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Berrios eyeing Opening Day start

Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | March 4, 2018

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Jose Berrios remains lined up to start on Opening Day against the Orioles on March 29 at Oriole Park at Camden Yards, but nothing is official yet, and the right-hander said he's still competing for that honor, with Ervin Santana set to miss the start of the season after undergoing surgery on his right middle finger on Feb. 6.

The Twins could turn to veteran right-hander Kyle Gibson or new addition Jake Odorizzi for the regular-season opener, but Berrios is coming off a breakout year that saw him post a 3.89 ERA with 139 strikeouts in 145 2/3 innings. Berrios looked sharp on Sunday in the team's 9-3 loss versus the Pirates, throwing 2 1/3 scoreless innings with two strikeouts and three hits allowed in his second start of the spring.

"Obviously, everybody knows Ervin won't start the season with us, so us starting pitchers are competing for that day," Berrios said. "So right now, I'm trying to be healthy and strong and ready for that day."

Berrios is on the upswing and isn't shy about his goals for the 2018 season. He endured a rookie season that saw him record an 8.02 ERA in 14 starts in '16, only to turn it around last year and show why he was such a highly regarded prospect.

"The first thing is, I want to help the team make the playoffs again," Berrios said. "For me, I want to win 20 games for the team and make the All-Star Game. If I accomplish those things, I think I can be up for a Cy Young Award."

Twins manager Paul Molitor has high expectations for Berrios given his stuff, work ethic and his demeanor, but cautioned that he's only 23 years old. Berrios, though, is the closest thing to a potential ace on the roster, and it's hard not to get excited about what he could become.

"I think we all are hopeful that he's going to be that kind of guy, but I always caution people not to jump too far too fast on people that young," Molitor said. "He's got experience, but it's not a ton. We're expecting growth. How far he takes that from the opening part of the season until the end, it's 162 games away."

With that long season in mind, Berrios is a workout freak who enjoys posting videos on social media, including one that went viral this offseason when he pushed a truck across a parking lot in Puerto Rico. The 6-foot, 185-pounder said he notices a difference physically from when he first got to the Majors two seasons ago.

"I'm moving better on the mound," Berrios said. "All my body is moving forward together. I don't worry about my arm too much. It's just nice and easy and pitch. When I was a rookie I felt strong, but I notice a difference from now when I pitch. I feel better."

Berrios also benefited from changing his pitch mix last year, as he threw his curveball more his second season, throwing it 30 percent of the time compared to 21.6 percent as a rookie. Opposing hitters hit just .220 with a .306 slugging percentage against it, while it generated 102 swings and misses, which ranked as the 10th-most in baseball, per Statcast™.

Berrios also learned to trust his stuff, and located better with 44 percent of his pitches in the strike zone compared to 38.3 percent in '17. His plus-stuff makes him tough to square up, as opposing batters had an average exit velocity of 85.2 mph against him, which ranked as the 10th-best mark among Major League starters.

Berrios said making adjustments is simply part of the game and its the same reason why he works out so hard in the offseason, as he knows it takes a lot to be a successful starting pitching.

"I want to play a long career in the Majors," Berrios said. "So I have to prepare myself."

Vying for rotation, Anibal scuffles vs. Bucs

Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | March 4, 2018

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Right-hander Anibal Sanchez, competing for the final spot in the rotation, scuffled against the Pirates in relief on Sunday, giving up six runs on five hits over two-plus innings, including a three-run homer to catcher Elias Diaz in the sixth inning of a 9-3 loss.

Sanchez was hurt by some bad luck early, giving up a pair of ground-ball singles and a bloop RBI single to center, but the homer to Diaz was hit hard to left into the wind at Hammond Stadium. Homers have been an issue for Sanchez in recent years, as he gave up 26 last season and 85 over the last three years, which ranks as the fourth-most in baseball over that span.

"The line is not going to look good and they hit some balls hard," Twins manager Paul Molitor said. "But he gets some really funny swings, and then they get some good swings. He was a little inconsistent today."

Sanchez settled down for a 1-2-3 seventh, but gave up a single and a walk in the eighth, and was pulled from the game before both inherited runners scored. Sanchez, though, did strike out four, showing his offspeed can be effective, but the homer also happened to come on a slider.

"I wasn't sure if we wanted to put him back out there for a third inning," Molitor said. "But [pitching coach] Garvin [Alston] wanted him back out there so he'd at least get up a third time. But he got a couple baserunners on and we had to get him out of there."

Sanchez is competing with Phil Hughes and Adalberto Mejia for a rotation spot, but both have struggled recently as well. Mejia gave up two runs, including a long homer, over three innings against the Cardinals on Thursday, while Hughes surrendered four runs on five hits, including two homers, in 2 1/3 innings against the Blue Jays on Saturday.

Camp battles

- Reliever John Curtiss, who has an outside shot at earning a spot in the bullpen, didn't help his cause with two walks and a run-scoring wild pitch with the bases loaded, but rebounded by inducing a 4-6-3 double play and getting a strikeout to end the eighth inning.

- Reliever Alan Busenitz, who is coming off a strong rookie season and is competing for a bullpen spot, struggled and couldn't complete the ninth inning, giving up four hits and a run while recording just one out. He also dealt with some blood from his fingernail, but it wasn't a blister.

Injury updates

- Catcher Jason Castro was scratched from Sunday's lineup because of the migraine he sustained on Friday. Mitch Garver, who had been out since Wednesday with a tweaked right knee, started in Castro's place. Garver wasn't expected to return until Tuesday, but was ready to play after resuming baseball activities on Friday and Saturday. Castro is expected to return on Tuesday.

- Shortstop prospect Nick Gordon, who had been sidelined with a mild right wrist strain sustained on Tuesday, returned to action on Sunday, replacing Brian Dozier at second base. Dozier went 2-for-3 with two doubles.

- Right-hander Ervin Santana remains scheduled to leave for New York on Monday to have his cast and sutures removed after undergoing surgery on his right middle finger on Feb. 6. Santana will get a better idea of when he'll be able to start throwing again, and find out more about the

timeline for his return, which isn't expected to be until mid-April or early May.

Up next

• Right-hander Kyle Gibson is set to make his second start of the spring on Monday against the Phillies in Clearwater at 12:05 p.m. CT. Other pitchers scheduled to see action include prospects Stephen Gonsalves, Fernando Romero, Aaron Slegers and Zack Littell, as well as Rule 5 Draft right-hander Tyler Kinley. Watch the game live on MLB.TV or MLB Network.

Brian Dozier sounds willing to walk away from Twins after season

Jim Souhan | Star Tribune | March 5, 2018

FORT MYERS, FLA. – Brian Dozier walked around the Twins clubhouse Sunday morning sounding a new duck call he had made out of one of his old bats. He'd prefer a buck call.

Dozier will become a free agent this fall if he doesn't agree to a contract extension with the team, and he said he has had no discussions with the front office.

"I don't want to touch too much on this, it's the thing that gets asked all the time, but at the same time, I will be a free agent this fall," he said. "That's the bottom line. You can only say you want to be here so much, and nothing gets done.

"That's just the way it is. I understand everything. At the same time, you're six months away from free agency. That's intriguing."

He is surrounded by excellent young prospects in the Twins lineup, but Dozier was an eighth-round draft pick who had to slowly turn himself into a star. In the past three years, he has made an All-Star team, won a Gold Glove and earned MVP votes.

Last year, he became the fifth Twin and first Minnesota middle infielder to hit 30 or more home runs in consecutive seasons. He has hit 76 over the past two years. Last winter, the Twins reportedly considered trading him but didn't find a worthwhile market.

This winter, the Twins did not move to extend the contract of their most proven quality player, who went 2-for-3 with two doubles in the Twins' 9-3 loss to Pittsburgh on Sunday at Hammond Stadium.

"There have not been any talks about exploring an extension," he said. "We'll see what happens, but at the same time you can only wait so long and then it's all just focusing on the season and getting yourself ready to win. I'm a firm believer, man, I don't put too much into all that kind of stuff. I go with the flow and let things take care of themselves."

Early in spring training, the Twins played top shortstop prospect Nick Gordon at second base. The Twins have depth at the middle infield positions with Jorge Polanco, Gordon and Royce Lewis.

They could save money by allowing Dozier to leave. He will earn \$9 million this season.

Or they could trade him this summer if they fall out of contention. Or they could open negotiations this summer if Dozier proves to be invaluable and willing.

Dozier clearly sees himself leaving in the fall, and does not sound bothered by baseball's unwillingness to sign a slew of free agents this winter.

"I think teams have gotten a lot smarter, and they really break down the numbers," he said. "The biggest thing in free agency is really making sure agents know their players' value, and that their players understand that.

"And how teams are evaluating players — that if you hit 30 home runs and drive in 80 and you're one-dimensional and your WAR is a .8 you aren't going to get paid like players used to. If you've had a high WAR for many years, I think you'll do all right."

WAR stands for Wins Above Replacement, an attempt to measure how many more victories a player would produce for his team over 162 games than a player pulled from the bench or the minor leagues.

Free-agent third baseman Mike Moustakas hit 38 home runs last year with Kansas City. His WAR, according to Baseball Reference, was 1.8. He remains unsigned. Dozier's WAR has been 6.5 and 4.4 the past two seasons.

"I think my better years are ahead of me, because of the way I feel and what I put into my body," Dozier said.

He grew up in Mississippi, where most foods are fried or covered in sauce or gravy.

“Four years ago, I was always achy, always dealing with fatigue during the season,” he said. “Now I treat food as fuel, and that’s it.”

Saturday night, his wife made him chickpea pasta with vegetables, turkey and marinara sauce.

“I never have a nice dinner anymore, which is stupid,” he said, laughing. “But a lot of the food I used to eat disgusts me now.”

He didn’t complain about the lack of contract negotiations. He just sounded hungry.

Jose Berrios' second spring start for Twins sharper than first

La Velle E. Neal III | Star Tribune | March 5, 2018

FORT MYERS, FLA. – Twins righthander Jose Berrios needed 20 pitches to get out of the first inning Sunday. He lasted only one inning in his Grapefruit League debut Tuesday, throwing a whopping 32 pitches against Boston. Sunday’s outing in a 9-3 loss to Pittsburgh was not as shaky, but it was far from smooth as Berrios needs to fine tune his command. And that is what spring training is for.

“Better than the first outing,” manager Paul Molitor said. “Not where I think he wants it to be, but saw enough. Rather than overthrow the fastball I think he was trying to locate it.

“I was pleased with the second outing overall.”

Berrios ended up with 2½ scoreless innings, giving up three hits while striking out two. He needed only 11 pitches to retire the side in order in the second. He was pulled in the third after throwing 14 more pitches.

“I tried to be more aggressive with the hitters,” he said.

Garver shows off his strong arm

Catcher Mitch Garver, out since Wednesday because of a minor knee injury, was back in the lineup Sunday and showed off his arm in the fifth inning when he threw out base-stealer Adam Frazier.

Garver cut the infield in half with his throw, making it easy for second baseman Brian Dozier to catch the ball and make the tag.

Garver has thrown out 32 percent of baserunners attempting to steal in the minors, a good rate.

Blood for Busenitz

Righthander Alan Busenitz left the game with one out in the ninth after giving up four hits and two runs. As it turned out, Busenitz was battling a bloody thumb and needed to leave the game.

“He had a little light blood on his fingernail,” Molitor said. “I don’t know if the skin was pulling off or not. But it didn’t look blistery to me. Sometimes you pull the skin off where it meets the nail and it will [bleed].”

Cuts are just around the corner

A majority of minor leaguers are already at camp ahead of Tuesday’s official reporting day. Intersquad games start Sunday and official spring games March 14.

The opening of minor league camp means the first cuts from the major league camp are getting close. Twins starting pitchers will be heading into their third appearances of spring. They all need to keep building their endurance for the regular season, but that will be hard to do as pitchers get stretched. So the Twins usually send a few down the street to pitch in minor league games so they can stay on their progression.

Etc.

- Catcher Jason Castro said he felt much better Sunday after suffering from a migraine late last week. He also isn’t worried that the migraine is linked to the concussion he suffered in August of last season. Molitor said Castro will start behind the plate Tuesday when the Twins play host to Baltimore.

• Infielder Nick Gordon (wrist) and outfielder Nick Stassi (back) returned to action Sunday after recovering from minor injuries.

On deck

Gibson is scheduled to start Monday when the Twins travel to Clearwater to face the Phillies. Aaron Slegers, Stephen Gonsalves and Fernando Romero also are scheduled to pitch.

Anibal Sanchez struggles, Twins lose 9-3 to Pirates

La Velle E. Neal III | Star Tribune | March 5, 2018

FORT MYERS, FLA. – Anibal Sanchez shook off a bad sixth inning with a 1-2-3 seventh inning Sunday. Set up for a strong finish, the Twins sent him back out for the eighth.

Two batters later, the veteran righthander was out of the game and the Pirates were well on their way to a 9-3 victory at Hammond Stadium.

“The line is not going to look good,” Twins manager Paul Molitor said.

Sanchez gave up six runs on five hits and one walk in two-plus innings.

In the sixth, Sanchez gave up three consecutive singles, including an RBI single to Colin Moran, before laying a pitch over the heart of the plate to catcher Elias Diaz. Diaz hammered the pitch over the wall in left-center field for a three run homer and 5-3 Pirates lead.

Sanchez came back in the seventh to retire the side in order, including strikeouts of Cole Tucker and Max Moroff. Instead of ending the day on a positive note, Sanchez gave up a leadoff single to Todd Cunningham in the eighth. Cunningham stole second, then Eric Wood followed with a walk, bringing Molitor and his hook out of the dugout. Both runners ended up scoring to give Pittsburgh a 7-3 lead. The Pirates added two more runs in the ninth.

“They hit some balls hard,” Molitor said. “The home run was an offspeed pitch. Not sure if it was a backup slider. It just kind of spun out over the plate a little bit.

“He gets some funny swings but then they get some good swings. It was a little inconsistent.”

The Twins scored the first three runs of game, two driven in by Joe Mauer, on a sacrifice fly in the first and a RBI groundout in the third. The Twins took a 3-0 lead in the fourth inning on a run-scoring single by Max Kepler, his first RBI of spring training.

Mitch Garver back behind the plate as Twins face Pirates

La Velle E. Neal III | Star Tribune | March 4, 2018

After two long road trips over three days, the Twins are taking it easy this morning. It's called, "Show-and-go," which means no pre-game drills, just prepare to go play. The team has been working for about three straight weeks now, so it's probably a good time.

With an off-day coming up on Thursday, they will be in good shape for the next phase of camp.

Catcher Mitch Garver, who gave the Twins a slight scare on Wednesday when he reported right knee soreness, but he's back in the lineup today.

Another thing to watch out for this week is the start of minor league camp. Players report on Tuesday (most already are here) with games set to start on Sunday. (Rochester v Chattanooga, Fort Myers v Cedar Rapids for a few days). The opening of minor league camp means the first cuts of camp aren't far away.

Also, with so many pitchers needing to build up endurance, some might use minor league games to stay on schedule. For instance, Anibal Sanchez will follow Jose Berrios today. Eventually, he will need to start a couple games so he can get stretched out.

After Sanchez, it looks like many of the key role players in the bullpen (Rodney, Reed, etc.) will get some work in.

Pirates

Adam Frazier, CF

Josh Harrison, 2B

Gregory Polanco, RF

Colin Moran, 3B
Jody Mercer, SS
Elias Diaz, C
Christopher Bostick, LF
Erich Weiss, 1B
Jameson Taillon, RHP - yes, no DH today

Twins

Brian Dozier, 2B
Joe Mauer, DH
Miguel Sano, 3B
Eddie Rosario, LF
LoMo, DH
Byron Buxton, CF
Max Kepler, RF
Jorge Polanco, SS
Mitch Garver, C

Jose Berrios, RHP

Twins prospect Fernando Romero could be a future ace

Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | March 4, 2018

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Fernando Romero won't make the Twins pitching staff out of spring training. On that, everyone in a decision-making capacity with the club pretty much agrees.

However, you don't have to squint very hard to see the 23-year-old right-hander reaching Target Field at some point this season, maybe even during the first half. Once he arrives, the fast-rising prospect from the Dominican Republic just might stick around for, oh, the next decade or so.

"I think we have a guy that could be the Number One guy in the rotation," said Ivan Arteaga, the Double-A Chattanooga pitching coach who has worked with Romero at two minor-league levels. "He's got the potential to be very good. Whether he's in the bullpen or in the rotation, time is going to tell, but I do believe he's got the possibility to be The Guy."

Romero made just three starts in a two-year span in 2014-15 due to Tommy John surgery, followed by torn meniscus in his left knee, suffering while doing box jumps for conditioning. The past two years, however, have been highly encouraging with Romero averaging between 8.0 and 9.4 strikeouts per nine innings at three different levels.

He has the fastball that reaches 98 mph and sits easily in the 92-96 mph range. He has the high-80s slider that can put hitters away with two strikes. He has the mound swagger that all the great ones seem to possess.

"Great guy, and even a better ballplayer," said infield prospect Nick Gordon, Romero's teammate last season with the Lookouts. "He can get it done. He goes about his business the right way and he competes."

Best of all, in this era of pace-of-play initiatives, Romero doesn't mess around. He gets the ball back from the catcher and goes right after hitters with his high-end stuff.

"He's quick," Gordon said. "He doesn't come to play (around). He comes to get his work done, and you've got to love it."

Rated the Twins' No. 6 prospect by Baseball America, Romero showed that in his first Grapefruit League outing this spring. Facing the Baltimore Orioles' A-lineup up in Sarasota, Romero retired all six batters he faced, fanning three.

That included conquests of Jonathan Scoop, who grounded weakly to shortstop; Manny Machado, who flied to right; and Adam Jones, who couldn't pull the trigger on a two-strike slider at 88 mph.

"I've been working on just trying to get those guys out quicker," Romero said. "I've been working more on my two-seamer. It feels great to be out there and do the best I can."

A year ago, Romero had a tendency to fall off toward first base in a max-effort delivery. With Arteaga's help, he has made great strides in staying

under control and taking all of his momentum toward home plate.

“He doesn’t need to overthrow,” Arteaga said. “He’s got velo. He’s got power. He just needed to understand that, which I think he did over time. Watching some video and working in the bullpen, he put a lot of effort into following the plan that we have for him.”

Romero wanted to pitch again in the Dominican Winter League in order to consolidate those gains, but the Twins vetoed that plan. In part, that was due to the career-high 125 innings he threw last season in the Southern League, where a shoulder impingement landed him on the disabled list for a week or so in August.

When he came back, he wanted to pitch in the league playoffs, but the Twins vetoed that as well. When you have an arm like Romero’s at your disposal, the last thing you want to do is lose sight of the big picture.

“You want to be perfect, as we should,” Arteaga said. “You can’t microwave a player.”

Arteaga, who spent two seasons (1994-95) on the same Double-A New Haven Ravens pitching staff as new Twins pitching coach Garvin Alston, remembers the path Johan Santana took to go from Rule 5 discovery to bullpen prodigy to two-time Cy Young Award winner.

Whenever Romero masters the changeup, perhaps he could make a similar surge to the top of the Twins’ rotation.

“Johan did it, and then he became The Guy for the Minnesota Twins,” Arteaga said.

What does he see in Romero that prompts such praise?

“He’s very smart,” Arteaga said. “He’s got a good memory. He’s very passionate about the game, very mature for his age. He gets along with everybody. He gets along with the catchers, and the guys that play behind him want to play for him. He’s a good teammate.”

Arteaga stopped and smiled upon delivering that impressive checklist.

“Those,” he said, “are the traits of a guy that could be a Number One.”

No extension talks yet for Twins’ Jose Berrios, who would definitely listen **Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | March 4, 2018**

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Coming off a 14-win breakout season but still two years away from arbitration eligibility, Twins right-hander Jose Berrios would seem to be an interesting candidate for a multiyear contract.

The Twins, however, appear to be willing to continue going year to year with Berrios, who has agreed on a one-year pre-arbitration deal for \$570,000, according to a person with direct knowledge. That’s a raise of \$32,500 over Berrios’ 2017 pay.

Asked if there had been any talks about buying out the arbitration years that will begin in 2020, Berrios said, “Not yet.”

Lined up to become the Twins’ youngest Opening Day starter since Brad Radke in 1996, Berrios smiled when asked how receptive he’d be to a multiyear offer.

“This is the team that drafted me (in 2012) and gave me the opportunity to play in the major leagues,” said Berrios, 23. “If they want to (sign) me for a long time, I’d be excited about that.”

With 11 players on track for arbitration eligibility next winter, including core position players such as Byron Buxton, Miguel Sano, Max Kepler and Eddie Rosario, the Twins figure to enter extension talks with most of their young stars at some point.

“We don’t talk about that yet (as a group), but that’s in our minds,” said Berrios, who received a \$1.55 million signing bonus out of high school. “We have to be ready for every opportunity.”

As for the chance to start on March 29 at Baltimore’s Camden Yards, where he tied a season-high with three homers allowed in 6 1/3 innings last May 24, Berrios would welcome that opportunity as well.

“They haven’t said anything about that,” he said. “It would be special for me in my young career to throw Opening Day. Every starting pitcher wants to be on the mound that first day. For now I have to prepare myself for every moment.”

ENNS REACTS

Twins lefty Dietrich Enns, a 2012 draftee out of Central Michigan University, was saddened to hear of Friday's double murder at his alma mater. James Eric Davis Jr., a 19-year-old student at the Mount Pleasant, Mich., school, was arrested after a 16-hour manhunt and charged with the shooting deaths of his parents.

"It's sad and tragic to have something like that happen," Enns said. "Unfortunately, it's happening more and more. To have it happen at a school you actually attended is very strange and difficult. It almost hits home a little more. (You realize) that it could happen to anyone, anywhere."

Enns was going through on-field workouts with the Twins on Friday morning when news of the shootings broke. When he returned to his locker before lunch, he had a few texts from family and college friends "that said there was something happening at the school."

Enns reached out to some of his former coaches with the Chippewa baseball program and was relieved to learn the team was playing in a tournament at Stetson University in DeLand, Fla..

CASTRO PLAN

Originally listed in Sunday's lineup, Twins catcher Jason Castro was scratched again so he could have another day to recover from Friday's migraine headache. Mitch Garver, who missed three games after tweaking his right knee in a rundown, started instead against the Pittsburgh Pirates.

"They just wanted to give me an extra day," Castro said.

Castro, who struggles with pollen-related allergies each spring, will not travel with the team for Monday's game in Clearwater. Instead, he is slated to play back-to-back games for first time this spring on Tuesday at home against Baltimore and Wednesday across town against the Boston Red Sox.

BRIEFLY

Infielder Nick Gordon (wrist) returned to action for the first time since Tuesday and made several nice defensive plays at second base. He struck out in both trips.

Veteran right-hander Anibal Sanchez gave up six earned runs on five hits and a walk, including a three-run homer on a hanging slider. Sanchez, who also struck out four in two innings, has a 13.50 spring earned run average.

Reliever Alan Busenitz retired just one of six batters he faced in a two-run ninth but said he was working on a changeup that's "not there yet." He also tore open a cuticle on his pitching thumb but said that was no factor in his outing.

Brian Dozier doubled twice off hard-throwing Pirates starter Jameson Taillon. ... Logan Morrison got his first start at first base but saw little action while going 0 for 3 at the plate.

No stranger to ambition, Twins starter Berrios shares his lofty goals for 2018

Derek Wetmore | ESPN 1500 | March 4, 2018

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Twins starter J.O. Berrios is no stranger to lofty goals. They helped make him a first-round draft choice, helped him earn his way to the big leagues as a good young pitching prospect, and last season they helped him bounce back after a rocky start to his MLB career in 2016.

This year is no different.

"Too many," Berrios responded, when asked about his goals for the season. "First of all, I want to help the team make the playoffs again. For me, I want to win 20 games. ... And then make the All-Star Game. If I accomplish those two things, I think I'm going to be [a candidate] for a Cy Young Award."

Those are lofty ambitions, of course, but that's nothing new for Berrios.

At the ripe old age of 23, Berrios is in Twins spring training as one of the few starting rotation locks. The only question left for the little guy with filthy stuff is which turn he'll take in the rotation. Will he be the opening day starter? Are the Twins ready to trust the guy with the best stuff to be

the anchor — at least until Ervin Santana gets back? Or will Berrios be pushed back to assure that he starts a game in Puerto Rico when the Twins go there in mid-April?

Wherever he pitches, Berrios said a few weeks ago that he's comfortable with whatever the team's choice. He'd love to pitch in Puerto Rico, in front of fans that don't get to see him stateside very often. On the other hand, there's another level of prestige that comes with the opportunity to take the ball on opening day. That's something some guys pitch their whole career and never get to do.

Berrios on Sunday got through 2 1/3 innings. It was a better outing than his first time on the mound this spring. This time around, he got 2 strikeouts and gave up 3 hits, including one to the pitcher. (He had the opposing starter, Jameson Taillon, in an 0-2 count before missing with a breaking ball and then giving up a hit with his fastball.)

"Use more of the plate, be more aggressive with the hitter, and that's what I did today," Berrios said. He added that attacking the strike zone will be important for him this season, and that his offseason conditioning program has him feeling "wonderful" physically.

Notes from Fort Myers: Odorizzi on analytics and free agency; May on his rehab

Jake Depue | ESPN 1500 | March 4, 2018

FORT MYERS, Fla.—After struggling a bit in his first start of the spring, J.O. Berrios had a much better outing in his second spring start Sunday, striking out two Pirates in 2.1 scoreless innings.

Berrios could be in line to start Opening Day for the Twins, though that might be partly dependent on whether an Opening Day assignment would still allow him to pitch in his native Puerto Rico when the Twins' play Cleveland there in mid-April. Berrios and Jake Odorizzi figure to be the two candidates to get the Opening Day nod in Baltimore, with Ervin Santana likely out until May.

Anibal Sanchez, trying to make the club after three rough years in Detroit, struggled in an inning of work, giving up 4 runs on 4 hits, including a 3-run home run to Elias Diaz.

Some notes from Sunday in Fort Myers:

Jake Odorizzi on analytics, juiced baseballs, and free agency

Jake Odorizzi comes to the Twins from the Rays, considered to be among the most analytically-inclined franchises in baseball. I asked Odorizzi about what type of information was disseminated to him when he was with the Rays, and what metrics he paid attention to. Odorizzi said he didn't pay close attention to most of the advanced stats, but there were a few metrics the Rays gave him that did help.

"We would have a chart that showed vertical movement," he said. "Anything over ten was considered above average. They would put all our fastballs on a chart, post-start. If you feel like you had good stuff, it would show up on the chart. That would be vindicating. That was just for guys who would do that. [Alex] Cobb would never get anything like that because he wasn't that type of guy."

Odorizzi said new Twins pitching analyst Josh Kalk, who was hired from the Rays, was one of the primary people involved in pitching analytics with Tampa Bay, but noted that Kalk was rarely around to disseminate the information in person.

"He was only around occasionally," he said of Kalk. "I've seen him more here in two weeks than I ever did in Tampa. He was like that mythical figure that was the guy breaking down all our analytics. Maybe he had a hand in getting me here."

Odorizzi also had some interesting comments on how the rumored changes MLB has made to the baseballs have impacted pitchers and how they're valued.

"I think so," he said of the balls being altered. "More information is kind of pushing it toward that direction. It's fine if you change that, but you need to announce if something's been altered to put everything back in perspective. It's going to change the fabric of the game and how pitchers are valued."

Odorizzi also said he's surprised no one has signed his ex-teammate, Cobb, noting that Cobb had a career high in innings last season and had a strong ERA (3.66) in what he called the toughest division to pitch in in baseball.

This year has been a historically slow free agent market, of course, with players like Cobb and Jake Arrieta remaining unsigned. Odorizzi understands teams placing higher value on younger players and being reluctant to sign older ones, but said the system should be changed to reflect that way of thinking.

“You can say that teams are changing to valuing younger guys,” he said. “Well if they’re going to change to valuing younger guys, you need to start paying people better at a younger age. You can’t have it both ways. First year [of arbitration] you might make four to five [million] max. So you get four years of under roughly six million bucks to pay an upper echelon talent. Something needs to be altered.”

Trevor May on his injury and rehab

Trevor May said Sunday he remains on track as he rehabs from Tommy John surgery. May said he started throwing fastballs at the end of January, and this is his first week throwing changeups. Next week he’s planning on throwing a few slow curveballs and sliders, which he hasn’t done to this point. May believes his velocity is back to where it was prior to the surgery.

“I’m there,” he said of his velocity. “For about three weeks I’ve been really letting go of fastballs. The intensity is there. It’s coming out easy. All the indicators are that my velocity is there. I don’t anticipate a huge drop or jump in velocity.”

May said the plan is to start throwing to hitters in live batting practice in the last week of spring, after which he’ll likely spend some time in extended spring training to stretch out. After one or two starts in extended spring, he’ll likely go up to Rochester in May, when the weather should start to improve in upstate New York.

The plan is for May to come back as a starter, and he said mechanical changes he made as a reliever caused back problems that sidelined him for stretches in 2016. Those changes, he said, might have ultimately helped cause the arm injury.

“I think making those mechanical changes did contribute [to the arm injury]”, he said. “My workout routine had changed because of my back. I wasn’t getting my upper body strength to where it needed to be because I wasn’t working out in the same way, because I needed my back to be healthy. I had started to get comfortable, and my arm strength wasn’t quite where it needed to be to do what it was doing, and that’s what causes a full one pitch type tear. I’m almost certain those were patterns that made it happen.”

Although he said he’s amenable to being a reliever this season if that’s where the team needs him, he wants to prove he can be a big league starter.

“My mind is fully on earning a spot and keeping it,” he said.

Berrios fans two, Sanchez struggles in Twins’ 9-3 loss to Pirates

Staff Writers | Fox Sports North | March 4, 2018

Elias Diaz went yard in the sixth inning for a three-run bomb, and the Pittsburgh Pirates overcame an early 3-0 deficit to knock off the Minnesota Twins 9-3 in spring training.

Twins starter Jose Berrios allowed three hits in 2 1/3 innings but didn’t give up a run while also fanning two hitters. Reliever Fernando Rodney pitched a flawless fourth inning.

Second baseman Brian Dozier tallied a pair of doubles, and Joe Mauer knocked in two runs with a sacrifice fly and a fielder’s choice in the first and third innings.

Anibal Sanchez, who the Twins signed in late February, fanned four batters in two innings of work but yielded six earned runs on five hits.

Minnesota drops to 4-5 in spring training with the loss.

After no contract talks with Twins, Brian Dozier says 'I will be a free agent this fall'

Staff Writers | ESPN | March 5, 2018

Brian Dozier reiterated that he expects to become a free agent after not having any talks with the Minnesota Twins on a contract extension this offseason.

"I will be a free agent this fall," Dozier told the Star Tribune in an interview published early Monday morning. "That's the bottom line. You can only say you want to be here so much, and nothing gets done."

"That's just the way it is. I understand everything. At the same time, you're six months away from free agency. That's intriguing."

Dozier, 30, will make \$9 million this season in the final year of a four-year contract. He told the Star Tribune that there have "not been any talks [with the Twins] about exploring an extension."

Dozier has discussed his future on multiple occasions this offseason and told Twins Daily last month that he expected to become a free agent. He made it clear, however, in his interview with the Star Tribune that the Twins have not approached him about a new deal.

"We'll see what happens, but at the same time you can only wait so long and then it's all just focusing on the season and getting yourself ready to win," he told the paper. "I'm a firm believer, man, I don't put too much into all that kind of stuff. I go with the flow and let things take care of themselves."

Dozier has emerged as one of baseball's best offensive second basemen, combining to hit 76 home runs with 192 RBIs and an .871 OPS over the last two seasons. He belted 42 homers in 2016 -- an American League record for a second baseman -- and had another outstanding season in 2017, batting .271 with 34 homers and 93 RBIs while helping Minnesota reach the postseason for the first time since 2010.

Despite a slow free-agent market this winter, Dozier is not concerned about hitting the open market. He would join a potentially historic free-agent class that could include Bryce Harper, Clayton Kershaw, Manny Machado, Josh Donaldson, Dallas Keuchel, Craig Kimbrel and Andrew Miller.

"I think teams have gotten a lot smarter, and they really break down the numbers," he told the Star Tribune, referring to this offseason's lack of free-agent activity. "The biggest thing in free agency is really making sure agents know their players' value, and that their players understand that. ... I think my better years are ahead of me, because of the way I feel and what I put into my body."

Report: Byron Buxton, Twins Have Mutual Interest in Contract Extension

Rob Goldberg | Bleacher Report | March 4, 2018

Although Byron Buxton can't reach free agency until after the 2021 season, he could potentially sign a long-term deal with the Minnesota Twins.

According to Jim Bowden of The Athletic, there is mutual interest in a new contract and both sides have already reportedly had conversations about a potential deal.

The 24-year-old is coming off his third season in the majors but his first full season, and he finally started to show the talent many have been waiting on for years.

Buxton was the No. 2 overall draft pick in 2012 and was considered the No. 1 overall prospect in baseball for two straight years by MLB.com. Unfortunately, he barely showed flashes of this ability in brief stretches at the major league level in 2015 and 2016.

This past season, however, the center fielder won a Gold Glove for his outstanding work in the field and was as good as ever at the plate. He finished the season with 16 home runs, 29 stolen bases and a .253 batting average, which was enough to earn MVP votes for the playoff-bound Twins.

Although he is still yet to truly reach his potential, a new contract through his arbitration years could benefit both sides.

The player would get guaranteed money instead of having to negotiate each season, also providing a safety net in case of injury or poor performance. The team could also get a discount for a player who could still have better years ahead of him.

Minnesota had a similar deal with second baseman Brian Dozier, who signed an extension from 2015 to 2018 through his arbitration years.

While there is no pressure to complete a new deal with Buxton, an extension could be mutually beneficial.

Happy and healthy, Rod Carew is back doing what he loves

Dan Hayes | The Athletic | March 5, 2018

FORT MYERS, Fla. — The recent conversation between the Hall of Famer and the prospect started behind the batting cage.

The topic du jour was bunting for base hits and how occasionally dropping down would keep the defense honest and prevent the use of a shift. The two chatted for several minutes before the youngster hopped back into the cage for another round of batting practice. Once he was finished hitting, they carried on for another five minutes at the top of the dugout steps before retreating into the clubhouse.

The discussion wasn't profound, nor was it unique. Similar exchanges happen countless times a day at every camp in the majors. But along with

every other experience at Twins camp this spring, the moment meant everything to Rod Carew. Given a second chance at life after undergoing a heart and kidney transplant 14 months earlier, Carew, 72, is beyond appreciative to be a full participant at Twins spring training after he missed it a year ago while recovering from surgery.

“I was really looking forward to coming down here this year,” Carew said. “I missed what I was doing in the cages and on the field and all that good stuff.

“I still get to hang out with these guys and help them as much as I can. This is vacation for me.”

It isn't difficult to detect how much Carew has enjoyed what amounts to a month-long holiday.

Whether it's disseminating bunting advice to minor-leaguer LaMonte Wade, talking shop with Twins manager Paul Molitor behind the cage during BP or holding court in the clubhouse with former roommate Tony Oliva and Miguel Sano, Carew has made the most of his time.

Only two months removed from his transplant, Carew was physically unable to attend spring training in 2017. It was the first spring he'd missed since rejoining the Twins as a special assistant to the front office 15 years earlier and maybe only the second since his pro career began in 1964. The 18-time All-Star missed being around the players and the Twins, his baseball home as a player until 1978.

Cleared to travel in early July after a rigorous, 36-session cardio program, one of the first stops Carew and his wife, Rhonda, made was Minneapolis.

He joined the team for a July 3 contest against the Los Angeles Angels. It was the first of several signs that Carew intended to get back to living a normal life, something he hadn't been able to do since he had a massive heart attack in September 2015.

People around the Twins have remarked that Carew looked even healthier when he arrived for TwinsFest in January, and it was evident he planned to attend spring training as if it were any other year.

“This year really demonstrated for Rod a return to normalcy,” said Twins president Dave St. Peter. “He just wants to go about his day normally healthy and not be burdened by the significant health challenges he has had. He's happy and he's got a smile on his face.

“His presence in spring training is absolutely magical when you think about a year ago at this time he was two months removed from a heart transplant and now he looks as healthy and happy as ever.”

Carew is as determined as ever, too.

If working around baseball is a passion, his mission is to promote the American Heart Association and awareness of heart disease as well as promoting organ donation. Carew estimates that he and his wife have attended events every weekend since he was cleared to travel to promote awareness.

Prior to arriving in camp, Carew and his wife stopped in Nashville for two days to meet another transplant recipient, a 24-year-old woman who received her heart the same day as he did.

He also has continued his work on the Heart of 29 Campaign, an initiative created by the Twins to help assist the AHA and “raise awareness and prevention of heart disease.” In working with the campaign, Carew plans to take part in the Twin Cities Heart Walk at Target Field on May 5.

“I don't want to just use my name,” Carew said. “I want to be a part of it and go out there and pound the streets and go to any event that I can attend to talk to different people. If you're going to do it, you have to do it the right way. I'm fortunate that I've been strong enough to be there to help.

“I'm glad to be alive and I'm glad to be here and I'm glad to be able to help other people.”

There have been so many who have assisted him, but last week Carew returned home to Southern California to honor one of those who helped him most, Dr. James Heywood. Heywood, whom Carew credits with saving his life, is the head of the team at Scripps San Diego who inserted the LVAD — a small mechanical device to pump blood to the heart — that allowed Carew to live long enough to receive a new heart and kidney 15 months later after his heart attack.

The day of his heart attack, Carew flat-lined three times: first at the golf course, then as he was loaded into the ambulance, and once more at the hospital. Heywood said that Carew's heart suffered so much damage that while the LVAD kept him alive, he'd eventually need a new heart. Despite what sounded like long odds, Carew never thought he'd die because of Heywood's confidence.

Last week, Carew presented Heywood with the distinguished alumni award he was receiving from his alma mater, Servite High School in Anaheim, Calif. Heywood was “touched” that Carew would travel back to present the award. But he insists that the promotion Carew has done means even more.

“It really lets people know this is possible,” Heywood said. “A lot of people don’t know that people can be supported and kept alive with these small pumps that now weigh only five ounces. They need to know, especially doctors need to know so we can do this. ... He’s saving lives by being so public.”

Carew knows how fortunate he is to be alive, let alone to travel to spring training. On Friday, he asked a security guard outside the Twins clubhouse how he was doing, to which the guard replied he was happy to be there.

“I am too,” Carew shot back.

Though his legs haven’t recovered their full strength, Carew still gets around to work with hitters on the fields littered throughout CenturyLink Sports Complex. He loves to talk hitting and his enthusiasm inevitably leads to discussions like the one he held with Wade prior to the Twins’ first exhibition game on Feb. 22.

Wade, 24, admits he had to research Carew after they first met (Carew’s career ended nine years before Wade was born). But even as they talked, it didn’t take long for Wade to determine that Carew, who had 91 career bunt-base hits, knew what he was talking about.

Wade, who is in the first big-league camp of his career, can’t wait to work with Carew on a backfield on bunting. He’s also inspired by Carew given where he was only a year earlier.

“He brings a lot of energy to the ballpark every day,” Wade said. “If he’s bringing that energy, then why can’t you bring that energy? He helps me every single day when he walks in here just with his smile. That helps me go through my business.”

Carew can’t stop smiling whenever he talks about working with the team’s players. He appreciates that they’ve accepted him and take his advice seriously. He credits Joe Mauer, Brian Dozier and Byron Buxton, among others, for providing the Twins with an egoless clubhouse in which he’s allowed to operate. Carew was moved by the way Mauer and Dozier kept in touch with his wife for updates before and after the transplant.

He credits his wife for her tireless efforts in being by his side. Carew calls her his hero and said he owes her a trip to Hawaii, a three-week getaway that is scheduled for later this month. Carew can’t wait.

But for now, Carew is focused on his current vacation.

“I was focusing on recovery to be here, to be able to come down here and smell the roses,” Carew said. “I’m walking to the different fields and hanging out at the cages and talking to the kids. How much better can it get? And them responding to me? I like this. I like what I’m doing.”