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Arenado not going to rest on his laurels

**After the sting of an early postseason exit, Rockies 3B sets '18 goals
By Thomas Harding MLB.com @harding_at_mlb | Jan. 20th, 2018**

DENVER -- Rockies third baseman **Nolan Arenado** skipped the team plane last fall and spent several depressive days in Phoenix after the Rockies' 11-8 loss to the D-backs in the 2017 National League Wild Card Game, filling his time with diversions, while longing for a baseball game that was not to come.

"I kind of hid a little bit," Arenado said to local media at Coors Field on Saturday, the final day of the Rockies Winter Caravan. "My mom and dad stayed with me a little bit. I think they were worried I was going to jump off a cliff, maybe. They wanted to check up on me a little bit. I want to thank them for staying with me, hanging out with me. They were hurting, too.

"It was just good to get away. I didn't want to fly home. I was kind of scared -- I didn't want people to see me here after we lost. ... Just to get away, I golfed. I went to a concert [Post Malone] -- by myself -- because nobody wanted to go with me. I actually enjoyed my down time. So when I got home I was ready to train and get back going."

The down time was sad, but it was short-lived. After winning his fifth straight Gold Glove Award, and every other significant defensive accolade at his position, and taking his third straight Silver Slugger Award, Arenado found himself in the weight room, on the field and in the batting cage quickly. He said a week hasn't passed that the loss to the D-backs -- in which he went 2-for-5 with a home run -- hasn't replayed itself in his mind. He isn't the only one. The game comes up in phone calls with teammates.

No wonder Arenado couldn't put his bat and glove away for long.

"I wanted to play more baseball," he said. "My cousin [Josh Fuentes, who put himself on the big league radar with a .307 performance at Double-A Hartford in the Rockies' organization] went to go play winter ball. And I was kind of jealous of him."

Pushing for more with the Rockies -- whose postseason appearance was their first since 2009 -- is motivation enough. Arenado doesn't have time to obsess about the recent Top 10 Third Basemen Right Now, which aired on MLB Network. "The Shredder," which makes judgments based on an alphabet soup of stats, rated the Cubs' **Kris Bryant** No. 1 and Arenado No 2. Fans, however, chose Arenado tops -- as did one of the panelists, former Major League third baseman Mike Lowell.

"I appreciate the fans and the support, absolutely," Arenado said. "But there are a lot of great players out there and there are a lot of good third basemen. I remember when I got drafted, people were telling me that third base isn't really a position where it's really going off yet, like there's not that many. And now during my time in the big leagues a lot of [teams] have good third basemen.

"I can see why people pick other players. I can also see why other people pick me. It's all good. I don't take it personal. I just go play baseball."

Arenado enters 2018 with loftier goals than numbers or acclaim.

"As weird as it sounds, I would like to try to get to bed earlier," Arenado said. "That's something I'm trying to take pride in this next year. I find myself staying up a little later, my mind racing and thinking about the game. And then I find myself going to bed at like 2 or 3 [a.m.]. Little things like that, I feel can make an impact in the game. Trying to get to bed earlier, trying to take of my body, go get massages, take that more serious.

"Obviously, I want to be a better fielder, a better hitter, but that's baseball. I'll continue to work at that. But I think those are little mental things I'm trying to work on to help me excel at my game a little bit more."

If the Rockies succeed in the postseason, imagine how much better Arenado will sleep.

Hampson is No. 7 in MLB on 2B prospect list

By Thomas Harding MLB.com @harding_at_mlb | Jan. 21st, 2018

DENVER -- Speedy Garrett Hampson fits the Rockies' plan of accumulating do-almost-anything players.

After leading the Class A Advanced California League in triples with 12, finished second in batting at .326 and steals with 51, and third in on-base percentage at .387, Hampson will enter 2018 as MLB's **seventh-ranked prospect** at second base, according to MLB Pipeline.

But putting him at one position is limiting. Hampson, 23, a third-round Draft pick out of California State University-Long Beach in 2016, began his career with 64 appearances at short and one at second at Short Season Class A Boise. Last season, he played 71 games at second base and 56 at shortstop, then went to instructionals to learn center field.

"I pride myself on being able to play anywhere on the field," said Hampson, who arrived at the Rockies' complex in Scottsdale, Ariz., last week to complete his preparations for Spring Training. "I learned a little bit of center field in instructional league this year. Whatever it takes for me to get on the field, that's something I can bring to the table -- that versatility."

Hampson was a solid line-drive hitter in college but it wasn't clear how his bat would transfer professionally. Added strength has made him a threat to hit into the gap and use his speed.

"I just learned to be more aggressive with the fastball and get the pitch I'm looking for, and be able to be on time with it," Hampson said. "I came from a college that it wasn't really OK to hit fly balls. The field plays really big at Blair Field. Now I'm able to use that to my advantage. I have a line-drive approach but can hit some gaps, too."

Hampson, currently the **No. 8 prospect** in the Rockies' organization, was part of a speed movement at Class A Advanced Lancaster. Teammate Wes Rogers led the Minors with 70 steals, and the JetHawks had Nos. 5 and 7 of the top eight players in the California League in steals.

"It was just so fun to be a part of that team," Hampson said. "It was an exciting bunch and we fed off each other on the bases and at the plate as well. Any way to get that extra 90 feet is huge. I'm not really sure why it's left the game. Maybe the more power, the less speed is useful. The whole goal of baseball is to score runs, and it makes it easier as an offense if you can gain that extra 90 feet."

"I think the Rockies are looking at the little things a little more. It's not all about hitting home runs and power. The Rockies pride themselves on executing and doing little things to win a game."

Hampson is a candidate to begin the 2018 season at Double-A Hartford. It's hard to rate the big league arrival of a fast-moving prospect, but the Rockies like giving their prospects more avenues. They had shortstop **Trevor Story** learn second base and third base, just in case. **Ryan McMahon**, the No. 2 prospect at first base, was drafted as a third baseman and has added first base and second. Infield prospect Brendan Rodgers is playing second and short.

"It's nice to have someone like that on a team, being able to put people here and there," Hampson said. "The more positions you can play, that means you'll probably be in that lineup the next day. I'm riding the wave, learning each position as I can and getting all the reps that I can."

Blackmon open to contract extension with Rox

Center fielder does not want to be distracted by talks during season

By Thomas Harding MLB.com @harding_at_mlb | Jan. 20th, 2018

DENVER -- Rockies center fielder **Charlie Blackmon** views the one-year, \$14 million contract he signed to avoid arbitration as a beginning.

Beginning of what? Well, Blackmon believes all will be revealed in good time.

Blackmon, who led the National League in batting (.331) for the first time, and topped multiple other categories, is eligible for free agency after this season.

The idea of the Rockies signing him to a multiyear deal lingers. In a sense, much has changed -- Blackmon is an established star and the Rockies, after years of struggle, are coming off a postseason appearance. But at the same time, Blackmon can view it as nothing having changed.

Blackmon, speaking Saturday at Coors Field during the final day of the Rockies Winter Caravan, acknowledged that maybe an extension before the season is possible, but ultimately his energy must go into his play.

"It's a two-way street," Blackmon said. "I really like playing here. It's been a great place to be. I like the people. I like the teammates. And I've also been on a one-year situation for the past three to four years, so it doesn't really change anything for me. I'm used to that go-out-and-produce mindset. Hopefully, something happens. That would be great.

"But I don't plan to let that get in the way of me playing baseball. I don't plan to be thinking about that during the season. That's my time to work. I don't want to be distracted."

While money doesn't necessarily change things, it could force him to adjust one thing. He still drives the 2004 Jeep Laredo he has had since high school. Maybe something new is on the horizon.

But it's not out with the old.

"I might get something else, but I'm not going to get rid of [the Jeep]," Blackmon said.

Worth noting

- Manager Bud Black reviewed the various possibilities at first base. The Rockies could revisit **Ian Desmond**, whom they signed last year, but Desmond is a fit in the outfield. There's more in-house.

"Ian's there," Black said. "We've got **Ryan McMahon**. Don't be surprised to see **Pat Valaika** play some first base. We're going to move him around the diamond. **Jordan Patterson** was in camp last year on the 40-man roster, played some first base in Triple-A and at big league Spring Training last year.

But this is, Black added, pointedly, "As of Jan. 20."

Mark Reynolds took the position last season after Desmond sustained a broken hand in Spring Training, and he was a Final Vote candidate for the All-Star Game. The Rockies are talking about a reunion. If not Reynolds, the Rockies could seek a similar right-handed-hitting veteran to pair with the left-handed-hitting McMahon.

- Blackmon was not happy with his performance in last year's 11-8 loss to the D-backs in the NL Wild Card Game -- something he discussed in December. On Saturday, he said experiencing the playoff mentality was valuable.

"As soon as you start playing pro ball, they grind this mentality into your head that it's a long season: Don't get too up, don't get too down, don't let one at-bat ruin your mindset because there's always tomorrow," he said. "And then you go play a one-game playoff, and there's not a tomorrow. It changes your mentality a little bit.

"So as I've gone into my offseason, I had this mentality that, 'OK, I've got to play 162 games, plus playoffs.' And really, playoffs are the only thing that matters."

Possibilities abound for Rockies' McMahon

MLB's No. 2-ranked first-base prospect has bases covered defensively, ready for Majors move
By Thomas Harding MLB.com @harding_at_mlb | Jan. 18th, 2018

DENVER -- The Rockies' **Ryan McMahon** admitted enjoying the buzz that comes with being considered a prospect. Fans recognize him by sight and extend their baseballs, cards and anything else for him to sign. But deep down, he enjoys the littlest of fans, those who may not yet be familiar with the top-prospect lists.

"My favorite thing is the kids who kind of want to have their ball or stuff like that signed," McMahon said. "They really don't know who you are. That's more fun for me, because I remember being that kid who was like, 'I don't know who this is, but I just got a baseball player to sign my ball. I'm going to hold on to this forever.'"

McMahon **ranks second** on MLB Pipeline's list of Top 10 first-base prospects, released Friday.

The left-handed-hitting McMahon, 23, batted .355 with 20 home runs, 43 other extra-base hits, 88 RBIs, a .403 on-base percentage and .583 slugging percentage between Double-A Hartford and Triple-A Albuquerque last season. He ranks behind only the Rays' Brendan McKay, who doubles as a pitcher. McMahon also went 3-for-19 over 17 games in the Majors, as the Rockies brought him up to experience their run to the postseason.

The possibilities are wide open for McMahon in 2018.

Drafted out of Mater Dei High School in Santa Ana, Calif., in the second round in 2013 as a third baseman, McMahon added first base in 2016, and second base last year. With **Mark Reynolds** exploring free agency, McMahon is preparing at all three positions in the event other moves affect his positioning.

First base is part of right-handed-hitting **Ian Desmond's** profile. So even if the Rockies don't sign Reynolds or another veteran, they can ease McMahon in with matchups in the beginning. They can also build experienced depth and use Spring Training to judge if McMahon is truly ready. And keeping fresh at the other positions could make McMahon a possibility in the case of injury to a pair of All-Stars/Gold Glove Award winners -- third baseman **Nolan Arenado** and second baseman **DJ LeMahieu**.

McMahon was one of the youngest players in Double-A in 2016. Not only did he play for a Hartford team that didn't have a home stadium -- meaning every game was a road trip and meals were sporadic -- but he went to instructional ball and the

Arizona Fall League. He was skinny by season's end, and now he is a muscular 215 pounds, and believes it's possible he can maintain his size and strength.

"It's just exciting for everything that's going to happen, everything this team is capable of and the personal things that can happen for me," McMahon said. "There's a lot of excitement surrounding this team. I'm just ready for it."

Freeland celebrates his Holm-town success

Rockies lefty returns to his elementary school as part of Rockies Winter Caravan

By Thomas Harding MLB.com @harding_at_mlb | Jan. 18th, 2018

DENVER -- Rockies left-handed pitcher **Kyle Freeland** carried a bemused expression as he navigated Holm Elementary School's tight hallways. Not many years before, there was plenty of room for him there, and the cafeteria tables were a lot taller than knee-high.

The place didn't stay strange for long. His mom, Susan Freeland, still works in the school office. A handful of teachers from when he was a student were still there when he visited Thursday during a Rockies Winter Caravan appearance with pitcher **Jon Gray**, infielder **Pat Valaika** and the triceratops mascot, Dinger, who challenged Freeland for most-popular purple visitor.

The assembly took place in the gym, Freeland's favorite place in the school.

"The gym," he said, laughing. "I always enjoyed science class, the basics of it, dissecting little things and learning. As a little kid you always think that's so much fun. Other than gym, that was probably my favorite subject."

Freeland, 24, is coming off a rookie season in which his Major League debut was the 2017 home opener. He tied with teammate **German Marquez** for the National League lead in rookie wins while going 11-11 with a 4.10 ERA, and has a high ceiling for '18. Building endurance for a full season after wearing out at the end of his rookie year and improving his changeup could be keys to Freeland taking the next step.

But Thursday was all about going back and staying grounded.

One of many ways teachers are valuable is helping children with dreams and reality. A Major League dream may be a narrow one, but folks at Holm knew Freeland, and didn't mind his dedication.

Left-hander Kyle Freeland, far right, and his Rockies teammates speak to students at Holm Elementary during Day 6 of the Rockies Winter Caravan. *Rockies*

"I think there was one writing assignment that really stood out, when he wrote about his love of baseball and always dreaming about it," said Nickie Tzimapitis, who taught Freeland and his older brother in fourth grade. "We had a certain curriculum, but he was able to sneak things in."

Freeland recalled, "Everything I did revolved around sports, and pretty much it was mostly baseball. One of the projects we had was to draw on a [ceramic] plate. They [kept] that plate. I think I still have it. I drew a baseball field. Baseball was everything."

Don Freeland felt the school's encouragement. He coached his son at the youth level, and sometimes had to pick him up early from school for a baseball event.

"We might've been leaving on Friday to go to a tournament," Don Freeland said. "I came here early before school was dismissed and walked to his classroom to pick him up, and his teacher jokingly said, 'No, you can't leave. He's got to do this stuff.'

"She knew ahead of time, of course, but gave me a hard time about it. She said, 'Baseball's not that important. He's got to stay in school.'"

Seeing Freeland back in the school as a baseball role model was surreal to his mother.

"It's fun to see him with his teachers, and at the end of this we're going to have a picture with the little 4-year-olds with Dinger," Susan Freeland said. "That was the age he was when he started this. It's hard to imagine him being this tall.

"He takes a picture with the preschool teachers, and how much taller he is blows me away. And they followed him all the way through. They knew what happened in middle school, in high school. His teachers followed him."

Of course, it's always good for anyone to realize they're not the biggest deal. Turns out Freeland is the second-most famous former Holm student. First place goes to actor Don Cheadle.

Barbara Althouse, who taught music to both, spotted Cheadle's talent and cast him as Templeton the rat during a performance of "Charlotte's Web." Her son, David Althouse, a sports executive producer for Fox 31 Denver, made sure to connect Freeland and Cheadle in a tweet:



And Freeland made sure to get on the web with his old music teacher.



What could Freeland have accomplished musically? At the time, Althouse cast another student with the baseball part in a production of "I Want a Vacation." Althouse couldn't remember what part she gave Freeland -- but she has the records of all her productions at home. She listens to Freeland's interviews, which sound much different from the child she remembers, and wonders.

"I can't believe his deep voice," she said, smiling.

Althouse and Susan Freeland are longtime friends, and the latter realizes that 2017 was so good for Freeland that he has his choice of favorite dreams.

"I'd have to say Opening Day," Freeland said of his six strong innings in a 2-1 victory over the Dodgers in the home opener. "The near no-hitter [8 1/3 innings before yielding a **Melky Cabrera** single in a 10-0 victory over the White Sox on July 9] was awesome but it's going to be hard to top Opening Day in my hometown, getting to pitch my debut and all that together.

"It's going to be hard to beat that."

Thursday was a good time to remember those times, and dream of even better.

Free-agent slugger Carlos Gonzalez ever the optimist

Veteran outfielder, 32, remains positive through dip in productivity, lack of top-tier signings

By Tracy Ringolsby MLB.com @TracyRingolsby | Jan. 18th, 2018

Carlos Gonzalez is caught in free-agent limbo. And he's not the least bit concerned.

Gonzalez is a realist. He knows he is coming off the least productive of the seven seasons in which he has played in 100 or more games. Gonzalez understands there is a logjam created by a lack of signings of the top-tier free agents.

Most of all, Gonzalez knows by the time spring camps open next month he will be in uniform, getting ready for Opening Day. It could be a return to the Rockies, where he played the past nine seasons, or it could come from a handful of other teams who reportedly have shown interest -- the Blue Jays, Orioles, Astros, D-backs or Royals.

"I have been enjoying it," Gonzalez said. "It's been slow, but I know I am going to have a job. My focus is on being ready when it is time to get back on the field."

Gonzalez has been working out in the Orlando, Fla., area with a group of players, including fellow Venezuelan **Jose Altuve**.

"My main man, Altuve," Gonzalez said. "I'm looking for pointers."

Gonzalez is one of the more interesting of the unsigned free agents. At 32, he is a three-time National League All-Star, a three-time NL Gold Glove Award winner and a two-time NL Silver Slugger Award honoree. Gonzalez led the NL with a .336 average in 2010 when he finished third in NL MVP Award voting.

And Gonzalez is one of those guys who's always smiling and never looking for excuses, not even during what, from an overall standpoint, was a disappointing 2017, a contributing factor in why the market has been slow for him. He hit .262 for the season, but he had a strong finish and was a key factor in Colorado claiming a Wild Card berth, hitting .377 with a .484 on-base percentage and .766 slugging percentage in September, when he had six home runs and drove in 16.

It was a far cry from that .221 Gonzalez hit with a .299 on-base percentage in the first half of the season. And it was the final year of a seven-year, \$80 million contract he signed with the Rockies going into his final year before being arbitration-eligible, forfeiting his three years of arbitration and three years of potential free agency.

"I was going to make minimum salary as a third-year player," Gonzalez said. "I was able to work a deal that was going to provide for my family. That was important for me: for my family to be taken care of. I am from Venezuela, it's a different situation than a lot of countries."

Now Gonzalez is on the open market, waiting for it to truly open up.

"**J.D. Martinez** is still out there," said Gonzalez, who along with Martinez is represented by agent Scott Boras. "Depending on the decision he makes, it could open up things for me."

It could prompt one of the teams with interest in Gonzalez to make a multiyear offer, but the reality is he might be best served with a one-year deal and look to rebuild his market value after last year. He felt the final weeks of that season helped him. Gonzalez also made some adjustments to his grip and swing that were more along the lines of his past.

What Gonzalez didn't do was pout. A veteran presence on a young Colorado roster, he kept a smile on his face and encouraged teammates at all times, while also dealing well with the constant media inquiries about his on-field struggles.

Gonzalez has enjoyed his time with the Rockies, and he does not rule out the possibility of returning. Both sides have remained in contact. He feels comfortable about his relationship with the people in the clubhouse, from manager Bud Black to general manager Jeff Bridich and owner Dick Monfort.

"I am thankful for every opportunity the Rockies gave me," said Gonzalez, who originally signed with the D-backs and made his big league debut with the A's. "The Rockies will always be special to me. I could still be with the Rockies."

And Colorado wouldn't hesitate. The Rockies would like to add an impact bat to play the outfield.

Gonzalez not only would fit that void, but history shows he would fit very comfortably into the clubhouse as well.

Gray enjoys fan interactions, looks ahead to '18

By Thomas Harding MLB.com @harding_at_mlb | Jan. 17th, 2018

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. -- It was as if Wednesday was the fans' chance to stoke Rockies pitcher **Jon Gray's** excitement for the 2018 season, rather than the other way around.

Gray, who had his wild, blond mane shaved last year for charity, practically melted when a fan told him, "By the way, I love your hair. It's gorgeous." A fan, setting an example for his young family, asked Gray -- plus pitchers **Kyle Freeland** and **Jeff Hoffman**, and infielder **Pat Valaika** -- what he wanted to improve.

"Delivery," Gray said. "If I get my delivery, it'll fix everything."

A boy who looked at Gray and said, "I love the Rockies," received a hug and a signature. Later, Gray said, "It gets me fired up when we talk baseball, new moves and all the young guys coming up. Our fan base is everywhere; not just Denver."

Gray, who had been at Rockies Winter Caravan stops in Albuquerque, N.M., on Tuesday, and will be in Denver on Thursday, appreciated the warmth Wednesday at the Rockies Dugout Store. It was a change of pace from the cold that he took into the offseason -- even though he embraced that feeling as well.

Last season ended on a sour note. After holding opponents to three or fewer runs in his final 13 starts -- one game shy of **Ubaldo Jimenez's** club record -- Gray yielded four runs on seven hits in just 1 1/3 innings during the 11-8 loss to the D-backs in the National League Wild Card Game.

"It's still there," Gray said. "I decided to use it as fuel and motivation for the offseason. It's been a blessing in disguise for me.

"I wanted to get back out there and just redo everything. But it doesn't work like that. You've got to wait and earn your spot. That's all I can do right now, focus on getting back to that spot and showing what I can do."

Gray, 25, made his first season-opening roster, started on Opening Day for the first time. He gave a preview of what he can accomplish -- 10-4, 3.67 ERA, 112 strikeouts in 110 1/3 innings -- even though he missed 2 1/2 months with a stress fracture in his right foot.

In 2016, his rookie year, Gray missed much of the first month with an oblique injury and struggled early before settling into a 10-10, 4.10 finish in 29 starts. Gray is motivated for wire-to-wire dominance -- something necessary for the Rockies, who are trusting that their group of 20-something pitchers can continue to succeed in an NL West full of veteran starters.

"From what I've seen, with guys like **Tyler Anderson**, Jeff Hoffman, **German Marquez**, Kyle Freeland, **Antonio Senzatela**; those guys have had a lot of success with their first taste of Major League Baseball," Gray said. "They're not scared of anything.

"I have all the confidence in the world in our guys and our depth, too; defensively and offensively. We'll have a very well-rounded team this year. The division is getting tougher, too, but we did well against them."

Gray can dominate games with a lively fastball and slider, and last season he unveiled a curveball -- a pitch he had never made part of his arsenal, even though his high-arm angle and 6-foot-4 frame made it a natural option. The changeup, which can be a weapon on his arm side is his next project.

In addition to an improved delivery, Gray believes stamina will help. Because of the foot injury, Gray lost conditioning in his legs and dropped to 219 pounds. Now he is 225, and in an offseason program that emphasizes leg work, with throwing to come later.

"Being healthy is all I can ask for this year, because last year I missed a lot," Gray said. "I couldn't lift with my legs at all. It'll be a lot different. Plus I got on a big eating train, had some fun with that, and put my weight back on."

Rockies resistant to some of MLB's pace-of-play rule changes

Nolan Arenado: "Not too fond of making too many changes in the game"

By PATRICK SAUNDERS | psaunders@denverpost.com | The Denver Post | January 20, 2018 at 4:10 pm

While the Rockies understand the need for a nip here and a tuck there to speed up the pace of baseball games, they are not in favor of major changes. Indeed, they view Major League Baseball's recent proposals with a skeptical eye.

"I'm not too fond of trying to make too many changes in the game," all-star third baseman Nolan Arenado said Saturday.

"Baseball is a slower game, it's a slower-paced game, that's just what it is. I think when you try to make too many changes, I think it can cause problems and people get out of their routines."

Last week, the players' association rejected MLB's proposal to institute a 20-second pitch clock and limit mound visits.

MLB, however, intends to exercise its right under the collective bargaining agreement to unilaterally impose those changes for the 2018 season if no agreement is reached before the owners meet Jan. 30 in Los Angeles.

Manager Bud Black thinks changes are coming: "I think that's real. I wouldn't be surprised of it happening."

The current proposal by MLB includes:

- A 20-second pitch clock when the bases are empty, similar to what has been used for three years in some minor leagues. An initial violation would result in a pitcher, or a batter backing out of the box, being given a warning. Subsequent violations would penalize the pitcher by charging a ball to the count, or penalize the batter by adding a strike to the count.
- A limit of six mound visits per game by the players on the field, including catchers.
- The possibility of more changes in 2019. If the average time of games remains at three hours or more in 2018, the pitch clock would be used at all times, including with runners on base, in 2019.

Owners, as well as commissioner Rob Manfred, are concerned that fans are increasingly put off by the increased length of games. In 2017, the average time for a nine-inning game was a record-long 3:05 during the regular season, and 3:29 during the postseason.

"I'm glad the players love the game the way it is, but we know based on fundamental research what our fans think about the game," Manfred said last February. "It's in the players' interest, it's in our interest, to be responsible to what fans think about the game."

Reducing the number of mound visits has become a major point of contention. Under MLB's proposal, a team would be allowed one visit per pitcher each inning, whether by a manager, coach or player. A second visit would result in the team being forced to change pitchers.

Black views such changes with caution.

"I think there are some mound visits that without a doubt are strategically based," Black said. "I don't have a problem with cutting down visits per se, whether maybe it's an infielder visit or a catcher visit. I think those can be slowed for sure. But I think some of the pitching coach visits, the manager visits, those are integral to strategy. I really do."

While all-star center fielder Charlie Blackmon would like to see play speed up, he doesn't want to lose some essential aspects of baseball.

"You are asking guys who have been playing the game at a high level their whole lives, to do something completely different," he said. "So I'm going to be resistant to change right out of the gate, no matter what it is."

While both Blackmon and Arenado can see the reasoning behind keeping hitters in the box, they don't like the idea of limiting mound visits by infielders.

"What it's really going to do is take the veteran leadership of your infielders and throw it out the window," Blackmon said. "I mean, how many times have you seen Nolan go out to the mound? Maybe there is a rookie out there on the mound, and Nolan settles him down a little bit. Well, Nolan (couldn't) do that anymore."

Black believes a quicker game could be found through less drastic measures.

"I think the pitchers working a little quicker helps," he said. "The batter — in the batter's box, or in and out of the batter's box — that can be addressed."

"I do think players coming off and on the field, that can improve. That's sort of a function of the time for commercials in between innings. But on balance, I don't want to really mess too much with the fundamental parts of the game."

Kiszla: Move over, Von Miller; 2018 is the year of Nolan Arenado in Denver sports
The Colorado Rockies are Nolan Arenado's team. Denver is his town. This is his time.
By MARK KISZLA | mkiszla@denverpost.com | The Denver Post
PUBLISHED: January 20, 2018 at 5:07 pm | UPDATED: January 21, 2018 at 7:34 am

A legit MVP candidate? Check. The owner of a glove that's 14-karat gold? No doubt. A mentor to young Rockies that dare to dream of winning a World Series ring?

Not so fast, buster. Nolan Arenado isn't so sure he's qualified to be anyone's baseball guru.

"I don't like mentoring that much, to be honest with you," Arenado said Saturday, when I asked him what sage advice he offers teammates. "Because I feel like if I do that and then strike out, I feel like a hypocrite."

This is why I love Arenado. He plays baseball with no regulator and talks baseball with no filter. He loves the game in the same timeless manner as that 9-year-old kid you watch lugging a yellow plastic bat to the playground. And Arenado plays defense at third base like nobody we've seen since Brooks Robinson won his 16th consecutive Gold Glove in 1975.

The urgency in Arenado has always been painted fire-engine red. But he will celebrate his 27th birthday in the opening month of the season, and every candle on that cake will burn with a heightened passion to win now. A superstar in his prime, Arenado is in a hurry to get to the World Series.

"We have a window here, let's try to take advantage of it," Arenado said.

This is his team, his town, his time. As 2018 dawns, the Broncos have no clue who will be playing quarterback, while the Rockies have championship aspirations.

With all due respect to Von Miller, Nikola Jokic and Nathan MacKinnon, this is the year of Arenado in Denver sports. Every second counts, because the Rockies need to leverage this rare combination of a young pitching staff on the rise, a veteran bullpen, the hitting ability of Charlie Blackmon and Arenado, who is the most talented player in franchise history, but not might be here for long unless general manager Jeff Bridich can build a championship contender that's built to last around him.

I'm convinced how long Arenado remains in a Rockies uniform is most directly related to how much the team wins.

After the Rockies' sweet story of 2017 came to a sudden, fade-to-black ending with a disappointing 11-8 loss to the Diamondbacks in the playoffs, Arenado was so upset he didn't take the team plane back to Denver, choosing instead to hole up in the Arizona desert until the pain subsided.

"I kind of hid, a little bit. My mom and dad stayed with me for a little bit. I think they were more worried that I was going to jump off a cliff or something," said Arenado, who played golf and went to a Post Malone concert alone to clear his mind. "I didn't want to fly home, I didn't want people to see me here (in Colorado) after we lost."

Down the road in the division, the Los Angeles Dodgers' approach to filling their roster is roughly the same as casting a blockbuster movie: Money's no object to add yet another star above the title. Down in Houston, the defending champs are the team the Rockies want to be when they grow up. Colorado is a 30-1 longshot to win the World Series.

In their first season with Bud Black as manager, the Rockies improved from 75 to 87 victories, which was no small feat. The climb, however, only gets steeper from here. Is Jon Gray ready to be a true ace? Will a healthy David Dahl hit? Will impending free agency cause Blackmon to press?

For much of this franchise's history, the unanswered questions heading into spring training sounded more like desperate prayers. Things have changed. So long as Black can write Arenado's name on the lineup card, Colorado will never play scared.

"We can hang with anybody," Arenado said.

Arenado does not become a free agent until 2020, but the clock is ticking with the knowledge his next contract will almost certainly be worth \$300 million if it's worth a dime. Money, however, can't buy a World Series ring. And nobody hates putting his bat and glove away for the winter more than Arenado.

The Rockies have much to prove this season, but there's nothing more crucial than proving to Arenado that his fondest baseball dreams can come true in Colorado.

Nolan Arenado setting high bar for Rockies' young starters

Charlie Blackmon thinks long-term deal still possible

By PATRICK SAUNDERS | psaunders@denverpost.com | The Denver Post

PUBLISHED: January 20, 2018 at 5:25 pm | UPDATED: January 20, 2018 at 10:02 pm

The Rockies' sky-high expectations for the 2018 season rest, in large part, on their young starting rotation.

All-star third baseman Nolan Arenado is excited about the rotation's potential, but he's setting a high bar for Jon Gray, German Marquez, Tyler Anderson, Jeff Hoffman and Antonio Senzatela.

"I think they are going to be great and I think they are already pretty darn good," Arenado said Saturday as the Rockies winter caravan concluded with a stop at Coors Field. "But I hope they understand that there is no time to rest. It's time to get better and better.

"I hope they understand that just because we got (late-game relievers) Wade Davis and Bryan Shaw, that doesn't mean you just (pitch) five innings. The goal is to go seven or nine. Don't let up, and don't give the ball to Wade Davis every day, because we need him healthy."

Contract year. Center fielder Charlie Blackmon, who's scheduled to become a free agent after this season, thinks there's still a chance a multiyear deal can be worked out.

"It's two-way street," the 2017 National League batting champion said. "I like being here, I really like the people and I like my teammates. Hopefully something happens, that would be great. ... I think it's possible. I think that happens to a lot of players. They sign a one-year contract in arbitration and then sign an extension some time in spring training."

Blackmon, who recently signed a one-year, \$14 million contract to avoid arbitration, doesn't think he's going to feel extra pressure playing for the first mega-deal of his career.

"I don't plan to let that get in the way of baseball and I don't plan to be thinking about that during the season," he said.

"That's my time to work. I don't want to be distracted."

Dahl update. Outfielder David Dahl, who earlier this month began swinging a bat for the first time since last summer, is hitting in the cage and making good progress at the club's spring training complex in Scottsdale, Ariz. Manager Bud Black predicted Dahl will be "full go" when spring training opens next month.

Dahl suffered a stress reaction injury to a rib during spring training and played in just two Cactus League games last year before he was shut down. He never played for the Rockies last season, but there is reason for optimism.

“He’s engaged, he’s running, he’s lifting weights, he’s swinging at 100 percent,” Black said. “Right now there are no concerns, and medically everybody feels really good about David.”

Rockies' versatile Pat Valaika ready to play any position, including first base

Starter Jon Gray and Kyle Freeland thrilled with Colorado's bullpen additions

By PATRICK SAUNDERS | psaunders@denverpost.com | The Denver Post | January 18, 2018 at 2:51 pm

Pat Valaika prides himself on being the Rockies' ever-ready utility player. As spring training nears, he's willing to expand that role to include first base, if called upon.

"I would anticipate getting some time over there," Valaika said Thursday. "I'm in the role where almost any position on the field is an option, so I need to be ready to play all of them, and first base is one of them."

Last year, Valaika started 16 games at shortstop, five at third base, three at second, two games in left field and one at first.

First base remains a question mark for the Rockies and they need depth at the position, but Valaika, a natural infielder, is also preparing for more time in the outfield.

"I've been working to get stronger and get faster," he said. "Instead of just doing a lot of infield stuff, I'm doing outfield stuff, too. I want to add that to my repertoire and get more comfortable."

Valaika, Colorado's best pinch hitter, appeared in 110 games last season, hitting .328 with four home runs, including a pinch-hit grand slam against San Diego on Sept. 16. He led all big-league pinch hitters in RBIs (16), runs (12), doubles (eight) and extra-base hits (12).

Boffo bullpen. Young starters Jon Gray and Kyle Freeland are thrilled with Colorado's off-season, free-agent signings of right-handed closer Wade Davis, right-handed set-up man Bryan Shaw and late-inning lefty Jake McGee. Over the next three seasons, the Rockies will spend \$106 million on the trio.

"When I heard that news, I was ready to go," Gray said. "I've been ready for spring training ever since. We are going to be even better out there (in the bullpen), and that's scary."

Added Freeland: "When we started making those moves, it was exciting. You know that no matter how your outing goes, if you are able to stretch it out to five or six innings, you know that bullpen is going to come in and hopefully do the job. It's extremely exciting."

Keith Law's 2018 top 100 prospects: Nos. 100-51
Keith Law | ESPN Senior Writer | Jan. 22

If you're not going for it in today's MLB environment, you're -- well, let's not use the T-word and just go with "developing." Teams that build from their farm system, through the draft, the international market and trades of veterans for prospects, keep reaching and winning the World Series.

The Royals had the No. 1 farm system in baseball in 2011 and won two pennants as a result, including a world championship in 2015. The Cubs hit the top five in 2013, ranked No. 1 in 2015, and won the World Series in 2016. The Astros had the No. 1 farm system in baseball in 2014 and won their first World Series in 2017.

I don't think any of this is a big coincidence: Teams can't buy championships. They can buy a player or two to finish off a good roster, but the bulk of a pennant-winning roster comes from within, either through cheaper players the team developed from its farm system or veterans acquired by trading such prospects.

This year's prospect rankings package begins today with the first half of my ranking of the top 100 prospects in the minors.

Editor's note: Age is the player's age as of July 1, 2018. Players with experience in foreign major leagues like Japan's NPB or Korea's KBO, such as Shohei Ohtani, are ineligible for these rankings.

63. Peter Lambert, RHP, Colorado Rockies

Age: 21 (4/18/1997)

Bats: R | Throws: R

6-foot-2 | 185 pounds

Top level: High-A | 2017 rank: Unranked

Lambert doesn't get the hype of fellow Rockies prospect Riley Pint, who can hit 100 mph as a starter, but he's the better prospect right now thanks to a broader mix of stuff, command and feel for pitching.

Lambert is a four-pitch guy who'll touch 94-95 mph but sits mostly at 90-91 mph on a fastball he throws for strikes. He's very athletic with some projection left in his body, so those 94s and 95s on the fastball should become more frequent as he gets older. He also mixes in an above-average changeup, a curveball and a cutter with potential for all four of his pitches to be average or better.

He had a tremendous year pitching for Lancaster -- one of the worst pitchers' parks in baseball -- as a 19-year-old and actually boosted his strikeout rate and cut his walk rate even with the promotion from low-A. If he stays healthy, he looks like a good bet for a No. 4 starter floor but given his feel for pitching and athleticism, I believe he'll keep improving enough to become an above-average starter after a little time in the majors.

Should the Rockies re-sign Mark Reynolds?

The veteran first baseman is reportedly interested in coming back to Colorado.

By Hayden Kane@hwkane | Purple Row | Jan 19, 2018, 9:00am MST

Mark Reynolds is reportedly interested in returning to Colorado for the 2018 season. The **Rockies** may or may not return those feelings. The *Denver Post's* **Patrick Saunders recently reported** that Reynolds would like to rejoin the Rockies if they will give him a major league contract. Here are some things to consider about whether the Rockies should want to re-sign Reynolds and what that move could look like.

Should they want Mark Reynolds?

Here's the dicey thing about Reynolds. He almost certainly isn't as good as the first half version of him that had us all rallying to get him in the **MLB All-Star Game**. He probably isn't as bad as the second half version of him that fell back into his strikeout-heavy form, but there is a risk that, at age 34, that's who he is and who he will be in 2018.

Reynolds will probably be somewhere in the middle in terms of his first half of 2017 versus the second half. In the right role, that can be just fine. The rub in 2017 came when the Rockies still needed Reynolds to start at first and thump in the middle of the lineup every day. As a part-time player, Reynolds could be an excellent fit and a veteran presence on a playoff team. That question about role is an important one though.

What would it mean for **Ryan McMahon**?

If it was McMahon and Reynolds handling first base duties, what would that look like? Would the team call it an open competition in spring training? Would they hand the job to McMahon? Would there be a platoon? Would it be some other sort of timeshare?

It feels like the path forward should focus on McMahon as first baseman. Reynolds reportedly wants a big league deal, but he might be fine as a bench player. It probably suits all parties to have McMahon playing the majority of the time with Reynolds as a backup, as opposed to using them in a true platoon. Pairing McMahon with a righty to handle first base makes sense, but it could potentially be a tricky needle to thread if the team plans to truly give McMahon the chance to shine.

Do the Rockies consider **Ian Desmond** a first baseman?

If the plan is to pair McMahon with a right-handed option who occasionally plays first base, the Rockies might already have an option on the roster. Desmond could presumably focus his time in the corners of the outfield and then fill in at first base as needed or if the Rockies are going with a right-handed heavy lineup.

One year after “Ian Desmond, first baseman,” the team might actually have a reasonable path to using his versatility between first base and the outfield. Reynolds isn’t necessarily a good fit if the team goes that route.

Who else might play first base?

This starts the exercise that really only happens with first base, the position we assume any player can handle. Throw out names and say they might play first. **Pat Valaika**? He **says he’s ready to play first**, although that seems like a bad idea unless it’s in the context of his utility role. **Tom Murphy**? Surely that’s a rumor that might crawl out if three catchers are doing well during spring training.

Gerardo Parra? You didn’t think I’d forget that one, did you? And if we really want to get weird, what about **Carlos Gonzalez**? We can hardly rule out his return, especially if the market seems to stay so cool on him. Maybe he would come back to play some first, or maybe he would return to play the outfield and free up the rag-tag combo of Desmond and Parra to help at first. That brings us to the last question.

Are the Rockies definitely done in free agency otherwise?

They certainly would be any other year. But with a stalled market and a nervous situation for players, there might be some bargains to be had. There are still players that would make sense; we just assumed they would be too expensive.

It’s unlikely the Rockies can spend any more on free agents, especially if they are going to get serious about extending **Nolan Arenado**, but we shouldn’t rule it out because we don’t know what the bottom is going to be for free agency just yet. If nothing else, the team might be waiting to see what happens before signing a veteran like Reynolds to a short deal.

What do you think?

The Rockies and the ghosts of Super Bullpens Past

Does spending big on relievers always work out?

By Kyle Bishop@bishopkm | Purple Row | Jan 18, 2018, 8:00am MST

The **Rockies** have made some major moves this offseason, locking down multiple relievers and building what some people have called a “super bullpen.” What nobody can argue with is how super expensive the super bullpen will be in 2018. As of this writing, the Rockies have six relievers signed for a total of \$45.8 million, the most any team has ever spent on relievers in one season.

Going into the offseason, the Rockies had salary commitments of \$7 million in 2018 with both **Mike Dunn** and Adam Ottavino. Since then, the Rockies have signed three more relievers: **Jake McGee** and **Bryan Shaw** both got \$27 million over three years, and the **blockbuster Wade Davis** signing, netting the closer \$52 million dollars in a three-year deal. Each of those three signings also come with options in 2021. And last week, another piece of the bullpen was put in place, as **Chris Rusin** avoided an arbitration hearing with the Rockies and got a \$1.2 million payday for 2018. With these pieces coming together, let’s take a look at some of the most expensive bullpens since 2010, and how those teams fared. (Salary data is via **Spotrac**.)

The Yankees’ Super Bullpen

With most of the expensive bullpens in baseball history, the bulk of the cost is covered by one big piece, the intended closer. For the 2018 Rockies, that’s Wade Davis, earning over twice that of any of the other relievers. For the 2008-2012 **Yankees**, that was **Mariano Rivera**. Rivera’s contract at the time made him the **highest-paid closer in baseball history**, earning him \$15 million a year (and \$10 million in his farewell 2013 season). In that timeframe, the Yankees made the playoffs four times, including winning the 2009 **World Series**. Rivera compiled an amazing 1.30 ERA while saving 209 games over the last six seasons of his career, even after missing most of 2012 to a knee injury.

Will Wade Davis be late-career Mariano Rivera? Probably not. And another factor is at play here. In 2011 (when the Yankees had their highest bullpen payroll at \$41.7 million), Rivera was tied with **Derek Jeter** as the fifth-highest-paid player on the roster. Wade Davis is only behind **Nolan Arenado** and **Ian Desmond** on the 2018 Rockies payroll. Even when the Yankees were paying record amounts of money to relievers, they were also spending record amounts on position players. The 2018 Rockies will not have the luxury of doing the same.

The Dodgers' Super Bullpen, 2014

The next historically expensive bullpen since 2010 comes from within the NL West. The **Dodgers** spent \$35 million on relief pitchers in 2014, and won the division by six games over San Francisco. (The Dodgers lost the division series that year to St. Louis, with the bullpen mostly holding up while **Clayton Kershaw** earned two losses.)

Name	Payroll Salary	% of total payroll	ERA	FIP
Brian Wilson	\$10,000,000	4.05%	4.66	4.29
Brandon League	\$8,500,000	3.45%	2.57	3.40
J.P. Howell	\$5,500,000	2.23%	2.39	3.30
Kenley Jansen	\$4,300,000	1.74%	2.76	1.91
Chris Perez	\$2,300,000	0.93%	4.27	5.07
Jamey Wright	\$1,800,000	0.73%	4.35	3.47

The Dodgers managed to get reasonable production from a few of their expensive bullpen pieces, with closer **Kenley Jansen** earning \$4.3 million for 44 saves and a 2.76 ERA. **J.P. Howell** was also a valuable contributor to the squad, producing a 2.39 ERA as a middle reliever. Even Brandon League had his only good season in Dodger blue that year, with a 2.57 ERA in the middle of a contract he never lived up to. But **Brian Wilson** was also on that Dodgers team, and he was bad. He was paid \$10 million, produced a 4.66 ERA, and did not return to the big leagues in the following season.

Will Wade Davis be late-career Brian Wilson? Probably not. If one of the Rockies' relievers in 2018 pulls a Brian Wilson, they may have the talent around to survive it. If multiple relievers crash and burn, this strategy will start to look very ugly.

The Diamondbacks' Super Bullpen, 2013

Much like the late-career-Rivera Yankees teams, the 2014 Dodgers had an expensive bullpen, and they spent a huge proportion of their payroll on starters and position players as well. A better comparison for the 2018 Rockies might be the 2013 **Diamondbacks**, whose \$25.2 million bullpen payroll represented 27.7% of their total payroll. (As of this writing, the Rockies have committed 35.8% of their 2018 payroll to relievers.)

Diamondback Bullpen 2013

Name	Payroll Salary	% of total payroll	ERA	FIP
Heath Bell	\$10,000,000	10.97%	4.11	4.10
J.J. Putz	\$6,500,000	7.13%	2.36	3.83
Brad Ziegler	\$3,150,000	3.46%	2.22	3.40
David Hernandez	\$1,375,000	1.51%	4.48	2.74
Tony Sipp	\$1,275,000	1.40%	4.78	4.88
Will Harris	\$388,251	0.43%	2.91	2.74

The headliners included **Heath Bell** (\$10 million for a 4.11 ERA), **J.J. Putz** (\$6.5m, 2.36 ERA over only 34.1 innings), and **Brad Ziegler** (\$3.15m, 2.22 ERA). Heath Bell was slightly disappointing for the price he was paid, but the other arms in the pen performed capably and led the D-backs to a .500 record, good for second place in the NL West. On the offensive side, **Paul Goldschmidt** was having a breakout year, **Aaron Hill** and **Martin Prado** were also good, and everyone else was about average. Most of the money on the team was going to Miguel Montero. The broad strokes: a couple of good bats, a relatively expensive bullpen, and **Gerardo Parra** was on the team too. The Dodgers won the division that year. Make of that what you will.

The 2018 Rockies may not look exactly like any of the teams mentioned here, but they can learn a few lessons. The conventional wisdom is that a strong bullpen is amplified in the playoffs, with starters having shorter and shorter leashes as the stakes start to rise. But an expensive bullpen is not always a good one. The playoff exit of the 2014 Dodgers shows that the rest of the pitching staff needs to do their job as well.

Aside from Mariano Rivera, arguably the best closer in baseball history, the most expensive reliever on each of these teams was not the best performer. In 2013, Heath Bell started the year as the closer for the Diamondbacks, but Brad Ziegler took over in July and kept the job the rest of the way. The Rockies should be flexible with the roles in the bullpen, and not let the magnitude of the Davis contract dictate who should be the closer this year.

The fun part about MLB salaries is that even something that looks modest today would have been unheard of just a few years ago. Five seasons ago in 2013, **Jonathan Papelbon** was the most expensive reliever, earning \$10 million. Eight relievers (as of this writing) will earn more than that in 2018. And as teams like the Rockies try to land their own Papelbons, those salaries will keep going up. The Rockies are gambling that, as relievers are relied upon to cover more and more innings, that their money secures the best of the bunch.

Colorado Rockies: Bud Black on offseason, MLB's pace of play initiatives

by Noah Yingling 1 day ago | RoxPile

On Saturday morning, Colorado Rockies manager Bud Black spoke with the media as a part of the Colorado Rockies caravan (along with All-Star third baseman Nolan Arenado). Black had some interesting comments on the Rockies offseason and one thing that has been in the news lately: a pitch clock for 2018.

Bud Black spoke with the media for an extended period of time on Saturday as a part of the Rockies caravan. One of the first questions asked to him was about the Rockies offseason moves and the Rockies really pounding home that they need relievers, particularly a dominant closer like **Wade Davis**. He discussed about how he and Rockies pitching coach **Steve Foster** feel about the Davis signing:

"Well, we feel good about it. You know, even before I got here, I think with Steve [Foster] and [Rockies bullpen coach] Darren [Holmes] and [Rockies general manager] Jeff [Bridich] and others in the organization, more quietly, I really think that there was an emphasis put on pitching and these guys, prior to my arrival [before or the 2017 season], set a standard for what was to become how we go about the pitching side of the game.

We saw, last year, some results of that—the results of those changes in mindset, in attitude, in fundamental pitching, in mechanics and philosophy, and all those things—you saw with the young pitchers who came up—some of the rookies—and I think we saw it with [our] aggressiveness in the free agents market with [Mike] Dunn and [Greg] Holland, and we saw that continued this year with [Wade] Davis and [Bryan] Shaw and resigning [Jake] McGee, and try[ing] to fortify the pitching as much as possible.

Again, we know pitching is such a big part of the game and you have to pitch to win and you need good pitching—bottom line—and we feel that we can acquire [pitching via free agency], we can develop [pitching], we can trade for [pitching so that] we have a better chance to win."

Colorado Rockies: One way Nolan Arenado plans to improve in 2018

by Kevin Henry 1 day ago | RoxPile

As amazing as Nolan Arenado might be on the diamond, the Colorado Rockies All-Star third baseman is always looking for ways to improve. On Saturday morning at Coors Field, Arenado revealed a surprising way he is looking to make himself better in time for the 2018 season.

"There's always something," Arenado told a group of reporters, including Rox Pile, when asked if there was something he was focused on improving before next season. "It doesn't even necessarily have to be baseball-wise. It could be away from the field.

"As weird as this sounds, I would like to try to get to bed earlier before games. That's something I'm trying to take pride in this next year. I find myself staying up a little later. Like, my mind racing and thinking about the game and then I find myself going to bed at 2 or 3. Little things like that, I feel like they can make an impact in the game."

It's nice to know that there is something about Arenado that many of us in the stands and the press box that say, "Hey, that sounds like me." We all could use a little more rest, right? It's also a reminder of just how passionate Arenado is about the game that he plays and exactly how good he wants to be at it, every day.

Even as a rookie, Arenado and then-Rockies manager **Walt Weiss** talked about how **he never liked to take a day off**. That continues to this day, with Arenado often having an offensive explosion the next day after getting a day off, such as he did in a **three-homer game against the New York Mets** last season. He's itching to get back on the field and opposing pitchers usually pay the price for that.

Pushing yourself during the season and playing at the level that Arenado does can certainly have an effect on even the star athlete's body. Arenado added on Saturday that he's looking for other ways to take care of himself more this season, including more rest off the diamond and even an increased number of massages.

Arenado turns 27 on April 16 and is in the middle of the prime years of his career. Finding ways to make himself even better, after five Gold Gloves and three Silver Sluggers, should be a scary thought for the rest of the National League.

Rockies' unsung reliever Rusin: 'It's a pretty nasty bullpen'

By Afternoon Drive with Goodman & Shapiro - January 19, 2018 | Mile High Sports

When you think of Colorado Rockies relievers, you probably think of free-agent additions Wade Davis and Bryan Shaw, holdovers Jake McGee and Adam Ottavino, veterans like Mike Dunn or flamethrowing youngsters like Carlos Estevez.

Chris Rusin flies under the radar — but he might have been the most valuable reliever the Rockies had last season.

Rusin, 31, led all relievers with 85.0 innings pitched; nearly 30 more than Scott Oberg, who pitched in 58.1. Name any situation, and Rusin pitched in it: long relief, middle relief, set-up, closing... Rusin did it all, and did it well, finishing with a 5-1 record, two saves, a dozen holds and a sparkling 2.65 ERA.

In an interview with Eric Goodman and Les Shapiro of Mile High Sports AM 1340 | FM 104.7, Rusin talked about the composition of the Rockies' new back-end.

"It's a pretty nasty bullpen, to add to what we had last year, too," Rusin said. "When every alert (about the Rockies' free agent signings) popped up on my phone, I said, 'whoa, I'm pumped about that; he's nasty.' Then another one, then Jake signed; it kept going. With the guys we have behind them, it's going to be a competitive bullpen. It's going to be tough to win a job — and that's what you want as a team."

"I'm looking forward to it."

The versatile Rusin talked about the challenges of being ready for anything; conditioning his body to do what baseball players prefer not to do: Play without a routine.

"It's a crazy process. I mean, if you asked Jake to go out and pitch two innings or three innings, he's not going to be able to pitch for five days, because he's used to only throwing 15 to 20 pitches a night," Rusin explained. "If he stays there — 15 to 20 pitches per night — he's going to be able to go back-to-back; maybe even [get] one out the third day [in a row] ... it's like working out for the first time in a year; you're not going to be able to move the next day."

"As a starter, you throw every day; you don't have to be prepared to throw in the game. You just play long-toss, have a bullpen [session]; a rep in between your starts," Rusin continued. "There are the guys that can throw two, three; multiple innings and rebound a lot quicker than the one-inning guys."

Bud Black says young, improving Rockies 'aren't in awe' of the majors anymore
By Mornings @ 5280 with Lundy, Drotar & Carpenter - January 18, 2018 | Mile High Sports

While traveling with the 'Rockies Caravan', a three-state, 10-city trek around the Rocky Mountain region to meet with fans prior to spring training manager Bud Black joined Shawn Drotar and T.J. Carpenter of Mile High Sports AM 1340 | FM 104.7, and noted the enthusiasm of the team's fans in the wake of their first postseason appearance in a decade.

"The reception's been great. I know we've had about 20 players, doing 25 events... up in Wyoming, down in Albuquerque (home of the Isotopes, the Rockies' Triple-A affiliate), Grand Junction — I think some boys were down in Colorado Springs and Pueblo," Black said. "I've been in and around Denver with some season-ticket holders; the response has been great. We're trying to build off of last season, going into this season, and I think the fans are doing the same. It's all good stuff."

The NL West has been ruled by the Los Angeles Dodgers and San Francisco Giants for most of the Rockies' history — the two clubs are traditionally sport top-five payrolls, giving them a margin for error that most teams can't even hope to match. For Black, that's just part of the business. "Well, we've got a good division; there's no doubt about it. The Dodgers and the Giants have sort of set the standard for the last number of years, but it's OK — personally, I've been in this division for a long time; I've been on the West Coast for a long time. It's just the reality of what we have going on, and I think... personally, I embrace it. I think the players do, too," Black said. "Listen, we're not afraid of the Dodgers; we're not afraid of the Giants or [Arizona] Diamondbacks or anybody in our division. We do what we do; we know what we have to do. We have a plan each and every year, and you know [that] you can't worry about what other clubs do; you've got to take care of your own business, and that's what we do."

Black, a 15-year major league veteran pitcher who will be managing for the 11th season of his career in 2018, made his debut with the Kansas City Royals in 1981 at the age of 24, understands how youth and inexperience affects young players, and especially pitchers. The Rockies had to force-feed rookies German Marquez (22), Antonio Senzatela (22), Kyle Freeland (24) and Jeff Hoffman (25) due to injuries and illnesses, and Black feels they'll be better for the experience this season.

"Obviously, I like the experience part, first of all. They got through their rookie seasons with success, for the most part. There was a couple rough spots for all those fellows, but nothing is better than experience," Black explained. "They've had

success with big-league hitters; they know what goes on during a big-league season. They're not in awe of big-league hotels, flights, all that stuff. Now, they can concentrate on getting better and improving."

Experience, however, can also fool young players into overconfidence. Black explained what he'll be on the watch for. "You've got to be careful; to make sure that the adjustments have been made and you keep moving forward in your game. You can't live on last year's laurels. That's the thing a lot of teams do after success," Black said. "We've got to keep moving forward; I know the National League is going to make adjustments to Marquez and Freeland and Senzatela and Hoffman — and others. Jon Gray's still a developing pitcher; he's still got some things to clean up. Again, I think it's adjusting right along with the league as they adjust towards us, but I like the fact that these guys went through a season — came out of it healthy — and can feel confident going on to the next year."

Regular season experience is one thing; postseason experience is another entirely. Even though the Rockies had only a one-game cameo, Black, who won a World Series ring with the Royals in 1985, believes that his team learned a great deal from the experience. "Well, I think it's not so much the one game; it's a different feeling playing in a playoff game, and the guys will remember that feeling of what it was like to end the season, go down to Arizona and prepare for one game," Black said. "What I liked is what happened in September; going through a pennant race. For the most part, most of the players on last year's team had not been through a pennant race. Really, 'CarGo [Carlos Gonzalez] was the only one that been through it, and that was years ago. So, Nolan [Arenado], Charlie [Blackmon], Trevor [Story], D.J. [LeMahieu], all the young players who came up in September — Tony Wolters, [Ryan] McMahon, [Mike] Tauchman, [Raimel] Tapia — all these guys went through a September where every game was pivotal. So what's what I like about last season; what they went through, and that experience on that end."

Certain players — Black mentioned football's Tom Brady, basketball Michael Jordan, and New York Yankee great Derek Jeter — seem to have a knack for big moments. Black feels that he has players like that on the Rockies today. "You know? I do. I think you look at — even though Charlie didn't like his one game against the Diamondbacks — I think Charlie [Blackmon] is a pretty clear thinker, and has poise in the most critical of situations. I think Nolan [Arenado] relishes that," Black said. "I think all good players sort of relish that; that moment in time when they're 'the guy'... closers who have passed the test of time; I think they have that in them. You can't pitch the ninth inning unless you have a certain personality. Mariano Rivera had it. Those players who play well with two minutes left in a football game; guys who come down and take the last shot — they're out there, and I think we have some of them."

The Rockies added three-time All-Star closer Wade Davis to a record deal in the offseason, adding to the team's collection of clutch performers.

On Wednesday, pitcher Kyle Freeland called Black 'a pitcher's manager'; something that the Rockies' second-year skipper embraces. "I think, with Kyle — and with all the pitchers — I have a different relationship with them, just because I played their position. I think that's natural for any manager, for position he played," Black said. "If you caught, I think you have the ability to relate with catchers and pitchers. If you were a great offensive player, and you become a manager, I think you can understand what goes on in the batters' box, you can understand the hitting side of it. If you were a great defender, a position player, you can understand the defensive component; what position players are going through."

"So, I think with me, our conversations with the pitchers are based on: 'I've been there; I've been in your shoes. I get it; I get what you're going through.' So it lends some credibility for me, and I think the pitching coaches, when we can talk to our pitchers."

Black discussed what he expected to see from a Rockies squad that now understands what they're capable of. "What I expect is that the expectation level should rise among the players, and the conversations should be more about what we can do, based on last year," Black said. "We have to turn the page on last year, because this year is a new year; we can't assume that things will be the same. But that does give you confidence to go through what we went through next year. I know that teams who have ultimately won — you know, the [Chicago] Cubs self-admitted that there was a little bit of a hangover (from their 2016 World Series title), going into spring training — so we're going to try to guard against it, which I think our group will do. We know we still have more steps to climb as we move forward. But again, I think there's growth every year; when professional teams talk about building a roster, you like to have that blend of guys who have been there and been through it, and can bring a perspective — a year-long perspective, from the start of the season till the end — about what it takes. And the young guys are always listening and learning and growing."

"I think we have a group of players that are committed to winning and to doing it the right way, from the start of spring training. We have great leadership in D.J. and Charlie and Nolan, and I think some of the new acquisitions — [Chris] Iannetta and Davis and [Bryan] Shaw — lend us that aspect, as well," Black said. "It's a pretty good group, and I think it's well-balanced."