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**Inbox: Vet showdown for fourth rotation spot?**

**Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | March 8, 2018**

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- It's exactly three weeks until Opening Day against the Orioles at Camden Yards on March 29, and the Twins have several roster decisions that need to be made in the coming weeks.

The final spot in the rotation remains up for grabs, there's a competition for the final bench spot and likely two openings in the bullpen. With that in mind, here's this week's Inbox:

Logan West  
@Logan\_Western

Who in your mind has a beat shot to be that 4th starter, that is, if the twins do a 4 man rotation early on.

Twins manager Paul Molitor said on Wednesday that he still plans on opening with a four-man rotation, adding that there is no current favorite in that race for the final spot. With Jose Berrios, Jake Odorizzi and Kyle Gibson locks to be the first three starters, the last spot is essentially between Phil Hughes, Anibal Sanchez and Adalberto Mejia.

Hughes and Sanchez are both coming off subpar outings, and Hughes will throw in a simulated game on Friday so he can work on his changeup and slider locations without the game results mattering. Sanchez will get his first start on Sunday after giving up six runs over two innings against the Pirates last Sunday. Both right-handers threw in long relief last year and the loser of the rotation battle could be a candidate for that role, along with Tyler Duffey.

Mejia has admirably lost 16 pounds since last year, but he still has trouble putting away hitters like last season. He's hurt by the fact he can easily be optioned to Triple-A Rochester to start the year. Hughes will get the longest look because he's owed \$26.4 million over the next two seasons, while only \$500,000 of Sanchez's \$2.5 million deal is guaranteed.

Jonas Maurer  
@sirjonas22

If the @Twins start with a four man rotation do you think they'll carry an extra bench player or an extra reliever?

The Twins are looking at opening with a four-man bench that's expected to be composed of backup catcher Mitch Garver, backup infielder Eduardo Escobar, utility man Ehire Adrianza and a final bench piece that's basically down to a fourth-outfielder competition between Robbie Grossman and Zack Granite. Of course, that could change if Miguel Sano is suspended to open the season, as it could open a spot for non-roster infielder Erick Aybar.

It's ultimately going to be up to the Twins to decide if they want a speedy backup outfielder who can play all three positions or a veteran switch-

hitter who can get on base but struggles defensively. Grossman is out of options, while Granite can be optioned to Rochester, which could play a factor.

As for the bullpen, the eight relievers are likely to be Fernando Rodney, Zach Duke, Addison Reed, Trevor Hildenberger, Taylor Rogers and Ryan Pressly, with two spots open. One could be a long reliever such as Sanchez, Hughes or Duffey, while the other has candidates such as Rule 5 Draft pick Tyler Kinley, Alan Busenitz, John Curtiss and Gabriel Moya.

James Carlson  
@MNSportsfan1991

I was just wondering if the Twins have talked with the Marlins about Kinley. I have heard some stuff but nothing major.

The Twins are very intrigued by Kinley, who must make the 25-man roster and remain on it all season or be offered back to the Marlins for \$50,000. Kinley has a fastball that's reached as high as 99 mph and his slider is sitting 91-92 mph. Kinley has a shot at making the roster, but Minnesota could look to rid him of his Rule 5 Draft status by making a trade with Miami to keep him. They're not at that point yet, but the Twins do like his stuff.

bolin  
@dockendorf\_19

Do you think the Twins will offer Dozier an extension? If not, why?

At this point, the Twins and Brian Dozier are both prepared to leave Spring Training without an extension being signed. Things can always change, but there has been no movement on that front. Minnesota, though, is open to talking about a possible extension during the season, so there's no firm deadline.

As for their rationale, the Twins have plenty of middle-infield depth coming up to join shortstop Jorge Polanco with highly regarded shortstops Nick Gordon, Wander Javier and Royce Lewis in the organization. But it's always tough to move on from a franchise cornerstone, especially one with power and defense at a premium position. So an extension can't be fully ruled out in the future, but as of right now, Minnesota has showed no interest in exploring an extension this spring.

Eric Walz  
@Ewalz85

Who are you most excited about seeing in the low minors this year on taking a big step this season?

Right-hander Brusdar Graterol is one to watch, as he has the highest ceiling of any of starting pitcher in the farm system. The 19-year-old is the club's No. 7 prospect and missed the 2016 season after Tommy John surgery, but he returned to Rookie ball last year, showcasing his fastball that can reach 100 mph to go along with his plus slider and plus curveball. Graterol is still a work in progress and is likely to see action at Class A Cedar Rapids this year, but he could shoot up prospect lists with another strong year.

### **Fast riser Gabriel Moya is making his case to stay with Twins**

**Phil Miller | Star Tribune | March 9, 2018**

FORT MYERS, FLA. – Time for a little off-day Twins trivia: The team used a franchise-record 28 pitchers in relief at least once last season; almost as remarkably, nearly two-thirds of those relievers are already gone. Only 10 are in training camp with the Twins today, and three of them (Jose Berrios, Phil Hughes and Aaron Slegers) are actually starting pitchers.

So here's the question: Of the remaining seven returning relievers, which one comes armed with the slowest fastball? Who in fact, outside of those pitchers recovering from injuries, might have the least velocity on the entire staff?

If you have ever watched him pitch, the answer — Gabriel Moya — might come as a shock. “The way he carries himself, the way he delivers the ball, it's very hard to read and perceive and react,” said Ivan Arteaga, the pitching coach at Class AA Chattanooga. “His fastball looks like 98, and it's actually 90 or maybe 91.”

Moya is the Venezuelan left-hander who so impressed Arteaga and the Twins after being acquired from Arizona in July for catcher John Ryan Murphy, he was promoted to the major leagues, and into the heat of a playoff race, only a month later. Now, having just turned 23 and with only six big-league innings behind him, Moya is making a strong case that he is ready to come north.

Certainly Moya has no doubts. If the adage that “You should dress for the job you want, not the one you have” is true, he feels right at home in a Twins jersey. A changeup pitcher's best friend is deception, the art of looking more fearsome than you actually are. And that's not just Moya's

best pitch — it's his entire persona.

"If you watch him around [camp], he acts like he belongs," manager Paul Molitor said. "He thinks he belongs."

So do the coaches who work with him.

"I see [guts] and heart. I see a guy who's not scared. At a young age, that's pretty good," said Eddie Guardado, the Twins bullpen coach and another former lefty reliever who relied on swagger and deception more than velocity. "Half the battle is going out there and believing in your stuff. And he believes in it."

Moya makes believers of hitters, too, even before he unleashes a pitch. Moya bends over to receive the sign, his left arm dangling like a gunslinger. He pulls himself into an exaggerated stretch position, his right leg stretched in front of him, toes pointed at the batter, while he coils his upper body into his chest, like a spring-loaded trap being set. Then, with a sudden jerk, he explodes toward the hitter and fires a pitch that appears launched from a catapult.

A pitch that often travels only 80 mph, which produces plenty of awkward swings and weak contact.

"When I go on the mound, my goal is to make the batter think I'm going to eat him alive. That this is my territory," Moya said through a translator. "A few years back, I started using [that delivery] to get into my arm slot quickly so it looked like the pitch gets there faster. It worked for me then and it works for me now."

It certainly works this spring. Moya surrendered a home run to the second batter he faced this spring, but he has been nearly perfect since then, retiring 13 of the past 14 hitters he has faced, five via strikeout, and without issuing a walk. But that comes as no surprise to a pitcher who posted an 0.77 ERA in 58 innings at Class AA last year, and a 1.55 ERA in Class A the year before.

"I feel good. That's the most important thing," Moya said. "I'm staying positive. Throwing the changeup well against righthanders."

The Twins believe lefthanded hitters are less susceptible to his changeup, so Moya is spending the spring establishing a slider that dives away from them. Taught to him by Jose Solarte, a former Venezuelan professional, "it's just getting to where it's enticing enough to get chases off the plate," Molitor said, "and he's comfortable enough to use it for either strike one or as a get-back-into-the-count pitch."

Will he get that chance this spring? Zach Duke and Taylor Rogers already own spots in the bullpen, so it means persuading Molitor that it's worth carrying three lefthanders. Guess what? Moya is confident. No wonder his teammates call him "Little Eddie," after Guardado, because of similarities in height, body type — and attitude.

"Guardado wasn't afraid to throw fastballs for strikes. I'm not either," Moya said. "I don't worry about making the team. I focus on getting hitters out, every time."

### **MLB balks at Twins' no-name road lineups in spring training**

**Phil Miller and La Velle E. Neal III | Star Tribune | March 9, 2018**

FORT MYERS, FLA. — Road teams are expected to field lineups with at least four regulars from the previous season during spring training games, and Major League Baseball is getting aggressive about enforcing that edict. It's to ensure that the ticket-buying fan sees some recognizable faces and is not stuck watching a bunch of anonymous minor leaguers wearing uniform numbers in the 80s.

MLB's cutoff to be considered a recognizable face: 300 plate appearances.

Complaints about how teams fill out their travel rosters have been on the rise in recent years. And Twins manager Paul Molitor acknowledged Wednesday that his club is one of several to have received a phone call from the commissioner's office about a couple of the lineups this spring.

"We were a little bit on the line with a couple lineups, from what I heard," Molitor said. "I'm going to have to spread out guys a little bit."

The Twins have 10 position players who had at least 300 plate appearances last season, and Kennys Vargas, with 264, was just short of that cutoff.

MLB has threatened to punish teams who break the rule, which is much more difficult for Florida teams. All 15 Cactus League teams hold spring training in the Phoenix metro area, making rides longer than 45 minutes rare. Grapefruit League travel is different, with three-hour bus rides unavoidable.

Tigers manager Ron Gardenhire recently told Detroit reporters that he doesn't want to risk one of his veteran players getting a sore back from a two-hour bus ride. And he has a rebuilding job on his hands.

"You try to be respectful. I do," Gardenhire said. "But a lot of times with the Twins, we didn't have five regulars. ... It's the same situation [with the Tigers]. We have a lot of young people and a lot of people aren't going to know their names."

Helmets with pop

The Twins' uniforms aren't changing this season, but they have made one alteration that sharp-eyed fans will notice right away. It's a change players have already embraced.

"I like these new helmets," said outfielder Eddie Rosario, holding up his 2018 team-issued headgear. "[They] make us look really good."

The Twins' batting helmets this season have a matte finish, a metallic look that doesn't reflect light the way their traditional shiny helmets do. The flatter-colored dark blue color also doesn't show scuffs and scrapes like the previous ones. In addition, the TC logo on the front is in three dimensions, rising about a quarter-inch off the surface, rather than a sticker applied to the front.

"I like them. The Padres were wearing them when we played them last year, and they looked really good," first baseman Joe Mauer said. "I'm not sure the blue on the helmet exactly matches the [blue on the] jersey, but they're pretty sharp."

The change came at the suggestion of Donna Pohlad, wife of Twins owner Jim Pohlad, according to equipment manager Rod McCormick. "She'd seen other teams with them, and it was something she liked," he said. "We looked into it and decided to go forward with it, and they look great."

On deck

Staying on his every-fifth-day schedule that would have him start Opening Day, Jose Berrios will be on the mound Friday as the Twins travel to Port Charlotte to face the Rays.

### **Twins pitcher Jose Berrios pushes and pushes to get better**

**Jim Souhan | Star Tribune | March 9, 2018**

JIM SOUHAN @SOUHANSTRIB

Fort Myers, Fla. – Jose Berrios pitched on Sunday. Early Monday morning, he walked alone to left field in an empty Hammond Stadium and endured a workout that looked like a form of punishment.

He sprinted forward and backward, seeming to meditate between sets, then wrapped his body in blue bands. Looking like he had been entrapped by a large, colorful spider web, he practiced his pitching motion, then a few moves that looked more suited to ballet than baseball.

You kept waiting for him to execute the Crane Kick from "Karate Kid."

This winter, Berrios, the best young pitcher in the Twins rotation, pushed cars to strengthen his legs. He's always been built like a boxer; now he looks like he's smuggling grapefruits under his jersey. Whether that makes him the best pitcher he can be remains to be determined.

"I feel great," Berrios said. "Wonderful. I feel stronger."

He'll start Friday against Tampa Bay, five days after saying his goal for the 2018 season is to contend for the Cy Young Award.

"Right now I feel I'm moving better on the mound, I feel all of my body going forward, together. That way I don't put too much strain on my arm. Nice and easy."

The question is not whether Berrios will do all he can to succeed but whether, in baseball, maximum effort yields maximum results.

Marty Cordova won the Rookie of the Year award in 1995 and drove in 111 runs in 1996. I visited him the next winter and went through his boxing workouts with him. He lifted weights several times a day, focusing on different muscle groups. He could have entered a bodybuilding contest.

Perhaps working out on a concrete floor at a boxing gym was unwise. Cordova developed a sore heel. In 1997, the budding star played in just 103 games and batted .246. He would never again drive in 70 runs in a season.

Modern athletes can be too dedicated. Instead of letting their bodies rest, many of them risk muscle fatigue and repetitive stress injuries with intense offseason workouts.

The Hall of Fame is filled with players who kept it simple, or hibernated during the winter. Bert Blyleven believed in running, and more running. So did Dennis Eckersley. Kirby Puckett never worked out during the winter until 1996.

Nolan Ryan lived on an exercise bike. Paul Molitor worked out but concentrated, during the winter, on leg strength and flexibility, not adding bulk.

The Twins have rightfully worried about the conditioning and weight of a handful of players in recent years, including Glen Perkins, Phil Hughes, Kennys Vargas and Miguel Sano. With Berrios, they worry he'll pull a hammy pushing a Hyundai.

"I love the kid," Twins Chief Baseball Officer Derek Falvey said. "His work habits and work ethic are off the charts. I will say, there are times I see that and want to say that as a young kid, maybe you should work smarter, not harder.

"The challenge with young players is they think that the routine they have right now that they've been doing that got them here and it can't change at all or they'll go sideways. It's superstition, or the way their body feels.

"I think you have to be more attentive to explaining why a player can change his routine and not screw up his performance. He may be able to enhance his performance by being a little more thoughtful about that work."

For most of the game's history, baseball conditioning was so rudimentary that players felt obliged to look for third-party training. The Twins won two World Series without a dedicated weight room in the Metrodome.

Third-party trainers tend to create remarkably well-conditioned athletes but don't always create better, or healthier, baseball players.

"I want to play, have a long career, so I have to prepare myself," Berrios said.

That's not his only goal. "I have too many," he said with a smile. "I want to help the team make the playoffs again. For me, I want to win 20 games and make the All-Star Game. If I can accomplish those two things, I think I can be up for the Cy Young Award."

Achieving those goals will have more to do with him controlling his fastball than pushing a Ford.

## **For Twins' Alan Busenitz, baseball and septic tanks are the family business**

**Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | March 8, 2018**

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Early mornings at spring training require little adjustment for Twins reliever Alan Busenitz. They fit neatly into an offseason routine he has maintained for the bulk of his 27 years, helping out with the family business back home in Madison, Ga.

"That's what we always did growing up," Busenitz says of B & B Concrete Products, which builds and delivers septic tanks in the north-central part of the state. "I can always remember loving to go to work with my dad when I was little. I had a plastic hammer, and I would just be down there hitting stuff."

He pauses and smiles.

"Those are some of my first memories," he says. "Some of my best memories, too. We'll build a fire when it's a cold morning and have a biscuit and a Mountain Dew, you know?"

A typical weekday winter morning will see Paul Busenitz's two sons, Alan and Aaron, roll up at 7:30 sharp to begin the process of constructing septic tanks. Depending on the upcoming orders that must be filled, they will choose forms ranging from 1,000 to 3,000 gallons, pour in the concrete and let the tanks cure for two weeks in order to become leak-proof.

After three hours of this, it's time to load up the four company trucks and begin making deliveries to homes and businesses within an hour's drive

or so. Nearby Athens, where Alan attended high school, is a frequent stop, as is Augusta, home of The Masters, but the traffic is so bad in Atlanta the B & B crew tries to avoid it at all costs.

A 1,000-gallon tank, the most popular size, sells for \$500 plus the trip charge and weighs around 8,000 pounds. It's enough to service a four-bedroom home that lies outside the reach of city sewer lines.

"Alan does make deliveries every now and then," Paul Busenitz, 52, says in a phone interview. "He'll drive it out there and back it up to the hole and set it in. He knows how to do it all."

The family patriarch, who bought the business in 1984 from his 80-year-old mentor, G.F. Samples, points out there is no danger for his talented young son with the golden right arm. Tank deliveries are made with specially outfitted trucks, complete with a boom off the back end, a 12,000-pound winch and a trolley.

"It's all mechanical," Paul Busenitz says. "There's no real manual labor to it."

The Clean Side of a Dirty Business, the family likes to call it.

### STILL CATCHING

The most dangerous part of the day comes after lunch. That's when Alan, whose 97-mph fastball ranks among the hardest on the Twins' roster, returns from a quick workout and continues his throwing program.

His catcher is his father. It has been this way since Alan was 9, back when a former minor leaguer named Bill Dallas started giving him 30-minute baseball lessons for \$40.

"Last offseason I went to my old high school for about a week or so," Alan says. "One day my dad said, 'You're not throwing this year?' I told him where I'd been going, and he said, 'I can do it.' "

Years ago Paul Busenitz built a plywood mound for his son out back at his tree-lined workplace and measured off the 60 feet, 6 inches to home plate, which he painted onto a concrete slab. Curing concrete tanks line each side of the throwing area, and one more is set up behind the plate as a makeshift backstop.

It's important not to wait too late in the day, they have found, for that's when the shadows from those tall Georgia pines start to intrude on their practice area.

"My eyes aren't as good as they used to be," Paul says.

Here's the kicker: Paul Busenitz catches those bullpen sessions without a shred of protection, aside from his regular work boots.

No catcher's mask. No chest protector. No shin guards. Not even a protective cup.

"I've definitely busted my shins a few times, which doesn't feel good," Paul says. "He's a little more careful with his placement than he is with a real catcher in there. He doesn't want to hurt me, so he'll throw a little bit easy, probably just 91 or 92 (mph), something like that."

Alan throws his power curveball as well, bouncing them from time to time. When that happens, his father isn't dropping to his knees and blocking pitches with his chest.

"Unless it looks like it's easily catchable, I will actually jump out of the way and let it go," says Paul, whose own baseball career stalled in Little League. "It hurts my hand enough sometimes if I don't catch it in the pocket."

Using a professional-model catcher's mitt handed down from one of Alan's former minor-league teammates, Paul keeps his index and middle fingers out of the glove. For added absorption he stuffs strips of foam packing material into the fingers and hopes for the best.

"My hands are pretty tough anyway," Paul says. "I work manually and I've got calluses and stuff. I don't have office hands."

### 'LITTLE TOO REDNECK'

Back when Alan was in high school, his dad bought a full set of catching gear but something didn't feel right.

"I wore it one time and I said, 'I don't know; this ain't me,' " Paul says. "I threw the stuff back in the box, and I think that's where it still is. I'm not even sure. I haven't laid eyes on it in quite some time."

He chuckles softly, an easy laugh that has been passed down to his eldest son.

“I don’t even wear steel-toe work boots; they’re uncomfortable to me,” Paul says. “Usually we don’t have a whole lot of time. We just go out there and do our thing. I guess we’re a little bit too redneck or something, I don’t know.”

Maybe taking a little off his pitches in deference to his courageous father finally has helped Busenitz smooth out a delivery that often left the Los Angeles Angels frustrated with their 25th-round draft choice in 2013 out of Kennesaw State. His nine-inning walk rate peaked at 5.6 (along with an 8.74 earned-run average) at the Arizona Fall League in 2015.

“We’re just playing catch,” Paul says. “Shoot, he was probably 3 when we started playing catch. You kind of grow into it. Now, if I was somebody that only had a 10-year-old and I said, ‘I’m going to play catch with Alan,’ you would be a little bit overwhelmed, I guarantee it.”

All those years of squatting and catching his son have given Paul the unique ability to recognize the slightest flaw the moment one creeps into his son’s mechanics. Whether watching in person or on television, the connection remains.

“He’ll call me with something, and I’m like, ‘Dad, leave me alone. I’m the one playing professional baseball,’ ” Alan jokes. “He’s like, ‘OK, call me in two days.’ Sure enough, he’s still got it, and I hate to hear it. He knows. It’s pretty funny.”

Call it a father’s intuition.

“I don’t know how to explain that, but I know what he’s capable of and I know about where he should be,” Paul says. “Mainly, with him, it’s more if he just stays pitching and doesn’t go to throwing then he’s good. Sometimes you get in a bind, and then he’ll forget about pitching and start just throwing and things get a little out of control.”

With the help of Triple-A Rochester pitching coach Stu Cliburn, who simplified things with his “Over the plate and in the air” mantra, Busenitz looks like the most valuable piece of that four-player trade interim Twins general manager Rob Antony made with the Angels on Aug. 1, 2016.

Twins mega-prospect Alex Meyer will miss all of 2018 following shoulder surgery. Busenitz posted a team-leading 1.99 ERA in 28 outings as a rookie last season, plus a two-batter appearance in the American League wild-card game at Yankee Stadium.

“For the most part, he knows way more about it than I do anyway,” Paul says. “Most of the time I’ll say something, he says, ‘Yeah, I know. I’m working on it.’ It’s almost pointless for me to tell him anything. I just try to be positive with him and keep him working hard.”

### **Twins dancing on the line with spring lineups**

**Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | March 8, 2018**

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Twins manager Paul Molitor was asked this week if he planned to run his projected Opening Day lineup out anytime soon.

“I hope to see it some,” he said. “The fact that you have to appease the rules regarding the four regulars changes things. We were a little bit on the line with a couple lineups, from what I’ve heard.”

Major League Baseball has long required teams to bring representative teams on the road for spring training games, despite the fact they are merely exhibitions. Starting March 1, teams are supposed to trot out four regulars with at least 300 plate appearances from the prior season, but that gets tricky with players like Kennys Vargas (264 plate appearances) and Ehire Adrianza (186) in competition for jobs this spring.

### **ADVERTISING**

What about Mitch Garver and Zack Granite, who could open the year on the team’s 25-man roster but who fell well short of that 300-trip figure last year?

“The criteria is specific but not 100-percent specific,” Molitor said. “Just send out a list: ‘These guys count, these guys don’t.’ Then you have a discussion if you have any issues with that in the beginning; and once you start, you know.”

What about rookies like Los Angeles Angels two-way star Shohei Ohtani?

“He might count for two,” Molitor said.

## ROTATION PLANS

The Tampa Bay Rays plan to use relievers to fill out the fifth spot in their rotation this season, but that's not something the Twins have interest in doing, Molitor said.

"I have not (considered that)," Molitor said. "I understand it's not the first time it's been talked about. I don't know how many times it's actually happened. Once in a while, circumstances in-season make you consider that, but to do it as a plan from the start, I'm not there for our personnel."

With veteran right-hander Ervin Santana recovering from Feb. 6 surgery on his right middle finger, the Twins are leaning toward opening the season with a four-man rotation for the first few weeks. Molitor said

"It's something we looked at from the beginning and it still, at least as of (now), looks like it's going to make sense for us to do that," Molitor said.

Asked if there was a front-runner for the fourth rotation spot after Jose Berrios, Jake Odorizzi and Kyle Gibson, Molitor declined to say so publicly.

"I don't want to say that," he said. "Obviously, you think about those things, but let it play out."

## SANO AGREES

Twins third baseman Miguel Sano has agreed to a \$602,500 salary for 2018, according to a person with direct knowledge.

That's the same salary as left fielder Eddie Rosario will receive. The difference is Rosario is getting a \$50,000 raise over his 2017 pay, while Sano is playing for just a \$30,000 raise.

Should Sano be optioned to Triple-A, his pay rate would be at \$286,300, the person said.

## REED IMPRESSES

Newly signed setup man Addison Reed has impressed Molitor in the early going.

"I think Addison Reed is just a tough at-bat," Molitor said. "He's got a different look. He's got a little different delivery. (The ball) just comes out kind of funny. It's never straight. It's tough."

Reed worked a scoreless inning on Wednesday against the Boston Red Sox, his fourth and most recent team before signing a two-year, \$16.75 million deal with the Twins. Reed's fastball was in the 91-92 mph range as he ran his string of scoreless innings to four this spring with no walks and three strikeouts.

## **New Twins farm director Jeremy Zoll has impressed every step of the way**

**Dan Hayes | The Athletic | March 8, 2018**

FORT MYERS, Fla. — He may be young and less experienced than many of his major-league counterparts, but Jeremy Zoll's understanding of the value of relationships puts him on even footing.

That's the opinion of a number of veteran front-office personnel littered across the baseball landscape who have worked alongside the Twins' new player development director the past five years.

And after spending much of the offseason hiring and getting to know his staff while also learning all he could about the farm system, Zoll, 27, is ready to now delve into meeting his players.

Minor-league camp officially opens on Thursday and Zoll's excitement to get first-hand knowledge of a group of players he has researched tirelessly since he was hired in October is quite obvious. He has gained everything he possibly could from countless hours of speaking to scouts and other development personnel in search of opinions, pouring over video, reading hundreds of scouting reports and crunching the numbers on every player. Now, Zoll wants the personal interaction he believes is requisite to performing well in his new role.

"It's so much more helpful once you have these visual representations, up close and personal, and watching them throw a 'pen and learning about their family and their offseasons," Zoll said. "It really changes the perception a good amount."

Zoll has already set out to change the way his new players may perceive the front office as he held a series of introductory meetings with them the



last two weeks.

Similar to the meet-and-greets held by Twins manager Paul Molitor, chief baseball officer Derek Falvey and general manager Thad Levine with each player over in major-league camp, Zoll, new assistant director of player development Alex Hassan and new field coordinator Edgar Varela have set aside 90-minute blocks to meet with every minor-leaguer, 157 in all not counting those in big-league camp.

Not only does Zoll hope to gain a few helpful nuggets from each session, he wants players to know the department heads are accessible.

“At a minimum, putting faces to names,” Zoll said. “But on top of that, it’s opening up lines of communication, creating this nature (that) we are approachable. Sometimes I think there’s these lines that are drawn and players feel a little bit uncomfortable. (We want) to break some of that down and start to build relationships and foster communication.”

His former Los Angeles Dodgers boss, Josh Byrnes, said Zoll has an advanced understanding of how to work with baseball people and players. Byrnes said in a phone interview earlier this week that Zoll took whatever task he was assigned and handled it with aplomb, whether it was hiring and mentoring staff, internal communications or data analytical work with players and fellow members of the front office. When it comes to the latter, Zoll knows how to work with each player on an individual basis, which allows him to disseminate the proper amount of information so as not to confuse anyone.

“He just has a good feel for baseball and what is worth trying and when and how,” Byrnes said. “It’s just not sort of overloading ideas and information. He has a really good instinct for the game.

“I’ve been around long enough. Some of those instincts, people at the front of their careers have them in varying degrees and can learn the feel and instincts as they go. But he has them now. Whatever was really thrown at him in player development, he just seemed to have a good sense.”

Zoll also worked alongside new Philadelphia Phillies manager Gabe Kapler in player development in Los Angeles. Not only did Zoll handle his assigned tasks, but he also impressed the Dodgers by taking charge and creating his own program.

Several springs ago, Zoll, a four-year catcher at Haverford College, suggested the Dodgers bring all of their minor-league catchers to camp early. After working alongside Seattle Mariners manager Scott Servais in the baseball operations department of the Los Angeles Angels, Zoll had a sense that so much is thrown at catchers early in spring training that he wanted to hold a mini-camp for them to refine other skills. That resulted in Byrnes bringing Dodgers bench coach Bob Geren and current catcher Yasmani Grandal over for what amounted to a catching seminar.

“Probably his greatest skill is taking an initiative from start to finish,” Kapler said. “There are so many guys in business and every industry that can incubate an idea but have difficulty taking that from Point A to Point B and through the finish line. Jeremy has a unique capability to start with the idea, get people involved, and take it all the way through the finish line.

“He’s also very good at managing up and down. He pushes people above him to stay after it. I’m a huge fan.”

The Twins also admired Zoll from the minute they brought him in to interview. Levine said everywhere he turned he discovered another strong recommendation in support of Zoll. From Byrnes to Kapler to Servais to Mariners GM Jerry Dipoto and Phillies GM Matt Klentak, everyone thought Zoll was ready to run his own player development department even though he has only worked in baseball for five years.

“His reputation, even at a less experienced, younger age, of galvanizing staffs and creatively developing individualized programs for players, really got our attention,” Levine said. “He’s got the ability to communicate very clearly to the 16-year-old Venezuelan kid or the college senior. There’s a presence about him that probably belies age. But I think the backbone of it really was he had such rave reviews from the senior staffers that he had worked with in the past.”

With a talented young farm system in the fold, the Twins are in a position where the next few years of player development will be critical to sustaining long-term success. Levine said the club likes Zoll’s approach, which favors individual development plans to a one-size-fits-all style. There will be no one “Twins Way.”

Byrnes believes it goes back to Zoll’s feel and because he combines “the ability to have boots on the ground but also have the perspective from 30,000 feet.”

Zoll feels fortunate to have worked with as many talented people as he has in his career. Between three years with the Angels and two more with the Dodgers, Zoll has a strong sense for how he’d like to run his own show. But it all comes down to working with each staff member and player to get the most out of them, a lesson he learned working alongside Servais.

“He’s the first one who instilled the value of getting to know the players and the staff,” Zoll said. “His leadership approach is pretty strong, and I think it’s something that was important for me to observe early in my career.

“Along the way I’ve been able to observe some things I really like and (we’ll) find ways to implement those. What if we try some things different, collaborate?”

“I just think the relationship piece is so useful for long-term potential benefits.”

### **Minnesota pro teams working on inclusivity toward the LGBTQ community**

**Chris Hine | Star Tribune | March 8, 2018**

Target Center is going to be a little more colorful than usual Thursday when the Timberwolves take on the Celtics. T-shirts with rainbow lettering will be available in the gift shop, a rainbow-colored light fixture will hang inside the arena’s glass atrium and some fans will be carrying socks with rainbow colors on them.

The merchandise and decoration are all a part of the Wolves’ Pride Night, when the organization will welcome and recognize its fans in attendance who are members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer community. It’s the first time the Wolves have officially hosted a Pride Night. The Twins will host their first official Pride Night on July 9 at Target Field.

The promotions are part of a growing desire among Minnesota’s professional sports teams to extend a hand to a group that has long felt marginalized from inclusion in sports.

While some LGBTQ fans and advocates applaud this commitment of Minnesota’s teams, others have felt some of the promotional efforts haven’t done enough to fully embrace the LGBTQ community. It has created a dynamic in which some LGBTQ fans and advocates would like some teams to do more to voice their support for LGBTQ inclusion in sports and not make those fans feel as if the teams are using them to sell tickets.

“I think they’re evolving. How’s that?” said Dot Belstler, the executive director of Twin Cities Pride. “When I started here about nine years ago, really the thing was to have us buy a block of tickets and that was their contribution to the LGBT community. ... [It could feel] like not a true partnership. Of course at the end of the day, they want to put butts in the seats.”

But Belstler said teams have gone about their LGBTQ promotions in different ways. Some have felt more “authentic” than others. She said Minnesota United FC and Lynx are examples for the Wild, Vikings, Twins and Wolves to follow, although she noted overall Minnesota teams have improved their outreach in recent years, especially the Twins, who have hosted LGBTQ fans for multiple years.

Not only did the Loons and Lynx market a specific game as Pride Night, but the teams made available or gave out Pride-themed merchandise, made announcements or showed videos on the scoreboard catered toward the LGBTQ fans in attendance and displayed pride flags or rainbow colors, like what the Wolves are attempting to do Thursday.

That kind of formal acknowledgment, instead of just selling tickets, can mean a lot to LGBTQ fans.

“Even knowing that the team will say, ‘Hey, we see you, you’re out there, you’re welcome here,’ that is such a huge thing for so many people,” said former Vikings punter Chris Kluwe, a straight LGBTQ “ally” who settled a potential lawsuit against the Vikings in 2014 over allegations of the team fostering a homophobic environment. “For so long it hasn’t been that way. It hasn’t been, ‘You exist.’ It’s been, ‘No, get out. We don’t want you.’ ”

Added Jennifer Richmond, a transgender athlete and coach from St. Paul: “[They’re] small but significant inclusions. I think it comes down to showing the youth in all the various sports that it’s OK to be yourself and that our pro sports franchises support them.”

Richmond was one of several LGBTQ fans in attendance for the Wild’s “Hockey is for Everyone” night Feb. 8. “Hockey is for Everyone” is a campaign the NHL started in 2017 to promote the game to different groups of minorities, including LGBTQ. Each team in the NHL had events in conjunction with the campaign.

Richmond and other fans left disappointed because the Wild highlighted other groups in attendance but there was no mention or recognition of LGBTQ fans beyond a few players sporting Pride tape on their sticks in warmups. Compared to other NHL teams, some of which had all players sport Pride tape, sold Pride-themed merchandise and auctioned off equipment for LGBTQ charities, the Wild’s overtures were lacking for some fans.

“Rainbow flags would’ve read like destination markers: ‘You’re here, you’re queer, you’re in the right place, you’re welcome,’ ” said Brennin Weiswerda, from Minneapolis. “I probably would’ve pointed at rainbow flags like a kid seeing herself on the jumbotron, ‘Look! It’s me!’ ” I would’ve felt seen, recognized, and valued.”

Wild senior vice president for marketing and ticket sales Mitch Helgerson said the team did not mean to slight LGBTQ fans and said the team will work to repair its relationship with those fans.

“I would say we missed an opportunity or didn’t do enough for the LGBTQ community and did more on the other sides [that night]...” Helgerson said. “Moving forward, I’m disappointed they were disappointed. We’d like to do better in their eyes. ... We never want to be seen that we took a step back. That’s what we heard from some people. That definitely wasn’t our intention. We’re looking to try and remedy that.”

One way the team plans on doing that is participating in the Twin Cities Pride parade and festival for the first time.

Brian Kitts, the co-founder of the You Can Play Project, an organization that supports LGBTQ athletes across the country in all sports, said the criticism that the Wild received was shortsighted, considering the team’s history of working with his group.

“It’s easy for fans to say they’re not doing enough, but frankly, the Wild were one of the first,” Kitts said.

Kitts said the Vikings took steps toward embracing the LGBTQ community. As part of their settlement with Kluwe, they agreed to donate to various LGBTQ causes, and according to the team, the Vikings have given to the Matthew Shepard Foundation, Sports Project for the National Center for Lesbian Rights, OutFront Minnesota and You Can Play.

The team is organizing a booth at the Pride Festival and will sponsor a table at the Human Rights Campaign Twin Cities Dinner, and it has other promotions or events in the works aimed at the LGBTQ community.

“A lot of it isn’t in your face, but both teams have provided support,” Kitts said. “Both teams have provided community outreach. ... The Vikings have been, in spite of what they went through with Chris Kluwe, I think as an organization they learned from that and have done a really good job of additional outreach.”

Kitts said when it comes to Pride Nights, he takes a longer view of how far such promotions have come in the past decade.

“You see we’ve gone from not having this discussion at all and whispering about who might be a gay athlete to having had openly gay athletes and having teams actually offer Pride Nights and having players speak up on behalf of LGBT fans and straight allies,” Kitts said.

Belstler said it’s important for teams to recognize that LGBTQ fans make up a significant portion of their audience.

“Somebody asked, ‘How do I get in front of the LGBT audience when I want to market something?’ ” Belstler said. “Well, how do you market to anybody else? We’re everywhere.”