us along the way and not to strike out so many guys is the name of the game, especially if they’re going to keep our pitch counts down.”

The Shark allowed three homers in one inning against the Mariners on Friday and has a 9.82 ERA in three spring starts, some of that attributable to his experimentation.

All that is fine with manager **Bruce Bochy**, who does not care about results until the final spring games and said, “I want these guys working on something to make them better players or pitchers.”

Longoria out: **Evan Longoria** said he has had plantar fasciitis in his left foot but is not sure if that is connected to soreness he has in the back of his left ankle that will sideline him for a few more days.

Longoria and the staff do not consider the current injury serious. Bochy said the new third baseman was down about it Saturday morning but felt better after treatment. Longoria said he had no diagnostics.

“It’s nothing to be nervous about,” Longoria said. “They’re pretty confident it’s nothing structural. It just flared up when I was working out. ... When I feel ready to play, I’ll play.”

Giants 11, Angels 7 (home)

Giants 9, Angels 8 (road)

Two top Giants starting prospects had rough days. **Andrew Suarez** started the home game and allowed five runs in four innings, including a three-run **Luis Valbuena** homer. Suarez pitched two shutout innings in his first appearance. At Tempe, **Tyler Beede** retired seven of his first eight hitters before allowing seven straight singles in a six-run inning. ... **Brandon Belt** homered for the second consecutive game in Scottsdale. He also hit an RBI double the other way. ... **Mac Williamson**, who is hitting .424 after reworking his swing, matched **Mike Trout** with a homer over the batter’s eye in Tempe. Williamson also tripled and singled.

Quotable: "It's not uncommon when you have any kind of procedure. It's spring training. He's got another five starts or so to overcome that. I saw the comments. That's human nature. I've watched him. The stuff is great. I've asked him, and he said he's feeling great. That's what I go by."

— Manager **Bruce Bochy**, responding to closer **Mark Melancon's** comments Wednesday on discomfort in his surgically repaired right arm.

Sunday's game: Giants vs. Padres, at Scottsdale, 3:05 p.m. TV: **Channel: 11** Radio: 680

MLB.com

Williamson crushing it in bid for roster spot
Chris Haft

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. -- Competition brings out the best in most athletes, which seems to be the case for **Mac Williamson** this spring.

Obscured by offseason acquisitions **Andrew McCutchen** and **Austin Jackson** and by prospects such as **Chris Shaw**, Williamson was widely considered an afterthought in the Giants' outfield as they opened Spring Training camp last month.

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Nobody's overlooking Williamson now.

Williamson, who spent portions of the previous three seasons with the Giants, went 3-for-4 in their 9-8 split-squad victory over the Angels. He highlighted his output with a prodigious home run over the center-field batter's eye at Tempe Diablo Stadium. Williamson lifted his batting average to .424, which is garnished by a cartoonish 1.394 OPS.

Giants manager Bruce Bochy acknowledged that Williamson might have become "a little stagnant" after his unsuccessful attempts to establish himself with San Francisco. Williamson escaped the doldrums by working diligently on his hitting and lowering his hands, which helped him uncork his considerable physical strength.

• **Giants Spring Training info**

"It's great to see him getting some results," Bochy said.

Melancon gives it another try

Giants closer **Mark Melancon** is slated to pitch in Sunday's exhibition against San Diego. It'll be Melancon's first appearance since last Wednesday, when he said that his surgically repaired throwing arm didn't quite feel right.

Bochy said Melancon's discomfort was "not uncommon," adding that the bullpen ace will make at least five more exhibition appearances, with the implication being that he'll feel better after that stretch.

Camp battle

Left-hander **Andrew Suarez** and right-hander **Tyler Beede** struggled in their respective starting efforts in the split-squad games against the Angels. Both **prospects** conceivably lost ground in their attempts to secure a spot in the Giants' starting rotation.

Suarez yielded five runs and five hits in four innings in Scottsdale, though he drew praise from Bochy by remaining focused enough to pitch a scoreless fourth inning. Suarez owns a 9.00 ERA.

In Tempe, Beede blanked the Angels for two innings but retired just one batter in the third inning before departing. He surrendered six runs on eight hits as his ERA climbed to 12.27.

Up next

Left-hander **Ty Blach**, a leading candidate for one of the starting rotation's two apparent openings, will face the Padres at Scottsdale Stadium in a 3:05 p.m. PT encounter Sunday (watch live on **MLB.TV**). San Diego will counter with right-hander **Luis Perdomo**.

MLB.com

Giants seek new attitude from baserunners

Chris Haft

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. -- Baserunning was not among the Giants' list of flaws in 2017. However, the scoreboard functions as the universal traffic signal for all baserunners, and since the scoreboard typically treated the Giants harshly last year, it follows that the basepaths can lead San Francisco not just toward home plate but also toward improvement.

Third-base coach Ron Wotus and first-base coach Jose Alguacil possess the responsibility of refining the team's baserunning skills. Both believe that the Giants can consistently put their best feet forward this year.

View Full Game Coverage

"Baserunning is an attitude," Wotus said Saturday before the Giants put 19 runners on base in an 11-7 split-squad victory over the Angels. The Giants also won the other game, 9-8, in Tempe. "The guys are listening, and they want to win. Anytime you have a group that wants to win, they understand how important the baserunning is.

"We want them to be in the moment, and the scoreboard dictates that."

Said Alguacil: "When things go the way they did last year, everybody started to play a little more timid. It's not about technique. But there's some stuff we can polish."

• Giants Spring Training info

The Giants hope to strike a better balance between aggressive and careful baserunning. That includes reacting to pitches in the dirt and advancing from first base to third or from second to home.

San Francisco performed adequately enough in these and similar situations last year to tie Washington for 10th in baseball-reference.com's Extra Bases Taken category. The Giants' 41 percent success rate in this category exceeded the National League average of 40 percent.

San Francisco also was competent at avoiding Outs on Bases, which baseball-reference.com defines as runners being put out on plays such as advancing on a fly ball, attempting to reach another base on a hit, being doubled off on a line drive, or attempting to advance on a wild pitch or passed ball. San Francisco's 51 outs on the bases fell below the MLB average of 53.

The Giants also want to incorporate basestealing more often. They ranked 10th in the NL with 76 steals last year. The offseason acquisition of nimble outfielders **Andrew McCutchen** and **Austin Jackson**, who have 171 and 111 career thefts, respectively, should help.

"Athleticism helps and speed helps," Wotus said. "But you don't have to be fast to be good at baserunning. A good example is **Buster Posey**. A ball in the dirt, he advances. A base hit, he knows where the outfield is playing and gets good reads. Those are the things we want to improve on, whether we're fast or slow, because we have to score from second base on base hits."

The Athletic

Thrill seeking: With a huge draft opportunity in June, can the Giants hope to unearth another Will Clark?

Andrew Baggarly

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. – Giants scouting director John Barr is holding the second overall pick in the MLB Draft this June. It will be the organization's highest selection since 1985, when then-general manager Al Rosen took a pure, left-handed hitting first baseman with a feisty spirit and screeching drawl out of Mississippi State.

Before Will Clark changed the direction of a franchise, he created a lasting memory for a rookie scout.

Barr won't forget the day 33 years ago when he climbed a 15-foot fence in Starkville, Miss., just so he wouldn't miss watching Clark take swings in the batting cage.

The New York Mets had dispatched Barr to Dudy Noble Field to scout the NCAA South Regional — a bracket that included a legendary Mississippi State team (Clark, Rafael Palmeiro, Jeff Brantley, Bobby Thigpen) as well as a Michigan roster that included Barry Larkin and Chris Sabo.

And, well, let's turn to Barr for the story:

"It was my first year of scouting and here I am watching all these players who are going to be really high picks," Barr said. "And in between games of the Regionals, on comes the announcement telling you to clear the stands. Well, I was a rookie scout so I thought, 'OK,' and I start to walk out because I've got a ticket in my hand for the next game. All the veteran scouts had stayed in the stadium because they knew the ushers, and the ushers let them stay. Did I mention that I was a rookie scout?"

"As I walk out, I look and the line goes from all the way behind home plate down the right field line and around the corner. I'm thinking, 'Holy cow, this is going to take forever. I'm going to miss BP.' So I went around the third base side and hopped up and climbed over the fence and bounced down. I just thought, 'They sent me here to cover this. I am not going not miss batting practice.'

"So here we are 30-some years later, and I'd still hop a fence to go see a kid. I just wouldn't do it as easily."

Barr has learned a few scouting tricks — and the names of dozens of ushers — in his three-decade scouting career. He will rely on all of them, along with his trusted staff of area scouts and crosscheckers, as he sharpens his list and settles on a pick that will be the Giants' most important in a decade.

Barr didn't miss when he held the fifth overall choice in his very first draft as the Giants scouting director in 2008. He took Buster Posey.

Is there another franchise anchor out there in this talent pool?

In some years, Barr already might know the answer. But as he stood on the concourse at Scottsdale Stadium on Saturday, checking in briefly with the home office before heading out to the next showcase or college game, he cannot point to a Bryce Harper or Stephen Strasburg or Kris Bryant — players who so obviously separated themselves long before they were chosen.

These next three months, then, will be critical — for the top players as well as those who hold the top choices.

“Do I think there is depth in this draft? Absolutely,” Barr said. “I think there’s depth in this draft. I think the guys up top right now are trying to sort themselves out and there are a lot of candidates that could fit into those spots. There’s no clear-cut ones right now. Some kids haven’t even started their schedule yet. There’s a lot of work to be done.”

Barr was scouting with Baltimore in 1989 when the Orioles selected college pitcher Ben McDonald with the first overall pick. He was back with the Mets as a cross-checker in 1994 when college pitcher Paul Wilson was the industry consensus with the No. 1 choice.

Neither pitcher ended up making a tremendous impact at the major league level, which brings us to the first bit of essential draft wisdom: no matter how high you choose, there is no such thing as a safe pick.

The next bit of essential wisdom: you don’t base your selection on addressing an immediate need on the major league roster.

But that wasn’t necessarily the thought process 33 years ago when the Giants took Clark with the second overall pick.

“They needed a first baseman ever since Jack Clark left, and I was told that’s why the Giants drafted me,” said Will Clark, who is in spring training as a special instructor this week. “And you know, I was hoping I’d be picked by the Giants because I had seen their scouts a lot — I mean, a lot — and I sort of knew the spot was open at first base. I knew I’d have the opportunity to move.”

The 1985 draft was unique because it contained one of the most celebrated groups of college players in history. And because so many of them played together on the 1984 U.S. Olympic team, they talked to one another and shared information. Clark knew before the draft that the Milwaukee Brewers, who held the first overall pick, would take catcher B.J. Surhoff because the parties had worked out a bonus arrangement in advance.

“Then it was myself and Barry Larkin and Bobby Witt — all Olympic teammates from ’84,” Clark said. “It was just a question of who was going to draft you. It was the Giants with the second pick, then the Rangers and Reds. And that’s how it fell.”

The Rangers used the No. 3 pick on Witt, who pitched parts of 16 seasons in the big leagues. Cincinnati did even better with Larkin, a future Hall of Famer who played his entire career in a Reds uniform. The Pirates still had a pretty good name to take, too — Barry Bonds — at sixth overall.

But the Giants and Rosen never had reason to regret taking Clark, who arrived fully equipped with both the skills to succeed at the big league level and the fearless personality to handle such a rapid rise.

Everyone knows that Clark went to camp in 1986 as a non-roster player, wrested the Opening Day starting job at first base and made that unforgettable debut in the Astrodome with a home run against Nolan Ryan in his very first major league at-bat. It was a flashpoint moment for an organization that would ascend on a wave of homegrown talent.

The lesser known part of the story: Clark homered in his first minor league at-bat, too.

“After the Giants drafted me, I told Al Rosen, ‘Look, I want to be up front about this: I’m not going to hold out. I want to play baseball. That’s what I am,’” Clark said. “It took two weeks, maybe, they offered and we countered, and that was that. And I flew out to San Francisco, did the press conference and stuff, and I literally drove to (Class A) Fresno that night, played that night and hit two homers.

“I hit a homer in my first minor league at-bat, too.”

Clark played 65 games with Fresno and then the Giants sent him to the Arizona Fall League, where he was winning the triple crown when they sent him home halfway through. They had seen enough. In so many minds, he already won the first base job in 1986.

“It probably didn’t sink in until that next offseason,” Clark said. “It’s like, ‘Wow, all that happened really quick.’”

It would be pure elation if the Giants could draft a player this June who could make the same kind of rapid rise and immediate impact. That’s especially true for an organization that has so much money tied up in future salary commitments to players already in their 30s, including \$125 million to eight players in 2020. While the front office believes their core will bounce back this season, it would appear that tough times are ahead unless the franchise receives significant inputs from the farm system.

But Barr explained why he cannot use that context to winnow his list.

“The depth of the (1985) draft from a college standpoint was really strong, where this one is heavy into high school kids,” Barr said. “It’s a different time, it’s a different age. You cannot sit there and say, ‘OK, who can get there quickly and who can help us? You’re limiting yourself if you do that. If it works out that way, great.

“But you still have to do all your work. You’re still looking at tools, you’re still looking at makeup, you’re looking at how a guy handles himself. You’re looking at whether or not he can be a difference maker when he does get to the big leagues, whenever that may be.”

There’s little doubt that makeup counted for Clark. His confident cackle might have contributed nearly as much to the Giants’ turnaround as his brilliance from the left-handed batter’s box. The Louisiana native still keeps in touch with the Giants area scout who signed him, Ken “Squeaky” Parker, who is retired and home bound with health problems. Clark will call him up from time to time just to shoot the breeze.

Parker once told Clark that his scouting reports included “not only the stuff you did in the field, but we heard about this in the clubhouse or we heard about that in the locker room, or how much of a leader you were.”

“It was a really nice compliment,” Clark said. “That’s one of the things you really don’t think about in the draft. You think about running and catching, hitting and throwing. You don’t think that they’re looking at how you deal with people and if you’re someone who is always pumping your teammates up.

“So now when I go around and talk to the young kids in the minor leagues, that’s one of my messages: Hey, you’ve got to be a good teammate, too.”

Getting a read on a player’s makeup can be more challenging than ascertaining his fastball velocity or his pop time or how his bat will play against major league pitching. Baseball is the only sport that holds its draft during the end of the college season, and teams have limited access.

“But it’s important information to have, because the quality of the person and the makeup is what allows a player to develop the tools into skills,” Barr said. “If he doesn’t have the work ethic, then he doesn’t become the player you hope he’ll become.”

Although Clark hasn’t been asked to help much in terms of amateur scouting as part of his wide-ranging duties, don’t be surprised if the Giants’ last No. 2 overall pick contributes his voice before the club makes its next No. 2 overall pick.

More than anyone, Clark understands the pressure that comes with being selected so high, as well as the persona it takes to thrive.

“They’re going to have a board and the board will have a bazillion names on it,” Clark said. “How they go about it, I don’t know. As the draft approaches, I’ll probably know a little bit better.

“It’s that intangible, you know? It takes a special person to run out there for 162 games. It’s not easy, not at all. And to deal with injuries and playing through pain, it’s tough and you need special people to do that.”

For the next three months, Barr and his scouts will be watching for that player to rise up. They’ll beat the bushes, turn over rocks — and yes, even scale a fence if necessary.

— Mac Williamson’s eye-opening spring continued Saturday when he went 3 for 4 and cleared

the batter's eye at Tempe Diablo Stadium with a home run in the road split squad's 9-8 victory over the Angels.

Earlier in the game, the Angels' Mike Trout hit one over the batter's eye off of Joan Gregorio and told reporters he'd never hit a baseball there before.

Williamson is batting .424 with a 1.394 OPS while incorporating a new hitting style patterned after the Dodgers' Justin Turner. He finished a double short of the cycle and bench coach Hensley Meulens, who managed the road squad, elected to send up a pinch hitter for Williamson's last at-bat.

— Hunter Pence struck out three times but also contributed an RBI hit. He's hitting .105 this spring.

— Tyler Beede tossed two scoreless innings but allowed seven consecutive hits in a six-run third inning in which he retired just one batter. On the plus side, Josh Osich continued his dominant spring by striking out three in his scoreless inning.

— The Giants' home split-squad rallied for five runs in the eighth inning to take an 11-7 victory over the Angels at Scottsdale Stadium, but the early offense might have been a more encouraging sight for manager Bruce Bochy.

His left-handed top of the lineup with Joe Panik and Brandon Belt continues to look like a potential fit against right-handed starters. Panik singled, stole a base, advanced on a ground out and scored on a wild pitch. Belt cranked his second homer of the spring and also lined a double to left field.

Bochy said Belt's swing looks shorter and "not as loopy" this spring. The first baseman is hitting .440.

Left-hander Andrew Suarez didn't have great command while allowing five runs in the start, but Hunter Strickland continued to place his fastball where he wanted in another scoreless inning.

— Third baseman Evan Longoria will be out a few more days with a sore left foot. Bochy said Longoria was discouraged when he arrived at the ballpark Saturday but his outlook brightened after treatment. The soreness is not in his Achilles tendon, but the area of the ankle near the heel.

— Right-hander Mark Melancon remains scheduled for his second Cactus League appearance on Sunday, and Bochy said he wasn't concerned after reading the closer's rather apprehensive comments following his debut last week.

"That's not uncommon when you have any procedure done," Bochy said of Melancon, who had surgery in September to alleviate pressure in a forearm muscle near the elbow. "He'll get another five or so (outings) to overcome that. He looked good when I watched him. The stuff was good. He says he's feeling good. So that's what I go on."

— Bochy raved about a relay from center fielder Steven Duggar to Panik that resulted in an out when an Angels player tried to stretch a double.

“I take as much pride in that — we all should take as much pride in that — as we do in a home run,” Bochy said. “That’s what we spend time working on here. It was perfectly done.”

NBCsportsbayarea.com

Panik, Belt continue to look like answers at top of Giants’ lineup

Alex Pavlovic

SCOTTSDALE — Bruce Bochy continues to keep his cards close when asked about his new lineup plans, but a couple of longtime Giants look like they’re trying to force his hand.

Joe Panik and Brandon Belt once again teamed up together atop the lineup, and once again it looked like a natural fit for a team that appears poised to have Andrew McCutchen, Buster Posey and Evan Longoria lined up in the heart of the order.

Panik led off the game against the Angels with a single and swiped second on a busted hit-and-run. He went to third on a grounder to the right side and scored on a wild pitch. Speed is not Panik’s game, but he’s a smart baserunner, and so much of what he does well matches up with the leadoff spot.

Panik had a .347 on-base percentage last season and was the hardest player in the majors to strike out. He’s equally adept at facing lefties and righties, too. Panik hit .290 with a .349 OBP against left-handed pitchers last year and .287 with a .347 OBP against right-handed pitchers.

“I definitely have gotten more comfortable this spring batting leadoff,” Panik said. “The approach is the same, but you are the guy setting the tone. So far I’ve enjoyed it. For me, hitting leadoff, I always think about keeping the same approach, but the more and more I do it, I can definitely see myself in that role.”

Bochy said earlier this week that Panik could remain near the top of the lineup against lefties, even if Austin Jackson — a southpaw crusher — is batting leadoff, and that seems the best option. Hunter Pence has been considered as an option to be the No. 2 hitter, but he’s been searching at the plate all spring, and is batting just .105.

The Giants are trying to embrace more advanced statistics with a new staff, and the new way of thinking for many teams is that your best all-around hitter should bat second. Belt, on many nights, qualifies, at least against right-handed pitching. He had a .375 on-base percentage and slugged .504 against right-handers last season.

In the third inning Saturday, Belt hit a homer that disappeared onto the back field at Scottsdale Stadium. The blast was his second in two games. In the fourth, Panik drew a two-out walk and Belt followed with a hard double down the left field line.

“He smoked that,” Bochy said. “That loop (in his swing) wasn’t as big. It was shorter. It wasn’t quite as loopy. He’s got to feel good about his day today.”

The Giants have two more weeks to nail down their final plans, but it seems pretty clear at this point that they’ll leave the desert having found a pretty good solution atop the lineup.

--- Evan Longoria was out of the lineup for a second straight day because of left ankle/heel tightness. He said the training staff is confident that there are no structural issues. “It just flared up out there during a workout,” Longoria said. It’ll be at least a couple more days before he returns.

--- The Giants played split-squads against the Angels and a couple of young starters had a rough go of it. Over in Tempe, Tyler Beede gave up six runs on eight hits in 2 1/3 innings. Beede was sharp early but was knocked out by a barrage of singles. At Scottsdale Stadium, Andrew Suarez was charged with five earned in four innings.

--- Steven Duggar is having a solid spring at the plate, but it’s in center where he’s really opening eyes. Duggar chased down a ball to the right-center wall early in the game and made a strong throw to Panik, who made an equally strong throw to third to cut down a would-be triple. Panik said Duggar’s throw hit him in the perfect spot, allowing him to spin and throw in one motion.

“We all should take as much pride in that as a home run,” Bochy said. “That was perfectly done.”

I’ll say this: It’s an outfield play the Giants would not have made last year. Or the year before. Or the year before that ...

NBCsportsbayarea.com

Evan Longoria calls Giants’ lineup ‘as deep as any’ in MLB

Dalton Johnson

The Giants ranked 29th in runs scored, 30th in home runs, 23rd in batting average, 29th in on-base percentage, and 30th in slugging percentage in 2017. Bad is one word for their offense last season. There are plenty more that can't be typed here.

It's no secret the front office knew those numbers after cringing at the product on the field. And they went out and added two big names who have combined for eight All-Star appearances and one MVP.

"Our lineup is as deep as any right now," Evan Longoria **said Friday on MLB Network Radio.** "Lot of guys who know how to hit, have been around, know how to prepare. And I think

it makes my job a lot easier."

San Francisco hopes its stagnant offense is a thing of the past and it's clear Longoria believes that to be true. Longoria (20) and Andrew McCutchen (28), who they also acquired in a trade with the Pirates, add 48 home runs to a line in a desperate need of a power boost. Both those players are expected to be somewhere in the middle of Bruce Bochy's lineup.

"Wherever I insert into the lineup I don't think it matters," Longoria says. "I think we have a really good balance of right handers and left handers. The ability to run the bases. The ability to hit the ball out of the ballpark."

Early on in the spring, the revamped offense has been producing. Going into Saturday's schedule, where the Giants have two games, they are leading the Cactus League with a .302 batting average. The Giants are also second in home runs (29), second in runs (107), and first in OPS (.907).

"I think there's a ton of pluses we've been able to put together this spring," Longoria said.

The veteran third baseman has played in six games this spring, batting .286 with one home run, one double and three RBI.

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The Gabe Kapler outfield shift: Is Phillies' experiment revolutionary or ridiculous? David Schoenfield

In a spring training game on Feb. 27, Tommy Joseph started in left field for the Phillies. It was strange enough to see the stout first baseman in the outfield, but then something even stranger happened. In the top of the second inning, the Phillies made a pitching change. Tigers farmhand Victor Reyes, a switch-hitter, was due up and would be hitting from the left side. Joseph jogged over to right field and Collin Cowgill moved from right to left field. After Reyes struck out, the two outfielders again exchanged positions.

One of the compelling aspects of baseball is how the game continues to evolve. Some changes are obvious even to the untrained eye, like the home run explosion of the past couple of seasons or the infield shifting that began earlier this decade. Some changes are more subtle. For example, take the pitchout. Did you know the pitchout is essentially dead? Last season, National League teams threw just 59 pitchouts. The Nationals under Dusty Baker had three. Back in 1996 when he was managing the Giants, Baker called 96 pitchouts. Nobody throws pitchouts anymore. Why waste a pitch?

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So maybe what we'll call the Gabe Kapler outfield shift will be the beginning of a revolution. In the specific case of Joseph, even if he makes the Phillies' roster, it's hard to envision a scenario in which he ends up in the outfield, although it's possible the Phillies will also consider the shift with Rhys Hoskins, a converted first baseman with little experience in left field.

As Matt Gelb outlined in the *The Athletic*, the specific maneuver for Reyes was discussed before the game. The Phillies' spray charts indicated Reyes was more likely to hit the ball to left field in the air, so they moved their better defensive outfielder there. From Gelb's piece:

"I think it'll happen a lot," Cowgill said. "I think it's great. I love it."

The Phillies have used the Grapefruit League games to implement their aggressive outfield shifting for every batter, based on spray charts. But they will go beyond that, flipping players across the field when the numbers tell them it is wisest.

That is why Hoskins, who will move from first base to left field this season, has begun some light work in right field. The Phillies hope Hoskins can be a passable defender in left field. But they know he lacks range and instincts because it is a new position for him. He will be their worst outfield defender. So Hoskins expects some mid-inning position changes when the data is clear.

"I think if it goes the way they're hoping, I don't see why not," Hoskins said. "Yeah. If we have a chance to get more outs in a big situation, I don't see why not."

So there appears to be some buy-in from Phillies players, at least for now, although I haven't seen evidence of them trying it again so far this spring. The bigger question: Is it worth it?

Part of the complexity of making this move is that while most ground balls are pulled, making the infield shift a more obvious decision, balls to the outfield are sprayed more equally. Here are the 2017 breakdowns for fly balls and outfield line drives from ESPN Stats & Information:

Left-handed hitters

- Left field: 37.1 percent
- Center field: 34.5 percent
- Right field: 28.4 percent
- Far left: 22.5 percent

- Far right: 16.4 percent

Right-handed hitters

- Left field: 29.7
- Center field: 34.8
- Right field: 35.5
- Far left: 17.9
- Far right: 21.4

For the generic hitter, there is no reason to make a change. Obviously, individual hitters have more extreme tendencies. Even then, only five qualified regulars last year hit at least 50 percent of their fly balls and outfield line drives to the opposite field -- Joe Mauer, DJ LeMahieu, David Freese, Eric Hosmer and Christian Yelich. Freese pulled just 3.4 percent of his fly balls and outfield line drives, but since he's a right-handed batter, that means his balls would be going -- in the Phillies' case -- to the better outfielder. Hosmer is definitely a batter a you might consider the Kapler Shift for:

What's the potential value in something like this? Russell Carleton of Baseball

Prospectus studied this in a piece last year. He was writing about using a pitcher in the outfield for a batter (and then bringing the pitcher back in to pitch), but his math still applies. He wrote: From 2012-2016, only 8.7 percent of plate appearances ended with either a fly ball or a line drive that the left fielder eventually fielded (whether to catch it or pick it up when it stopped rolling). We also know that most fly balls fall into either the category of "any competent human with a glove on his hand could make that catch" or "no one was going to get to that." The spread between good fielders and bad is generally on a small subsample of fly balls per year. I've estimated that the difference between an average left fielder and a really bad one is about .02 runs per inning, and we're not talking about a full inning here.

Of course, the Phillies have their own team of analysts and it's possible they've come up with a different number on the potential runs that could be saved, depending on how often the tactic is employed. If it's .02 runs, it hardly seems worth the effort, especially after considering the mitigating circumstances: Do you really want to make Hoskins run back and forth throughout a game? Does it affect the pitcher's rhythm? For the love of god, what about pace of play?

Still, it's a fascinating idea. Maybe it saves the Phillies a few outs a year -- and maybe one of those outs saves a couple of runs in a key moment. You never know.

By the way, while I don't know of another team trying this experiment (except a couple of times when a pitcher ended up in the outfield in an extra-inning game), the 1959 Indians tried something similar in the infield. Check out these box scores from June 27 and June 28. If you click, you can see that Woodie Held's position is listed as SS-2B-SS-2B-SS-2B-SS-2B-SS-2B-SS-2B-SS-2B-SS-2B-SS-2B. Same thing with Granny Hamner. Manager Joe Gordon was moving Held and Hamner based on whether the batter was a lefty or righty, playing the younger Held on the pull side.

So why was the experiment abandoned after two games? As it turns out, there were only four games where Held started at shortstop and Hamner at second base, June 25 through June 28. In the first game, there were no changes. In the second game, there was one change (my guess is for Ted Williams). In the next two games, also against the Red Sox, Gordon went wild. But Hamner played just a few more games the rest of the season and started just once more (at third base), so he abandoned the player more than the experiment.

Will Kapler pull his own version of Gordon's exchange? Stay tuned.