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Thursday, March 8, 2018

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Three ranked prospects among 6 sent down

Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | March 7, 2018

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- The Twins made their first cuts of Spring Training before their game against the Red Sox on Wednesday, optioning Dietrich Enns and Felix Jorge to Triple-A Rochester, optioning Lewis Thorpe and Zack Littell to Double-A Chattanooga and reassigning catchers Brian Navarreto and Wynston Sawyer to Minor League camp.

The moves, which help Enns, Jorge, Thorpe and Littell get stretched out as starters at Minor League camp, leave the Twins with 53 players in camp, including 26 pitchers and five catchers. Minnesota is still expected to break camp with four starting pitchers, eight relievers and two catchers.

Thorpe is the highest rated prospect of the group, as he's the club's No. 12 prospect, per MLB Pipeline. Littell is ranked 15th, Jorge is ranked 17th and Enns is not among the club's Top 30 prospects.

"They're guys who need to get out on the mound more to prepare for their seasons," Twins manager Paul Molitor said. "We're trying to get as many guys stretched out as possible as starters. Keeping them over here is mathematically impossible."

Enns, who came over to Minnesota along with Littell in the trade that sent Jaime Garcia to the Yankees at last year's non-waiver Trade Deadline, has Major League experience, posting a 6.75 ERA in two appearances (one start) with the Twins. The 26-year-old posted a combined 2.05 ERA in 57 innings in the Minors last year, but he gave up four runs in 3 2/3 innings this spring.

Jorge, 24, also made his debut last year, making two starts for the Twins, allowing nine runs in 7 2/3 innings. But he had a combined 3.68 ERA between Double-A and Triple-A last year and gave up one run over three innings this spring.

Thorpe, 22, remains an intriguing prospect who was on an impressive trajectory until missing the 2015 and '16 seasons after undergoing Tommy John surgery. But he returned last season to post a 2.93 ERA with 91 strikeouts in 83 innings between Class A Advanced Fort Myers and Double-A Chattanooga. He gave up three runs over 2 1/3 innings this spring and is opening the year at Double-A for the first time.

"He needs to go down and there build up his innings," Molitor said. "He's a guy I didn't know a lot about other than good reports and word of mouth."

Littell, 22, is coming off an impressive season that saw him go 19-1 with a 2.12 ERA in 27 appearances (25 starts) between Class A Advanced and Double-A last year. He was a candidate to open at Triple-A Rochester for the first time, but the Twins have a lot of depth there with fellow prospects Stephen Gonsalves, Fernando Romero and Aaron Slegers expected to open at Triple-A. Littell fared well this spring, giving up one run in five innings, showing off his sinker that gets above-average ground-ball rates.

"I told him I was impressed by him this camp," Molitor said. "I complimented his work ethic and mound presence. Obviously, you know about a guy coming in but it was good to get eyes on him and build him up because I felt good about what he did here."

Rosario sidelined with right triceps tendinitis

Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | March 7, 2018

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- Twins left fielder Eddie Rosario is sidelined with mild right triceps tendinitis, while right-hander Ervin Santana returned to Hammond Stadium after having his cast removed from his right hand in New York on Monday.

Rosario hasn't played since Sunday and isn't throwing in the short-term as he lets the injury heal. The Twins don't believe it's serious and it shouldn't affect his status leading up to Opening Day. Rosario was the lone Twins regular out of the lineup in their 8-1 win over the Red Sox on Wednesday, but the hope is he could return by Sunday or Monday.

View Full Game Coverage

"I'm not concerned long-term," Twins manager Paul Molitor said. "I think he's dealing with a little bit of inflammation and we can afford to give it some time. He's feeling a little bit better today, but he won't be ready to play Friday. But we'll get a better feel for when he can play."

Rosario, 26, will be re-evaluated on Friday after Thursday's off-day and said he's able to swing without any issues.

"My arm is just a little tired," Rosario said through a translator. "It's just rest for a few days and trying to be healthy for the start of the season."

Twins general manager Thad Levine said he believes the injury could've come from throwing too much early in camp, but he is hopeful Rosario will return soon.

"Sometimes the volume of throwing catches up to some of these guys," Levine said. "We're hopeful it's nothing more than that."

With Rosario out, it gives more playing time to both Robbie Grossman and Zack Granite, who are competing for the fourth outfield position. Grossman started in left against the Red Sox on Wednesday, while Granite replaced Byron Buxton in center in the sixth.

"It can be harder to find at-bats for guys now that the regulars are playing a little more, so we get to see people we want to see, like potential bench guys," Molitor said.

Santana, meanwhile, had his cast and stitches removed from his right hand after undergoing surgery on his right middle finger on Feb. 6 to remove calcium deposits. Santana said his finger remains a bit sore and swollen, but he is doing strengthening exercises before progressing to throwing off flat ground. Santana, though, had no timetable for when he'll be able to start throwing.

"Right now, it's mostly just mobility exercises," Santana said. "I take it one day at a time. I'm just happy to have the cast off."

Levine, though, noted that nothing has changed with Santana's status, as he's expected to be out until late April or early May. Santana was in line to start on Opening Day for the third straight season, but he now must build up arm strength before he returns.

"The initial plan has him throwing flat-ground fastballs only, because when he started throwing sliders is when he felt the discomfort initially," Levine said. "We're probably at least a step or two away from throwing. He's working more on flexibility, mobility and strengthening. We're still targeting late April or early May. We'll know a lot more when he starts throwing and we see how his hand reacts."

Injury update

- Logan Morrison left Wednesday's game with tightness in his right glute after scoring from second on a single in the second inning. The injury is considered minor and Morrison was 2-for-2 before departing.

- Michael Kohn visited the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota and he was diagnosed with a nerve issue in his right arm that will require four-to-six

months of rest and rehab. But it won't require surgery.

Camp battles

- Grossman broke out of his 0-for-17 slump by going 2-for-3, while Granite went 0-for-2. Kennys Vargas went 1-for-3 and is hitting .300.
- Right-hander Ryan Pressly, who is considered highly likely to make the bullpen, continued to help his cause with a third straight strong showing with a scoreless seventh.

Odorizzi solid

- Twins right-hander Jake Odorizzi made his second start of the spring and looked sharp against the Red Sox, allowing one run on three hits and a walk over 3 2/3 innings to lower his ERA to 1.42.

"It was an offspeed heavy day by design," Odorizzi said. "Getting a feel for that is always the toughest after a long winter. My fastballs were easy effort-wise and I wanted to see how many outs I could get by throwing in the zone with offspeed pitches. It was kind of eye-opening."

Pelfrey retires

- Mike Pelfrey, who pitched with the Twins from 2013-15, announced his retirement from baseball and is coaching at Newman University, a Division II school in his hometown of Wichita, Kan., according to report from NCAA.com. Pelfrey, 34, posted a 4.94 ERA in 64 starts with the Twins.

Up next

- Right-hander Jose Berrios will start against the Rays on Friday in Port Charlotte at 12:05 p.m. CT. Fellow right-hander Tyler Duffey will piggyback Berrios and is expected to throw multiple innings.

Top 20 players who will shape AL Central race

Will Leitch | MLB.com | March 7, 2018

If you can believe it, Opening Day is only three weeks away, and we're previewing each division every Wednesday. Baseball is an individual sport masquerading as a team sport, so we'll be previewing each division by counting down the 20 most pivotal players in the division. These aren't necessarily the best players. They're just the ones whose 2018 performance will be most vital to their teams' success this season, and in seasons moving forward. To keep it fair, we can only pick four players from each team.

Today: The American League Central. Tell me what you think not just about what you think of this list, but also whom I should not miss when I do the National League East next week, at will.leitch@mlb.com.

20. Jordan Zimmermann, Detroit Tigers

You're going to notice real quick that it's tough to come up with compelling, particularly important players from the bottom three teams in the AL Central. The market has been what it has been this offseason, but if Jake Arrieta, Lance Lynn and company need to stare daggers at anyone, Zimmermann -- \$74 million and three years left to go! -- would make a decent target, all told.

19. Tim Anderson, Chicago White Sox

Anderson's name has popped up nationally a lot lately because Cardinals shortstop Paul DeJong just broke his record for the largest contract to a player with less than one year service time. Cards fans might not enjoy the comparison: Anderson took a big step back his sophomore year. He rebounded in the second half, and, superlatives aside, the contract is reasonable enough that if he crawls himself back to average, he'll be a steal. And Anderson's probably going to be a lot better than average.

18. Michael Fulmer, Detroit Tigers

Fulmer has so much promise that if he were healthy, you could see teams lining up to help Detroit with its rebuilding project. But he's currently dealing with an elbow injury. Will the Tigers end up getting more than they would have from the Yankees? We'll see.

17. Eloy Jimenez, Chicago White Sox

Jimenez probably won't make it to the Majors this year, or if he does, it'll just be for a few weeks in September. I bet his name is still mentioned on more White Sox broadcasts than Omar Narvaez.

16. Salvador Perez, Kansas City Royals

With Alex Gordon evaporating like the kids in "Back to the Future," Perez is the only man left standing from the glory days. He's signed through 2021, but the Royals probably aren't going to be any good then either. Perez will still only be 31 years old then -- how in the world is he still only 27? -- and maybe he'll sign a Yadier Molina deal to become, essentially, Kansas City Molina. With a ring, there are worse fates.

15. Nicholas Castellanos, Detroit Tigers

Yet another guy for Detroit whose trade value makes every at-bat feel a little like an infomercial, Castellanos looks like a legit hitter and a sort-of scary outfielder. The Tigers will likely find a team who cares enough about the former to overlook (or change entirely) the latter in the next few months.

14. Jorge Soler, Kansas City Royals

Soler might be the face of the Royals' "it's gonna be a long and bumpy ride so let's play the kids movement" and if so ... this is not going to be a fun ride. The guy with the terrifying power in Chicago has disappeared, replaced by a guy who has the old Soler's contact and on-base issues but nothing else. He hit enough homers (24) in Triple-A to keep him in Kansas City's plans, but let us never talk about his .144/.245/.258 slash line in the Majors in 2017 ever again.

13. Danny Duffy, Kansas City Royals

Bury him a Royal!

(Except the Royals should totally trade him.)

12. Whit Merrifield, Kansas City Royals

If Merrifield had done in, say, 2015 what he did in '17, he would be the beloved folk hero to end all folk heroes. A 29-year-old journeyman comes out of nowhere to lead the AL in steals and hit 19 homers, and he played five positions and he did this: If Merrifield were that guy for a World Series-winning team, he'd be a legend: They'd name a fountain after him. Unfortunately, Merrifield did it for a Royals team at the end of its run, and now, alas, no one really cares. He's still having the time of his life, and he absolutely should.

11. Lucas Giolito, Chicago White Sox

It is looking increasingly probable that Giolito is never going to become the No. 1 we all thought he would be when he was with Washington. This is a lot different than saying Giolito is a bust or even a disappointment: Even though he doesn't throw 100 mph anymore, he's still handy to have around, and still has considerable upside. The White Sox are starting the crawl back up. Giolito is still gonna be a big part of it.

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Halftime mascot break! AL Central mascots, ranked.

1. Sluggerrr

That is the correct number of "R"s in Sluggerrr's name, though personally I think there should just be one "r," but with a bar over it like you would use over a repeating decimal in math class.

2. Slider

If you ask me, they should have Slider on the hats.

3. T.C. Bear

The Twins' mascot bear gets extra credit for not being an actual twin. Would have been a little too on-the-nose.

4. Paws

Paws looks a little too much like a college football mascot, though to be fair, half of college football teams are named "the Tigers."

5. Southpaw

I'm a Ribbie and Roobarb guy myself.

* * * * *

10. Theoretical free-agent pitcher, Minnesota Twins

I know that Minnesota is probably still holding out for some bargain -- there is no way a contending team enters the season with that rotation -- but these guys aren't going to be free, for crying out loud. Just give Lynn a two-year deal with a high average annual value and an opt-out clause after the first year and let's move on already.

9. Miguel Cabrera, Detroit Tigers

Here's a fun factoid: Last year was the first year of Cabrera's entire career -- including when he played for the Marlins -- that he didn't receive a single down-ballot MVP Award vote. Time is undefeated, but this can't be it already for him ... can it?

8. Danny Salazar, Cleveland Indians

You keep thinking this is the year Salazar will stay healthy and put it all together ... and then you see that he's not even going to be ready to start the season. He's now 28 years old: There aren't that many shopping days until Christmas.

7. Fernando Rodney, Minnesota Twins

April: "I can't believe the Twins really think Rodney is their closer."

May: "I can't believe Rodney is still the Twins' closer."

June: "How much longer are the Twins going to keep Rodney there?"

July: "Will the Twins trade for a real closer to replace Rodney?"

August: "How much longer can Rodney hang on?"

September: "Are the Twins really going to make a stretch run with Rodney finishing games?"

October: [Rodney leads the AL in saves.]

6. Yoan Moncada, Chicago White Sox

Moncada was the guy whose promise sold White Sox fans on The Big Plan and got everybody so excited in the first place. So, hey, Yoan: You can start hitting anytime now. In two cup-of-coffee stints in the Majors with the Red Sox and the White Sox, he has hit .231 with just three steals in 218 at-bats. The eight homers last year were intriguing, but this year, the restraints are off and Moncada can just go go go. He won't turn 23 until May. Let's see how fast this thing can move.

5. Yonder Alonso, Cleveland Indians

Carlos Santana is gone, and he's replaced by a guy who just had the best year of his career at 30. Is Alonso just a launch-angle hero? Did the declining numbers down the stretch imply the league was back to figuring him out? Alonso may be the fifth hitter in the AL Division Series, so the Indians best hope the revolution is still in effect.

4. Miguel Sano, Minnesota Twins

No one knows what's going to happen with his off-field allegations -- how many games it may or may not cost him, what the Twins could or should do about it or anything else. But it is uncertainty at a time when Sano is more important to the Twins than ever. Logan Morrison is a handy power piece behind Sano. He is less handy if he is the only handy power piece.

3. Jason Kipnis, Cleveland Indians

The forgotten man of last year's juggernaut Indians team is back and healthy again, ensconced back in his second-base position (over to third, Jose Ramirez!) and may even be batting second. That's a lofty spot for someone who didn't get to be a part of last year's fun, but Kipnis sure is launching the ball this spring.

2. Byron Buxton, Minnesota Twins

Buxton has gone from can't-miss prospect to "Wait does this guy have any idea how to hit a baseball?" to "Watch this dude play center!" to, well, something close to the five-tool darling we all thought he was in the first place. Quite a journey for a guy who just turned 24. If Buxton's batting eye can improve just a little bit more, everything else is in place. At this point, the question is whether he's a just building block ... or something potentially magnificent.

1. Francisco Lindor, Cleveland Indians

Lindor actually took a step backward in batting average and on-base percentage last season, though he still had 178 hits and still has a walk-to-strikeout ratio that would be iffy in 1986 but will work just fine in 2018. But the leap forward in power was something to behold: "Little" Lindor hit more homers in 2017 than Albert Pujols (who essentially only hits homers anymore) has hit in two seasons. Lindor, obviously, does everything else splendidly, and is quickly becoming one of the unmissable players in the game. He won't turn 25 until the season is over, and he's as close to being the face of baseball as you'll find. Lindor is already a legend in Cleveland, three years into his career. Wait until he helps the Indians win a World Series.

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We finish this preview, as we will with all of them, with predictions. I apologize in advance because these predictions are guaranteed to be correct and thus I'm a little worried I'm spoiling the season for you.

Cleveland Indians: 98-64

Minnesota Twins: 82-80

Chicago White Sox: 76-86

Kansas City Royals: 64-98

Detroit Tigers: 59-103

Twins outfield prospect Ryan LaMarre tries to keep it simple in a complex game

Phil Miller | Star Tribune | March 8, 2018

FORT MYERS, FLA. – They’re always right there, in the same spots, like Supreme Court justices taking their assigned seats. Take a look at the Twins’ dugout during a spring game, from first pitch to last, and you’ll see Paul Molitor next to the stairs, on the side nearest the plate. Pitching coach Garvin Alston is beside him on the right, and coaches Jeff Pickler and Derek Shelton are on the other side of the stairs, within earshot.

And between them? If he’s not on the field, Ryan LaMarre is usually standing there, too.

“He loves to talk the game. I have to push him away once in awhile in the dugout,” Molitor said with a laugh about the journeyman outfielder. “He’s always got something.”

It’s a habit he can’t control, LaMarre said, bred into him from the first time he swung a bat.

“Noticing little stuff with pitchers has helped me at times. Certain guys tip pitches, certain guys always go to certain pitches on certain counts,” LaMarre said. “Honestly, I don’t even think about it anymore. I just find myself noticing things, little tidbits.”

Molitor knows the breed. It’s the sort of hyper-attentiveness, the brand of curiosity, that helped a certain St. Paul infielder find enough small advantages to fuel a brilliant Hall of Fame career, and eventually become the Twins’ manager. But that kind of analytical mind can be a hindrance on the field, too — or so LaMarre has found.

“I can overthink things, big time,” he said. “When it came to my swing, I’d try anything. I was always questioning stuff, trying to pick people’s brains.”

He’d join a new team — the Twins are the fifth organization for the 29-year-old Michigan native — and immediately focus on his most successful teammate.

“I’d see what he does and try to incorporate those things. And maybe it doesn’t work for you,” said LaMarre, Cincinnati’s second-round pick in 2010. “And then you’ve given those at-bats away and you might not get another opportunity.”

That’s not going to happen this time, LaMarre vowed last winter after signing with the Twins. He’s simplified his approach, simplified his swing, and even if he can’t help but habitually scrutinize opposing pitchers like a detective on the case, he’s given himself a chance to compete for a job as a spare outfielder, perhaps even in the majors.

All the tips, all the changes, all the leg kicks and swing planes and timing mechanisms — he junked them all. He took a career’s worth of tinkering and tossed it in the trash.

“I’ve simplified everything a lot,” said LaMarre, who has reached the majors, however briefly, three times in three years with three different teams. “It came down to realizing the opportunities I’ve had. They’ve always been like, pinch hit here and then sit for three days. Start a game, sit a couple more. You can’t have a lot of moving pieces in your swing if that’s your role. I realized you’ve got to trim the fat off. I try to make it as simple as I can right now. Set up good angles, take a good pass at the ball, and that’s it. It sounds funny, but I’m almost back to a Little League and high school [approach]: See ball, hit ball.”

It’s worked better than even the Twins imagined. LaMarre crushed a pitch from Boston righthander Teddy Stankiewicz into the right field stands Wednesday, his second home run of the spring. He now leads the Twins in homers, RBI (eight) and is 9-for-18 at the plate.

LaMarre came to the Twins upon the recommendation of Jeremy Zoll, the Twins’ new minor league director, who tried to sign him for the Dodgers last summer. Should he make it to Minneapolis this season, he’ll have plenty of fans in the stands. His wife, Whitney Taney, is an Edina native and a former associate head coach of the Gophers women’s tennis team.

Taney was also a legendary high school tennis player, going 166-0 and winning five state championships at Edina a decade ago.

“She’s a lot more famous than I am,” LaMarre said of his wife, whom he met while they both were athletes at the University of Michigan. “She didn’t even tell me that until we’d been dating a year. But her family is all [in Minnesota], so that’s even more inspiration to make an impact with this team.”

Is that possible? Could LaMarre beat out the likes of Robbie Grossman or Zack Granite for an outfield spot? Molitor said he’s impressed that LaMarre, though he is only 2-for-37 as a big leaguer, can play all three outfield spots, and he’s stolen 165 bases in the minors. “He’s gotten our attention,” said Derek Falvey, the Twins’ chief baseball officer.

Molitor likes his enthusiasm — and yes, his questions and observations, too. “He’s a get-dirty kind of player,” the manager said.

Maybe that’s the opening LaMarre is looking for. “If he loves it,” LaMarre joked, “I’ll dive before the national anthem.”

Pitching 101 for the Twins' Ryan Pressly: throw curveball for strikes

Patrick Reusse | Star Tribune | March 8, 2018

FORT MYERS, FLA. – Pitcher Ryan Pressly was in his fifth season with the Boston Red Sox organization in 2012, when he was promoted to Class AA Portland (Maine) and put in the bullpen for 14 games.

The Twins saw him strike out 18 batters in 14 innings in the Arizona Fall League and took him with the fourth selection in the 2012 Rule 5 draft. The main rule is that a player thus selected must spend the next season with the major league club, or to be placed on waivers and if unclaimed, returned for half-price to his former club.

“All I knew is that it meant I would be in major league camp,” Pressly said. “I’ve found out that the odds of being on the team all year are against you in that situation.”

Pressly stayed all year and manager Ron Gardenhire actually used him in 49 games and for 76⅔ innings, second behind long reliever Anthony Swarzak in the 2013 bullpen.

The Twins have taken seven Rule 5 players — all pitchers — in the past 11 winter meetings. Jason Jones and Terry Doyle didn’t pitch for the Twins, J.R. Graham lasted for the 2015 season, Justin Haley lasted until July 24 in 2017, and Scott Diamond made 58 starts from 2011 to 2013.

There are two Rule 5 products in this big-league camp: Tyler Kinley, a righthander selected as a 27-year-old last December, and Pressly, 29, with no more options to be returned to the minor leagues.

So, basically, Pressly is in the same situation he was six seasons ago: Either the Twins keep him or he goes elsewhere. And he’s still the guy trying to convince the Twins there’s a big payoff to come by sticking with that power arm — the fastball in the high 90s and the big curveball.

The difference is this is no longer a wide-eyed young man from Texas wondering what it’s about. This is a veteran who has made more appearances (156) for the Twins over the previous three seasons than any pitcher, and knowing what it will take to get better.

It’s not working harder. Pressly is a fanatic about that. It’s not better “stuff.” There isn’t a more potent arm in the bullpen.

What is it?

“I can’t repeat the first half of last season,” Pressly said. “I have to get my breaking ball over on a consistent basis. If I can use the breaking ball off my fastball, I will help this team win.

“We’ve added Fernando [Rodney], Addison [Reed] and Zach Duke. Hildy [Trevor Hildenberger] and Taylor [Rogers] were outstanding last year. This is going to be a deep, strong bullpen, and I want to be another reason for that.”

There was no question of Pressly’s job status entering 2017: When holding leads, manager Paul Molitor was going to use Matt Belisle in front of closer Brandon Kintzler, with Pressly and lefthander Rogers in front of them.

Pressly pitched his way out of that duty. He was optioned twice to Class AAA Rochester in June. He returned July 1, and the results were still wanting.

On July 25 in Dodger Stadium, Pressly relieved Hildenberger, gave up three consecutive hits and turned a 4-2 deficit into 6-2. He followed with four outs, three on strikeouts.

Maybe that was it.

At the end of that night in L.A., Pressly had appeared in 32 games, with seven home runs allowed, a 6.75 ERA and a .279 batting average against. He pitched in 25 games after that, with three home runs allowed, a 2.25 ERA and a .163 batting average against.

Asked this week about Pressly, Molitor said: “We’ve all seen stretches where his elevation to the role he played was significant; other times, he’s maybe dipped back. He’d be the first guy to tell you he gets frustrated when his stuff doesn’t work out.

“He may have the mind-set of, ‘OK, I’m going to use my fastball more,’ and someone would hit a homer. He was just searching for how to use those pitches that he has.”

Molitor compared Pressly to a bullpen equivalent of Kyle Gibson: “Gibby has kind of had some really good runs as a starter, and then not so good. I think of him and Press — different roles, obviously — but having the same issues of trying to find that level of consistency.”

Gibson also went back to Rochester last summer, returned in early August, had three so-so starts and then found a fine level of consistency: 6-0 in his last eight starts, a 2.92 ERA and much importance in the Twins’ run to the AL wild-card game.

Perhaps Pressly found out about the same time how to use those pitches he has: a 98-mph fastball and a big curve.

For Pressly, it’s clear enough: Get that last one over and he’ll get ’em out.

Twins jump on Red Sox early in 8-1 victory; Jake Odorizzi pitches into fourth inning

La Velle E. Neal III | Star Tribune | March 8, 2018

FORT MYERS, FLA. – Twins manager Paul Molitor had many of his regulars make the short trip to jetBlue Park on Wednesday, and the experienced lineup didn’t waste time taking it to Red Sox pitching.

The Twins scored four first-inning runs on the way to an 8-1 victory over Boston. Eduardo Escobar and Ryan LaMarre hit home runs. Robbie Grossman and Max Kepler each went 2-for-3, and Logan Morrison was 2-for-2 before leaving the game after the second inning because of right gluteus tightness. He’s considered day to day.

Seven Twins batted in the first inning to knock out Boston righthander Chandler Shepherd. Morrison, Jorge Polanco and Kepler hit back-to-back-to-back singles and Byron Buxton added a sacrifice fly as the Twins took a 4-0 lead. Miguel Sano, at the end of a long at-bat, hit a ground-rule double to right in the second inning that allowed Grossman to score and put the Twins ahead 5-0.

Boston scored a run in the fourth, but Escobar, pinch hitting for Polanco in the sixth, launched a two-run homer to right to put the Twins ahead 7-1.

The Twins hope it was a glimpse of what the offense can do during the regular season.

“With justification that we do,” Molitor said. “It’s one that we saw make a lot of strides last year.”

Minnesota Twins' Eduardo Escobar

Twins righthander Jake Odorizzi gave up one run over 3½ innings on three hits and a walk, lowering his spring training ERA to 1.42.

First cuts of spring: Twins send 4 pitchers, 2 catchers to minor leagues

Phil Miller | Star Tribune | March 7, 2018

FORT MYERS, Fla. — The first cuts of the spring came Wednesday morning, with four Twins pitchers and two catchers reassigned to minor-league camp.

Left-handers Dietrich Enns and Lewis Thorpe, righthanders Zack Littell and Felix Jorge, and catchers Brian Navarreto and Wynston Sawyer will work with the major league team on Wednesday, then move across the complex to the Twins’ minor-league side on Thursday.

Get play-by-play of today's Twins-Red Sox game here.

None of the cuts were a surprise — of the half-dozen first cuts, only Enns and Jorge have any major-league experience, having pitched in two games apiece for the Twins last season. None had pitched more than three innings during the first two weeks of Grapefruit League play, and with minor-league camp opening Tuesday, the Twins chose to give them more regular work. That foursome may eventually form the heart of the starting rotation at Class AAA Rochester this season, though some could open the season at Class AA Chattanooga.

The moves reduce the Twins’ roster to 53 players with three weeks left before Opening Day, 26 of whom are pitchers.

Spin rate, 'pitchability' make Zack Littell an intriguing Twins prospect

Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | March 7, 2018

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Zack Littell heard nothing but positives upon getting optioned out of his first Twins spring training on Wednesday morning.

“I told him he had an impressive camp,” Twins manager Paul Molitor said. “Complimented the work ethic and mound presence. It was nice to put eyes on him and build him up because I felt good about what he did here.”

Littell, acquired along with lefty Dietrich Enns in the July 31 trade that sent veteran pitcher Jaime Garcia to the New York Yankees, is best known for his 19-1 record at three levels last summer. At 6-foot-4 and 220 pounds, the right-hander from North Carolina should open the year at Triple-A Rochester.

Twins prospect Zack Littell pitches this spring at Hammond Stadium in Fort Myers, Fla. (Brace Hemmelgard/Minnesota Twins)Brace Hemmelgard/Minnesota Twins)Twins prospect Zack Littell pitches this spring at Hammond Stadium in Fort Myers, Fla. (Brace Hemmelgard/Minnesota Twins)

“He’s got a little different style,” Molitor said. “His fastball plays and it’s not very hard. He’s got deception, the ability to hide the ball and pitch up in the zone. He hit 90 (mph) a few times. I know he can cut it, I know he can spin it, I know he can slow it down. He seems to have a good feel of how he can get people out.”

The scouting term for that is “pitchability,” a label that has followed Littell since he signed for \$100,000 out of the 11th round with the Seattle Mariners as a high school draftee in 2013. Already traded twice by age 22, the easygoing Littell smiles when asked what “pitchability” means to him.

“It’s really having to be a pitcher, you know?” he said. “A lot of the guys who throw really hard are incredible pitchers but they can get away with a little bit more just based on ‘velo’ and pure raw stuff. I just don’t have it.”

Littell might touch 92 mph with his fastball, but it’s really more about carving up the zone into four quadrants, changing hitters’ eye levels and keeping them off balance with a full pitch mix that includes a solid changeup and a 72-mph curveball.

“I think I learned pretty quickly I had to find a way to get it done,” he said. “I think ‘pitchability’ is a term to describe just finding a way to get it done. It’s not necessarily a compliment, but it’s not an insult by any means. It’s just what you are.”

He learned from two of his Mariners pitching coaches, Rich Dorman and Jason Blanton, the value of pitching inside to open up the outer half of the plate.

“It was just an organizational philosophy,” Littell said. “It was having that mentality of, ‘You own the mound while you’re out there, and anybody who steps in the box is doing it at their own risk.’ ”

Littell isn’t a headhunter but he has averaged seven hit batters in his four full professional seasons. That might be one reason, despite modest stuff, he has averaged just 5.8 homers allowed in that same span.

There’s also the matter of his spin rate, especially on his four-seam fastball, that allows him to pitch up in the zone with success. His nine-inning strikeout rate is a shade under eight for his first 538 pro innings, and last year at Double-A with the Yankees it spiked to an eye-popping 10.6.

A high spin rate will cause hitters to swing under the ball, which was something Matt Belisle used to his advantage out of the Twins’ bullpen last year.

“It definitely helps,” Littell said. “That’s the idea, at least. When I got to the Yankees, they started really looking at those numbers and sharing them with us. That’s when I guess I realized I might have a little bit better (spin rate) than some guys.”

The first time Littell even heard the term “spin rate” was in 2015 while pitching in the Midwest League. The TrackMan system was installed that year at the Mariners’ Class A affiliate in Clinton, Iowa, but the data wasn’t readily shared with the pitchers.

Littell, who has never thrown with a Rapsodo machine recording his data points, has no idea if he’s always had high spin rate on his riding fastball or if it took a leap forward at some point in his development.

“I honestly don’t like to look into a whole lot of that kind of stuff,” he said. “I overanalyze a little bit. I try and stay away from as much as I can. A lot of that I can’t control, regardless. I can’t make it any better or any worse.”

Even as he was recruited out of high school, first by Appalachian State (where he signed) and later by Duke after hiring away two Mountaineers coaches, Littell didn't hear much about his spin rate. Notably, new Twins minor league pitching coordinator Pete Maki, who later moved from App State to Duke, convinced Littell to re-commit to App State after six attempts at improving his SAT score (which he did). "That level of analytics is fairly new," he said. "The research definitely wasn't there to back it up (in 2013). Maybe I did have it then. Maybe I didn't. You just never know."

The important thing is he has it now.

Twins' Eddie Rosario dealing with minor issue in his throwing arm

Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | March 7, 2018

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Twins left fielder Eddie Rosario is dealing with mild tendinitis in his right triceps and has been placed on no-throw status.

The Twins don't consider the issue serious at this point, but if the symptoms persist, he would be sent for further tests. Rosario hasn't played since Sunday, when he was lifted after four innings in a home game against the Pittsburgh Pirates, and he will be reevaluated Friday.

Twins manager Paul Molitor said he wasn't concerned about this being a long-term issue for Rosario, who might not return to the lineup until Sunday or Monday.

Rosario said it wasn't an acute injury that happened on one throw.

"I didn't feel anything throwing," he said through a team translator. "My arm's a little tired. It's just resting for these few days. Just trying to be healthy for the start of the season."

Pitchers typically have dead-arm periods around this point of spring training, and Rosario didn't rule that out as a cause of his concern.

"It could be," he said. "I'm an outfielder. I'm not a pitcher. I wouldn't be able to tell you about pitchers, but it could be."

Rosario, coming off a career-high 27 home runs in 2017, said his arm was healthy coming into camp, and he continues to take swings in the batting cage. He is 3 for 13 (.231) with a home run and three strikeouts this spring.

"I don't want to predict, but sometimes this is nothing more than volume of throwing," Twins general manager Thad Levine said. "You think you're prepared coming into camp, and sometimes the volume of throwing catches up to some of these guys. We're hopeful it's nothing more than that."

MORRISON LIFTED

Logan Morrison lined a pair of singles and hustled to score from second on a Max Kepler single in the first, but was lifted after two innings in the field due to tightness in his right glute.

Kennys Vargas took his place at first base in the bottom of the third.

"He wanted to keep playing," Molitor said of Morrison. "Don't think it's anything major. There's a chance I'll hold him out on Friday. We'll see how he does over the next 48 hours."

The Twins are scheduled to make a pair of trips up the road to Port Charlotte this weekend (Friday and Sunday) to face Morrison's former team, the Tampa Bay Rays.

ERVIN UPDATE

Ervin Santana, the Twins' Opening Day starter the past two seasons, was back in camp Wednesday minus a cast on his surgically repaired pitching hand.

Santana, who underwent surgery on his right middle finger on Feb. 6, will continue doing rehab exercises on his finger before proceeding to flat-ground throwing sessions with fastballs only. He remains on target for a late April/early May return to the Twins' rotation.

"He's probably at least a step or two away from throwing," Levine said. "We'll know a lot more when he starts throwing and we see how his hand reacts."

Throwing his signature slider was an intermittent problem for Santana last season as he dealt with a calcium deposit on the knuckle of his finger.

HUGHES ON FRIDAY

With his next turn scheduled to fall on Thursday's off day, Phil Hughes will throw live batting practice on Friday instead.

Hughes said new pitching coach Garvin Alston wants to have each starter use one spring outing in that fashion in order to work on specific pitches, sequences or locations. Kyle Gibson did that last week while going eight days between starts.

Hughes, who has an 8.31 earned-run average through his first two outings, should be up to four innings or 60 pitches by Friday.

"Garvin just wants to be able to work on some things without having game situations," he said. "We have more starters than days to throw everybody on a game day."

BRIEFLY

Four pitchers were optioned to the minor leagues, and two catchers reassigned Wednesday morning. Optioned were right-handers Zack Littell and Felix Jorge and lefties Dietrich Enns and Lewis Thorpe. Catchers Brian Navaretto and Wynston Sawyer also were sent out, leaving the Twins with 53 players in big-league camp.

Right-hander Michael Kohn will not require surgery for a nerve irritation in his throwing arm but will need four to six months of rest and rehab, a follow-up visit to the Mayo Clinic determined. Kohn, who hasn't pitched in the majors since 2015, turns 32 in June.

Right-hander Aaron Slegers has agreed to a 2018 split contract that would pay him \$547,500 in the majors and \$88,900 in the minors. Tyler Duffey's minor-league salary would be \$271,300 vs. \$557,500 in the majors, according to a person with direct knowledge.

Robbie Grossman, playing left field in Rosario's absence, singled in his first two trips to snap a 0-for-17 start to his spring. ... Miguel Sano walked twice and had a run-scoring double after coming in 1 for 11.

Jake Odorizzi, featuring his offspeed arsenal as he worked for the first time with catcher Jason Castro, scattered three hits and allowed one run in 3 2/3 innings in his second start of the spring.

Why Jake Arrieta, Lance Lynn and Alex Cobb fit (or don't fit) on all 30 teams

David Schoenfeld | ESPN | March 8, 2018

We're now a couple weeks into spring training games, and Jake Arrieta, Alex Cobb and Lance Lynn remain unsigned. They are quality veteran pitchers for sure -- all three have ZiPS projections of at least 2.1 WAR, with Arrieta leading at 2.7 -- but they have yet to find the right match at the right price. Keep in mind that each pitcher rejected a \$17.4 million qualifying offer from his former team, and the market they expected never materialized.

So what now? Maybe they're waiting for an injury. So far, the only significant injury of spring training for a rotation candidate has been to Rays prospect Brent Honeywell, who went down with season-ending Tommy John surgery.

Still, you have to think these three will find homes soon, even if that ultimately means terms much lower than they expected in November. Let's look at three groups of teams, the state of their rotations with projected WAR figures from FanGraphs and where these three might fit.

BEST BETS

Orioles

Projected rotation: Kevin Gausman, Dylan Bundy, Andrew Cashner, Chris Tillman, Gabriel Ynoa

Depth/minors: Mike Wright, Miguel Castro, Hunter Harvey

Projected WAR: 7.2 (28)

In a glass-half-full scenario, the Orioles can dream of improvement from Gausman and Bundy, another soft-contact, low-BABIP season from Cashner and a healthy Tillman. You don't want to know the glass-half-empty scenario. As is, only Gausman projects to have an ERA under 4.50, and the Orioles are the obvious team selling itself as a contender that needs rotation help. Food for thought: Manny Machado, Chris Davis and Mark Trumbo combined for just 2.8 WAR in 2017 -- down from 11.3 in 2016. If those three bounce back, it isn't outrageous to consider the Orioles a sleeper team for the playoffs if the rotation is adequate.

Brewers

Projected rotation: Chase Anderson, Zach Davies, Jhoulys Chacin, Brent Suter, Brandon Woodruff

Depth/minors: Yovani Gallardo, Junior Guerra, Jimmy Nelson (could return in June), Corbin Burnes

Projected WAR: 11.4 (19)

The Brewers have plenty of options here, especially if Nelson returns from his September shoulder surgery and Burnes, who made 16 starts at Double-A in 2017, proves ready sooner rather than later. What the staff clearly lacks is a No. 1 or No. 2-type starter, but it isn't clear that Arrieta is still that guy. With such a young roster, the Brewers do have the flexibility to take a gamble on Arrieta.

Phillies

Projected rotation: Aaron Nola, Jerad Eickhoff, Nick Pivetta, Vince Velasquez, Ben Lively

Depth/minors: Mark Leiter, Zach Eflin, Jake Thompson, Enyel De Los Santos

Projected WAR: 11.9 (16)

General manager Matt Klentak told me a couple weeks ago that the Phillies were still considering their options in free agency but also that the club wanted to be careful not to block any of its current young starters. In other words, the Phillies aren't ready to give up on Velasquez as a starter and want to see what Pivetta and Lively can do with more experience. He also suggested that it is important not to rush a rebuilding project a year early. That's all understandable, and jumping from 66 wins to the playoffs is unlikely -- though not impossible. The Phillies have ultimate financial flexibility, and they could sign Arrieta to a long-term deal, similar to what they did with Carlos Santana, knowing that he can contribute in 2019, 2020 and 2021.

Twins

Projected rotation: Ervin Santana (out until May), Jose Berrios, Jake Odorizzi, Kyle Gibson, Phil Hughes

Depth/minors: Adalberto Mejia, Anibal Sanchez, Stephen Gonsalves, Fernando Romero

Projected WAR: 10.8 (21)

Mike Berardino of the St. Paul Pioneer Press reported that the Twins had offered Lynn a two-year, \$20 million contract, an offer Lynn's camp viewed as a "nonstarter" and that the club wasn't actively pursuing Cobb. Considering that the Twins will play 57 games against the White Sox, Tigers and Royals, they should be right in the middle of a crowded wild-card race. That means even a one- or two-win upgrade could make the difference between making and missing the playoffs.

Nationals

Projected rotation: Max Scherzer, Stephen Strasburg, Gio Gonzalez, Tanner Roark, A.J. Cole

Depth/minors: Edwin Jackson, Erick Fedde

Projected WAR: 16.7 (5)

The Nationals are certainly fine with their top four starters, but their depth is among the worst in the majors. Cole's numbers at Triple-A Syracuse were miserable (5.88 ERA), Fedde is starting again after a temporary bullpen stint in the minors, and Jackson might have a chance to make the team as a non-roster invite. The Nationals and Scott Boras are the best of friends, so speculations persist that Arrieta will eventually end up here. The Nationals might not need him to win the NL East, but he could be a boost in the postseason.

POSSIBILITIES, ESPECIALLY IF AN INJURY OCCURS

Yankees

Projected rotation: Luis Severino, Masahiro Tanaka, Sonny Gray, CC Sabathia, Jordan Montgomery

Depth/minors: Chance Adams, Luis Cessa, Domingo German, Domingo Acevedo, Justus Sheffield

Projected WAR: 16.4 (7)

The Yankees have five proven starters, and I'd take all five over Lynn. Arrieta and Cobb are better but more expensive, and Brian Cashman wants to keep that payroll under the luxury tax and maintain more room for next year's budget. For now, the Yankees will rely on their Triple-A depth, and they should. That Scranton rotation is probably better than what several major league clubs will throw out. Adams had a 2.81 ERA in 21 starts there last year, Cessa has big league experience, and Sheffield could move quickly with his top-shelf stuff. There's no need for the Yankees to do anything right now. They can re-evaluate things in July, as a trade is probably more likely than a free-agent signing.

Mariners

Projected rotation: James Paxton, Mike Leake, Felix Hernandez, Marco Gonzales, Ariel Miranda

Depth/minors: Erasmo Ramirez, Hisashi Iwakuma, Andrew Moore

Projected WAR: 11.6 (17)

The middle of the lineup -- Robinson Cano, Nelson Cruz and Kyle Seager -- is another year older, the minor league system is barren, you're trying to chase down the Astros, and you have the longest playoff drought of any team in the four major pro leagues. Gonzales has looked good early in spring, as he has re-added the cutter to his arsenal, a pitch he didn't throw last year in his first season back from Tommy John surgery. Still, given the fragile health of Paxton and Felix, finding more depth in that elusive search for the playoffs would be beneficial.

Dodgers

Projected rotation: Clayton Kershaw, Rich Hill, Alex Wood, Kenta Maeda, Hyun-Jin Ryu

Depth/minors: Walker Buehler, Ross Stripling, Brock Stewart

Projected WAR: 18.5 (3)

The Dodgers had all kinds of rotation depth last season and needed it, as Scott Kazmir missed the entire season and Julio Urias' shoulder fell apart, and they had to trade for Yu Darvish. The most interesting depth piece the Dodgers have now is Buehler, Keith Law's No. 12 prospect, but he threw just 98 innings last season, so it's unlikely that the Dodgers will want to bump that up to much more than 120 or 130 innings. That means some starts from Stewart and/or Stripling as the Dodgers undoubtedly conserve the innings of the rest of the rotation.

Red Sox

Projected rotation: Chris Sale, David Price, Rick Porcello, Drew Pomeranz, Eduardo Rodriguez (expected to start on DL after knee surgery)

Depth/minors: Brian Johnson, Steven Wright, Hector Velazquez

Projected WAR: 15.9 (8)

The Red Sox have five solid starters when healthy, but Rodriguez and Wright are both coming off knee surgery and won't be ready at the start of the season, plus David Price has to be considered a potential health red flag, given his DL stint last season.

Cardinals

Projected rotation: Carlos Martinez, Michael Wacha, Luke Weaver, Adam Wainwright, Miles Mikolas

Depth/minors: Jack Flaherty, Alex Reyes (possible return in May or June from Tommy John surgery)

Projected WAR: 15.7 (9)

There's no obvious need here at the moment, though the Cardinals are counting heavily on a better Wainwright and Mikolas transitioning back from Japan. Mikolas' first two spring outings weren't good, as he allowed 13 hits and 10 runs in 4.2 innings, so maybe the door remains open for a possible reunion with Lynn. At the minimum, if Mikolas continues to struggle, that should open a slot for Flaherty, who made five starts in the majors last year after posting a 2.18 ERA in the minors. If Reyes is ready by the All-Star break, even better, and with Martinez, Weaver, Flaherty and Reyes, the Cardinals could be looking at the best young rotation in the game in the near future.

LONG SHOTS

Cubs

Projected rotation: Jon Lester, Yu Darvish, Jose Quintana, Kyle Hendricks, Tyler Chatwood

Depth/minors: Mike Montgomery, Eddie Butler

Projected WAR: 17.9 (4)

After signing Darvish and Chatwood, the Cubs would dip into free agency only if a couple of these guys go down for a long period. Even then, they'd probably do something like John Lackey on a one-year deal, rather than shell out for a bigger contract.

Giants

Projected rotation: Madison Bumgarner, Johnny Cueto, Jeff Samardzija, Ty Blach, Chris Stratton

Depth/minors: Derek Holland, Tyler Beede

Projected WAR: 12.4 (15)

Unless they blow way past the tax threshold, there isn't room in the budget for one of the big free agents, even if they're a little short on depth. Plus, they're paying Cueto \$21.8 million for at least four more seasons and Samardzija \$19.8 million for three more seasons, and they'll have to pony up some loose change for Bumgarner in two years.

Angels

Projected rotation: Garrett Richards, Shohei Ohtani, Matt Shoemaker, Andrew Heaney, Tyler Skaggs, Parker Bridwell

Depth/minors: JC Ramirez, Nick Tropeano, Jaime Barria

Projected WAR: 11.6 (17)

The Angels are expected to go with a six-man rotation -- in part to protect Ohtani since he pitched once in a week in Japan but also to limit the innings of a group of pitchers wrecked by injuries in recent seasons. The Angels might have a little room left in the budget to sign another pitcher and remain under the tax threshold, but they'll probably run with this group and see how the six-man experiment unfolds.

Indians

Projected rotation: Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco, Trevor Bauer, Josh Tomlin, Mike Clevinger

Depth/minors: Danny Salazar (will miss start of season with shoulder inflammation), Ryan Merritt

Projected WAR: 18.8 (2)

The Indians already have one injury with Salazar battling a tender shoulder. Still, the rotation is strong enough and deep enough. Given their payroll roadblocks, the only way they'd dig into free agency is if Kluber or Carrasco suffered a season-ending injury.

Reds

Projected rotation: Luis Castillo, Anthony DeSclafani, Brandon Finnegan, Sal Romano, Homer Bailey

Depth/minors: Tyler Mahle, Robert Stephenson, Amir Garrett, Cody Reed, Jackson Stephens

Projected WAR: 9.0 (26)

The Reds churned through 16 starters in 2017, with Castillo emerging as the bright spot and potential ace after posting a 3.12 ERA in 15 starts. After that? The Reds have no idea what they'll get from everybody else, so getting stability from a veteran such as Arrieta or Cobb makes sense. As with the Phillies, it wouldn't be so much for 2018 as for the next few seasons.

Diamondbacks

Projected rotation: Zack Greinke, Robbie Ray, Taijuan Walker, Zack Godley, Patrick Corbin

Depth/minors: Braden Shipley, Albert Suarez, Shelby Miller (expected back midseason from Tommy John surgery)

Projected WAR: 15.1 (10)

The Diamondbacks have a very good rotation. What they lack is reliable depth if one of the top five suffers a serious injury. Trading Anthony Banda to get Steven Souza provided a necessary upgrade in the outfield, but it chipped away at the potential rotation depth. Still, it would seem that even Lynn or Cobb might be out of Arizona's price range.

NOT GONNA HAPPEN

Rays, Blue Jays, Rockies, Marlins, Braves, Pirates, White Sox, Tigers, Royals, Mets, A's, Padres, Astros and Rangers.

Wetmore: Losing Brian Dozier would sting, but here are 4 reasons why Twins could wait on contract

Derek Wetmore | ESPN 1500 | March 7, 2018

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Brian Dozier does not love talking publicly about his contract situation — unless he has to. Dozier's name is in the news this week for the apparent inactivity in contract extension talks between the slugging Gold Glover and his current employer.

I'm going to spend the majority of the column on the reasons why the Twins should not feel compelled to give Dozier a contract extension this spring. There are logical reasons. We'll get to those. The first thing that should be said is that Dozier deserves to be paid. He's the face of a franchise, one of the faces of the Twins' resurgence, a worker, a good player and he still has good years left to give the only team he's ever known. Also worth noting: the Twins could afford to show Dozier the money. They have enviable payroll flexibility beginning next year (when Dozier would hit free agency). And we can talk all day long about the most efficient way to allocate resources; ultimately, that's a fancy way of saying "stingy."

With that said, here are 4 factors that could be keeping the Twins from jumping head-first into those contract extension talks.

1. The changing tide in free agency absolutely impacts what teams will think about extension candidates.

It's the second week of March and Jake Arrieta, Lance Lynn, Alex Cobb, Greg Holland, Mike Moustakas and plenty of other players are technically unemployed. They're qualified, they want to work, and they can't find a team that wants to upgrade their roster by signing of them. Not at the current asking price, anyway.

That's kind of a nightmare scenario for a player, I'd imagine. Many agents have been paid in the past and will be paid in the future. A player is an "n" of 1. He has one career and financial picture with which to concern himself. Work basically your whole adult life to get to the big leagues, succeed enough once you get there to make it all the way to free agency, and then, thud. The open market stops valuing the future contributions you can provide. With only about 18 teams looking willing to add free agents — and cost concerns ever-present within that group — the free-agent market hasn't been the cash grab that it once was for good players.

Neil Walker is a second baseman who hit .265/.362/.439 with 14 homers last year. He's a good player but not as good as Dozier. FanGraphs has him valued at an average of 2.9 Wins Above Replacement over the past 4 seasons. He's 32, which is a year older than Dozier will be next winter when he's scheduled to hit free agency.

The point isn't to compare the two players but only to say that Walker is a worthwhile second baseman and he's looking for work. I would think that teams would be less inclined to commit big money to extending older 3-Win players if they know that 2-Win players might just grow on trees.

Aaron Gleeman at Baseball Prospectus did a good write-up on the Dozier extension question, and his analysis included the fact that for the most part, good second basemen haven't been paid handsomely.

2. Free agency next year could be a totally different story.

I've poked fun this winter at the concept that teams now prefer to be "efficient spenders" than winners. Maybe that's just the natural evolution of non-super teams that fear being out-resourced by the heavyweights in L.A., New York and Chicago. Call it a defense mechanism.

It's cool to be a thrifty baseball team that still wins games.

It's also cool to sign Bryce Harper.

So before we write off this winter as The End of Free Agency, we should at least acknowledge three things: Maybe there will be fewer than 10 teams tanking next year; Maybe the Yankees and Dodgers won't be so scared of tip-toeing the luxury-tax line; and maybe the truly great players next year will reignite the days of GMs casually throwing around the company credit card.

How does all of that affect Dozier? Well, he'll join a market that includes younger stars like Harper and Manny Machado. It could include Josh Donaldson, Adam Jones, Charlie Blackmon and some awfully good pitchers. It also could include another great-hitting second basemen: Daniel Murphy. And don't forget Ian Kinsler and D.J. LeMahieu.

Again, the point isn't to compare Dozier with these players. It's to ask the simple question: How many good teams will be looking to spend good money on a second baseman next year? And who is the top banana? And how much are teams going to be willing to spend on their backup plan?

Supply could exceed demand. That would be bad news for a guy like Dozier, who deserves to get paid.

3. What would the Twins do without Dozier at second base?

Jorge Polanco looked for awhile like he was ticketed to be a second baseman. Now, I think he could stay on the left side of second. Would prospect Nick Gordon be ready to rock in 2019 as an everyday second baseman?

Gordon doesn't appear to have an elite-level tool like Dozier's power, which, by the way, didn't emerge until he was a big leaguer.

But while Gordon might not excite you if you're looking for superstar prospects, I believe that he makes up for it by being pretty good at everything. He can run a little bit — he'll steal bases but he gets thrown out a lot. He hit .270/.341/.408 with 9 home runs at Double-A last year as a 21-year-old. That looks to me like holding your own in the Southern League, although it's not the power output to match Dozier. They're different players.

So, maybe Gordon is ready to be an everyday contributor in 2019. Whichever player is a better shortstop — Polanco or Gordon — gets to keep the position, and the other replaces Dozier at second base.

If Gordon isn't ready — or if he gets traded this season at some point — then the Twins could sign one of those other free-agent second basemen. Or they could sign a shortstop and move Polanco to second base.

In some ways Dozier is irreplaceable. If you have money and freedom to spend, though, and there's a good supply of good players, you can buy back some of that production on the free agent market.

4. Teams seem like they're increasingly fearful of "old guys."

Logan Morrison joked at his introductory press conference this spring that he still had a few good years left in him, even if they're trying to kick him out of the league. Morrison is 30.

He said it with a wink and a smile. There's a kernel of truth packed away inside.

I started following baseball in the height of the steroid era. It was many years later that I learned that the drugs don't make you huge; they give your body a well-above-average recovery ability, and that's why a lot of baseball get so itchy when the topic is discussed. When some players had more to rely on than their natural biology, those guys could extend their career well into their 30's.

Well, now that the game appears to have been cleaned up, at least for the most part, there's a term you hear thrown around every now and again. Aging Curves.

Think of it like the average expected outcome for certain players as they get older. The Aging Curve of a speedy center fielder might be different than a power-hitting corner infielder or DH, and they might be different for players with different body types. The point is that teams are discounting future performance of players as they get into their 30's — past their athletic prime — because in general that's what happens with players. There are exceptions, sure. Do you want to be the team that gambles that Player X will defy the average of what most other players do at his age? A lot of teams seem too risk-averse for that now.

I'm curious to see how Dozier's skills carry into his 30's. (He'll be 31 in May.) He's a unique player. He plays good defense, with solid range if not spectacular arm strength. He seems to me like he runs the bases well. He's elite when it comes to sending high fastballs into the left-field bleachers, which speaks to his plan at the plate and a top-level physical ability.

I'm not qualified to project those things going forward. I just know that it's a factor, whether you're considering a 2-year deal or one of those 7-year jumbo contracts.

Twins, like the Rays, plan to start with a 4-man rotation, but Minnesota won't try to make it last

Derek Wetmore | ESPN 1500 | March 7, 2018

FORT MYERS, FLA. — The Rays are going to start the season with a 4-man starting rotation, just like the Twins. Minnesota, however, plans to bump that up to a 5-man starting staff once the need arises, which is where the Twins deviate from Tampa Bay.

The Rays, according to reports out of their spring training, will go with a 4-man rotation for the full season, if things go according to plan. To be more specific: The Rays will have 4 regular starters and every time there's need for a fifth starter, they'll turn to a "Bullpen Game," which is a handful of starters each taking a couple innings and piecing it together for 9.

The Twins won't need a fifth starter until April 11 — and they'll rarely require his services in the first month of the season. So they'll most likely start the season with 4 to make the best use of the roster spots available. Then they'll call up a fifth when they need him. (And probably send him back down as soon as they don't.)

The Twins also have a deep list of candidate for the back end of the starting rotation and for the bullpen, too, for that matter. A similar wealth of arms in Tampa — and the salary dump of Jake Odorizzi — means they'll ask a group to come together on days when a traditional starter is not available. It's an interesting ploy. Manager Kevin Cash is quoted in the Tampa Bay Times as to whether or not this is the Rays being innovative:

"Only if it works," Cash said. "If it doesn't, it's dumb."

For the Twins' part, manager Paul Molitor said he doesn't see that as a likely option for his club. The difference between the Rays and Twins, it appears, is that the Twins are making a bid for the postseason while the Rays are making a bid to be less expensive.

"With where we're at and the schedule, it still looks like — at least as of today — it's going to make sense for us to [begin with a 4-man rotation]," Molitor said.

But would he consider extending that into the season?

"I have not. I understand that it's not the first time it's been talked about," Molitor said. "Once in awhile circumstances in season makes you consider that, but to do it as a plan from the start, I'm not there for our personnel."

My guess right now is that the Twins are going to begin the season with J.O. Berrios, Jake Odorizzi and Kyle Gibson in their rotation. Then they'll pick one from the quarter of Phil Hughes, Anibal Sanchez, Adalberto Mejia and Tyler Duffey to be the fourth starter.

First round of cuts at Twins camp involves some pitching prospects

Derek Wetmore | ESPN 1500 | March 7, 2018

FORT MYERS, Fla. — The Twins on Wednesday announced that they've trimmed their spring training roster down by a few names. They've trimmed some fat ahead of Thursday's off day.

The Twins optioned starters Dietrich Enns and Felix Jorge to Triple-A Rochester. They optioned starters Zack Littell and Lewis Thorpe to Double-A Chattanooga. And they reassigned two non-roster catchers — Brian Navarreto and Wynston Sawyer — to minor league camp.

That will help with some congestion in the clubhouse, and it will allow the starters to begin to build up their innings workload, so that they can be ready to start the season. As the more seasoned veterans, like Jake Odorizzi, begin to get stretched out, it leaves a big shortage of innings for all the pitchers in camp. So the Twins got ahead and lessened the demand for innings.

The Twins open the season March 29 at Baltimore. But they'll be out of Florida and playing a warm-up game at Nationals Park on the 27th. This round of cuts, then, is a little bit ahead of what CBO Derek Falvey told our Patrick Reusse this week: The first round of cuts is typically between 20 and 23 days from the start of the season.

Twins' Morrison collects two hits in win over Red Sox

Staff Writer | Associated Press | March 7, 2018

J.D. Martinez went 0 for 2 in his Boston debut, hitting a pair of flyballs. Martinez, who signed with the Red Sox in late February, batted cleanup and played left field.

Jake Odorizzi gave up a run on three hits over 3 2/3 innings in his second start for Minnesota. Twins newcomer Logan Morrison got two hits and Miguel Sano doubled.

Fernando Romero is creating one very good debate for the Twins

Dan Hayes | The Athletic | March 7, 2018

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Fernando Romero's sizzling pitching performance this spring has likely only made the decision-making process that much harder on the Twins.

Working solely in relief, the organization's top pitching prospect has been unhittable in three spring outings, providing the front office with more justifiable reasons to soon promote him to the big leagues. Romero, ranked the No. 68 overall prospect in baseball by MLB Pipeline.com, hasn't allowed a hit in five spring innings and has walked one with six strikeouts.

In one corner, the Twins think Romero's lethal fastball-slider combo is close to being major-league ready and offering a nasty complement to the back end of a talented bullpen.

On the other hand, Romero's velocity has lasting power that the Twins think could make him a potential front-end-of-the-rotation starter if given the proper amount of time to further develop his changeup.

Whether or not the Twins can afford Romero that opportunity based on their major-league needs could prove to be one of the biggest internal debates of the 2018 season. But damn if general manager Thad Levine can't help but to hear the bad influence on his left shoulder screaming now, now, now instead of focusing on the good guy on the right.

"There could be a temptation for us to move him over sooner than later because with the evolution of the game and how teams build pitching staffs, a guy who can get the best hitters on the other team potentially, and do it in three-to-six-out clips, is extremely valuable," Levine said. "So we'll weigh that as he continues to develop in the short term. We're challenging him to develop the changeup and stay every bit on the starting track."

Romero has been one of the most talked about players in Twins camp so far. His fastball, which sits in the mid-90s and reaches 98-99 mph, has natural run and his slider is nasty, too.

Manager Paul Molitor is intrigued by reports that Romero — who missed the 2014 and 2015 seasons because of Tommy John surgery — can sustain his velocity through 110 pitches. When Romero met with the Twins' braintrust earlier this spring, Molitor tried to emphasize to Romero that he currently sees him as a starter.

"It's kind of potentially a rare find in terms of starting," Molitor said. "I think that's the path I wanted him to stay on and tried to kind of dispel anything he might have heard about trying to get him to transition (to the bullpen) and to focus on starting, which will include improving his secondary pitches and maybe we'll turn him into something special."

Though he hasn't pitched above Double-A, Romero has heard the chatter and is aware he's on the cusp of the big leagues. He has even allowed himself to imagine the possibility.

"I've been thinking about it," Romero said. "Why not?"

But Romero doesn't intend to limit his options, and that's why he has worked hard to improve his changeup this spring. Romero said he has practiced throwing the off-speed pitch with catch partner José Berrios on the sidelines.

"It's getting there," Romero said. "We're working on it."

"I'm just trying to feel my wrist."

Berrios said Romero's assessment is accurate. Berrios also has tried to emphasize a concept Romero clearly is grasping, that the changeup is

critical to provide a second option out of the same arm slot from which he throws his fastball. In order to be a starting pitcher, Levine said Romero needs an effective changeup in order to face a lineup a third time through.

“It’s getting better,” Berrios said. “He’s got good power in his arm. He just needs the same arm action with two pitches. He just needs to practice. That’s what he’s doing right now.”

The Twins are actively trying not to dream too much about the immediate impact Romero potentially could have on their bullpen. Adding a stretched-out arm with 215 innings pitched the past two seasons could give the Twins a deadly option capable of multiple innings to include in a rebuilt bullpen.

Farm director Jeremy Zoll said Romero’s top objective is getting confident throwing the changeup. The team strives to do what it can to help Romero create an “extra level of conviction” with the pitch, Zoll said. But Zoll also suspects there’s a distinct possibility the impatient bastard on Levine’s left shoulder could defeat the right’s sage wisdom soon and result in a promotion.

“I’m sure it’ll be an ongoing conversation we’ll be having, but those feel like the good ones you want to be having,” Zoll said. “If we think guys have an opportunity to help the big-league team and (it’s) balancing more immediate potential big-league success versus playing the long game, you’d rather have those problems.”

Farm System Rankings: Pitchers (20-11)

Kelsie Heneghan | MiLB.com | March 6, 2018

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, 20-11:

20. Arizona Diamondbacks

It was a good year for D-backs prospects, especially at the lower levels. While reliever Jimmie Sherfy was making his Major League debut and securing a spot on the postseason roster, Jon Duplantier was dominating the Minors. MLB.com's No. 73 overall prospect led all Minor Leaguers with a 1.39 ERA over 136 innings. The real kicker is that the 23-year-old was in the hitter-friendly California League for half the season. Before turning 19, Matt Tabor shined in a limited stay in the Rookie-level Arizona League, while Taylor Clarke did well at Double-A Jackson but had trouble adjusting at the end of the year with Triple-A Reno. In February, the D-backs added another talented arm in Taylor Widener, who led the Florida State League with a 1.15 WHIP as a Yankees prospect. All-in-all, Chase Field could host to a stacked rotation in a few years.

19. Boston Red Sox

Like the D-backs, the Red Sox have a relatively young system, with six of their top eight pitching prospects turning pro in the past two years. From the 2016 Draft class, No. 2 prospect Jay Groome was rattled by injuries last year, while Mike Shawaryn ranked among the Minor League leaders with 169 strikeouts and 2016 signee Bryan Mata shoved as the youngest player in the South Atlantic League at 18. Following the 2017 Draft, Tanner Houck and Jake Thompson led the Class A Short Season Lowell rotation as Alex Scherff focused on resting his arm. Southpaw Jalen Beeks represents the organization's closest arm after fanning 155, advancing to Triple-A and being named the Red Sox Minor Leaguer Pitcher of the Year.

18. Miami Marlins

Considering the Marlins' offseason, it's no surprise many of their top arms came from trades, including Sandy Alcantara, Jorge Guzman, Nick Neidert and Zac Gallen. Alcantara and Guzman, as well as Edward Cabrera, possess fastballs that grade well-above average, with former Yankees prospect Guzman's being the most touted. In terms of homegrown talent, 2016 first-rounder Braxton Garrett underwent Tommy John surgery last June, 2017 first-rounder Trevor Rogers did not pitch after the Draft and Dillon Peters missed three months with a thumb injury. Peters made his Major League debut in September, though, and is competing alongside Alcantara for a rotation spot in Miami.

17. Minnesota Twins

The Twins' top pitching prospects have had to overcome their share of adversity, but fans can take comfort in how well they seem to bounce back. Minnesota's top Minor League arm, Fernando Romero, missed parts of 2014 and 2015 following Tommy John surgery but has flashed his well above average fastball since. Stephen Gonsalves had his 2017 season delayed by a shoulder issue but advanced to -- and did well at -- Triple-A once he returned. Brusdar Graterol had Tommy John surgery in 2016, while Lewis Thorpe missed 2015 after the procedure and 2016 with mononucleosis. And Zack Littell has been traded twice since the 2016 season. All that being said, they notched sub-4.00 ERA's last year.

16. Cleveland Indians

The Indians do not have a lot of pitching depth in the Minors, but they do have Triston McKenzie. MLB.com's No. 24 overall prospect -- and

ninth-ranked right-hander -- ranked second in the Minors with 186 strikeouts while issuing 45 free passes over 143 innings for Class A Advanced Lynchburg. And most of that happened before he turned 20 in August. The 2015 competitive balance pick earned a trip to the All-Star Futures Game as he continues to add speed to his fastball. Joining McKenzie on the Hillcats staff that led the Carolina League with a 3.21 ERA were Shane Bieber and Aaron Civale, both of whom were selected in the 2016 Draft. The pair combined for 303 punchouts and 24 walks -- an impressive 12.63 K/BB.

15. Milwaukee Brewers

Most of the Brewers' best pitching prospects are in the heart of the Minors, with Corbin Burnes, Luis Ortiz, Freddy Peralta, Marcos Diplan and Cody Ponce pitching for Class A Advanced Carolina and/or Double-A Biloxi last season. That should mean callups this and big league proving time in 2019. However, Brandon Woodruff and Adrian Houser could make waves sooner. The former made his big league debut last August after shaking off a hamstring injury, while the latter returned from Tommy John surgery in July before a stint in the Arizona Fall League. Houser got a cup of coffee in 2015 and will look to resume that momentum this season.

14. Cincinnati Reds

While two-way players were all the rage last year with the Rays drafting Brendan McKay and the Angels signing Shohei Ohtani, Reds first-rounder Hunter Greene put his bat away to focus on pitching. And with a fastball that grades an 80 (on the 20-80 scale) and touches triple digits, there's still plenty to be excited about. Tyler Mahle, the organization's other Top-100 prospect, enjoyed a big 2017 that featured a Southern League perfect game and his Major League debut. After repeating Class A Dayton, 2015 second-rounder Tony Santillan got back on track, while Vladimir Gutierrez will look for his own rebound after a tough full-season debut. Jimmy Herget is looking for a spot in the Cincinnati bullpen after leading the farm system with 25 saves in 31 chances at the upper levels.

13. Pittsburgh Pirates

Like the Reds, the Pirates have two big names about whom fans should be jazzed, as well as some other noteworthy arms. Following Tyler Glasnow's graduation from the prospect rankings, Mitch Keller -- MLB.com's No. 15 overall prospect -- shook off a back issue and shined on the way to Double-A Altoona. Meanwhile, in his pro debut, 18-year-old Shane Bieber put his five-pitch arsenal on display in the Rookie-level Gulf Coast League. Taylor Hearn battled an oblique injury, joining Keller in the AFL to end the year, while Nick Kingham put an ankle injury behind him to pitch for Triple-A Indianapolis. Although he earned a trip to the Futures Game, Luis Escobar continues to work on control issues at the lower levels.

12. Oakland Athletics

Two years ago, Sean Manaea was the A's only big pitching name. Now he's in the Oakland rotation and the farm system has four potential aces in the pipeline. With a well above average fastball, 2016 sixth overall pick A.J. Puk is the Minors' No. 2 southpaw, earning a trip to the Futures Game and a promotion to the Double-A Texas League in his first full season. The A's picked up Grant Holmes from the Dodgers in 2016 and last July got lefty Jesus Luzardo from the Nationals and righty James Kaprielian -- who's coming off Tommy John surgery -- from the Yankees. Puk and Holmes should see time in Oakland this year, while Kaprielian could follow in 2019 and Luzardo a year later as a succession falls into place.

11. Detroit Tigers

If there was any doubt, the Tigers are officially a pitcher-heavy system. Detroit's top four prospects are all right-handed hurlers -- they're the club's only entries in the Top-100 -- and six of the system's top eight prospects are pitchers. Franklin Perez came over in the Justin Verlander trade and has a shot at being the team's next ace, reaching Double-A at the age of 19. The Tigers have been cautious with first-rounders Matt Manning (2016) and Alex Faedo (2017), but the pair should log plenty of innings this season. Rounding out the Top-100 quartet is 2015 first-rounder Beau Burrows, who excelled at Class A Advanced but found the adjustment to Double-A difficult, though it probably won't be long before he figures out the level. His Florida State League teammates, Kyle Funkhouser and Gregory Soto, dominated with the Flying Tigers. With all those arms, fans in Motown should be able to dust off their highest hopes.