



Press Clips

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FROM THE OC REGISTER**Angels hitters come up empty again, dropping series to Mariners**

By Jeff Fletcher

SEATTLE — The Angels came to Safeco Field looking to kick-start their stalled season.

Instead, they just got kicked.

The Angels lost 4-1 to the Seattle Mariners on Thursday, dropping two of three in the series against one of the teams they need to catch if they are going to get back into the playoff chase.

They are now 12 games behind the Mariners in the race for the second American League wild-card spot, with six more games to go against Seattle at Angel Stadium the rest of the month.

“We need to do some things better on the field,” Manager Mike Scioscia said. “That’s what we’re focused on. We’re working hard at it. When we do, you’re going to see us put the wins up like we can. Until we do that, we’re going to be hit or miss. We know what we need to work on. We’re going to keep working toward that.”

What the Angels need is to score some more runs. They got a decent outing from starter Jaime Barría (two runs allowed in 5-1/3 innings), but the offense gave him little support.

The Angels scored one run apiece in the losses on Tuesday and Thursday, getting stymied by starters Wade LeBlanc and Marco Gonzales, respectively.

The Angels were hitless in eight at-bats with runners in scoring position on Thursday, most notably when Albert Pujols grounded into a double play with the bases loaded in the first and when Ian Kinsler got unlucky in the eighth.

The Angels had gone without a hit for three innings, as the Mariners pulled out to a 4-1 lead before the Angels mounted a rally in the eighth.

With one out, Justin Upton walked and Pujols singled.

Scioscia then brought up Luis Valbuena to pinch-hit for Jefry Marte in the No. 6 spot, representing the potential tying run against Alex Colome. Scioscia also had Shohei Ohtani available, but he said he was trying to play for the lead, and not the tie, so he wanted to save Ohtani to hit for Martín Maldonado in the No. 8 spot.

Valbuena struck out. Kinsler then hit a ball that seemed headed for center field, which would have driven in a run and brought Ohtani to the plate with a chance to give the Angels the lead.

But Mariners second baseman Dee Gordon made a spectacular diving catch, ending the rally.

“That was pretty impressive,” Kinsler said of his fellow second baseman.

All three Angels hitters – including Ohtani, batting for Maldonado – then struck out in the ninth against closer Edwin Diaz, ending a frustrating night for the Angels.

“Anytime you have opportunities like that, you want to take advantage of them,” Kinsler said. “It’s a good sign we’re getting those opportunities. As long as we keep getting opportunities in games we’re playing, that’s a good sign. We should be able to drive in runs moving forward. Not very often we’re going to come up empty-handed. Today was tough, but we stayed in the game and kept fighting. They just kind of pulled away from us a little bit.”

Angels’ Garrett Richards prepares to face trade rumors

By Jeff Fletcher

SEATTLE — With the days ticking off before the July 31 trading deadline, Garrett Richards is aware that, if the team doesn’t begin to play better, he might hear his name more in trade rumors.

“I feel like every year there’s a guy who is a free agent on our team that could possibly be traded, but if we’re playing well, we’ll hang on to him,” said Richards, a free agent at the end of the season. “It’s nothing I haven’t seen before. It comes up. It’s part of the game.”

“Obviously this is the only team I’ve played for. I’ve known everyone around here since being drafted almost 10 years ago. This is where I want to be. Obviously, I want to grind with these guys, but I don’t make the decision.”

General Manager Billy Eppler said earlier this week that the Angels “will always look to improve our major league product,” an implication that they would be less inclined to become sellers.

If they do choose that course, Richards would likely be the most attractive trade chip among the Angels’ would-be free agents. He has a 3.42 ERA, including a solid outing in his first game off the disabled list on Wednesday.

Richards also said the Angels have never approached him about an extension.

“It’s one of those things where it will take care of itself,” he said. “I am just going to go out and try to win a ballgame every time it’s my turn to pitch. This is all I’ve ever known. I like it here. We’ll see what happens.”

PITCHERS ON THE MEND

Nick Tropeano (shoulder) is scheduled for a 60-pitch rehab game Saturday with Class-A Inland Empire. If that goes well, he could be ready to return to the rotation. Richards threw 63 pitches in one rehab outing before returning to the rotation and throwing 80 pitches on Wednesday.

The alternatives – Felix Peña and Deck McGuire – are both limited to around 80 or 90 pitches, so it wouldn’t be much different if Tropeano came back before he was up to a full starter workload.

Matt Shoemaker (forearm nerve surgery) is scheduled to resume throwing next week, according to Eppler. Shoemaker will then be re-evaluated by doctors before he gets back on a mound, which presumably would be within a couple weeks.

Jim Johnson (back) is also close to being ready for a rehab assignment, Manager Mike Scioscia said.

ALSO

Jefry Marte (wrist) was activated from the disabled list and Jabari Blash was optioned to Triple-A, leaving the Angels with no true backup outfielders. Beyond starters Mike Trout, Justin Upton and Kole Calhoun, they have David Fletcher and Marte, who can play some in the corners. ...

Shohei Ohtani, who turned 24 on Thursday, did not start, which allowed Albert Pujols to go back to DH. Ohtani is hitting .125 in 37 plate appearances against left-handed pitchers. ...

The Angels might break the franchise record for hottest first-pitch temperature for a game at Angel Stadium this weekend. The starting temperature was 106 degrees twice, on Sept. 4, 1988 and Sept. 3, 2007.

UP NEXT

Angels (Felix Peña, 1-0, 3.71) vs. Dodgers (Kenta Maeda, 5-5, 3.36), Friday, 7 p.m., Fox Sports West, KLAA (830 AM)

Freeway Series: Angels and Dodgers have built up some history in their relationship

By Bill Plunkett

It has always mattered. But it hasn't always counted.

The Dodgers and Angels have been playing each other as far back as 1962 when the Dodgers stopped by Palm Springs to face the new American League franchise preparing for its second season.

The relationship has had its difficulties. The Angels were motivated to build their own stadium and move out of Dodger Stadium in part because the Dodgers were making them split the cost of everything from parking lot resurfacing to toilet paper despite the fact that Dodgers games far outdrew the Angels. And just this spring, the last game of their annual exhibition series was halted when sewage – and metaphors – spilled onto the field in L.A.

But it wasn't until 1997 when MLB added interleague play to the regular-season schedule that the two SoCal neighbors started playing games that counted in the standings.

Mike Scioscia was still wearing blue, as the Dodgers' bench coach to first-year manager Bill Russell, when the interleague Freeway Series was born. Dave Roberts was with the Jacksonville Suns, the Detroit

Tigers' Double-A affiliate, playing the fourth of an eventual eight minor-league seasons before he would establish himself as a major-leaguer.

Mike Trout was racing around Millville, N.J., fresh out of kindergarten. Shohei Ohtani was looking forward to his third birthday. Cody Bellinger was still in diapers.

These two teams have built up some history since interleague play began. Here's a recap:

- **1997** – The Freeway Series began for real on June 17, 1997. The first game wasn't decided until Todd Zeile hit a walk-off home run against Angels closer Troy Percival, giving the Dodgers a 3-2 victory.

The first Freeway Series home run was hit earlier that night by Wilton Guerrero. That was one of 11 home runs the older brother of future Angel (and Hall of Famer) Vladimir Guerrero hit during his eight big-league seasons – not that Wilton wasn't trying. Earlier in the month, he had served an eight-game suspension after he was caught using a corked bat.

The Dodgers won the season series 4-0.

- **1998** – The Angels didn't get their first victory over the Dodgers until the second season of interleague play. It was one of two walk-offs in the four games – and a real walk-off. After Matt Luke homered off Percival to tie the score in the top of the ninth, Dodgers relievers Greg McMichael, Mark Guthrie and Jim Bruske combined to load the bases on walks then force in the winning run on a fourth walk, to Tim Salmon.

The Angels won the season series 3-1.

- **1999** – The Freeway Series has largely been contested, at least on the field, as just another series in a long season. Not in 1999. Things got testy when Dodgers pitcher Chan Ho Park dropped a bunt along the first base line and objected to the way Angels pitcher Tim Lincecum tagged him. Words were exchanged. Lincecum no doubt shared some disapproval of the way Park had brushed back Angels infielder Randy Velarde earlier in the game and maybe even mentioned the confrontation between Park and Angels DH Tony Phillips two years earlier.

Shoves were exchanged followed by, most memorably, a kick. Park's attempt at a spinning drop kick only served to land him on the bottom of the pile as benches emptied and earned him a seven-game suspension.

The Dodgers won the season series 4-2.

- **2000** – Scioscia changed sides in the Freeway Series starting this year – and the momentum of the series changed as well. The Dodgers won nine of the first 14 matchups. But once Scioscia took over the Angels, the Dodgers won the season series just once in the next 13 years. The Angels dominated that stretch, going 49-29 (a .628 winning percentage) against their northern neighbors.

But the former Dodger said it's not personal.

“Honestly, it’s just another ballclub,” Scioscia said in 2000. “The only difference is the fans. That’s the part I get emotional about. There are a lot of good memories.”

The Angels won the season series 4-2.

- **2001** – The Angels got back-to-back walk-off wins in June. Garret Anderson (RBI single) and Troy Glaus (home run) had the winning hits.

The Angels won the season series 4-2.

- **2002** – For the first time (and only time), the Freeway Series featured that season’s World Series champions. The Dodgers split with the eventual champs, each team taking two of three at their home stadium. Aaron Sele pitched the first complete-game shutout in the Freeway Series, holding the Dodgers to three hits in a 7-0 win at Angel Stadium.

The two teams split the season series 3-3.

- **2003** – The Angels won the season series 4-2.
- **2004** – For the first time in the history of the two franchises, both the Dodgers and Angels made the postseason in 2004. The Angels dropped a 13-0 beating on the Dodgers in one game. Veteran infielder Robin Ventura pitched the final inning for the Dodgers.

The two teams split the season series 3-3.

- **2005** – The Angels won the season series 5-1.
- **2006** – The biggest blowout in the series came on May 19, 2006, when the Dodgers beat the Angels 16-3 at Dodger Stadium. Rookie outfielder Andre Ethier had five of the Dodgers’ 25 hits, drove in three runs (including two on a home run off Angels reliever Brendan Donnelly) and scored four.

The Dodgers won the season series 4-2.

- **2007** – The Angels won the season series 5-1.
- **2008** – The Angels pitched a no-hitter – and lost. At Dodger Stadium in June, Jered Weaver and reliever Jose Arredondo held the Dodgers without a hit for eight innings. But the only run scored in the fifth inning when Weaver bobbled a ground ball for an error that allowed Matt Kemp to reach base. Kemp stole second and went to third on a wild throw by Angels catcher Jeff Mathis. A sacrifice fly scored him.

“A little weird outcome,” Weaver said afterward of only the sixth time in baseball history a team was no-hit and won.

The two teams split the season series 3-3.

- **2009** – A year later, Weaver had a more positive experience in the Freeway Series. He and older brother, Jeff, made baseball history on June 21, 2009, becoming the 21st pair of brothers to start against each other in a major league game. Big brother Jeff got the win. Jered gave up six runs in 5-1/3 innings.

The two teams split the season series 3-3.

- **2010** – The middle game of three at Angel Stadium provided one of the oddest endings in series history.

With the Angels leading 2-1 in the ninth, Jamey Carroll dropped a bloop single into left field, seemingly driving in the tying run from second base.

But Russell Martin was on first base and rounded second base, thinking Angels left fielder Juan Rivera's throw would go through to home. Instead, Rivera threw behind Martin and Angels second baseman Howie Kendrick tagged Martin for the final out before pinch-runner Reed Johnson touched the plate. Game over.

"Now that I think about it, it was a dumb play," Martin said later.

"Eighteen years in professional ball – I don't think I've ever seen a play like that," Angels outfielder Torii Hunter said. "That's the game of baseball – every time you think you've seen it all, the game comes up and slaps you in the face with something new."

The Angels won the season series 5-1.

- **2011** – The Angels won the season series 4-2.
- **2012** – The Angels won the season series 4-2.
- **2013** – The two teams split the season series 2-2.
- **2014** – The Angels' only victory in this year's renewal of the Freeway Series was the first complete-game shutout of Garrett Richards' career. He held the Dodgers to five hits while striking out nine in an August victory.

The Dodgers won the season series 3-1.

- **2015** – The Dodgers won the season series 5-1.
- **2016** – The Angels won the season series 3-1.
- **2017** – The Dodgers have regained the upper hand in the series, having won 11 of the past 18.

The two teams split the season series 2-2.

Overall – The Angels lead the all-time series 63-51.

FROM THE LOS ANGELES TIMES**Angels end road trip with 4-1 loss to Mariners**

By Jeff Miller

The Angels at times took exception Thursday night to home plate umpire Mark Ripperger's version of the strike zone.

Twice, the Angel did.

The Angels at times took exception Thursday night to home plate umpire Mark Ripperger's version of the strike zone.

Twice, the Angel did.

The loss dropped the Angels (44-44) back to .500 as they finished a four-city, 10-game journey at 3-7.

They also lost two of three to the Mariners, who again have a 12-game edge on the Angels for the American League's second wild-card berth.

The teams will meet again for three more games starting Tuesday in Anaheim, the Angels probably needing a sweep to at least get the Mariners' attention.

For now, they have no choice but to deal with their fate in much the same way Trout had no option Thursday but to walk away before risking the first ejection of his career.

Replays and enhanced graphics suggested that Trout had a point, both third strikes appearing to be just wide. But until baseball starts calling pitches with laser beams and the like, there will be room for dispute.

"Mike never argues," manager Mike Scioscia said. "I haven't seen the pitches [on replay], but I guarantee you he doesn't argue without merit."

It wasn't just the umpiring that was a source of consternation for the Angels. Coming off a game in which they had six hits in 17 at-bats with runners in scoring position, they went hitless in eight such opportunities.

"We just didn't pressure them enough offensively," Scioscia said. "We did put guys on early, for sure."

Indeed, five of those at-bats came in the first three innings, five chances that disappeared quickly.

Albert Pujols grounded into a bases-loaded double play to end the first inning, Kole Calhoun and David Fletcher struck out with a runner on second in the second and Justin Upton and Pujols were retired with a runner on second in the third.

After Calhoun drove in a run with a sacrifice fly in the fourth, the Angels managed little until the eighth.

With two on and one out, pinch-hitter Luis Valbuena struck out and Ian Kinsler lined a ball toward center field that Seattle second baseman Dee Gordon snagged with a highlight-quality dive.

With Shohei Ohtani available to pinch-hit as the potential tying run, Scioscia opted instead to use Valbuena.

Ohtani was on deck to hit for Martin Maldonado when Gordon ended the Angels' final threat. He pinch-hit to lead off the ninth and struck out against Seattle closer Edwin Diaz.

The loss went to Jaime Barria, who gave up an RBI single to Gordon in the third and an RBI double to Guillermo Heredia in the fifth.

Otherwise, he kept the Mariners off the scoreboard through 5 1/3 innings, mostly working around five hits and three walks.

These six games in 10 days against Seattle have been viewed as the Angels' chance to set the direction for the remainder of their season.

The team that was tied for first in the American League West as late as mid-May now returns to Southern California for the final homestand before the All-Star break entrenched in fourth place, much closer to last place than first.

Yes, the Angels have tumbled dramatically in the standings, and here's why: they have gone 6-17 of late, while the Houston Astros (21-7), Mariners (11-2) and Oakland Athletics (14-3) have trended the other way.

Angels keeping a wary eye on rookie Anderson's high pitch counts

By Jeff Miller

The Angels love **Justin Anderson's** right arm.

They only wish he didn't have to use it so much.

The rookie reliever is one of the Angels' hardest throwers and, through the first 30 games of his big-league career, he has become a favorite late-inning option for manager **Mike Scioscia**.

His continued development, however, is a matter of economics, the Angels wanting Anderson to be more efficient and limit his high pitch counts.

"It comes down to commanding the baseball," Scioscia said. "It comes down to repeating your delivery. It's not just throwing the ball down the middle."

The right-hander averages 19.91 pitches per inning, the highest average on the Angels staff among those who have appeared in more than five games.

He has thrown at least 20 pitches in 16 appearances, although eight have lasted more than one inning.

"I want to make sure I'm pounding the strike zone a little bit more," Anderson said, "instead of going out there and just sort of throwing the ball around in circles."

He had his most efficient inning of the season June 27 at Boston, when he retired the Red Sox in order on eight pitches in the sixth inning, facing **Mookie Betts**, **Andrew Benintendi** and **J.D. Martinez**.

"I'm still learning a bunch of things every day," Anderson said. "I think maybe in the transition to the big leagues you sometimes try to overdo things a little."

Strong up the middle

No team in baseball has permitted fewer stolen bases than the Angels and only the Miami Marlins have thrown out a higher percentage of would-be base stealers.

They've made fewer errors than all but one other American League team and they lead the league in double plays.

"We're not leading the league in double plays as a fluke," Scioscia said. "We've been turning double plays at an incredible rate."

The San Francisco Giants began Thursday with 94 double plays and the Angels were next with 91.

"You have to look at the guys in the middle," Scioscia said. "You look at **Andrelton [Simmons]**. You look at **Ian [Kinsler]**. These guys are as good as there is at their positions."

Short hops

Nick Tropeano (shoulder) is scheduled to make his first rehabilitation start Saturday with single-A Inland Empire. He's expected to throw about 60 pitches. ... Reliever **Jim Johnson** (lumbar) has been throwing off a mound and is moving toward starting a rehab assignment. ... **Matt Shoemaker** (forearm) is getting close to starting a throwing program. The right-hander has been limited to one start and is coming back from surgery in late May. ... Outfielder **Chris Young** has a strained left hamstring. He was injured against the Mariners on Tuesday.

Halos miss chances, drop rubber game vs. M's

By Maria Guardado

SEATTLE -- It was an evening littered with missed opportunities for the Angels.

They squandered multiple early scoring chances against left-hander **Marco Gonzales** and fell to the Mariners, 4-1, on Thursday night at Safeco Field. More broadly, they couldn't take advantage of an opportunity to gain some ground on Seattle in the American League Wild Card race.

By dropping two of three games this series, the Angels fell to 12 games behind the Mariners for the second AL Wild Card spot, a daunting position to be in with less than a month to go until the July 31 non-waiver Trade Deadline. The AL West rivals are set to play six more times this month, setting up a crucial stretch for the Angels (44-44), who have lost nine of their last 12 games to fall back to .500.

"We need to do some things better on the field," Halos manager Mike Scioscia said. "That's what we're going to focus on. We're working hard at it. I think that when we do, you're going to see us put the wins up like we can. Until we do that, we're going to be a little hit or miss. I think we know what we need to work on, and we're going to keep working toward that."

The Angels mustered six hits, going 0-for-8 with runners in scoring position and leaving nine men on base. **Kole Calhoun** produced their only run of the night with a sacrifice fly in the fourth inning.

"Any time you have opportunities like that, you want to take advantage of them," Angels second baseman **Ian Kinsler** said. "Not very often are we going to come up empty-handed. Today was tough, but we stayed in the game and kept fighting. They just kind of pulled away from us a little bit."

Rookie **Jaime Barria** took the loss after giving up two runs on five hits over 5 1/3 innings. The Angels initially planned to skip Barria's turn during this series to deploy their top three starters -- **Andrew Heaney**, **Garrett Richards** and **Tyler Skaggs** -- against the Mariners, but Barria was pressed into action after Skaggs landed on the disabled list on Wednesday with a right adductor strain. Barria said he learned he would be starting after throwing his bullpen session on Wednesday.

"It changed the plan a little bit," Barria said in Spanish. "I always throw my bullpen two days before my starts, but I only had one day this time. But I came out to compete, like I always do."

The Angels tested Gonzales early, but they struggled to capitalize. **David Fletcher** opened the game with a walk and advanced to second on a single by **Andrelton Simmons**, but **Mike Trout** struck out on a called third strike by home-plate umpire Mark Ripperger. Trout was visibly unhappy with the call, as the pitch appeared to be off the plate.

Justin Upton then drew a four-pitch walk to load the bases with one out, but **Albert Pujols** grounded into a 5-4-3 inning-ending double play.

In the second, the Angels put runners on first and second with one out after Kinsler reached on an error and **Martin Maldonado** singled, but Gonzales struck out Calhoun and Fletcher swinging to escape the jam.

"There's no doubt, early in the game, we had a lot of guys in scoring position," Scioscia said. "Give Gonzales some credit. He made some pitches."

The Mariners took a 1-0 lead in the third after **Guillermo Heredia** doubled and scored on **Dee Gordon's** RBI single, but the Angels came back to tie it in the fourth. After Kinsler and Maldonado delivered back-to-back singles to put runners on the corners with one out, Calhoun lifted a fly ball to deep center field to score Kinsler from third, tying the game at 1.

The Angels' frustrations at the plate came to a head in the fifth, when Trout took another called third strike from Ripperger that appeared to be outside. Trout vehemently protested the call, a rare outburst from a player who has never been ejected from a game in his career.

"Mike never argues," Scioscia said. "I haven't seen the pitches, but I guarantee you that he doesn't argue without merit. That's for sure."

Added Trout: "I didn't like the call, obviously. It is what it is."

Seattle went ahead, 2-1, after **Ben Gamel** walked and scored on Heredia's RBI double in the fifth.

In the sixth, Barria yielded a leadoff single to **Jean Segura** and a one-out walk to **Nelson Cruz**, prompting Scioscia to lift him in favor of left-hander **Jose Alvarez**. After Alvarez retired **Kyle Seager** on a forceout, Scioscia brought in **Miguel Almonte** to face **Ryon Healy** in his Angels debut.

Almonte struck out Healy swinging to end the inning, but he then surrendered a solo home run to **Chris Herrmann** in the seventh that made it 3-1. Seattle later added an insurance run on Segura's RBI single.

MOMENT THAT MATTERED

Halos can't break through: The Angels had a rally going in the eighth after Upton walked and Pujols singled to put runners on first and second with one out. **Shohei Ohtani** was available off the bench, but Scioscia decided to send up **Luis Valbuena** to pinch-hit against Mariners reliever **Alex Colome**. Valbuena struck out for the second out of the inning. That brought up Kinsler, who smoked a ball toward center field, but Gordon made an incredible leaping catch to rob him of a hit and end the inning.

"It's a very difficult play," Kinsler said. "That ball was kind of floating in the air. He mistimed his jump a little bit, so that's what caused him to really stretch out like that. ... He had to kind of adjust in the air. It was very, very impressive."

Ohtani, who was on deck to hit for Maldonado in the eighth, led off the ninth, but he struck out swinging against Mariners closer **Edwin Diaz**.

"We were looking at putting Ohtani in a spot where Maldonado was to see if the inning got to that spot," Scioscia said. "We didn't have enough players to really make a lot of those moves that we were looking at. Valbuena for [Jefry] Marte was a good change, and then we had Shohei for however the

inning went. Kinsler lines out, [but] if that ball goes in there, we've got Shohei up trying to put us ahead."

UP NEXT

The Angels will return to Southern California to face the Dodgers in the annual Freeway Series on Friday night at 7:07 p.m. PT at Angel Stadium. Halos right-hander **Felix Pena** (1-0, 3.71 ERA) will oppose righty **Kenta Maeda** (5-5, 3.36) in the series opener. Pena, a converted reliever, is 1-0 with a 2.51 ERA in his first three starts for the Angels. He worked three scoreless innings over two relief appearances against the Dodgers last season while pitching for the Cubs.

Angels activate Marte, option Blash to Triple-A

Ohtani out of lineup against left-hander Gonzales

By Maria Guardado

SEATTLE -- The Angels activated infielder **Jefry Marte** off the disabled list and optioned outfielder **Jabari Blash** to Triple-A Salt Lake on Thursday ahead of their series finale against the Mariners.

Marte, who missed 20 games with a left wrist sprain, started at first base against Seattle left-hander **Marco Gonzales** in his first game since June 11. Before the injury, Marte was batting .262 with a .752 OPS and three home runs over 39 games in a part-time role.

With Marte at first base and **Albert Pujols** at designated hitter, the Angels chose to leave left-handed-hitting **Shohei Ohtani** out of their lineup against Gonzales. Ohtani, who turned 24 on Thursday, has logged a 1.066 OPS against right-handers and a .399 OPS against lefties this season, making it likely that he'll sit against lefties to give the 38-year-old Pujols a chance to occasionally DH rather than start at first base every day.

"We've got Marte back, who we like against left-handed pitchers," manager Mike Scioscia said. "Shohei, he'll definitely get his looks."

Scioscia added that Ohtani would be available to pinch-hit or pinch-run on Thursday.

Blash was called up Wednesday to replace the injured **Chris Young** on the roster, so his demotion means Marte and **David Fletcher** will temporarily serve as the Angels' backup outfielders. Marte and Fletcher have some outfield experience, but they're both natural infielders.

"We're excited to get these guys back," Scioscia said.

AL West: Who's buying, who's selling?

By T. R. Sullivan

ARLINGTON -- The American League West had four teams above .500 for most of the first three months of the season, but is evolving into a two-team race between the Astros and Mariners.

With the July 31 non-waiver Trade Deadline approaching, clubs now have to decide where they stand, what their needs are and what they hope to accomplish leading up to that crucial date.

ANGELS

What we've learned

Mike Trout is the best player in baseball, but that doesn't do a team much good when the offense is inconsistent and the pitching staff is riddled with injuries. **Shohei Ohtani** came back as an offensive player on Tuesday, but his loss as a starting pitcher has been hard to overcome. Starters **Garrett Richards**, **Nick Tropeano**, **Andrew Heaney**, **Matt Shoemaker** and **JC Ramirez** have all spent time on the disabled list.

What they are hoping to accomplish in the trade market

The Angels' pursuit of right-hander **Kelvin Herrera** before the Royals traded him to the Nationals showed that the Halos were interested in upgrading the back end of their bullpen. They need pitching, but they are also rebuilding their farm system with athletic, high-upside players.

Stock watch

The Angels have appeared to be in a buying mode to this point, but that may no longer be practical if they continue to lose ground in both the division and the AL Wild Card race. The Halos could be sellers, but there doesn't appear to be much to sell unless somebody like **Ian Kinsler** or Richards gets hot in the next few weeks. General manager Billy Eppler will look to be as creative as possible to improve the Major League product.

ASTROS

What we've learned

Everything is going great for a team on pace for 103 wins, the most in club history. The Astros lead the league in pitching and their offense is among the league leaders in runs scored. Everything would be no sweat, except they can't quite shake the Mariners.

What they'll be hoping to accomplish in the trade market

Houston saw last year how much of an impact acquiring starter **Justin Verlander** had on the team. It's quite possible it may attempt the same impact trade for a closer. **Ken Giles** doesn't have a blown save, but **Hector Rondon** is starting to take over as closer.

Stock watch

The Astros are definitely buyers. They are in the middle of a run with a special group of players, so they are going to do everything they can to maximize their chances.

ATHLETICS

What we've learned

The Athletics, led by a strong bullpen, surged in the final two weeks of June and passed the Angels into third place in the AL West. **Blake Treinen** has been particularly outstanding as a closer and infielder **Jed Lowrie** has played like an All-Star.

What they are hoping to accomplish in the trade market

Oakland's history under Billy Beane -- their vice president for baseball operations -- is that it is a postseason team if and only if it has strong starting pitching. This team is still rebuilding its rotation and that will likely be foremost in the A's minds at the Trade Deadline.

Stock watch

Beane and general manager David Forst are always looking for creative ways to keep the Athletics competitive, but it's difficult to see them making enough moves to keep up with the Astros and the Mariners. The A's are still a team looking more toward the future than the present, even though they have exceeded expectations to this point.

MARINERS

What we've learned

The Mariners played the entire second quarter without suspended second baseman **Robinson Cano**, and they continue to find ways to win, especially in one-run games. They were 33-14 in their first 47 games without Cano. Their starting pitchers were 22-7 with a 3.18 ERA in that stretch, but Seattle continue to be linked to starting pitchers available on the trade market based on its current rotation being relatively inexperienced or a recent history of health issues.

What they are hoping to accomplish in the trade market

Cole Hamels of the Rangers and **J.A. Happ** of the Blue Jays are the two most prominent starting pitchers being mentioned now, but others could surface before July 31.

Stock watch

The Mariners won't be sellers, and rarely does general manager Jerry Dipoto do things in between. He is one of the most aggressive general managers in the game, and he should be fun to watch as Seattle fights for its first postseason berth since 2001.

RANGERS

What we've learned

The last two weeks of June were revealing as **Adrian Beltre** and **Elvis Andrus** returned to the lineup. The Rangers won 11 of 13 games because their starters -- led by **Mike Minor** -- were 8-1 with a 3.18 ERA. Texas' young position players continue to progress and their bullpen is strong. Starting pitching is still the riddle the Rangers must resolve before they return to the status of a contender.

What they'll be hoping to accomplish in the trade market

Texas wants as many young, controllable players as possible for the future. The emphasis has to be on pitching, especially if there are any young starters available.

Stock watch

Hamels makes the Rangers sellers. There are clubs that could use him, but they may not be willing to meet the asking price or take on the contract. The chances of Texas trading third baseman Beltre seem to be diminishing.

All-Star FAQ: All you need to know on rosters

Rosters unveiled at 7 p.m. ET Sunday on ESPN; Final Vote next

By Anthony Castrovino

The votes are in, and so now we wait for the official unveiling of the American League and National League rosters for the 2018 All-Star Game presented by Mastercard on Sunday night. In the meantime, a little refresher on how these squads are selected is in order.

As always, fans voted for the starting position players via the 2018 Camping World MLB All-Star Ballot. But the selection process for pitcher and reserve spots changed in the Collective Bargaining Agreement that took effect last year. Not only was the connection between the Midsummer Classic and home-field advantage in the World Series eliminated, but roster sizes were reduced. So here's a handy FAQ to guide you through the particulars of the selection process.

How many spots have to be filled?

The NL has 24 spots, while the AL has 23. The difference, of course, is that fans vote in a starting designated hitter for the AL team. There are 32 total roster spots for each league, as opposed to the previous total of 34. There will be 20 position players and 12 pitchers per side, whereas last year's 34-man rosters had a 13-pitcher minimum.

Who picks the reserves and pitchers?

In short, it's a group effort. The player ballot, the Commissioner's Office and the fans all have a say in how the rosters rounded out. The new wrinkle this year is that the NL and AL skippers (in this case, Dave Roberts and AJ Hinch) no longer have a say in the selections, so there won't be accusations of homerism.

How many player ballot selections are there?

The ballots gathered in all 30 clubhouses shortly before the roster announcements account for 16 players in the NL and 17 in the AL -- eight pitchers (five starters and three relievers), as well as one backup for each position (including DH in the AL).

What if the players selected a guy already voted into the starting lineup by the fans?

Next man up. The guy who was second on the player ballot at that particular position is selected as the backup. This doesn't change the number of player ballot selections. The player ballot is basically used as a pecking order to fill the backup slot at each position.

How many MLB selections are there?

The Commissioner's Office is responsible for selecting seven NL players (four pitchers and three position players) and five AL players (four pitchers and one position player). At this stage, MLB must ensure that every club is represented by at least one All-Star selection.

What about the fans?

You guys aren't done yet. You'll fill the 32nd and final spot on each roster via the Final Vote ballot. It will feature five position players as candidates (again, selected by MLB) from each league.

Does every team have to be represented?

Yes, and it is the job of the Commissioner's Office to ensure this stipulation is accounted for with those selections.

It should be noted, however, that if a player is selected to the roster and can't participate for a particular reason, he does not necessarily have to be replaced by a teammate.

How is the starting pitcher for each team determined?

By the league managers. See, they still have some say in this process! The announcement is made the day before the game.

Who picks the replacements for injured players or those who decline to participate?

If an elected starter is going to be unable to play, the reserve who received the most votes on the player ballot at that particular position moves into the starting lineup. The roster replacement is then chosen by the league.

If a player-elected reserve position player must be replaced, the next in line on the player ballot becomes a reserve. Once the top three finishers on the player ballot at a given position are covered, then it becomes a selection by the Commissioner's Office.

Does an injured or otherwise unavailable player have to be replaced by a player from the same position?

Not necessarily. Pitchers will be replaced by pitchers. But on the position-player front, we've seen situations like infielders replacing outfielders and vice versa.

Are starters who pitch the Sunday (July 15) before the game allowed to participate?

Initially, Sunday starters were deemed ineligible. Then, they were allowed to make the decision themselves (albeit limited to a single inning if they opted to play). Now, clubs or players are allowed to make requests for usage accommodation if there are factors (such as a DL stint, recent surgery, innings workload or other reasons) that would affect the pitcher's availability. If an accommodation is granted, then the parties will agree upon the pitcher's status and workload availability.

So how many total All-Stars are we talking about here?

Even with the reduced roster sizes that went into effect last year, we still ended up with 71 total All-Stars (after an average of 79 in the five years prior to the reduction) due to injury and scheduling replacements. So try not to get too worked up about "snubs" when the initial rosters are announced, because things will evolve in the lead-up to the game.

What if a selected player gets traded to a team in the opposite league before the All-Star Game?

This happened to **Jeff Samardzija** in 2014, when the Cubs dealt him to the A's. In such a scenario, the player is deemed ineligible to participate in the game but is still recognized as an All-Star for the original league. In Samardzija's case, he wore a generic NL jersey and All-Star Game cap for the pregame player introductions.

FROM THE ATHLETIC**Frustrating run finds Angels in a precarious position: Mediocrity**

By Fabian Ardaya

SEATTLE — For a second, it appeared as if Mike Trout was set to check off yet another career milestone — albeit not a great one.

The Angels center fielder stepped into the box in the first inning of Thursday's 4-1 loss against Seattle and took all but one of Marco Gonzales' five pitches. The last one, an 87-mph cutter, just dove back into home-plate umpire Mark Ripperger's strike zone. Trout disagreed, letting Ripperger know as such. Two at-bats later, he sat and watched six straight pitches. Again, Ripperger felt the final one caught the corner, and Trout disagreed.

Trout, appearing as vocal as ever in his career, voiced his displeasure. The broadcast cameras concurred with Trout's summation of the pitch — it was outside. Not by a lot, but outside. The brief outburst could have led to Trout's first career ejection, though in a 1-1 game it would require more than a mild outburst to get run out.

"I didn't like the call, obviously," Trout said. "It is what it is."

Frustration sets in for everyone, even the most even-keeled of personalities.

"Mike never argues," Angels manager Mike Scioscia said. "I haven't seen the pitches, but I can guarantee you that he doesn't argue without merit, for sure."

The rest of the offense didn't fair much better, despite generating traffic against Gonzales. The left-hander meandered through six innings, allowing just a run with no real damage done.

"We just couldn't pressure them enough offensively," Scioscia said.

The Angels find themselves in a difficult place. At 44-44, they've essentially been what they've repeatedly emphasized they're not: average. Another key opportunity to shake that notion slipped through their fingers. A three-game set against the Mariners, who have seemed to have a grip on the rabbit's foot for the entire year as they've surged to challenge the Astros for the division lead, yielded but one victory. They finished 3-6 after a nine-game road trip to Boston, Baltimore and Seattle.

Without a serious run in the coming weeks, the club, seemingly in win-now mode looking to milk some of Trout's best years, may be forced to consider selling off some of their assets on expiring contracts. Thursday was filled with frustrations, with missed opportunity to engineer such a run.

The club went 0-for-8 with runners in scoring position, including an eighth inning that saw Justin Upton and Albert Pujols reach safely to bring on the tying run against a shaky Alex Colomé. Scioscia opted to bring in Luis Valbuena to counter and go for the tie. If the inning had pushed for two more batters, Scioscia would've given Shohei Ohtani the chance to push across the go-ahead run.

With a three-man bench, Scioscia wanted Valbuena to be an easy swap with Jefry Marte instead of wasting his bat. Had he brought in Ohtani immediately, he said, he'd have to bring in Valbuena or José Briceño in at first base and waste a batter.

"We didn't have enough infielders," he said.

Valbuena struck out. Ian Kinsler appeared to push the inning to Ohtani anyways, his broken-bat liner seeming destined for the outfield to keep the inning alive. Instead, Mariners second baseman Dee Gordon's full-extension diving grab ended what would be the Angels' best chance of the night.

"I broke my bat, that was my thought," Kinsler said. "My second thought was, that's going to center field. My third thought was, I'm out. It was pretty impressive.

"It's a very difficult play. That ball was kind of up in the air, and he mistimed his jump a little bit. That's what caused him to really stretch out like that. When the ball's on a line, sometimes in the infield you can't tell how hard it's hit until it's about halfway or it gets to you. He was already in the air, so he kind of had to adjust in the air."

Ohtani would eventually enter to lead off the ninth, and struck out as well against Mariners closer Edwin Díaz. The Angels wouldn't threaten, as Díaz struck out the side — they had blown their chance, along with the several others that had littered the early innings.

"Any time you have opportunities like that, you want to take advantage of them," Kinsler said. "It's a good sign we're getting those opportunities. As long as we keep getting those opportunities in games that we're playing, that's a good sign. We should be able to drive on that moving forward. It's not very often that we're going to come up empty-handed."

The time is running thin to make a decision before July's non-waiver trade deadline. A gauntlet awaits them until the All-Star break brings some sort of reprieve, facing the surging Dodgers six times and the Mariners for three more. Facing a pair of clubs that appear destined for the postseason, the Angels will have to be more than just the .500 club they've shown through 88 games.

"We need to do some things better on the field," Scioscia said. "That's what we're focused on, and we're working hard on it. I think that when we do, we're going to see us put up the wins like we can. Until then, we're going to be a little hit or miss."

Rosenthal: Playing by the rules, here are my (sometimes cringeworthy) picks for the All-Star teams

By Ken Rosenthal

Here was the existential question as I made my All-Star picks, and it was most definitely not brought to you by Camping World or any other sponsor of Major League Baseball:

Should teams that stink get, uh, fewer selections?

The Miami Marlins, Pittsburgh Pirates and Detroit Tigers rebuilt over the last 12 months in part by trading former All-Stars. The Oakland Athletics, Tampa Bay Rays and Chicago White Sox built low payrolls in part because they would not pursue expensive All-Stars. The New York Mets, Baltimore Orioles, Toronto Blue Jays and Texas Rangers entered the season with ambition and flopped, and it sure does not seem like the incompetence of those clubs — and others — should be rewarded.

The players bear a measure of responsibility for the sports' current rich-man, poor-man state — the most recent collective bargaining agreement, crafted by MLB and the players' union, included no provision requiring clubs to spend at a certain minimum. But after careful consideration — ok, three minutes — I decided to follow my usual practice, picking the players on merit without holding the performances of their individual teams against them.

My magnanimous gesture somehow left me with two Mets and one Phillie — a cringeworthy outcome, if not a fireable offense. But hey, I'm playing by baseball's rules, assigning 20 position players and 12 pitchers to both the AL and NL rosters, and making sure each club, gulp, is represented.

As always, direct all of your righteous anger to the comments section below as well as to my Twitter account, @Ken_Rosenthal. But do not — repeat, DO NOT — mention your favorite All-Star wanna-be and ask, "Not even an unfortunate omission?" The answer is, *No, not even an unfortunate omission!*

Oh, and don't worry: Once the withdrawals start, whether because of injury or some other unforeseen circumstance, virtually every deserving player will find his way onto the team, anyway.

Asterisks () denote the starter.*

NATIONAL LEAGUE

Catcher

*J.T. Realmuto, Marlins

Francisco Cervelli, Pirates

Yadier Molina, Cardinals

Unfortunate omissions: Willson Contreras, Cubs; Yasmani Grandal, Dodgers; Buster Posey, Giants.

Crowded position, especially considering how paper-thin the AL is at this spot. True, Molina missed nearly a month with — I can barely write these words — an awful pelvic injury, but he still leads all NL catchers with 13 homers. Then again, I would have no problem if his spot went to Contreras or Posey; Realmuto and Cervelli are their teams' only representatives.

First base

*Freddie Freeman, Braves

Paul Goldschmidt, Diamondbacks

Max Muncy, Dodgers

Jesús Aguilar, Brewers

Unfortunate omissions: Brandon Belt, Giants; José Martínez, Cardinals; Joey Votto, Reds.

Heck, yes, Muncy and Aguilar make my team. Part of the magic of the ASG, as I wrote earlier this week, is when previously unheralded players erupt with monster first halves and prove worthy of the honor. That said, Belt, in particular, deserves better; he is enjoying his best offensive season.

Second base

*Javier Báez, Cubs

Scooter Gennett, Reds

Ozzie Albies, Braves

Unfortunate omissions: None.

Albies and Báez are two of the most fun players to watch in the sport, and there is simply no denying Gennett, who leads the NL with a .331 batting average and ranks eighth with an .898 OPS.

Shortstop

*Brandon Crawford, Giants

Trea Turner, Nationals

Unfortunate omission: Trevor Story, Rockies.

Story's .866 OPS is 105 points higher than Turner's, but his home-road splits (1.124-.662) are extreme, so I'm going with the greater stolen-base threat.

Third base

*Nolan Arenado, Rockies

Eugenio Suarez, Reds

Unfortunate omissions: Kris Bryant, Cubs (injured); Matt Carpenter, Cardinals; Daniel Descalso, Diamondbacks; Anthony Rendon, Nationals.

Those omissions aren't *that* unfortunate. Carpenter got off to a horrible start, Rendon missed three weeks with a left toe contusion and Arenado and Suarez rank 1-2 in the NL in OPS.

I just wish I could find a spot for Descalso, who is one of the game's best utility men and a big part of the D-Backs' success.

Outfield

*Lorenzo Cain, Brewers

*Matt Kemp, Dodgers

*Nick Markakis, Braves

Brandon Nimmo, Mets

David Peralta, Diamondbacks

Kyle Schwarber, Cubs

Unfortunate omissions: Albert Almora, Cubs; Bryce Harper, Nationals; Odúbel Herrera, Phillies; Rhys Hoskins, Phillies; Juan Soto, Nationals; Christian Yelich, Brewers.

Harper was practically born an All-Star and never mind his .840 OPS — I couldn't justify including him when he's batting .215. Schwarber's offense *and* defense have been impressive, and Peralta needs to be recognized. I struggled with including Nimmo over Yelich and the two Phillies outfielders, but Nimmo is a plus defender and sixth in the NL in OPS. It's not his fault the Mets drafted him.

Pitchers

*Max Scherzer, Nationals

Patrick Corbin, Diamondbacks

Mike Foltynewicz, Braves

Jacob deGrom, Mets

Jon Lester, Cubs

Miles Mikolas, Cardinals

Aaron Nola, Phillies

Josh Hader, Brewers

Kenley Jansen, Dodgers

Jeremy Jeffress, Brewers

Kirby Yates, Padres

Sean Doolittle, Nationals

Unfortunate omissions: Kyle Barraclough, Marlins; Seranthony Domínguez, Phillies; Kyle Freeland, Rockies; Brad Hand, Padres; Adam Ottavino, Rockies; Richard Rodríguez, Pirates; Ross Stripling, Dodgers.

Freeland and Ottavino were particularly difficult to exclude; they deserve extra credit for pitching their home games at Coors Field, and I would be comfortable with both as injury replacements. Ditto for Barraclough and Domínguez.

AMERICAN LEAGUE

Catcher

*Wilson Ramos, Rays

Yan Gomes, Indians

Unfortunate omissions: None. Even the two choices are somewhat, "Meh."

First base

*Mitch Moreland, Red Sox

José Abreu, White Sox

Unfortunate omissions: Matt Olson, Athletics; Justin Smoak, Blue Jays.

Not exactly a position of strength in the AL. Abreu's OPS in his last 150 plate appearances is .568. Olson and Smoak are good, but Moreland — while 19 plate appearances shy of qualifying for the league leaders — has both of them beat by more than 100 points in OPS.

Second base

*Jose Altuve, Astros

Jed Lowrie, Athletics

Whit Merrifield, Royals

Unfortunate omissions: Gleyber Torres, Yankees.

Torres was on my team until he went on the disabled list on Thursday with a strained right hip. His injury opens a spot for Lowrie, who would make his first All-Star appearance at 34. I'm going with Merrifield over Mike Moustakas as my Royals rep.

Shortstop

*Francisco Lindor, Indians

Manny Machado, Orioles

Jean Segura, Mariners

Unfortunate omissions: Xander Bogaerts, Red Sox; Carlos Correa, Astros; Andrelton Simmons, Angels.

I hate snubbing Simmons, who has never been an All-Star yet arguably is the best defender in the sport. To exclude him in the year of his offensive breakout, even though he missed time with a right ankle sprain, seems patently unfair.

Maybe a spot will clear if Machado gets traded to an NL club before the ASG and becomes this year's Jeff Samardzija during player introductions — an official representative, but an All-Star without a country.

Third base

*José Ramírez, Indians

Alex Bregman, Astros

Unfortunate omissions: Matt Chapman, Athletics; Eduardo Escobar, Twins; Mike Moustakas, Royals.

Escobar needs to be on the team. I just can't find a spot for him.

Designated hitter

*J.D. Martinez, Red Sox

Shin-Soo Choo, Rangers

Unfortunate omission: Nelson Cruz, Mariners.

Cruz merits automatic consideration for his brilliant photo op with Cowboy Joe West at last year's game, and his numbers are slightly better than Choo's. Outfielder Nomar Mazara is the next most worthy Ranger, but Choo is a better choice — and he would be a first-time All-Star at 35.

Outfield

*Mookie Betts, Red Sox

*Aaron Judge, Yankees

*Mike Trout, Angels

Andrew Benintendi, Red Sox

Nicholas Castellanos, Tigers

Eddie Rosario, Twins

Unfortunate omissions: Michael Brantley, Indians; Mitch Haniger, Mariners; Aaron Hicks, Yankees.

I was tempted to go with Hicks over Benintendi, but Hicks has made nearly 100 fewer plate appearances after missing the start of the season with a right intercostal strain. Benintendi is also 16-for-17 in stolen-base attempts, the best percentage in the majors.

Pitchers

*Justin Verlander, Astros

Trevor Bauer, Indians

Gerrit Cole, Astros

J.A. Happ, Blue Jays

Corey Kluber, Indians

Charlie Morton, Astros

James Paxton, Mariners

Chris Sale, Red Sox

Luis Severino, Yankees

Blake Snell, Rays

Aroldis Chapman, Yankees

Edwin Díaz, Mariners

Unfortunate omissions: Dellin Betances, Yankees; Craig Kimbrel, Red Sox; José LeClerc, Rangers; Blake Treinen, Athletics; Collin McHugh, Astros; Lou Trivino, Athletics.

Treinen might be the most unfortunate omission on either of my rosters; he throws multiple innings often, his 0.84 ERA is the best of any AL reliever and his .446 opponents' OPS ranks sixth. I excluded him for Happ, who isn't quite at the level of the other AL starters but is the most deserving Blue Jay.

FROM THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Stars and stripes: Sending baseball's best to Washington

By Mike Fitzpatrick

NEW YORK (AP) — Now that fan voting is finished, it's a good time to take a hard look at All-Star Game selections.

Which players are worthy of participating July 17 in Washington, and who gets left out?

Let's touch on this topic first: Shohei Ohtani is incredibly talented and fascinating to watch, but the Los Angeles Angels' two-way Japanese star simply hasn't been on the field enough to earn a spot. Not at pitcher OR designated hitter.

Ohtani just returned to the lineup from an elbow injury that's knocked him off the mound for now. He's only made nine major league pitching starts, and the Angels have limited his at-bats all season due to concerns about the rookie's workload.

So while it would definitely be fun to see him in baseball's summer showcase, there are several more deserving American League sluggers at DH. It wouldn't be fair to deny one of them in favor of Ohtani. And he's unavailable to pitch at this point.

Let him win his invitation next season with a fully healthy and productive first half. Or the year after that. Or whenever it happens.

Buzzkill, I know.

But even without Ohtani, there's plenty to watch for leading up to the first All-Star Game in the nation's capital since the Senators hosted at RFK Stadium in 1969.

Start with Atlanta outfielder Nick Markakis. With more than 2,150 career hits, he's poised to make an All-Star team for the first time in his 13th big league season.

Matt Kemp, Miles Mikolas and Mike Foltynewicz are enjoying feel-good comebacks.

Robinson Cano, the MVP of last year's game, will sit this one out while serving a drug suspension.

Injuries may keep familiar stars such as Clayton Kershaw, Stephen Strasburg, Carlos Correa and Corey Seager from returning, but in their place should be exciting newcomers like Aaron Nola, Ozzie Albies, Alex Bregman and Eddie Rosario.

The American League has won five times in a row and is 17-3-1 in the last 21 years.

"I want to win. I always want to win. It's not playing for home-field advantage anymore in the World Series, but all these guys are competitors and they want to win for their respective league," said National League manager Dave Roberts of the Los Angeles Dodgers.

There's a logjam at shortstop in the AL, and the NL bullpen is loaded.

That sort of thing is where it gets complicated: Each roster has 32 spots, with 12 going to pitchers. Every club must be represented, too.

Online voting for the starters at each position ended at midnight Thursday, and the teams will be revealed Sunday night.

"I'm looking forward to it. It'll be a great experience," said Houston's AJ Hinch, who will manage the AL squad. "It's as casual a game as you'll play with the biggest names on the stage, and all the attention that comes with it. It's a big deal."

Disregarding fan and player balloting, here are our picks:

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AMERICAN LEAGUE

FIRST BASE — Jose Abreu of the White Sox gets the start, barely nudging out Toronto switch-hitter Justin Smoak.

SECOND BASE — AL MVP Jose Altuve from the World Series champion Astros is backed up by 34-year-old Oakland veteran Jed Lowrie, whose first All-Star nod is probably long overdue.

SHORTSTOP — Cleveland whiz Francisco Lindor is in the lineup. Top trade target Manny Machado from lowly Baltimore, and Jean Segura from Seattle are on the bench. Gold Glove winner Andrelton Simmons of the Angels is really tough to leave out.

THIRD BASE — Jose Ramirez gives the Indians both starters on the left side of the infield. Bregman backs up at the hot corner, from Houston.

CATCHER — Wilson Ramos is a big reason the Rays are holding their own. Perennial pick Salvador Perez represents the struggling Royals despite his subpar season.

OUTFIELD — Angels star Mike Trout plays center, with Boston's Mookie Betts in left and Yankees masher Aaron Judge in right. Reserves include Rosario from the Twins, Mitch Haniger from the Mariners, and Nicholas Castellanos from the Tigers.

DESIGNATED HITTER — J.D. Martinez has been worth every penny during his first season in Boston. Texas' Shin-Soo Choo and New York hulk Giancarlo Stanton, last year's NL MVP, both still play the outfield sometimes, which helps. Seattle slugger Nelson Cruz is a very difficult omission.

STARTING PITCHERS — Luis Severino is in line to become the first Yankees pitcher to start an All-Star Game since Roger Clemens in 2001. Other right-handers include Justin Verlander, Gerrit Cole and Charlie Morton from Houston, plus Cy Young Award winner Corey Kluber and Trevor Bauer from Cleveland. The left-handers are Boston ace Chris Sale and Tampa Bay's Blake Snell. Seattle lefty James Paxton is our top

pick to replace Verlander, who doesn't plan to pitch in the All-Star Game because he's scheduled to start two days before.

RELIEVERS — Four filthy closers in the bullpen: Yankees lefty Aroldis Chapman, plus right-handers Craig Kimbrel (Boston), Edwin Diaz (Seattle) and Blake Treinen (Oakland).

NATIONAL LEAGUE

FIRST BASE — Braves cornerstone Freddie Freeman starts over Arizona's Paul Goldschmidt, who overcame a miserable May with a monster June.

SECOND BASE — The unexpected starter at a competitive position is Scooter Gennett from the Reds. Right behind him are flashy Javier Baez from the Cubs and 21-year-old igniter Ozzie Albies from the surprising Braves.

SHORTSTOP — San Francisco pro Brandon Crawford is backed up by Colorado bopper Trevor Story.

THIRD BASE — Nolan Arenado is sensational with his bat and glove for the Rockies. Eugenio Suarez is blossoming into a big run producer for the Reds, and St. Louis' Matt Carpenter can play both corner infield spots — even second base if needed.

CATCHER — A changing of the guard, with Miami's J.T. Realmuto starting and Chicago's Willson Contreras second string. St. Louis stalwart Yadier Molina barely beats out familiar rival Buster Posey of the Giants for another bench spot.

OUTFIELD — Milwaukee newcomer Lorenzo Cain is expected back from a groin strain in time to start in center, flanked by Markakis in right and Kemp from the Dodgers in left. Despite a low batting average, slumping slugger Bryce Harper of the Nationals starts at DH in his home ballpark. Also available are Christian Yelich (Brewers), Odubel Herrera (Phillies) and Gregory Polanco (Pirates).

STARTING PITCHERS — Washington ace Max Scherzer, who won his second consecutive Cy Young Award last year and third overall, gets the ball to start on his own mound. The other right-handers are Nola from the Phillies, Foltyniewicz from the Braves, Mikolas from the Cardinals, and Jacob deGrom of the Mets. Cubs lefty Jon Lester rounds out the group, with Patrick Corbin of the Diamondbacks next in line as a potential replacement for someone.

RELIEVERS — So many to choose from, and not only closers. A bevy of NL setup men are putting up dominant numbers. In the end, this bullpen features Dodgers closer Kenley Jansen, Arizona setup man Archie Bradley and San Diego's Kirby Yates from the right side, complemented by Nationals closer Sean Doolittle, Milwaukee strikeout artist Josh Hader and San Francisco's Tony Watson from the left side.

Herrmann's HR helps lift Mariners over Angels 4-1

By Todd Milles

SEATTLE (AP) — In early April, Chris Herrmann was a free-agent catcher sitting on his couch at home wondering if he was going to play baseball again.

Now he is. And the Mariners are glad they found him.

Herrmann hit his first home run for Seattle, and Marco Gonzales pitched six solid innings to lead the Mariners to a 4-1 victory over the Los Angeles Angels on Thursday night.

Gonzales (9-5) gave up five hits while striking out seven in a 102-pitching outing. The lone run he gave up was Kole Calhoun's sacrifice fly in the fourth inning to tie the game at 1.

Considering how rough a first inning the left-hander had, Gonzales gladly took the outcome.

"It was a constant chess game," Gonzales said.

He had no control over his sinker. His changeup wasn't getting over the plate. And he was working with a catcher in Herrmann — called up from the minors in late-May — with whom he had no familiarity.

But after regular catcher Mike Zunino was placed on the 10-day disabled list Thursday with a bruised left foot, it was up to Herrmann and Gonzales to figure things out.

"In that first inning, (Gonzales) did not have it. He really didn't," Mariners manager Scott Servais said. "I've been around a long time, and you see pitchers with six-to-seven years' experience in this league that panic. They don't have it, and they throw in the towel.

"It says a lot about his maturity and where he's at."

Gonzales escaped a bases-loaded jam in the first by getting Albert Pujols to ground into a double play.

"Give Gonzales some credit," Angels manager Mike Scioscia said. "He made some pitches and got out of it."

In the fifth, Guillermo Heredia's line drive went over Justin Upton's head in left field for an RBI double gave Seattle the lead back at 2-1.

In the seventh inning, Herrmann's solo blast off reliever Miguel Almonte carried deep into the right-field bleachers. Not a bad ending for a guy who did not find out he was in the starting lineup until five hours before first pitch.

"I know a lot of pitchers here have a lot of confidence behind Mike behind the plate, and I hope I can gain that confidence from these guys as well," said Herrmann, who was signed by the Mariners to a minor league deal in early April after being designated for assignment by Arizona at the end of spring training. "I am trying to do my part and fill in while he is gone."

Dee Gordon tripled into the right-field corner with two outs, and Jean Segura greeted reliever Cam Bedrosian with a high-chopping RBI single to third baseman David Fletcher to extend Seattle's lead to 4-1.

Gordon also saved a run in the eighth with his highlight-reel diving catch of Ian Kinsler's line drive behind second base.

"It was just instincts. I just jumped as far as I could," Gordon said.

Edwin Diaz struck out the side in the ninth to lock up his major league-leading 34th save.

The Mariners have not lost a home series since May 6, when they dropped two of three games to the Angels. They are 6-0-3 during that span.

Angels starter Jaime Barria (5-5) gave up two runs in 5 1/3 innings.

HERNANDEZ BACK 'BETTER'

Seattle right-hander Felix Hernandez insists he feels much better before his scheduled start Friday against Colorado than he did nearly a week ago.

Hernandez tweaked his back during a workout in Baltimore. It tightened on him before his start Saturday against Kansas City - one in which he surrendered three earned runs before recording an out in a 6-4 victory. With the help of heat and ice packs, and more stretching, Hernandez's back has felt better this week. He even threw an abbreviated bullpen session.

"I am better today, more loose," Hernandez said. "I will be fine."

BIRTHDAY BOY

What did Japanese star Shohei Ohtani get on the day of his 24th birthday Thursday in Seattle? He got a seat on the bench against Gonzales, a left-hander. With Albert Pujols serving as the designated hitter, Jefry Marte got the start at first base after being activated from the 10-day disabled list earlier in the day.

Ohtani struck out in the ninth inning as a pinch hitter against Diaz.

ROSTER RESHUFFLING

Angels: To make room for Marte, the Angels sent outfielder Jabari Blash to Triple-A Salt Lake.

Mariners: Left-handed pitcher Ariel Miranda, who started 29 games last season, was granted his unconditional release from Triple-A Tacoma to pursue playing opportunities in Japan.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Angels: Outfielder Chris Young (left hamstring) had an MRI test on his hamstring Thursday. Results weren't revealed, but he is still expected to be out past the All-Star Break. ... Right-hander Nick Tropeano (right shoulder) will pitch Saturday as part of a rehab assignment. He will be limited to 60 pitches, Scioscia said. ... Right-hander Jim Johnson (back) threw a bullpen session and is approaching a rehab assignment as well.

Mariners: Zunino (left ankle) was placed on the 10-day disabled list with a bruised left foot. He rolled his ankle late in Seattle's 7-4 loss Wednesday running the basepaths and was walking around in a boot in the clubhouse Thursday. David Freitas was recalled from Tacoma to serve as the backup catcher behind Herrmann. ... Outfielder Mitch Haniger was scratched from the starting lineup because of a bruised right knee. Heredia took his place.

UP NEXT

Rockies: Right-hander German Marquez (6-8, 5.14 ERA) faces off against one of his famous Venezuelan countrymen in Hernandez. He has never faced the Mariners, but is 2-0 in interleague play.

Mariners: Hernandez (8-6, 5.11 ERA) is one of 11 pitchers to win at least 23 games against NL squads, including the Rockies, whom he beat in August 2015 in Colorado (6 2/3 IP, 4 ER) in his only career start against them.

FROM ESPN.COM

ESPN's 2018 All-Star picks: Will any Angels join Trout in D.C.?

By Sam Miller

In advance of the 2018 Camping World All-Star Selection Show on Sunday (**7 p.m. ET on ESPN**), ESPN.com asked five of its contributors -- Bradford Doolittle, Jerry Crasnick, Buster Olney, David Schoenfield and Sarah Langs -- to select the players who should comprise the rosters for the 89th Midsummer Classic on July 17 at Nationals Park.

Below are our starters based on their votes and all of the other players who got votes as reserves or pitchers. We also asked some of our experts to answer questions about their selections.

American League

Starter voting:

Catcher: Wilson Ramos, Tampa Bay Rays (5 votes)

First base: Jose Abreu, Chicago White Sox (4) (Mitch Moreland received one vote, and Abreu was chosen as a reserve on that ballot)

Second base: Jose Altuve, Houston Astros (5)

Third base: Jose Ramirez, Cleveland Indians (5)

Shortstop: Francisco Lindor, Cleveland Indians (4) (Manny Machado received one vote, and Lindor was chosen as a reserve on that ballot)

Outfield: Mookie Betts, Boston Red Sox (5); Mike Trout, Los Angeles Angels(5); Aaron Judge, New York Yankees (5)

Designated hitter: J.D. Martinez, Boston Red Sox (5)

Reserve voting:

C: Evan Gattis, Astros (2); Salvador Perez, Royals (1); Yan Gomes, Indians (2)

1B: Moreland, Red Sox (1); Justin Smoak, Blue Jays (2)

2B: Jed Lowrie, A's (4); Whit Merrifield, Royals (1)

3B: Alex Bregman, Astros (5); Mike Moustakas, Royals (3)

SS: Machado, Orioles (4); Andrelton Simmons, Angels (4); Jean Segura, Mariners (4)

OF: Eddie Rosario, Twins (5); Mitch Haniger, Mariners (2); Nick Castellanos, Tigers (4); Andrew Benintendi (2)

DH: Shin-Soo Choo, Rangers (5); Nelson Cruz, Mariners (2)

Q: Why Gattis at catcher in the AL?

A: Catcher in the American League is not a deep field. Ramos is far and away the starter, but beyond that, there's no clear-cut No. 2. Gary Sanchez and Mike Zunino have double-digit homer totals, but they're also hitting below .200. So my AL team will improvise -- with Gattis, who's having a good year and has played 241 games at catcher in his career, the position he played the most for the Astros in 2017. -- *Sarah Langs*

Pitcher voting:

Luis Severino, SP, Yankees (5)

Justin Verlander, SP, Astros (5)

Chris Sale, SP, Red Sox (5)

Corey Kluber, SP, Indians (5)

Gerrit Cole, SP, Astros (5)

Trevor Bauer, SP, Indians (5)

Edwin Diaz, RP, Mariners (5)

Aroldis Chapman, RP, Yankees (5)

Blake Snell, SP, Rays (4)

James Paxton, SP, Mariners (4)

Charlie Morton, SP, Astros (3)

Blake Treinen, RP, A's (3)

J.A. Happ, SP, Blue Jays (2)

Craig Kimbrel, RP, Red Sox (2)

Mike Clevinger, SP, Indians (1)

Joe Jimenez, RP, Tigers (1)

Q: Who should be the starting pitcher for the AL?

A: This answer is different than it would've been even a few weeks ago. I'll pick Severino, who would be the first Yankees pitcher to start an All-Star Game since Roger Clemens in 2001. -- *Langs*

National League

Our starters:

Catcher: J.T. Realmuto, Marlins (5)

First base: Freddie Freeman, Braves (5)

Second base: Javier Baez, Cubs, and Scooter Gennett, Reds, tied (2) (Ozzie Albies received one starter vote and Baez and Gennett were chosen as a reserve on that ballot)

Third base: Nolan Arenado, Rockies (5)

Shortstop: Brandon Crawford, Giants (5)

Outfield: Nick Markakis, Braves (5); Lorenzo Cain, Brewers (5); Matt Kemp, Dodgers (4) (Christian Yelich also received one vote, and Kemp was chosen as a reserve on that ballot)

Designated hitter: Paul Goldschmidt, Diamondbacks (4) (Joey Votto also received one vote, and Goldschmidt was chosen as a reserve 1B on that ballot)

Reserve voting:

C: Buster Posey, Giants (4); Francisco Cervelli, Pirates (1); Willson Contreras, Cubs (1)

1B: Brandon Belt, Giants (3); Jesus Aguilar, Brewers (2); Votto, Reds (3); Max Muncy, Dodgers (2)

2B: Albies, Braves (4)

3B: Eugenio Suarez, Reds (3); Matt Carpenter, Cardinals (2); Anthony Rendon, Nationals (1)

SS: Trea Turner, Nationals (4); Trevor Story, Rockies (3)

OF: Odubel Herrera, Phillies (3); Bryce Harper, Nationals (4); Corey Dickerson, Pirates (3); Starling Marte, Pirates (1); Christian Yelich, Brewers (2); Brandon Nimmo, Mets (1)

Pitcher voting:

Max Scherzer, SP, Nationals (5)

Jacob deGrom, SP, Mets (5)

Aaron Nola, SP, Phillies (5)

Sean Doolittle, RP, Nationals (5)

Josh Hader, RP, Brewers (5)

Mike Foltynewicz, SP, Braves (4)

Jon Lester, SP, Cubs (4)

Miles Mikolas, SP, Cardinals (4)

Patrick Corbin, SP, Diamondbacks (3)

Kirby Yates, RP, Padres (3)

Jeremy Jeffress, RP, Brewers (3)

Adam Ottavino, RP, Rockies (2)

Archie Bradley, RP, Diamondbacks (2)

Kenley Jansen, RP, Dodgers (2)

Brad Hand, RP, Padres (2)

Sean Newcomb, SP, Braves (1)

Zack Greinke, SP, Diamondbacks (1)

Ross Stripling, SP, Dodgers (1)

Kyle Freeland, SP, Rockies (1)

Kyle Barraclough, RP, Marlins (1)

A.J. Minter, RP, Braves (1)

Q: Who should be the starting pitcher for the NL?

A: The last time a pitcher started the All-Star game in his home ballpark was in 2013, when Matt Harvey started at Citi Field. His opponent, the AL starter, was Scherzer -- my pick to be the first pitcher since Harvey to start the All-Star Game in his home park. There's an argument to be made for deGrom or even Foltyniewicz, but ultimately, the fanfare and excitement of Scherzer starting at home can't be topped. -- *Langs*

Q: Who were the toughest omissions for you?

A: There are so many good starting pitchers in the AL, plus several teams who don't deserve an All-Star on merit. My final selections ended up as Paxton over Morton and Simmons over Segura. -- *David Schoenfeld*

A: Lowrie's season for the A's has been tough to ignore, but there just wasn't enough room. He's already matched or surpassed his marks from last year in some counting and power stats. In the NL, Kris Bryant. He hasn't been as powerful as we've come to expect over the first three years of his career, but he's still been good. His stint on the disabled list didn't help, though. -- *Langs*

Q: Dave, you were the only one not to pick Harper. Why?

A: I had Harper on my original list -- after all, it's the All-STAR Game, and Harper is one of the biggest names and stars in the game. Then I realized Harper has hit under .200 for more than two months now. He's had two great weeks and 10 weeks of replacement-level play. -- *Schoenfeld*

FROM NBC SPORTS

Yankees the only team yet to hold a Pride Night

By Bill Baer

Kit Ramgopal of NBC News reports that the Yankees are the only team yet to hold a Pride Night at its stadium. The Angels announced their plans to host a Pride Night in June next year, **Maury Brown of**

Forbes reported on Tuesday. Before that announcement, the Angels and Yankees were the only two teams not yet on board.

Ramgopal spoke to David Kilmnick, the CEO of the New York-based nonprofit LGBT Network, who said, “I still thought it was important that ... all New York teams show their support for the LGBT community. Kilmnick said the Yankees didn’t seem interested, saying “there wasn’t much going back and forth.” Kilmnick added, “It’s a shame that we have a team here in the greatest city in the entire country, and one of the most diverse cities in the entire country, that is not doing a Pride Night to welcome its LGBT fanbase.”

While a Pride Night may not seem important, the gesture goes a long way, especially in a sport that has had issues with homophobia, even recently. The effort to include a historically disenfranchised group helps break down barriers and helps LGBTQ fans feel safe and welcome.

Ramgopal also spoke with Brian Kitts, co-founder of nonprofit You Can Play, who said, “It’s easy to get caught up in whether or not holding a Pride Night is a sin. In a lot of ways, Pride Nights are an easy way to check a box.”

He’s right, of course. And Ramgopal points out that the Yankees have supported the LGBTQ community in other ways behind the scenes. That being said, it isn’t all that much more effort to allot one of the 81 home games.

Former player Billy Bean has served as MLB’s Ambassador for Inclusion since 2014, helping Major League Baseball become more inclusive. He has been at most, if not all, of the Pride Nights the teams have hosted in the last few years. Beyond Pride Nights, he will certainly be helping the league to find more ways to open its doors to different groups of people.

FROM CBS SPORTS

Angels' Ohtani, Dodgers' Maeda set for first MLB meeting

Los Angeles Dodgers right-hander Kenta Maeda is expected to face fellow countryman Shohei Ohtani of the Los Angeles Angels for the first time in their major league careers Friday night in the series opener at Angel Stadium.

By STATS

Los Angeles Dodgers right-hander Kenta Maeda is expected to face fellow countryman Shohei Ohtani of the Los Angeles Angels for the first time in their major league careers Friday night in the series opener at Angel Stadium.

The Dodgers (47-39) have won four in a row to climb eight games over .500 for the first time this season. They moved two percentage points ahead of the Arizona Diamondbacks (48-40) for first place in the National League West after Arizona lost its series opener at the San Diego Padres 6-3 on Thursday night.

The Angels (44-44) completed a 10-game road trip with a 4-1 loss against the Seattle Mariners on Thursday night, dropping 12 games behind the Mariners for the second wild card from the American League. They'll try to avoid falling below .500 for the first time since losing their season opener.

Ohtani, who turned 24 on Thursday, is in his first major league season after playing for the Nippon Ham Fighters the previous five years. He began this season as a right-handed pitcher and designated hitter and was having success as a two-way player until he was placed on the disabled list June 8 with a grade 2 sprain of his right ulnar collateral ligament.

He received stem-cell therapy and a platelet-rich-plasma injection to help heal the ligament without surgery, and was activated Tuesday before the Angels opened the three-game series against the Mariners.

Maeda, 30, pitched in Japan for the Hiroshima Toyo Carp from 2008-15 and faced Ohtani a few times, but told the Southern California News Group earlier this week that he considers this a new challenge.

"The image I had about him as a hitter has changed, so my approach to the way I pitch to him will change," Maeda said through an interpreter. "I'm just going to approach it as if I'm facing a new hitter."

Maeda (5-5, 3.36) has pitched well since mid-May, when he didn't allow a run in back-to-back starts against the Miami Marlins and Colorado Rockies.

His past two outings have been nearly as good.

Maeda blanked the Chicago Cubs for seven innings in a 2-1 victory June 25, and then allowed three runs (two earned) and five hits over seven innings in a 3-1 loss to the Rockies on Saturday.

Maeda has made two career starts against the Angels and is 1-1 with a 3.27 ERA. He threw seven shutout innings in his last appearance against Los Angeles on June 27, 2017 and the Dodgers won 4-0 at Dodger Stadium.

The starting lineup the Angels used against Seattle right-hander Mike Leake on Wednesday is a combined 3-for-25 off Maeda. Angels catcher Martin Maldonado is hitless in eight at-bats against Maeda, which may open the door for rookie Jose Briceno to get his first start since Sunday.

Angels rookie right-hander Jaime Barria was originally scheduled to start the series opener against the Dodgers, but was moved up to Thursday after left-hander Tyler Skaggs went on the 10-day disabled list with a right adductor strain, becoming the 10th starter for the Angels to go on the DL this season.

Felix Pena (1-0, 3.71 ERA) will make the start for the Angels and try to continue his transition from relief pitcher to starter.

He has made two career appearances against the Dodgers, both out of the bullpen covering three scoreless innings overall.

FROM SPOTRAC.COM

How Mike Trout's Contract Alters Bryce Harper & Manny Machado

By Michael Ginnitti

With 1,000 games under his belt, Mike Trout is beginning to make a serious case for baseball's GOAT conversation. Lost on an Angels' team that hasn't been able to push through to the postseason with any regularity of late, the numbers for Trout are eye-popping across the board.

The 26-year-old is averaging 182 hits, 35 doubles, 36 home runs, 100 RBIs, 30 stolen bases, and a .989 OPS in 7+ seasons. He's had 4 seasons with a batting average north of .300, and is currently carrying a .332 average, league leading .471 on base percentage, and league leading 1.155 OPS - a ridiculous split for nearly July.

While much has been made of the pending free agency for Nationals OF Bryce Harper and Orioles SS Manny Machado, it would behoove both of these players to look in Trout's direction when contemplating their next financial move. Many eyebrows rose when Mike Trout agreed to a 6 year, \$144.5M contract back in March of 2014, a deal that bought out his entire arbitration process plus his first three years of free agency. In an era where \$200M+ contracts were almost certain for the game's elite players, a \$144M contract seemed questionable for Trout given his high ceiling. But a closer look at the deal might change your impression a bit:

CONTRACT:				SIGNING BONUS:		AVERAGE SALARY:		FREE AGENT:	
6 yr(s) / \$144,500,000				\$5,000,000		\$24,083,333		2021 / UFA	
YEAR	AGE	STATUS	BASE SALARY	SIGNING BONUS	TOTAL SALARY	ADJUSTED SALARY			
2015	23	🔒	\$5,250,000	\$833,333	\$6,083,333	\$6,083,333			
2016	24	🔒	\$15,250,000	\$833,333	\$16,083,333	\$16,083,333			
2017	25	🔒	\$19,250,000	\$833,333	\$20,083,333	\$20,083,333			
2018	26	🔒	\$33,250,000	\$833,333	\$34,083,333	\$34,083,333			
2019	27	🔒	\$33,250,000	\$833,333	\$34,083,333	\$34,083,333			
2020	28	🔒	\$33,250,000	\$833,333	\$34,083,333	\$34,083,333			
2021	29					UFA			

THE ARBITRATION YEARS

Let's begin with a look at the first three seasons, his arbitration years. His 2015 season comes with a \$5.25M salary + a \$5M signing bonus, or \$10.25M. For reference, Cubs 3B Kris Bryant is playing out his first year of arbitration in 2018 on a \$10.85M salary. Rockies 3B Nolan Arenado's first year of arbitration came with a \$5M price tag, as did Manny Machado's, and Bryce Harper's, who accepted a 2 year \$7.5M extension in 2015 to keep that cost in check.

In year two of arbitration (2016), Trout reeled in \$15.25M, compared to \$11.5M for Machado, \$11.75M for Arenado, and \$13.625M for Harper.

Moving on to 2017, Trout's year three of arbitration comes with a \$4M pay raise, up to \$19.25M. Elsewhere, Machado is reeling in \$16M this year, Arenado \$17.75M, and Harper a whopping \$21.625M.

So doing some quick math on these years, we get to:

Trout: \$44.75M

Harper: \$40.25M

Arenado: \$34.5M

Machado: \$32.5M

THE VETERAN YEARS

But it's the final three years of Mike Trout's contract that become the most notable. For 2 decades now, baseball has been a league that has paid its stars exponentially higher year in and out regardless of logic or tact. Albert Pujols' 7 year \$100M extension with the Cardinals back in 2004 was nearly identical to the structure & reasoning behind the Mike Trout contract we assess here. But then the Angels poured on 10 years, and a guaranteed \$240M more to a 32-year old shell of Albert Pujols in 2012. The Tigers have done the same with Miguel Cabrera, adding 8 years, & \$248M guaranteed at age 33, while the Brewers tacked on 5 years, \$105M guaranteed to a 32 year old Ryan Braun.

Long story short here, those days *appear* to be dwindling. We like to say Jason Heyward's 8 year, \$184M contract with the Cubs is the straw that broke the camel's back, and in many cases that might be true. But it's not an accident that the 2017-18 free agency season went the way it did. Teams refused to overbid, rush to pay, or add in additional "fluff" years for even the most coveted players. The result? Players were signed at or slightly below their calculated market values across the board this offseason, led by J.D. Martinez's \$22M AAV contract with the Red Sox.

Per his current contract, Mike Trout will earn \$99.75M over the next three seasons, more than any player is set to make across 2018-2020 (Kershaw, \$98M if he opts-in). In other words, not only did Mike Trout's deal pay him top dollar across his arbitration range, it appears to also be paying him top dollar across his first three years of veteran status as well - a nearly perfect contract for the game's best player. Furthermore - and maybe the most important point here, is that Trout's contract will expire after the 2020 season, when he'll be just 29 years old. Getting yourself to a second major contract before the age of 30 is becoming *vital* across all of the major American sports, as career durations shorten, and rookie wages tighten.

HARPER & MACHADO GOING FORWARD

Much has been made about the exciting free agency that players like Bryce Harper and Manny Machado will bring us this winter. And numbers like \$400M have been thrown around joyously across various mediums. But in an age of baseball where owners appear poised not to overpay, and elite players are enforcing player options (opt-outs) across all of their veteran contracts, \$400M may be nothing more than a marketing buzzword.

The last eye-popping contract to hit the board was Giancarlo Stanton's 13 year, \$325 million deal with the Marlins back in 2015. But a quick glance shows that Stanton can opt-out of the deal after 6 years (2020) and "just" \$107M (for reference this contract also bought out Stanton's arbitration years at just \$30M). In other words, contract numbers are beginning to not be what they seem in today's baseball - and it's a positive step for both teams and players.

As noted above, the age factor should be just as important to Harper & Machado as the dollar figures. Manny Machado will turn 26 in a few weeks. Harper won't be 26 until the middle of October, but both should be very conscious of how their new contracts - wherever signed - are structured in 4 years.

Generally speaking, having analyzed contracts for a decade now, I've nearly always pushed for short and sweet with structure - allowing for cash upfront, and control at the end. But in Bryce Harper and Manny Machado's case, a more plausible (and likely) contract structure should be a more strict version of Giancarlo Stanton's. It makes sense for both to sign a hypothetical 10 year contract, but more importantly, both should be seeking multiple player options built in, the first to come in 4 years, at their 30 year age mark. In saying this, it will be extremely difficult for these players to receive top dollar in a 4 year span.

Knowing what we know about Mike Trout's next 3 years (\$99.75M), and the fact that Trout's on-field production has been markedly better and more consistent, will teams really shell out \$135M+ over a 4-year span to lock in Bryce Harper or Manny Machado? Recent free agencies plus a push to reduce luxury tax bills across the league say no. In fact, it seems reasonable to assume that neither of these players will even garner \$30M per year over that first 4 year span, putting them well behind Trout in this regard.

So while the buzz continues to build (even though Harper's numbers continue to drop), for a wild MLB offseason with huge paydays, we're here to slow things down a bit and suggest that the details may be a little underwhelming when push comes to shove. Anyone still craving jaw-dropping, ridiculously overpaid players though, simply need to click on the NBA portion of this website.

FROM YAHOO! SPORTS

Here's what the 2018 All-Star teams should look like

By Jeff Passan

On Sunday, Major League Baseball will announce its All-Star teams, a combination of fan voting, player ballots and league picks. There will be questionable choices. There will be snubs. There will be 62 names, with two more to come from the Final Vote and even more via injury and pitching replacements. Those are the teams you'll see July 17 in Washington, D.C.

These are the teams you should see.

American League

Starters

C: Wilson Ramos, Tampa Bay – When you can start off the All-Star rosters with a player who has grounded into 17 double plays in the first half of the season, you just gotta do it.

1B: Mitch Moreland, Boston – The first two starting spots on the American League All-Star team belong to Wilson Ramos and Mitch Moreland. Stay hot, 2018.

2B: Jose Altuve, Houston – OK, this is a little more like it.

SS: Francisco Lindor, Cleveland – Fine, a lot more like it.

3B: Jose Ramirez, Cleveland – Little-realized fact: Ramirez has an average on balls in play of just .276, meaning if luck tilts back on his side, he's going to be even better ... and he's already on pace for the highest single-season WAR total by a third baseman ever.

OF: Mike Trout, Los Angeles – He's been even better than Ramirez.

OF: Mookie Betts, Boston – More or less identical to Trout, only with 19 fewer games because of injuries.

OF: Aaron Judge, New York – He'd be the clear-cut favorite to win MVP in the National League. In the AL, he's something like the fifth-best player.

DH: J.D. Martinez, Boston – Next to Trout and Betts, he's been the best hitter in baseball – and easily the best free agent bargain.

Backups

C: Max Stassi, Houston – He will not be an All-Star in real life, but some guy on the internet says he warrants a spot, so at least he's got that going for him.

1B: Jose Abreu, Chicago – This deserved to go to Oakland's Matt Olson, but the rules state that every major league team must be represented. Yes, the White Sox are still technically a major league team.

2B: Whit Merrifield, Kansas City – So are the Royals.

SS: Manny Machado, Baltimore – And the Orioles. Except unlike the previous two, Machado would've made it the team regardless of team.

SS: Andrelton Simmons, Los Angeles – Sorry, Jean Segura, but Simmons is a similar hitter with a far better glove at shortstop.

3B: Matt Chapman, Oakland – Sorry, Matt Olson and Jed Lowrie – whose spots were taken by Abreu and Merrifield – but the last slot on the team goes to an A's teammate with the best third-base glove this side of Nolan Arenado.

3B: Alex Bregman, Houston – The King of the Walkoff in 2018 has some heady company – Wilmer Flores and Luke Maile – with three apiece this season.

OF: Eddie Rosario, Minnesota – Back-to-back Yahoo Sports MLB Podcast guests making the All-Star team. Coincidence? Yes. Yes, it is.

OF: Nick Castellanos, Detroit – Considering how he plays the outfield, he'd have made a great starting first baseman.

OF: Mitch Haniger, Seattle – Apologies to Andrew Benintendi, but the numbers are practically identical, and Haniger hits in a much tougher park.

DH: Shin-Soo Choo, Texas – With a \$130 million deal, he is the highest-paid player never to make an All-Star team. This year should change that.

Pitchers

SP: Luis Severino, New York – Best pitcher in the AL so far.

SP: Trevor Bauer, Cleveland – Best podcast guest in the AL so far.

SP: Justin Verlander, Houston – Surprising fact: He hasn't been an All-Star in five years.

SP: Chris Sale, Boston – The All-Star break is typically the worst time of the year for him. His career ERA is nearly 0.60 higher in the second half.

SP: Gerrit Cole, Houston – The pitcher of April was excellent in May, OK in June and meh during his first outing of July. Trends notwithstanding, he earned this spot.

SP: Corey Kluber, Cleveland – All-Star Version 3.0 of everyone's favorite animatronic pitching machine.

SP: Blake Snell, Tampa Bay – In two-thirds of his 18 starts this season, Snell has allowed zero or one run. Only one other player has done the same.

SP: J.A. Happ, Toronto – That other player is definitely not J.A. Happ, who is here because the Blue Jays need an All-Star.

SP: Charlie Morton, Houston – Went back and forth between him and James Paxton. Morton walks more guys, Paxton pitches in a pitchers' park, Morton is a righty, Paxton is a lefty. Otherwise pretty much same dude, and Morton on the backside of his career, sentiment took over.

RP: Edwin Diaz, Seattle – He is on pace to throw in 83 games, which would be the most for a closer since Billy Koch threw in 84 in 2002. He was out of baseball three years later.

RP: Blake Treinen, Oakland – Lots of strikeouts, limited walks and nobody can homer off him. The 0.84 ERA is no fluke.

RP: Aroldis Chapman, New York – Back to his old, unhittable self, with hitters striking out in more than half their at-bats against him.

National League

Starters

C: J.T. Realmuto, Miami – The most underrated player in baseball. A true star for whom the Marlins rightfully would ask the moon in a trade.

1B: Freddie Freeman, Atlanta – He's not underrated anymore so much as he is underappreciated. As the Braves ascend, he may be to them what Kent Hrbek was to the 1987 and '91 Twins.

2B: Scooter Gennett, Cincinnati – Last year, it was all funny when Gennett hit four home runs in a game and everyone got to say Scooter. Now we know it was just a warning sign for the unlikeliest offensive breakout in the game.

SS: Brandon Crawford, San Francisco – At the end of April, he was slashing .189/.237/.300. Since then, he's hitting .359/.426/.578. Arbitrary endpoints, shmarbitrary endpoints. That's good.

3B: Nolan Arenado, Colorado – Just a reminder that arguably the best baseball player in the NL – and the current league leader in WAR – will be a free agent at 28 years old following the 2019 season.

OF: Nick Markakis, Atlanta – A reminder that the elderly, although slow and dangerous behind the wheel, can serve a purpose.

OF: Lorenzo Cain, Milwaukee – He's a singular player: athletic and strong, with great defensive instinct and speed in center field, plus on-base and bat-to-ball skills, and yet without the home run power that would make him MVP. Oh well. He'll have to settle for All-Star starter.

OF: Brandon Nimmo, New York – Look, I'm as surprised as you are. A blighted NL outfield landscape combined with a real breakout makes real and justified.

Backups

C: Willson Contreras, Chicago – Slowly climbing the ranks of famous Wil(l)sons. Has leapt Mookie, C.J., Brian (baseball), Rainn, Owen. Continues to chase Russell, Rebel, Hack, Brian (music), Woodrow and, of course, the king of all Wilsons, the Volleyball.

C: Francisco Cervelli, Pittsburgh – While it's true the Pirates don't have anyone else, Cervelli has earned a spot on the NL team, even in a crowded landscape.

1B: Paul Goldschmidt, Arizona – Remember when he was too old and his bat had slowed down? Yeah, me either.

1B: Jesus Aguilar, Milwaukee – By the end of the 2016 season, Aguilar looked like a 4A bat destined to spend his career in the upper reaches of the minors. Now he's got the fourth-best OPS in the NL.

2B: Ozzie Albies, Atlanta – The 21-year-old is on pace for 93 extra-base hits. Only one second baseman ever has reached that threshold: Hall of Famer Rogers Hornsby, one of the greatest hitters ever, did it when he was 26 and 33.

SS: Trea Turner, Washington – He's the Lorenzo Cain of the infield. Speed, defense, on-base acumen and enough power to keep pitchers honest.

3B: Eugenio Suarez, Cincinnati – Between thieving Gennett for nothing off waivers and parlaying Alfredo Simon's All-Star season into a trade for Suarez, the Reds have checked off a few items on the rebuilding to-do list. If only they had even one reliable starter.

OF: Kyle Schwarber, Chicago – The Large Adult Son of MLB is striking out far less, walking far more and hitting tanks like he always does. Bonus: He's acquitting himself in the field (though the notion that he's been better there than Trout, Betts and even teammate Jason Heyward strikes neither scouts nor quantitative analysts with clubs as correct).

OF: Christian Yelich, Milwaukee – He may never be much more than a guy who hits .290/.370/.450, and that's a wonderful complementary player on a championship team. In a year like this, it's good enough to be an All-Star.

OF: Matt Kemp, Los Angeles, – Just like they planned: The Dodgers' resurgence, led by Matt Kemp, Joc Pederson and ...

UT: Max Muncy, Los Angeles – Someone needs to do a remake of "Brass Monkey" with Max Muncy.

UT: Javier Baez, Chicago – Please create an All-Star Game skills competition so Baez can sweep tag and swim slide on demand.

Pitchers

SP: Max Scherzer, Washington – The best, full stop.

SP: Jacob deGrom, New York – In six June starts, he allowed 11 runs and struck out 49 against nine walks. His team lost five of those games. Mets gonna Mets.

SP: Aaron Nola, Philadelphia – The Big Easy has stayed healthy and turned into the kind of pitcher the Phillies gladly would throw in a one-game wild-card setting.

SP: Patrick Corbin, Arizona – The velocity that was present for the first six starts of his season simply hasn't returned. Even without the extra mph or two, he's still striking out more than 10.6 per nine and adding dollars to a boffo free agent payout this winter.

SP: Miles Mikolas, St. Louis – I reserve the right to remove him from this team if he does not grow back his resplendent mustache.

SP: Jon Lester, Chicago – His ERA is 2.25. His FIP is 4.16. Even if he has benefitted from the Cubs' exemplary defensive positioning, his performance thus far should make him a five-time All-Star – and add to the great value the Cubs are getting out of his \$155 million deal.

SP: Mike Foltynewicz, Atlanta – Among Folty, Sean Newcomb, Julio Teheran, Brandon McCarthy, the resurgent Anibal Sanchez and a rotating cast of talented kids – Luiz Gohara, Mike Soroka, Max Fried, the almost-ready Kolby Allard and Touki Toussaint – the Braves are good now and are going to be very good for a long while.

SP: Ross Stripling, Los Angeles – Surely you had Ross Stripling making the All-Star team over Clayton Kershaw, too.

RP: Josh Hader, Milwaukee – Hitters are 15 for 144 with 83 strikeouts against Hader this season.

RP: Sean Doolittle, Washington – His command exemplary, his repertoire Bartolish (89 percent fastballs), Doolittle is what he's always been, only even better this year.

RP: Kenley Jansen, Los Angeles – Since he blew his second save of the year in mid-April, Jansen has been Jansen, sniping fools with his cutter. The strikeouts are down, and that doesn't portend well long-term, but this year he's managing just fine nonetheless.

RP: Kirby Yates, San Diego – This Kirby does not swallow others and inherit their powers. He just throws high heat, low splitters and has the best ERA in baseball (0.79) among pitchers with at least 30 innings.

FROM THE STAR TRIBUNE

From WAR to launch angle, we explain baseball analytics

Here's the reasons behind some of the newer baseball statistics.

By Chris Hine

Advanced baseball statistics can be hard to understand and often contain more acronyms than the New Deal. Here is a list of 12 terms that are widely used with an explanation of what they measure.

WAR (or WARP, wins above replacement player)

WAR attempts to encapsulate the value of all players across all positions for a season: How much better or worse is a player than a theoretical call-up a team has waiting in the wings? And how many wins did he add to his team's total that season compared to if he wasn't in the lineup? It takes into account a player's offense, defense and base running. Pitchers' WARs have their own metrics. Three websites, Fangraphs, Baseball Reference and Baseball Prospectus, have different variations of this statistic. They differ the greatest in what metrics (some of which are on this list) they use to calculate a player's defense and how they evaluate pitchers. So a player's WAR on one website can be different than the others.

Good, bad and average: These are the general ranges across each version of WAR -- below 0 is replacement level; 0-2 is a bench player; 2-5 is a starter; 5-8 is an All-Star and above 8 is MVP-worthy.

Examples: Mike Trout of the Angels leads the majors with a 6.3 WAR, according to Fangraphs, and Eddie Rosario leads the Twins with a 3.6 WAR (13th in MLB). Joe Mauer's WAR this season is .5; during his 2009 MVP season it was 7.6.

OPS (on-base percentage plus slugging percentage) and OPS+ (OPS plus)

OPS is a statistic that can sound more complicated than it is – it simply adds a player's on-base and slugging percentages together to show how often he reaches base and hits for power. OPS+ makes small adjustments to OPS and scales it to a more easily digestible number with 100 being the league average and each point up or down being 1 percent better or worse than league average.

Good, bad and average: That changes by year, but according to Fangraphs, an OPS of .570 and below is awful, .600 is poor, .670 is below average, .710 is average, .800 is above average, .900 is great, 1.000 excellent. For OPS+, 150 and up is excellent. 125-150 is very good. Below 75 is poor.

Examples: Boston's Mookie Betts is edging out Trout in OPS so far this season: 1.103 to 1.089. Rosario again leads the Twins – and just misses the top 10 – with his .924 number.

wOBA (weighted on-base average)

This is a more refined statistic that attempts to improve on OPS. Instead of counting the value of a double as twice that of a single (as slugging percentage does), wOBA attempts to use that actual mathematical value of each outcome at the plate (walks and hit batters included) in how it usually contributes to scoring a run.

Good, bad and average: The average changes by season, but these are generally the accepted ranges, according to Fangraphs: below .300 awful; .300 to .310 poor; .310 to .320 below average; .320 to .340 average; .340 to .370 above average; .370 to .400 very good; .400 and up is excellent.

Example: Betts leads MLB at .458 with Trout at .450. Boston's JD Martinez is third at .428, giving the Red Sox two of the top three players in that statistic. Rosario again leads the Twins at .385, 15th overall in MLB.

wRC (weighted runs created) and wRC+ (weighted runs created plus)

Updates a statistic Bill James devised called runs created. It uses a player's weighted on-base average to determine a player's offensive value and measure it in runs. wRC+ takes every outcome a hitter had and adjusts for the park he was playing in and how the rest of the league was scoring that season. Similar to OPS+, wRC+ uses a scale with 100 as the league average.

Good, bad and average: For wRC+, 60 is awful; 75 is poor, 80 is below average, 100 is average, 115 above average, 140 great, 160 is excellent.

Example: Trout leads here at 196. Betts isn't far behind at 195. Rosario leads the Twins at 146, good for 16th.

Exit velocity

How hard the ball is hit off the bat, in miles per hour. This was introduced in 2015 with the launch of MLB's Statcast, the technology that provides a lot of advanced data.

Good, bad and average: Anything 95 miles per hour and above is hard hit. Most home runs are around the 100 miles per hour mark or greater. The hardest hit ball this season was 121.1 MPH by Gary Sanchez of the Yankees. Anything from the mid 80s to 90 is moderately hit and the low 80s and below is not that hard and unlikely to result in a hit.

Example: The hardest hit home run for the Twins this season was a two-run blast from Miguel Sano on April 25 at Yankee Stadium. Sano hit the ball 440 feet at 114.6 MPH off the bat.

Launch angle

The angle at which the ball comes off the hitter's bat, with the point of contact serving as the vertex of the angle. MLB also introduced it with Statcast technology in 2015. Players in recent seasons have tried to raise their average launch angle in an attempt to hit more home runs.

Good, bad and average: MLB.com says 10 degrees or less is a ground ball; 10-25 degrees is a line drive; 25-50 degrees is a fly ball; 50 degrees and up is a popup. Most home runs occur in the sweet spot just above the 25 degree line – a line drive with a little bit of lift. Anything in that area, provided it has a hard-hit exit velocity, is likely to result in an extra-base hit or a home run. When the launch angle and exit velocity are in such a positive correlation, it's referred to as a "barrel."

Example: Eddie Rosario's 18 home runs have an average launch angle of 33 degrees. His highest was 42.4 degrees, his lowest was 24.7.

BABIP (batting average on balls in play)

This statistic only focuses on balls a batter puts in play. It does not take into account home runs. It shows how often a batter gets a hit when he puts the ball in the field of play. It can also be used to evaluate pitchers to see what their batting average of balls in play is against them. You can use BABIP to determine how lucky or unlucky a hitter is. If a hitter has a high BABIP, it usually means he's getting lucky. If it's low, he might be unlucky. This works in reverse for pitchers.

Good, bad and average: The league average tends to be around .300, but you have to take into account each individual when using BABIP. For example, if a hitter has had a career .280 average BABIP but in a given season it's .330, that might mean he is getting a bit lucky. Or maybe he's hitting the ball harder. You can then use his average exit velocity to see if that's the case. For pitchers, a lower BABIP than their career averages may mean they are benefiting from luck or good defense or maybe they're inducing softer contact.

Example: Eduardo Escobar hit just .279 on balls in play last season but that number improved to .327 this season. Escobar has also raised his hard contact rate by eight percent. It's one reason Escobar has been so successful through the first three months.

Catch probability

According to MLB.com, it's "likelihood that a batted ball to the outfield will be caught, based on four important pieces of information. 1. How far did the fielder have to go? 2. How much time did he have to get there. 3. What direction did he need to go in? 4. Was proximity to the wall a factor?"

Good, bad and average: Every fly ball gets assigned a catch probability percentage. MLB has a star-rating system for each catch. Catches with a 0-25 percent catch probability is a five-star play; 26 to 50 is four star; 51 to 75 percent is three star; 76 to 90 is two star; 91-95 percent one star.

Example: Byron Buxton led baseball in 2017 with 16 four-star catches and was tied for second with five five-star catches.

UZR (ultimate zone rating)

This attempts to quantify how many runs a fielder saved because of his range, their arm strength (for outfielders) and double plays turned (for infielders). It attempts to quantify every batted ball event in terms of the amount of effort it would take an average fielder to make the play. Its calculations vary by position. Another related statistic is defensive runs saved (DRS).

Good, bad, average: Per Fangraphs, the scale for both UZR and DRS is: -15 awful; -10 poor; -5 below average; 0 average; +5 above average; +10 great; +15 Gold Glove caliber.

Example: This is a statistic that accumulates throughout the season. Kansas City outfielder Alex Gordon leads MLB at 9.7. Rosario leads the Twins at 3.5. Buxton was seventh in baseball last season at 10.0.

FIP (fielding independent pitching)

A metric similar to ERA, but FIP uses all the batted ball events within a pitcher's control (the amount of strikeouts, walks, hit by pitches and home runs allowed) and puts them into a complicated formula to show how a pitcher would perform regardless of the defense behind him.

Good, bad and average: The numbers compare to ERA. FIP can be helpful if there's a significant gap between a pitcher's ERA and his FIP. If his ERA is lower than his FIP, it could suggest he has been a bit lucky and had good defense behind him. If his FIP is lower than his ERA, he might be getting unlucky.

Example: Lance Lynn had an ERA of 3.43 and FIP of 4.82 with the Cardinals last season. Even though his ERA is worse this season (5.49), his FIP is actually better (4.38). However, his hard contact rate has risen from 29.2 percent to 35.9 percent.

WHIP (walks plus hits per innings pitched)

It adds together the walks and hits a pitcher allows to give you an indication of how often a pitcher allows base runners in an inning. Whether it was a walk or a home run, each time a batter reaches base is treated the same.

Good, bad and average: WHIP varies by season, but according to Fangraphs a general guide is this: 1.6 awful; 1.5 poor; 1.4 below average; 1.3 average; 1.2 above average; 1.1 great; 1.0 excellent.

Example: Justin Verlander leads MLB with a 0.86 WHIP. Jose Berrios is tops on the Twins at 1.00.

Spin rate

How much a ball spins out of the pitcher's hand to home plate. It is measured in revolutions per minute. Data has suggested that fastballs and breaking balls are harder to hit when they have a high spin rate, which can create more movement on the pitch.

Good, bad, average: It varies by pitch. For a four-seamer, the average in 2016 was around 2,226 rpm; two-seamer was 2,123; splitter 1,524; changeup 1,746; slider 2,090; curveball 2,308.

Example: Cubs reliever Carl Edwards Jr. has the highest spin rate in baseball among all fastballs at 2,663 RPM. Ryan Pressly is tops on the Twins at 2,561 RPM.

FROM SPORTS BETTING DIME

Catch me if you can: Angels' Mike Trout Running Away with AL MVP Race

By Bryan Thiel

Mike Trout is inhuman. Mike Trout is a generational player. Mike Trout, understandably, is the favorite for AL MVP.

Trout is enjoying a monster season, even by his standards. The Angels' outfielder is dominating every category. He's on pace for 42 home runs, 97 RBI, 121 runs scored and 22 stolen bases. That would set a career-high in home runs (41), while coming close in RBI (111) and runs (129).

His batting average (.310), on-base percentage (.456), slugging percentage (.627), and OPS (1.082) are all among his career bests too. If the season ended today, he'd set new career-highs in OBP and OPS, while his slugging would be second best, and his average third.

Considering his career trajectory as one of the GOATs of baseball, that's pretty impressive.

Trout continues to dominate AL MVP talk

Trout has been the AL MVP favorite since the season began. He opened in March with +125 average odds, and has now skyrocketed to an average of -350.

Jose Altuve opened closest to him, as the 2017 MVP sat at +570. Mookie Betts has had the best non-Trout odds this year, sitting at +300 on May 31. Betts' teammate JD Martinez has rocketed up the charts too. He's gone from +2200 to +400 but he still can't touch Trout.

Even Cleveland's gruesome twosome, Francisco Lindor and Jose Ramirez, can't keep up. Lindor opened the year at +1100, but has since leveled off at +2000. Ramirez's torrid pace has bumped him up from +2800 to +2000.

Still not good enough.

Betts (.338), Altuve (.332) and Martinez (.327) all sit ahead of Trout in average, while Betts, Trout and Altuve are all within three stolen bases of each other. Martinez is the only one ahead of Trout and Ramirez in homers (by two), and Trout leads them all except Lindor in runs.

If advanced stats are your thing, Trout's nailed those. He has a WAR of 6.6 with Ramirez closest at 5.7. His 0.7 defensive WAR is also better than everyone but Lindor and Ramirez.

Player	AVG	HR	RBI	RUNS	WAR	Def WAR	Odds at Bovada
Mike Trout	.310	24	49	67	6.6	0.7	-350
JD Martinez	.326	26	71	60	3.6	-1.1	+400
Mookie Betts	.338	21	42	66	5.2	0.5	+800
Jose Altuve	.332	7	41	56	4.1	0.4	+1000
Francisco Lindor	.297	23	55	75	5.3	1.7	+2000
Jose Ramirez	.294	24	56	58	5.7	1.1	+2000

In fact, the only thing Trout trails in is RBI. He sits 22nd in the AL, which is significantly behind Martinez (71) who leads the league.

Will Trout fall back to the pack?

The easy answer is: no.

If Trout were 30 or older, you could make the argument he'd be due for a slowdown. That's not the case, though, as Trout is 26 years old and may just be hitting his stride. It's scary to think his best may be yet to come.

Mike Trout already ranks in the top eight of seven offensive categories for the Angels franchise. The most impressive though? He's the franchise leader in WAR at 60.7 in just 1012 games.

He also has longevity on his side. Outside of a thumb injury last year, Trout has played in at least 139 games every season since 1011. He played in an almost unheard of 157+ games a year from 2013-16.

Could the AL MVP hinge on Halos' playoff hopes?

With that in mind, we move on to the age-old question: can a player be the AL (or NL) MVP if he doesn't make the playoffs?

Trout has been so good that the answer should be yes. In fact he's been this good before. In 2016, he became one of just eight guys to win the award while missing the playoffs in the Divisional Era. (*Giancarlo Stanton made it nine in 2017.*)

2016

VS

2018 (PROJECTIONS)

.315	Average	.308
29	Home Runs	42
100	RBI	97
123	Runs	121
.441	OBP	448
10.5	WAR	8.4

Some voters may still hold missing the playoffs against him, though.

Right now the Boston Red Sox, Cleveland Indians, and Houston Astros lead their respective divisions. It seems like Boston and the New York Yankees will both get in, with one taking the AL East and one taking the first Wild Card spot.

With the Angels sitting 12.5 games back of Houston, their best bet is the second Wild Card. The problem is, they aren't even the third-best team in the AL West. They're behind the Seattle Mariners and Oakland Athletics.

What if the AL MVP *isn't* Mike Trout?

Really? After all this you're still going to ask that question?

Fine. All five guys we've talked about check the 'making the playoffs' box today. Right now, all of them are on division leaders too.

In terms of production, JD Martinez looks like he should keep going. He's staring at his third 30-homer season, and a second-straight year with 40+.

Betts looks like a safe bet to stay above the .310 mark, even if he doesn't stay atop the AL batting race. He's hitting for power at a monster pace too, so he should remain firmly in the conversation.

That leaves Ramirez, Lindor and Altuve. Ramirez has been prone to hot and cold months in the past. Both he and Lindor were in the thick of voting last year, though, so they won't go anywhere.

Then there's Altuve. As last year's AL MVP and the 2016 runner up, he may be in the toughest spot.

His power pace is lower, and while it's not his calling card, his average is and that's down too. Now that he's won an MVP hitting .346, doing it hitting .332, fair or not, will be harder going up against Trout.

So if you have to put your money somewhere other than Trout? Betts and Lindor may be it.

Betts and Martinez should keep flip-flopping in the odds this season, but Betts finished sixth in AL MVP voting last year with lesser numbers. Ramirez beat Lindor in voting last year, but the shortstop has rounded out his game and plays the sexier position.

Don't be fooled, though: unless something catastrophic happens, Trout is staring down his third AL MVP.

FROM USA TODAY

30 MLB Rookie Cards That Are Now Worth A Fortune At Auction*

Some rookie cards are extremely rare to find nowadays and if fans happen to find one, they should probably look into their full value.

By Michael Chin

Baseball cards started out targeting kids. They were fun collectibles that young people could fish out of packs that they could fish out of foil wrappers and feed through the spokes of bicycle wheels, or hold in their grubby fingers while they played out baseball fantasies in their heads. These kids would keep the cards of their favorite players for these purposes and trade the cards of other popular players among their friends. The remaining cards of journeymen, anonymous role players, and rookies no one had ever heard of before? Those ones would often as not be discarded.

There's a very different culture around baseball cards today as a collecting culture developed, and the careless treatment of particularly those earlier cards created scarcities of a lot of them. Add onto that the story of cases of Topps discarding an estimated thousands of Mickey Mantle rookie cards at sea, because they'd produced more cards than they thought the market demanded. Cases like this furthered not only rarity of some cards, but the legend around cards that in some cases exceeds the athletes themselves.

More recent decades have seen the rise of much more conscientious collectors, not to mention the fact that companies create cards in a higher volume than they did in those early days of the business. Still, there are those rookie cards that emerge from the pack based on the popularity of the player captured,

scarcity, or craftsmanship of special cards that keep them in high demand. This article looks at thirty MLB rookie cards that are now worth a fortune.

30Albert Pujols - 2001 Bowman Chrome

Albert Pujols is a widely respected first baseman who won Rookie of the Year honors in 2001 and went on to become a perennial All-Star, playing first with the St. Louis Cardinals, and more recently with the Los Angeles Angels.

He's regarded as an all-time great hitter, and with his laundry list of accolades, it's little wonder his rookie card would draw a premium.

Pujols's Bowman Chrome Autographed rookie card was limited to just 500 copies, making it not only an aesthetically appealing card, but an immediately scarce, and one of the most sought after rookie cards of the 2000s.

25Mike Trout - 2009 Bowman Chrome

Mike Trout from the Los Angeles Angels is one of the top players in baseball today, earning American League Most Valuable Player honors in 2014 and 2016. There's reason to believe he has many seasons of play left in his tank, and so plenty of time to expand his legacy.

**Article cut to only include Angels-related material.*

FROM VILLAGE VOICE

Hold the Peanuts, Pass the Grasshoppers: What to Eat at the Ballpark This Summer

By Molly Fitzpatrick

The only thing more American than baseball is disgusting novelty foods, and the only thing more American than disgusting novelty foods is the disgusting novelty foods served at baseball games. As Thomas Jefferson wrote, verbatim, I'm in no way paraphrasing here, in the Declaration of Independence, grilling dogs and burgers in your backyard is entry-level dining patriotism. Nothing tastes better than when it's at risk of dripping all over the unfortunate stranger in the seat in front of yours, ideally accompanied by a vendor-thrown beer that flew precariously close to your skull.

The inaugural, sold-out MLB FoodFest, held April 21–22 in Manhattan, invited ticket holders (\$25, or \$40 with beer) to sample thirty hyper-indulgent regional delicacies, one from each ballpark — or, as the official site ominously warned, “at least as much as you can try in two hours.” Naturally, I took that as a challenge: to lasso these strands of American culinary DNA and braid them into one ungodly, belly-busting chimera. I arrived at the large midtown event space on Fifth Avenue that hosted FoodFest with nothing short of a mouth-based road trip across the country in mind. It was Friday, April 20 — a preview

night for members of the media and VIPs — and it occurred to me too late to do anything about it that the 4/20 timing may have been an implicit suggestion that I should have gotten stoned before this.

Hot dogs, peanuts, and popcorn were standard ballpark fare for most of the twentieth century, but things started to get weird (in the very best, greasiest, and nacho cheesiest sense of the word *weird*) in the Nineties. Per *The Joy of Ballpark Food: From Hot Dogs to Haute Cuisine* author Bennett Jacobstein, MLB's food revolution was in part precipitated by the construction of twelve new stadiums with specially designed concessions spaces. 1970 American League MVP Boog Powell opened Boog's BBQ with Oriole Park at Camden Yards in 1992, launching a ballpark barbecue trend. And following the MLB player strike in 1994 — game attendance dropped 20 percent the following year — exciting food was another tactic for clubs to lure back prodigal fans.

And MLB FoodFest, to be sure, was all about the excitement; the more Instagrammable the dish, the better. "On top of the eats, we'll also be keeping your IG feed fed," the FoodFest site promised. (Disclosure: In a previous lifetime, this reporter was employed as a blogger by Major League Baseball, with her primary beat being goofy mascot bloopers.) These aren't your father's Dodger Dogs. Instead, this was baseball's answer to the Museum of Ice Cream, a social-media playground impeccably designed with irresistible photo opportunities and thoughtful, quirky details, like the unique custom paper printed with the team logo that each dish was served in. In the lobby beckoned a ball pit constructed to resemble a classic red-and-white-striped popcorn box. "Shoes off, pockets empty," a staff member advised a young man, before instructing him to dive backward into the yellow plastic "kernels." Upstairs, two chalkboards invited passersby to record their answers to the question: "Is a hot dog a sandwich?" (Last I saw, the tallies on the "no" side were winning by a factor of two.) This space was styled as the "Museum of Modern Dog," where pop-art representations of the humble frankfurter included what appeared to be a gold Jeff Koons-inspired balloon weiner and an enormous hot dog seesaw. Past that, in the main event hall, each team had its own designated booth serving a favorite dish from its stadium, in a portion roughly half the size of the real-life version. Several bars offered a wide selection of beers, as well as wine, bourbon, and prosecco garnished with bright-blue cotton candy that promptly dissolved, rendering the drink both a) a delightful shade of aquamarine and b) nauseating. In one corner, lined with artificial turf, a DJ in a classic Astros jersey spun Drake on a turntable below a neon sign reading "World Series Chomp-ions." In another, a security guard stood watch beside the roped-off, largely ignored Commissioner's Trophy.

It's slightly surreal to experience anything in the near-exclusive company of people who are being paid to document it, but at an event like this one, engineered in a laboratory for optimal social-media results, maybe it wasn't so far from the organic, civilian reality. There were cameras everywhere, both professional TV rigs and plucky iPhones, and I was surrounded by people who could earnestly give their job title as "influencer" recording their real-time culinary commentary. I watched one team of co-workers fan out and gather all thirty dishes like participants in the world's easiest scavenger hunt, assembling them on one tabletop, only to allow the food to languish, untouched and unloved, for the rest of the evening. I would never.

Let's begin, like evolution, in the sea. The New England Lobster Rolls (Boston Red Sox, duh) were served on hunks of bread that had been neither buttered nor grilled, which everyone knows is actually the best part of eating a lobster roll. (OK, maybe second best.) Nevertheless, it feels rude to look a gift lobster in the mouth. The San Francisco Giants' Crazy Crab Sandwich was quite good, with a smear of garlic butter that leveled it up above the Nats' Crab Grilled Cheese. The Chesapeake Waffle Fries (courtesy of the

Baltimore Orioles, unsurprisingly) was served with a solid crab dip and a welcomingly aggressive dusting of Old Bay, but the titular fries were mush.

Then there were the nachos. Were there ever nachos: The Seaside Market's Tri-Tip Nachos (San Diego Padres), Jerk Chicken Nachos (Toronto Blue Jays), and the refreshingly dill-forward Chicken Shawarma Nachos (Detroit Tigers) — basically a salad with bad-boy nacho aspirations, if we're being honest with ourselves. The best-tasting, if worst-named, was the Royals' Brisket-Acho. At night's end, meat plaque having fully encrusted my cerebrum, I scrawled in all caps in my notebook: "NACHOS ARE A WASTE OF TIME." Having fully digested FoodFest, both emotionally and literally, I no longer stand by this sentiment, but you get the point. It was rough out there.

I was of course nosy to figure out exactly who the VIPs in attendance were, and early on, I saw a man carrying a gold championship belt from booth to booth. I gave up my covert Google investigation ("wrestling guy with reddish beard??") once I realized up close that the belt was emblazoned with the word *Nathan's*. It was Joey Chestnut, the competitive eater ranked first in the world (and who just won the 2018 Nathan's Hot Dog Eating Contest, for an eleventh time), just as I am a world-ranked idiot.

I give the Yankees' Adobo Bao, stuffed with chicken and crumbled chicharrones, an A for concept, but the steamed white bun itself was on the dry side. The Angels' Japanese-inspired Pork Katsu certainly stood out among the masses (not unlike the team's rookie phenom Shohei Ohtani, the 23-year-old ex-Nippon Professional Baseball star who threw six perfect innings in his home debut this April), but the curry lacked flavor, and because I didn't initially realize that plastic utensils were available, I attempted to eat the rice with my hands, which was less than ideal.

By this point, I'd done the math — with two hours to eat thirty plates, you'd need to be putting away one every four minutes to finish in time. At 7:37, I consulted my master list of dishes: I'd checked off ten of thirty. I was on pace, in terms of time, but it was already clear that belly volume would be at a premium. The Pittsburgh Pirates' Pulled Pork Pierogi Hoagie was good, though I ended up scavenging just the top-notch pierogi tucked inside and chowing down on that. Served on a skewer like a corn dog, the Bacon-Wrapped Plantain (Miami Marlins) was delicious, largely thanks to a generous helping of guava marmalade. The Dodgers' Cheeto-Lote (as in *elote*) was a true junk-food innovation, a corn cob smothered in chipotle mayo, cheese, and most importantly, a vivid dusting of crushed (brand-name!) Flamin' Hot Cheetos that I had no doubt could be seen from space. It was both disgusting and a surprisingly effective balance of sweet corn, hyper-intense salt, and chemical spice. But again, disgusting, even though I would like to eat one now, if only so that my teeth can regain their distinctive, faint-orange Cheeto-Lote cast.

Behind me, I heard a woman ask, "Can I put you on my Instagram?" I turned around to see that she was speaking to Kardashian hanger-on Jonathan Cheban, who recently "collaborated" on 24K gold chicken wings with an East Village restaurant and boasts 2.7 million followers on his "Foodgōd" Instagram. (There he would post a photo of himself cavorting in the popcorn pit, tagged #sponsored.) Later, I was genuinely starstruck by the sight of Yankees legend Mariano Rivera, shirt tucked into his dad jeans, holding — what else? — nachos.

Overall, I was pleasantly surprised by the quality of the ingredients at FoodFest, as well as the obvious effort and care that went into the production of the full tasting menu. But some teams brought their imaginative A game more than others, giving life to Frankenfoods that any mad scientist would be proud to nosh on. The Houston Astros' Chicken Waffle Cone, filled with honey mustard and mashed potatoes

and topped with a handful of popcorn chicken — I ate it like a regular ice cream cone; I have no idea if I was supposed to eat it like a regular ice cream cone — was cute, and tasted better than it should have, even if it falls into the savory-sweet uncanny valley. I could not say the same for the Texas Rangers' oozy-glazed Chicken and Donut Slider, which harbored an unaccountably, upsettingly tart layer of buffalo ranch sauce. But no dish got more attention, and rightly so, than the Mariners' Toasted Grasshoppers: three bugs, dwarfed by an accompanying lime wedge. The grasshoppers were fried to a brown crisp but were otherwise perfectly intact, their limbs extended and their tiny black eyes staring into space, or maybe at Jonathan Cheban. The mouthfeel was pleasantly crunchy, but the chile heat was a little overpowering — is it strange to say I wish they tasted a little more insect-y?

After trying sixteen out of thirty dishes, I took a lap around the venue to give my increasingly beleaguered vital organs a break, and also, primarily, to hunt for more famous people. I did see a woman I think I might have gone to high school with, which I recognize is probably less interesting to you than Mariano Rivera, but was nevertheless jolting.

While some teams hit it out of the park (I'm so sorry), others made only a minimal effort, like a fifth-grader transparently ad-libbing through a book report on a novel that he did not bother to open, much less read. The Phillies' Bull's BBQ Slider (four-time All-Star Greg "The Bull" Luzinski now operates Bull's BBQ at Citizens Bank Park) was a generic pulled pork slider with coleslaw. See also: The Rockies' forgettable Helton Burger & Fries, named after longtime first baseman Todd Helton. If this were the NFL, you might say they were just here so they didn't get fined.

That's not to say that "basic" necessarily meant "bad." The Mets' NY Deli Pastrami Sandwich (exactly which New York deli, though, goes suspiciously unspecified), at least, had the benefit of being regionally appropriate, though I wish they'd opted for a meaner mustard. Cheddar Beer Bratwurst (Milwaukee Brewers) distinguished itself with sweet onion jam and a pretzel bun. The Cubs' Chicago Dog was a fairly standard dog loaded with more pickles, peppers, and mustard than actual meat on a poppy seed bun — it was good, if not exactly life-changing. But the Nathan's Famous All-Natural Bacon-Wrapped Hot Dog (St. Louis Cardinals) proved to be a mouthful, in more ways than one. To me, this was the platonic ideal of a hot dog, with a drizzle of mayo, a hidden layer of baked beans, fried onion, diced tomato, and a thin slice of pickle. That said, since when does Missouri get first dibs on Brooklyn's foremost purveyor of delicious meat tubes?

My favorite dishes fell somewhere in the middle of the spectrum between boring and truly unhinged. The Twins' Kurd-Marczuk, named for Minneapolis deli Kramarczuk's, was a visibly greasy pile of deep-fried cheese curds and sliced bratwurst soaking in brown gravy. I loved it, taking several more bites than is advisable, given how much more I had yet to eat. Easy to miss, buried alive as it was under a pile of uninteresting fries, the Monte Khrush Davis Cristo (Oakland A's) was a teensy, delectable Monte Cristo served on mini Belgian waffles with strawberry preserves. We might see its namesake, slugger Khris "Krush" Davis, compete in the 2018 Home Run Derby; the Monte Cristo would surely clean up in the sandwich version thereof. The Tampa Bay Rays' Reuben Cuban Sandwich was exactly what it sounds like, combining pulled pork, corned beef, kraut, Swiss cheese, and Russian dressing into one multicultural dish. It was extremely good, and not just because its name rhymes. Under normal circumstances, I would have shoved at least one more of these sandwiches into my face, but that night, I had to move on. I took on the Indians' Flamethrower — pulled pork, bacon jam, Flamin' Hot Cheetos (yes, again) — around 8:30, and I enjoyed it (especially the bacon jam) far more than I should have this late in the game, considering I was about a hundred more stomach-churning calories away from hijacking the hot dog seesaw as my personal bilevel nap gurney. I was by then painfully aware that everywhere I looked,

everyone was chewing, and I wished I knew how to make them stop. Pig Pickin' (Atlanta Braves) was a taco bowl stuffed like yin and yang with the metaphysical duality that is macaroni & cheese and pulled pork. (If you're playing along at home, five of thirty FoodFest dishes featured pulled pork. Pulled pork is the new Cracker Jack, although I don't recommend looking for a prize hidden inside.) It also came with fried pork rinds, because of course it did. This dish would be intimidating under normal circumstances, but having done battle with more than two dozen of its brothers and sisters, I entered a BBQ sauce-flavored fugue state upon taking one bite and lost the next five minutes. I'd call this my seventh-inning stretch, but I would have preferred to seventh-inning lie down on the ground.

The White Sox's South Side Horseshoe — an Italian sausage patty atop a round of garlic Texas toast, doused in cheese sauce (and a nod to the horseshoe, a messy open-faced sandwich of central Illinois tradition) — was quite tasty. That said, compared to the neatly sliced, evenly distributed scallions garnishing some of FoodFest's surprisingly fussy ballpark dishes, this thing was downright goofy, with a lone waffle fry jammed into the thick yellow paste like an elementary school craft gone awry. Besides not being a particularly creative concept, the Cincinnati Reds' Fry Box — which was...a box of fries, with bacon, cheese, gravy, and scallions — did not age well in the time it spent waiting for me on the counter, fat glistening in the bright lights. The gravy coagulated into an off-white solid beneath the exterior potato crust. I would not say I loved it. (Where is Skyline Chili when I need it the most?)

I saved the sole sweet entry for last (technically, I did see someone piping soft-serve ice cream directly into mini baseball helmets, but as that particular dessert is unaffiliated with any specific team, I granted my stomach a well-deserved and very necessary exemption). The D-Backs' Churro Dog was made to order: a (room-temperature, sadly) churro nestled inside a donut and slathered with Froyo, chocolate sauce, caramel, and whipped cream. It was a mess, as was I. But I was just happy to finally be eating something cold and sweet, without the slightest suggestion of pulled pork or nachos.

I finished my quest just a minute or two before 9 p.m. and headed home, leaving behind a woman in a "Highway 420" shirt, who probably has a million YouTube subscribers, singing a list of foods she ate to the tune of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" into a camera.

A few weeks ago, I watched the Yankees beat the Rays at home in the Bronx. Even after my #FoodFest #foodgod journey through the vanguard of ballpark food innovation, I couldn't resist ordering my long-standing favorite: regular old sausage and peppers. Deeply generic, yes, but also deeply delicious.