



MEDIA CLIPS – Dec. 17, 2018

**Banning the shift in MLB generates growing, heated baseball debate
Rockies Bud Black, Jeff Bridich say no to outlawing the shift
Patrick Saunders | DenverPost.com | Dec. 16, 2018**

LAS VEGAS — Bryce Harper, Manny Machado and contracts potentially worth one-third of a billion dollars were the hot topics at last week's winter meetings.

But there was another debate brewing here that's much more important to the future of baseball.

The Shift.

Major League Baseball's competition committee recently gave Commissioner Rob Manfred a green light to explore ways to limit shifts. The reason: Manfred, and many others throughout baseball, believe the game's slower pace and lack of action is hurting the product. The shift, they contend, is a major culprit.

"Eliminate (shifts). Do it now," Kansas City manager Ned Yost said. "The shift makes the game much, much more boring, in my opinion."

Rockies manager Bud Black's view, however, is 180 degrees different.

“Let teams play their fielders where they want to play them.” Black said. “And it’s up to the other team, if they so choose, to make them pay (for playing) there. Hit the ball where they ain’t. Who said that? Wee Willie Keeler? That’s my theory. Hit the ball where they ain’t.”

Added Rockies general manager Jeff Bridich: “I have zero issues with shifting, personally. I think it’s baseball strategy. I think it’s based on baseball information and baseball data and information and statistics, which are generated by players that play the game.

“I struggle with changing those elements just because we are in a phase of this game (slow play). I personally think that players need to adjust. Players have adjusted to things for decades and decades.”

While there are many debates about how to effectively combat the shift, there is no question that the way players are positioned has dramatically changed the game over the past few years. The rise of analytics has led to an increased number of shifts, which has resulted in fewer base hits and less action. To what degree, and to what effect, no one can be sure.

In 2010, about 1 percent of plate appearances featured a defensive shift, often deployed only against extreme pull hitters. Last season, however, that number increased to 22 percent, according to Fangraphs. (A shift is defined as three or more infielders being on the same side of second base.)

The Rockies, for example, employed a shift against left-handed hitters 33.2 percent of the time in 2018, a sharp increase from 17.3 percent the year before. Against right-handers, the Rockies used the shift 7.5 percent of the time in 2017, a number that increased to 18.3 percent last season.

Opponents of the shift directly link its rise to a marked decrease in offense, and statistics back that up. The 2018 big-league batting average of .248 was the worst in 46 years and singles have been in decline for the last five years. There were 26,322 fewer singles in 2018 than in any season since 2000, according to Jayson Stark of The Athletic, working with Sports Info Solutions.

Stark also uncovered this nugget: the chances of a left-handed hitter reaching base on a pulled ground ball to the right side dropped to the lowest rate in 15 years. That so-called “Reached Base Rate” — Stark describes it as basically on-

base percentage, included errors — was .192 in 2018. That's a drop of 43 points since 2011 for left-handed hitters getting on base when pulling groundballs to the right side.

But lack of offensive production can't all be pinned on the shift. The emphasis on launch angles and players' desire to swat home runs, along with a corresponding increase in strikeouts, has contributed to a decline in action. The strikeout rate in 2018 was 22.3 percent, a dramatic increase from 16.5 percent in 2000.

SHIFTING LANDSCAPE

MLB teams that employed the most shifts in 2018 (percent per plate appearances):

Team	Total	vs. RHH	vs. LHH
1. Astros	37.3	21.2	59.7
2. Rays	24.8	39.3	
3. Twins	28.4	22	36.6
4. Yankees	28.2	12.1	52.6
5. Royals	27.4	18.6	39.7
13. Rockies	18.3	8.6	33.2

Source: Baseball Savant

The rise of power pitching also must be mixed into the equation. Since 2002, the average fastball velocity has increased from 89 miles per hour to 92.8 mph, according to Baseball Info Solutions. Teams are also using fresher pitchers who come to the mound armed with raw heat. Big-league teams continue to increase the number of pitchers they use each game, rising from 3.63 per team in 2002 to 4.36 last season. More and more, hitters are at a distinct disadvantage.

Manfred's goal, it's clear, is to increase action to spark fans' interest and revive lagging attendance. Banning the shift, or at least modifying it, appears to be his favored strategy.

Yet it's unclear if outlawing the shift would make a major difference. According to Stark's research, banning shifts (or altering them) would mean about 500 more hits per season across the majors (most of them singles), or just under three extra hits per team per month. In other words, not much of a difference.

HIT ROBBERS

Total groundballs or short line drives hit into a “full shift” over the last three seasons and then just in 2018:

Seasons	Balls hit into shifts		
Hits	Would have been hits		
2016-18	22971	5181	6317
2018	9096	2034	2551

Source: Sports Info Solutions, via The Athletic

It is clear, however, that the effectiveness of certain players — especially left-handed pull hitters such as former Rockies outfielder Carlos Gonzalez — is hurt by shifting defenses. Last season, Gonzalez faced an extreme shift in 54.2 percent of his at-bats and finished with a .317 wOBA (weighted on-base average). An average hitter will finish the season with a wOBA of around .320. When Gonzalez didn't face a shift, his wOBA rose to .399.

With the left side of the infield wide open to him, it would have seemed logical for Gonzalez to beat the shift by laying a bunt down the third-base line, or hitting the ball the opposite way. But it's not that easy.

“If you go out there thinking, ‘I'm going to hit the ball to the left side,’ most of the time you're going to be out or you're not going to square the ball up,” Gonzalez told The Denver Post last summer. “So I just go out there and try to hit the ball hard anywhere in the park, and if it's outside, I just try to flip it.”

Yost is outspoken in his belief that most hitters are not going to be able to adjust to baseball's analytic-based defenses.

“The shift, for me, has eliminated the single,” he said. “You would think that players would try to make an adjustment. But I've seen one player that has really focused on making an adjustment, and that's Mike Moustakas. He said, ‘That's it, I've got to do something different.’ He started driving the ball the opposite way.

“But the majority of the hitters, I'd say 90 to 95 percent, say to heck with it, I'm going to try to hit a homer and a double. Our numbers for singles last year dropped way down. (So) you lose strategy, you lose the ability to steal bases. You lose the ability to hit and run or bunt if you want to. A lot of people don't like the bunts. I like bunts.”

Milwaukee's Craig Counsell, who was a finalist for National League manager of the year, mixed and matched his starters and relievers in all sorts of creative ways. When it comes to shifts, he's vehemently against outlawing them.

"I don't see the sense in banning the shift at all," he said. "I don't see how it improves the game. I think (the shift) is a strategic part of the game, and that is one of the things that makes our game fun — let's find strategies to win baseball games.

"We can make a concerted effort on the downtime in the game. I would love for us to try to attack the dead time in games. But attacking strategies to win baseball games, man, I just don't see that as improving the game."

Rosenthal: Allure of the 2019-20 free-agent class; Yanks shopping Andújar?; Happ's confidence; more notes
Ken Rosenthal | TheAthletic.com | Dec. 17, 2018

For years, anyone with even a passing interest in baseball eagerly awaited the Great Free Agent Class of 2018-19, topped by its two 26-year-old megastars, right fielder Bryce Harper and shortstop/third baseman Manny Machado.

Turns out the top position players in the 2019-20 class – first baseman Paul Goldschmidt and third basemen Nolan Arenado and Anthony Rendon – might be even more attractive to some clubs.

All three players would be older free agents than Harper and Machado; Goldschmidt would be entering his age 32 season, Rendon his age 30, Arenado his age 29. All three also are candidates to sign extensions, raising the possibility none will hit the open market.

But all three also lack the warts of Harper, who is coming off a poor defensive season and plays a position in plentiful supply; and Machado, whose comments and antics during the postseason raised questions about him as a long-term investment.

This is not to diminish Harper and Machado, both of whom are brilliant talents. Harper, if not quite as iconic as his agent Scott Boras suggests, certainly has the “it” factor, increasing his appeal. Machado lacks the same charisma. So do Goldschmidt, Arenado and Rendon. But the list of stars who might become available does not end there.

Mike Trout and Mookie Betts will be free agents after the 2020 season if they do not sign extensions. Teams also might be eyeing Francisco Lindor, who — with likely salaries in arbitration of \$10-12 million in '19 and \$16-20 million in '20 — eventually might grow out of the Indians' price range and become available in trade.

Another factor in the equation: Most teams are better positioned to absorb big salaries in the future than the present. Both the Yankees and Dodgers, for example, expended considerable time and effort to get under the luxury-tax threshold in 2018 and re-set their penalty rates to the minimum this offseason. But with big salaries coming off the books, both will carry even greater flexibility next winter, assuming they do not sign Harper and Machado.

The Yankees are a realistic suitor for Machado, whom they reportedly will host for a visit on Wednesday. But if Machado's price exceeds the Yankees' comfort level, the team could always sign a second baseman and start the season with Gleyber Torres at short and Miguel Andújar at third while waiting for shortstop Didi Gregorius to recover from Tommy John surgery. Gregorius, a free agent after next season, is another player the Yankees must weigh as a long-term consideration.

The Dodgers are widely rumored to be in on Harper, but the reality, according to major-league sources, is that they do not want him on a long-term, record-setting contract. A short-term deal with a high average salary and opt-outs might hold more appeal, but such an agreement likely would create luxury-tax issues for the Dodgers in 2019, and the team already has too many outfielders.

Either Matt Kemp or Yasiel Puig is in play for a possible trade to the Reds, among other possibilities, sources say. Alex Verdugo also is a candidate to be moved — maybe for Marlins catcher J.T. Realmuto or one of the Indians' starting pitchers — but the Dodgers are reluctant to part with his six years of control, knowing Puig is likely to be either traded or lost as a free agent after the '19 season. The Dodgers do not want to turn their outfield surplus into a deficit, and Verdugo's contact skills would be welcome in a lineup that averaged a strikeout every 3.62 plate appearances in the postseason.

For the moment, the team is committed to Cody Bellinger in center, but A.J. Pollock's ability to play that position might actually make him a better free-agent fit than Harper, provided the Dodgers indeed trade other outfielders. Pollock has not played more than 113 games in a season since 2015, but the Dodgers — due to their depth and versatility — could withstand his absences more easily than most clubs. He would be the position-player version of left-hander Rich Hill, valued for bursts of excellence in limited action. And he would be considerably less expensive than Harper, likely commanding a contract in the three- or four-year range at around \$15 million per season.

The Dodgers then could pursue Arenado or Rendon next offseason, possibly moving Justin Turner to first base in 2020, the final year of his contract. The Cardinals face similar choices — Goldschmidt is entering his walk year and third baseman Matt Carpenter his final guaranteed season (the team holds an \$18.5 million option on Carpenter for '20).

Nationals general manager Mike Rizzo told reporters at the winter meetings that he has made multiple extension offers to Rendon, and Rendon has spoken publicly about his desire to remain in D.C. The Rockies, likewise, are expected to pursue an extension with Arenado, and the Cardinals might do the same with Goldschmidt after he grows more familiar with the city and team.

Still, players rarely sign long-term extensions less than a year away from free agency. Goldschmidt, as I wrote previously, will be coming off a below-market contract. Arenado might be eager to demonstrate his worth outside of Colorado. And Rendon, during the past two seasons, has outperformed Arenado in OPS+ (138 to 131) and fWAR (13 to 11.3), only increasing his value.

The best guess is that all three will want to hit the open market, and that teams will be waiting for them. Especially teams that, for financial and/or performance reasons, might be less inclined to make a run at Harper or Machado.

The Yankees' Andújar: on the move?

A number of rival executives are convinced the Yankees want to trade Andújar, who finished second to Shohei Ohtani for American League Rookie of the Year. Andújar hit 27 homers with an .855 OPS last season, but according to Fangraphs' defensive metric — which includes a positional adjustment — he was the seventh-worst defender in the game.

Only Nick Castellanos, Khris Davis, Bryce Harper, Rhys Hoskins, Trey Mancini and Teoscar Hernández rated below Andújar, who finished at minus-15.5, somewhere between “poor” and “awful” according to Fangraphs. The Yankees continue to say Andújar, 23, can develop into an average defender, but they have little choice but to hold that belief. The signing of Machado, whose long-term position almost certainly is third, likely would change their perspective.

One rival executive views the Padres as a possible destination for Andújar, considering their need for a third baseman and apparent willingness to settle for less defensive skill at the position. San Diego pursued Pablo Sandoval as a free agent in the 2014-15 offseason. They have engaged the Phillies in talks about Maikel Franco. They even tried Wil Myers at third last season.

So, picture this: Andújar to the Padres. Realmuto to the Yankees and young talent to the Marlins (those would be the central pieces; others almost certainly would be involved). The idea is more fantasy than reality, in part because the Yankees say their only involvement in the Realmuto talks was to flip him to another club.

Realmuto, though, makes sense for the Yankees, who could either trade Gary Sánchez or use him as a catcher-first baseman-DH, with Giancarlo Stanton playing more outfield, a scenario first outlined by Joel Sherman of the New York Post.

Sánchez suffers occasional defensive lapses, but The Athletic's Marc Carig recently wrote the Yankees value him for his ability to stick to the pitching game plan, not to mention his offensive attributes.

The true measure of the Yankees' confidence in both Sánchez and Andújar will be if both are on the team's Opening Day roster.

The confidence of Happ

To the Yankees, free-agent left-hander J.A. Happ's willingness to bet on himself at 36 only reinforced their belief that he possesses the mettle to achieve continued success in New York.

Happ's agent, Dave Rogers, told teams he had at least one three-year guarantee. The Phillies were known to be interested, and the Reds, Angels, Braves and White Sox also were in the mix, sources said. But Happ accepted a two-year, \$34 million deal from the Yankees with a vesting option for a third season instead.

His reasons are not yet known, but his \$17 million average annual value with the Yankees might be higher than other teams offered, and the thresholds for the vesting option — 27 starts or 165 innings in 2020, as first reported by Sherman in the Post — are not especially onerous.

Happ will be 37 in 2020, but even if he does not hit one of the thresholds, the Yankees could exercise his option or re-negotiate his deal, provided he is healthy. His other alternative would be to sign as a free agent with another club.

Some in the industry viewed Happ as a must-have for the Yankees, particularly after Patrick Corbin signed with the Nationals. The Yankees' experience with Sonny Gray demonstrated anew that not every pitcher can succeed in New York, but Happ made a strong impression last season by producing a 2.69 ERA in 11 starts after joining the team in a trade from the Blue Jays on July 26.

Tulo ready to go?

When we last saw Troy Tulowitzki, he was still a quality defensive shortstop, ranking sixth in defensive runs saved at the position in 2016 and 19th in '17, even though he did not play after July 28 that season due to a sprained ankle.

Tulowitzki, 34, then missed all of 2018 after undergoing surgery to remove bone spurs from both heels, but he is again working out and is said to be in good shape. Naturally, teams are willing to take a look, knowing they can sign Tulowitzki for the minimum salary; the Blue Jays released him last week despite owing him \$38 million for the final two years of his contract.

The Pirates — under Clint Hurdle, Tulowitzki's former manager with the Rockies — are one team with interest, according to major-league sources. The Yankees might be a possibility if they fail to sign Machado and want a low-cost stopgap while Gregorius is out in the early part of the season.

The Cubs plan to scout Tulowitzki, as reported by FanCred's Jon Heyman, but they would want him only as a utility player, and not as a potential replacement for shortstop Addison Russell, sources said. Even in that role, their interest might be muted — the team is strongly pursuing free-agent infielder Daniel Descalso, sources said.

Contrary to earlier reports, the Athletics are not interested in Tulowitzki. The team is set with Marcus Semien at short and interested in acquiring a true second baseman if it loses free agent Jed Lowrie. Tulowitzki is willing to play second or third, but all 1,033 of his defensive appearances in the majors have been at shortstop.

Around the horn

Information from major-league sources:

*The Phillies lost free-agent lefty Patrick Corbin in part because they would not guarantee a sixth year and Happ in part because they would not guarantee a third. The Yankees made Happ the better short-term offer and got their man.

Each team values players differently, and the Phillies' risk-averse strategies with both Corbin and Happ might be proven correct. But the Phils seemingly took a different approach with free-agent outfielder Andrew McCutchen, whom they signed for three years and \$50 million, a number that surprised many in the industry.

The Phillies lack a left-handed starter, but consider one more of a "want" than a "need." They have been engaged for some time in discussions about a trade for Rangers lefty Mike Minor, who is owed \$9.5 million in each of the next two seasons, but no deal is close.

*The Rangers at one point thought they were close to sending Minor to the Brewers, and also made a strong run at free-agent right-hander Charlie Morton before signing Lance Lynn.

Morton, a resident of Bradenton, Fl., not far from the Rays' home in St. Petersburg, accepted the same \$30 million guaranteed over two years that the Rangers gave Lynn over three.

Minor remains a decent possibility to be moved, as does infielder Jurickson Profar, who has drawn interest from both the Athletics and Padres.

*The catching shortage in the majors is acute. The Pirates' Francisco Cervelli is available. But some in the industry believe Cervelli's concussion issues in 2017 and '18 will result in the Pirates receiving diminished offers and ultimately keeping him.

Cervelli, who turns 33 on March 6, otherwise would be appealing; he is considered a strong defender, and his career on-base percentage is .362. His \$11.5 million salary in his walk year also is not prohibitively high.

The Mets reached agreement on Sunday with oft-injured free agent Wilson Ramos, 31, on a two-year, \$19 million contract.

*As The Athletic's Peter Gammons noted on Twitter, the decline of new Mariners DH Edwin Encarnación is undeniable, his OPS dropping from 152 to 148 to 134 to 128 to 115 over the last five seasons and his fWAR from 4.5 to 3.9 to 2.3 to 1.0 over the last four.

The Rays are seeking a right-handed bat, but an analytically driven team is not going to ignore such numbers, particularly when Encarnación, 35, is still owed \$25 million, including a \$5 million buyout at the end of the season.

*And finally, here's Marlins president of baseball operations Michael Hill on the market for Realmuto in the wake of the Mets signing Ramos:

"Nothing changes for us. Still have multiple teams to deal with."

**From movie set to World Series, Dave Magadan will force a needed new philosophy as Rockies' hitting coach
Nick Groke | TheAthletic.com | Dec. 16, 2018**

LAS VEGAS — A large chunk of Dave Magadan's daily routine sees him leaning against a corded batting cage watching hitters hit, but nothing prepared him for the dull life of a movie star.

"There was a lot of standing around," he said Thursday. "It was much different than anything I'd done in my life. It's amazing how tedious it is. Actors are basically just waiting around."

The Rockies' newest hitting coach, a decades-long veteran player and coach, a World Series winner and constant adapter, can settle in to see practice pitch after endless practice pitch through the long toil of a baseball season, but he cannot stand the waiting.

It took days to film his moment of big screen glory in the 1994 movie "Little Big League," a classic of the baseball movie canon in which Magadan chops a grounder through the legs of a Twins infielder, then gets thrown out sliding to second base with a miffed look on his face that would make Joan Crawford proud. At least he didn't get thrown out on a hidden ball trick like Ken Griffey Jr. did in the movie.

Magadan played 16 seasons in the majors from 1986 through 2001, including seven stellar seasons with the Mets and one with the Mariners that landed him a role in a movie. He carried a career .390 on-base percentage that would have easily bested any Rockies hitter last season.

And the Rockies will be Magadan's fifth job as a hitting coach, after he was hired Tuesday during baseball's Winter Meetings. His coaching time includes a six-year stop with the Red Sox that netted him a World Series title in 2007, when Boston swept Colorado. By next season, he will have a longer tenure as a coach than a player.

He rarely waits for baseball, always moving to meet the game on its terms.

"If you're stagnant," Magadan said, "you're dead. It's like being a shark. I always keep learning. Once you think you've figured it out, that's when it's time to get out of the game."

The Rockies for two seasons were among the worst offenses in the National League, a lineup loaded with boppers that too often settled for big hits at the expense of quality at-bats. And when they finally advanced to an NL division series for the first time in nine years, against Milwaukee in October, the Rockies scored just two runs in three games.

So Colorado manager Bud Black and general manager Jeff Bridich resolved to fix their hitting issues, vowing to find offensive help by trade or free-agent signing or by hook or crook. And they fired Duane Espy in favor of Magadan, who was available after getting let go from the same job in Arizona.

Magadan was part of a wide-sweeping turnover of hitting coaches across baseball this winter, with 17 jobs changing hands. Magadan will work with assistant hitting coach Jeff Salazar, who remains in that job from last season.

“As long as I’m in this game,” Black said, “there’s a teaching component that I think is real. So the coaches that I have, I want them to be regarded as teachers. I want them to teach our players. ... There’s also the knowledge, the credibility from where they’ve been, can get through to players.”

And Magadan has been around. A two-time All-American at Alabama and Baseball America’s player of the year in 1983, he set up his slap-hitting, base-hogging style early on, then transferred it to the major leagues. His career years, in 1990 with the Mets and 1995 with the Astros, saw Magadan finish with a .400-plus OBP.

That contact style, though, is off trend in the majors right now, surpassed by the true-outcome era, with home runs and strikeouts at record levels. But that style is how the Rockies fell into trouble in the playoffs.

His task is not to take away home runs from Nolan Arenado and Trevor Story, but to add the knowledge of situational hitting.

“You look at teams going deep into the postseason, they’re not Punch and Judy’s, they’re not just trying to put the ball in play, but they get good at-bats,” Magadan said. “They’re successful in what the game tells them they need to do in that situation.”

Charlie Blackmon was lobbying for that kind of approach in the hours after the Rockies were eliminated from the postseason. Blackmon knew then that his team was not prepared for do-or-die at-bats in the highest of leveraged situations in October.

“It’s one thing to play the six-month season and be a good player, but it’s another thing to have to get the hit right now or you lose and go home,” Blackmon said after Milwaukee’s sweep.

“It’s a different mentality. When you play that one-game playoff or get to the division series, every game is so important,” Blackmon said. “We need to bring that into the regular season and make those leveraged at-bats really count and be better with runners on base or with two outs and a guy on third. So when we do make it to the playoffs, we’re ready and prepared and we’re where we need to be mentally.”

What Blackmon wanted, unknowingly perhaps, was Magadan’s specialty, a plate philosophy in the Ron Washington school of hitting. If a groundball to second base scores a run, then stay inside the ball and don’t roll over to the left side or chase junk outside the strike zone. If the pitcher gives you an RBI, take it.

“Do what the game is asking you to do,” Magadan said. “No more, no less.”

Home runs are cool, they play. Don’t turn them down. But don’t wildly chase them at the expense of runs.

“Why can’t you be both?” Magadan said, dismissing the greed of being a slugger and slapper in the same game. “You can hit the ball over the fence and make contact when you need it. The right approach at the plate, the ability to be stubborn with your pitch, all those things tie in with my philosophy.”

His ideas for the job, Magadan said, will not be focused on launch angles, but more on preparation. It starts with a simplified way of thinking. Get a pitch to hit, ignore the pitches you don’t want, get into good counts.

“Be stubborn,” he said. Magadan moves from one at-bat to the next without lingering too long. Too much standing and waiting for others to yell “action” is a method for boredom.

Earlier this week, just after the Rockies hired him as their new hitting guru, Magadan drove to Brandenton, Fla., from his home near Tampa to play golf with Diamondbacks catcher J.R. Murphy. The group behind them crowded in and one golfer stalked close to Magadan.

It was Ian Desmond, Colorado's veteran first baseman and outfielder. He pointed and smiled, already aware of his new coach. "That was nice to know that he was tuned in," Magadan said. They immediately started talking hitting.

By spring training, he will have talked with every Rockies hitter, trying to jump-start a season and an offense.

"Part of my message is, starting with spring training, the 192 games leading to the postseason are a dress rehearsal," Magadan said.

"You can't be a terrible situational hitter from March 1 through September and all of a sudden you're in the postseason with the winning run on second, facing the closer, biggest at-bat of your life," he said. "You're not just suddenly going to find the ability to get the job done. That has to be the priority through the whole season."

Compromise is key in the Rockies' search for a new first baseman
Luke Zahlmann | MileHighSports.com | December 14, 2018

Ian Desmond, Mark Reynolds, Ryan McMahon, Ben Paulsen, Justin Morneau and several other fill-in players have been tabbed to replace Colorado Rockies' legend, Todd Helton. This offseason, the search continues, with each option available having a blemish.

Desmond, the primary first baseman last year, trudged through the year en route to a .236/.307/.422 batting line. In the field, the former shortstop accrued a -6 runs saved, all adding up to a -0.6 WAR.

With Desmond, the Rockies were forced to sacrifice defense at the corner opposite Nolan Arenado, while also leaving a glaring hole in their lineup. This year's crop of trade targets and free agents to replace him will all force the Rockies to compromise in one area, but not both.

First up, the most explosive of the bats available, Edwin Encarnacion.

What the former Cleveland Indians and Toronto Bluejays' first baseman and designated hitter brings to the plate dwarfs what the team has received in recent memory. Going back to 2011, Encarnacion has yet to finish below 30 home runs. Going back one year further, 2010 was the last time the slugger finished below Desmond's .307 on-base mark.

The type of consistency and pedigree Encarnacion offers the Rockies is widely unparalleled by their other options. A true clean-up hitter in every sense of the word. But, the National League doesn't yield a designated hitter spot, which creates a problem.

In the past four seasons, Encarnacion has registered more games at the DH spot than at first base by a total of 238 contests. In the limited appearances at first, he has yet to register a single season with more than zero in the runs saved column.

With Encarnacion, the team would be provided a much-needed bat, with a consequence of continuing a spree of subpar defense and the threat of injury from playing in the field only rising.

Though he was recently dealt to the Seattle Mariners, all signs point to his availability being unchanged:

MLB Network

@MLBNetwork

"He [Edwin Encarnacion] will probably be a Mariner about as long as Carlos Santana was a Mariner."@Ken_Rosenthal dives into the details and moving pieces of yesterday's three-team swap between the M's, #Rays and #Indians.

Next up on the trade wish list is Jose Abreu.

Abreu brings much of the same consistency at the plate as Encarnacion. Outside of a down year last season, Abreu has eclipsed a .347 on-base mark in each, breaching the 30 home run plateau in three of the four seasons prior to last year.

In the field, Abreu has also struggled, failing to yield above average defense in any single season.

Though the two are connected in their area of sacrifice, Abreu offers a rental opportunity, with a slightly lowered salary than Encarnacion's' \$20 million base salary next year. Despite a lower financial commitment, Abreu lacks the same upside as Encarnacion, while also likely costing more on the market compared to Encarnacion's small haul for the Indians.

Going into the open market, the Rockies figure to have a pair of options in Daniel Murphy and Marwin Gonzales. Though they should both be the top targets for the club, they offer very different prospects for the future.

As a 33-year-old infielder, coming off of his worst season in recent memory due to injury, Murphy offers a short-term solution with risk.

At the plate, Murphy carries a career slash line of .299/.344/.458, all figures that trump Desmond, with the versatility to fill two open spots for the Rockies on the right side of the infield. Once again, the club would be forced to deal with subpar fielding though.

The last piece of the resume for Murphy is his 25 games in the postseason, most recently with the Chicago Cubs. The Rockies could benefit from a player with a double-digit total in postseason appearances, especially as a team that has entered the postseason in back-to-back seasons.

The last, and likely most desirable free agent option is Gonzalez.

With holes at first base, second base and in the outfield, Gonzalez offers the positional flexibility to fill any of the Rockies' three needs on any given day. In his career, the former Houston Astros' switch-hitter also serves as an upgrade over Desmond's production last year.

In the field, Gonzalez also serves as the top fielder of the options discussed, at multiple positions. A total of 30 postseason games with the Astros also aids his upside.

The compromise lies in his contract situation.

As a 29-year-old late bloomer, Gonzalez is entering his prime offseason to get paid. No, he is not going to be paid like Bryce Harper or Manny Machado, but, Gonzalez will likely rival any contract given to a hitter outside of the pair.

With Nolan Arenado set to become a free agent after the year, with little progress on extension talks, signing Gonzalez could take away money that could be allocated to the pillar of the franchise.

On the other hand, the aggression to win now may prove fruitful in talks with Arenado.

Any avenue the Rockies choose to take will have a speed bump, but this is a situation that the franchise must accept.

Growing prospects and a fan base: Inside the success of the Hartford Yard Goats
Kevin Henry | RoxPile.com | Dec. 16, 2018

Hartford Yard Goats general manager Mike Abramson still remembers going to his first baseball game in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, when he was eight years old. The cherished moments he carries with him from that night help fuel his desire for everyone who watches his team play to walk away with memories that will also last a lifetime.

The Double-A affiliate of the Colorado Rockies, the Hartford Yard Goats have created a following for themselves, both in person and on social media. Last season, in the second year of Dunkin' Donuts Park being open in downtown Hartford, the Yard Goats registered 47 sellouts and saw more than 400,000 fans come through the turnstiles, setting a new record. Abramson looks at the numbers as a success for his franchise, but there is more to it than just having people attend a game, he says.

“My job as a GM is to bring people into the ballpark, have them buy food, buy merchandise, have a good time and want to come back,” Abramson told me in an exclusive chat during the recent Winter Meetings in Las Vegas. “For me, it’s ideally selling out 70 games and having every single person at all 70 games thrilled and want to come back the next day. That would be the 100 percent goal. In reality, we want to sell as many games as we can. Customer service is huge for us. We want people to be absolutely delighted. I don’t want them to have an OK time. I want them to leave with stars in their eyes.”

Part of that goes back to his experience at minor league games as a child and what he hopes the children and families of Hartford walk away from after a night with the Yard Goats.

“I went to my first baseball game in Pawtucket. I was eight years old. I still remember seven or eight instances of that night. I probably remember seven or eight instances of the rest of that year when I was eight,” Abramson smiled. “That’s the kind of thing we can do and these are the kind of memory imprint things that happen.”

Following through on creating those experiences are just part of the reason why Hartford was named the 2017 minor league team of the year by Ballpark Digest. Of course, everything in Hartford has not always been rosy. The team was forced to play on the road for its first season after moving from New Britain, Conn., thanks to delays in their new home park’s construction. Looking back, Abramson said that year helped build the Yard Goats brand into what it has become.

“The fact that the ballpark didn’t open for a year, I feel probably helped us at the end of the day because everybody got in so deep emotionally,” Abramson said. “It was the social media that really got everything started. That’s how we made our friends. That’s how we created a fan base. That’s how we gave the brand a voice. When we didn’t have a ballpark or team that everybody could see and meet locally. Everything was stacked in the right place. We just needed to open. When we did, we were ready to sprint. We had been waiting a long time to sprint and we sprinted and we haven’t stopped.”

Social media has provided a fantastic voice for the Yard Goats throughout the country and helped keep Rockies fans informed of what is happening with the next generation of players. Abramson says that not only has social media been critical for Hartford’s success but also the way they approach the medium has been beneficial as well.

“I have a philosophy that is a little bit different than a lot of the other minor league teams. I don’t look at social media as a way to sell tickets or bring people into the ballpark,” Abramson explained. “It’s a free medium. I look at it as a place to go and make friends as the voice of the brand. I look at it as a big room where you are with a bunch of friends. You’re showing the stuff you do and they’re showing the stuff they do. When they reach the point where they are choosing some form of entertainment, you like to think they choose you because you’re friends. That’s always been the direction for us.”

Of course, Double-A baseball is also a place where the Rockies can groom their prospects to succeed at the Major League level. Abramson said Hartford’s relationship with their parent club (the Rockies) is “fantastic” in part because everyone is on the same page.

“It seems like everyone wants the same thing, which is to have a place where we can treat the players like rock stars and the Major Leaguers we all hope they will be someday,” he said. “There are no hard asks from them or us. That’s what we want. We want to treat our players well so down the line when they’re Major League players, or even if they’re not, they want to come back and help us do things in the community.

“The Rockies want their players to play in a place that is packed every night so they feel the intensity and the nervousness they need to feel to get to where they want to go. To play on a big stage in minor league standards but also have a clubhouse where they are comfortable and hopefully like where they will get to.”

Among the Rockies who saw Major League action in 2018 and also have donned a Yard Goats uniform are Ryan McMahon, Garrett Hampson, David Dahl, Noel Cuevas and German Marquez. Not a bad group of players for the locals to see make the transition from the minors to playing for the Rockies. Hartford fans are enjoying seeing their former players make an impact in Denver, Abramson said.

“They’re buying into the Yard Goats,” Abramson said of the local fan base. “Unless you’re a Red Sox, Yankees or Mets affiliate in Connecticut, it doesn’t much matter who your affiliation is with. However, I hear from fans that they get a real thrill out of seeing players who played for us now play with the Rockies. I do too, by the way.

“We’re in a really fortunate position because the Rockies are a big development team. They have a lot of young guys and things are moving quickly. When I watch a game now, I can’t believe how many players on that team played for us.”

It’s all part of the memories Abramson and the Yard Goats are creating in Connecticut.