



Press Clips

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FROM THE OC REGISTER**Billy Eppler begins search for next Angels manager**

By Jeff Fletcher

ANAHEIM — A day after Mike Scioscia's 19-year tenure as the Angels manager officially ended, Billy Eppler drew a picture of the type of manager he'd like to hire.

Developing a rapport with players and comfort with analytics seem to be at the top of the list.

"What we're looking for in that next manager is connectivity with the players," the Angels general manager said. "We're are looking at somebody who can think with a probability-based mindset. We are looking for someone who is eager to grow. Someone who can develop a culture that puts the welfare of the team ahead of any singular person. Those are the criteria."

Eppler defined a "probability-based mindset" as a "making decisions in-game, tactically, to get the win expectancy or run expectancy in your favor."

Eppler said he planned to immediately begin reaching out to the external candidates, and he'd already told the internal candidates who would get interviews.

The internal candidates most likely to be interviewed are special assistants Brad Ausmus and Eric Chavez, bench coach Josh Paul and third base coach Dino Ebel.

Eppler said there would be "more external candidates than internal candidates."

Based on Eppler's description, the Angels might be more focused on younger, analytically-inclined managers, as opposed to more traditional, experienced managers.

Eppler said prior managerial experience "is one factor, but it's not necessary. ... We've seen managers who had prior experience have a success, and we've seen managers that don't have experience have success."

Eppler also said he and his staff already have planned the type of interview that will help them find the right manager.

"It's going to be a long one," Eppler said. "It's going to involve some quantitative aspects and some of it is going to involve qualitative aspects. We're going to peel back the layers and identify the best candidate that we can."

As Eppler begins the search for a new manager, he had nothing but positive words for Scioscia, who announced that he would not seek an extension upon completion of his 10-year contract. Eppler and Scioscia spent three seasons together.

"He's been a lighthouse for this organization," Eppler said. "He provided stability and direction when there was a lot of fog. That's what lighthouses do."

“I’m glad that I got an opportunity to be around him, and what I think is a Hall of Fame career.”

Angels to focus on pitching market, while looking internally for offensive upgrades

By Jeff Fletcher

ANAHEIM — Billy Eppler has two specific goals for improving the Angels in 2019: a deeper pitching staff and a better offense.

He has a different path for each.

The general manager said he’s more comfortable with the internal options among the everyday players, so his outside shopping is going to be focused on pitching.

“We are going to be in the pitching market, both in the starting and relief market,” Eppler said Monday. “What that’s going to yield, that’s hard to predict, but we’re going to have a lot of conversations.”

A year ago, Eppler said he had nine starting pitchers on the depth chart who they believed could contribute in 2018. Eight of them ended up getting injured.

Heading into this winter, Eppler said he only has three starting pitchers he considers to be “locks.” Although he wouldn’t specify which ones they are, two certainly are Tyler Skaggs and Andrew Heaney.

The other three who finished this season in the rotation are Matt Shoemaker, Jaime Barría and Felix Peña.

Although Barría was the best of the group this season, he’s also 22 years old. Eppler, speaking in general, added: “Sometimes, with young players, you have to be patient with them.”

Beyond that, Eppler said there “are a lot of candidates to emerge into that group.”

That likely includes Parker Bridwell, Nick Tropeano, Alex Meyer and minor leaguers Griffin Canning and José Suarez. JC Ramírez also could be back from Tommy John surgery sometime toward the end of the season.

Clearly, though, Eppler isn’t satisfied with that group, which includes a lot of time on the disabled list.

“We’re going to prepare for adversity,” he said. “That’s kind of what we have to do, but we hope we can get through with a little less patchwork than we’ve had in the last couple seasons.”

In order to supplement the pitching, the Angels probably have something in the neighborhood of \$30 million to spend on players not currently in the organization, assuming the payroll is going to be near what it was this season.

It sounds as if most of those resources will go to the pitching staff, because Eppler said he's confident that the answers to their offensive problems could be solved internally.

"We have more depth on the position player side than we've had," he said.

Eppler said the Angels need to improve their on-base percentage to make better use of their power. They ranked 20th in the majors with a .313 OBP, which is why they were 15th with 721 runs, despite being seventh with 214 homers.

"A lot of solo home runs," Eppler said.

David Fletcher, Taylor Ward, José Fernández, Michael Hermosillo, José Briceño, Francisco Arcia and minor leaguers Matt Thaiss, Jared Walsh and Luis Rengifo are all among the players Eppler said could provide an offensive boost.

Further away, but perhaps also looming later in 2019, is top prospect Jo Adell.

The performances of those players in the minors gives Eppler hope that they can graduate to improve the offense in the majors. His evidence: Triple-A Salt Lake City finished second in the Pacific Coast League in on-base percentage, and Double-A Mobile led the Southern League.

"The philosophy is there," Eppler said. "They know it. The players know it. They'll help contribute, no doubt."

As for where the young players can fit, Eppler said he's told Zack Cozart to prepare to play second or third, which would allow for a young player at the other spot. Fernández, Thaiss and Walsh all could share time at first with Albert Pujols.

Eppler conceded that the Angels still could look to upgrade externally at first base and catcher. Last year, however, he believed the Angels absolutely needed to address second base (Ian Kinsler), third (Cozart) and left field (Justin Upton) and he said this year he doesn't feel any of their position player needs are as dire.

"That position player depth, knocking on the door and pushing their way in here, allows us now to direct more focus toward the pitching side," Eppler said. "We've always been opportunistic there. That depth now gives us comfort that we didn't have in previous years. I think we have a lot of answers internally."

Shohei Ohtani undergoes successful Tommy John surgery

By Jeff Fletcher

ANAHEIM — Shohei Ohtani's Tommy John surgery on Monday went as expected, although it's too early to know how soon he'll be able to play next season, General Manager Billy Eppler said on Monday.

Eppler said Dr. Neal ElAttrache, the noted orthopedist who performed Ohtani's surgery, "was pleased with what he saw" and "feels confident in the recovery process."

Ohtani, the two-way star who just finished his rookie season with the Angels, will not be able to pitch in 2019. The Angels are expecting him back as the designated hitter in 2019, but they aren't sure how soon.

Ohtani will get evaluations every four weeks, and each time they will get a clearer view of how soon he can return.

Ohtani finished his season with a .285 average, 22 home runs and a .925 OPS. He was named American League Rookie of the Month for September, the second time this season he won that award. He also won in April.

Ohtani was 4-2 with a 3.31 ERA in 10 starts as a pitcher, the last of which revealed that stem-cell treatment and a platelet-rich plasma injection had been insufficient to heal his damaged ulnar collateral ligament.

Angels recap and offseason preview

By Jeff Fletcher

2018 RECORD: 80-82, 4th place in AL West

WHAT WENT WRONG? A little bit of everything. The Angels were in the middle of the pack in most categories, which explains how they ended up finishing right around the middle of the pack in the league. The underlying problem, as it has been lately, was injuries. They lost two starting pitchers in the first week, Matt Shoemaker and JC Ramírez. Shoemaker didn't come back until September and Ramírez never did. In one two-week span in June, Garrett Richards, Shohei Ohtani and Zack Cozart all went on the disabled list. Also, in that period, Tyler Skaggs suffered an injury that would grow more serious through the summer and ruin his second half. The Angels started the season with nine starters they believed could pitch in the major leagues, and by the end of the season, eight of them had gotten hurt.

WHAT WENT RIGHT? Mike Trout had his best season, and Ohtani was a better than expected hitter, despite missing much of the year as a pitcher. Besides that, the injuries opened the door for several players to have unexpected success. Rookie Jaime Barría was the most notable. The only starter who didn't get hurt, Barría started 26 games and ended up leading the rotation with a 3.41 ERA. Felix Peña proved capable in 17 starts after a move from the bullpen. Rookie relievers Ty Buttrey and Justin Anderson had impressive moments, as did Hansel Robles. David Fletcher got a chance to be the everyday second baseman for most of the last two months. Taylor Ward got a shot at playing third base every day. Although his defense and offense left plenty of room for improvement, he finished with three homers in the final week, including a walk-off homer to end the season.

2019 ROSTER OUTLOOK

SIGNED: OF Mike Trout (\$34M), 1B Albert Pujols (\$28M), OF Justin Upton (\$18M), SS Andrelton Simmons (\$13M), IF Zack Cozart (\$12.7M), OF Kole Calhoun (\$10.5M)

OPTIONS: None

ARBITRATION ELIGIBLE: RHP Matt Shoemaker (\$4.125M in 2018), RHP JC Ramírez (\$1.9M), LHP Tyler Skaggs (\$1.875M), RHP Blake Parker (\$1.8M), RHP Cam Bedrosian (\$1.1M), RHP Odrisamer Despaigne (\$1.09M), LHP José Álvarez (\$1.05), RHP Hansel Robles (\$900K), LHP Andrew Heaney (\$800K), IF Jefry Marte (\$559K)

FREE AGENTS: RHP Garrett Richards, RHP Junichi Tazawa, RHP Jim Johnson, RHP Blake Wood, OF Eric Young Jr.

FROM THE LOS ANGELES TIMES

Angels have three questions for next season: Pitching, pitching and who's going to manage

By Maria Torres

If his third offseason as Angels general manager was his finest, the challenges Billy Eppler will contend with in his fourth will make matching his earlier success difficult.

He will have to reconstruct the team's pitching staff and coordinate the rehabilitation process of two-way player Shohei Ohtani, who had elbow ligament-replacement surgery Monday.

Oh, and Eppler must hire a manager to transition out of the Mike Scioscia era. The search will include candidates who prefer to use analytically driven approaches.

The next few months will allow Eppler to put his boldest stamp on the organization that signed him to a four-year contract in 2015.

These are some questions he'll have to answer:

What to do about Ohtani?

Nothing has changed in the week since the Angels announced Ohtani would have the surgery. Even now that he has undergone the procedure, it's too early to judge how soon Ohtani, who on Monday was named American League rookie of the month for the second time this season, will return from Tommy John surgery.

But the rehab process, which can take months and typically takes a year and a half for pitchers, will begin in upcoming weeks. Ohtani will start with range-of-motion exercises and build back strength in his right elbow when he is medically cleared.

Although he won't pitch competitively until 2020, the Angels still expect Ohtani to recover in time to be their designated hitter for most of 2019.

Ohtani finished his debut season batting .285 with a .361 on-base percentage and .925 on-base-plus-slugging percentage. He drove in 61 runs, launched 22 home runs and hit 21 doubles. His weighted-runs-created-plus score of 152 outranked all rookies who logged at least 350 at-bats. His wins above replacement (2.8) ranked sixth in that group, one full win behind leader Ronald Acuna of the Atlanta Braves.

What to do about the pitching staff?

Last year, Eppler thought he made the right moves to put the Angels in position to compete for a spot in the postseason. He re-signed outfielder Justin Upton, signed infielder Zack Cozart and traded for second baseman Ian Kinsler.

Although the offense didn't produce at the rate Eppler expected — the Angels were seventh in home runs (214) but 20th in OBP (.313) — it was the decimation of the starting rotation that did the Angels in.

"There were some instances where we were looking for starters the night before games sometimes," Eppler said. "We tested our depth. We tested how often — we tested the airport, we were in there so much running guys back and forth."

All the starters the Angels thought would carry them to the playoffs for the first time since 2014 succumbed to injury in some way or another this year.

And next season, Ohtani will not be the only missing link in the starting rotation. JC Ramírez had Tommy John surgery in April and won't be ready on opening day.

So Eppler will have to reconstruct his pitching staff and be aggressive in the starting pitching market.

"What that's going to yield, that's hard to predict," Eppler said. "But we're going to have a lot of conversations."

There are only three starters who have locked up a chance to start at the major-league level next season, but Eppler did not emphasize who. The remainder, he said, were strong candidates for rotation jobs.

Jaime Barría, Parker Bridwell, Matt Shoemaker and Felix Pena are the likely leaders of the candidate group.

The state of the bullpen, whose 3.97 ERA was seventh lowest in the American League, is just as unclear. With Keynan Middleton out rehabbing from Tommy John surgery for most of 2019 and the free-agent

departures of Jim Johnson and Junichi Tazawa to consider, the Angels will have relievers Ty Buttrey, Cam Bedrosian, Taylor Cole, Hansel Robles and others compete for spots during spring training.

Who will catch those pitchers?

In the wake of Martín Maldonado being traded to the Houston Astros, Eppler was encouraged by the work of rookies Jose Briceno and Francisco Arcía. He touted their understanding of the pitching and their experience — although both debuted this year, Briceno spent eight seasons in the minor leagues and Arcía spent 12.

“Those two players established a pretty good rapport with the pitchers,” Eppler said. “They’re smart, they know the opposing hitters, they know the game plans and they stick to the game plans. I was impressed with both of them.”

So it’s more likely the Angels will look for an external candidate at first base. But even that position, Eppler said, offered plenty of internal options.

“We have more depth on the position player side than we’ve had in the past,” he said.

Does Mike Trout change the calculus?

In short, no.

Trout, who was named AL player of the month for September, will begin 2019 with two seasons left on the six-year, \$145.2-million contract he signed in 2014. He will make just north of \$34 million for the second straight year.

There is no logical reason for Eppler to ask owner Arte Moreno for any more money to shove into Trout’s already-stacked coffers.

“That position-player depth, knocking on the door and pushing their way in here, allows us now to direct more focus toward the pitching side,” Eppler said.

FROM ANGELS.COM

Eppler reveals what he’s seeking in next skipper

Angels’ search for Scioscia’s replacement already underway

By Maria Guardado

ANAHEIM -- The quest to find Mike Scioscia's successor is underway for the Angels.

One day after Scioscia announced that he was stepping down after a 19-year run as the club's field boss, general manager Billy Eppler met with reporters to discuss the upcoming managerial search and describe the attributes he plans to prioritize as he sifts through potential candidates.

"What we're looking for in that next manager is connectivity with the players," Eppler said Monday. "We're looking for somebody who can think with a probability-based mindset. We're going to look for someone who is eager to grow and evolve. Someone that can develop a culture that will put the welfare of the team above any singular person. Those are the criteria that we're going to look for in our next manager."

How would Eppler define a "probability-based mindset"?

"Making decisions in-game tactically that tilt the win expectancy or the run expectancy in your favor," Eppler said.

Eppler said he expects the pool of contenders to include more external candidates than internal ones. Bench coach Josh Paul, third-base coach Dino Ebel and special assistants to the GM Brad Ausmus and Eric Chavez are among the current Angels personnel who will likely garner consideration for the job.

Of that group, only Ausmus has prior managerial experience in the Majors, which came with the Tigers from 2014-17. Eppler said that won't be a prerequisite for the position, though.

"It's not necessary," Eppler said. "But it's a factor that we'll look at. If that candidate had prior experience, [we'll look at] how that experience went, so on and so forth. We've seen managers with a lot of experience have a lot of success. We've seen managers that don't have experience have a lot of success."

Eppler said he hopes to begin interviewing candidates soon, though he didn't put a timeframe on when he'd like to have a new manager in place. Each contender's merits will be assessed during a lengthy interview that has already been developed by Eppler and his staff.

"We've set up an interview, and it's going to be a long one," Eppler said. "Some of it is going to involve some quantitative aspects, and some of it is going to involve some qualitative aspects. But we're going to try to peel back layers and identify the best candidate that we can."

While Eppler will now have the opportunity to pick a manager who is philosophically aligned with the Angels' front office, he praised Scioscia's work with the club and said he appreciated the chance to work alongside him for three years.

"He's been a lighthouse for this organization," Eppler said. "He's provided stability and direction when there was a lot of fog around and that's what lighthouses do, and that's how he was. I'm glad that I got an opportunity to be around him in what I think is a Hall of Fame career. He's a Hall of Fame manager, and I'm glad I got time with him."

Ohtani has successful Tommy John surgery

By Maria Guardado and Matt Kelly

Angels general manager Billy Eppler announced that Shohei Ohtani underwent successful Tommy John surgery Monday. The procedure was performed by Dr. Neal ElAttrache in Los Angeles.

"The doctor was pleased with what he saw and feels confident in the recovery process," Eppler said.

It remains to be seen what the Angels' 2019 plans are for Ohtani, who also received Major League Baseball's American League Rookie of the Month Award for September on Monday. The surgery to repair the ulnar collateral ligament in Ohtani's right pitching elbow will likely sideline him from the mound until 2020, but he could still see significant time as Los Angeles' designated hitter next season.

Eppler said it's still too early to know how soon Ohtani will be available to hit in 2019.

"It's hard to judge right now," Eppler said. "When you go through a UCL reconstruction, or any kind of sizeable surgery, the recovery process and the markers along the way in the recovery process, those tell you or uncover things for you and give you a little bit better sense of a timeline."

Position players typically return to the field in less time following Tommy John, such as Yankees rookie infielder Gleyber Torres, who missed about half a season in 2017 after tearing the UCL in his non-throwing elbow. Dodgers star Corey Seager underwent Tommy John surgery this past May and is expected to be on the team's Opening Day roster in 2019. Other notable position players to receive the surgery include former MLB outfielder Carl Crawford, Angels infielder Zack Cozart, Twins third baseman Miguel Sano and Red Sox catcher Christian Vazquez -- all of whom were able to return to the field in a year's time or less. Ohtani could theoretically return next season and log significant time as Los Angeles' designated hitter while still allowing his elbow to recover for an eventual return to the mound.

The two-way phenom Ohtani is a frontrunner for the AL's Rookie of the Year Award after excelling as both a pitcher and hitter in ways unseen since Babe Ruth a century ago. The righty finished with a 3.31 ERA and 63 strikeouts over 10 starts as a pitcher, and his .564 slugging percentage ranked seventh in MLB among those with at least 350 plate appearances.

"He's got a championship mindset," Eppler said. "He knows what he wants to do, and he's got a plan. That was pretty inspiring to see. We all saw what we saw on the field. He can dominate a game on the mound, and he can dominate a game in the batter's box. And he can dominate it on the bases. It was rewarding to watch that. I enjoyed watching him play."

FROM THE ATHLETIC**What's next for the Angels? Here's the primer on their busy offseason ahead**

By Fabian Ardaya

ANAHEIM, Calif. — The first Angels offseason of its kind in nearly two decades begins now.

Angel Stadium on Monday had all the signs of starting over. Nearly every locker was empty. Nameplates were removed. Bags filled with bats and equipment were piled up, ready to be shipped off.

Rookie catcher José Briceño, one of the few stragglers, came back to pick up some of his leftover gear. As he walked out, he looked back at the clubhouse door, then ahead to the offseason.

“Who knows what’s going to happen,” said Briceño, hopping into a cart to drive him back to the players’ parking lot.

The man in charge of bringing such change — Angels general manager Billy Eppler — held court for close to an hour on Monday to discuss the future of the franchise and how it moves forward after a third consecutive losing season dating back to 2015, the year Eppler was hired.

Moving on to a new manager

One day after Mike Scioscia tearfully announced he was stepping down as Angels manager, a position that’s vacant for the first time since November of 1999, Eppler began the search for a replacement.

The internal candidates — reportedly bench coach Josh Paul, third-base coach Dino Ebel and special assistants to the GM Brad Ausmus and Eric Chavez — have already been informed of their status. The club will begin contacting external candidates “soon,” according to Eppler, and a decision is not imminent, particularly with some outside candidates potentially currently working for postseason clubs.

“You don’t want to put limitations on yourself,” Eppler said. “We’re going to be thorough.”

As the Angels were informed earlier this month of Scioscia’s decision to step down, they began the opening stages of mapping how this process will go. Eppler has been through just one managerial search — he was part of the Yankees front office when Joe Girardi was hired to replace Joe Torre following the 2007 season.

Eppler and the Angels front office spent much of September looking at other organizations, some ranging outside of baseball, on how to establish criteria of “quantitative and qualitative” aspects. He and his staff have already assembled an interview template, a “long one.”

“We’re going to peel back the layers and identify the best candidate we can,” Eppler said.

Prior experience, as is the case with Ausmus and Girardi (whom the Yankees let go after last season), is a factor, but it’s not a requirement of the new manager. The checklist for Eppler is connectivity with players by the manager, who must be eager to develop “a culture that will put the welfare of the team

in front of any singular person.” The mold appears to be a younger, more new-age face instead of an “old school” and traditional manger such as Scioscia.

The new manager also will have an eye towards analytics, adopting what Eppler considers to be a “probability-based mindset.” For example, no team in baseball used defensive shifts less frequently than the Angels’ 3.4 percent this season, according to Baseball Savant.

“(It’s) making decisions in-game, tactically, that tilt the win expectancy or the run expectancy in your favor,” Eppler said. “It’s not always going to work out. If you have a league-average reliever pitching to a league-average hitter, odds are that league-average hitter will not get on base. You might not have the result you wanted, because you want the guy on base, but your process was right. Your mindset was right. Your decision-making was right.

“That’s what we’re looking for, somebody that understands probability. That’s one of the criteria we’re looking for. There’s a lot of criteria.”

What’s next for Mike Scioscia?

Mike Scioscia left his post as Angels manager on his own terms, but he stated he has a desire to continue managing.

Should he not claim one of the open managerial positions, does that mean Scioscia will remain an Angel for life in the front office? That’s not a guarantee or even an immediate possibility, Eppler said.

“We haven’t discussed that,” the GM said.

If Scioscia does continue with the organization in a different capacity, it will be entirely on his own terms, said Eppler, who added that he would not be surprised if Scioscia took some time after spending the past 19 seasons directly tied to Angels baseball and, before that, more than two decades in the Dodgers organization as a player and coach.

“I think when you go through a couple decades with a company, with a team, with an academic institution, I think it takes a long time to process what you want to ultimately do,” Eppler said. “You don’t come to the conclusion lightly. You spend time. By the time he was at a point where he wanted to talk to me about it, you know he’s probably thought about it for a while.

“Just as anybody would do if they were going to leave a company they’ve been at for a couple decades or a school they’ve been teaching at for a couple decades. Mike was very much at peace by the time he told me.”

Eppler did not hire Scioscia as manager; he inherited him. Scioscia won more games with a single franchise than any manager not named Walter Alston, and he survived two owners and four general managers, including Eppler. Scioscia’s presence within the Angels organization is immeasurable, and he left an imprint on Eppler, who, along with team president John Carpino, was among the Angels brass in attendance at Scioscia’s press conference after Sunday’s season finale.

Eppler spoke affectionately of his time with Scioscia, highlighting his relationship with the players and a clubhouse culture he hopes to maintain when it comes to hiring a replacement. Any change, any front-office motion, had to come with the players in mind first.

“He’s been a lighthouse for this organization,” Eppler said. “He’s provided stability and direction when there was a lot of fog around, and that’s what lighthouses do. That’s how he was. I’m glad that I got an opportunity to be around him and what I think is a Hall of Fame career. He’s a Hall of Fame manager. I’m glad I got time with him.”

Shohei Ohtani officially goes under the knife

Eppler announced that Shohei Ohtani had successful surgery on Monday to reconstruct the ulnar collateral ligament in his right elbow. Dr. Neal ElAttrache, who has handled at least five of the eight publicly-known Tommy John surgeries in the Angels’ organization this season, performed the procedure in Los Angeles.

Ohtani’s two-way play as both a pitcher and a hitter this season has made him the first of his kind in close to a century, even as the damage to his right elbow cost him much of the second half and will cost him at least all of 2019 as a pitcher. He became the first player ever with 20 home runs and 50 or more strikeouts as a pitcher in the same season, as well as the only player ever with 20 homers, 10 stolen bases and 10 pitching appearances in the same season.

In 10 starts, Ohtani had an ERA- of 80 — about the same of the likes of Carlos Carrasco — and as a hitter, he slashed .285/.361/.564 with 22 homers, 61 RBI and a 152 wRC+, mirroring much of the per at-bat production of AL MVP candidate José Ramírez. He is a strong candidate to earn AL Rookie of the Year honors. His combined 3.8 fWAR between hitting and pitching ranks as the highest mark among AL rookies this season.

The 24-year-old Ohtani will largely rehab in California, spending much of his time around the Angels’ medical personnel instead of returning home to Japan in the offseason. There is no immediate timetable for his return, but it is not unreasonable to project Ohtani behind ready to play for at least most of 2019 as a hitter. The Angels remain hopeful he would be able to return to two-way duty for the 2020 season — a full workload for an Ohtani season, as Scioscia outlined earlier this season, would be between 20 and 24 starts and about 400 plate appearances.

“I was impressed,” Eppler said of Ohtani’s rookie season. “Watching him, both on the mound and in the batter’s box ... I wouldn’t say I’ve never seen it before, because I went over to Japan and watched him play, but I hadn’t seen it before at the major league level. It was something I’ll always remember, from the first game in the batter’s box in Oakland to his outing that Sunday in Oakland. His home opener here, it was pretty special. I’m glad I got to watch it.

“He’s got a championship mindset, knows what he wants to do and he’s got a plan. That was pretty inspiring to see,” Eppler added. “We also saw what he could do on the field. He can dominate a game on the mound, and he can dominate a game in the batter’s box. And he can dominate it on the bases. That was rewarding to watch that. I enjoyed watching him play.”

Pitching, pitching, more pitching

A year ago, Eppler proposed that he had what he believed to be nine pitchers within the organization who were ready to pitch in a regular big league rotation. Given Ohtani's pitching and hitting schedule, the Angels attempted to adopt a six-man rotation, banking on their rotational depth to carry them through the season.

It did not happen. The Angels used a franchise record number of pitchers, and a record number of starters, as they combined to throw the fewest number of innings of any team other than the Tampa Bay Rays, who adopted "the opener" for much of the season.

"It was difficult to navigate," Eppler said. "There were some instances where we were looking for starters the night before games, sometimes. We tested our depth. We tested the airport, we were in there so much running guys back and forth."

Now, Eppler says he only has three starting pitchers as potential locks, with several additional candidates. While he didn't name them specifically, two are surely Andrew Heaney and Tyler Skaggs. Matt Shoemaker made a strong return in September, but he dealt with forearm issues for much of this season and last. Jaime Barria showed signs of being a rotation stalwart, but as Eppler stated, young players are at times unpredictable.

Felix Peña, Parker Bridwell and Nick Tropeano are among the few healthy starting pitchers with big league service time who remain under team control for next season. Griffin Canning or Jose Suarez could earn a big-league call-up. Also, JC Ramirez could return next season from Tommy John surgery.

Ideally, Eppler said, he would have four starters capable of making 26 or 27 starts — only Heaney and Barria reached that mark this season — with a fifth starter taking between 20 and 22 starts. A sixth starter would be capable of filling in here and there, at times by design to help stem an extreme workload. A six-man rotation remains something the Angels will be "open minded" about, but it will depend on depth and health.

The Angels will be active in pursuing additional pitching, Eppler said, whether it is through the trade market, free agency or waiver wire, where the Angels have recently found success in Peña, Ramirez and Taylor Cole. They'll "prepare for adversity," as Eppler put it, and should have some room to work with. Eppler wouldn't comment on where the club's payroll should stand by next Opening Day, but the Angels have somewhere in the range of \$30 million in contracts coming off the books this season, including a rehabbing Garrett Richards.

"It's something we have to do," Eppler said. "But we do hope we can get through it with a little less patchwork than what we've had to do the last couple of seasons."

The Angels will also look at finding even more ways to prevent injury with their pitching staff. They will continue to compile information, "using more technical tools to supplement what we are currently doing" in trying to find out a potential cause for the club's spate of arm injuries.

Canning, the club's second-round pick in last year's draft, was shut down from throwing following his selection in an attempt to avoid future injury. It's a trend that continued into this draft, with several

college arms being shut down from throwing as the club plans on building them up in ways that don't involve actual pitching and the risk of injury.

"I think rest and strengthening are sometimes under-appreciated," Eppler said. "I think you can have situations where you take a timeout with a player and you physically develop him and you prepare him for what's a long season. ... You're trying to prepare an athlete and on the pitching side, someone that's going to make 85, 95 or 105 or 115 explosions a game. They're really tired. It takes a lot out of you. We need to physically prepare the individual for that and we need to prepare their lower body, prepare their core, and we need to prepare their upper body. All of those areas in the body help absorb stress, and that kinematic chain, we need to make sure it's strong and it's linked."

Improving the offense from within

Eppler sees his club's biggest flaw in the offense, but it's a solution that, unlike his pitching staff, should be able to be solved internally.

The club ranks seventh in baseball with 214 home runs — the Rays are the only non-playoff team with more. But the Angels rank just 15th in runs, including a .313 on-base percentage that's 20th in baseball.

"It was too low," Eppler said. "That's a lot of solo home runs. We need to be on base. That is the only statistic that correlates with runs scoring."

It's something Eppler feels the organization can fix internally. He alluded to the club's Triple-A and Double-A affiliates in Salt Lake and Mobile, who ranked second and first in their respective leagues in getting on base. Some of those players, such as Taylor Ward, David Fletcher, Michael Hermosillo, José Miguel Fernández and rookie catchers Briceño and Francisco Arcia are now in the big leagues.

"The philosophy is here," Eppler said. "They know it. The players know it."

Health could also reinforce the club's offensive profile. Zack Cozart, one of the club's marquee free-agent signings, underwent season-ending surgery on his left shoulder in June and is on track to potentially return in time for spring training. Cozart, a trained shortstop, moved to third base last season with Andrelton Simmons entrenched at shortstop. Eppler said he told Cozart to prepare to play either third or second base next season. That would allow Ward, Fletcher or even Luis Rengifo — the player to be named later in the CJ Cron trade — to claim a big-league job.

"I don't want them going through a winter trying to read the tea leaves or connect dots," Eppler said. "Here it is, this is what it's going to be. I can't predict what happens with other clubs in trade markets, things like that, but I did lay it out there for those guys that, as of now, this is what we're looking at."

Last season, Eppler addressed three major position-player needs: second base, third base and left field. He signed Cozart to play third, traded for Ian Kinsler to play second base, and re-signed Justin Upton to a long-term extension. This season, however, the club's added depth of Ward, Fletcher, Hermosillo, Rengifo, Matt Thaiss and Jared Walsh should allow them flexibility to focus instead on pitching. The Angels will remain open to acquiring a catcher or a first baseman, Eppler said, but they feel comfortable with where they currently stand at the positions.

What's next for Mike Trout?

The Angels, as of now, are guaranteed just two more seasons with the best player in baseball under contract. But the club hasn't publicly stated its intentions to begin extension talks, as Ken Rosenthal of *The Athletic* suggested earlier this season.

Even with such a limited window, there is no added directive to try to push to compete right away.

"We need to win for our fans," Eppler said. "Win for our fans, win for our owner. That's where the mindset is. Everybody in that locker room wants to win.

"We want to do things to increase our win expectancy. But we also need to know where that takes us. Does that take us from an 80-win team to an 81-win team or an 82-win team or does that move us to an 85-win team and then to an 88-win team and then to a 92-win team? That's part of the analysis that goes into all decision making, whether it's signing a free agent or making a trade."

Trout is coming off what he said is the best season of his career. The two-time AL MVP put together a strong case to garner his third award, slashing .312/.460/.628 with a career-best 191 wRC+ to go with 39 home runs, 79 RBI and a value of 9.8 fWAR. He put together his best defensive season, according to several defensive metrics, since his rookie year in 2012, and he has committed only one error in two seasons.

"You lay a challenge out to him, and he likes it," Eppler said. "He looks forward to dominating it, so to speak. He came in with a goal of trying to improve his defense, and he did. We showed him some things, and showed him some things on video and he embraced it. It was phenomenal to see that level of open-mindedness from a star player and that pride to get better, to have that humility to sit back and say, 'I don't have all the answers. What do you have for me?' He achieved his goal. What a surprise!"

Down on the farm

Eppler has revamped a farm system that ranked as one of the league's historical worst to one that includes a pair of prospects in MLB Pipeline's top 100.

It's a system he's not so quick to tear down in exchange for a big league boost. Save for the Andrelton Simmons trade, which saw the Angels ship promising left-hander Sean Newcomb to Atlanta, Eppler has yet to truly dip into the minors in a big way to acquire veterans.

"I'd prefer to keep good players and have them grow organically," Eppler said. "Certainly, if there's circumstances where we feel we're making a move that's really just going to help our win expectancy, then you've got to be open-minded to that.

"But when you draft a player, or when you sign a player in July out of the international marketplace and that player is then turned over to your development system, and then that player matures through the organization — all of these people have put their hands on your player. That's a lot of fingerprints of your way of doing things, of your philosophy that is now embedded in that player.

“It’s good for the organization, good for the amateur scouting department, good for the player development department, good for the fans, good for our ownership. It’s a morale boost when one of your own is out here playing for you.”

News and notes

- The most promising prospect of the bunch is last year’s first-rounder, 19-year-old prep outfielder Jo Adell. The No. 16 prospect according to MLB Pipeline, moved up as high as Double-A this season, playing at three different levels in his first full professional season and posting an .897 OPS in 441 plate appearances. Eppler said he wouldn’t rule out the possibility that Adell, who doesn’t turn 20 until after Opening Day, could debut in the big leagues as soon as next season.

“We’re not afraid to challenge him,” Eppler said. “He learned a lot. He had exposure to his first full season, and he was tired. August usually gets those guys, hits them right in the face. He’s gifted, a gifted athlete. He’s strong. He’s going to be a big man. I’m very proud of what he did this year, and how he responded to challenges, how he took constructive criticism.”

- Eppler declined to publicly comment on the Angels’ potential pursuit of Japanese left-hander Yusei Kikuchi, citing the fact that he remains under contract with the Saitama Seibu Lions. The 27-year-old Kikuchi and Ohtani each went to the same high school.

- The Angels are waiting on a decision from right-hander Matt Shoemaker to see if the right-hander will take part in MLB’s upcoming tour in Japan, but they have not confirmed his participation.

“Maybe Shohei could show me around,” Shoemaker joked.

Awards Watch: Would-Be Ballot Edition

By Cliff Corcoran

Although the ballots for the Baseball Writers’ Association of America awards are submitted in the small window between the end of the regular season (delayed a day this year by Monday’s Games 163) and the start of the postseason, the debate about which players are most deserving for the three major awards will rage on until, and likely beyond, the second week of November, when the voting results are announced.

Throughout this season, and for eight of the last nine, Awards Watch has attempted to help structure that debate by looking past traditional distractions such as pitching wins, runs batted in and team-based definitions of “value,” while also digging deeper than wins above replacement to assess the most deserving players for each award at various points throughout each season.

With the 2018 season (mostly) in the books, I wanted to take one last look at these races at the same approximate moment that the voters will, before postseason successes and failures complicate our memories and distract us from the great performances that were confined to the regular season through no fault of the players who delivered them.

Breaking from the usual format slightly, what follows are my *would-be* ballots for each award, structured to match the official ballots (top three for Rookie of the Year, top five for Cy Young, and top 10 for Most Valuable Player). As a member of the BBWAA's crowded New York chapter, I have never had an awards vote, but my lack of an official ballot allows me the opportunity to submit the following hypothetical ballots publicly.

As always, league-leading statistics are in bold. MLB-leading statistics are in bold and italics.

Rookie of the Year

American League

1. Shohei Ohtani, DH/RHP, Angels

.285/.361/.564 (152 OPS+), 22 HR, 37 BB, 102 K, 10 SB (71%), 367 PA

3.31 ERA, 126 ERA+ (3.57 FIP, 3.45 DRA), 2.86 K/BB, 29.9 K%, 1.16 WHIP, 10 GS, 51 2/3 IP

Ohtani instantly lived up to the hype this season, becoming the first true two-way player to excel on both sides of the ball since Babe Ruth. A torn ulnar collateral ligament in his pitching elbow led to a midseason disabled list stay and limited him to hitting for most of the remainder of the season, but he responded by vastly exceeding expectations at the plate.

Back in March, I attempted to quiet the concerns of those who doubted that Ohtani would be able to hit major league pitching — remember the scout who said Ohtani was the equivalent of a high-school hitter? — by attempting to translate his production in Nippon Professional Baseball to the major leagues. Based on the previous transitions of 15 other NPB veterans, and the Angels' projected use of Ohtani as a part-time DH between pitching starts, I projected the 23-year-old import to hit *.289/.355/.400* with seven home runs, 33 walks and 88 strikeouts in 350 plate appearances. Cover up the slugging and homer totals, and that was a pretty remarkable projection, but uncover those slugging stats and Ohtani made me look as foolish as the doubters.

Because he was able to play close to full-time down the stretch, Ohtani actually wound up with more plate appearances than planned and radically exceeded all expectations at the plate. In addition to which, he banked 51 2/3 innings of a 126 ERA+, which has the equivalent value of a full season of elite glove work at a skill position.

Ohtani's injury — which, following his Tommy John surgery scheduled for later this week, will keep him off the mound for most of next season and off the field entirely for a significant portion of it — is both frustrating and disappointing. Still, his combined value on the field in his two different roles easily places him among the most valuable rookies in either league despite his time missed, and the extra degree of difficulty, the novelty and the historical significance of his performance are more than enough to put him over the top for this award.

2. Joey Wendle, 2B/UT, Rays

.300/.354/.435 (118 OPS+), 7 HR, 37 BB, 96 K, 15 SB (79%), 545 PA

Go ahead and hate, but Wendle is closer to first than third place in this race. Getting him past Yankees second baseman Gleyber Torres is easy. Both posted a 118 OPS+, but Wendle had 61 more plate appearances and was more valuable in the field, both for his versatility and the quality of his fielding. As for Miguel Andújar, Wendle's value with the bat, alone, was much closer to Andújar's than you might think.

The trick is that the two are very much an apples-to-oranges comparison. Andújar is a low-on-base-percentage slugger who played his home games in a slugging-friendly ballpark. Wendle is a player with modest power who played his home games in a park that suppresses offense in all its forms. Take them on the road, however, and you'll find that Wendle hit .335/.392/.485 outside of Tampa's terrordome, while Andújar hit just .281/.316/.483 outside of the Bronx. Add the home numbers back in, and Andújar, who posted a 126 OPS+ in 606 plate appearances, was more valuable at the plate than Wendle in the aggregate, but not dramatically so.

What *was* dramatic was the difference between the two players in the field. Again, Wendle was versatile, making double-digit appearances at second, third, short and in left field, and above average at his primary position. Andújar, meanwhile, was a borderline disaster in the field for the Yankees, costing them at least a win and a half, according to multiple metrics, with his bad footwork and hard hands. It may not be much fun to rank a 28-year-old with limited potential over a 23-year-old budding star like Andújar, but Wendle, who was also the best baserunner of the bunch, was clearly the superior player this season.

3. Gleyber Torres, 2B/SS, Yankees

.271/.340/.480 (118 OPS+), 24 HR, 42 BB, 122 K, 484 PA

The fact that there are just three spots on BBWAA's Rookie of the Year ballot, means that every voter will have to leave off one of the obvious top four rookies in the league, and that limitation could have significant repercussions in the final results. For me, Andújar fails to make the cut because of his brutal fielding and weak on-base percentage. True, Andújar came to the plate 122 more times than his teammate Torres, but Torres still drew 17 more walks and had just three fewer homers, while playing superior defense. Yes, Torres could also be erratic in the field, but that was more the result of youthful inconsistency from a 21-year-old than the kind of fundamentally poor technique we saw all year from Andújar.

National League

1. Ronald Acuña Jr., LF, Braves

.293/.366/.552 (144 OPS+), 26 HR, 45 BB, 123 K, 16 SB (76%), 487 PA

It didn't go exactly according to plan, but somehow the two preseason favorites for the Rookie of the Year awards managed to finish at the top of their respective rookie classes. Entering the season with nearly as much hype as Ohtani, Acuña was good but not great for the first two months, then, like Ohtani, lost most of June to injury, in Acuña's case to his left knee. Acuña didn't really blossom until the end of July, but, oh, what a finish! From July 30 through September 30, he hit .325/.401/.628 with 17 home runs and 11 stolen bases in 267 plate appearances. For most of September, the race for this

award appeared to be down to the 20-year-old Acuña and another NL East left fielder, 19-year-old Juan Soto, who hit right away, going 2-for-4 with a homer in his first major league start on May 21. However, Acuña not only finished with a superior batting line to Soto, but he is the better fielder and baserunner, as well.

2. Juan Soto, LF, Nationals

.292/.406/.517 (142 OPS+), 22 HR, 79 BB, 99 K, 494 PA

After his big debut in late May, Soto went about setting a slew of records for teenaged hitters. He set the record for most multi-homer games by a teenager (3), became the first teenager with four hits and two homers in a single game, became the first teenager to steal three bases in a game (a true oddity as he stole just five bags in the majors this year), became the first teenager to homer in three straight games since 1898, surpassed Mickey Mantle for the second-longest on-base streak by a teenager (21 games, two shy of Mel Ott's record), and tied teammate Bryce Harper for the most home runs — in a season or a career — by a teenage hitter (two shy of Tony Conigliaro's record of 24). Now that his season is over, we can add the fact that Soto's .406 on-base percentage is the best ever by a teenager with at least 150 plate appearances (again, single season or career), and his 142 OPS+ is the best ever by a teenager with at least 300 plate appearances (season or career).

Of course, Soto is not being compared only to teenagers here, and experience, not age, is the relevant factor for this award. Still, as with Ohtani, Soto's season contained a historic component that boosts his candidacy.

3. Brian Anderson, RF/3B, Marlins

.273/.357/.400 (116 OPS+), 11 HR, 62 BB, 129 K, 670 PA

The Cardinals' Harrison Bader and Jack Flaherty had strong rookie seasons. Dereck Rodríguez impressed with the Giants, and Walker Buehler could yet add to his rookie résumé as the Dodgers' starter in Game 163 on Monday. Still, Anderson's consistently above-average bat and play at two positions (64 starts at third base, 89 in right field), and the sheer quantity of his contribution — 233 more plate appearances than Bader — earned the 25-year-old the final place on my ballot.

Cy Young

American League

1. Justin Verlander, RHP, Astros

2.52 ERA, 159 ERA+ (2.78 FIP, **2.32** **DRA**), **7.84** **K/BB**, **34.8** **K%**, **0.90** **WHIP**, 6.3 IP/GS, 214 IP

Injuries threw this year's American League Cy Young race into chaos in the second half of the season. After a hot start by Verlander, Chris Sale surged to the front of the pack in July, but shoulder issues limited the Red Sox's ace to just 17 innings after July 27. Cleveland's Trevor Bauer overtook Sale in early August, but a comebacker broke his leg on August 11, limiting him to 9 1/3 innings over the remainder of the season. With those two out of the way, Tampa Bay's Blake Snell caught fire down the stretch, but

he had already missed three weeks with a shoulder issue of his own by that point and built up his pitch-count slowly after his return. As a result, three of the best pitchers in the league finished with just 180 2/3 (Snell), 171 1/3 (Bauer) and 158 (Sale) innings pitched, respectively, on the season.

Prior to this season, just two starting pitchers had ever won the Cy Young award for a performance spanning fewer than 200 innings. Clayton Kershaw won the NL award in 2014 despite missing April with a torn muscle in his back and finishing with 198 1/3 innings pitched, and Rick Sutcliffe won it in 1984 for the 150 1/3 innings he pitched after being acquired by the Cubs in June, though even Sutcliffe had thrown 244 2/3 innings on the season as a whole, the rest coming with Cleveland in the American League.

There's a strong chance that Snell, who finished with a better ERA+ than Jacob deGrom, could become the third. However, I have always weighed innings pitched heavily in my Cy Young rankings, and Verlander's strong finish (1.09 ERA, 0.64 WHIP, 50 K, 5 BB, 1 HR in 33 IP over his final five starts) went a long way toward allowing him to reclaim an award that appeared to be his to lose at the end of June.

The bold and italicized type in Verlander's line above, indicating AL- and MLB-leading figures, speaks to just how dominant he was this season. Beyond that, he finished just one frame off the AL lead in innings and bested Snell in the two defense-independent metrics I use here, fielding independent pitching and deserved run average. The only thing Snell did better than Verlander this season is prevent runs, and those metrics suggest that outside factors (fielding, ballpark, catcher framing, etc.) contributed more heavily to Snell's run prevention than Verlander's. When you add in the gap in innings, which amount to a difference equivalent of a full month worth of starts — as our Ken Rosenthal pointed out in an excellent piece on the relationship between innings totals and this year's AL Cy Young voting — Verlander's superiority becomes clear.

It's also worth noting here that, should Snell win, Verlander could reasonably argue that he has had three Cy Young awards stolen from him by the voters. He was better than 20-game-winner David Price in 2012, he was better than 22-game-winner Rick Porcello in 2016, and he was better than 21-game-winner Blake Snell this year. By rights, this should be Verlander's fourth Cy Young, but it may not even be his second.

2. Blake Snell, LHP, Rays

1.89 ERA, 217 ERA+ (2.95 FIP, 2.44 DRA), 3.45 K/BB, 33.3 K%, 0.97 WHIP, 5.8 IP/GS, 180 2/3 IP

None of the above is meant to diminish Snell's season, only to elevate Verlander's. In his breakout season, Snell was very good through mid-June and nearly untouchable the rest of the way. Though that remainder included his disabled list stint and several starts shortened in connection with his injury, over his final 16 turns, Snell allowed as many as three runs just once, posting a 1.25 ERA over that stretch, while his opponents hit .162/.245/.248 against him. His defense and ballpark helped, and he didn't pitch particularly deep into games after his return, averaging less than six innings per start even after building his pitch count back up to triple digits. Still, just 23 pitchers in the entire history of baseball, including Snell, have exceeded a 215 ERA+ over at least 180 innings in a single season. However, neither of the last two won the Cy Young award. Zack Greinke finished second behind Jake Arrieta in 2015, and Roger Clemens finished *third* behind a pair of 20-game winners in 2005.

3. Corey Kluber, RHP, Indians

2.89 ERA, 151 ERA+ (3.12 FIP, 2.84 DRA), 6.53 K/BB, 26.4 K%, 0.99 WHIP, **6.5 IP/GS, 215 IP**

Kluber typically finishes strong, but he actually pitched best in April and May this year, posting a 1.99 ERA through his first 14 starts. The right knee issue that caused him to miss the All-Star Game may have contributed to his leveling off thereafter, but he never missed a start and continued to devour innings, even if he was less dominant in the second half. Fun facts: Kluber walked three men in a game just once all year. He also tied for the major league lead in complete games, with two, and shutouts, with one, the lowest MLB-leading totals in those categories in major league history.

4. Gerrit Cole, RHP, Astros

2.88 ERA, 140 ERA+ (2.70 FIP, 2.59 DRA), 4.31 K/BB, 34.5 K%, 1.03 WHIP, 6.3 IP/GS, 200 1/3 IP

Like Kluber, Cole started white-hot (1.42 ERA, 77 strikeouts in 50 2/3 innings through his first seven starts), before settling into being good but not-quite-dominant for most of the remainder of the season. Also like Kluber, he never missed a start.

5. Chris Sale, LHP, Red Sox

2.11 ERA, 207 ERA+ (1.98 FIP, 2.20 DRA), 6.97 K/BB, 38.4 K%, 0.86 WHIP, 5.9 IP/GS, 158 IP

Sale's shoulder issues prevented him from reaching the 162 innings required to qualify for the league lead in rate stats. Had he thrown four more representative innings, he'd have led in FIP (Trevor Bauer led the league at 2.44), DRA, K% and WHIP, reclaiming those last three from Verlander. At the point that his shoulder became problematic, Sale was destroying the league. In his last nine starts prior to his first trip to the disabled list, he had a 0.75 ERA and 0.73 WHIP with 97 strikeouts in 60 innings and had allowed just one run in his last 39 innings. After that first DL stint, he came back and struck out 12 in five scoreless innings while allowing only a single, extending his streak of innings without a home run allowed to 68 frames. Unfortunately, he still wasn't fully healthy, and the five runs he allowed in eight innings over his final two starts and the accompanying dramatic decline in his velocity have prompted considerable concern about his health heading into the postseason. Still, Sale's first 23 starts of the season were good enough to keep the next three men in the Cleveland rotation (Bauer, Mike Clevinger and Carlos Carrasco), the Yankees' Luis Severino and ace relievers Edwin Díaz and Blake Treinen off my ballot.

National League**1. Jacob deGrom, RHP, Mets**

1.70 ERA, 216 ERA+ (1.99 FIP, 2.08 DRA), 5.85 K/BB, 32.2 K%, 0.91 WHIP, **6.8 IP/GS**, 217 IP

2. Max Scherzer, RHP, Nationals

2.53 ERA, 168 ERA+ (2.65 FIP, 2.26 DRA), **5.88 K/BB, 34.6 K%, 0.91 WHIP**, 6.7 IP/GS, **220 2/3 IP**

Real talk: this isn't a difficult choice. To begin with, either deGrom or Scherzer led the league in every category listed above, the ones I hand-picked because I find them most illuminating in this context, and every time the bold type is on Scherzer's line, the gap between him and deGrom in that category is minuscule (in WHIP it's Scherzer's 0.911 to deGrom's 0.912). By comparison, deGrom's advantages in both the real-world run prevention and adjusted run-prevention statistics are significant. Jacob deGrom was just better and easily the best pitcher in baseball this year.

The 24 consecutive quality starts with which deGrom finished the season are a single-season record. He needs just two more at the start of the 2019 season to tie Bob Gibson's all-time streak (set between the 1967 and '68 seasons, of course). During his still-active streak, deGrom averaged more than seven innings per start, and 14 of those starts saw him throw at least seven innings while allowing no more than two runs, earned or otherwise. That the Mets went 10-14 during that streak is of no matter. In the nine losses deGrom was charged with over that span, the Mets scored a total of 13 runs.

3. Aaron Nola, RHP, Phillies

2.37 ERA, 175 ERA+ (3.01 FIP, 2.61 DRA), 3.86 K/BB, 27.0 K%, 0.98 WHIP, 6.4 IP/GS, 212 1/3 IP

Nola was very clearly one of the three best pitchers in the NL this year. He was also, to my eye, very clearly the third best. Nola's relatively underwhelming peripherals put him comfortably behind deGrom and Scherzer, and while some have suggested that Nola deserves a major adjustment to compensate for the record-setting atrociousness of the Phillies defense this season, FIP and DRA are there for that purpose and don't indicate that quite so large a correction is due. Indeed, the biggest difference between Nola this year and last, other than his workload, was a 56-point drop in his opponents' batting average on balls in play. He reduced his home-run rate, as well, but as bad as the Phillies were in the field, there's little evidence that Nola bore the brunt of it.

4. Patrick Corbin, LHP, Diamondbacks

3.15 ERA, 137 ERA+ (2.47 FIP, 2.82 DRA), 5.13 K/BB, 30.8 K%, 1.05 WHIP, 6.1 IP/GS, 200 IP

Corbin had an odd walk year. After getting off to a strong start, he suddenly lost two miles per hour off his fastball when May turned to June, but he battled through the middle months and slowly began to recover that missing speed. In September, a point in the season when other pitchers might show fatigue, he rediscovered his early season velocity and finished strong, though he was unable to arrest the Diamondbacks' September swoon (they went 1-6 in his last seven starts despite his 3.05 ERA in those games).

5. Zack Greinke, RHP, Diamondbacks

3.21 ERA, 135 ERA+ (3.17 FIP, 3.08 DRA), 4.63 K/BB, 23.7 K%, 1.08 WHIP, 6.3 IP/GS, 207 2/3 IP

Greinke had a rough go in three of his first five starts this season, but posted a 2.94 ERA the rest of the way and had a particularly strong stretch from late June into early August in which he posted a 1.36 ERA over nine starts. He just edges the Cardinals' Miles Mikolas for this final spot by virtue of park-adjustments, defense-independent run prevention and an extra seven innings pitched.

Most Valuable Player

American League

1. Mike Trout, CF, Angels

.312/.**460**/.628 (**199 OPS+**), 39 HR, **122 BB**, 124 K, 24 SB (92%), 608 PA

2. Mookie Betts, RF, Red Sox

.**346**/.438/.**640** (186 OPS+), 32 HR, 81 BB, 91 K, 47 2B, 30 SB (83%), 614 PA

When Mike Trout beat out Mookie Betts for this award in 2016, it was more obvious that Trout had the better season. This is absurdly close. In nearly identical playing time, Trout has a significant lead in OPS+, and was the more efficient basestealer. However, Betts is the better fielder, and one could argue that Trout's offensive numbers are inflated by his 25 intentional walks. Plus, who knows how many times he was pitched around on his way to those league-leading 122 walks and .460 on-base percentage, all of those numbers career-highs for the Best Player in Baseball. Still, I'm not about to hold Trout's extra times on base *against* him, and I'd rather go by the hitting stats I trust than the defensive metrics I don't. As always with Trout, we have to remember that he plays in an unfriendly home ballpark for hitters, while quite the opposite is true for Betts. And, yes, I do argue that Trout deserves this award every year (other than last year, when he missed too much time due to injury). That's because he *does* deserve this award every year. By rights, this should be his *sixth* MVP award, though there's no guarantee it will even be his third. It *will*, however, be his sixth top-two finish in seven full major league seasons.

3. José Ramírez, 3B/2B, Indians

.272/.388/.555 (151 OPS+), 39 HR, 106 BB, 80 K, 34 (85%), 698 PA

4. Alex Bregman, 3B/SS, Astros

.286/.394/.532 (156 OPS+), 31 HR, 96 BB, 85 K, **51 2B**, 10 SB (71%), 705 PA

Ramírez was right there with Trout and Betts through the end of July, but his bat cooled in August and died an untimely death at the end of that month. Ramírez hit just .173/.325/.316 with a mere two home runs over his final 27 games this season. Still, I have him here ahead of Bregman, whose candidacy kicked into gear with a big June, by virtue of Ramírez's superior fielding and baserunning.

5. Francisco Lindor, SS, Indians

.277/.352/.519 (131 OPS+), 38 HR, 70 BB, 107 K, 25 (71%), **745 PA**

6. Matt Chapman, 3B, A's

.278/.356/.508 (136 OPS+), 24 HR, 58 BB, 146 K, 42 2B, 616 PA

My AL MVP ballot descends in steps. Below the only two relevant contenders and the league's top-two third basemen are these two defensive wizards, who had big seasons at the plate but cooled off late. Like his teammate Ramírez, Lindor didn't hit much after July, but nine home runs in September gave him a surprising power kick down the stretch. Chapman might be the best fielder in the majors at this point, and he was really coming on with the bat in the second half before his stick went cold in the second half of September.

7. J.D. Martinez, DH, Red Sox

.330/.402/.629 (173 OPS+), 43 HR, 69 BB, 146 K, 649 PA

In March, I predicted that Martinez would be the second-best hitter in the American League this year. I was wrong. He's been the third-best (good news for commenter Jeffrey C!). Unfortunately, he undermines his value at the plate when on the bases or in the field, and he spent way too much time wearing a glove this year (57 starts in the outfield). The gap between Martinez and the two players above him on this list in terms of defensive value is in the neighborhood of three wins, and if Martinez played the field more, it would only get larger. Did Martinez help coach his teammates to better seasons at the plate this year? If he did, that's great, but it doesn't make Martinez a more valuable *player*. Martinez's production with the bat is undeniable, but, if anything, I have him too high here.

8. Justin Verlander, RHP, Astros

2.52 ERA, 159 ERA+ (2.78 FIP, **2.32 DRA**), **7.84 K/BB**, **34.8 K%**, **0.90 WHIP**, 6.3 IP/GS, 214 IP

Is eighth too low for the best pitcher in the league? Possibly. The way I see it, the seven players above are the ones who had seasons that stood out as special. The two below are there just because I had 10 spots to fill. Verlander, who, truth be told, was my Cy Young pick somewhat by default, is the dividing line.

9. Whit Merrifield, 2B/CF, Royals

.304/.367/.438 (121 OPS+), 12 HR, 61 BB, 114 K, **45 SB** (82%), 707 PA

Merrifield did everything well for a terrible Royals team this year. He led the majors in hits (192) and stolen bases, spotted at four positions other than his primary one, hit for average, got on base, added 43 doubles and three triples and was above-average in the field. He'll turn 30 in January and is under the control of a once-again moribund franchise for four more seasons, but the very real value he accrued on the field this year could bring a solid package if the Royals shop him this offseason.

10. Mitch Haniger, RF, Mariners

.285/.366/.493 (138 OPS+), 26 HR, 70 BB, 148 K, 683 PA

That Taijuan Walker trade sure is working out nicely for the Mariners. The two everyday players they acquired from Arizona in that swap, Haniger and Jean Segura, were the M's two best players per Baseball-Reference's wins above replacement this season. Haniger validated their faith in his bat last year, but injuries interrupted. This year, he stayed healthy, played in 157 games, handled centerfield in a

pinch more than a few times, made the All-Star team, finished sixth in the league in OPS+ — behind the top four men on this list and Martinez — and snuck onto the bottom of my MVP ballot.

National League

1. Jacob deGrom, RHP, Mets

1.70 ERA, 216 ERA+ (1.99 FIP, 2.08 DRA), 5.85 K/BB, 32.2 K%, 0.91 WHIP, 6.8 IP/GS, 217 IP

When you really boil these awards down to their essence, they're not about whatever your interpretation of "value" might be (though there is a correct one, it's in the voting rules, and it's about individual performance on the field, specifically "strength of offense and defense"). Rather, the awards are about sticking a flag in the season's signature performances, the ones that should be remembered and that will resonate beyond the season at hand. In the National League, this year, that performance was the one turned in by Jacob deGrom. Yes, he was the most *valuable* player in the league — pick a WAR stat at random and it will confirm that fact — but he was also the most *exceptional* player in the league. His was the performance that stood apart as something special, something we don't see every year, something worth remembering.

Yes, that performance, that value, was wasted by the Mets, who didn't score for him and went an almost unfathomable 14-18 in his starts as a result of their own impotence, but that's all the more reason for us to appreciate it, to separate it from the miserable context in which it occurred and celebrate it. Jacob deGrom turned in one of the great pitching seasons in the game's history this year. In the entire history of the major leagues, there have been just 16 seasons in which a pitcher exceeded both a 215 ERA+ and 215 innings pitched. Half of those seasons came during the deadball era. This was one of the other eight (with Bob Gibson's 1968, Dwight Gooden's 1985, Pedro Martínez and Roger Clemens in 1997, Martínez again in 2000, and Greinke in 2015).

2. Max Scherzer, RHP, Nationals

2.53 ERA, 168 ERA+ (2.65 FIP, 2.26 DRA), 5.88 K/BB, 34.6 K%, 0.91 WHIP, 6.7 IP/GS, 220 2/3 IP

Scherzer's season wasn't as special as deGrom's, but it was awful close, and Scherzer did strike out 300 men, becoming just the third man to do so in the last 16 years (though it has become more common of late).

3. Christian Yelich, OF, Brewers

.323/.400/.596 (163 OPS+), 36 HR, 68 BB, 134 K, 21 (84%), 647 PA

Things get a bit tricky here, because, as I write this, Yelich, Lorenzo Cain, Javier Báez, Nolan Arenado and Trevor Story all have one more regular season game to play. Still, Yelich, who is the player most likely to actually win this award, seems safely ensconced in the top three thanks to a mind-blowing second half. Yelich has hit .361/.445/.770 since the All-Star break with 25 home runs in 64 games and seemed only to get hotter as the season drew closer to its thrilling conclusion. Over the last 15 games of the regular season, prior to Monday's tiebreaker, Yelich went 21-for-51 with 15 walks and 15 extra-base hits, which works out to a comical .420/.561/1.080 line over 66 plate appearances. Hot finishes tend to stick in the

minds of voters, and that performance will likely push Yelich to the top of many ballots. For me, however, he hits a hard ceiling when he approaches deGrom and Scherzer.

4. Aaron Nola, RHP, Phillies

2.37 ERA, 175 ERA+ (3.01 FIP, 2.61 DRA), 3.86 K/BB, 27.0 K%, 0.98 WHIP, 6.4 IP/GS, 212 1/3 IP

As mentioned above, Nola's peripherals don't quite measure up to those of deGrom and Scherzer, but what really separated him from those two was a four-game hiccup in early September in which Nola allowed eight home runs in 23 1/3 innings, posted a 5.01 ERA, and turned in just one quality start. He recovered for his final two starts of the season, both against the first-place Braves, but that small stumble created room for someone like Yelich to sneak into the top three, as he has, at least from my point of view.

5. Trevor Story, SS, Rockies

.291/.348/.564 (127 OPS+), 36 HR, 47 BB, 168 K, 27 SB (82%), 652 PA

6. Javier Báez, IF, Cubs

.291/.327/.556 (127 OPS+), 34 HR, 29 BB, 165 K, 9 3B, 21 SB (70%), 641 PA

Story and Báez are in a virtual tie here, with identical OPS+ figures. Story has come to the plate 11 more times and has been a more efficient and effective basestealer. Both are excellent fielders, though I might give Báez the edge in the field, both for his skill and his versatility (he has started 75 games at second, 51 at shortstop, and 18 at third base). Báez is a more aggressive baserunner, though that can be problematic, as we saw early in Sunday's game when he ran through a stop sign and into an out at home in a win-or-go-home game. Per Statcast's sprint speed, Story is the faster runner. Ultimately, I'm giving Story the edge for his more responsible baserunning, and for his superior on-base skills (even Story's road OBP is better than Báez's overall figure).

7. Nolan Arenado, 3B, Rockies

.297/.374/.558 (133 OPS+), **37 HR**, 73 BB, 122 K, 669 PA

Arenado is a tick below the other two infielders because he lacks their wheels and because the 27-year-old's play in the field isn't quite as dazzling as it once was.

8. Lorenzo Cain, CF, Brewers

.308/.396/.419 (120 OPS+), 10 HR, 71 BB, 94 K, 30 SB (81%), 616 PA

Speed, elite centerfield defense, a consistent ability to hit for average and top-of-the-league on-base skills are what put Cain above many other contenders with seemingly superior batting statistics. Cain's .396 OBP ranks fourth in the league, as does his .308 batting average, and his 120 OPS+ isn't that far behind the 127 marks of Story and Báez, who also add value with their legs and gloves, while he bests both on the bases and in the field.

9. Freddie Freeman, 1B, Braves

.309/.388/.505 (140 OPS+), 23 HR, 76 BB, 132 K, **44 2B**, 10 SB (77%), **707 PA**

10. Matt Carpenter, 1B/3B, Cardinals

.257/.374/.523 (143 OPS+), 36 HR, 102 BB, 158 K, 677 PA

Carpenter's season was split into three parts. He hit .140/.286/.272 through May 15; .332/.433/.721 with 30 home runs in 79 games from May 16 through August 13; then .195/.328/.315 from August 14 through the end of the season. The end result is that he was awful for half the year and incredible for the other half. That inconsistency is why he ranks behind Freeman here. In Freddie's worst month, he hit .283/.366/.425. He never reached that next level that Carpenter did for the middle three months of the season, but he was a rock in the heart of the order for a young, emergent Braves team all year. A very valuable player, indeed.

FROM THE ASSOCIATED PRESS**Angels' Eppler seeking new manager to lead playoff return**

By Greg Beacham

ANAHEIM, Calif. (AP) — For the first time in the 21st century, the Los Angeles Angels are looking for a manager.

The person who lands the job will play a major role in determining whether the Angels keep Mike Trout, get the most out of Shohei Ohtani — and finally end a nine-year postseason victory drought for this big-budget underachiever of a baseball club.

A day after the Angels finished 80-82 and missed the playoffs for the fourth consecutive season, general manager Billy Eppler set no timetables and confirmed no candidates as he began what's expected to be a lengthy process to identify the successor to Mike Scioscia, who stepped down Sunday after 19 seasons in the Big A's home dugout.

Eppler praised Scioscia as "a lighthouse for this organization" and touted the manager as a Hall of Fame candidate. The GM also gave a few indications of what he's seeking in a leader when he puts his numerous managerial candidates through a lengthy interview process.

"What we're looking for in that next manager is connectivity with the players," Eppler said. "We're looking for somebody who can think with a probability-based mindset. We're going to look for someone that's eager to grow (and) evolve. Someone that can develop a culture that will put the welfare of the team above any singular person."

Although the Angels still haven't posted a winning record during Eppler's three seasons in charge, the GM feels his new manager will have the ingredients to create a winner, and he plans to get more talent in the free-agent market.

The Angels haven't won a playoff game since 2009, and they're in a streak of three consecutive losing seasons for the first time since 1994 — but any organization that can build around Trout and Ohtani has a firm foundation, and Eppler is eager to continue the work he's been doing.

"We need to win for our fans," Eppler said. "Win for our fans, win for our owner. That's where the mindset is."

More things to watch during the long offseason in Anaheim:

INJURIOUS EPIDEMIC

Injuries were the root of almost every problem for the Angels this season, with a jaw-dropping 25 players missing a significant amount of playing time. The Angels ended the season with 11 players on the DL, including key contributors such as slugger Albert Pujols, former ace Garrett Richards, free-agent signee Zack Cozart and former closer Keynan Middleton. They had to use 16 starting pitchers during a season in which they lost seven potentially important big-league starters to arm surgery, including Ohtani. Although there appears to be no common thread in this enormous tapestry of injury, Eppler said the Angels will try some new things next season in an effort to preserve their players' health — but Eppler declined to say exactly what those things would be.

FOR STARTERS

Durable starting pitchers will be atop Eppler's list of desired free agents, but he also emerged happy with Andrew Heaney, Tyler Skaggs and surprising rookie Jaime Barria. All three made at least 24 starts for an otherwise patchwork rotation — and while they weren't stars, they were solid. "It was difficult to navigate," Eppler said. "There was some instances where we were looking for starters the night before games sometimes, and we tested our depth. We tested the airport, we were in there so much running guys back and forth. But what our goal is is to get through the season with five or six starters next season. That would be great."

UP WITH OBP

Even with a lineup featuring talents like Trout, Andrelton Simmons, Pujols, Justin Upton and Ohtani, the Angels scored only 721 runs — good for just 15th in the big leagues. Eppler distilled his plans for the Angels' 2019 offense to one key statistic: "Our team on-base percentage (.313) was low. It was too low, simply put. We were seventh in home runs in baseball (214). All the teams in front of us were in the postseason except one (Toronto). We were 20th in on-base percentage, which is why we were only 15th in runs scored. A lot of solo home runs. We need to be on base. It is the only statistic that correlates with runs scored."

TROUT'S FUTURE

Trout will be at least 28 years old before he wins his first playoff game, and the amiable outfielder is frustrated by losing. But he has remained publicly content with Eppler's efforts to build a winner around him while restocking a farm system left bare by previous GM Jerry Dipoto. Trout was the highest-paid player in baseball this season under a contract that runs through 2020, and Eppler declined to say anything Monday about the Angels' reported desire to lock up the two-time AL MVP to an even longer-term, more lucrative contract. Trout batted .312 with 39 homers and 79 RBIs in 140 games this season, and he led the majors with a .460 on-base percentage and a 1.088 OPS.

SHOHEI'S RECOVERY

Ohtani had Tommy John surgery on Monday, less than 24 hours after he singled in the final at-bat of his unique rookie season. Although the two-way star has many months of rehabilitation ahead, Eppler remains confident Ohtani will hit for the Angels in 2019 before he resumes his pitching career in 2020. Ohtani will spend plenty of time in Southern California during the winter, and he is a top candidate for the AL Rookie of the Year award.

FROM SPORTING NEWS

Angels manager search: Eric Chavez, Joe Girardi among potential replacements for Mike Scioscia

By Ryan Fagan

We will see several new managers take the field in 2019, but only one of those newbies will have the pleasure of writing Mike Trout's name on his Opening Day lineup card.

That's quite the draw. Some of the new managerial openings present challenges. That's not to say the Angels' job doesn't have challenges — it certainly does — but it also has an upside other openings do not. And that's why it's fascinating to see which person the Angels choose to replace Mike Scioscia, who will not be back in 2019 after spending the previous 19 seasons at the helm in Anaheim.

Let's take a look at some of the likely candidates.

Eric Chavez

Why he makes sense: He's been reported as a favorite by multiple sources close to the situation, and that month-long stint as the manager of the Angels' Triple-A squad this summer sure as heck had the feeling of an audition. At the very least, a chance to get things figured out so he avoids a Gabe Kapler-esque pitching change embarrassment like the Phillies' new manager had in his debut this season. Chavez is still young — he turns 41 in December — and is clearly a Billy Eppler guy. He's had wide-ranging roles in the organization since he was hired by Eppler in 2015.

Joe Girardi

Why he makes sense: Some of the names you'll hear on the managing carousel are hoping against hope that they'll land any one of the open jobs, just to get their first crack in the bigs. Girardi, with his track record both as a player and manager, isn't in that category. It's hard to see him wanting to take on a rebuilding challenge like the one, for example, the Orioles will be undergoing the next couple of years. But the chance to manage Mike Trout? Yeah, that's a different story.

Brad Ausmus

Why he makes sense: After four years as Tigers manager, Ausmus spent last season as a "special assistant" to Eppler in the Angels' front office, though he spent much of spring training in uniform. It's easy to imagine Eppler brought Ausmus into the fold knowing that a managerial change was possible in the next year or two. That doesn't mean the job is his, of course, but Ausmus does make a lot of sense.

Other candidates

If the Angels value continuity above all else, there are other in-house options outside of Chavez and Ausmus. **Josh Paul** spent three years in the Yankees organization as the minor-league catching coordinator, then spent the 2018 season as Scioscia's bench coach. He spent a couple of years with the Angels as a backup catcher, too.

When Paul was hired, **Dino Ebel** moved from bench coach to third-base coach for Scioscia. He's been with the Angels and Scioscia in a wide variety of roles for a long time; he was actually hired to fill the opening created when Joe Maddon was hired as Tampa Bay's new manager in 2005.

And Ebel moved to third base for 2018 when **Ron Roenicke** left to join the Red Sox as a bench coach. Roenicke, of course, was the Brewers' manager from 2011 to 2015. Milwaukee made it to the NLCS in his first year but failed to make the playoffs again under Roenicke.

If the Angels are open to looking outside the organization — after one playoff berth (and zero wins) in nine seasons, maybe that's not such an awful idea — they would do well to chat with **Sandy Alomar Jr.** after Cleveland's playoff run ends. He's been strongly connected to several managerial openings over the past several offseasons and has spent the past few years learning from one of the best, Terry Francona, with the Indians.

Gary DiSarcina is technically outside the organization right now — he's the bench coach for the Mets — but he spent his entire 12-year playing career with the Angels. He's held multiple coaching and front-office positions since he retired as a player (including a few with the Angels) and he's interviewed for several major-league manager jobs.

FROM BLEACHER REPORT**Shohei Ohtani Undergoes Successful Tommy John Surgery; Expected to DH in 2019**

By Timothy Rapp

Los Angeles Angels pitcher and designated hitter Shohei Ohtani underwent successful Tommy John surgery on Monday.

General manager Billy Eppler revealed as much, per Jeff Fletcher of the *Los Angeles Daily News*, and noted Ohtani will not pitch in 2019. Instead, he will only serve as a designated hitter, although it is not yet known when he will be available.

The 24-year-old was initially put on the disabled list on June 8 and diagnosed with a Grade 2 sprain of his ulnar collateral ligament. He underwent "platelet-rich plasma and stem cell therapy," according to Yahoo Sports.

But Ohtani ultimately opted to have surgery after new damage to his ulnar collateral ligament was discovered.

"I think it was the proper decision Shohei made to have surgery, and the sooner the better," then-Angels manager Mike Scioscia said in late September, per ESPN.com.

"It obviously puts him out of pitching in 2019, but he'll be able to hit, and I think he's at peace with that," Scioscia added. "He wants to excel at both phases of the game. The fact he can't pitch (next season), there is a little bit of a void. But he'll be able to hit and focus on that."

Ohtani was arguably the team's best player outside of superstar Mike Trout in 2018. On the mound, he went 4-2 with a 3.31 ERA, 1.16 WHIP and 63 strikeouts in 10 starts and 51.2 innings. At the plate, he hit .285 with 22 homers, 61 RBI and 59 runs in 326 at-bats.

The injury didn't appear to negatively affect Ohtani's impact at the plate, and his numbers there alone may be enough to earn him the American League Rookie of the Year award. But it was his ability to make a major impact as both a starting pitcher and hitter that made him one of the most unique talents in baseball.

Now, though, the pitching side of his overall game will be shelved for at least the 2019 season, a disappointment for both the Angels and MLB fans in general.