

Carrasco doing part to make holidays bright

By Mandy Bell MLB.com @MandyBell02

A young Carlos Carrasco spent each Christmas Eve writing the perfect letter to place under the tree so that Santa could find the wish list overnight. The following morning was filled with excitement, as Carrasco would race to the tree to see his desired toy sitting where he placed the note just hours prior.

Christmas morning can be one of the most exciting times of the year for young children. But it didn't take Carrasco long to realize that not everyone was fortunate enough to celebrate the holiday by opening presents. Growing up, the Indians pitcher said he noticed a lot of people who would go out of their way to help children at all times of the year, and he made it his goal to do the same.

Although his work is done year-round, the holiday season holds a special place in Carrasco's heart. Through his Carlos "Cookie" Carrasco Children's Foundation, the hurler ships toys to areas in Venezuela and the Dominican Republic to help brighten families' holidays.

"I really like [to help during] the holidays, because I know that there are children who do not get toys," Carrasco said. "That's why we're there."

Many of the gifts have already been sent, and almost all of the remaining toys will reach their destinations before Christmas Day. Carrasco has provided families with holiday gifts for the last few years and said he will never forget seeing the kids' faces for the first time.

"I still have pictures from last year in Venezuela," Carrasco said. "A lot of the children are on the streets, so just to see their smiles is incredible."

Carrasco's work in the community stretches far beyond the final page of the calendar. He and his wife have traveled the globe to help children in need. This past November, the couple was in Africa delivering clothes and backpacks so that kids have an easier time going to school, after having done the same in India the year before. Over Thanksgiving, the Carrasco family delivered 75 plates of food to the homeless in downtown Tampa.

"Those people don't have anything to eat," Carrasco said. "Just to give them their food and, like I said before, the same way it is for kids, just bringing smiles and happiness made me feel great. I like to do it. I never get [tired] of doing it."

Besides the joy of helping people in need, what's most meaningful to Carrasco is sharing these experiences with his children. He wants to make sure his kids see and understand how important giving back to their community is and hopes they will do the same as they grow older. Although she may only be 7 years old, his daughter, Camila, seems to have wasted no time following in her father's footsteps.

"Something I remember is [two years ago] I was looking for Camila around the house and couldn't find her," Carrasco said. "She was in her bedroom cutting her hair and I looked at her and said, 'What are you doing? Why are you cutting your hair?' She said, 'I'm doing it so you can send it to the kids in Venezuela or wherever for cancer and all of that.' That made me cry."

Camila and her younger sister, Emma, 3, helped shop for the toys and load up the backpacks that were to be sent out to the other countries. Carrasco said Camila even took it upon herself to make a video, which he thought was "something unbelievable."

Carrasco said he's looking forward to having his extended family in town over the holidays to have more hands to help pass out food to the homeless near his home in Florida. The pitcher said he does not have to wait until a special time of year to help those around him. But, thanks to him and his family, more children in Venezuela and the Dominican Republic will have a present under their tree in place of their Christmas Eve letters.

Tribe, Anderson agree on deal, avoid arbitration

By Mandy Bell MLB.com @MandyBell02

The Indians announced Wednesday evening that they have come to an agreement with right-hander Cody Anderson for the 2019 season, avoiding arbitration.

According to a report from MLB Network insider Jon Heyman, the deal is for \$641,250.

Anderson, 28, has missed the last two seasons after undergoing Tommy John surgery on his right elbow in March 2017. In 2015, the righty started 15 games and went 7-3 with a 3.05 ERA in 91 1/3 innings. In 2016, he made 19 appearances, including nine starts, with a 6.68 ERA.

After his long stretch away from the Major Leagues, Anderson could spend some time in Cleveland's bullpen in 2019. At the Winter Meetings in Las Vegas last week, Indians president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti said a focus this offseason would be adding to the bullpen, but the team could use some players returning from injuries to fill that role.

"It's definitely on the list of things we'd like to do," Antonetti said regarding bolstering the bullpen. "At the same time, we do feel that we have a number of alternatives that are coming back that we expect will either be better than what they were in 2018 or, in some cases, guys returning from injuries that weren't available to us in 2018. We've run through that list of guys. Everybody from Cody Anderson to Nick Goody, Danny Salazar, there's a variety of different guys that could fill that role."

Bauers may be option in Tribe's outfield mix

By Mandy Bell MLB.com @MandyBell02

For an Indians team whose offseason goal has been to cut down payroll and infuse players with longer-term control into its organization, Jake Bauers seems like a perfect match.

The 23-year-old is an athletic first baseman with 96 Major League games under his belt, and he is under team control for the next six years. Now that the Indians have traded Yonder Alonso, Bauers will likely see a lot of time at first, but could he also be an extra piece to mix in to the outfield?

Bauers was acquired through a three-team deal with the Mariners and Rays at the conclusion of the Winter Meetings last Thursday. The Tribe also brought first baseman Carlos Santana back to Cleveland, leaving the club with two new options to take the first-base spot.

"We can take some time to work through that," Indians president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti said during a recent conference call. "I think both guys are certainly capable of doing that, so we will see how things progress over the course of the winter and Spring Training, but either guy is capable of filling that role. I would imagine it would be some blend of the two."

Santana could spend a decent amount of time as the designated hitter with the current roster, putting Bauers at first base. But, when Santana gets his reps in the infield, the biggest question that remains is whether Bauers can make an impact in the outfield if need be.

After losing Michael Brantley, Melky Cabrera and Lonnie Chisenhall to free agency, the Indians could absolutely use some additional depth in the outfield. If the season would begin today, the Tribe could potentially start Jordan Luplow -- who has played in just 64 big league games -- in left, a recovering Leonys Martin (bacterial infection) in center and Tyler Naquin -- who had right hip surgery in Aug. -- in right.

Bauers was ranked as the Rays' No. 5 prospect by MLB Pipeline entering the 2018 season. After getting promoted to the big leagues on June 7, he played 16 games in left field, four games in right, and he made his other 76 appearances at first base for Tampa Bay.

With extremely limited experience beyond the infield, it's hard to determine what Bauers could bring to the Indians' outfield. Of the 31 chances he had in right and left field to make an out last season, he was successful in 27, leaving just four uncaught. But all the 27 outs he made had a catch probability of at least 80 percent, meaning they were not too difficult to track down (although his diving grab against the A's in September appeared to be more difficult than at least an 80 percent chance).

Bauers was expected to make 90 percent of his opportunities, and he ended up converting 87 percent. Although he didn't quite get to every ball he was "expected" to make, the small sample size makes it difficult to determine how good of an outfielder Bauers really is. One known quantity is that he has decent speed. Statcast™ measured his sprint speed of 27.8 ft/sec, which is above the MLB average of 27.0 and is similar to outfielders like Giancarlo Stanton, Michael Conforto and Andrew Benintendi.

"He's a very good defender at first base and is pretty athletic, so he has some potential to not only play first base, but play the outfield if that's where there's an opportunity," Antonetti said. "We think he has a lot of ingredients to be a successful Major League player."

With his rookie season in the rearview mirror, Bauers could settle in to be a solid provider for the Indians on offense. He displayed some power last season, clubbing 11 homers and knocking in 48 runs in his 96 games. The left-handed hitter also drew 54 walks in just 388 plate appearances, and he posted a .700 OPS with a wRC+ of 95.

"He's a guy that we've liked for quite a while," Antonetti said. "He's young, a 23-year-old, left-handed-hitting first baseman that can impact the game on both sides. We feel like he's a developing, young hitter that's got a good approach at the plate with emerging power."

Valera ready to break out in 2019

By William Boor, Jonathan Mayo and Mike Rosenbaum MLB.com

AL Central

Luis Robert, OF, White Sox No. 4 (MLB No. 44)

Robert's five-tool potential has never been questioned. However, his enticing skillset has hardly been on display as injuries have hampered his brief career. Robert missed time with minor injuries in 2017, then played only 50 games in '18 after injuring the ligaments in his thumb. Robert showed flashes of potential in the Arizona Fall League, where he hit .324 with two homers, but again missed a few games with a minor injury. If Robert can stay healthy in 2019, there's a good chance he will post huge numbers.

George Valera, OF, Indians No. 5

Signed for \$1.3 million in July 2017, Valera carried plenty of hype into his pro debut and got off to a strong start in the rookie-level Arizona League, only to have his season end after six games due to a broken hamate bone in his hand and subsequent surgery. The injury has done nothing to diminish the 18-year-old outfielder's upside, and scouts continue to rave about Valera's gorgeous left-handed swing as well as his ability to apply his power during games at a young age.

Jose Azocar, OF, Tigers No. 19

Azocar's tools have long been tantalizing, and every time he's appeared poised to take a step forward, he's gone backward. He still needs to refine his overall approach at the plate, but he cut his strikeout rate considerably in 2018, perhaps a sign he's ready to head consistently in the right direction.

Kyle Isbel, OF, Royals No. 14

Isbel took a leap forward during his junior season at UNLV, before the Royals took him in the third round of the 2018 Draft. The 21-year-old carried that momentum into his professional debut, where he hit .326 with seven homers over 64 games. Isbel finished the year with Class A Lexington, and his initial success, along with his compact swing and patient approach, could be foreshadowing a big full-season debut in '19.

Yunior Severino, 2B/SS, Twins No. 21

Severino was one of the Braves' prospects who was declared a free agent in the wake of the organization's international rules violations. He signed with the Twins and had a solid 2018 season in the rookie-level Appalachian League. There's considerable offensive upside here, with the chance to hit for both average and power from both sides of the plate.

Do the Cleveland Indians still have to trade a pitcher to get better? Hey, Hoynsie

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com | Posted December 22, 2018 at 03:03 PM | Updated December 22, 2018 at 03:52 PM

Do the Indians still need to trade a pitcher to improve?

Hey, Hoynsie: I am glad that the Indians have saved enough money that they may not trade Corey Kluber or Trevor Bauer. They need a No. 4 hitter who can also play the outfield and two good relievers. Can they do that with the \$21 million saved from their recent trades or will they still have to trade Kluber or Bauer to fill all the holes on the roster? -- Joe Eversole, Pelham, Ala.

Hey, Joe: That is the question no one seems to be willing to answer. The Indians need serious help in the bullpen and outfield, but when Chris Antonetti, president of baseball operations, was asked if the money the Indians saved from their recent trades would be put back into the team this year, he said that had yet to be decided.

If that money is not used to improve the 2019 roster, and the Indians still expect to win the AL Central and be competitive in the postseason, then more trades are coming.

At the moment, it seems that the Indians are going to keep Kluber and Bauer, but this offseason rests on shifting sands.

How is Carlos Santana's D and where is he going to hit?

Hey, Hoynsie: (Blending two questions into one): One of my lasting memories of Carlos Santana was the way he transformed himself into an elite defensive first baseman. How was his defense in 2018? Where is Santana going to hit in the lineup? -- Joe Cepec, Powell and Bob Earnest, Mansfield.

Hey guys: I checked out Fangraphs.com and Santana's defensive runs saved for 2018 was zero, which I guess is like being stuck in neutral -- you're not going to run into the guy in front of you on Dead Man's Curve, but you can't get out of the way of the guy behind you whose brakes just went out.

Antonetti was asked about who was going to hit in the middle of the lineup following the trades of Edwin Encarnacion and Yonder Alonso. He named Santana and Jake Bauers. But I would not be surprised to see Santana hit leadoff from time to time because he did a good job there in his first tour with the Tribe.

A voice in the wilderness cries for Bryan Shaw

Hey, Hoynsie: Any chance the Tribe can get Bryan Shaw back to help solidify the pen? As much as I complained about him -- we really missed him last year and could use him back. -- Jim McGuire.

Hey, Jim: I'm going to take your email, get it framed and send it to Shaw as a Christmas present. You may be the only person to actually say the Indians miss him in the bullpen.

Has one Indians reliever ever received so much grief for doing a good job for a long time? As for an answer to your question, judging by the way Shaw pitched last season I'm sure the Rockies would be willing to talk trade. The Indians not so much.

Why isn't the Tribe pursuing Adam Ottavino?

Hey, Hoynsie: I am disappointed to see that the Indians have not been connected to free agent reliever Adam Ottavino. After an up-and-down career, he developed a slider and was a huge cog in the Rockies' bullpen last season. A 1-2 punch of Ottavino and Brad Hand at the back end of the bullpen might be the best in the American League. I believe he'd settle for a two-year, \$16 million deal, which the cash-strapped Indians should be able to afford. -- David Bolger, Lakewood.

Hey, David: I agree Ottavino would be a perfect fit for the Tribe's pen. But you saw what Andrew Miller signed for on Thursday -- two years for \$25 million with St. Louis. Ottavino doesn't have Miller's track record, but if he ends up close to those numbers, that's a deal breaker for the Indians.

Does Carlos Carrasco have a no-trade clause?

Hey, Hoynsie: If Carlos Carrasco wants to finish his career in Cleveland and the Indians want to keep him, why didn't Carlos insist on a no-trade clause in his contract? -- Anthony Vasquez.

Hey, Anthony: The Indians usually don't put no-trade clauses in contracts. In fact, under the current administration, they've never given a player a full no-trade clause.

The only no-trade language in Carrasco's contract that I'm aware of would give him an assignment bonus if he's traded. Corey Kluber has the same language in his contract.

Cleveland Indians bring OF Brandon Barnes, RHP Brooks Pounders to camp on minor-league deals

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com phoynes@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The Indians have invited outfielder Brandon Barnes and right-hander Brooks Pounders to spring training on minor league deals.

Barnes, 32, spent last season in the Indians' organization. He hit .273 (136-for-498) with 39 doubles, 14 homers and 81 RBI at Class AAA Columbus. He was promoted on Sept. 4 and hit .263 (5-for-19) with one homer and two RBI in 19 games with the Indians.

The 6-5 Pounders, 28, was the second-round pick of the Pirates in 2009. He made 14 appearances for the Rockies last season, going 0-1 with a 7.63 ERA. Pounders struck out 17 and walked two in 15 1/3 innings. He offset that good strikeout to walk ratio by allowing 25 hits and 13 earned runs.

Pounders spent most of the season at Class AAA Albuquerque. In 26 games, he went 2-3 with a 3.48 ERA. He struck out 36 and walked 10 in 31 innings. He has appeared in 38 games in the big leagues with the Rockies, Angels and Royals.

Barnes, drafted by Houston in the sixth round in 2005, has played in the big leagues with the Astros, Rockies and Indians. The Indians designated him for assignment at the end of last season with the idea of re-signing him to a minor-league deal.

The Indians have openings in the outfield and bullpen. Barnes and Pounders may have a chance to win one of those jobs.

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Free-agent relievers who could help the Cleveland Indians including a couple of wild cards just for fun

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com | Posted December 22, 2018 at 09:41 AM | Updated December 22, 2018 at 10:56 AM

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The Indians' bullpen needs a boost. After leading the big leagues in ERA in 2017, it had the third-highest ERA in the American League last season. The free agent defections of Andrew Miller, Cody Allen and Oliver Perez have not helped.

What follows is a look at 11 free-agent relievers who could help the Tribe next season. Since reducing the payroll has been a focus for the front office, salaries have been taken into consideration in most cases.

So let's take the plunge starting with Perez. Every bullpen needs a good left-on-left lefty. Perez was all of that and more last year and he did for at a bargain-basement rate of \$1.75 million.

Perez was in the minors with the Yankees when he opted out of his deal on June 2 and signed with the Indians. They brought him right to the big leagues and he not only stayed the rest of the year, but had one of MLB's best under-the-radar seasons.

He went 1-1 with a 1.39 ERA in 51 appearances. He struck out 43 and walked seven in 32 1/3 innings. Lefties hit .194 and righties .104.

There is interest on both sides for a reunion in 2019, but if it happens it may not be until late January or early February. If Perez does return, he's in line for a well-deserved raise.

Cody Allen

The 2018 season did not go the way Allen hoped. After five plus years of consistent high-quality work, there were too many peaks and valleys in Allen's performance.

Still, he became the Indians' all-time saves leader on July 4. For the season he saved 27 games in 32 chances.

It's been speculated that Allen will sign a two-year, \$16 million deal with a team. It's also been speculated that he could return to the Indians on a one-year deal to re-establish his value before hitting the free agent market again.

That theory took a hit when the Cardinals signed Andrew Miller on Friday for two years and \$25 million. While Allen has never been on the disabled list in his career, Miller has made five trips to the DL in the last two seasons.

Still it would be nice for manager Terry Francona to be able to mix and match Allen and lefty Brad Hand at the end of games in 2019.

Kelvin Herrera

Tribe fans know all about hard-throwing Kelvin Herrera. They saw enough of him as a member of Kansas City's bullpen that helped the Royals win consecutive AL pennants and a World Series in 2015.

Herrera pitched for the Royals and Nationals last season before becoming a free agent. Under normal circumstances, he'd be too expensive for the Indians, but his season was cut short by a left foot injury after being traded to the Nationals. He was also on the disabled list with rotator cuff impingement in his right shoulder.

In 44 1/3 innings Herrera struck out 38, walked 10 and saved 17 games. He's still throwing 97 to 98 mph, but it's unclear if he's fully recovered from his foot injury.

Herrera could be a candidate for a one-year deal in the \$8 million range to re-establish himself before taking another swing at free agency after the 2019 season.

Sergio Romo

The Rays paid right-hander Sergio Romo \$2.5 million last season and he gave them as much, if not more, in return. Romo went 3-4, pitched in 73 games and struck out 75 in 67 1/3 innings.

He saved 25 games and even made five starts as an "opener" in manager Kevin Cash's strategy to take advantage of Tampa Bay's strong bullpen.

Romo, 35, is a free agent and it's going to cost somebody more than \$2.5 million to sign him. He would make a great fit in the Tribe's pen.

Right-handers hit .260 and lefties .239 against Romo. His best pitch is a slider backed up by a fastball that ranges in the high 80s.

Adam Warren

Right-hander Adam Warren, 31, pitched well in middle relief for the Yankees and Mariners -- 3-2 with a 3.14 ERA with 52 strikeouts and 20 walks in 51 2/3 innings.

Warren, who made \$3.3 million last season, is a fastball-slider pitcher. His average velocity is between 92 and 93 mph.

The Indians drafted Warren in the 36th round in 2008, but he didn't sign. The Yankees drafted him in 2009 in the fourth round and signed him and then turned him into a yo-yo.

They traded him to the Cubs after the 2015 season for Starlin Castro. They re-acquired him in 2016 when they sent the Cubs Aroldis Chapman. Last season, the Yankees sent him to Seattle for international bonus money.

Luis Avilan

Left-hander Luis Avilan, 29, pitched for the White Sox and Phillies last season. He went 2-1 with a 3.77 ERA in 70 games and was non-tendered by the Phillies.

Lefties hit just .220 against Avilan, but he wasn't strictly a left-on-left specialist. He faced more right-handed hitters than lefties and they batted .280.

Avilan, who made \$2.45 million last season, relies on his change-up, throwing it almost 48 percent of the time. The Indians may have a cheaper alternative in Tyler Olson, but he's worth a look.

Brad Brach

Brad Brach, a 6-6 right-hander, pitched for the Orioles and Atlanta last season. The Orioles traded Brach to Atlanta for the stretch run and he posted a 1.52 ERA in 27 games.

Overall, he went 2-4 with 12 saves and a 3.59 ERA. He struck out 60 and walked 29 in 62 2/3 innings. Branch made \$5.2 million last season and should be in line for a two-year deal in the \$12 million range.

Brach leans heavily on a fastball that clocks in the mid-90s. He also throws a change-up. He's probably a little out of reach for the Indians unless they get an infusion of cash or trade somebody else.

Justin Wilson

When the Tigers traded lefty Justin Wilson to the Cubs in July of 2017, the Indians were in on the bidding. Now all they have to do is spend money to get him, but that's easier said than done given the desire to cut payroll.

Wilson, 31, posted a 3.46 ERA for the Cubs last season in 71 games. He struck out 69 and walked 33 in 54 2/3 innings.

Last season Wilson made \$4.25 million and is in line for a multiyear deal. He's a power lefty, throwing a four-seam fastball that sits at 95 mph and a 91.4 mph cutter. Lefties hit .190 and righties .244 against him last year.

Aaron Loup

Lefty Aaron Loup, 31, pitched for the Blue Jays and Phillies last year. His appearances dropped from 70 in 2017 to 59 in 2018 as he missed time with a strained left forearm with the Phillies.

Loup throws a fastball, cutter and slider. Last season he struck out 44, walked 14 and allowed 44 hits in 39 2/3 innings. Lefties hit .268 against him, but right-handers hit .325.

He made \$1.8 million last season.

Hunter Strickland

The Giants non-tendered right-hander Hunter Strickland in November. Strickland went 3-5 with a 3.97 ERA and 14 saves in 49 games last season.

He was the Giants' closer until he broke his right hand punching a locker room door in frustration after a blown save in June against the Marlins. Strickland throws a 95 to 96 mph fastball along with a sinker.

Strickland made \$1.6 million last year. He has just three plus years of service time so he'd still be eligible for arbitration.

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Cleveland Indians: Carlos Santana in outfield? Another trade coming? – Terry Pluto

By Terry Pluto, The Plain Dealer tpluto@plaind.com

ABOUT CARLOS SANTANA

When the Indians traded for Carlos Santana last week, I assumed he'd return to his old position at first base.

That's where Santana played from 2013-17. He was a catcher before that.

But in that same 3-way deal with Seattle and Tampa Bay, the Indians also added Jake Bauers.

I've heard the following:

1. As of now, the Indians would like to see a lot of Bauers at first base. It's the natural position for the 23-year-old prospect.
2. A few days before Tampa Bay traded Bauers, Rays manager Kevin Cash said this at the winter meetings: "He has helped our infielders because he gives them confidence when they throw to first base."
3. So that leaves Santana replacing Yonder Alonso at first base. It also leaves a huge hole in left field after Michael Brantley signed a 2-year, \$32 million contract with Houston.
4. Santana has let the Indians know he's willing to try left field. As I was told, "Carlos really is willing to play anywhere that will help us. He likes to play the field."

5. Santana will turn 33 on April 8. The Indians don't see him as a regular left fielder, but playing out there some of the time? It's a possibility – especially given how the roster is constructed right now.
6. In his big league career, Santana has played 695 games at first, 330 as a catcher, 45 at third base and eight in the outfield. He played two games in the outfield in 2016.
7. Part of the reason the Indians traded for Santana is they appreciate his attitude. He plays every day. He is willing to try different positions. He was the team's opening day third baseman in 2014 when the Indians were hurting at that position.
8. Manager Terry Francona loves Santana because he's a durable switch-hitter who can hit in different spots in the lineup. The Indians prefer Santana to the soon-to-be 36-year-old Encarnacion, who is primarily a DH.
9. I didn't like the Yandy Diaz/Bauers part of the deal. But Francona seemed to have a hard time buying into Diaz. The manager couldn't seem to figure out where to play him – or have the confidence to commit to him.
10. Bauers is intriguing to the Indians because he also is willing to play the outfield. He played 143 games in the minors in the corner outfield positions.
11. The Indians know they will have to be patient with Bauers. He came to the Majors at the age of 22, and struggled: .201 (.700 OPS) with 11 HR and 48 RBI in 323 at bats for the Rays.
12. In the end, the Tribe baseball people preferred Bauers over Diaz – and Tampa had the opposite opinion. It will be fascinating to look back in a year and then three years to see who made the right call.
13. The Indians believe they will be OK in center field. They like the combination of Leonys Martin and Greg Allen, both players with speed. Martin played three games for the Tribe before coming down with a life-threatening bacterial infection. He is healthy now.
14. In right field is a platoon of Jordan Luplow (acquired from Pittsburgh) and Tyler Naquin. Left field is wide open, and that's why Santana could see some time out there.
15. I've not heard this, but the Indians could bring back Melky Cabrera on a very reasonable contract, and he could help as a DH. Francona really liked the switch-hitting Cabrera, who batted .280 (.755 OPS) with 6 HR and 39 RBI in 78 games for the Tribe. It feels as if he began playing when Bob Feller was still pitching, but Cabrera is 34 – and probably can still hit.

DO FACTS MATTER?

1. The Indians have the best record in the American League over the last six seasons. In that span, they have been to the playoffs four times and never had a losing season.
2. They have an elite manager in Francona and a Chris Antonetti-led front office with a recent history of making wise moves.
3. They have ranked higher in payroll than attendance in each of the last six years. They are a mid-market team in a sport with no salary cap. Cleveland is the smallest market with big league teams in the NBA, NFL and MLB.
4. "I don't know exactly what the Indians have brought in (revenue) the last few years," one executive told me. "But we are in the same kind of market. I'm telling you, they lost a lot of money with that \$135 million payroll."
5. You can believe that – or not. You can say it doesn't mater. The Tribe's \$135 million payroll was the highest in the Central Division. They ranked No. 15 out of 30 teams, according to Baseball Prospectus.
6. The Tribe's attendance has been flat the last two seasons: ranking 22nd and 21st, about 2 million fans.
7. In the last six years, the Indians have always ranked higher in payroll than attendance. Even with the cuts in payroll, the Indians will probably spend the most in their Central Division.
8. Baseball's economic structure remains messed up, unless you follow one of the mega-market teams. Detroit once played in that expensive ballpark. No more, the Tigers have been shedding payroll for the last two years and want to dump more.

ABOUT THE WINTER MOVES

1. Gone are Yan Gomes, Yonder Alonso, Andrew Miller, Lonnie Chisenhall, Brantley, Encarnacion, Diaz and Erik Gonzalez.
2. The only name player added is Carlos Santana. They have picked up Bauers, Luplow and some other young players. The biggest loss is Brantley.
3. I explained some of the reasoning for the moves last weekend, one key point being the Tribe will have Santana for two years at \$29 million compared to one year of Encarnacion at \$25 million. They have cut about \$10 million from the 2019 payroll.
4. The trades have put the front office in a stronger position when it comes to dealing a starter. Some in the media don't think that's likely. My guess is they will deal Corey Kluber or Trevor Bauer, depending upon who can bring them the most in return. They know this roster has to improve, especially in the outfield and bullpen.
5. So how are the Indians stronger in terms of future trades? They don't have to use a deal involving Kluber or Bauer as a major cost-cutting mechanism. As I was told, the Indians can make more of a "pure" baseball trade – talent for talent.
6. The real point is the Tribe isn't done yet. Rumors will continue. But also remember how rumors can be so wrong. Were there any rumors of an Encarnacion/Santana deal even 24 hours before it happened?
7. It was no secret the Tribe was trying to deal Encarnacion. But who knew Santana was returning to the Tribe? That's why I'm willing to wait.

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St. Louis Cardinals' signing of Andrew Miller emphasizes bare-bones look of Cleveland Indians' bullpen

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com phoynes@cleveland.com
CLEVELAND, Ohio – The market was indeed “robust” for Andrew Miller.

Miller, who spent the last 2½ years with the Indians, has agreed to a two-year, \$25 million deal with the Cardinals. In doing so he is the latest free agent to say adios to Cleveland. On Monday, Michael Brantley agreed a two-year, \$32 million deal with Houston and Rajai Davis agreed to a minor-league deal with the Mets.

The Indians' list of unsigned free agents has shrunk from 12 to seven. Lonnie Chisenhall signed a one-year, \$2.75 million deal with Pittsburgh and Josh Donaldson signed for one year and \$23 million with Atlanta earlier in the offseason.

Among the unsigned players who spent time with the Indians last season are Cody Allen, Josh Tomlin, Brandon Guyer, Melky Cabrera, Oliver Perez, Adam Rosales and Brandon Barnes.

Miller was a boom or bust reliever for the Tribe. He helped pitch them to within one win of the 2016 World Series after being acquired from the Yankees in a July 31 deal. The last two years, however, the 6-7 left-hander made five trips to the disabled list with a variety of injuries and never looked like the same super reliever he was in the second half of the 2016 season.

The Cardinals will pay Miller, 33, \$11 million in 2019 and \$11.5 million in 2020, according to reports. The deal includes a vesting option for 2021 and a full no-trade clause.

At the winter meetings, a source said the market for Miller was “robust.” The source had it right. The Cardinals were one of nine teams that showed initial interest.

The Indians sent Justus Sheffield, Clint Frazier, Ben Heller and J.P. Feyereisen to the Yankees for Miller. After the Astros eliminated the Indians from this year's ALDS, they told Miller that they would be unable to re-sign him because of where his salary was headed.

The loss of Miller, and the potential loss of Allen and Perez, has given the Tribe's bullpen a bare-bones look. Allen was the Tribe's closer and Miller their primary set-up man. Perez was their top left-on-left reliever.

Brad Hand will handle the closer's job, but the rest of the pen needs to be reshaped. The signing of Miller could open the market for Allen, who has drawn steady, but not overwhelming, interest. There may still be a chance for the Indians to sign Allen, but right now things are quiet.

There has been mutual interest between Perez and the Indians, but they certainly aren't going to get him at last season's bargain price of an estimated \$1.5 million plus incentives.

At the winter meeting earlier this month, manager Terry Francona when asked about the bullpen said, “For the first time (last season) our bullpen was inconsistent. Cody had issues from time to time. Andrew wasn't always healthy. Neil Ramirez had a stretch where he was lights out. Then he had stretches where he wasn't. That's probably the hardest thing for a manager is when you don't know what you're going to get.”

Francona pointed to the anticipated return of Nick Goody, who missed most of last season with a right elbow injury. He liked what he saw of Jon Edwards in September, calling him a “huge sleeper.” He felt Adam Cimber, who joined the Indians with Hand in July from San Diego for catcher Francisco Mejia, would improve.

Perez did a great job for the Tribe. Lefties hit .194 against him and righties .104. He allowed just four of 34 inherited runners to score, the best percentage in the AL.

If he doesn't re-sign, can Tyler Olson fill that spot? Olson, after trying to pitch through a left lat injury with poor results, came off the disabled list and didn't allow a run in his last 14 appearances with the Tribe. Lefties hit .182 against him and righties .314.

Danny Salazar and Cody Anderson could help the pen as well. Salazar missed the entire 2018 season because of a sore right shoulder that eventually needed surgery. Anderson was rebounding from Tommy John surgery in 2017. They've spent most of their careers as starters, but may have to focus on the bullpen now, especially if the Indians don't trade Corey Kluber or Trevor Bauer.

Hand, between San Diego and Cleveland, converted 32 of 39 save situations. But who is going to be his set-up man if Allen doesn't return? Dan Otero and Neil Ramirez would need great springs to have a shot at that job. Perhaps spring-training invitee James Hoyt will get a chance or newcomers Walker Lockett, Chih-Wei Hu or Jefry Rodriguez

“We know we have some work to do out there still,” said Francona.

The statistics back that up. After leading MLB in bullpen ERA in 2017, the Indians finished with the third-highest ERA in the AL last season.

12 free agent outfielders who could help the Cleveland Indians in 2019

By Joe Noga, cleveland.com | Posted December 20, 2018 at 01:48 PM | Updated December 20, 2018 at 02:12 PM

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- One of the biggest areas of uncertainty entering the 2019 season for the Cleveland Indians will be the outfield.

The departure of veterans Michael Brantley and Lonnie Chisenhall, coupled with injuries and trades, has left the outfield without a lot of reliable options, which could force president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti and general manager Mike Chernoff to look for help on the free agent market.

If Antonetti and Chernoff decide to spend money on the open market, they will not likely pursue several of the top players at the position such as Bryce Harper. But history has proven the duo quite capable of finding a veteran bat that can be added at a team-friendly price. And in most cases, those veterans have contributed greatly to the Tribe's recent success.

Below is a list of veteran free agent outfielders who could fit that role again for the Indians in 2019. The list is weighted with the players expected to cost the most toward the bottom. Projected stats for 2019 were taken from each player's individual page on Baseballreference.com.

Melky Cabrera

Cabrera rescued an uncertain Indians outfield last year, joining the club for two stints and starting all three playoff games against Houston.

He hit .280 with a .755 OPS and six home runs in 78 games. Cabrera earned \$1 million, plus a \$250,000 incentive for making 278 plate appearances. Another incentive-laden contract could be beneficial to both sides as the 34 year old looks to hang around in his 15th season.

There shouldn't be a lot of competition out there to sign Cabrera if he's willing to return.

Carlos Gonzalez

Gonzalez went back to the Rockies on a team-friendly one-year deal toward the end of spring training last year as the 33-year-old Venezuelan did not find a lot of suitors on the open market.

With a history of nagging injuries, he signed a \$5 million contract that included incentives for the number of days he remained on Colorado's active roster that bumped him to \$8 million. Gonzalez hit a respectable .276 with 16 home runs and 64 RBI and an OPS of .796 for the Rockies, who of course play in the thin air at Coors Field. He's projected to bat .267 with an OPS of .776 in 2019.

Jon Jay

A journeyman, Jay projects as a potential fourth outfielder -- and the Indians already have plenty of those on the roster. Still, the 33-year-old has good speed and a solid glove and is projected to hit .267 in his age 34 season.

He'll be affordable, and the Indians could invite him to big-league camp with a chance to hit his way onto the roster. He batted .303 in 2014 with a .750 OPS for St. Louis before bouncing from San Diego to the Cubs and Kansas City.

Derek Dietrich

The Cleveland native and St. Ignatius High School grad was set to earn about \$4.8 million in arbitration before he was designated for assignment by the Marlins in November.

At 29, Dietrich has a quality left-handed bat (.751 OPS in 2018) and can play a variety of positions both in the outfield and on the infield. He's projected to hit about .255 with 14 home runs and 51 RBI in 2019.

Hunter Pence

Pence is precisely the kind of veteran player with whom the Indians have found success over the last few seasons, beginning with Mike Napoli and Rajai Davis.

Pence has something to prove coming off the worst big-league season of his career, hitting .226 with a .590 OPS and four home runs in 97 games while battling injuries for San Francisco in the final year of a five-year, \$90 million contract. He made \$18.5 million last year, but might be willing to come to Cleveland on a team-friendly one-year deal.

A lifetime .280 hitter, the three-time All-Star could also help fill a huge leadership void in the Tribe's clubhouse following the departure of Michael Brantley.

Cameron Maybin

Maybin started 82 games for the Mariners in 2018 batting .249 with a .668 OPS. He could be an affordable option in right field with an estimated market value of \$4 million according to Spotrac.com.

Maybin has been able to cut down on his strikeouts in the last couple of seasons, and still has the speed to steal a couple of bases. He's projected to hit .251 with a .701 OPS and eight home runs in his age 32 season.

Avisail Garcia

Garcia, age 28, was non-tendered by the White Sox after making \$6.7 million in 2018. He battled knee and hamstring injuries that limited him to 93 games last year. Garcia could be a good candidate for a one-year deal to prove that his .330/.380/.506 slash line in his All-Star season of 2017 was no fluke.

His percentage of hard-hit balls was up last season and he's improved defensively in right. But perhaps the most compelling reason to sign Garcia would be to see how he interacts with Trevor Bauer in the clubhouse.

Matt Joyce

Joyce appeared in only 83 games while battling back injuries throughout the 2018 season. He could be a good candidate for a one-year show-me contract after earning \$6 million last year.

Joyce will have to prove that he still has the pop in his bat that produced 25 home runs and 68 RBI in 2017.

Adam Jones

The Indians were rumored to have interest in adding Jones last season both before the non-waiver trading deadline and in late August. With a market value of \$16 million, Jones would represent a big commitment. But the 13-year veteran can still get it done at the plate. He hit .281 last year with a .732 OPS. He's projected to hit just under 20 home runs and drive in 62 in 2019.

Nick Markakis

The 13-year veteran earned his first All-Star selection in 2018 as he helped lead the Braves to a surprising division title. According to Spotrac.com, Markakis' market value climbed to \$14.9 million, and at age 35 he's expected to sign a multi-year contract.

He's a career .288 hitter who's expected to check in with a .738 OPS in 2019. Defensively, he would be an upgrade with three career Gold Glove Awards, if the Tribe is willing to commit that kind of money to the position.

Marwin Gonzalez

If the Indians are willing to spend, Gonzalez would be at the high end of players who could fit. He killed the Tribe for Houston during the Astros' three-game sweep in the ALDS, and at age 29 Spotrac.com projects his market value at upwards of \$17.9 million.

He's versatile both at the plate and in the field with the ability to play multiple positions. He hit .247 last year coming off a 2017 campaign that saw him hit .303 and finish 19th in MVP voting. The seven-year veteran would be an instant upgrade in right field, projected to hit 17 home runs and drive in 68. His strikeouts were at a career-high 126 last year in 552 plate appearances.

A.J. Pollock

Probably the top right-handed hitting outfield bat on the market, Pollock, 31, has an injury history that could scare some teams off. But when he's healthy, he represents one of the best available options.

An All-Star in 2015, Pollock was limited to 113 games for the Diamondbacks last year, hitting .257 with an .800 OPS, including 21 home runs and 65 RBI. Spotrac.com projects his market value at \$14.6 million with a projected .252 average, .768 OPS and 17 home runs.

Commentary: Rajai Davis is gone again, but the roar will live forever

Jim Ingraham | The Chronicle-Telegram Published on Dec. 20, 2018 | Updated 7:00 a. m.

The roar will live forever.

It hit like a thunderclap. Sudden. Raw. Unrestrained. It washed over the ballpark like a sweet tsunami of sheer, unrestrained joy.

It was one of those moments that the living rarely get to live. That dreamers dare not to dream. How could you? Why would you? Who'd believe you?

But there it was. At that exact instant. At that single, sensational moment in time, thousands of human beings packed shoulder to shoulder into a confined area on a cool November evening were hoping, pleading, praying for one specific thing, one unthinkable, unlikely, impossible thing to happen ... and then it happened.

Joe Buck:

"DRIVE TO LEFT! AT THE WALL! IT'S GONE! . . . TIE GAME! . . . RAJAI DAVIS! . . . SIX-SIX!"

I've been covering ballgames at Progressive Field since the joint opened in 1994. I have never heard such a sustained explosion of emotion and delirium as I heard when Davis answered thousands of prayers. The ballpark shook. It was 6-4. Bottom of the eighth. Game 7 of the 2016 World Series. The Indians were losing by two runs after Superman closer Aroldis Chapman threw his sixth pitch to Davis.

After Chapman's seventh pitch, the game was tied. The Indians were still batting. It was the bottom of the eighth inning of Game 7 of the World Series, and it was like the whole world suddenly realized that the Indians might actually win the World Series.

Instead, they lost.

The next day, Davis became a free agent. Two months after that, he signed with Oakland. Seven months after that, Oakland traded him to Boston. Three months after that, on Nov. 2, 2017 — one year to the day that he hit the most dramatic home run in Cleveland Indians history — he became a free agent. Three months after that, he signed with the Indians.

On Oct. 29 of this year, Davis became a free agent. On Monday he signed with the Mets.

Rajai Davis, the unlikeliest Cleveland sports cult hero ever, is gone again.

But the roar will live forever.

I'll never forget looking down into the stands and seeing grown adults jumping up and down over and over and over again. Looking for someone to hug. Hugging someone they didn't know. Spontaneous, uninhibited joy.

Produced by a journeyman player, for a team that never wins it all, on the biggest stage of all, where, despite one of the most flabbergasting home runs of all, the Indians STILL didn't win it all. Again.

It may not be up there with Bobby Thomson's "The Giants win the pennant! The Giants win the pennant!" thunderclap-for-the-ages. But Cleveland will always have, "It's gone! . . . Tie game! . . . Rajai Davis!" The madness that greeted that epic swat was blunted two innings later when the Indians lost the game and the World Series.

It's the closest they've ever come to winning the World Series in our lifetime. Ok, maybe the second closest, after Jose Mesa, and Craig Freaking Counsell.

But for sheer dramatic effect, a singular mic-drop moment that nobody saw coming and nobody will ever forget, "Tie game! . . . Rajai Davis!" would still be my leader in the clubhouse. A common man, an ordinary ballplayer, doing something so extraordinary that he will forever have a home in the hearts and minds of Cleveland sports fans.

Thrills like that don't grow on trees. Even though the Indians couldn't ride it to a World Series victory, it will forever stand as one of the greatest moments in Cleveland sports history. To the point where I would argue that the placing of either a plaque or small statuette, cast with Rajai rounding the bases with his right arm and index finger pointing to the sky, on the spot where Davis' home run landed, would not be inappropriate at all.

It's a home run that will be remembered forever, but let's not take any chances.

Normally statues go to all-time great players who had all-time great careers, not to a journeyman who had one great moment. But why not, if it's a common man who produced one of the most uncommon moments in sports history, one that thrilled millions upon millions of fans?

Rajai Davis is a baseball Everyman. His ilk, which is our ilk, don't normally produce moments that cause millions of adults to jump up and down and hug people they don't know.

It's why we care about sports. It's why they play the games. It's why fans pay money to watch the games. This wasn't Hall of Famer Jim Thome hitting a home run for the ages. This was Rajai Davis. One of us! The outcome of the game is almost immaterial.

With everything on the line, Rajai hit one on a line, over the wall.

Tie game! Six-six!

The roar will live forever.

Mayfield grad Mitch Longo dreams of playing for Indians

By Mark Podolski mpodolski@news-herald.com @mpodo on Twitter Dec 20, 2018 Comments

Home is undoubtedly where he eventually wants to be permanently.

The Mayfield graduate and Indians prospect is looking forward to spending the holidays with friends and family, but soon after it's off to Arizona.

Out west, he'll begin preparations for spring training. From there, as it is for all minor-leaguers, where he begins the 2019 season is anyone's guess. Many have forecasted Longo will start at Double-A Akron but nothing is guaranteed. If it is with the RubberDucks, it will be significant.

The Double-A level is a key stop for minor-leaguers, as it's a spot where the major-league spotlight really intensifies for prospects. So Longo's 2019 stop is big one.

The upcoming season will mark Longo's fourth in the Indians organization, and his third full season. Visions of one day wearing an Indians uniform and playing at Progressive Field dance in his head.

"I get goosebumps thinking about it," said Longo during a Dec. 18 sit-down at his alma mater Mayfield High School.

With the current state of the big-league club's outfield, it seems anything could be on the table and that includes perhaps Longo getting an opportunity at some point as an Indian in 2019.

There's been a major overhaul in the outfield. Michael Brantley is now a Houston Astro, top prospect Bradley Zimmer is recovering from shoulder surgery and Lonnie Chisenhall signed with the Pirates. What's left are the likes of Tyler Naquin, Jordan Ludlow, Greg Allen, Leonys Martin and perhaps second baseman Jason Kipnis.

"It's cool to think about and dream about but at the end of the day you can't play general manager," said Longo, "If I can help the team, I'll be there. If I can't, then I'll help someone else.

"But I want it to be the Indians really, really bad."

The dream began for Longo in 2016 when he was 14th round pick by the Indians after a standout career at Ohio University. At the minor-league level, he's produced. In 217 career minor-league games spanning three seasons, Longo has batted .307, including a .376 mark in 2017 mostly with the Captains.

This season, he's intent on evolving into a complete player. That means improving his defensive skills. Longo's played all three outfield positions, and set building his arm strength and making better routes on fly balls as goals. Longo is also confident his power numbers — 13 career home runs — will improve with age.

There's more. The Indians' "GRIT" framework within the organization promotes "growth mindset," "routines," "individual mechanics," and the "team-first approach," the latter of which Longo plans to work on in 2019.

"I think it's a big year for me to be more of a leader, and do more to win because that's what the Indians value," he said.

Longo wants to do that and more as a Indians player.

"It would mean the world to me," said Longo. "I'm Cleveland through and through. I love this city and I would be home. I love this community."

That love has Longo giving back.

On Dec. 20, he and Jack Hollinshead, a 2017 Mayfield graduate, announced they were partnering to donate a number of New Balance shoes to the My Inner Warrior Foundation, a non-profit that provides for inner-city baseball programs run through the Cleveland Baseball Federation.

Hollinshead, a sophomore catcher at Wittenberg, created the Foundation. Longo's endorsement deal with New Balance allows him to participate with the company's "NB Gives Back" charity drive.

Longo and Mentor grad Kade McClure, a White Sox prospect, have also teamed up the last two years for an area youth baseball camp.

For Longo, it's about making an impact in the area that goes beyond the diamond. In a few months, though, it will be an important time for Longo, 23, as the pressure mounts for him to get to the majors. A lot of that pressure is self-imposed, he said, and Longo is fine with that.

"If I don't make it it's because I'm not physically good enough, not because I couldn't handle (the pressure)," he said. "The way I look at it, the more versatile you make yourself, the more valuable an asset you can be. I'm excited to put it all together and see what can happen."

Indians have to find run producers after trading flurry | Jeff Schudel

By Jeff Schudel JSchudel@News-Herald.com @JSProlinsider on Twitter 16 hrs ago Comments

Baseball analytics experts say RBI are not a true measure of a player's worth to his team. That should be some comfort to Indians fans, because producers of 354 runs batted in for the Tribe in 2018 have scattered across the country in the past two months.

Edwin Encarnacion (107 RBI) was traded to the Mariners. Yonder Alonso (83) was traded to the White Sox. Yan Gomes (48) was traded to the Nationals. Infielder Erik Gonzalez (16) was traded to the Pirates and Yandy Diaz (15) was traded to the Rays. Michael Brantley (76) signed with the Astros in free agency. Lonnie Chisenhall (nine), limited to 29 games last season because of calf injuries, signed with the Pirates in free agency.

The long list does not include third baseman Josh Donaldson (seven RBI) because Donaldson was acquired as a rental from the Toronto Blue Jays on Aug. 31 for a playoff push.

Brandon Guyer (27 RBI in 103 games) is a free agent and is not on the list.

First baseman/designated hitter Carlos Santana (86 RBI) was acquired from Seattle in the Encarnacion trade. Outfielder/first baseman Jake Bauers (48) was acquired from the Rays.

The Indians got prospects (pitcher Jefry Rodriguez, outfielder Daniel Johnson and infielder Andruw Monasterio) for Gomes. They got outfield prospect Alex Call from the White Sox in the Alonso trade.

Early in November, the Indians shipped versatile Gonzalez to the Pittsburgh Pirates for outfielder Jordan Luplow. Luplow had 92 at bats with the Pirates in 2018, batting .194 with three home runs and seven RBI.

Analytics experts aren't big on RBI as a measuring tool because they conclude the RBI total is a product of the player's environment and where he hits in the order. Encarnacion had the benefit of hitting cleanup in most games with Francisco Lindor, Michael Brantley and Jose Ramirez hitting in front of him, so naturally his RBI total is going to be high.

But just because a player's RBI total doesn't measure his true value doesn't mean manager Terry Francona can plug anybody into the cleanup spot and count on that player, perhaps Santana, driving in 100 runs. Lindor hit leadoff in 2018 and managed to drive in 92 runs.

Indians president Chris Antonetti is trying to cut salary because of the storm brewing. Lindor is projected to earn \$10.2 million in 2019 — his first year of arbitration eligibility — after making \$623,200 last season. Trevor Bauer, also arbitration eligible, is expected to get a \$5 million salary bump to \$11.6 million. He made \$6.25 million last year.

Starting pitcher Corey Kluber, 20-7 in 2018, is set to make \$17 million after making \$10 million last season. He has been mentioned in trade rumors for more than a month, but for now is still with the Indians.

Fans expect owner Paul Dolan to just open up his wallet and spend, spend, spend. That isn't realistic. The Indians have to find ways to pay for the salary increases due some players and the easiest way to do that is move others.

But Antonetti and Francona also have to find players to drive in runs – even if a guy with a laptop says that stat isn't important.

Nick Cafardo / SUNDAY BASEBALL NOTES There's a reason why the Red Sox' holiday shopping list appears modest

Nick Cafardo

So there won't be a nice shiny expensive object under the Red Sox' Christmas tree this year. But a nice cheap, one-year deal for a reliever? Probably so. You would think when you've been nice like the Red Sox that Santa would deliver something big and expensive rather than something more befitting a team that's been naughty.

But that's not the way it works with big-market teams who are already at the top of the payroll food chain.

It's an offseason during which teams are trying to keep up with the Red Sox.

Already the Yankees have traded for James Paxton and brought back J.A. Happ for two years. They now have a pretty formidable rotation of Masahiro Tanaka, Luis Severino, Happ, Paxton, and CC Sabathia. They must address two bullpen losses in David Robertson and Zach Britton. Robertson could still be a fit to return, but Britton is likely headed elsewhere.

They are now looking at potential offensive upgrades such as Manny Machado, who had dinner with the Yankees' brass this past week.

We know New York is where Machado wants to play. His idol, Alex Rodriguez, played there. He wants to follow in those footsteps. It could be he starts out at shortstop and then moves to third once Didi Gregorius comes back from Tommy John surgery.

Rumors abound that the Yankees are willing to deal third baseman Miguel Andujar, who had an excellent rookie season, in order to accommodate Machado.

Machado may be one the best defensive third basemen in history. He's been an above-average shortstop and an outstanding offensive player, but his "extraordinary" label comes from his play at third base.

Maybe people don't like his attitude. He was quoted in a Ken Rosenthal interview that hustling isn't his thing, and then backed it up a couple of times in the postseason.

Maybe he is an acquired taste. He's certainly been a villain to Red Sox fans who didn't like his spikes-up slide, which wrecked Dustin Pedroia's knee a couple of years ago. And if he became a Yankee he'd become the biggest villain since A-Rod himself.

The Yankees stayed under the luxury-tax threshold last season so they're willing to go over this year. The Red Sox paid almost \$12 million in luxury-tax penalties and lost 10 spots in the draft as a result of their spending.

The Astros are gunning for them, too. They just added Michael Brantley to the outfield mix, an indication they're likely to deal Josh Reddick. They also have their eyes on Nelson Cruz. What the Astros must do is address a spot or two in their rotation after free agent Charlie Morton signed with the Tampa Bay Rays and with the possibility their other free agent starter, former Cy Young winner Dallas Keuchel, will sign elsewhere. Not everyone is convinced Keuchel won't be back in Houston.

The Astros are still a real possibility to trade for Marlins catcher J.T. Realmuto. They signed free agent catcher Robinson Chirinos, but he could be the backup if a deal were made for Realmuto. The Astros would have to give up a pitching prospect or two to make it happen.

Suffice to say, Boston's biggest challengers are loading up.

So, what are the Red Sox doing?

They hope to find the next Ryan Brasier. They traded with the Padres for Colten Brewer, a pitcher they feel could be another Brasier. They also signed former Rays reliever Erasmo Ramirez, who had a tough year recovering from shoulder problems, and former Mariner Zach Putnam, who is recovering from Tommy John surgery. You can see where they're headed.

That's not to say that Red Sox ownership won't give Dave Dombrowski the go-ahead to spend more, either by re-signing Craig Kimbrel, who doesn't seem to be getting a lot of action in free agency for the enormous sum he's asking (5-6 years at \$17 million-\$19 million per), or to go after a high-end reliever such as Britton, Robertson or Adam Ottavino.

They could opt for middle of the road types such as Greg Holland or Bud Norris. They could also sign former Royals and Nationals closer Kelvin Herrera and wait for his recovery, which might be around midseason after surgery to repair a torn Lisfranc ligament in his left foot. If the Red Sox want to give Matt Barnes a chance to be the closer, Herrera could be a decent midseason addition.

They may also be in the market for insurance at second base. Plenty are available in case Pedroia struggles to make it back. Jed Lowrie remains the most intriguing option, though he may be too expensive for the Red Sox. Lowrie is seeking at least a two-year deal.

But second basemen Neil Walker and Logan Forsythe, who would be a nice fit for the Red Sox, could be adequate on a team that also has Brock Holt and Eduardo Nunez. The Red Sox would be interested in making a one-year commitment.

The Red Sox were also one of 11 teams who took in shortstop Troy Tulowitzki's workout this past week, but Tulo, released by the Blue Jays (who ate \$38 million), would want a starting job.

Not sure the Red Sox can offer that at this juncture.

And so as the holidays approach, this is where we stand.

The American League is chasing the Red Sox, which is what every team wants. Now the trick is to stay ahead of the chase.

Hall of Fame worthy?

Baines, Smith spark controversy

There's been much controversy about the Today's Game Committee election of Harold Baines and Lee Smith into the Hall of Fame two weeks ago.

Normally I'm not critical of Hall of Fame selections because it's tough to pick deserving candidates, and in their own way Baines and Smith have Hall of Fame attributes. When that same committee voted in Jack Morris and Alan Trammell last year I applauded the selections. I had always voted for both in the BBWAA Hall of Fame balloting, but neither got in.

And I must say I think the BBWAA got it right in not electing Baines or Smith. I never voted for either in the 15 years they were on the ballot. I covered Smith with the Red Sox for parts of three seasons and never felt he was a Hall of Famer, even though he also had good seasons with the Cardinals and Cubs.

Even though Smith was an imposing figure and hitters hated to face him, for me he wasn't at the level of Goose Gossage or Trevor Hoffman or Dennis Eckersley or John Smoltz — and he certainly wasn't Mariano Rivera.

As for Baines, he was a very good hitter and his longevity was impressive. And longevity should be considered strongly in assessing Hall of Fame credentials because it's hard to stay in the majors for that long and still be as productive as Baines.

The question is, does including these two players lower the bar for Hall of Fame voters?

You certainly can make the case that if Baines is in then players who we've long considered borderline — Fred McGriff, Larry Walker, Andruw Jones, Scott Rolen, etc. — should now be elevated to Hall of Fame status.

But not so fast.

The BBWAA likely won't go there. Yes, there are some writers who have already been influenced by previous selections into voting for players they normally wouldn't have voted for. Not sure that's going to be seen in the current voting until next year.

But I for one will ignore the committee's decision. In fact, the inclusion of Baines and Smith for me is an outlier, and in discussing this with my voting friends in the BBWAA, they believe that as well.

It's hard to understand how these two got in when others who have been up for this committee's consideration — Luis Tiant (229 wins, 3.30 ERA), Jim Kaat (283 wins, 3.45 ERA, 16 Gold Gloves), Tommy John (288 wins, 3.34 ERA), Marvin Miller, George Steinbrenner — don't get a sniff.

Tiant is especially baffling since his numbers were so close to Don Drysdale (209 wins, 2.95 ERA), Catfish Hunter (224, 3.26), Juan Marichal (243, 2.89), and Jim Bunning (224, 3.27), all of whom are in the Hall of Fame and pitched roughly in the same era.

Baines, who played for 22 years, averaged .289 with 22 homers and 93 RBIs and an .820 OPS. Good numbers, for sure. Solid. Consistent. Just like Carlos Delgado (473 homers, .929 OPS), McGriff (493 homers, .886 OPS), Lance Berkman (366 homers, .943 OPS), and Walker (.313, 383 homers, .965 OPS). Heck, Gary Sheffield, with 509 homers, 1,676 RBIs, a .292 career average, and .907 OPS isn't even in. Sheffield only received 11.1 percent of the vote last year. You also can make a strong case for Dwight Evans — eight Gold Gloves, 385 homers.

There's a lot of sentiment that Billy Wagner was a much more effective closer than Smith, and Wagner, too, only got 11.1 percent of the vote.

Miller, as union leader, was the reason players have so many rights and make as much money as they do. Steinbrenner, say what you want, was committed to winning and poured every resource he had into making his team the best as opposed to some owners now who endorse tanking.

Updates on nine

1. Alex Cobb, RHP, Orioles — With the Orioles' management team in place, teams are now starting to inquire about Cobb and Dylan Bundy, two pitchers who could have value to contending teams. Cobb had a 2.54 ERA over his last 11 games, taking him a while to fully come back from Tommy John surgery. There's about \$43 million left on three years of his four-year, \$52 million deal. That's not unreasonable for a pitcher of Cobb's caliber. He looked more like the Tampa Bay version than the Baltimore version pitching earlier in the season. Bundy always has been an enigma, but he's shown signs of brilliance. Some believe he's merely a good pitching coach away from success.
2. Corey Kluber, RHP, Indians — Contending teams will continue to see what it would take to land arguably the best and most consistent pitcher in baseball. But from what we're hearing, the Indians won't deal him unless they get value-plus. There would have to be an overpayment of prospects and young players to get a deal done.
3. Nelson Cruz, DH/OF, free agent — Did Houston's signing of Michael Brantley take it out of the Cruz hunt? Maybe not. Cruz is that Brian McCann/Carlos Beltran type who can bring a team together. Yes, Cruz was a PED user, but the respect he has from fellow players remains high. He is considered a real team leader. The Mariners will miss him. The Rays could also be considering Cruz as a free agent.
4. Troy Tulowitzki, SS, free agent — Tulowitzki looked fluid and healthy, according to one assistant general manager whose scout watched during his workout in Long Beach, Calif., this past week. Tulowitzki left scouts thinking he can play this season after missing 2018 with surgery on both heels. The next step for teams who watched him was to double-check video of the workout to see if there was anything awkward that wasn't detected live. Another potential problem is workouts don't tell you whether he can hold up over the long haul. "That's the chance you take," said the assistant GM. "Because it's a deal where you're only giving up the minimum salary, then it makes it less risky to take that chance. If he's OK, who doesn't love his offense? He seems to be driving the ball again like he used to. But, of course, it was a workout, not a live game."
5. Edwin Encarnacion, DH, Mariners — The expectation is that the Mariners will flip Encarnacion rather than pay him \$21.667 million this season, with a 2020 option for \$20 million and a \$5 million buyout. But where? Tampa Bay, Houston, and Minnesota are possibilities.
6. Zach Britton, LHP, free agent — The Phillies appear to have major interest in him. There's an outside possibility the Phillies could get in on Craig Kimbrel, but he may be too expensive if they land both Manny Machado and Bryce Harper.
7. Dallas Keuchel, LHP, free agent — It's surprising that he remains available. The Angels, who signed Trevor Cahill and Matt Harvey this past week, may be waiting to make their biggest splash with Keuchel. They have been interested in him the entire offseason, but there's also interest from Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and Texas, among others. Keuchel is a Scott Boras client so it may take a while for the full market to develop.

8. Roy Halladay, former pitcher — I didn't vote for Halladay, who died in a plane accident in 2017, on my Hall of Fame ballot this time. I really believe Roger Clemens, Curt Schilling, Mike Mussina, and Andy Pettitte deserve to be elected ahead of him.

9. Justin Wilson, LHP, free agent — Wilson would be a good fit for the Red Sox, who don't have a power lefthander in their bullpen. Obviously, the absence of one had no negative bearing on what transpired last season. According to Brooks Baseball, "His four-seam fastball generates an extremely high number of swings and misses compared to other pitchers' four-seamers, is blazing fast, has much less arm side movement than typical and has some added backspin. His cutter is thrown at a speed that's borderline unfair, has extreme cut action, has good 'rise' and results in somewhat more ground balls compared to other pitchers' cutters." Wilson, who was 4-5 with a 3.46 ERA with 69 strikeouts in 54⅓ innings and 71 appearances with the Cubs, throws his fastball at 95 miles per hour, his cutter at 92, and his slider at 84. He's a Levinson brothers client, and they usually like to get their guys signed quickly (see Joe Kelly, Nathan Eovaldi). MLB

Bill Madden / Brodie Van Wagenen's declaration that Mets are team to beat in NL East, puts Mickey Callaway square on the hot seat

By BILL MADDEN

When Brodie Van Wagenen declared last week the Mets should now be viewed as the favorites to win the National League East next year he sure caught a lot of people by surprise, and you have to wonder if Mickey Callaway wasn't foremost among them. That's quite an onus on the Mets manager considering what a disaster his 2017 maiden voyage was.

While it was arguably the right decision on the part of the Mets high command not to take the wrecking ball to the team that finished 77-85 and instead keep intact, for at least one more season, the rotation of young, talented starting pitchers they've been touting for four years now, the fact remains it's still a decision that will require Van Wagenen, Callaway & Co. to hold their breath, daily, beginning on the first day of spring training. They are gambling that Jacob deGrom, Noah Syndergaard, Zack Wheeler and Steven Matz are all going to stay healthy and finally reach their maximum potential — a big lift since they have never all been able to stay healthy for a whole season.

One can just imagine Terry Collins, who knows a thing about Mets injuries, approaching Callaway in spring training and whispering: "Division favorites? Good luck, fella!"

It was interesting that Van Wagenen made his proclamation on the day he was introducing 31-year-old Wilson Ramos as the new Mets catcher to handle his talented but delicate rotation. Coming off his most productive season (.306/15 HR/70 RBI), there's no denying Ramos potentially brings the most offense the Mets have had at catcher since Mike Piazza. But there is also no denying his own injury record — torn medial meniscus in his right knee in 2012, two trips to the DL with hamstring issues in 2013, broken hamate bone after being hit by a foul tip, and another hamstring injury in 2014, torn right ACL in 2016 and a month on the DL last year with another strained hamstring — is almost as lengthy as that of Syndergaard, Wheeler and Matz combined.

In making his "we're the favorites now" statement, Van Wagenen indicated he's pretty much finished with the heavy lifting in fortifying the Mets around the starting pitchers corps — and that one last major expenditure on, say, an A.J. Pollack for a big bat in center field, is not in the offing. (Yep, when it comes to the outfield, signing Rajai Davis and Gregor Blanco to minor league contracts apparently was it.) Rather, he is also banking on 36-year-old Robinson Cano to continue supplying 25-homer offense at second base while also hoping Juan Lagares, the king of injuries who's been hurt most of the last three seasons, can finally grab hold of the center field job and keep it all year without again breaking down.

Let's be honest here. Van Wagenen's bold prediction is an "on paper" prediction, based on everyone on the Mets avoiding lengthy injuries and having peak seasons (with maybe a comeback by Yoenis Cespedes thrown in). It does not take into account that, if any of the core four starters — deGrom, Syndergaard, Wheeler and Matz — go down, there is no safety net behind them. But now that he's said it, it stands that, if whatever reason the Mets do not get off to a fast start, there is no safety net for Callaway either. As Collins can tell him, injuries, which have been a way of life around the Mets these past three years, are a pitch.

IT'S A MADD, MADD WORLD

The Dodgers' trade of Yasiel Puig and Matt Kemp to the Reds in exchange for Homer Bailey and his cumbersome \$23 Million contract for 2019 is still going to save them about \$17 million and makes them the favorite to land Bryce Harper if they so choose. The Dodgers are Harper's preferred team now that the Yankees have shown no interest in him, but L.A. couldn't make a move until they cleared both outfield glut and payroll. This does that. However, to sign Harper would mean going over the luxury tax threshold and they may just choose to stay under it and sign A.J. Pollack. If they do that, it would be a major setback for Harper's agent Scott Boras in his quest to get the richest contract in history for his client. All the while he's been waiting in the weeds for the Dodgers to trade Puig and Kemp...After meeting for the better part of last Wednesday with Manny Machado and his wife, it appears the Yankees and the free-agent shortstop will be doing their dance around a contract through the holidays, all the while waiting to see if Phillies owner John Middleton follows up on his hint of possibly doing something "a little bit stupid." That would be meeting agent Dan Lozano's reported demand of 10 years and upwards of \$300 million for his client. Perhaps because they've come to realize what an albatross Giancarlo Stanton's \$30 million per year contract is going to be from 2022-27, the Yankees are not going to be venturing into that territory. Question is, with all of Machado's baggage — his periodic lack of hustle, his reputation as the dirtiest player in the game, two surgically repaired knees — will anyone? From the Yankees' standpoint, there is also the question of whether Machado is a big-time, big city player. His .182 AVG. and 5 strikeouts in the World Series while playing for the Dodgers against the Red Sox was another red flag. ...Maybe Van Wagenen has a point about the Mets being the favorites in the NL East, given the curious moves so far this offseason by the defending champion Braves. After throwing \$23 million at aging, injury-prone Josh Donaldson, who may be finished as a productive everyday player, the Braves let Anibal Sanchez walk as a free agent last week for a two-year/\$19M contract with their NL East rivals, the Nationals. The 34-year-old Sanchez, in a comeback season with a 7-6 record, 2.76 ERA and career-low 1.08 WHIP in 24 starts, provided much-needed stability to the Braves' rotation last year when their other young starters faltered and were injured. With Julio Teheran in decline, Sanchez's loss leaves the Braves with only three proven frontline starters in Mike Foltynewicz, Kevin Gausman and lefty Sean Newcomb, who was wildly inconsistent last year. Also a bit mystifying is why the Braves have so far eschewed re-signing Nick Markakis, an invaluable veteran presence in their clubhouse who had one of his best seasons (.297/14 HR/93 RBI) last year.

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