

Press Clips

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FROM THE OC REGISTER**Angels' Garrett Richards looks to add more curves to his repertoire**

By Jeff Fletcher

TEMPE, Ariz. — Garrett Richards has done plenty of introspection about his baseball career during the past couple injury-marred seasons.

One of the decisions he made during that time was to try to increase the usage of his curveball.

"I've had some time to take a step back and think about things," Richards said. "Watching who we play, and who struggles with breaking balls, you play a lot of games in your head."

When Richards takes the ball for his third outing of the spring on Wednesday, he will continue to throw the pitch that he feels could take him to an even higher level.

Throughout Richards career, he has relied mostly on his fastball and a slider, throwing the latter about 25 to 30 percent of the time. He's used his curve sparingly, about 3 to 6 percent of the time.

Now, though, it's a point of emphasis.

"I've always had it," he said. "It's just been a progression with my delivery to understand where I need to be to throw it well. You evolve as a pitcher as you go. You pick up little things."

Richards' slider comes in hard and breaks sharply down and away from right-handed hitters. If he can add a curveball, which is slower and breaks more straight down, he feels he can be even tougher. Most pitchers who rely on a curve have two versions, one intended to drop in for a called strike and another that breaks into the dirt, used to induce swings and misses.

"I feel comfortable enough with it now that I can throw it for strikes and put guys away with it too," Richards said. "If that's another weapon for me, that opens up a lot of different pitch sequences. I'd have more options out there."

A couple years ago, Richards tried to implement a changeup, but that didn't work. Not only could he not throw it as effectively as he wanted, but he felt it may have contributed to his elbow injury. He said the curve is more natural for him.

Richards is pitching Wednesday against the Dodgers, who are starting Clayton Kershaw. Obviously that would seem to indicate Richards is in line to start on opening day. Manager Mike Scioscia traditionally doesn't announce his opening-day starter until the end of spring training, usually after the schedule has already made it obvious.

Richards, who would be the natural choice for the assignment, said he's heard nothing.

“It’s an honor, but it’s not something that I think about,” he said. “When it’s your turn to pitch, you just prepare yourself to pitch. That’s it. Opening day is just one of 162 regular-season games.”

Also

The Angels exhibition game against the Tijuana Toros will start at noon, Arizona time, on Friday in Tempe Diablo Stadium. It will be open to the public, with no charge for admission. Shohei Ohtani is scheduled to start and pitch four innings for the Angels. ...

The Angels have another B game scheduled for Wednesday against the Colorado Rockies, at one of the back fields at the Rockies complex at Salt River Fields in Scottsdale. Nick Tropeano, Troy Scribner and Jesus Castillo are scheduled to pitch in that game for the Angels. ...

Chris Young (stained calf) was scheduled to take batting practice on the field Tuesday, the first time he would have done so since getting hurt on the second day of full squad workouts. Scioscia said Young still has time to get ready for opening day. The Angels can accelerate the at-bats he gets by having him hit in minor league games later in the month. ...

Reliever Dayan Diaz, who missed the start of camp because of visa issues, is still absent, with the Angels having no more information on when he might arrive, Scioscia said. Diaz, who is from Colombia, could have had a shot to break camp with the team, but that seems unlikely now. “We’re approaching a point where we’re not going to be able to give him enough innings or give him enough looks to make a decision on him, but we’re not there yet,” Scioscia said. Diaz, 29, has pitched 19 2/3 innings in the majors over the past two seasons. He has a career 2.41 ERA in the minors, with 9.1 strikeouts per nine innings, making him attractive to the Angels. They claimed him on waivers from the Astros last season.

Philadelphia Eagles tight end Brent Celek spent some time in the Angels dugout on Tuesday. Celek was a guest of Mike Trout, a noted Eagles fan...

Shohei Ohtani says his timing is improving, but he goes hitless in Angels’ loss to Diamondbacks

By Jeff Fletcher

THE GAME: The Angels gave up three runs in the third inning and lost 5-4 to the Arizona Diamondbacks on Tuesday at Salt River Fields. The Angels are 6-6 this spring.

PITCHING REPORT: Right-hander JC Ramirez gave up three runs, all on a David Peralta home run, in 3-1/3 innings. Ramirez retired the first six hitters of the game, three on strikeouts. Ramirez, who underwent stem-cell therapy to repair a damaged ulnar collateral ligament last year, said he feels his mechanics are better now. “Before, when the tear was there, I had to move my arm around to throw without pain,” he said. “Now it’s doing the same thing, same mechanics, same arm slot. I can repeat my

pitches, and get my sinker down. It's a huge thing for me." ... Right-hander Blake Parker pitched a scoreless inning, with a strikeout. ... Right-hander Keynan Middleton pitched a scoreless inning. He has not allowed a run in three innings this spring.

HITTING REPORT: Shohei Ohtani struck out twice, both on breaking balls, and walked. He is 1 for 9 with three walks and three strikeouts so far this spring. "I still feel like my timing is not fully there yet but I feel like it's getting better each time I go out there," Ohtani said through his interpreter. "At this pace I think I'll be fine by the season." Ohtani might play again against the Dodgers (and Clayton Kershaw) on Wednesday, but the Angels will have to see how he feels in the morning. He also needs to throw a bullpen session on Wednesday. ... Mike Trout went hitless in three at-bats, stretching his drought to start the spring to 0 for 10. ... Ian Kinsler doubled and walked. He's drawn three walks in 11 plate appearances so far this spring.

DEFENSE REPORT: Shortstop Andrelton Simmons made a diving catch of a line drive up the middle. ... Center fielder Jahmai Jones misplayed a catchable ball, allowing it to drop for a single.

UP NEXT: Angels (Garrett Richards) vs. Dodgers (Clayton Kershaw), noon PT, Tempe Diablo Stadium, Fox Sports West/KLAA (830 AM)

FROM THE LOS ANGELES TIMES

Angels' Ian Krol has found relief in relieving

By Jeff Miller

He was a reliever trapped inside a starter's regimen.

So, when the Oakland Athletics suggested to Ian Krol that he move to the bullpen, the left-hander needed no convincing.

"The whole starter program didn't work out too well for me," Krol said. "I don't plan my days out very well, just kind of 'Give me the ball and let's go,' you know?"

That was back in the minors, after a torn flexor tendon impeded Krol's progress as a starter. The shift to reliever resulted in an increase in the velocity — on his fastball and his path to the big leagues.

"It's worked out a lot better," Krol said. "My character on the mound definitely shows as more reliever than starter."

Over the last five seasons, he has appeared in 224 games for three teams. Krol, 26, signed a minor league deal with the Angels in February and was invited to spring training.

He isn't likely to be on the opening-day roster, the Angels figuring to go with Jose Alvarez as their lone left-hander in the bullpen. Last year, Alvarez made 64 of the 67 left-handed relief appearances for this team.

Their job is one of the stranger ones in baseball, a mix of an often light workload staged under typically heavy circumstances. Left-handed specialists normally face only a batter or two but do so when games are tight.

"You just don't try to make the situation too big," Krol said. "Don't let it get out of hand."

Even though he's facing a challenge in trying to make the roster, predicting how a baseball season will unfold is a slippery venture. And Krol is not unfamiliar with battling for whatever he can get.

"I've always been fighting for a spot," he said. "I'm not trying to beat out anybody. I'm not trying to have all this competition. I'm just trying to do what I can do and see how things work out."

Krol can opt out of his deal May 1 and also June 1 and become a free agent if he remains in the minors and is dissatisfied with his situation.

Mike Trout is pulling for Shohei Ohtani

He is generally recognized as the best player in baseball and, as such, **Mike Trout** often is the target of national attention when it falls upon the Angels.

As for the international eyes on this team, however, **Shohei Ohtani** is the one being poked, prodded and picked apart with each swing and pitch, practice or otherwise.

"It's going to be challenging for him," Trout said. "It's going to be a grind. It's something he's going to have to embrace. He's handling it great so far. All the guys in here [the clubhouse] are here to support him."

In his fourth game of the spring as a designated hitter, Ohtani was 0 for 2, both strikeouts, with a walk in the Angels' 5-4 loss to Arizona on Tuesday. He is one for nine with three walks.

"I still feel like my timing's not fully there yet," he said. "It's getting better each time I go out there. At this pace, I think I'll be fine by the season opener."

Ohtani has a bullpen session scheduled for Wednesday, but manager **Mike Scioscia** said he could bat later in the day when the Angels host the Dodgers.

Upon his arrival at camp, Ohtani did daily sessions with the media, not speaking only on the days before he pitched.

The Angels have since attempted to lessen the load on a 23-year-old adjusting to a new country and a new league while attempting to make baseball history as a pitcher and hitter — as a rookie.

He did not address reporters en masse after leaving the game Monday. Instead, the Angels had a team employee ask him media-submitted questions and then made the answers available.

"Even if he just practices he's being asked a lot of questions," Trout said. "He does a great job of blocking it all out when we're playing. He handles all that off-the-field stuff well."

Extra bases

Nick Tropeano will make his next start Wednesday morning in a "B" game in Scottsdale. ... Pitcher **Dayan Diaz**, claimed off waivers from Houston in September, still has not reported to camp because of apparent visa issues. A Colombian, Diaz, 29, appeared in 10 games with the Astros last season. ... Outfielder **Chris Young** (calf) is "getting close," Scioscia said. He took batting practice Tuesday.

Angels drop to .500 in spring training with 5-4 loss to Diamondbacks

By Jeff Miller

AT THE PLATE: Luis Valbuena had two hits, including a home run, his first of the spring. Unlike several of the others who also will make the Angels' opening-day roster, Valbuena has been playing regularly in the early part of the schedule. Kole Calhoun had a run-scoring double. Andrelton Simmons had a sacrifice fly. Chris Carter drove in a run with a ground out. Mike Trout is hitless in his first 10 at-bats.

ON THE MOUND: After retiring the first six batters, JC Ramirez surrendered a three-run home run to David Peralta in the third inning. He pitched 3 1/3 innings with four strikeouts. Rule 5 pick Luke Bard retired the two batters he faced. Relievers Blake Parker and Keynan Middleton each pitched a scoreless inning.

EXTRA BASES: Brent Celek, tight end for the Super Bowl-winning Philadelphia Eagles, spent the game in the Angels dugout. Trout is an Eagles fan. ... Garrett Richards will make his third start of the spring Wednesday against the Dodgers. ...

UP NEXT: Dodgers at noon Wednesday at Tempe Diablo Stadium. TV: FS West; Radio: 830.

FROM ANGELS.COM

Eck visits Angels camp to work with infield

Former star shortstop's message to Angels' defense: Do the little things well

By Jack Magruder

TEMPE, Ariz. -- As far as could be discerned, David Eckstein did not bring a rally monkey to Spring Training for his second year as a guest infield instructor for the Angels.

Everything else that gave Eckstein such a special place in team history, however, was front and center for players young and old to absorb.

That, of course, was the whole idea, even if many of the Angels' younger players were teenagers when the undersized, overachieving Eckstein was helping the Angels and the Cardinals to World Series championships.

"I think most of our guys still know who David Eckstein was, and what a terrific Major League shortstop he was, and how he had to learn how to do things very efficiently," Angels manager Mike Scioscia said. "They respect his experience. They respect the way he adapted to play a very important position. His words resonate with a lot of other players for sure."

At 5-foot-7, Eckstein was the starting shortstop and a key component in the Angels' rally-monkeying, boom-sticking roll to the 2002 World Series championship in his second season with the Angels, two years after being waived by the Red Sox. Eckstein reprised that role for St. Louis when it won the '06 World Series. That year, he was the MVP.

After stops with Arizona and San Diego, Eckstein stepped away from the game in order to help his wife Ashley start Her Universe, a fashion and apparel company that makes science-fiction clothing targeted for women and girls.

Most recently, Eckstein spent four days in Tempe with an eye toward helping the younger infielders in the Angels' system.

It was a natural fit for Eckstein, not only because of his Angels' connection but because he spent four years as a coach for Team USA's under-18 baseball team.

Eckstein played the majority of his 10 Major League seasons at shortstop, although he also spent considerable time at second with the D-backs and Padres in the final two years of his career. His resume is a how-to manual on doing the little things properly. He fielded his position well, put the ball in play and was an efficient base stealer/runner.

Eckstein was the most difficult player to strike out in the American League in 2004 and was in the top 10 in that category in nine of his 10 seasons. He was successful on 73 percent of his stolen-base attempts and was an aggregate plus-24 in career runs saved over the average shortstop.

"Eck, when he was on the field, he was always the smartest player on the field," Scioscia said. "He meticulously studied not only our system to understand it but the little nuances. As far as physical ability, he had more than I think a lot of people give him credit for. Had really good hands. Strong, tough out at the plate. Although his throwing arm was probably not in the range of some major league shortstops, he made it work and was very accurate with it. He was a terrific player."

Even the older players understand the value of having Eckstein to talk to, bounce ideas off or simply observe.

"With a guy like David Eckstein, [it's] what he brings every day," Angels second baseman Ian Kinsler said. "He loves baseball. He brings a lot of intensity to baseball. He's not a big guy...but he figured out a way to be a really, really good player. The energy that he brings and the knowledge that he has for the game. Positioning.

"Just the kind of nose-in-the-dirt type of mentality. He was always fighting. He never really gave an inch anywhere. Any time you have guys around like that, it is obviously beneficial."

Halos trying to balance Ohtani's arm, bat

Two-way star scheduled to throw bullpen session Wednesday, could also DH against Kershaw, Dodgers

By Jack Magruder

TEMPE, Ariz. -- Next up for Shohei Ohtani: Clayton Kershaw.

Well, maybe.

Ohtani is to throw a normal bullpen session Wednesday in preparation for his Friday start, but Angels manager Mike Scioscia did not rule out the possibility Ohtani would get some at-bats against the three-time National League Cy Young Award winner Kershaw when the teams play at Tempe Diablo Stadium.

"We hope to get him some at-bats," Scioscia said, "but, obviously, he has to pay attention to the pitching side of it, too. There are some things you have to factor in. It is not a simple equation. He's going through a lot."

Ohtani said he looks forward to seeing Kershaw whether he plays or not.

"If I am, then I'll be excited," Ohtani said through an interpreter. "He is one of the best pitchers. Not just him, I'm facing the best pitchers in the world."

Ohtani is 1-for-9 after going 0-for-2 with two strikeouts and a walk while hitting fifth as the DH in a 5-4 loss to Arizona at Salt River Fields on Tuesday.

"His swings are fine," Scioscia said. "It's just getting some timing. Seeing the ball. It is going to take some at-bats. He's very comfortable in the batter's box. Tracking pitches is step one in Spring Training. Now it's about seeing the ball, putting a swing on it. Sometimes that takes 15, 20 at-bats."

Ohtani is using a slightly different bat this spring, one with a little deeper cup at the top, but said he often changes bats and considers that no issue.

As far as seeing pitches he had never faced before, he said: "I try not to change my approach, even though it is the first time. After that, I try to make the adjustment."

Ohtani is to make his third pitching appearance in a split-squad game Friday against the Tijuana Toros of the Mexican League in Tempe. Jorge Cantu, Omar Quintanilla and Horacio Ramirez are among the former Major Leaguers listed on the Toros' roster. The Angels also play the Cubs in Mesa that day.

Ramirez remembers

This time, JC Ramirez had a real left fielder when he took the mound at Salt River Fields. When Ramirez pitched in a Spring Training game for Arizona in 2015, actor Will Ferrell played left field as part of his five-game, 10-position tour while shooting an HBO special for charity.

"I actually thought about that when we came here," Ramirez said. "It was funny."

Farrell also played for the Angels that day, replacing Mike Trout in center field in the third inning after a short drive to HoHokam Stadium in Mesa. The Angels later tweeted that they traded Farrell to the Cubs for a washing machine.

Ramirez ran his string of consecutive spring outs to 12 while cruising through his first two innings before running into trouble Tuesday. He struck out three of the six he faced before giving up a three-run, opposite-field homer to Arizona left fielder David Peralta with one out in the third inning. Daniel Descalso and Jeff Mathis singled to start the rally before Peralta hit a sinker that stayed up.

Ramirez said he might have chosen a different pitch in a regular-season situation, but wanted to work on his sinker.

"Spring Training, [I'm] still getting my location," he said. "I'm working on it, and I feel pretty good with what I had today."

Time getting short

Right-hander Dayan Diaz remains in limbo while attempting to work out visa issues to enter the country from his native Colombia, and he is running out of time to land a spot on the Major League roster out of Spring Training.

Diaz, 29, was acquired off waivers from Houston in September after making 10 appearances with the Astros last season. He gave up three homers and 13 runs in 13 innings, but also struck out 20 while walking only four.

"We're approaching a point where we are not going to be able to give him enough innings or get enough looks at him to make that kind of decision, but we are not quite there yet," Scioscia said.

Injury report

Chris Young ran on a treadmill, stretched and took batting practice during early work while recovering from a calf injury suffered early in camp. He appears close to playing in games, and Scioscia said Young still has enough time to be ready for the regular season.

Up next

Right-hander Garrett Richards is slated to make his third spring start when he opposes Kershaw at

Tempe Diablo Stadium on Wednesday. Richards has given up three hits and one run while striking out five in his first five innings. First pitch is set for 12:10 p.m. PT, and the game will be broadcast live on MLB.TV.

The Angels also will play a "B" game Wednesday, with right-hander Nick Tropeano scheduled to start against Colorado at Salt River Fields. Troy Scribner and Jesus Castillo also are scheduled to pitch for the Angels.

GMs discuss the future of two-way players

Executives break down Angels' utilization of Ohtani

By Richard Justice MLB.com

PHOENIX -- Shohei Ohtani just may be that once-a-century player so unique that it's silly to compare him to anyone else. So before we decide he's about to usher baseball into a bright and shiny new era in which two-way players are nearly commonplace, this might a good time for a long, slow, therapeutic deep breath.

Here's the thing that needs to be made clear: Baseball people want Ohtani to succeed. They want it because it would be good for the game, since baseball hasn't had anything close to a full-time two-way player in 99 years. That would be 1919, when Babe Ruth logged 543 plate appearances and 133 1/3 innings for the Red Sox.

And at a time when bullpens are more stressed than ever, when more teams are carrying seven and eight relievers and making do with two or three bench players, baseball people want it because the sport seems to be approaching a critical mass when two-way players are almost a necessity.

Here it's important to make a distinction between what Ohtani is attempting to do with the Angels and what most baseball executives see as more reasonable possibilities for two-way players.

The Halos hope they have a truly historic figure in Ohtani, a player so gifted that he may be a full-time two-way player -- say, starting 25 games on the mound and another 100 or so as a designated hitter or position player. Such a feat would be groundbreaking.

"I don't think anyone has come around with this talent and this skill set -- and I have no sense in how they're going to use him -- but it will tell us a lot about whether or not it's possible," Dodgers general manager Farhan Zaidi said.

Two examples from the 2017 Draft offer a glimpse into the thinking of teams. When the Reds used the second pick on high school phenom Hunter Greene, they had a decision to make. Virtually every scout believed he could be either a pitcher or a shortstop, if not both.

In the end, though, Cincinnati did not think it would be fair to ask him to do that, so -- at least for now -- Greene is an 18-year-old pitcher on course for the Majors.

The Rays took a different approach with Louisville's Brendan McKay, who was taken two picks after Greene. MLB Pipeline said he was the best two-way prospect since Dave Winfield, and Tampa Bay decided to give it a go. In McKay's first Minor League season, he recorded a .725 on-base plus slugging percentage in 149 plate appearances and a 1.80 ERA in six starts on the mound.

The Rays have no idea if McKay can continue to do both, but like the Angels with Ohtani, they're going to take the experiment as far as they can. Skeptics abound.

"Skill development in baseball is really, really difficult," Indians president Chris Antonetti said. "There are so few guys in baseball capable of developing on both paths, especially when you talk about a starting pitcher and all the things you need to do to be successful, and then to have enough reps as an offensive player to excel in both, that's a really challenging thing to do."

Versatility needed

Yet as teams look at ways to save roster spots, they've looked for opportunities to create a sort of super-utility player. Think Ben Zobrist with a fastball.

"It's probably going to be a guy on the bench who can relieve or go pinch hit," D-backs general manager Mike Hazen said. "Or throw an inning and then go play left field. You know, come into a game, strike out a lefty, play the outfield, steal a base."

Last season, the Dodgers wanted to reintroduce outfielder Brett Eibner to pitching, which he'd done at the University of Arkansas. That experiment never got off the ground after Eibner injured his right elbow and underwent Tommy John surgery. But when he returns later this season, he'll try again.

"I think it is realistic, but there's probably going to be some trial and error unfortunately," Zaidi said.

The A's toyed with such a possibility as far back as 1997 when they drafted Tim Hudson after he pitched and hit 18 home runs his junior season at Auburn. In the end, they couldn't find enough hours in the day to allow Hudson to hone both crafts. He went on to pitch 17 seasons and win 222 games.

Giants ace Madison Bumgarner has long been considered a candidate to occasionally DH. Astros infielder J.D. Davis was a closer at Cal State-Fullerton and pitched twice in blowout losses last season.

The Padres converted catcher Christian Bethancourt into a short-inning reliever in 2016, and he eventually got into six big league games without having much success (10.13 ERA).

And surely the Yankees have wondered if center fielder Aaron Hicks could do both after he threw out a runner at home plate with a throw clocked at 97 mph -- a Statcast™ record at the time.

For this kind of role, Brooks Kieschnick could be the model. In his final two seasons with the Brewers (2003-04), he had 144 plate appearances and 74 pitching appearances.

"I would love to have the possibility of doing that, because we are, with expanding bullpens and all, we're really cramped as far as roster space goes," A's general manager David Forst said. "You could get

to a point where it's so important for your roster that you find a guy to do it regardless of how much he excels at both things."

Anything is possible

No executive interviewed would use the word "impossible" to describe the possibility of two-way players becoming more commonplace. To a man, they're excited about the possibility. On the other hand, the skill set required to pull it off would be extraordinary even at a time when players are bigger, faster, stronger and more talented than ever.

"There would be great utility to the team," Antonetti said. "If you can get a player with one roster spot that's capable of contributing on the mound and in the batter's box, that's a really valuable guy."

"I think generally teams are open to anything that will give them a competitive advantage. To the extent teams find their way to maximize their 25-man roster spots, teams will aggressively pursue it."

While Ruth is a handy reference point for plenty of Ohtani stories, he only had 300-plus plate appearances and 15-plus starts twice (in 1918 and '19). When he joined the Yankees in '20, someone wisely thought he had a nice future as a slugger, and that was that.

In the years since, some players have flamed out at one thing and tried to do the other. But true two-way players have mostly been a topic of late-night conversation among scouts.

Hundreds of high school and college players pitch and hit, and in every draft room, scouts argue about which skill will allow the player to be most successful in professional baseball.

"I think it's really hard to be successful in the Major Leagues as either a pitcher or a hitter," Antonetti said. "I think the pool of players that are capable of being successful as both is really, really small."

For the sake of argument, let's consider the upside of having such a player.

"I would love it," Hazen said. "I think you would put managers in a position of more freedom to be creative. Roster management is such a big deal. Giving them more roster flexibility, the way we try to manage our pitching workloads, I'd love to see it."

Hazen does not think a shortstop, catcher or outfielder would be able to do it because of the number of throws.

"Maybe a first baseman that doesn't have to throw a lot, or obviously a DH," he said.

Still, as forward thinking and as analytically driven as the D-backs are, Hazen is more intrigued than convinced.

"We're not there yet," he said. "I also think we need to think through how we would do it. We don't want to set the player up for failure. I don't know if we're there as an organization yet. I don't know exactly how we'd execute it. I'd hate to take a kid and say, 'Hey, you're a guinea pig.'"

For the Dodgers and Zaidi, it's not a question of whether there are college players talented enough to both hit and pitch in the Major Leagues. It's figuring out a workload that would allow them to practice both, to keep each skill honed.

In the end, that's the thing that gives everyone in baseball pause, and it's what the Angels are attempting to work through with Ohtani. If it's a success, that would be a great start.

"I think teams are going to err on the side of caution," Zaidi said. "But it's definitely a learning thing for the whole industry. Until we have some of those seasons on the board and see how guys recover and bounce back, not just in that season but in subsequent seasons, there'll still be some learning to do."

Or as Forst said, "I think we'll know better in about six months, won't we?"

10 spring performances to get excited about

Harvey, Kemp among those off to strong starts in camp

By Richard Justice

Spring Training isn't make or break for a lot of players. For some, spring performances are neither revealing nor critical. So Justin Verlander and Max Scherzer are not eligible for this list. Neither is Joey Votto, Kris Bryant nor Francisco Lindor.

This one is for the players who needed a good spring, either for their own confidence or to make a team. In these cases, every at-bat really does count.

This is for some very young players, some older players and some who simply need to reprove themselves. So here goes with a few guys who should feel good about the way this spring has begun:

1. Matt Harvey, RHP, Mets (2 starts, 5 IP, 1 ER, 3 K)

Some wondered if Harvey would even get this far. After the past couple of years, no one knew what he was still capable of. At this point, the right-hander has given the Mets every reason for optimism. Harvey could be the difference between the Mets making and missing the playoffs. Or he could be dealt at the Trade Deadline.

2. Matt Kemp, OF, Dodgers (.313 BA, 3 HR, 1.228 OPS, 16 AB)

Wait, what? Wasn't Kemp's return a bookkeeping part of a complicated salary-dump trade with the Braves? Well, maybe not. He singled and homered in his first two spring at-bats, has been getting warm ovations and seems to be handily winning the Dodgers' left-field job.

3. Ronald Acuna Jr., OF, Braves (.435 BA, 1 HR, 2 SB, 1.084 OPS, 23 AB)

It's one thing to read the scouting reports that predict a 20-year-old is going to lead the Braves' rebirth. It's another thing for every fan, teammate and coach to actually see it. This spring, they've seen it. Acuna may start the season in the Minors, but he's unlikely to be there long.

4. Miguel Andujar, 3B, Yankees (.421 BA, 4 HR, 2 2B, 1.579 OPS, 19 AB)

Brandon Drury seemed penciled in to start at third base on Opening Day while Andujar polished his game at Triple-A. But if Andujar keeps banging balls off the wall and slapping them into gaps, general manager Brian Cashman will have the kind of decision everyone in his position would love to have.

5. Tanner Roark, RHP, Nationals (3 starts, 8 IP, 0 ER, 1 BB, 8 K, 0.50 WHIP)

Are we sure the Nationals need another starting pitcher? If this is a statement spring for Roark, he's making it emphatically. With Roark slotted into the fourth spot, Washington could have the National League's best rotation without another addition.

6. Blake Swihart, C/DH/1B/OF, Red Sox (.429 BA, 5 2B, 1 HR, 1 SB, 1.310 OPS, 21 AB)

Swihart might be the most pleasant surprise of the entire spring and appears to be on his way to forcing his way onto Boston's Opening Day roster. Manager Alex Cora is moving Swihart all around the field to see if he can be a super-utility player. He has answered every challenge.

7. Jason Kipnis, 2B, Indians (.571 BA, 5 HR, 2.214 OPS, 14 AB)

Kipnis apparently didn't enjoy hearing his name floated around as a trade candidate. Or maybe it's just that he is a really good player, healthy again and prepared to show how much game he still has. Kipnis is the kind of player who can elevate a championship-caliber team to an even higher level.

8. Ty Blach, LHP, Giants (3 starts, 8 1/3 IP, 1 ER, 0 BB, 9 K, 0.96 WHIP)

Blach experienced some of the usual growing pains in his first full Major League season. That is, he was really good in some games and struggled in others. But the Giants never stopped believing Blach had a chance to be a contributor on a postseason team. This spring, he is proving them correct.

9. Ryan McMahon, 1B, Rockies (.400 BA, 3 2B, 1 HR, 1.063 OPS, 25 AB)

Maybe the Rockies still could use another corner outfielder, but McMahon is making their decision to insert the 23-year-old former second-round Draft pick onto the depth chart at first base look smart. This is exactly the guy who hit .355 in 119 games at Double-A and Triple-A last season.

10. Garrett Richards, RHP, Angels (2 starts, 5 IP, 1 ER, 2 BB, 5 K, 1.00 WHIP)

If Richards makes 30 starts, the Angels will be back in the postseason. Other players figure into this prediction as well, but none of these are as important as the ace of the staff, the guy who has made just two starts the past two seasons combined. So far, so good.

FROM THE ATHLETIC**Notes from Angels camp: Ohtani works on his timing, Johnson finds a good read**

By Pedro Moura

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — In one wedge of Phoenix on Tuesday morning, the Dodgers' Kenta Maeda threw a rare bullpen session at Camelback Ranch without any Japanese media attention. The reason was clear. Seven miles up the freeway, scores of foreign reporters waited at the Seattle Mariners' spring training complex for new signing Ichiro to show.

On the metropolis' eastern end, in Mesa, Yu Darvish debuted as a Chicago Cub, facing, of course, his former team, the Dodgers. He threw two up-and-down innings and professed himself pleased with his velocity and uncertain if he tipped his pitches during the World Series. Nine miles north of there, at Salt River Fields, the Angels' Shohei Ohtani took his 10th, 11th and 12th plate appearances of Cactus League play. He was hitless.

It was an unusual day for the four biggest Japanese stars of the Cactus League.

Another awaits Ohtani on Wednesday, when he will throw a bullpen session to prepare for a Friday 'B' game start, and, potentially, hit for the third consecutive day. If he is cleared to bat once more, he will oppose Dodgers ace Clayton Kershaw, who will face the Angels on Wednesday at Tempe Diablo Stadium.

On Tuesday, Ohtani fell twice for Arizona right-hander Zack Godley's sharp curveball, striking out in his first two opportunities. He drew a walk in his third, his third walk of the spring against only one hit. He has not appeared overmatched, but he has not dominated.

"The swings are fine," Angels manager Mike Scioscia said. "It's just, getting some timing, seeing the ball, and that's going to take some at-bats."

Scioscia suggested it would require 15-20 trips, or an additional game or two, for him to feel comfortable.

"I still feel like my timing is not fully there yet, but I feel like it's getting better each time I go out there," Ohtani said through interpreter Ippei Mizuhara. "At this pace, I think I'll be fine by the season."

Unlike at the start of this spring, Ohtani is now speaking to reporters on select occasions. An Angels spokesperson said that when Ohtani is scheduled to hit on consecutive days during Cactus League play, he will often not conduct a press conference after the first game. Rather, he will answer select questions from a team employee. The club will record his answers and distribute them to the press.

In that team-handled session on Monday at Goodyear Ballpark, Ohtani expressed excitement about his longtime idol Ichiro's impending arrival.

“Hopefully, I’ll be on the roster and be able to play against him,” Ohtani said. “That would make me happy.”

Johnson the reader

At the start of this year, new Angels reliever Jim Johnson resolved to read regularly. Since then, he has learned he prefers nonfiction more than fiction, but finds a mix of both is best. So, he has struck up a pattern of rotating between one of each and an audiobook, all at once.

Acquired from Atlanta in November in a trade that also brought the Angels international pool money to lure in Ohtani, Johnson is likely to pitch in high-leverage situations this season.

His plan is use books as diversions during the hundreds of hours of travel the Angels will undertake this season. He does not yet know if he’ll be able to read on an airborne airplane. That’s where the audiobooks might offer value.

Johnson has taken to reading Lee Child’s Jack Reacher series this spring, sometimes even while sitting at his Diablo Stadium locker. While his teammates browse their phones or play cards with each other, he leans back and focuses in on the printed word.

He loved “Killing Floor,” Child’s first of the set, and was lukewarm on “Die Trying,” the next.

But his favorite read of late was “How to Catch a Russian Spy” by Naveed Jamali and Ellis Henican, a nonfiction work about a man who worked for the American government without formal training. The Washington Post described it as “an entertaining and breezy read, with little to overthink.”

Johnson enjoyed it so much he lent it to fellow reliever Blake Parker. But a bullpen book club, Johnson said, is “not going to happen.” He is 34, with 12 seasons of big-league experience earned over six stints with five teams, and by now he knows that not everyone around him will be interested.

FROM FANGRAPHS

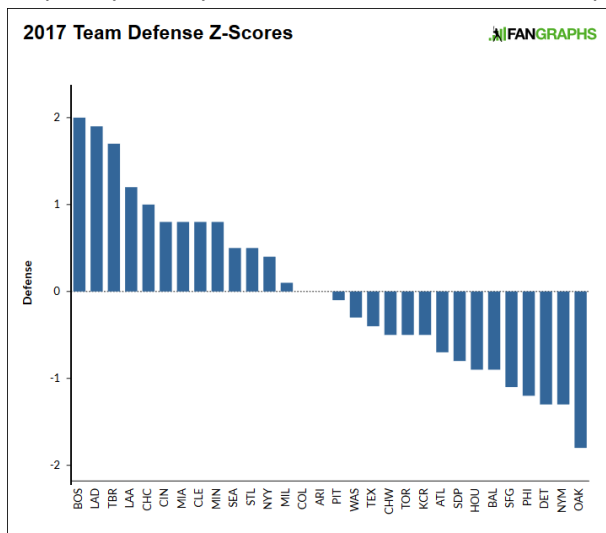
The Angels Appear to Have Baseball’s Best Defense

By Jeff Sullivan

It’s time to say what I feel like I say every year. The overall team projections are right there, linked up top. You know where they are and you know what to do with them. We’ve talked about them a lot, already, even though the ZiPS projection system was only recently included. We here at FanGraphs are projections dorks. Estimated future baseball is the next-best thing to actual current baseball. And projections offer some relief to panicking over ugly spring-training results.

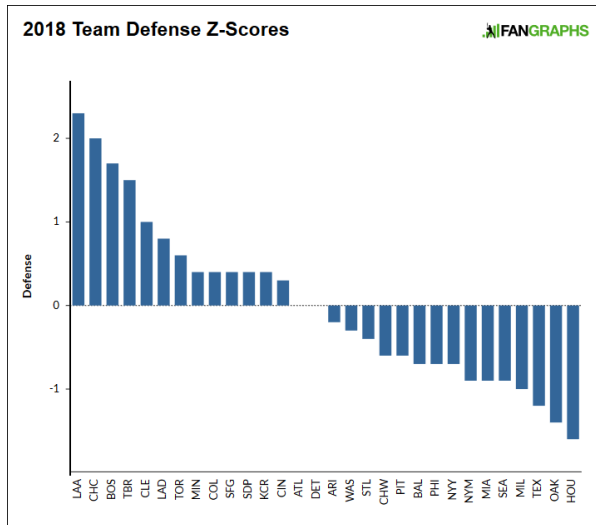
Mostly, what people care about are wins and losses. That’s obvious and self-explanatory, given that, what’s more fun than winning? But while it’s easy to look at the overall projections, less attention is given to projected components, because the data is harder to track down and see all together. We know the Astros are projected to finish with baseball’s best record. That’s because they’re probably baseball’s best team. They just won the World Series. Okay. But what if you want to know who’s projected to have the best defense? That information is provided. It just doesn’t have its own standings page. It has this blog post instead.

Before looking forward, let’s take a quick look back. Projected defense is pretty heavily regressed. What I’ve done, then, is convert all defensive numbers into z-scores, showing the number of standard deviations above or below the mean. For this first plot, I want to revisit 2017’s team defensive performances. All this is is a blend of Defensive Runs Saved (DRS) and Ultimate Zone Rating (UZR), with pitchers excluded since we don’t have pitcher defensive forecasts. I doubt the following plot will surprise you very much. This is a season that’s happened!



DRS does track pitcher defense, but I’ve left it out, because later on I’m going to compare 2017 data to projected 2018 data. I want to keep things consistent. So, anyway, while I understand that defensive metrics aren’t perfect, the numbers suggest that, last year, the Red Sox might’ve had baseball’s best defense. They were 2.0 standard deviations better than average, here, just edging out the Dodgers and the Rays. A’s fans know why their team brought up the rear. Mets fans know why their team brought up the rear in its own league. We don’t need to look at this any longer. It’s over. The Astros won.

This is what’s more relevant. Here now are 2018 team projections, based on Steamer and ZiPS. Both systems have their own ways of estimating defensive true talent, and even if you don’t love modern defensive metrics, projections regress the numbers appropriately. Again, I converted the team projections into z-scores, so that it’s easy to compare between 2017 and 2018. That comes later. Here, another plot similar to the one above.

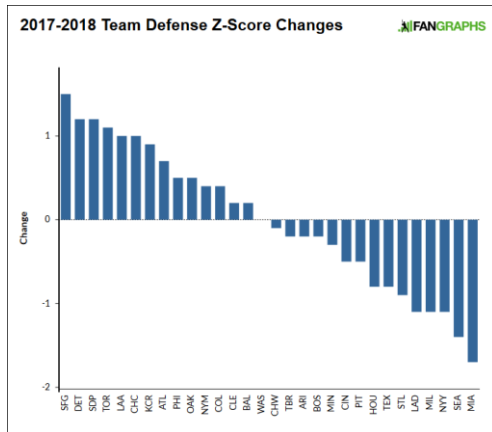


As I write this, the Angels are projected to have baseball's best defense, at +2.3 standard deviations. That's no slight against the Cubs; the Cubs lead the National League, and they're close enough to the Angels that there's room to argue for either. But, projected first place is projected first place, and to understand this, you have to remember what happened much earlier in the offseason. While Shohei Ohtani was the winter's most meaningful splash, the Angels also traded for Ian Kinsler, and they signed Zack Cozart. Those two will play on either side of Andrelton Simmons. While first base might be a defensive adventure, the Angels look great around the rest of the infield, and the outfield has no problems, even if Mike Trout isn't what he was when he was younger. You could say the Angels' season will come down to whether enough of the pitchers stay healthy. But even if they have to give innings to guys who might not deserve them as much, the defense should come to their aid. The Angels have created something special.

Many of these teams are around where you'd think. The Cubs have had some great defenses for years, and maybe in 2018, Kyle Schwarber will find agility he didn't used to possess. I'm personally skeptical that weight loss can make a professional athlete significantly better in the outfield, but it's not like it could hurt. And Schwarber won't define the Cubs' defense, anyway. There are several other players who are better than average at their positions. To say nothing of the positioning of the players themselves, within team-specific schemes. That's still a weak spot when it comes to measuring team performance. We use what we have.

Based on that plot, the Astros are the only team keeping the A's out of the defensive basement. Now, with Matt Chapman at third base, the A's should play stronger in the field, but you could say they have plenty to prove. As for why the Astros are where they are, they don't have anyone dreadful. They just also don't have anyone terrific. Mostly, they have their position players because they're awesome at hitting. No other team's lineup is even close to the Astros, offensively. This is just a relative weakness, which the Astros will accept. It's worth noting that arguably their best defensive player is Dallas Keuchel, who is excluded from these measurements.

At last, here’s a plot of the projected year-to-year changes. This is all expressed in z-scores. A positive change reflects an improvement, while a negative change reflects a decline.



Although the Angels are projected to have baseball’s best defense, the Giants are projected to have baseball’s most improved defense, which is maybe more important. While the Giants aren’t young, they’re still positioned to put the 2017 catastrophe behind them, and part of that is just being rid of Denard Span in center field. The Tigers and Padres are also improved, although neither looks likely to contend in 2018. So, maybe your eye is drawn to the Blue Jays, who have quietly lined themselves up for a wild-card spot. The Angels are there in fifth, mostly, again, because of Kinsler and Cozart.

At the other end, it’s only fitting to see the Marlins getting worse, because, you know, they’ve decided to suck. By the second half of the season, there could be some interesting young players playing just about every day, but the 2018 season as a whole is going to be a bad one, so, why not make it bad in several different areas? Outside of the Marlins, the Mariners have the next-biggest projected decline, which just goes to show it’s usually not a great idea to let Jarrod Dyson walk. In fairness, while Dee Gordon has no track record playing center field, he’s already reportedly looking terrific. You see the Yankees next to the Mariners, but like with the Astros, the Yankees probably won’t fret too much about the defense as long as the lineup is going bananas.

Just how reliable all this is, I don’t really know. The shifting of the modern era makes defensive measurements far more complicated. But at the end of the day, you want to bet on talent, and the numbers can identify talent. The Angels have a whole lot of 2018 talent on the defensive side of things. It doesn’t exactly make them favorites to knock the Astros out of first, but consider it a potential key to the team’s plan for success. A good defense helps everybody, and the Angels might’ve built something extreme. That team is a lot more than Ohtani and Trout.

FROM BLEACHER REPORT

Predicting MLB’s Top 2018 Rookie of the Year Candidates at Each Position**

By Zachary D. Rymer

After a 2017 season in which Aaron Judge and Cody Bellinger hit home runs in record-sized bunches, all Rookie of the Year candidates for 2018 have a hard act to follow.

Nonetheless, the top would-be contenders are worth knowing.

For both the American League and the National League, we're going to go through and name the top Rookie of the Year candidates at each position going into 2018. These are the guys who not only have talent—their MLB.com ranks will serve as quick-and-dirty guidelines—but who are also ready for Major League Baseball and have shots at significant playing time.

Let's get to it.

Pitcher: Shohei Ohtani and Jack Flaherty

American League: Shohei Ohtani, Los Angeles Angels

MLB.com: No. 1 Overall, No. 1 Pitcher

Whether it's right to call Shohei Ohtani, a 23-year-old veteran of five Nippon Professional Baseball seasons, either a prospect or a rookie is debatable. But technically, he's both.

And realistically, his combination of talents make him the most exciting prospect to come along since...well, maybe ever. He can throw 100 mph and also features a nasty splitter and slider. He can hit the ball 500 feet. He's even a pretty fast runner.

Because Ohtani's pitching is ahead of his hitting, it's likely to be his arm that spearheads his Rookie of the Year pursuit. His bat will help, though, and that could turn the competition into a rout.

MLB's Team-by-Team Spring Training Prospect Report**

By Jacob Shafer

Spring training is about a lot of things. For veterans, it's a time to stretch muscles, hone swings and re-discover release points.

For prospects, the exhibition slate is an opportunity to showcase skills and possibly win an MLB job.

With that in mind, let's take stock of how all 30 teams' top prospects are faring. For our purposes, we'll only consider prospects who got a taste of big league camp. Also, we'll pare the conversation down to each squad's top 10 prospects, per MLB.com.

Los Angeles Angels

Top Prospects in MLB Camp

1. RHP/DH Shohei Ohtani (9 AB, 1 H, 3 SO; 1.1 IP, 1 ER, 1 BB, 2 SO)

4. OF Jahmai Jones (16 AB, 2 H, 1 3B)
7. RHP Jamie Barria (3.2 IP, 3 ER, 1 BB, 5 SO)
9. 1B Matt Thaiss (20 AB, 6 H, 2 2B, 2 HR, 8 SO)
10. OF Michael Hermsillo (18 AB, 2 H, 2 2B, 3 SO)

Notes

Shohei Ohtani came into spring with the Los Angeles Angels trailing Ruthian expectations. Literally. Can the 23-year-old, two-way Japanese star translate his hitting and pitching tools stateside? "I don't think anyone has come around with this talent and this skill set—and I have no sense in how they're going to use him—but it will tell us a lot about whether or not it's possible," Los Angeles Dodgers general manager Farhan Zaidi said, per MLB.com's Richard Justice.

Jahmai Jones climbed to High-A in 2017 where he hit .302 and got a spring training invite. He's obviously a good distance from cracking the Halos roster, but the 20-year-old is a riser to keep an eye on.

***Articles cut to include only Angels-related material

FROM WDRB.COM

BOZICH | Louisville players, Jo Adell dominate Baseball America Prospect Handbook

By Rick Bozich

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (WDRB) – Nearly every story will be a college basketball story until further notice. But before John Lewis and I depart for St. Louis and the Southeastern Conference basketball tournament this week, there is news to share from the Baseball America Prospect Handbook.

According to my unofficial count, at least 15 players with local connections were ranked among the Top 30 prospects within the 30 major-league franchises.

The performance was led by Dan McDonnell's consistently powerful University of Louisville program, which placed nine former players in the book. Kentucky has four, Indiana one and Ballard High School one.

Here's the list, with several sentences from the Baseball America talent evaluators. If you want to purchase the book, it's available from Amazon for \$22.83.

LOUISVILLE

Drew Ellis, 3B; No. 9 prospect, Arizona Diamondbacks: “Ellis’ pro debut at short-season Hillsboro started well, but he tailed off as he wore down following a long college season ... Ellis struggled with wood bats in college summer leagues and did so again in his pro debut. He will seek a strong year from start to finish in 2018, perhaps at high Class A Visalia.”

Zack Burdi, RP; No. 11 prospect, Chicago White Sox: “Burdi’s stuff is that of a long-time closer, but he’s been used just once in his pro career in back-to-back games, and he got shellacked in the second outing. There’s also a chance the White Sox could utilize him as a ‘multi-inning’ relief ace. Burdi is rehabbing from (Tommy John elbow) surgery and could return late in 2018.”

Lincoln Henzman, RP; No. 19 prospect, Chicago White Sox: “Henzman starts his arsenal with a heavy low-to-mid 90s fastball and couples it with an average slider with varying bite in the mid-80s. His slider has flashed plus at its best. He’s also got a split-type change-up as his third pitch with average potential.”

Kyle Funkhouser, RP; No. 11 prospect, Detroit Tigers: “Funkhouser’s control is much better than it was late in his college career, and he shows average command when he’s really locked in. He should head back to (high Class A) Lakeland, but a midseason promotion could be in the offing if he performs as he has so far.”

Will Smith, C; No. 9 prospect, Los Angeles Dodgers: “He is an above-average receiver with soft hands that allows him to handle 100-mph arms, and he consistently pops times of sub-1.95 seconds on throws to second base because of a lightning quick transfer ... The quality of Smith’s defense can get him to the majors as a back-up, while improved contact skills could make him an everyday option.” (Smith is also a product of Kentucky Country Day High School.)

Corey Ray, OF; No. 10 prospect, Milwaukee Brewers: “The Brewers sent Ray to the Arizona Fall League with the hope of salvaging something from 2017, but he struggled badly there, too. He might have to repeat the Carolina League to re-establish his plate discipline and hitting setup.”

Nick Solak, 2B; No. 12 prospect, New York Yankees: “Solak solidified his reputation as one of the polished hitters in the system. He brings a short, quick line-drive stroke designed to spray line drives to all fields.” (Note: Solak was traded to Tampa Bay after the book was published.)

Nick Burdi, RP; No. 25 prospect, Pittsburgh Pirates: “Burdi will begin the season on the disabled list (while recovering from elbow surgery) and likely won’t be available until the second half. However, if he can return to form, the Pirates hope he can become a go-to high-leverage reliever.”

Brendan McKay, 1B-P; No. 3 prospect, Tampa Bay Rays: “The Rays will allow McKay to play both ways until the dual responsibility becomes too much. McKay is determined to make the most of the rare opportunity to play both ways, and is supremely confident that he’ll succeed. He will likely open 2018 at low Class A Bowling Green (Ky.), but could move quickly once he starts building a foundation in pro ball.”

KENTUCKY

A.J. Reed, 1B; No. 24 prospect, Houston Astros: “It’s hard to see Reed pushing aside (big leaguer) Yuli Gurriel, and Collin Moran has passed him as a back-up plan. He might need a change of scenery. Slugging first basemen/DH don’t land much in trade unless they’ve produced in the big leagues, so for now he’s headed back to Triple A.”

Riley Mahan, 2B; No. 18 prospect, Miami Marlins: “Though his swing most often results in line drives, there is some untapped power in his frame that should continue to develop as he matures physically ... He has a chance to move up the Marlins’ system relatively quickly, due mostly to his pedigree as an advanced college bat.”

Evan White, 1B; No. 2 prospect, San Francisco Giants: “White projects as a high-average hitter with 15-20 home run power and Gold Glove defense at first base. He’ll get his first taste of full season ball in 2018.”

Kyle Cody, RP; No. 7 prospect, Texas Rangers: “Cody has the stuff to become a No. 3 or No. 4 starter. He’ll likely return to high Class A Down East to begin 2018, but he should be in the upper levels soon and be ready to help the major league club in 2019.”

INDIANA

Sam Travis, 1B; No. 7 prospect, Boston Red Sox: “The 2018 season may be pivotal in shaping Travis’ future. If he can make swing adjustments to turn raw strength into in game power, he could carve out a big-league role. But a return to Pawtucket is likely until he proves he has the power to be a first baseman.”

BALLARD HIGH SCHOOL

Jo Adell, OF, No. 2 prospect, Los Angeles Angels: “The dynamic Adell has the ability, makeup and intangibles to grow into an all-star caliber outfielder. The degree to which he translates his physical skills and attributes into baseball-specific skills will determine whether he becomes a superstar.”

FROM MiLB.COM

Farm System Rankings: Pitchers (10-1)

Wright, Soroka keep Braves on top; Padres gain momentum

By Kelsie Heneghan

With Spring Training underway and the 2018 season almost upon us, MiLB.com will look at the state of all 30 farm systems over the next couple weeks and rank them, according to certain changing criterion with each edition. After looking at position player prospects (30-21, 20-11, 10-1), this edition focuses on

pitching prospects and considers the quality and quantity of top talent in each system in its current state. Here are the rankings, 10-1:

10. Houston Astros

It's set to be an exciting year for the reigning World Series champions, but part of that excitement will have to wait 50 games. Forrest Whitley, MLB.com's No. 9 overall prospect who reached Double-A at 19 last year, has to put his much-anticipated third season on hold after violating the Minor League drug program. Filling in for the Astros' top prospect are right-handers J.B. Bukauskas and Jorge Alcala, who both sport well-above average fastballs, as well as Cionel Perez, who advanced to Double-A in his pro debut last summer. Corbin Martin, Hector Perez and Jairo Solis provide depth from the lower levels. David Paulino is set to shake off suspension and elbow surgery to return to Houston, while Rogelio Armenteros could be first in line if there's an opening in the Astros' stacked rotation.

9. Los Angeles Angels

The Angels went from zero Top-100 prospects since trading Sean Newcomb to the Braves in 2015 to having the No. 1 overall prospect in two-way player Shohei Ohtani. He's got an 80-grade fastball on the 20-80 scale along with two other above-average pitches in a slider and splitter. Since Ohtani likely will never throw a pitch in the Minors until a potential rehab appearance, let's focus on the top arms that are still in the pipeline. Los Angeles is high on Chris Rodriguez and his four-pitch mix, although his numbers in the Pioneer and Midwest leagues did not reflect that last season. Left-hander Jose Suarez and righty Jose Soriano did well at those levels, while Jaime Barria advanced to Triple-A. Jesus Castillo was able to settle in with the Angels after starting his career with the D-backs and Cubs. Castillo and Barria should join Ohtani in Anaheim at some point this season and 2017 second-round pick Griffin Canning will make his pro debut this year.

Review farm system rankings: Pitchers 30-21 | 20-11

8. Los Angeles Dodgers

If things keep going the way they're progressing, the Dodgers could have some exciting rotation options next season; first, they're primed for a taste of the Majors in September. Each of the system's top-five pitching prospects saw time with Class A Advanced Rancho Cucamonga last year, led by Walker Buehler. MLB.com's No. 12 overall prospect utilized his well-above average fastball and plus curveball to advance from the California League to the National League, mostly as a starter. Mitchell White battled past a broken toe to compete at Double-A, where he was joined by Dennis Santana and Yadier Alvarez, who made it to the Texas League in his first full season. Rounding out the group, Dustin May was stingy in a limited Cal League stint at the end of the summer.

7. St. Louis Cardinals

Cardinals, assemble. After a suspension delayed his 2016 season until the end of May and Tommy John surgery erased his entire 2017 campaign, Alex Reyes is ready to return to the mound. Before the

surgery, the No. 17 overall prospect was showcasing his 75-grade fastball in the Majors, where he posted in 1.57 ERA over 46 innings between the rotation and the bullpen. If he gets off to a strong start with Triple-A Memphis, he'll return to Busch Stadium sooner rather than later. Joining him could be Jack Flaherty, who earned trips to the All-Star Futures Game and The Show; Dakota Hudson, who advanced to the Pacific Coast League in his first full season; and Ryan Helsley, whose cutter and four-pitch arsenal also earned him time with the Redbirds last year. Down the depth chart, Jordan Hicks and Junior Fernandez showcased 70-grade fastballs in the Florida State League, while Austin Gomber overcame a tough start to the season to post dominant numbers at Double-A.

6. Tampa Bay Rays

There's no doubt the Rays have a promising future on the mound, with two of the Minors' most exciting names in Brent Honeywell and Brendan McKay. Honeywell, MLB.com's No. 18 overall prospect known for his screwball, continued fooling hitters in Double-A and Triple-A last year, tying for fourth in the Minor Leagues with 172 strikeouts over 136 2/3 innings. And of those top five hurlers, no one had fewer walks than Honeywell's 35. While the 22-year-old never got "the call," it felt imminent. But Honeywell will miss all of 2018 after undergoing Tommy John surgery last month. Still, his ceiling boosts this system into the top 10 for pitching, especially when you add this next young phenom. Drafted fourth overall last June, Brendan McKay has lived up to lofty expectations, especially on the mound. The two-way player notched a 1.80 ERA with 21 punchouts and five walks over 20 innings for Class A Short Season Hudson Valley. Along with those two potential big league aces, the Rays have Austin Franklin, who will compete with McKay as they climb the ladder together, and Anthony Banda, a near-Major League-ready arm who came over in the three-way trade with the Yankees. And last year, the Triple-A Durham rotation -- featuring Honeywell, Ryan Yarbrough, Jake Faria, Yonny Chirinos, Blake Snell and Michael Roth -- set the single-season Minor League strikeout record with 1,421.

5. Philadelphia Phillies

The best pitchers in the Phillies system are in the heart of the Minors, led by Sixto Sanchez and Adonis Medina. Ranked 26th and 86th overall by MLB.com, they made their full-season debuts last season with Class A Lakewood. Sanchez and his 70-grade fastball advanced to Class A Advanced Clearwater, where he had a little bit of trouble adjusting as the season wound down. JoJo Romero, Ranger Suarez and Seranthony Dominguez also reached the Florida State League, while Franklyn Kilome took his well-above-average fastball to the Eastern League. The Phillies picked up Enyel De Los Santos, who ranked third in the Double-A Texas League with 138 strikeouts, from the Padres in December. Other options include Tom Eshelman, coming off the best year of his career, and Jake Thompson, whose made multiple trips to the Majors last season.

3. New York Yankees

In the Majors, the talk is all about the Yankee boppers, but in the Minors, it's all about their pitchers. Eleven of New York's top 15 prospects are hurlers. Justus Sheffield stands above them all -- and not just because he's the only southpaw. MLB.com's No. 48 overall prospect battled a strained oblique last

season but put up dominant numbers when healthy. He continued to develop his changeup while relying on a plus fastball and slider as he produced similar results in the prospect-heavy Arizona Fall League. Albert Abreu (No. 74 overall) also shined in the AFL, while Chance Adams (No. 75 overall) dominated with Triple-A Scranton/Wilkes-Barre. Because of near-ready arms like Sheffield and Adams, the Yankees edge the Phils in these rankings. New York also has well-above average fastballs in Luis Medina, Freicer Perez and Domingo Acevedo, while Dillon Tate found the stuff that made him a first-rounder in 2015. At the lower levels, Yankee fans will get their first real glimpses of 2017 picks Clarke Schmidt, Matt Sauer and Trevor Stephan this year. Jonathan Loaisiga returned from Tommy John surgery in June, with sharpened command and control as the Nicaraguan produced a silly 33/3 K/BB ratio over 32 2/3 frames.

3. Chicago White Sox

You know it's a stacked system when Zack Burdi -- a recent first-rounder with an 80-grade fastball who started his first full season at Triple-A -- is ranked 13th. Of course, his big debut was truncated by Tommy John surgery in July, meaning he won't be back until the end of next season. Still, the White Sox have other well above-average arms in Michael Kopech, Alec Hansen and Dylan Cease. Kopech, MLB.com's 10th overall prospect, tied the aforementioned Honeywell for fourth in the Minors with 172 strikeouts as he finished the season with Triple-A Charlotte; Hansen advanced from Class A Kannapolis to Double-A Birmingham; and Cease missed almost a month with a leg injury before coming over from the Cubs but switched Class A leagues with ease. Dane Dunning, the system's fourth Top-100 arm, followed closely behind Kopech with 168 punchouts over 144 innings in his first full season. While 2015 first-rounder Carson Fulmer has slipped in the rankings, he pitched well during four stints in the Majors. He needs to cut down on the walks as he continues to develop secondary pitches around his cutter.

2. San Diego Padres

It's an exciting time in the Padres system with by far more top prospects than they've had in recent years, especially on the mound. San Diego boasts seven Top-100 pitching prospects, led by lefty MacKenzie Gore. The 2017 third overall pick was stingy over 21 1/3 frames in the Rookie-level Arizona League and will look to bring his signature leg kick to full-season ball this year. In his first full campaign, 2016 first-rounder Cal Quantrill earned a trip to the Futures Game and advanced to Double-A San Antonio, while 2016 signees Michel Baez and Adrian Morejon were promoted to Class A Fort Wayne in their debuts. Anderson Espinoza was acquired from the Red Sox in July 2016 but soon underwent Tommy John surgery, so 2018 will be the Padres' first good look at the right-hander who turns 20 this week. Logan Allen showed what he could do when healthy, averaging 10.2 strikeouts per nine innings across two Class A levels, while 2016 picks Joey Lucchesi and Eric Lauer posted dominant numbers in advancing to Double-A together. While the latter two could see Petco Park this September, it's likely the rest of these prospects will arrive in 2019 or 2020, meaning Padres fans will have to wait just a little bit longer for an All-Star rotation.

1. Atlanta Braves

Like the Yankees, the Braves' top-15 prospects feature 11 pitchers. Unlike any team, however, Atlanta carries six Top-100 hurlers. Kyle Wright, the 2017 fifth overall pick, not only did well in the Rookie-level Gulf Coast League, he went on to make six starts in the Florida State League. Right-handers and 2015 first-rounders Mike Soroka and Kolby Allard cruised at Double-A Mississippi, while 2016 picks Ian Anderson, Joey Wentz and Bryse Wilson excelled with Class A Rome in their first full seasons. Kyle Muller, a 2016 second-rounder, stayed with Rookie-level Danville to continue to develop. The Braves are known for quickly advancing players, with Wright skipping two levels less than two months after the Draft and Allard pitching in Double-A before turning 20. Lefties Luiz Gohara and A.J. Minter know a lot about racing up the ladder -- the former used a plus-plus fastball to move from the FSL to the Majors last year, while the latter started the year in the South Atlantic League and ended it in the Majors as the Braves' top relief prospect. And there's southpaw Max Fried, who did not fare well at Double-A but was promoted and shoved at Triple-A and, eventually, the Majors before keeping it going in the AFL. Touki Toussaint also benefited from a promotion during a tough stretch, lowering his ERA after moving up to the Southern League. It's the third year in a row the Braves boast the top farm system, based solely on pitching.

FROM ESPN.COM

What goes into a big league position switch? Four All-Starts are finding out this spring

By Jerry Crasnick

PEORIA, Ariz. -- The movie "Moneyball" received six Academy Award nominations and a 94 percent Rotten Tomatoes approval rating while sparking a backlash in baseball circles for its simplistic take on the analytics vs. scouting debate. Baseball lifers chafed over the film's harsh portrayal of Art Howe and its omission of the impact of pitchers Tim Hudson, Barry Zito and Mark Mulder on the Oakland Athletics' success.

But one scene in the movie resonated with anyone who has ever picked up a glove. During a pivotal living room sequence, Billy Beane tries to sell Scott Hatteberg on the idea of playing first base and downplays the difficulty of the transition. He solicits input from coach Ron Washington, who promptly undercuts him by pronouncing the move "incredibly hard."

Many professional ballplayers who switch positions have the luxury of doing it in the minors, where mistakes are part of the developmental process and the crowds are small and generally forgiving. When the adjustment takes place in the big leagues, where every player is ostensibly a finished product and 30,000 people are in the stands, the stakes are higher.

This spring, four players with All-Star Games on their résumés and long-term contracts totaling \$276 million are dealing with strange vantage points and information overload as they try to embrace the

subtleties of a position change in the Cactus League. The regular-season opener is barely three weeks away, and they're tasked with making something incredibly hard look like second nature.

Ryan Braun, Brewers, from left field to first base

Braun, the longtime franchise face, is no longer the focus of attention in Milwaukee. The Brewers spent \$80 million on free agent Lorenzo Cain and traded four players to Miami for Christian Yelich, and the new arrivals adorn the cover of the team media guide. The Brewers would be happy with a healthy season from Braun, who logged an .823 OPS while missing 58 games because of calf and wrist injuries a year ago.

Manager Craig Counsell envisions Yelich, Cain, Braun, Domingo Santana and Eric Thames divvying up the roughly 2,800 plate appearances available between the three outfield spots and first base. Braun underwent back surgery in late 2015 and needs to be vigilant with his maintenance program to guard against a recurrence of an old problem.

Braun broke into pro ball as a third baseman and has made 1,296 MLB starts in the outfield, but first base is foreign turf to him. In his Cactus League debut against the Giants, he used an outfielder's glove at first.

"There are going to be mess-ups, no question," said Brewers coach Pat Murphy, who's helping Braun with the move. "He's never played first base. Never. It's a huge transition, and there's so much to learn. But he'll make that transition as good as anybody in the game because of the athlete he is. He's diligent about his game, and he will take care of business."

Braun's first 14 innings at first were action packed. He ranged over the mound to catch two popups, scooped multiple balls in the dirt, made an adept tag on a pickoff throw from catcher Jett Bandy to nab Rajai Davis, dived to save pitcher Jhoulys Chacin from an error and then committed an error with an off-target throw to Chacin. He has also tried to avoid mucking up the process by overthinking. After his first game, Braun told Milwaukee beat writers that he would not be providing daily progress reports.

"Until you get there and start running around playing the position, you don't realize how much you know already," Murphy said. "He's done some things naturally. When you watch the way he can handle the intermediate throw, and you see him pick the ball the way he does and see his feet move in the infield, you think, 'This guy's got it.' "

Braun's ability to adapt could go a long way toward crafting a positive final act in Milwaukee. He has \$57 million left on his \$105 million contract extension, and that outlay will be a lot more palatable to the Brewers if he can stay on the field for 120-130 games and contribute an .800 or better OPS each season.

Dee Gordon, Mariners, from second base to center field

It came as no big shock when Gordon preceded Giancarlo Stanton, Marcell Ozuna and Christian Yelich out of town as part of the Miami Marlins' offseason roster purge.

The surprise twist: All four players are now outfielders.

Gordon broke in as a shortstop with the Los Angeles Dodgers and made himself into a Gold Glove second baseman with the help of infield coach Perry Hill in Miami. Now he'll have to adjust to a whole new world view in center field. Mariners general manager Jerry Dipoto, the quintessential free thinker, saw the dynamic potential of a Gordon-Jean Segura pairing at the top of the order, and the Statcast numbers convinced him that Gordon had the raw materials to play outfield. Gordon's sprint speed of 29.7 feet per second is fourth best in MLB behind Minnesota's Byron Buxton, Cincinnati's Billy Hamilton and Cleveland's Bradley Zimmer -- all center fielders -- and he has the capacity to outrun the occasional bad jump or read.

Gordon had just returned from a vacation to the Bahamas with his girlfriend when he learned about the trade to Seattle. He immediately visited a Dick's Sporting Goods in Miami and bought a red outfielder's glove that has since been replaced by a different model and now sits in the trunk of his car.

Gordon elicited some laughs when he told the story at a Mariners fan event, but the tone in his voice suggests he's not fully recovered from the shock of having to reinvent himself at age 29.

"If I woke up every day just worrying about my world, I probably wouldn't have the most productive day in the world," Gordon said. "I'm gonna be all right with it. I'm a professional. I'm not here to cry about it. People tell me, 'You're a ballplayer,' and I realize that now. I'm a ballplayer and I'll adapt to the situation."

Mariners coach Chris Prieto flew to Orlando, Florida, in December for the first of two offseason tutorials with Gordon. They sat down and discussed the finer points of center-field play and the best ways for Gordon to embrace the change. Prieto returned to Florida a month later and found that Gordon had already made substantial progress.

There's still more Gordon must tackle to master his new position, as evidenced by some items on his spring to-do list. He'll spend his time working on his throwing motion to generate more spin off his fingertips to get greater carry with more accuracy, staying on top of situations to have an idea where he needs to throw the ball before it's hit to him, communicating with his fellow outfielders (a group that now includes Ichiro Suzuki), backing up second base in the event of errant throws and learning to read situations so he can change his depth and position in the middle of counts to gain precious extra steps.

During his spring tutorials, Gordon fields balls launched from a machine and fungoes directly off the bat, which behave less predictably. He looks natural on fly balls in the gap, while line drives hit straight at him or directly over his head pose more of a challenge.

"Once the season starts and we get the scouting reports, we'll have a really good idea where he should play hitters," Prieto said. "Right now, I want him to use his instincts. I want him to read swings and challenge himself to the pull side and the opposite side. He comes in every day and he's looking to get better. He doesn't just want to be a good center fielder. He wants to be a great center fielder, and it shows in everything he does."

The Cactus League is notoriously difficult for outfielders because of the carry on fly balls, the blinding sun and the absence of cloud cover, so any atmospheric conditions that Gordon encounters during the regular season should be relatively benign by comparison. He realizes it is best to roll with the inevitable mistakes, but that's not in his nature.

"I'm going to beat myself up," Gordon said. "I'll be agitated, for sure. That's just how I am. I want to play good, and at the end of the year we'll assess how well I play. I definitely want to help us way more than I hurt us. Hopefully, I don't hurt us too often."

Zack Cozart, Angels, from shortstop to third base

In 2014, Atlanta shortstop Andrelton Simmons led the majors with plus-28 defensive runs saved. Cozart, then with Cincinnati, ranked second at the position with plus-19. Now, they're teammates, with a shared goal of tormenting opponents on anything hit to the left side in Anaheim. Cozart, who ranked second to Carlos Correa among MLB shortstops with a .933 OPS and made his first All-Star team in 2017, had the misfortune of coming out in a tough winter for free agents. He landed a three-year, \$38 million deal with the Angels while Todd Frazier took less to sign with the Mets and Mike Moustakas remains unemployed.

"There's definitely some stress that goes with it, and a learning curve," Cozart said. "If I was on a different team where I felt I should be the starting shortstop, then I'd be like, 'Man, what am I doing playing third?' But I feel like Sim is the only guy in the league that is probably better than me, so it's an easy decision for me to move over and have a good attitude about it. Being the competitive person that I am, you want to perfect that spot and prove people wrong. Or if they're saying you're going to be good, to prove them right."

At shortstop, Cozart was conditioned to think aggressively. At third, his first step is neutral or even back, and he's getting used to the idea that he can knock the ball down and have time to recover and record an out. He's sticking with his old shortstop setup as opposed to getting low and wide in the manner of his former Reds teammate, Scott Rolen. Beyond that, he'll figure out the niceties of positioning as he goes. Angels special assistant Eric Chavez, a six-time Gold Glove Award winner, is helping with the transition, and he looks out from the dugout and sees Cozart's mind spinning in a thousand different directions.

Cozart is still using his old shortstop glove -- a faded black Wilson A2000 with six years of wear on it. It measures 11.5 inches and is slightly smaller than the typical third baseman's glove. Cozart keeps one of those in his duffel bag, and he's gradually breaking it in with daily games of catch.

In Cozart's Cactus League debut, the Angels' infield was playing in and Cleveland's Ryan Hanigan hit a bolt directly at him. Cozart reached out in self-defense and snagged the liner, fully cognizant that it could just as easily have been a chopper requiring him to charge the ball and make an off-balance throw. Such is life at third base.

It brings some comfort to Cozart knowing that Simmons, the best defensive shortstop of his generation, is right by his side as a security blanket.

"If the ball is hit to my left, I'm like, 'Sim, you got it,' " Cozart said, laughing.

Wil Myers, Padres, from first base to right field

Myers hit a career-high 30 homers last year, but he also struck out 180 times and batted .229 after the All-Star break. He went home to Charlotte, North Carolina, in October, worked with a personal trainer, loaded up on protein shakes and increased his weight from 201 pounds to a bulked-up 226.

"I'm tired of being tall and skinny," Myers said. "I wanted to be tall and big."

After taking a hard look at his career arc, Myers also began seeing a sports psychologist over the winter. He plans to maintain a regular regimen of mental skills training throughout the season.

"I've always been a guy who had great physical ability and never really put it together," Myers said. "This is the first offseason I was like, 'My mental ability is not where it needs to be.' I felt like my talent has taken it as far as it will get me, and I have to continue to work to be more than just an average player in the big leagues. This offseason, I checked every single box and did everything I possibly could do."

One development was beyond Myers' control. Two days before the Padres' first full-squad workout, the team signed Eric Hosmer to a franchise-record eight-year, \$144 million contract. The first domino was moving Myers from first base to right field.

Myers is no stranger to the view from the pasture. After starting his professional career as a catcher, he moved to right field in the Double-A Texas League in 2011, and won the American League Rookie of the Year award while starting 68 games in right for the Tampa Bay Rays in 2013. The Padres tried him in center field in 2015 and the experiment was widely regarded as a failure after he logged a minus-7 defensive runs saved.

"People said I was terrible in the outfield," Myers said. "But I was also playing center field at the time, and I'm not much of a center fielder. Getting back to one of the corner outfield spots is going to be better for me, because it's a position I know I can play pretty well."

"It's not necessarily working on the fly balls. It's all the little things: working on the wall balls and my footwork. Charging ground balls. Communication. Things like that. I think it will come back pretty quickly, and we still have plenty of time to get there."

While it's natural to assume the weight gain might put a strain on Myers' legs, he's more concerned about the state of his throwing arm. Myers focused on speed work during the offseason and thinks his jumps and outfield coverage could benefit as a result. But he arrived in camp with a first baseman's arm, and he'll spend the next few weeks focusing on lengthening out and getting greater extension on his throws.

Dave Roberts, now the Dodgers' manager, tutored Myers on the art of center-field play in 2015. Now Padres coach Skip Schumaker is overseeing his transition to right. Myers, who can be searingly candid in interviews, concedes that boredom and inactivity in the outfield are a potential issue after being in the middle of the action at first base.

"Absolutely," he said. "You're out there by yourself, and you have to watch 150 pitches a game, if not more. There can be times when you're kind of looking in the stands and you get distracted, but Skip is gonna be great. He's going to hold me accountable a lot, and that's what I need."

FROM USA TODAY.COM

Japanese rookie Shohei Ohtani drawing plenty of attention at Angels' spring training

By Pete Donovan

The annual gathering of the Baseball Optimist and High Hopes Club is in full swing from Arizona to Florida.

It's the first day of school, the new house, the new car, the new job. The ultimate honeymoon.

Spring training! Is there a better time for baseball? Why does the grass seem greener, the sky bluer, the uniforms cleaner?

Thirty undefeated teams are stretching, jogging, running, signing autographs, doing interviews with a little hitting, pitching and fielding thrown in.

Players are all in the "best shape of their lives." Everyone is "excited to show what we have." Managers tell us their clubs "are working hard to reach our goals."

Stories and sub-plots abound. The biggest, of course, is in Tempe, Arizona, where the Angels have trained for 25 years. The spotlight is not on the best player in the game (Mike Trout) or the first-ballot Hall of Famer (Albert Pujols), but on a 23-year-old rookie from Japan (Shohei Ohtani) who they say can pitch and hit with the best of them. This rare feat is done about every 100 years or so (see Ruth, Babe, Boston Red Sox, 1918).

More: Dodgers, Cubs, Yankees part of Great Divide in baseball as most teams playing for next year

Over in Glendale where the National League champion Dodgers are readying to defend their title, there's a familiar face. Matt Kemp was the best player in Los Angeles seven seasons ago (39 home runs, 126 RBIs, .324 average, MVP runnerup).

He was sent to San Diego a few years later and then on to Atlanta. The Dodgers would like to trade him. Well, not exactly trade Kemp, who is only 33 and still has some power, but trade his contract – which is \$43.5 million over the next two years. They traded four players (contracts), including Adrian Gonzalez (who has moved on to the Mets), Scott Kazmir and Brandon McCarthy for Kemp's contract. The Dodgers owed those three over \$51 million this season, so Kemp at \$21.750 this year represents a significant financial gain. (Playing ability appears to be secondary in many trades these days).

While the Angels are dealing with the large Japanese media contingent that follows Ohtani on a daily basis and the Dodgers are dealing with their former superstar, the Padres over in Peoria are readying for the future. Their farm system has been ranked No. 1 in all of baseball with a handful of pitchers and hitters who seem destined to turn around the fortunes of the long suffering franchise.

*The slow free-agent market. There's still some significant players yet unsigned – Jake Arrieta, Mike Moustakas, Alex Cobb, Lance Lynn, Greg Holland, Jonathan Lucroy and Carlos Gonazlaez can all help teams – but when?

*Mound visits are restricted to six per nine-inning game so catchers are having to learn new ways to communicate with their pitcher. This should shave a few seconds off each game.

The Bronx Maulers. Giancarlo Stanton hit 59 homers a year ago and was the National League MVP. Aaron Judge hit 52 and was the American League Rookie of the Year. They're now in the Yankee lineup together. Thirteen feet of raw power.

*Despite making the playoffs, the Yankees, Red Sox and Nationals all fired their managers and replaced them with rookies – Aaron Boone in New York, Alex Cora in Boston and David Martinez in Washington. How hot are those seats?

How the Angels worked this weird winter to perfection

By Bob Nightengale

TEMPE, Ariz. - You drive all over the state of Florida, fly to Phoenix, venture to spring-training camps all around the Valley, and suddenly you find it, the epicenter of baseball's new wacky world.

The Los Angeles Angels clubhouse is where you'll find an All-Star who was forced to switch positions twice to even sign a free-agent contract, a premier outfielder who made the shrewd move to pass up free agency, a player who considered retirement because of the market conditions, another who was dumped by the new wave of tanking teams and faces free agency this winter, and a forgotten slugger.

Say hello to Zack Cozart, Justin Upton, Chris Young, Ian Kinsler and Chris Carter.

They represent baseball's landscape in which a former Cy Young winner, Jake Arrieta, celebrated his 32nd birthday Tuesday in Austin, Texas, instead of at a spring training camp; a 29-year old slugger, Mike

Moustakas, who broke a franchise record for homers last season might not even sign before June; and the National League saves leader, Greg Holland, who committed the triple-play faux pas of rejecting a player option, declining the qualifying offer and not accepting a contract offer.

Three weeks remain before opening day and more than 40 viable free agents remain unsigned, led by Arrieta, Moustakas and Holland.

Arrieta, who could have returned to the Chicago Cubs if he accepted a contract less than the six-year, \$126 million deal that Yu Darvish signed, still should wind up in the Washington Nationals' opening-day rotation. The Nationals, who had 10 players represented by Scott Boras clients last season, have \$61.25 million coming off the books next year simply with free agents Bryce Harper, Daniel Murphy, Gio Gonzalez and Matt Wieters. It's the ideal fit for a team whose owners not only have the coziest relationship with Boras but are desperate to win a playoff series before Harper departs.

It's possible that Holland lands in Washington as well, but GM Mike Rizzo insists they'll stay with their current triumvirate of late-inning options, just like the St. Louis Cardinals. Holland rejected a \$15 million player option at the season's conclusion, declined a \$17.4 million qualifying offer and didn't accept the Rockies' three-year offer early in the winter before they turned to Wade Davis. He's the No. 1 target for any team that suddenly discovers they're a closer short of contending.

Moustakas, who hit 38 homers last season for the Kansas City Royals, appeared to be an ideal fit for several teams, but no one wanted to surrender a second-round draft pick as compensation. So the Angels signed Cozart, the San Francisco Giants traded for Evan Longoria, and the New York Yankees acquired Brandon Drury, leaving Moustakas standing alone in the third-base market of musical chairs.

Suddenly, the likes of Drury, Matt Duffy (Tampa Bay), Johan Camargo (Atlanta) and Martin Prado (Marlins) have starting third base jobs, and Moustakas does not.

Little wonder he may now wait until after the June draft, when clubs won't suffer the loss of a draft pick, and try again.

The Angels, who could use Arrieta and Holland if they suddenly were willing to cross the \$197 million luxury tax threshold, and once had a burning need for Moustakas, too, epitomize baseball's new wave of constructing teams.

This is a team that entered the off-season desperate for a third baseman and second baseman. So, what do the Angels do? Sign a free-agent All-Star shortstop who has never played another position in his career, telling him he's being moved to second base, only to change their minds and switch him to third a few days later.

"It was a crazy market," says Cozart, who signed a three-year, \$38 million deal in December. "I wanted to stay at shortstop, obviously, but there weren't a lot of contending teams who needed a shortstop. You look around the landscape of baseball, and it's like the golden age of shortstops. And the winning teams all have shortstops for a long time.

“So we had all of these calls seeing if I was interested in playing second or third.”

The Angels told Cozart they were moving him to second base and he was on his way to take his physical when GM Billy Eppler called him. He asked if he'd mind moving to third base. They were trying to acquire Kinsler from the Detroit Tigers.

“I knew it would make us a better team,” Cozart says, “so I agreed. Billy told me it was up to me, but I didn't want to be the guy responsible for Kinsler not being here.”

“I'm just glad I signed. Now, all I have to do is worry about getting a place in Irvine instead of worrying about who I'm going to play for. It's frustrating seeing so many guys like Moustakas who can help teams, but are still not signed.”

Kinsler, a four-time All-Star and Gold Glove winner, knows he could be in the same predicament next winter. He may still be one of the finest offensive second basemen in the game, hitting 50 home runs the last two seasons, but he's also 35.

“I can't believe how many guys are still out there,” Kinsler says. “And these teams are using compensation attached to them as an excuse. Who gives a (bleep)? So basically, you're opposed to improving your club now so you can get a compensation pick, who probably won't be in the big leagues for four or five years, and has only about 30% chance of even making it? They make it sound like it's a terrible thing to sign a guy with this pick attached to them.”

“It's all eye-wash.”

Upton, 30, a four-time All-Star who hit a career-high 35 homers and 109 RBI last season, wasn't about to take the risk of the volatile free-agent market. He could have opted out of his contract, and gambled that someone would have paid him more than the four years and \$86 million left on his deal.

Uh-uh.

Upton, who had only two teams, the Tigers and Atlanta Braves, willing to offer him more than \$100 million two years ago when he hit free agency, stayed put. He wasn't planning to opt out even if he stayed with the Tigers, but once the Angels acquired him, and offered an extra year and \$20 million to stay, it was a no-brainer.

“It's almost like you don't want to be a free agent now,” Upton said, “almost like it's a bad thing. That's how they're making a guy feel, even for the best players. It's one thing if you're not productive but it's another thing if you're productive and people don't value you.”

“It's funky, just weird.”

Young, 34, finished a two-year, \$13 million deal with the Red Sox and ultimately accepted a one-year, \$2 million guarantee from the Angels after camp opened.

Carter hit 41 home runs two seasons ago in Milwaukee, was non-tendered and received a \$3.5 million deal in New York, but played his last major league game July 4 after the Yankees released him. He took a minor league deal with the Angels that will pay him \$1.175 million if he makes the team.

Modest deals, to be sure, but it beats unemployment. Meanwhile, both players present little risk but some upside to the Angels, who seek their first playoff berth since 2014.

As it stands, they worked the system to perfection - dipping under the luxury tax threshold while improving their club and receiving a huge boost when Japanese two-way star Shohei Ohtani chose them to start his major league career.

A good deal for them. Less so for the players still trying to negotiate the new landscape.

“You used to think that free agency was the promised land,” says Cozart, an All-Star in his final season with the Cincinnati Reds. “You work hard for six years and maximize your value. That’s what we all believed.

“Then this year happened. It’s scary out there.”

FROM BASEBALL ESSENTIAL

Shohei Ohtani: the desert and the dream: transitioning into MLB

By Chris Northrop

Japanese baseball phenomena Shohei Ohtani had a dream of playing Major League Baseball. The dream was realized on Valentine’s Day this year, when Ohtani rolled into Tempe Diablo Stadium, the Los Angeles Angels’ spring training facility, according to Jerry Crasnick of ESPN, “with his boundless talent, effortless charisma and an ambitious agenda.”

On the mound and with the bat three weeks into spring training, Ohtani is having the kind of spring you would expect, knocking off some rust here and there and having workman-like performances.

Spring training is a time for experimenting, and the Angels are running the biggest experiment in the league this year with Ohtani pitching and, then, between starts on the mound, hitting in the designated hitter spot, as the Angels try to figure out how best to use him.

On the mound, Ohtani will be part of the Angel’s six man rotation, along with Garrett Richards, JC Ramirez, Tyler Skaggs, Andrew Heaney and Matt Shoemaker.

In 2016, Ohtani had a breakout season as a hitter. In 104 games and 382 plate appearances, he hit 22 home runs, 18 doubles, 67 RBI, batted .322 with an OBP of .416, scored 65 runs and had seven stolen bases. He won the Best Nine award as the designated hitter.

Ohtani was also dominant on the mound. In 21 games, he had a career low ERA at 1.86. He had a 10-4 record, struck out 174 batters in 140 innings with four complete games and one shutout. He also won the Best Nine award as a pitcher and won the Pacific League MVP.

Due to a right ankle injury suffered in the 2016 Japan Series, Ohtani did not have a repeat of his spectacular '16 season in 2017. In 2017, he played in just 65 games, however, he hit .332 with eight homers and 31 RBIs while going 3-2, with a 3.20 ERA with 29 strikeouts on the mound.

In the offseason in 2017, Ohtani had surgery to repair his ankle.

Ohtani made it clear after the season that he wanted to make the transition to Major League Baseball and, as Tyler Kepner of the New York Times wrote, Ohtani:

Was so eager to play in the majors that he left Japan before he could seek his true value as a free agent, a decision that cost him a nine-figure contract...The Angels paid \$20 million to the Fighters for his rights, but had less than \$2.5 million to spend on Ohtani, who will make the league minimum salary of \$545,000 this season.

In his Cactus League debut on February 24, he pitched to a split-squad Milwaukee team with limited success, according Dayn Perry and R.J. Anderson of CBS Sports; he pitched 1 1/3 innings, giving up two hits, two runs (one earned), a walk, two strikeouts, and a loud home run to Keon Broxton. Ohtani also threw a wild pitch, too.

On March 2, he pitched to a "B" team of the Milwaukee Brewers, using fastballs, sliders, curveballs and splitters. He had eight strikeouts in 12 batters. Tyler Kepner described his outing:

Working only from the stretch, Ohtani yanked some sliders into the dirt and struggled with his landing spot on the mound. But he felt comfortable by his third inning, when he struck out the side in order.

Ohtani himself said after his March 2 outing that he was satisfied with it. He felt like he was "in the zone with all my pitches compared to last time...I did take a step forward."

With the bat, Ohtani has likewise had limited success so far, but is hitting the ball hard. In his debut against San Diego, he singled and walked twice and two days later on, he went 0-3 against Colorado.

In his most recent DH role on March 5 against the Cincinnati Reds, he hit a long line drive that looked to fall in until Billy Hamilton made the catch with an acrobatic dive to rob Ohtani of a base hit.

2018 promises to be a bounce back year for Ohtani and he appears to be fully healthy to take on the challenges of both coming back from the ankle surgery and transitioning into a new league.

Along the way he'll encounter a myriad of challenges, such as a slightly bigger ball, and longer road trips across time zones, but given the challenges he's already met and surpassed just getting to this point, no doubt he'll meet each challenge with success as he gains much-needed experience in spring training.

Ohtani will be the designated hitter today against the Dodgers.