



SF Giants Press Clips
Friday, September 7, 2018

San Francisco Chronicle

What is Brandon Belt's future with the Giants?

Henry Schulman

MILWAUKEE — Did Brandon Belt drop a house on a wicked witch during a tornado? Did he drive his car into a mirror factory?

Ballplayers get hurt. Brandon Belt gets hurt in the most unfortunate ways: concussions from beanings, a broken thumb from a pitch, and this year, an appendicitis and a noncontact bone bruise in his knee that derailed what was shaping up to be that breakout season that Belt and the Giants long have sought.

"It's tough because these injuries are not what you would call normal injuries," Belt said in Denver on Monday, before a game he didn't start because of knee soreness. "They're just out of nowhere, some weird accident happens.

"Who gets appendicitis in the middle of the season? It's kind of stupid."

What's not stupid is the question of Belt's future with the Giants, even though he still has three years left on an extension he signed before last season.

The Giants drafted Joey Bart in June to be their catcher, sooner than later. When Bart arrives, Buster Posey surely will move to first base and leave Belt — where?

Moreover, recent history suggests the Giants cannot fix things solely by throwing money at free agents. They will have to venture into the trade market to get younger, quicker and more

potent. It takes talent to get talent, and executive vice president Brian Sabean has hinted that even core players might be on the block.

Posey and shortstop Brandon Crawford are staying put. Both have no-trade clauses. Also, trading World Series hero of heroes Madison Bumgarner would be a huge leap for the organization even if he could attract the greatest return.

That leaves Belt, who intrigues other teams because of his ability to get on base, hit for power and field his position as well or better than any first baseman in the game. He should bring a significant return, assuming the Giants pay down some of his contract.

Belt is not thinking about changing cities, but perhaps changing positions.

“I love being a Giant and I hope that’s the way it stays,” he said, “but if it’s something like me moving to left field to give my spot to Posey, it is what it is. It doesn’t bother me. It’s just another position I’ve got to play. I really pride myself on being a little bit more versatile out there. If that’s in the cards, it’s in the cards.”

For the first two months of 2018, the cards he held were all aces. On June 1, he was hitting .307 with 11 homers and a .950 OPS that placed him among the league leaders. Those numbers over a full season attract Most Valuable Player votes.

That night, the Giants pulled Belt after two innings in a home game against the Phillies and rushed him to the hospital, where he had his appendix removed in emergency surgery.

He has not been the same hitter since, batting .211 with three homers in 210 plate appearances. With the appendicitis and knee injury costing him about five weeks, Belt might fail to reach 500 plate appearances for the fourth time in his seven full seasons.

Belt believes his downturn is an issue of lost timing and rhythm, which can be hard to regain.

“Great players always say when they’re going good, they don’t want a day off,” hitting coach Alonzo Powell said. “You want to keep playing because there’s a feeling that you have.

“He was in an unbelievable rhythm when he had the surgery. It seems like he’s been in and out of rhythm since then. Once your rhythm is a tick off, you miss balls you normally hit hard. That makes things go the wrong way.”

On the other hand, Belt is proof that defense rarely slumps. Thanks to metrics that now compose part of the formula for selecting Gold Gloves, he might win his first, and he is not shy about his qualifications.

“I’ve said many times I don’t need one to validate what I’ve done out there, but it would be nice,” he said. “I feel like I’m the best defensive first baseman in the game. I would love to have that. I’ve worked hard for it, just like everybody else has.”

Belt admitted that another curtailed season has frustrated him, especially since he thought on Opening Day he was primed for his best season.

“I’d just like to have that full season under my belt,” he said. “I’ve had a couple of them, but here lately, especially where I feel like I’ve progressed mentally and physically out on the field, I’d like to be able to show that for an entire season.

“I’m still wholeheartedly confident in myself and my abilities. I’ve shown what I can do the first half of the season. I know it’s in there. I’ve just got to get back to it.”

San Jose Mercury News

Uncertainty in center field shouldn’t compel Giants to deviate from 2019 plan

Kerry Crowley

MILWAUKEE — As Cactus League play drew to an end and the Giants prepared to travel north to round out their exhibition schedule, they hadn’t settled on a starting center fielder for 2018.

Back in March, the Giants had practically penciled in their Opening Day center fielder for 2019, but the team’s top decision-makers struggled to determine whether Steven Duggar was ready to play in the major leagues right away.

Days before the season began, Duggar learned he would open the year at Triple-A Sacramento while free agent signee Austin Jackson would man the middle of the Giants’ outfield.

The plan backfired, but it wasn’t because the Giants thought Duggar needed more seasoning in the minor leagues.

Jackson didn’t have the range to cover the vast outfields of the National League West and he failed to drive the ball, recording only eight extra-base hits in 59 games. The Giants needed a better defender and a more threatening hitter, but they didn’t have to look far to find one.

Reserve Gorkys Hernández was easily the more capable player.

As the Giants play out their remaining schedule, Hernández is tied for the team lead in home runs despite starting only 86 of the club’s 141 games. His 15 homers are easily a career-high and on Tuesday, he became the first player to hit 15 a year after recording 300 plate appearances without a home run since Phil Bradley accomplished the feat in 1985 with the

Seattle Mariners.

“You look at Gorkys’ year, I think we’ve seen the improvement,” manager Bruce Bochy said.

But even after a career year, Hernández isn’t being billed as the Giants’ center fielder of the future. Despite only 141 at-bats in an injury-shortened season, that title still belongs to Duggar.

“I really liked where he was at the plate,” Bochy said of Duggar. “That’s why it was so unfortunate he got hurt when he did. But I think he showed enough in the two months that he can play up here.”

Duggar is the fastest player to appear for the Giants this season, recording a 28.9-foot-per-second sprint speed that even outranks speedy infielder Alen Hanson. The rookie was easily the best outfield defender the Giants used this season, as he is still tied with Hernández for the team lead with three Outs Above Average, a range-based metric of fielding skill that accounts for the number of plays made and the difficulty of the plays.

And while Duggar hit .255 with a .303 on-base percentage, he showed glimpses of gap-to-gap power and adequate plate discipline the Giants believe will improve over time.

“When Duggar came up, you saw what a tremendous defender he is,” Bochy said. “And the bat, I thought he made a lot of progress with the swing. He was really cutting back a lot of those swing and misses.”

Awarding a starting job at such a crucial position to a player lacking experience isn’t an easy decision, but the Giants don’t need to deviate from their plans in center field next season. As long as Duggar’s rehab from a labrum tear plays out as expected, the Giants can count on him to start in part because of the potential he showed, but also thanks to the emergence of Hernández.

When Jackson struggled, the Venezuela native proved he could handle the rigors of playing every day. He’s a .260 hitter as a starter, and he’s the rare outfielder on the roster with the power to hit the ball out of AT&T Park. After playing through a hamate bone injury last year, a healthy Hernández is in a better position to lift the ball when he swings.

“I just think with him being healthy, he’s able to get through the ball and his hand is healthy so with more bat speed, he’s able to get the ball up in the air,” hitting coach Alonzo Powell said this summer. “We didn’t tweak his swing or anything to hit more flyballs.”

Seven of Hernández’s 15 home runs have come at home and he leads all Giants with 10 homers of at least 400 feet. Though outfielder Andrew McCutchen (recently traded to the New York Yankees) and third baseman Evan Longoria have also hit 15 for the Giants this season, the

marquee offseason acquisitions have combined for 10 home runs of at least 400 feet and neither hit more than five of their homers in San Francisco.

Hernández, 30, also has the defensive versatility to play all three outfield positions, which makes him a more valuable asset to a 25-man roster. He has the range to spell Duggar in center — Hernandez has a sprint speed of 28.3 feet per second — but he can also patrol both corners.

With a duo of Duggar and Hernández, the Giants have enough talent, particularly defensively, to feel confident in center field heading into next season. Though the roster has a list of flaws that must be addressed this offseason, the front office should be able to dedicate more time and resources to fixing holes in the corners, in the infield and potentially on the starting staff thanks to two center fielders under team control.

“It’s always going to stay competitive, but I certainly like what I’ve seen from both of them,” Bochy said.

MLB.com

5 pressing questions in NL West

Mathew Leach

There's no need to manufacture drama or reasons to watch the National League West this year. It's been -- from top to bottom -- arguably baseball's most consistently watchable division over the past five months.

It may be down to a three-team race with 3 1/2 weeks remaining (though don't tell the Giants that), but there are things to keep an eye on with all five clubs. Here is one question to be answered down the stretch for each team.

D-backs

The question: What do they do in the late innings?

The D-backs thought they had one of baseball's best late-inning duos in **Brad Boxberger** and **Archie Bradley**. In the first half, they may have been right. Lately, that's not so clear.

Both pitchers have had strange and similar second halves. Both have seen their strikeout rates go up some, their walk rates go up a bit and their home run rates stay more or less steady. They've both experienced massive jumps in BABIP, which should be encouraging, but patience is rarely a trait shown with late-inning relievers on contending teams.

If both get sorted out, as the numbers suggest they should, Arizona's late relief is strong. If not, Torey Lovullo will have to figure out some alternative options quickly.

Dodgers

The question: Whither Kenley Jansen?

The problem is that it's not entirely clear what exactly the right question even is regarding Jansen. Is his health the primary concern? Or is that in the past? And if that's the case, we still haven't entirely established how effective he'll be.

- **Doctor: Jansen should skip road trip to Denver**

The Dodgers' lineup is deep and dangerous from both the left and right sides. Their rotation has front-line talent and plenty of depth. And in the middle innings, they have more quality options than you might think. But then there's the ninth, which should be the most cut-and-dried aspect of the whole club.

Until and unless Jansen turns in a string of outings that show that he's both healthy and effective, the Dodgers will have to wonder.

Giants

The question: Can the kids play?

At their peak earlier this decade, the Giants masterfully combined the ability to stay competitive with the ability to cycle in talented young players. The past couple of years, neither of those has gone quite so well.

As this season approaches a close, they'll give a long look to two of their better prospects, outfielders Chris Shaw and **Austin Slater**. Shaw, the Giants' **No. 4 prospect** per MLB Pipeline, has flashed power throughout the Minors and may have more upside, but he also comes with the risk of being strikeout-prone. Slater, meanwhile, has the better bat-to-ball and on-base skills, and he has held his own at the big league level for a while now.

The club must find out as much as it can as to whether these two promising youngsters can be contributors to a competitive 2019 team.

Padres

The question: What do they do with Francisco Mejia?

Mejia, **baseball's top catching prospect**, makes his first Padres start on Thursday. He's known for his bat, while the Padres already have one of the game's most talented young defensive catchers, **Austin Hedges**, to compete for playing time.

So San Diego must start figuring out where Mejia will play. He could well split time at catcher with Hedges or even emerge as the long- (and possibly short-) term starter, but he's also played third base and outfield in the Minors. If the bat plays, or if Hedges forces the issue, Mejia could see much of his time at other positions. We'll start getting some idea soon.

Rockies

The question: What will they get from Nolan Arenado?

As recently as a few weeks ago, Arenado may have been the leading candidate for the NL MVP Award. He could still take the trophy, but a recent slump can't be helping his chances. Arenado has two home runs since Aug. 6, a stretch over which he's slugging .385. He's driven in 12 runs in that span and scored 14, so it's not like he isn't contributing, but he's this team's most important player.

That's in large part because this Rockies team is not the offensive juggernaut of some past Colorado teams, and it needs Arenado playing like an MVP. A right shoulder problem cost him a little time early last month, and though Arenado has said the discomfort does not affect his swing, it's hard not to wonder a little bit.

The Athletic

Giant steps: Sean Hjelle takes his first strides toward becoming the tallest player in major league history

Andrew Baggarly

KEIZER, Ore. — The Salem-Keizer Volcanoes gathered to celebrate a comeback victory, and right-hander Sean Hjelle stood at the end of the high-five line. He stretched his arm as high as it would go.

Nobody slapped his hand. Nobody could reach.

When you stand a hair under 7 feet in your sweat socks, and are just beginning a professional career, and assured a place in baseball's record books as soon as you throw your first major league pitch, you either embrace the novelty of your height or seek to hide from it.

"Yeaah," said Hjelle, his far-off gaze fixed somewhere beyond where his lodgepole legs ended as they stretched over a row of seats at Volcanoes Stadium. "I'm not so good at being sneaky."

The Giants, appropriately enough, selected Hjelle (pronounced "Jelly") with their second-round draft pick in June. He is a far stretch from pitching at AT&T Park. But if he reaches the pinnacle of his profession, he would become the tallest player in major league history.

Taller than Hall of Famer Randy Johnson, who was 6-foot-10. Taller than Chris Young, another 6-10 pitcher who made an All-Star team and started 221 games over a 13-year career. Yes, even

taller than the current record holder, journeyman reliever Jon Rauch, who was a towering, 6-11 presence on the mound.

The Giants measured Hjelle's height and weight as part of his physical in June at the club's minor league complex in Arizona. The draft database listed him as 6-11. He measured in at 6-11 ½. He swears he stood flat-footed.

"Got 'em by a half an inch," said Hjelle, smiling. "Yeah, 83 1/2 inches. It's not how I dreamed of getting into Cooperstown. It'd be cool. But being a major league pitcher, that would be the dream come true."

Hjelle wants to be known as a successful pitcher and not merely the tallest one, yet his height is the first thing anyone notices — and not just when he stilt-walks onto a baseball diamond or gallops like a giraffe on the savanna to cover first base or perches himself atop the mound while peering over his glove as if from a second-story window. It's so much easier to cope with the gawkers and the jokesters if he maintains a sense of humor about it.

So ... the high-five line, and an arm stretched to the stars for comic effect.

"When I first got really tall and people would stare, it was a weird new experience," said Hjelle, a native Minnesotan who underwent an 8-inch growth spurt in the eighth grade while going through a new pair of shoes every week or two. "Then it was kind of, 'whatever,' and I'll be honest, then it got annoying for awhile.

"But I came to terms with it. It's sort of mind-numbing at this point. I'll go out in public with someone for the first time and they'll be like, 'Do you know that everybody is staring at you right now?' It's like, 'Yeah.' I stopped keeping track or paying attention to that. It's just life."

For his first taste of life in minor league baseball, the Giants put Hjelle on a short leash. Club officials were concerned about his workload following his junior season the University of Kentucky. So when the Giants assigned Hjelle to the short-season Northwest League, they limited him to two-inning starts.

Working short was not in his nature.

"You want to throw the kitchen sink," said Hjelle, who pairs a low-90s fastball with a knuckle curve, slider and changeup. "You only have two innings. You want to try to work out as many pitches as you can."

It was up to catcher Joey Bart, the second overall pick in the draft, to rein him in.

"He gives me that look sometimes," Hjelle said. "It's, 'Dude, throw fastball. C'mon. I put one (finger) down. Like, I'm going to put the one down again if you shake. Just throw it regardless.' He's been really good at reminding me, 'Hey, your stuff got you here. Just trust it.'"

Hjelle made 12 starts for Salem-Keizer and never had a chance to win any of them because he was done after six outs — or sooner, if he encountered a long inning. There were a few of those, too. He finished with a 5.06 ERA, a .273 opponent's average and four home runs allowed in 21 1/3 innings. The encouraging part: he also struck out 22 and issued just four walks.

And that tells you: Hjelle might stand eye to eye with the Big Unit, but he is a much different kind of pitcher.

Johnson struggled to harness extreme wildness until he was almost 30 years old and in his sixth big league season, but it was Hjelle's advanced control and coordination, as well as his size, that made him attractive to Giants scouting director John Barr.

"He doesn't move like he's a 6-foot-11 pitcher," Barr said. "You expect him to be gawky, but he moves his feet. It's not until you get close enough to him that you realize how tall he is. From a distance, he looks like any other pitcher because of how well he controls his body."

In addition to becoming the tallest player in major league history, Hjelle, of course, would become the giantest Giant in franchise history. That distinction currently belongs to Johnson, a Bay Area native who finished his career with them as a 45-year-old in 2009 and won his 300th career game in black and orange.

Johnson was introspective and nostalgic in his final season. Every question from a reporter, no matter how mundane, became "This Is Your Life." With little prompting, he'd lay bare all his insecurities and early-career doubts.

"I just thought I'd get lost in the shuffle," Johnson said during his final spring training. "I saw kids that were light-years ahead of me. I threw harder, but they had everything else with it: fluid mechanics, off-speed pitches. They just looked like a big league pitcher compared to me. I was throwing 98 mph, but I was throwing to the backstop — literally."

One year, while pitching for Felipe Alou's club in West Palm Beach, Florida, Johnson walked 94 in 120 innings. There were games in which Johnson was incredibly wild — Alou recalled he once threw a pitch over the chicken wire and into the stands — but the manager was under orders from Montreal Expos officials that he throw at least 75 pitches.

"I'd reach it in three innings and I'd be done," Johnson said. "I wouldn't learn anything from it. It was just very frustrating, because one day I could do it, I'd strike out 11 in five innings, and five days later I'd throw my pitch limit and get shelled."

The turning point came when Nolan Ryan watched Johnson throw a side session prior to a game in Texas in 1992 and noted that he was landing on his right heel. Ryan and Texas Rangers pitching coach Tom House suggested that Johnson try landing on the ball of his right foot, instead. In that moment, the greatest late-blooming pitching career in baseball history flashed its first blush of color.

But no two pitchers are the same. Even extremely tall pitchers, for all the similarly long shadows they cast, are not monolithic. Johnson was left-handed and whipped the baseball from a three-quarter arm slot. Hjelle more closely resembles Young, both right-handers who throw more conventionally over the top. But tall pitchers do share some unique challenges. Whatever their ideal mechanics are, it can be a struggle to repeat them.

"Even a 6-foot-1 pitcher has to repeat his arm motion," Johnson said in a recent phone interview. "But the taller you are, the longer limbs you have, it can be harder to keep everything under control. The process sometimes takes longer to find the consistent release

point you need. And my height doesn't include the length of my arm, which is 4 or 5 inches longer than someone who is 6-foot-1. Even pitching coaches had a hard time understanding that. It hindered me for a long period of time."

When it comes to consistent mechanics, Hjelle might be ahead of the game — both in terms of coordination and mindset.

"Obviously, I have to think about mechanics more than the guy who's 6-foot," Hjelle said. "But I try not to get caught up in thinking about mechanics every single time I throw a baseball. I simplify it to this: find a way. Find a way to get the baseball to where you want it to go. I've found that mindset helps me better than ... I struggle when I throw a pitch and I'm like, 'I've got to change this.'"

Johnson, told all about Hjelle, laughed as thinks about how he has become the consultant and whisperer-in-chief to tall pitchers. There is no universally applicable advice, he said, other than to stay patient and avoid feeling discouraged. But even that simple message carries weight when it comes from a Hall of Famer.

One of Johnson's earliest protégés was Young, whom he first met while the right-hander was pitching at Princeton University.

Princeton's coach, Scott Bradley, was Johnson's one-time batterymate with the Seattle Mariners and caught one of his no-hitters. For all the ways Young and Johnson were dissimilar, Bradley knew his two-sport student (Young also played for Princeton's basketball team) could benefit from a conversation with the Big Unit.

"One of the biggest things Randy emphasized to me was it took him a while to learn his delivery and his body, and that I might go through the same challenges," said Young, who retired after last season and is now working for Major League Baseball as a vice president assisting with on-field operations initiatives and strategies. "Over the course of my career, it was an ongoing process. It never stops. There's just so much room for error. As a bigger guy, if you're just a little off, it's magnified by the time the ball reaches home plate.

"But if you're on that day, it's also magnified, and you have the ability to excel."



Tall pitchers share more than similar mechanical challenges. They share similar advantages, too. Length equals leverage. From the batter's box, a 6-11 pitcher looks like he can reach out and grab your uniform sleeve.

It can be just as intimidating for the catcher as it is for the hitter. Bart recalled receiving one of Hjelle's first starts for the Volcanoes in Eugene, where the shadows can be difficult in the early innings.

“I literally could not see the ball,” Bart said. “First pitch of the game, low and away on the corner, boom. It popped out of my glove for a ball. I was all, ‘Oh my gosh, he made a perfect pitch and I stunk it up and dropped it to cost him a strike.’ He’s a little deceptive because of that, no doubt. Sean is a competitor and it’s fun to catch him. He’s going to be very good.”

Bradley had the same experience the first time he caught one of Young’s side sessions at Princeton.

“He’d throw the ball down in the strike zone, and you felt like you had to turn the glove over like it’d be in the dirt,” Bradley said. “But it would stay on that same plane and it would handcuff you. I’m sure hitters would say the same thing: the pitch that looked down was at their knees and the pitch at the waist was over their heads.”

Bradley loves to tell the story about the time he caught Johnson in Kansas City and George Brett stepped to the plate in the first inning: “First pitch fastball, literally right down the middle, Jim Evans behind the plate. George looked back and he goes, ‘You’re kidding me. Where was that pitch?’ Evans says, ‘George, that was the right down the middle.’ And George goes, ‘Well, it sounded high to me.’

“With Randy, it felt like he was letting go of the ball 10 feet in front of the glove. It’s something hitters just don’t see.”

Literally.

Young understood that his fastball had a high spin rate before spin rates became all the rage. So he learned to pound the top of the zone, always careful to err on the high side. Once, after Young blanked the Phillies, Jimmy Rollins said he had no chance against the pitcher’s “invisiball.” Another time, against an inexperienced Marlins lineup, Young threw almost exclusively high fastballs – 99 out of 104 pitches – in seven innings.

Young developed a reputation as a fly-ball pitcher, and this is where he must confess to indulging a bit of vanity. He couldn’t help but correct people. He wasn’t a fly-ball pitcher. He was a pop-up pitcher.

“The way I pitched, guys naturally swung under the ball,” Young said. “It’s a higher angle and the trajectory of the ball created a different view for the hitter. It’s just hard to get on top of the ball when it’s coming from a 6-foot-10 arm angle.

“I knew what my strengths were. There were times, sure, you wished you could get a ground-ball double play. Other times, with a runner on third and no outs, I felt a pop-up and a strikeout and I could get out of it, where with a ground ball I might not. I gave up a few more home runs than a ground-ball pitcher. I just tried to keep those solo shots so they hopefully didn’t beat me.”

So, that just about settles it. Hjelle aspires to a long and successful career in the Giants rotation, pitching at the letters with his four-seam fastball and inducing a hailstorm of easy pop-outs.

Except ...

“I’m a ground-ball guy,” Hjelle said. “Honestly, I try to focus on getting ground balls on every guy. I just let my defense do the job.”

Hjelle estimated that during his sophomore year at Kentucky, when he was SEC pitcher of the year, more than 80 percent of his outs came on ground balls. His knuckle curve is considered his best pitch. He thinks of his pitching style as intuitive, not reductive.

“In high school, it was throw whatever I could throw for a strike at that point in time,” Hjelle said. “I didn’t really understand pitching. In college, I learned to make hitters uncomfortable. It’s not always what you feel, it’s reading hitters and their swings and having an open conversation all the time with your catcher.

“But when I’m at my best, it’s usually a lot of weak, pull-side ground balls. Maybe I will turn into (having) a more even mix or a pop-up pitcher as I progress. My whole life, though, it’s been, ‘Shoot knees-shoot-knees-shoot knees.’ So right now, I’m a ground ball pitcher.”

Maybe the Giants will try to tweak Hjelle’s repertoire and pitch plan as he advances in the system, grooming him to be more to be like Young — a strategy that is perfectly tailored to today’s swing-for-the-fences approach in the big leagues. They expect that Hjelle will add to his low-90s fastball velocity as his 21-year-old body matures and he adds weight to a spindly, 225-pound frame.

Bradley speculated that taller pitchers could be more valuable and sought after than ever, given the game’s direction.

“Or that may be the way his ball plays,” Young said of Hjelle’s ground-ball tendencies. “For me, I was a four-seam pitcher, stayed behind the ball, got late life, had a high spin rate. I realized early on that the ball didn’t sink for me. Other tall pitchers may have more of an upright delivery, get sink on the ball, change their arm angle. Everyone is different. Your height doesn’t necessarily make you a ground ball pitcher or a fly ball pitcher.

“The goal is to be a pitcher who gets outs.”

Left-handers. Right-handers. Ground-ball outs. Fly-ball outs. No matter how they operate, the tallest pitchers in baseball history are identical in one respect.

Traveling sucks.

Johnson’s minor league roommate at Double-A, former Giants pitcher and coach Mark Gardner, recalled that the left-hander was so uncomfortable during the 12-hour bus rides out of Jacksonville that he’d sleep in the luggage rack.

“He’d get in on his own, but he needed help to get unfolded and get out,” Gardner said. “He definitely paid his dues.”

Young actually used his height to his advantage on bus trips, since nobody wanted to share a seat with him. His biggest challenge in the minor leagues was to find baseball pants that fit right. One year with the Class A Hickory Crawdads, the situation called for some creative tailoring.

“They ended up taking two pairs of pants and sewing them together,” Young said. “And even with that, they didn’t reach my ankles.”

When he reached the big leagues with the Texas Rangers in 2004, the clubhouse manager asked Young how he liked to wear his pants.

“I don’t know,” Young stammered. “I’ve never had a choice before.”

He decided to wear them all the way down.

“Because for the first time in my life, I could,” he said. “I’ve finally got a pair of pants that fit me.”

Basketball shorts are so much easier, and to this day, Young will walk into a public place and someone will ask if he played in the NBA. If they don’t recognize him as the 13-year major league veteran, he won’t volunteer the information. He’ll just tell them no.

“I’ve even had people say, ‘Oh, what a waste,’” Young said with a laugh. “Which is fine. I’m not a public person, I don’t crave the attention. And really, I was probably a better natural basketball player. I always say baseball chose me.”

Hjelle says the most common question he gets, aside from his actual height, is whether he plays basketball. And yes, he led the Mahtomedi High basketball team to a 24-6 record as a senior. College basketball is “a religion” in his family, and they don’t wait for March Madness to become glued to the TV for a top-25 game.

“Even my mom jokes every once in awhile, ‘Aww, you should have played basketball,’” Hjelle said with a laugh.

But he told any college basketball recruiters that approached him that he planned to focus on baseball, and word spread.

“Since I was a kid, it was baseball,” he said. “It was just that innate thing. Baseball’s always been the love, always been the passion. It’s that simple.”

He might have laid the matter to rest for good during his freshman year at Kentucky, when he was among a group of baseball players selected to participate in a halftime contest of a basketball game at Rupp Arena. They had to team up to make a 3-pointer, a halfcourt shot and a layup. Hjelle was an obvious choice for the points in the paint.

“I was a freshman, I was very hyped up, there were 26,000 people ... ” he said. “I was feeling the adrenaline. So I try to take off from the middle of the lane and throw it down as physically hard as I could. It was, ‘Just bring the house down and go for it.’”

The ball hit the back iron and clanked out.

Hjelle got a second chance and dunked it home. But not before convincing a hoops-mad campus that he indeed belonged on a pitcher’s mound.

And now he’s a professional baseball player, eager to start climbing the rungs and reaching new heights.

“It’s been awesome,” Hjelle said. “I’m a taxpayer now. I’m an adult. I’ve got to get used to the fact this is actually my career now. You’ll hear all these things about pro ball, how it’s just gonna be you, how nobody’s gonna care. Thankfully, that’s not the case. The Giants organization, the players, coaches, everybody has been super supportive, super helpful.

“And its still 60 feet, 6 inches. So that’s nice.”

The Athletic

Down on the farm: Naming the Giants’ 2018 minor league All-Stars

Melissa Lockard

The Giants made a lot of personnel changes in the player development department and added some significant talent through the draft and trades, but the improvements didn’t translate in the win-loss column for the Giants system this season. They finished with the second-worst winning percentage in the minor leagues as a whole and only their three Rookie ball squads finished with better than .500 records.

That being said, there were certainly some promising individual performances this season in the Giants system. Below is our 2018 Giants minor league All-Star squad.



1B: Gio Brusa, San Jose Giants

107 G, 408 AB, .238/.298/.458, 19 HR, 70 RBIs, 23 2B

Brusa struggled to get on base with High-A San Jose, but the first baseman led all Giants’ minor leaguers in RBIs and finished second in home runs. The switch-hitter struggled to hit right-handed, but he smashed 17 home runs in 330 at-bats as a lefty. Brusa put up those numbers while learning the first-base position after playing all but one game in the outfield during his first two pro seasons. He needs to improve his plate discipline, but Brusa is one of the Giants’ top minor league power threats.

Beicker Mendoza, the 20-year-old first baseman for the AZL Giants Orange, emerged as an intriguing prospect this season. In 173 at-bats, he hit .301/.330/.462 with four home runs. He should get an opportunity in full-season ball next season after three years in Arizona.

2B: Jalen Miller, San Jose Giants

123 G, 511 AB, .276/.321/.434, 14 HR, 62 RBIs, 35 2B, 11 SB

Miller slumped a bit down the stretch, but he impressed enough people around the league to land on the California League's selective postseason All-Star team. Miller is a terrific athlete who showed improved pitch recognition this season at the plate. He offers power and speed as a hitter and good range at second in the field. He moved himself into the Giants' top-20 prospect list with his standout campaign.

SS: Ryan Howard, Richmond Flying Squirrels

117 G, 422 AB, .273/.336/.396, 32 2B, 9 SB

In an era of power-hitting shortstops, Howard is a flashback to a different time in the game. He doesn't hit for much over-the-fence power, but he fed the gaps on a consistent basis for Richmond while displaying above-average contact skills (11.93 percent K%). His .123 ISO was a significant improvement over his .091 ISO with San Jose in 2017 despite playing in a more pitcher-friendly league. Defensively, Howard was solid at both his primary position at shortstop and his secondary spot at second base.

3B: David Villar, Salem-Keizer Volcanoes/AZL Giants Black

62 G, 245 AB, .282/.342/.535, 13 HR, 47 RBIs, 23 2B

Villar, the Giants' 11th-round pick this season out of South Florida, quickly established himself as a power-hitting threat with a standout pro debut. Villar tied for third in the league in home runs and RBIs while finishing third by himself in SLG. Villar's strong season built off of his junior year at South Florida, when he hit .374/.463/.648. Villar is a candidate to skip Low-A and jump into the San Jose lineup next season.

UT: Chase d'Arnaud, Sacramento River Cats

76 G, 253 AB, .292/.393/.522, 12 HR, 43 RBIs, 15 SB

D'Arnaud was a solid minor league free-agent signing for the Giants this offseason. The veteran filled a lot of gaps on the River Cats roster through early July before earning a promotion to the big leagues. Since then, he's provided some pop off the bench for the Giants. With Sacramento, d'Arnaud did a bit of everything, hitting for average, working the count and hitting for power. He also moved all over the field, logging time at every position except pitcher and catcher. D'Arnaud has since thrown an inning for the Giants in a mop-up role.

C: Joey Bart, Salem-Keizer Volcanoes/AZL Giants Orange

51 G, 204 AB, .294/.364/.588, 13 HR, 40 RBIs, 15 2B

Given the state of the Giants farm system and the makeup of their current big league roster, it is fair to say that Bart is the most important draft pick the Giants have made in nearly a decade. The second overall pick certainly looked the part of a future superstar in his pro debut season. He finished tied for third in the Northwest League in home runs and first in SLG. He also threw out 42 percent of would-be base-stealers. He should jump to San Jose next April and is likely to be on a fast track to the big leagues from there.

LF: Chris Shaw, Sacramento River Cats

101 G, 394 AB, .259/.308/.505, 24 HR, 65 RBIs, 21 2Bs

It wasn't a perfect season for Shaw, who still needs to find a way to get on base more consistently, but the Giants' 2015 first-round pick continued to show he can hit for power at the highest levels. Shaw's .246 ISO this season was his best since his pro debut in 2015. He led all Giants minor leaguers in home runs and finished tied for seventh in the PCL in that category. Shaw made his big league debut last week and will get an opportunity this month to audition for a spot in the Giants' 2019 plans.

CF: Johneshwy Fargas, San Jose Giants

89 G, 278 AB, .288/.354/.421, 8 HR, 32 RBIs, 47 SB

With the exception of a poor month of May, Fargas was a big weapon for San Jose, hitting for average and wreaking havoc on the basepaths all season. He finished ninth in all of the minor leagues in stolen bases and led the Giants organization in that category. The native of Puerto Rico finished with career bests in nearly every category, including ISO (.133), SecA (.320) and wOBA (.330).

RF: Heath Quinn, San Jose Giants

96 G, 357 AB, .300/.376/.485, 14 HR, 51 RBIs, 24 2B

A hamstring injury suffered in May was the only thing to slow down Quinn this season. The 2016 third-round pick hit for power and average. He posted a .185 ISO and a .371 wOBA, significantly improving his numbers in both areas over his 2017 stint with San Jose. Quinn also played solid defense in both corner positions. He will jump to Double-A at the start of next season and could see significant time in Triple-A by the end of the year.

Rotation

Shaun Anderson (3.69 ERA, 141 1/3 IP)

Logan Webb (2.41 ERA, 104 2/3 IP)

John Gavin (2.87 ERA, 122 1/3 IP)

Conner Menez (4.46 ERA, 135 1/3 IP)

Aaron Phillips (3.72 ERA, 101 2/3 IP)

Anderson was the biggest standout performer in the Giants system this season. The right-hander established himself as the Giants' top starting pitching prospect with an outstanding year for Richmond and Sacramento. The former Florida closer consistently worked deep into games thanks to his approach of aggressively attacking the strike zone. He struck out nearly four batters for every one he walked and did a good job keeping the ball in the yard. Anderson should receive a non-roster invite to spring training and could compete for the Giants' fifth-starter spot next spring.

Webb was another breakthrough performer, as the right-hander impressed in his first full season back from Tommy John surgery. The Giants were careful to monitor Webb's innings and pitches thrown throughout the season and he remained strong throughout the year. He spent most of the season with San Jose — where he posted a 1.82 ERA and struck out a batter an inning in 74 innings — before finishing the final month of the season in Double-A. He may return to Double-A to start the 2019 season, but Webb could be considered for a big league spot as soon as late next summer.

For a big portion of the summer, Gavin was nearly unhittable for the Low-A Augusta GreenJackets. The left-hander held South Atlantic League batters to a .167 average in 95 innings and he posted a 2.08 ERA with Augusta. He also threw a shutout. Gavin finished the season pitching for his hometown team in San Jose, where he mixed three good starts with three mediocre outings. Gavin should return to San Jose at the start of 2019.

The Giants' minor league strikeout leader was none other than the left-hander Menez, who finished the season with 171 in 135 1/3 innings spread between San Jose, Richmond and Sacramento. That mark left him tied for fourth in all of the minor leagues in strikeouts. Menez actually pitched better in the upper levels than he did with San Jose this season. He'll be a prospect worth watching in 2019.

Phillips dealt with a few injuries early in the season, but he still managed to rack up 101 2/3 innings by the end of the year. He struck out 120 and walked only 16, earning him the title of "best command" among Giants' minor league pitching prospects. Phillips came to pro ball with the "raw prospect" label, so his maturation on the mound in 2018 was a nice development for the Giants. The 6-foot-5 right-hander should be ready for the challenge of the California League

in his age-22 season next year.

Bullpen

Ray Black (2.52 ERA, 35 2/3 IP)

Dan Slania (2.43 ERA, 70 1/3 IP)

John Russell (2.34 ERA, 65 1/3 IP)

Dillon McNamara (2.38 ERA, 53 IP)

Black finally had the breakthrough season that the Giants had been waiting for, as the right-hander was able to stay on the field for the entire year after making only three appearances in 2017. Black dominated with Richmond and Sacramento, allowing opposing batters to hit only .153 against him and posting a 16.65 K/9. Black's results so far in the big leagues have been mixed, but he's had enough dominant outings that one can envision him blossoming into a shutdown late-innings reliever if he can continue to stay healthy.

Slania didn't reach the big leagues this season after making his debut last year, but he had a strong campaign out of the bullpen for Richmond. He struck out nearly a batter an inning while posting a 1.02 WHIP and holding opposing batters to a .205 average.

The Augusta rotation deservedly got plenty of attention this season, but the bullpen had a few shining stars, as well, with Russell leading the way. In his first full professional season, he posted a 2.49 ERA in 61 1/3 innings for the GreenJackets before making two scoreless appearances for San Jose to close out the year. All told, he struck out 77 and held opposing batters to a .189 average in 65 1/3 innings. He also saved seven games. Russell doesn't have traditional closer's stuff, but he has two swing-and-miss breaking balls and could be an intriguing setup man down the road.

Relievers who throw strikes are a manager's best friend and Willie Harris could count on McNamara to throw strikes all season. In 45 innings with the Flying Squirrels, the right-hander walked only eight while striking out 50. He also posted a 1.20 ERA. It was a strong recovery for McNamara, who began the year with Sacramento but struggled out of the gate and was sent to Richmond in early May.

NBCsportsbayarea.com

Giants rookie Chris Shaw watching, learning from Brandon Belt's approach

Alex Pavlovic

DENVER — Giants manager Bruce Bochy thought about giving Brandon Belt another night off Wednesday to rest his sore knee, but the first baseman told him he wanted to play, explaining that he has missed enough time this season because of injuries. One rookie batting behind Belt surely was happy to see him in there.

In his first week in the big leagues, Chris Shaw has tried to soak up as much as he can from a hitter with a similar build.

“Belt is a guy that I try to watch because he’s hitting ahead of me in the order and he’s a big lefty,” Shaw said on **The Giants Insider Podcast**. “The way it is, I figure I’ll probably get pitched similarly to him, so I pay attention to what he’s doing and talk to him about what his approach is and what he looks for. I’m really similar to him as far as approach goes. Once we start looking in, we kind of leave ourselves susceptible to other things.”

Belt has found his most success in the big leagues when he’s focused on the middle of the field, although at times, that can lead to frustration at AT&T Park. Shaw’s first big league homer was crushed to right-center field, but he said the opposite gap actually is a target.

“When I know I’m going well and my swing is where it needs to be, I’m even taking a ball that’s middle or middle-in and driving it to the left-center part of the yard,” Shaw said. “That shows me I’m staying on the inside part of the baseball and staying through and finishing my swing. Whenever I can get stuff in the air that way with backswing I know I’m in a good spot.”

Shaw hasn't found that groove in his first week in the majors -- the homer is his lone hit in 14 at-bats, and he also has 10 strikeouts. The Giants will keep running him out there, though. This month is about development, and this is a chance for one of their top prospects to get his feet wet.

Shaw talked about that and much more on this week's episode of The Giants Insider Podcast. You can **stream it here** or download it on **iTunes here**.

ESPN.com

MLB's next big thing: Why Red Sox are flying under radar

Bradford Doolittle

Is it just me, or are the Boston Red Sox running a little under the radar this season?

I can't really quantify that, but I strongly suspect I'm not the only one who's picking up that vibe. Now, let's be clear: This is the Red Sox, so of course they are getting attention. From the viewpoint of the club, the crucible of the Boston media likely seems just as intense as it always has been. It's the national buzz that I sense is lacking.

Compare the coverage of this year's Red Sox to that of last year's Dodgers and Astros, or the Cubs in 2016. That's what I'm getting at. Boston is a team that is 53 games over .500 and has a nonzero shot at setting a record for wins. (They'd have to go 20-1. Like I said, nonzero.) As a franchise, the Red Sox haven't won 100 or more games since 1946, the year of Ted Williams' only World Series, and their high-water mark is 105 W's, set two years before the Sox signed Babe Ruth. Yet they've been handled as just a run-of-the-mill pennant contender.

Right now, Boston is on pace to win 111 games. Their expected final total, based on run differential, is "only" 106 wins. Because of that and some other esoteric factors, such as roster value, the Red Sox actually rank behind the Astros in my power rating formula. Boston moved ahead of Houston during a three-week stretch in August, but the Astros are back in the slot they've generally held since spring training.

Let's assume I'm right about baseball's winningest regular-season team being a little short in the respect department. Is there a reason for it that we might not consciously sense? Just how good are these Red Sox?

With Houston in the top spot of my power rankings, the Astros own the best odds for winning the World Series at present, holding a 33-percent chance per my most recent run of simulations. Boston is second at 20 percent. That's not a bad place to be, but still, we're talking about the team that by good, old-fashioned W's has at least 10 more victories than every other team in baseball.

Some thoughts on why the Sox may be getting the short end of the attention stick:

1. They are overachieving, but it's not a feel-good story.

When the Mariners seemed destined for a playoff spot despite a negative run differential, it created a stir. When the A's went sprinting past them in the standings, it created a stir. People are excited about the Braves and the Rockies in the National League.

The Red Sox? They are overachieving external preseason forecasts, but it's not like those forecasts were dire. There looked to be little separation between them and the Yankees, though New York appeared to be a little stronger on paper. When we were referring to the superteams in baseball, the Red Sox might have been part of that conversation in some corners, though I tended to think of them as a half-tier down from that, probably the sixth- or seventh-best team.

They've proved to be a heck of a lot better than that, but these are still the Red Sox. They've won three of the last 14 championships, and their current payroll is easily the highest in the majors. Where's the feel-good story in that?

2. There are flaws in the roster -- or at least there were.

It feels like I've mentioned this about 600 times over the last couple of months, but the Red Sox rate poorly at multiple positions, at least in terms of bWAR. For the season, Boston ranks 28th at catcher, 29th at third base and last at second base. They are also in the bottom half at first base (16th) and shortstop (17th). That's a lot of holes for a team on pace to win 111 games.

That's also not the profile of the other power teams. Houston ranks 19th in left field but is in the top half everywhere else. The Dodgers are 22nd in the bullpen and 24th at second base, but are in the top 10 everywhere else. The Cubs are in the top half everywhere, and in the top 10 at all spots but the rotation, left field and center field. The Yankees are 26th at first base, 19th at third but in the top 12 everywhere else. You get the picture: The Red Sox don't seem as complete as the other top contenders.

3. They've been lucky.

Here, I'm purposely conflating the word "luck" with "clutch." As mentioned, the Sox are on pace to outperform their run profile by 5.8 games. They've gone 36-17 in games decided by one or two runs. They also have been terrific situationally, ranking first in Fangraphs' clutch metric with their hitters and seventh with their pitchers. These factors tend to mean more when describing what has happened than what is going to happen.

4. A lack of splashy in-season acquisitions.

Boston has added to its roster during the season, but these have tended to be low-key acquisitions. Ian Kinsler was brought in to plug the hole at second base, and while his glove remains a big plus, the 36-year-old's bat seemed to have slowed by the time he arrived in Boston. However, after a slow start with the Red Sox, Kinsler has heated up with an .877 OPS over his last 13 games.

It's a similar story elsewhere. Steve Pearce didn't generate many headlines when he was traded from Toronto to Boston, but he has pounded the ball since moving, with a .940 OPS. Brandon Phillips? Yawn. There was a reason no one signed him, right? Well, Phillips crushed a ninth-inning go-ahead homer during Boston's epic comeback at Atlanta on Wednesday. Nathan Eovaldi? Who's that? Well, he's a big, right-handed starter who revs it up to the plate at triple digits and has a 107 ERA+ since coming over from the Rays during a time when Boston has battled key injuries to its rotation.

None of these moves set Twitter ablaze when they were made, but they've all paid huge dividends. Enough that by the time we reached the end of August, the last date for external acquisitions who would be postseason eligible, the Red Sox stood pat.

That deadline passed last week while Boston was in Chicago. During their series against the White Sox, power lefty Eduardo Rodriguez made his first start since suffering a badly sprained ankle in July. He was devastating, striking out 10 of the first 12 batters he faced and finishing with 12 whiffs overall. During his absence, Boston went 26-13.

"I know there's a lot of teams that made trades yesterday," Red Sox manager Alex Cora said. "Let's put it this way: His return was a trade for us. We'll take that one."

Boston might have had holes, but they've filled most of them in a low-key fashion that has paid off in high-key ways. If they were a bit lucky while getting off to the extreme start that they did, it was only a little lucky. Then they got better. Even though my roster ratings still leave the Red Sox behind the Astros, Yankees and Dodgers, they've improved their rating more than any of the other so-called superteams since the season began.

5. Individual successes have garnered more attention than the team's success.

This might be a reach, but it helps me make a point: While Boston needed to shore up some areas for much of the season, in the areas they've been good, they've been off the charts.

Those bWAR ratings I was just nit-picking about? I left out the areas where Boston is good. The Red Sox rank first in left field and right field, third in the rotation, second in the bullpen and fifth in center field.

Mookie Betts sits atop my Award Index as the AL MVP front-runner and is the guy I see as 2018's top overall performer. J.D. Martinez ranks eighth and is making a run at a Triple Crown. Chris Sale is my Cy Young favorite and ranks as the 13th-best player in baseball this season. Andrew Benintendi and Xander Bogaerts both rank in the top 35. David Price and Craig Kimbrel are in the top 100.

The Index rates players against average performance, so anyone who rates in the positive has

been an above-average player this season. Boston has 22 such players, with 53.7 percent of their current contributors rating better than average. Only Houston and Philadelphia have featured more roster depth.

(Side note for context: Of the players remaining in the Orioles' organization after all that team's trades, just four of the 45 players who have logged big league time this season have performed better than average.)

The bottom line is that for a good chunk of the season, Boston's actual level of talent didn't quite match up with what was a historical rate of winning games. It also appeared to be buoyed by career performances by the likes of Betts and Martinez that could have been expected to level off, at least to some extent. But those stars haven't cooled off at all, and the Boston roster has fewer holes than it did while it was building all of this momentum.

How good are these Red Sox? Really good, and better than they were when the season began. They might be just one of the superteams, but they are indeed super and they've won more games than any of the others.

What Ohtani's injury means for Pujols

With Shohei Ohtani likely headed for Tommy John surgery, there's a lot of debate going around about whether allowing him to continue as a two-way player is the best course of action, either for him or the Angels. David Schoenfield has that pretty much covered in this piece.

Schoenfield mentions the Albert Pujols dilemma, but I want to burrow into that a little further. Let's assume that Ohtani does have the surgery and is cleared to play as a DH during the entirety of the 2019 season, or at least most of it. Obviously, the recovery time from the procedure is much quicker for a hitter than a pitcher, so perhaps that's semi-realistic. Just to cite one case, Yankees rookie Gleyber Torres had the surgery on June 21, 2017, was back in time to play 13 games during spring training this year and is now a strong Rookie of the Year candidate. As a middle infielder, Torres has to be able to throw, a factor that isn't in play for Ohtani if he remains strictly a DH.

Assuming Ohtani won't play the field, DH is the only option. That also happens to be the best position for Pujols, who turns 39 in January and recently underwent season-ending surgery on his left knee. Pujols is an all-time great, but in more than 1,000 plate appearances over the last two seasons, he has hit .243/.287/.397 with a bottom-line value below replacement.

Pujols has ranked last in all of baseball in sprint speed in each of the last two seasons, according to Statcast, and that was *before* the knee surgery. His athleticism is gone. He graded out as roughly average with the glove this year, but has played just 76 games there over the last two

years. Now consider these splits that cover Pujols' last two seasons, from baseball-reference.com:

OPS as 1B: .632 (76 games)

OPS as DH: .705 (189 games)

OPS vs. LHP: .637 (275 plate appearances)

OPS vs. RHP: .699 (859 plate appearances)

The average AL first baseman has a .737 OPS this season, and the average DH is at .782. Last season, those numbers were .805 for first basemen and .735 for DHs. There is not a role in which the Angels can expect a 39-year-old Pujols to match league-average production.

Ohtani has not hit lefties well this year. He's at .194/.289/.299 against southpaws with only one of his 18 homers coming against them. That homer came Tuesday, off Texas' Mike Minor, and it was the culmination of some improved results for the phenom against lefties. It's a tiny sample, but he is 4-for-14 against lefties since the beginning of August with a .912 OPS.

The point here is that with a hitter as talented as Ohtani, you don't want to consign him to a platoon role. Sure, you might sit him against tougher lefties from time to time, but chances are those platoon splits will level off as he gains experience. And while it might be harsh to point this out, the fact of the matter is that Ohtani's overall .588 OPS against lefties is only marginally worse than what the right-handed Pujols has done for two years running.

Angels GM Billy Eppler says that the plan is to put a contending team on the field next year. That team possibly will be the first Angels team not managed by Mike Scioscia since 1999. If the Angels indeed have a new skipper, that person might not have a history with Pujols and will have much more motivation to prove himself than the long-tenured Scioscia.

The proverbial elephant in the room is Pujols' contract, which will pay him \$28 million next season, \$29 million in 2020 and \$30 million in 2021. I don't know what, if any, role Angels owner Arte Moreno has played in how Pujols has been deployed, and without hearing otherwise I'd assume it's none. However, Moreno entered into his partnership with Pujols with the long view in mind.

After his current massive pact expires, Pujols will begin a 10-year, \$10 million personal services contract with the team. He has to pay Pujols that money whether or not he plays, and this doesn't seem like the kind of relationship that would be terminated by the player being released, leaving the club to eat a mountain of cash if it just lets him go. The Angels have a lot of incentive to stay in the good graces of Pujols, who will be a face of the franchise for years to

come. Does this play into how, or if, he is used? I don't know, but I hope it would not.

ESPN's Alden Gonzalez suggested one way to limit Pujols' time at first base next season would be to teach Ohtani how to play the position. It's worth considering, though Eppler quickly shot down the notion.

What I keep coming back to is this: If the Angels are serious about winning and they need to accommodate somebody, it should be Ohtani, not Pujols. It hurts me to even write the words because I have so much respect for Pujols and a general child-like reverence for the game's all-time greats, of which Pujols is clearly one. But how long can the Angels keep putting Pujols on the field every day when doing so is undermining their attempts at contention?

Complicating all of this is the two years remaining on Mike Trout's current contract. Eppler dismissed the idea of trading Trout, for good reason. The upside from even a small chance that you can keep him beyond his current deal, not to mention the 20 or so WAR he'll give over the next two years, is worth more than anything the Angels could bring back in a trade. If he leaves and the Angels are left with a compensatory draft pick, so be it.

Nevertheless, the rails of those eventual Trout negotiations would be smoothed by a couple of seasons of bona fide contention. Trout will get his money no matter what, but if he finishes his contract and still has but one career postseason hit (a homer, of course), that seems as likely to turn his head as any quest for fame and fortune. But if the Angels win, and that window looks like it'll stay open, then L.A. can only help its case.

All these factors were present even before news of Ohtani's probable surgery. Now that the Angels could be looking at the prospect of having him as an everyday DH, things get much more complicated. For a player as great as Pujols, you'd want the Angels to do right by him. At the same time, they owe it to Trout, their fans and themselves to do what is right by the team. I'm not sure, given Pujols' late-career level of play, those two objectives can be reconciled.

Since you asked

he service-time issue

The issue of service-time manipulation has once again reared its ugly head with another round of high-profile decisions by clubs to leave seemingly big-league-ready players in the minors. That determination of readiness is subjective, and you always have to acknowledge the possibility that my assessment of a prospect (or yours) might not match up with that of a team's key decision-makers. Nevertheless, this is one rodeo we've been to time and again.

The rhetoric around these most recent decisions was all too familiar:

On Eloy Jimenez: "At this point, we don't feel it makes sense for [Eloy], at age 21, to make an appearance at a third level this season. From a player-development standpoint, we view him as continuing to improve. He has had a very good season offensively," White Sox general manager Rick Hahn said.

On Vladimir Guerrero Jr.: "We feel like there is a good opportunity in the minor leagues for Vlad to become a better more well-rounded player than in the majors leagues," Blue Jays GM Ross Atkins said earlier this season.

Last week, during a radio interview in Toronto, he said that, indeed, Guerrero will not be recalled during September roster expansion, and team president Mark Shapiro said Wednesday the decision "has nothing to do with business."

Then there is the case of Minnesota's Byron Buxton, who looked like a budding star entering the season before injuries set him back, injuries that Buxton later said he tried to play through while struggling early in the campaign.

"We are singularly focused on putting together a plan with our strength and conditioning, medical staff, hitting staff to put Byron in the best position to enter spring training 2019 ready to compete, seize the starting center field job and be the force we all believe he can be, which he knows he can be for the Minnesota Twins for years to come," Twins GM Thad Levine said. Buxton finished the season playing for Triple-A Rochester. His minor league numbers this season weren't too good, but he did hit .365/.400/.596 in August, which at least suggests he was turning things around. He won't get a chance to build on that uptick in the majors, where the Twins have a lot of games remaining against weak AL Central pitching staffs, nor in the minors, because that season is over.

In making these decisions, each of these teams is buying another year of cost control for the players in question, a fact particularly difficult for Buxton to swallow because he had already established himself as one of the best defenders in the major leagues.

To be clear: I don't blame any of these executives for their decisions. You have to do what is in the best interests of the club, balancing short-term and long-term objectives under a system that is in place and was created through the process of collective bargaining. None of the Twins, White Sox or Blue Jays are in contention, but if any of them were, chances are these young players would have been in the majors for a while now. I also don't blame the execs for their boilerplate-type comments. What are they supposed to say? At least they said *something*.

This has become standard practice in major league baseball under the current system of accruing service time, moving toward arbitration eligibility and eventually reaching free agency.

Earlier this season, we saw it with Ronald Acuna Jr. in Atlanta. We saw it in years past with the likes of Chicago's Kris Bryant and Philadelphia's Maikel Franco, who both ended up filing grievances that remain unresolved.

If you're interested in the legalities of this practice, I point you to this breakdown by Sheryl Ring at Fangraphs of a Boston College Law Review paper related to the issue. Some food for thought. That aside, it's clear that there is a structural problem at play, one that incentivizes teams away from always putting their best team on the field at the big league level. That's not fair to the players, nor is it particularly fair to fans -- though many of the latter support their teams' decisions to grab that extra year. Still, for fans of the White Sox and Blue Jays, getting to see Jimenez and Guerrero would be a much better reason to turn up at the ballpark than anything those teams have to offer during the weeks to come.

There are a number of possible solutions to this dilemma, such as changing the number of days needed to be credited with a year of service time. I've also seen the idea floated of simply starting the clock on a player's eventual eligibility for free agency from the date he signs his first professional contract. Of course, any change to the current system would be a matter of bargaining between the players and owners, and the current CBA runs through the 2021 season.

However, this could end up being *the* hot button issue by the time negotiations for the next CBA begin. After last winter's shockingly slow free-agent market, we might be entering a time when teams simply don't want to step up for a player who, after surviving six years of team control, might already be in the midst of, or even past, his career peak.

The idea has always been that while good players were undervalued early in their careers, they would make up for it via free agency. But if that paradigm has truly shifted for all but the most bankable of stars, then the MLBPA is going to be clamoring for a change that gets players into free agency faster. So while the debate about service time right now is centered around the beginning of the clock, the players might be increasingly concerned with the end of it.

Either way, this is an issue that isn't going away any time soon.

These matchups are why we watch

Junk stat time! I've written about this before, but I have a metric in the schedule tab of MLBPET -- my projection and tracking system -- that rates the "quality" of each matchup. It doesn't mean anything, really. I just like to be able to quickly create a hierarchy of games as I follow the action.

Well, this weekend's series between the Astros and Red Sox at Fenway Park features the three highest-rated games of the season. I made this claim earlier this year of an Astros-at-Yankees series, but now that Boston has flown past New York in my power rankings, this becomes the "it" series. Sunday night's game is on ESPN, with Houston's Dallas Keuchel scheduled to face Boston's Rick Porcello.

Over in the National League, this week will feature a few head-to-head series with some heavy-duty impact on the packed postseason races. Over the weekend, the Dodgers will visit the Rockies. They'll do so without closer Kenley Jansen, which will put the beleaguered L.A. bullpen to the test.

The other big weekend series in the National League began Thursday in Phoenix, with the Braves taking on the Diamondbacks. Both teams are suddenly staggering, so they will try to renew their respective postseason pushes. Once that's done, Arizona will head north to play the Rockies in a key four-game set at Coors Field.

Remember that excellent Brewers-Cubs series earlier this week? They're doing it again next week, with Milwaukee visiting Wrigley Field. Finally, next Thursday the Dodgers will begin a huge four-game series in St. Louis.

These are the games we've been waiting for all season. Enjoy.