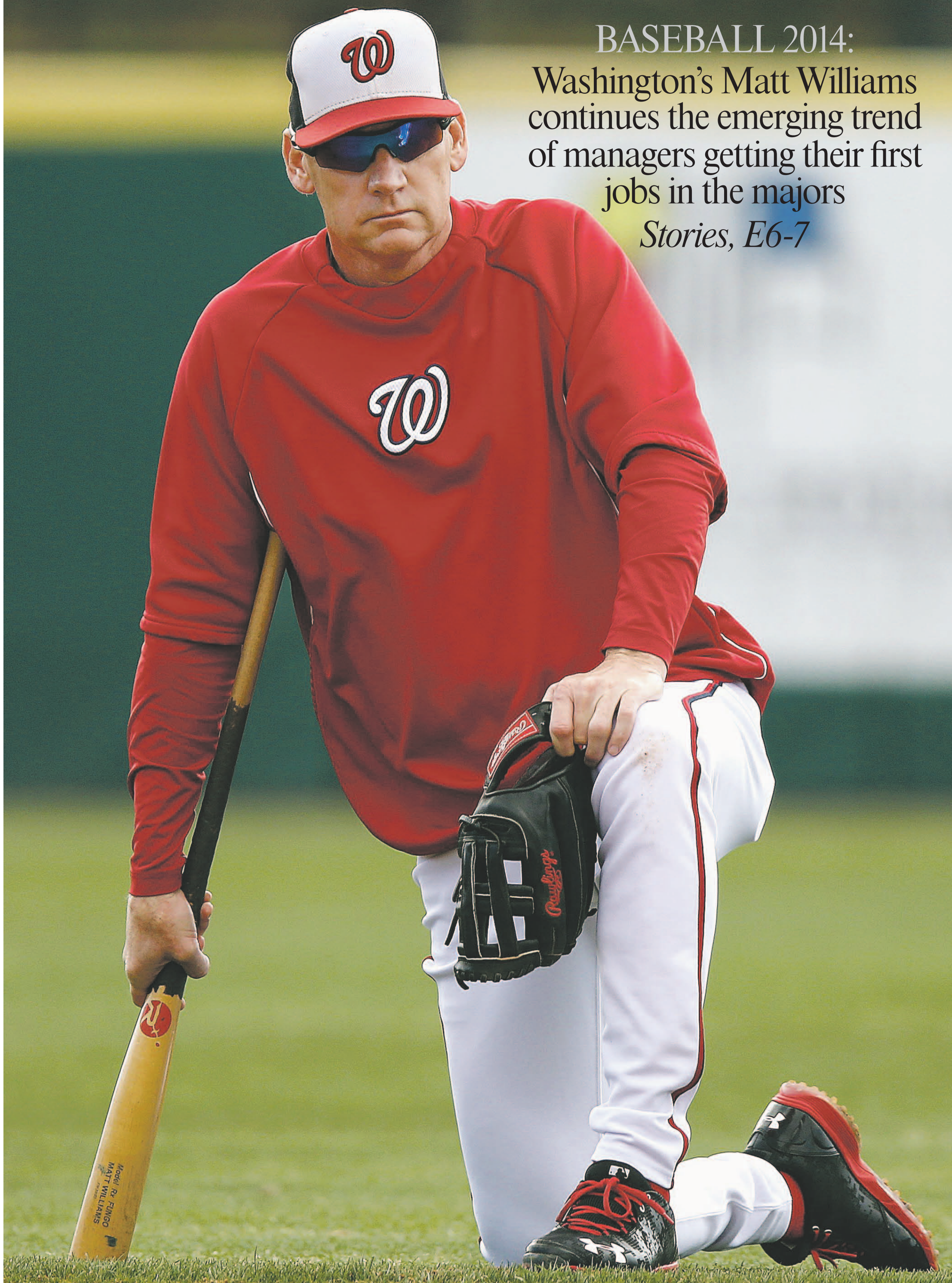


STARTING AT THE TOP

BASEBALL 2014:

Washington's Matt Williams continues the emerging trend of managers getting their first jobs in the majors

Stories, E6-7



HARRIS:

EXPECT WILLIAMS TO LEAD TALENTED NATS BACK TO POSTSEASON
PAGE E2

NATS EXTRA:

RAMOS' STREAK SHOWED CATCHER'S VALUE TO BALLCLUB
PAGE E4

LOVERRO:

HARPER, TROUT, MACHADO AND PUIG: MLB'S 'FOUR KINGS'
PAGE E5

MLB EXTRA:

O'S EXPECT TO WIN; TEAM-BY-TEAM CAPSULES; FULL NATS SCHEDULE
PAGES E8-12

BASEBALL 2014

Nats to give fans reason to celebrate

Playoff return can be expected under Williams



MIKE HARRIS

Without meaning to, former Nationals manager Davey Johnson came up with a nifty catchphrase for the 2013 season when he said, "World Series or bust?"

He didn't mean it quite like it got interpreted.

Johnson knew he was retiring before the season started and, if he was going to manage in the World Series again,

this was his final chance. But those four words still became the mantra for the Nats' season and, as everyone knows by now, it was a bust.

Sure, Washington won 86 games for its second-highest victory total since relocating from Montreal before the 2005 season. Sure, the Nats played like one of the best teams in baseball over the final third of the season. But when the playoffs started, the Nationals were not one of the participants and that doesn't qualify the season as a success under the measuring stick the Nats created the year before when they had the best regular-season record in the game.

New Nats manager Matt Williams hasn't been as accommodating as Johnson when it comes to providing words to hang a season on, so let's help him out and do it for him. Let's call 2014 the Year of the Mulligan for the Nats.

Make the playoffs? All is forgiven.

Miss them again? Then it might be time to ask a few more questions and wonder if there's a deeper problem here. What that might be is anybody's guess, but we're going to go out on a limb here and say the questions won't even need to be asked.

This is a playoff team, just as it was last year, but this year the Nats won't miss.

First, it helps that the Nats play in a division that has become one of the weakest in the game. Sure, the Mets or the Marlins or the Phillies might surprise a lot of people and be a lot better than expected. How likely is that?

If the division winner isn't the Nats or the Braves, it will qualify as a major shock.

Second, and most important, the Nats still have a lot of young talent that is continuing to develop and grow. As many as a half a dozen key players — Bryce Harper, Wilson Ramos, Stephen Strasburg, Jordan Zimmermann, Anthony Rendon and even Ian Desmond — are still on the rise. If they continue their progression (and stay healthy) and the team's more veteran presences perform anywhere close to their career norms, this team could be scary good.

While not discounting what will be major contributions from many others, big years from three players could make this quite a memorable year.

Ramos: He showed at the end of last season what he could do when healthy, starting 23 straight games and producing at the plate. The Nats need 130 starts out of him this season.



GREGG NEWTON/SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Ian Desmond (center), who already has established himself as one of the best shortstops in the game, is poised to build on his previous two seasons and have a true breakout year as a key element in the Nationals returning to the postseason in the first year of manager Matt Williams' tenure in D.C.

Strasburg: Maybe he hasn't been quite as good as advertised when the Nats took him with the No. 1 overall pick in 2009. That's because it is almost impossible to be that good. Since returning from his 2010 Tommy John surgery, he's been plenty good. He was an All-Star in 2012 and was, for the most part, even better last year despite it not being reflected in the numbers. His maturation as a pitcher has been fun to watch.

This is the year he needs to take another step. He needs to consistently dominate. He needs to be able to look the Dodgers' brilliant Clayton Kershaw in the eye and say, "Don't clear room for another Cy Young just yet." No disrespect to Zimmermann, Gio

Gonzalez and Doug Fister, but Strasburg is on top of this rotation for a reason.

Desmond: Most agree that the best shortstop in the game is Colorado's Troy Tulowitzki. When the discussion turns to next best, Desmond has to be in the conversation. He's still only 28 and he's become a standout defender. He had 34 errors in 2010 and has only 35 the past two years combined. He's become a force at the plate, too, with 45 home runs and 153 RBI the past two seasons. If he matches what he's done in recent years, Desmond is a vital cog. Something says there's even more there and 2014 will be a breakout year for a guy already regarded as among the best at his position.

And let's not forget Williams, who will be managing for the first time outside the Arizona Fall League. Unlike former Nats coach Bo Porter when he took over the Astros last season, Williams has been handed the keys to a Cadillac rather than a Yugo. It's a pretty good situation for a rookie manager and it will be interesting to see how he handles things. He's much more intense than Johnson, but he's also more than smart enough to know he's got a quality machine on his hands.

He'll make it hum and end up as National League Manager of the Year. He may not be good for catchphrases, but he'll prove to be plenty good for this playoff-bound team.

OUR BEST GUESS: PREDICTIONS FROM THE PROS

BRIAN McNALLY, THE TIMES

NATIONALS RECORD: 94-68

FINISH IN NL EAST: First

NATS AVERAGE LEADER: Jayson Werth, .312

NATS HOME RUN LEADER: Bryce Harper, 35

NATS RBI LEADER: Ryan Zimmerman, 101

MOST VICTORIES: Stephen Strasburg, 19

LOWEST ERA: Stephen Strasburg, 2.50

NATS ON ALL-STAR TEAM: Stephen Strasburg, Bryce Harper, Ian Desmond, Ryan Zimmerman

BIGGEST NATS SURPRISE: Ross Detwiler

BIGGEST NATS DISAPPOINTMENT: Anthony Rendon

AL PLAYOFF TEAMS: Rays, Tigers, Rangers, Red Sox, Indians

NL PLAYOFF TEAMS: Dodgers, Cardinals, Nationals, Giants, Reds

ALCS: Rays over Rangers

NLCS: Cardinals over Nats

WORLD SERIES: Rays over Cardinals

AL MVP: Mike Trout, Angels

AL CY YOUNG: Felix Hernandez, Mariners

AL ROOKIE OF THE YEAR: Xander Bogaerts, Red Sox

AL MANAGER OF THE YEAR: Terry Francona, Indians

NL MVP: Troy Tulowitzki, Rockies

NL CY YOUNG: Stephen Strasburg, Nationals

NL ROOKIE OF THE YEAR: Oscar Taveras, Cardinals

NL MANAGER OF THE YEAR: Don Mattingly, Dodgers

ZAC BOYER, THE TIMES

NATIONALS RECORD: 86-76

FINISH IN NL EAST: First

NATS AVERAGE LEADER: Jayson Werth, .301

NATS HOME RUN LEADER: Ryan Zimmerman, 26

NATS RBI LEADER: Ryan Zimmerman, 88

MOST VICTORIES: Jordan Zimmermann, 16

LOWEST ERA: Doug Fister, 2.98

NATS ON ALL-STAR TEAM: Bryce Harper, Ryan Zimmerman, Doug Fister

BIGGEST NATS SURPRISE: Doug Fister's performance

BIGGEST NATS DISAPPOINTMENT: Stephen Strasburg's health

AL PLAYOFF TEAMS: Red Sox, Tigers, Angels; Rays, Rangers

NL PLAYOFF TEAMS: Nationals, Cardinals, Dodgers; Reds, Giants

ALCS: Tigers over Red Sox

NLCS: Dodgers over Cardinals

WORLD SERIES: Dodgers over Tigers

AL MVP: Miguel Cabrera, Tigers

AL CY YOUNG: Justin Verlander, Tigers

AL ROOKIE OF THE YEAR: Masahiro Tanaka, Yankees

AL MANAGER OF THE YEAR: Brad Ausmus, Tigers

NL MVP: Joey Votto, Reds

NL CY YOUNG: Clayton Kershaw, Dodgers

NL ROOKIE OF THE YEAR: Oscar Taveras, Cardinals

NL MANAGER OF THE YEAR: Bryan Price, Reds

MARK ZUCKERMAN, CSNWASHINGTON

NATIONALS RECORD: 94-68

FINISH IN NL EAST: First

NATS AVERAGE LEADER: Jayson Werth, .303

NATS HOME RUN LEADER: Bryce Harper, 37

NATS RBI LEADER: Bryce Harper, 93

MOST VICTORIES: Stephen Strasburg, 20

LOWEST ERA: Stephen Strasburg, 2.75

NATS ON ALL-STAR TEAM: Bryce Harper, Stephen Strasburg, Jordan Zimmermann, Wilson Ramos

BIGGEST NATS SURPRISE: Danny Espinosa

BIGGEST NATS DISAPPOINTMENT: Nate McLouth

AL PLAYOFF TEAMS: Rays, Tigers, Athletics, Red Sox, Royals

NL PLAYOFF TEAMS: Nationals, Cardinals, Dodgers, Giants, Braves

ALCS: Rays over Tigers

NLCS: Dodgers over Nationals

WORLD SERIES: Rays over Dodgers

AL MVP: Mike Trout, Angels

AL CY YOUNG: Yu Darvish, Rangers

AL ROOKIE OF THE YEAR: Xander Bogaerts, Red Sox

AL MANAGER OF THE YEAR: Ned Yost, Royals

NL MVP: Bryce Harper, Nationals

NL CY YOUNG: Adam Wainwright, Cardinals

NL ROOKIE OF THE YEAR: Gregory Polanco, Pirates

NL MANAGER OF THE YEAR: Bruce Bochy, Giants

MIKE HARRIS, THE TIMES

NATIONALS RECORD: 97-65

FINISH IN NL EAST: First

NATS AVERAGE LEADER: Jayson Werth, .311

NATS HOME RUN LEADER: Bryce Harper, 32

NATS RBI LEADER: Bryce Harper, 104

MOST VICTORIES: Stephen Strasburg, 22

LOWEST ERA: Jordan Zimmermann, 2.61

NATS ON ALL-STAR TEAM: Bryce Harper, Stephen Strasburg, Wilson Ramos

BIGGEST NATS SURPRISE: Danny Espinosa's 20 HRs

BIGGEST NATS DISAPPOINTMENT: Rafael Soriano

AL PLAYOFF TEAMS: Red Sox, Yankees, As, Tigers, Angels

NL PLAYOFF TEAMS: Nationals, Cardinals, Dodgers, Reds, Pirates

ALCS: Yankees over Tigers

NLCS: Dodgers over Nationals

WORLD SERIES: Dodgers over Yankees

AL MVP: Mike Trout, Angels

AL CY YOUNG: Justin Verlander, Tigers

AL ROOKIE OF THE YEAR: Masahiro Tanaka, Yankees

AL MANAGER OF THE YEAR: Mike Scioscia, Angels

NL MVP: Andrew McCutchen, Pirates

NL CY YOUNG: Clayton Kershaw, Dodgers

NL ROOKIE OF THE YEAR: Billy Hamilton, Reds

NL MANAGER OF THE YEAR: Matt Williams, Nationals

MARC LANCASTER, THE TIMES

NATIONALS RECORD: 88-74

FINISH IN NL EAST: First

NATS AVERAGE LEADER: Jayson Werth, .315

NATS HOME RUN LEADER: Bryce Harper, 32

NATS RBI LEADER: Ryan Zimmerman, 91

MOST VICTORIES: Jordan Zimmermann, 18

LOWEST ERA: Stephen Strasburg, 2.91

NATS ON ALL-STAR TEAM: Bryce Harper, Stephen Strasburg, Ian Desmond

BIGGEST NATS SURPRISE: Ross Detwiler excels in the bullpen

BIGGEST NATS DISAPPOINTMENT: Wilson Ramos can't stay healthy

AL PLAYOFF TEAMS: Red Sox, Tigers, Rangers, Angels, Rays

NL PLAYOFF TEAMS: Nationals, Cardinals, Dodgers, Diamondbacks, Brewers

ALCS: Rangers over Tigers

NLCS: Dodgers over Cardinals

WORLD SERIES: Rangers over Dodgers

AL MVP: Mike Trout, Angels

AL CY YOUNG: Yu Darvish, Rangers

AL ROOKIE OF THE YEAR: Masahiro Tanaka, Yankees

AL MANAGER OF THE YEAR: Mike Scioscia, Angels

NL MVP: Paul Goldschmidt, Diamondbacks

NL CY YOUNG: Clayton Kershaw, Dodgers

NL ROOKIE OF THE YEAR: Javier Baez, Cubs

NL MANAGER OF THE YEAR: Kirk Gibson, D'backs



WELCOME TO
WHAT'S
NEXT ▶

Bringing media and technology together to bridge the **digital divide.**

The future belongs to everyone. So two years ago we created Internet Essentials,SM America's largest and most comprehensive broadband adoption program for low-income Americans. Today, over one million low-income Americans have been connected to the power of broadband Internet at home through Internet Essentials. We're also partnering with schools and organizations to provide hands-on digital literacy programs so young people can be ready for what's next. Find out more at comcastcorporation.com


COMCAST
NBCUNIVERSAL

BASEBALL 2014

NATS PROSPECTS

LUCAS GIOLITO, RHP

Ht/Wt: 6-6, 230 Age: 19

2013: 2-1, 1.96 ERA, 36 2/3 IP

Expected level: Hagerstown (low-A)

The Nats rolled the dice with a 2012 first-round pick even though Tommy John surgery was likely. Now recovered, Giolito is ready for a full season of minor-league ball and his power repertoire has scouts raving.

A.J. COLE, RHP

Ht/Wt: 6-5, 200 Age: 22

2013: 10-5, 3.60 ERA, 142 2/3 IP

Expected level: Harrisburg (Double-A)

Sent away in the Gio Gonzalez trade, Cole returned last year in the Michael Morse deal. He recovered from a rough season in Oakland's system to regain his status as a potential big league starter.

BRIAN GOODWIN, OF

Ht/Wt: 6-0, 200 Age: 23

2013: .252, 10 HR, 40 RBI

Expected level: Syracuse (Triple-A)

The 34th overall pick in 2011, Goodwin improved at the plate across the board after a full season in Harrisburg. He's still in the running to be the organization's center fielder of the future, but this is an important developmental season.

SAMMY SOLIS, LHP

Ht/Wt: 6-5, 250 Age: 25

2013: 2-1, 3.13 ERA, 54 2/3 IP

Expected level: Harrisburg (Double-A)

The first four spots in the rotation are locked up. But Solis, who missed 2012 after Tommy John surgery, can pitch himself into the mix for that final spot later in the summer if he performs well in his first Double-A stint.

Steven Souza Jr., OF

Ht/Wt: 6-4, 225 Age: 24

2013: .297, 15 HR, 46 RBI

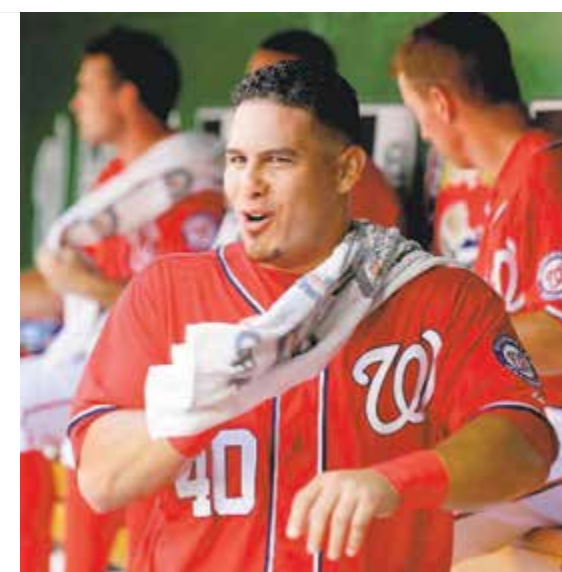
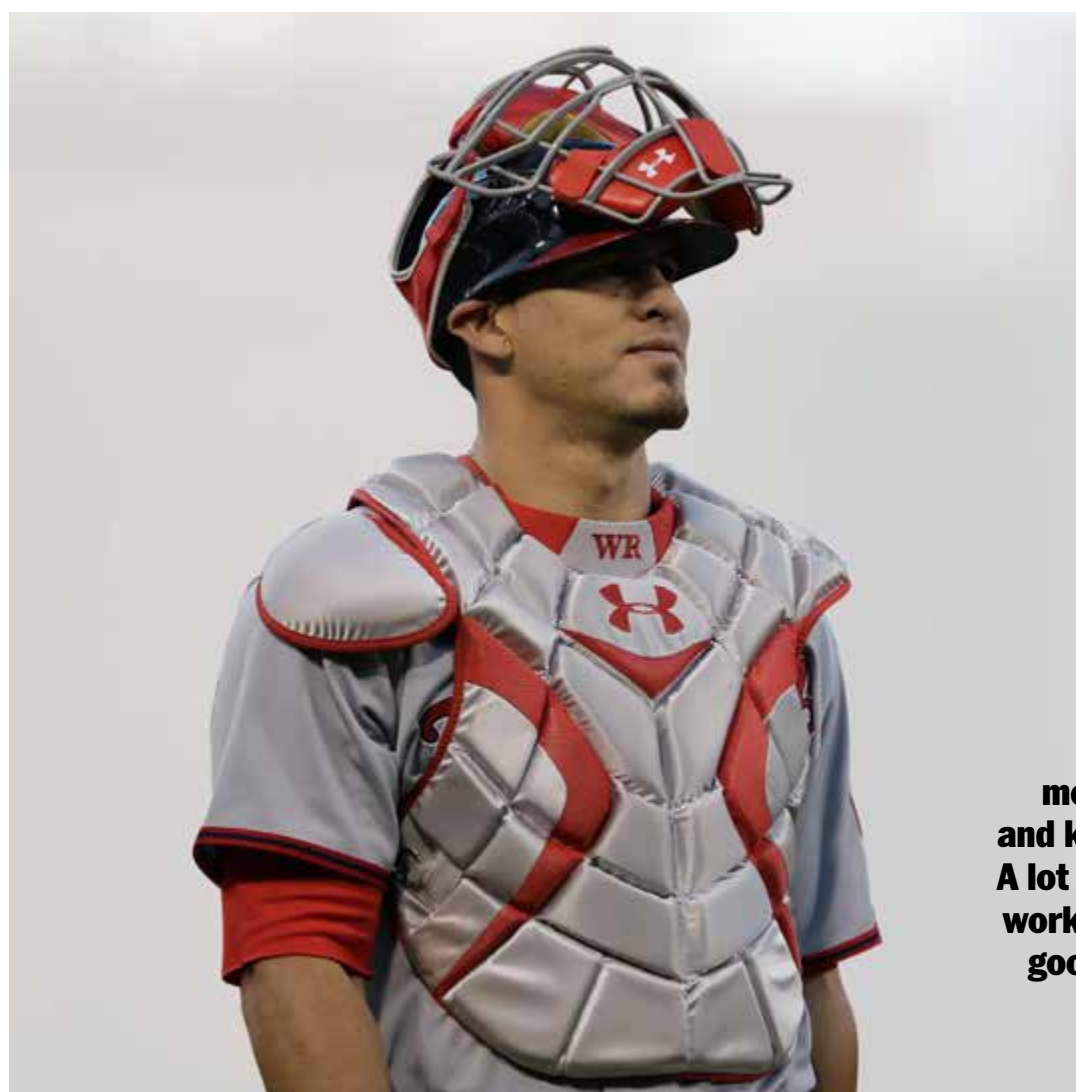
Expected level: Syracuse (Triple-A)

A member of the organization since 2007, Souza finally forced himself onto the 40-man roster this winter and had a fine spring training. If veteran Scott Hairston falters, Souza could arrive in Washington as a reserve outfielder.

— Compiled by Brian McNally



Brian Goodwin



"You have to be strong mentally, try to turn that page and keep working. That's what I did. A lot of times it was hard, but I kept working hard and right now it feels good. I'm ready to play all year."

ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTOGRAPHS

When the Nationals acquired catcher Wilson Ramos from the Twins in 2010, they envisioned him one day becoming a crucial part of their lineup. That time is now.

Dependability factor

By MIKE HARRIS

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

VIERA, FLA. | Every day late last season, Wilson Ramos walked into the Washington Nationals clubhouse with a huge smile on his face.

Every day, Ramos knew his name would be in the lineup as the Nats' catcher. The only question was, at what spot in the batting order? A couple of games became a week, then two, then three. Finally, a doubleheader late in the season meant Ramos needed to take a seat. His streak of consecutive starts ended at 23, the most of any catcher in baseball in 2013.

"It helped me a lot, to get confident, to show what I could do," Ramos said. "I remember after 18 games they wanted me to take one off. I said no, I want to keep going. I'm ready to play."

When the Nationals acquired then-minor-leaguer Ramos from the Twins in 2010 for relief pitcher Matt Capps, they envisioned him one day becoming a crucial part of their lineup. Now 26, Ramos goes into the 2014 season ready to be exactly that.

The 23-game streak of starts helped him mentally as much as physically. After a serious knee injury and two bouts with a hamstring injury, Ramos was able to show exactly what he could do as a catcher and as a hitter.

"When you go through injuries like that, there's a process I've seen just from observing people that you have to prove it to yourself, that you're over that hurdle," said Nats reliever Tyler Clippard. "That was kind of the stretch where he was, yeah, I can do this. It was fun to watch."

Added reliever Drew Storen, "It was unbelievable to see him come back and catch that many games. You could tell, too, it was an even-keel 23 games. It wasn't like he was dragging himself out there just for the sake of it. For him to come back healthy like that, to play that many days in a row and be the buffalo he is, it was beyond impressive."

Ramos shows toughness, value in 23-game streak

Ramos offered a tease of his ability in 2011 when he hit 15 home runs in 113 games. What is expected of him this season was expected in 2012. But he severely injured his knee in Cincinnati on May 12 and missed the rest of the season. Last season, a short stint on the DL with a hamstring issue was followed by a longer stint for the problem.

Yes, Ramos said, he wondered if he was destined to be troubled by injuries his entire career.

"Some days, I did think about that. I say to myself, 'What's wrong with me?'" Ramos said. "That happens in baseball. You have to be strong mentally, try to turn that page and keep working. That's what I did. A lot of times, it was hard but I kept working hard and right now it feels good. I'm ready to play all year."

Given continued health and based on what he did in the second half in 2013, it could be quite a year. After returning from the second hamstring injury, Ramos played 64 games. He hit 14 home runs, drove in 53 runs and had a .276 batting average.

"A healthy Wilson means a stronger lineup for us," Nats pitcher Gio Gonzalez said. "He's fun to watch, the type of guy who when he comes up, everybody goes to the top step of the dugout."

Matt Williams, the Nats' first-year manager, has been impressed by Ramos' approach at the plate. Ramos, he noted, is more than just a slugger.

"I just see a guy that understands how to hit," Williams said. "He has power. He also understands how to drive a run in. There's an art to that. He has the innate ability to bounce that ball back through the middle. That's how your RBI totals go way up."

"He's one of the main cogs to this team in that he's going to be a guy presented with a lot of situations to drive those runs in."

All the talk about Ramos' offense obscures his defensive ability. He's far from the finished product behind the plate, but already an above-average catcher with room to grow. Nats pitchers are comfortable throwing to him and trust his judgment. They also like that the 6-foot, 235-pounder presents a very big target.

"Great hands," Gonzalez said. "His hands are like catcher's mitts themselves. He takes every chance he gets to work at it and make himself better."

Said Williams, "It is not easy for him to move around back there because he's so big. But he takes pride in it, takes pride in his throwing ability and game calling. It's important to him. You pull all those things together and he's a really good player."

As much as he'd like to catch every game, Ramos knows that isn't possible. His goal is to play about 130 games, push the 500 at-bat mark and see what happens.

"When I get to play every day, I feel comfortable. I feel consistent," Ramos said. "My body feels good now. I know I can do a lot of things. I know I can do more than what I did last three years. We just have to see what happens."

The Nats are just as eager to see what happens. They know they need Ramos in the lineup, not in the training room. That's why they've instituted an unwritten rule for him. Both hamstring injuries happened while he was running the bases.

"He's the one guy that we're like, you've got a free pass not to run 100 percent on a ground ball," first baseman Adam LaRoche said. "When he hits a ground ball, you'll see the whole dugout screaming at him to slow down."

"It just crushes him when he can't be out there and play. He wants to be out there and we really need him out there."

Fister brings blue-collar work ethic to mound

By BRIAN McNALLY

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

VIERA, FLA. | Nationals starting pitcher Doug Fister grew up around firefighters and police officers in his hometown of Merced, Calif.

His father, Larry, worked both jobs, starting as a beat cop and then as a member of the city's SWAT team, before switching to fighting fires. An uncle was a police officer and rose to detective before retiring.

Growing up in that environment in Merced, a town about two hours southeast of San Francisco in the San Joaquin Valley, Fister quickly figured out what it meant to be part of a group that relied on you. It was from those men that he learned how to build things. Fister worked construction in the offseason while making his way through the minor leagues, and this offseason, he even remodeled his own bathroom.

Those life lessons easily translated into sports, where he was a basketball and baseball star as well as an avid runner. Fister would accompany his dad to shooting practice, a hobby he maintains. He would sometimes accompany his uncle on ride-alongs, too.

After seeing what they went through on a daily basis at their jobs, with danger lurking around every corner, shaking off a line drive to the head — as he did in Game 2 of the World Series in 2012 while pitching for the Detroit Tigers — or keeping an even-keeled approach in a sport that can drive you crazy doesn't seem all that difficult to Fister.

"The building is on fire. Everybody is running out," Fister said. "Well, they're running in. They're true heroes."



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Doug Fister follows his father's advice: "Go out there ... and let your actions show what you're all about."

Fister's addition via trade this offseason was a luxury for Washington at a position where depth simply means a team thinks it has enough pitching to last the season.

But the Nationals may have to wait a bit to see him in action. An elbow scare limited his innings during spring training, and he left a start in a

minor-league game on Thursday with a lat strain. He may have to start the season on the DL. When he comes back, he will give the Nats an advantage no other NL East team possesses: Four quality starting pitchers.

Washington only had to look at the Atlanta Braves, its rival and the defending division champ, to see what can happen in a bad week. That club lost ace Kris Medlen and Brandon Beachy to torn elbow ligaments and Tommy John surgery during spring training.

Even last season, the Nats returned to reality after a dream 2012. Ace Stephen Strasburg pitched through bone chips in his elbow. There's no guarantee Jordan Zimmermann or Gio Gonzalez make it through the entire year intact.

The offseason trade of utility man Steve Lombardozzi, pitching prospect Robbie Ray and reliever Ian Kroll for Fister should pay immediate dividends for Washington even if Ray, 22, becomes a legitimate starter in a few years.

"That's the good thing about this team is the core group of guys is still relatively young, and we should be together for at least another two years, and if things go well, you would hope longer than that," third baseman Ryan Zimmerman said. "But to add a guy like Fister, and even a guy like [reserve outfielder Nate] McLouth, the depth on this team is probably the best I've ever seen."

Washington will be adding a steady presence to an interesting group — the intense Strasburg, the stoic Zimmermann and Gonzalez, the group's class clown. Taylor Jordan and Tanner Roark are fighting for the final starting spot.

"I've always tried to kind of lay low and just try to put my nose to the grindstone and work," Fister said. "From Day 1, my father's always instilled in me not to speak about it, just go out there and work hard and let your actions show what you're all about. That's my mentality and the mentality that I try to take out to the ballpark every day."

Don't let that low-key personality mask Fister's competitiveness, though. Nats general manager Mike Rizzo recalled with pride Fister taking a line drive off his head in that World Series game, but shaking it off to retire 13 of the next 14 batters he faced. It's part of why the Nationals made the trade in the first place.

It also doesn't hurt that Fister, 30, is under team control for two more seasons and, at least for this year, costs just \$7.2 million, a bargain given the prices teams must pay on the open market for starting pitchers.

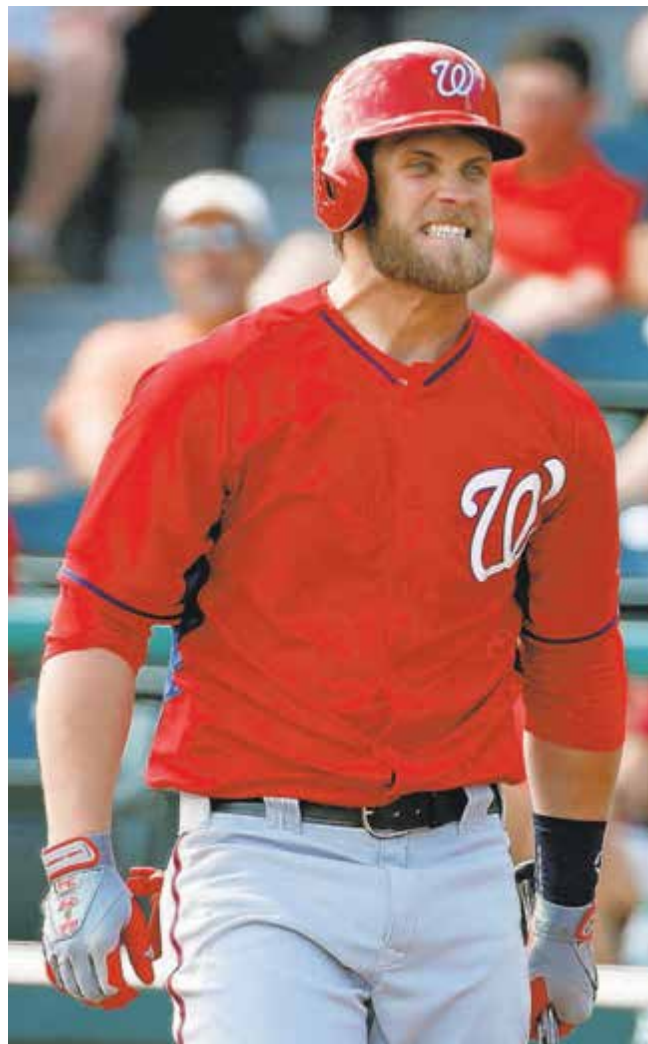
Fister's 13.3 WAR (wins above replacement) over the last three seasons ranks ninth in the majors over that stretch, according to FanGraphs.com.

He doesn't allow many home runs and has impeccable control while providing innings, twice topping 200 in the last three seasons. And at 6-foot-8, he's able to get his pitches on top of batters quicker despite lacking the velocity of his fellow starters.

"[Fister] doesn't light up the radar gun, by any stretch of the imagination, as compared to a lot of guys in baseball these days," Washington manager Matt Williams said. "But he's that guy that you walk up there and go, 'Man, I'm 0-for-4, how did that happen?' And you just keep beating balls into the ground."

BASEBALL 2014

Harper keeps royal company



Bryce Harper



Manny Machado



Yasiel Puig

Bryce Harper knows who his peers are. He knows how he will be measured, perhaps for the rest of his major league career.

The 21-year-old Washington Nationals outfielder let you know he recognizes his competitors in a February interview with Comcast Sportsnet, when he declared, “[Mike] Trout’s very good. [Manny] Machado’s really good.”

Then he tried to tell you he’s not paying attention to the comparisons — while telling you what he believes separates him from the others. “I could care less what people think,” Harper said. “I’ve been to the NL East title. I won it. Nobody else can say that.”

Harper better get used to the comparisons — and he left one out: Yasiel Puig. He shouldn’t forget the Los Angeles Dodgers’ Cuban phenom. He could be the one Harper winds up battling in the National League for individual honors.

Harper. Trout. Machado. Puig — they are the four kings of baseball, the new wave of young, talented players who have injected passion and interest in the game for a new generation of baseball fans.

There have been stars who have come into the game together over the years who have been linked together through different circumstances. Alex Rodriguez, Derek Jeter and Nomar Garciaparra were three shortstops who were compared to one another because they all played the same position and came up together.

But as great as they were, the trio never seemed to ignite the flame that the four kings have so quickly in their careers. Adding to the spotlight are the stages they perform on — Trout with the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim, and Puig just 31 miles north with the Dodgers, and, on the East Coast, Harper in Washington and Machado up the road 39 miles away.

Harper seemed destined to be a king, featured on the cover of Sports Illustrated as “The Chosen One” in 2009 at the age of 16, who fast-tracked his career by leaving high school early with his GED, spending a year in junior college and then drafted No. 1 by the Nationals in 2010.

He was the 2012 NL Rookie of the Year, batting .270 with 22 home runs, 59 RBI and 18 stolen bases in 139 games at the age of 19, and, despite struggling with injuries last year, seems poised for the sort of season he has been destined for.



THOM LOVERRO

Trout, 22, came as more of a surprise, passed over by 24 teams in the 2009 draft until the Angels selected him with their first-round selection. But by the time he arrived in the major leagues in 2011, great things were expected — and

he exceeded those expectations.

Trout set the baseball world on fire in 2011, batting .326 with 30 home runs, 83 RBI, 129 runs scored and 49 stolen bases in 139 games. He has become a perennial MVP candidate, finishing second again last year with 27 home runs, 97 RBI, 109 runs scored, 33 stolen bases and a .323 average.

Machado, 21, entered baseball in the same draft as Harper, just two behind, selected by the Orioles with the third pick of the first round. The shortstop-turned-third baseman was called up to the major league club in August 2012 and became the spark that led the Orioles to a wild-card spot in the playoffs, the club’s first postseason appearance since 1997.

He led the league with 51 doubles in 2013, and finished sixth in hits with 189, while batting .283 with 14 home runs and 71 RBI. He is coming back from knee surgery in October and won’t be ready for Opening Day, but he is already considered the driving force in a powerful Orioles offense, and the key to the resurgence of the franchise.

Puig, 23, is the wild card, the Cuban star who defected in 2012 and signed a seven-year, \$42 million contract with the Dodgers.

He made his debut last June, and became the biggest thing in baseball, with his exciting, emotional play, winding up with 19 home runs and a .319 average in 104 games. He was also considered a loose cannon off the field, a volatile, unpredictable player who has given the Dodgers trouble this spring.

That doesn’t make him any less compelling to watch — just like Harper, Trout and Machado, the kind of players you can’t take your eyes off of, the kind of players you come to the ballpark to see because you don’t know what to expect next from them.

The four kings.

• Thom Loverro is co-host of “The Sports Fix,” noon to 2 p.m. daily on ESPN 980 radio and espn980.com.

Focused on October

Trout building stellar resume, but he seeks team success

By ZAC BOYER
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

TEMPE, ARIZ. | The awards, the accolades, the titles. Mike Trout has had his fair share of success during his first two full seasons with the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim, but the center fielder hasn’t been able to avoid a feeling of emptiness each fall.

The Angels haven’t made the playoffs since 2009, when they lost to the New York Yankees in the ALCS.

He wants to change that.

“I don’t think he’s ever taken the field thinking about, ‘Hey, you know, I’m going to put any of my personal goals ahead of winning a game,’” said Angels manager Mike Scioscia. “I think that’s part of why he’s a special player. He’s not chasing numbers. He’s out to play and help us win at all aspects.”

“It’s definitely not a thing like, ‘For two years, he didn’t care about winning, and now he does.’ That’s not right.”

Trout debuted with the Angels late in 2011, but largely struggled to acclimate to the major leagues in 40 games. His first two full seasons with the Angels were spectacular, earning AL Rookie of the Year honors in 2012, while also finishing as the runner-up for the AL MVP award each year.

Despite his performance, the Angels have spent their Octobers at home.

They were knocked out of playoff contention on the second-to-last day in 2012 despite finishing 89-73. Last season, they stumbled to a 78-84 record and a third-place finish in the AL West, sunk by injuries, subpar pitching and poor defense.

Not long after it ended, Trout, 22, returned home to Millville, N.J., as he has after each of the last three seasons, to decompress.

“He’s just very humble, and that’s pretty cool for a guy of his stature with the things he’s done his first couple years. ... He just enjoys the game ... and he just wants to win.”

— Howie Kendrick

A few close high school friends have grown accustomed to the chaos Trout’s celebrity can cause, so any time spent together is time away from others.

The highlight of his offseason was a hunting trip just before Christmas — a chance for Trout to truly escape.

“He’s just very humble, and that’s pretty cool for a guy of his stature with the things he’s done his first couple years,” said Angels second baseman Howie Kendrick. “I mean, he’s very down-to-earth. He’s just like all of us. He’s the same guy. He just enjoys the game ... and he just wants to win.”

When Trout reported for spring training last month, the Angels, in a good-faith gesture, offered the outfielder a one-year, \$1 million contract. It trumped the modest \$20,000 raise Trout was handed after last season, and it was the most money ever given to a pre-arbitration player.

Even then, it’s nothing compared to what Trout is likely to earn when he becomes eligible for arbitration for the first time after this season. His performance to date could lead to a contract in excess of \$150 million over six years, which were the figures reportedly discussed by the Angels and Trout’s representatives before spring training began.

“Arte [Moreno, the Angels’ owner] going out of his way — he easily could have given me the

minimum, but he stepped up, and that makes you feel good about the organization,” Trout said.

But, as far as further discussions go, “I don’t think about that stuff. You just take it year-by-year right now and go from there.”

Exactly where the Angels go this season will depend on their regulars. First baseman Albert Pujols was limited to 99 games last year because of a tear of the plantar fascia in his left foot, and left fielder Josh Hamilton battled back, shoulder and wrist injuries during a mediocre season.

And rather than make the high-profile signings with which they’ve been associated the last few Decembers — Pujols in 2011, Hamilton in 2012 — the Angels altered their strategy, with their most notable moves a series of trades for third baseman David Freese and pitchers Hector Santiago and Tyler Skaggs.

When Freese first met Trout in February, he was struck by how easygoing and focused the young outfielder can be. After five seasons with the St. Louis Cardinals, including two World Series appearances, Freese knew what a winning clubhouse felt like. This team, he thought, can be special.

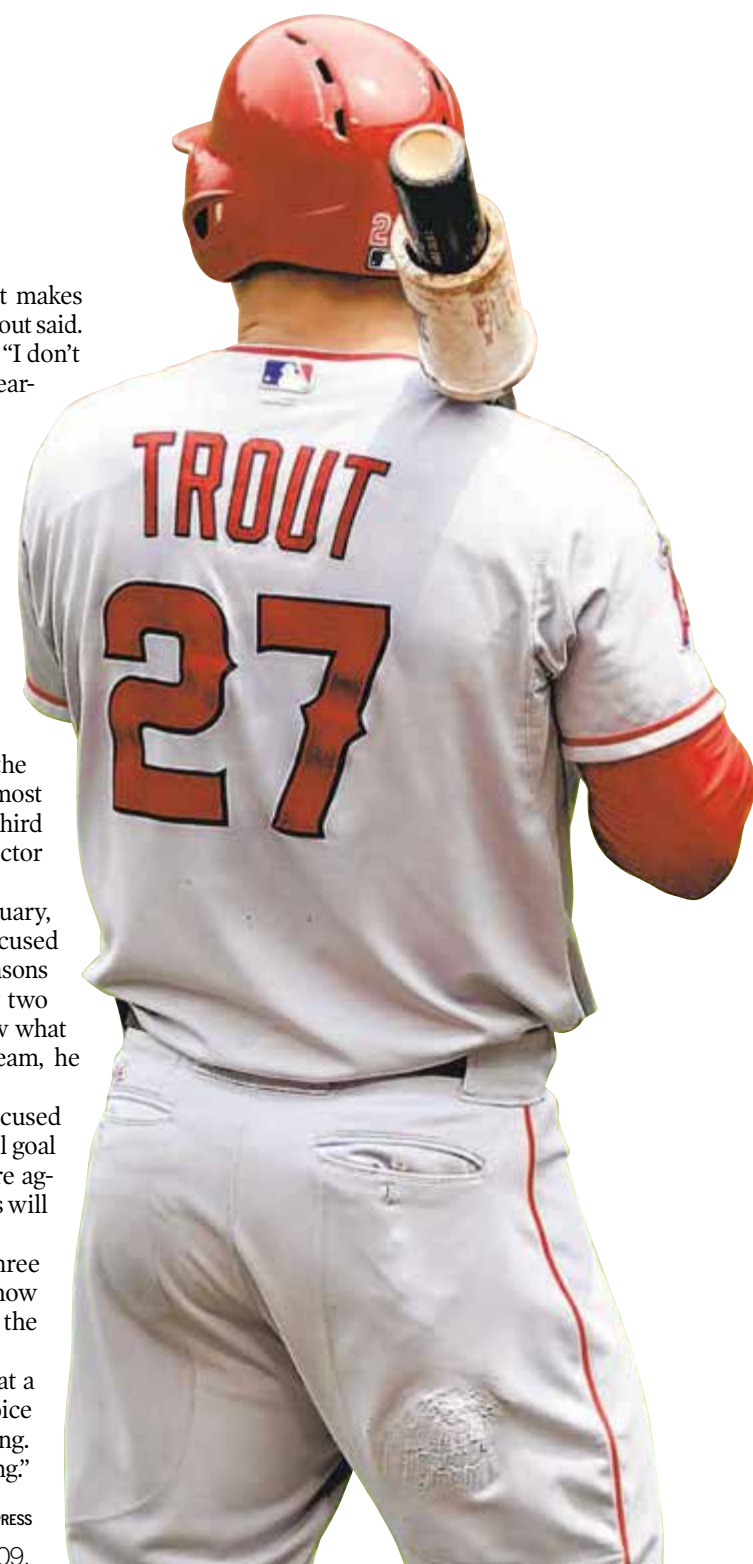
Trout, though, has tried to stay focused and remained tight-lipped. His personal goal entering spring training was to be more aggressive early in counts, which he hopes will cut down on his high strikeout rate.

His other goal? Winning. After three years, he realizes whatever he hits and how much he produces means little unless the Angels are playing well into October.

“We’re just gonna take it one game at a time,” Trout said, the monotony in his voice telling. “It started [this year] with spring. We got off to a good start. Just keep it going.”

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Mike Trout has enjoyed historic success in his first two full seasons, but the Angels have struggled in that time and haven’t made the playoffs since 2009.



BASEBALL 2014

“We feel that we’ve got the right man at the right time here in Washington, D.C. He’s a man that brings passion and an intensity to the game, but also brings a communication style of eloquence and intelligence, so we think that he’s got the full package.”

— Mike Rizzo, on the day he announced Matt Williams as Nationals manager



GREGG NEWTON/SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Nationals first-year manager Matt Williams and shortstop Ian Desmond discuss strategy during practice before a Grapefruit League game against the Tigers in Viera, Fla. The success of first-time managers like the Cardinals' Mike Matheny has led to a trend of teams hiring managers who had no managerial experience in the majors or minors. Williams, the Reds' Bryan Price and the Tigers' Brad Ausmus all fit that description heading into the season.

IN WITH THE NEW

First-year managers make up for inexperience with modern thinking

By ZAC BOYER

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

GOODYEAR, ARIZ. | The night of the day he dreamt about for years, Bryan Price lay awake in his bed, a realization of his future beginning to sink in.

Price had a nondescript career as a minor league pitcher in the 1980s and began his coaching career with the Seattle Mariners' rookie league team in 1989. By 2001, he had worked his way up to the big leagues as the Mariners' pitching coach, and he was hired by then-manager Dusty Baker and the Cincinnati Reds prior to the 2010 season.

In October, after Baker was fired following six seasons with the Reds, general manager Walt Jocketty gauged Price's interest in interviewing to replace him. Price got the job four days later, and fears and doubts plagued him throughout that first night.

“I was going, ‘Boy, I just got the job. What does that mean?’” Price said. “That means I have to make the decisions that could fundamentally affect the outcome of the ballgame, and I can't be a weak link. I've got to be ready for this. I can't be the guy that disappoints.”

Living with the outcome of such decisions, many of which are made under significant pressure, is a fundamental part of being a manager. When Price reflected on his hiring this month, he knew he would have just over a month to grow into one of the most crucial, and often misunderstood, roles in baseball.

Of the six managers hired this past offseason, Price, the Washington Nationals' Matt Williams and the Detroit Tigers' Brad Ausmus had not previously managed a game in the majors or minors.

No longer is managing about sitting in a cinder block office, filling out a lineup card and substituting players in late innings. New-age thinking has begun spreading down from the front office, where many teams have begun to accept and incorporate advanced analytics into their day-to-day thinking.

For some teams, it's also a way to infuse fresh ideas into what can be a stale clubhouse. It makes little sense



ASSOCIATED PRESS

First-year Reds manager Bryan Price watches from the dugout during a spring training game earlier this month. Despite never having managed at any level, Price understands that he “can't be a weak link. I've got to be ready for this. I can't be the guy that disappoints.”

for a franchise looking to break from a period of stagnation — years that likely led to a managerial change in the first place — to bring in a manager who was unsuccessful in previous stints.

“We feel that we’ve got the right man at the right time here in Washington, D.C.,” Nationals general manager Mike Rizzo said when he introduced Williams on Nov. 1. “He’s a man that brings passion and an intensity to the game, but also brings a communication style of eloquence and intelligence, so we think that he’s got the full package.”

A changing dynamic

Walt Weiss had spent 14 years in the major leagues and seven years as a special assistant with the Colorado Rockies before he left organized baseball following the 2008 season. He wanted to spend more time with his family, and when his son Brody's high school team needed a coach in 2012, Weiss stepped in.

That experience was all Weiss had in a managerial role before he was hired by

the Rockies prior to last season. In fact, the Rockies' search was well outside the norm; in addition to Weiss, they interviewed Williams and Jason Giambi, who played for the team the previous three seasons and has not yet retired.

“I'm not going to say there was never a doubt [that I could do it], because I had never done it before, so I think that would be false confidence or false bravado,” Weiss said. “But I don't know if there was ever a point where I said, ‘Yeah, I've got this,’ and I don't know if there ever will be, because there are a variety of challenges, almost daily, that you have to deal with.”

Hiring a first-time manager isn't a particularly new trend. Of the 30 managers in place for this season, 17 are in their first gig — a number that has held approximately steady over the previous decade. In fact, of the 36 managers who have won a World Series in the past 50 years, 14 of them accomplished the feat in their first stint as a big-league manager. The turnover in the profession is

great. Only seven managers are entering at least their fifth season with a team, and 12 — including Lloyd McClendon, hired by the Seattle Mariners in November — are on at least their second managerial stint. Jim Riggleman was with his fourth team when he quit managing the Nationals in 2011; Billy Martin managed five teams over nine stints, including five with the New York Yankees, until he died in a car accident in 1989.

What is new is the hiring of managers without any coaching experience. Weiss, Ausmus, the Chicago White Sox's Robin Ventura and the St. Louis Cardinals' Mike Matheny all were hired without having held any coaching responsibilities in the majors or the minors.

Matheny's hiring might have been the most surprising. A longtime catcher who played for the Cardinals from 2000 to 2004, he was stepping in to replace Tony La Russa the season after the Cardinals won the World Series and would be managing players he once played with. “He just trusts his players, puts us in

positions to succeed as often as possible, takes no credit for the stuff he does great, [and] takes all the credit for the stuff we do bad, which for a manager to do that is selfless,” said Cardinals pitcher Adam Wainwright, who debuted the season after Matheny left St. Louis as a player. “But he's just a great leader. He has a quiet confidence about him that we all respect, and we want to follow that.”

For decades, the path to the manager's office was blazed through the minor leagues, and some still take that route. Ryne Sandberg managed the Chicago Cubs' Single-A, Double-A and Triple-A teams before being hired as the Philadelphia Phillies' manager in September.

Rick Renteria, hired by the Cubs on Nov. 7, followed a similar trail. He spent 11 seasons in the Florida Marlins' organization as a manager and an instructor before latching on as the San Diego Padres' bench coach in 2011.

A former infielder, Renteria tried to address his weaknesses by filling out his staff with coaches of different backgrounds. Among those he hired was Jose Castro, who will help the Cubs with scouting and defense. Castro was Renteria's mentor in 1998, when Renteria began managing with the Brevard County Manatees.

“If you have people that are supporting you, it makes it a little easier,” Renteria said. “It's still difficult because you're still learning who you are. You're still trying to put yourself, and what you bring to the table, into that position. I think the biggest thing I always brought, quite frankly, was a positive attitude ... and it's kind of served me well.”

No weak links

Ventura was 17 games into his first season with the White Sox in 2012 when he faced a classic managerial dilemma. His team was trailing the Oakland Athletics by two runs in the ninth inning, and with two outs and a runner on first, Ventura tabbed Adam Dunn to pinch hit for Alex Rios.

Based solely on the matchup, Ventura

BASEBALL 2014

Williams right on schedule

Washington's detail-oriented manager prepared to overcome inexperience

By **Brian McNally**
THE WASHINGTON TIMES**VIERA, FLA.** | Matt Williams is ready for the grind.

A baseball lifer, the Nationals' new manager has jumped into a role that will keep his days full. His ultimate goal is to guide Washington to the city's first World Series title in 90 years, but how Williams gets there is entirely up to him.

And so, when the baseball season opens at Citi Field in New York on Monday, Williams will, for the first time, spend the following six months setting lineups and defining roles, overseeing a blended coaching staff and getting to know 25 active players and maybe a dozen more who will pass through his clubhouse this season.

There are particular veterans like Jayson Werth, young stars like Bryce Harper and Stephen Strasburg, relief pitchers like closer Rafael Soriano — men from varied backgrounds who have reached the big leagues doing things a certain way and won't always be happy during a long season.

It's up to Williams to reach them, a task maybe more important than even the thousands of in-game decisions he will make throughout this season.

"You get into a situation where it looks like it's a good opportunity to steal a base or you hit and run — that's within the game," Williams said. "Those opportunities don't come every day. You deal with personalities on an everyday basis. So what I want to do is know them first and foremost. What's important to them?"

This is a man so devoted to details that his coaching staff was allowed to fine him if he said the word "schedule" early in spring training. The jar had enough cash to buy a nice steak dinner by the end of the first week.

"He probably hasn't had much sleep since he got the job," said center fielder Denard Span, only half-joking.

After a first day spent watching more than participating, Williams lamented his lack of blisters. But he quickly and enthusiastically threw himself into drills during

camp, hitting fungoes, tossing batting practice, working with fielders and speeding from one place to the other in a golf cart. Almost all of it was done with a smile.

But as his players have come to know Williams during spring training, they've realized there is another side to him, too. It is the steely intensity that he displayed often during his playing career, the fire which allowed him to stand up to San Francisco Giants teammate Barry Bonds when few other players on that team in the early and mid-1990s had the mettle to do so.

"You won't hear a word out of him, he lets it build up for a little while, then it's gonna be a show," said first baseman Adam LaRoche, who was coached by Williams while playing for the Arizona Diamondbacks in 2010. "Not just an umpire, it could be the other manager, it could be one of the players. And it's not show. It'll be for good reason. It'll have purpose. He doesn't have a problem airing it out — just not very often."

Some of the players in the clubhouse had advocated for another managerial candidate last October. Bench coach Randy Knorr, who has been with the organization in some capacity since 2001, worked with many of the Nats over the years and remains in his position on Williams' staff.

Four of Washington's six coaches returned from former manager Davey Johnson's group and general manager Mike Rizzo was given the clearance to add a seventh from outside the organization, defensive coordinator Mark Weidemaier, who came with Williams from Arizona.

Weidemaier's presence gives a tell about the kind of manager Williams hopes to become. As a defensive coordinator, his primary role is to analyze data and position his fielders. The Nats will aggressively use shifts when the numbers say that will help.

It's a non-traditional approach that teams like Tampa Bay and Pittsburgh have employed in recent years, a continuing blend of new analytics and raw scouting that Rizzo is comfortable with. It also matches with Williams' expressed desire to use the hit-and-run more often, send



Manager Matt Williams greets Michael Taylor and the rest of the Nationals after a spring training victory over the Astros. One of Williams' biggest challenges will be relating to a varied group of younger players in the Nationals' clubhouse. ASSOCIATED PRESS

runners from first to third base, challenge outfielders' arms and steal more bases.

"It's not easy to do," third baseman Ryan Zimmerman said. "It's all forcing the issue a bit. ... He's a lot more about putting pressure on the other team, going out and making something happen rather than waiting for something to happen."

How much the players buy into it will depend on if that aggression actually leads to wins. But Williams' demeanor won them over during spring training, at least, which is a start. There were quotes tacked above the daily schedule each morning, aphorisms for all 41 days of camp intended to get players talking about the style of

play Washington wants to use. It's a fresh start that a team coming off a disappointing 86-win season probably needed if it wants to make it back to the postseason as it did in 2012 as the NL East champions.

"There's a lot of nonsense that goes on in all aspects of life," Werth said. "If you just focus on what your goals are, and the task at hand, and get the other stuff out of the way and just focus on winning, I think that's the best formula. Not that it wasn't the case before. [But] it is definitely the case now with Matt."

But Williams admits that he will have to delegate more than during his four years as a coach with the Diamondbacks,

where he could do more individual instruction with a player, if needed or asked. That's an adjustment for someone who enjoyed that daily interaction. It's also one of many he will have to make throughout the season as a first-year manager in an organization that believes it can win a World Series.

"In my previous [job] being a third base coach and the infield coach, I had multiple roles, but nothing like this," Williams said. "It's good, though. I look at it as a challenge, and I embrace it. I certainly wanted to be here. So, here you are, Matt. Now go and get them."

● Mike Harris contributed to this story.

NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY

MATT WILLIAMS, NATIONALS

The 48-year-old spent 17 seasons in the majors as a player and served as a special assistant and occasional broadcaster for the Diamondbacks after retirement. He was on Arizona's coaching staff from 2010-13.

BRAD AUSMUS, TIGERS

A former 48th-round draft pick, the longtime major-league catcher is the youngest of this year's newcomers; he turns 45 next month. He retired after the 2010 season and was a Padres special assistant the last three years.

BRYAN PRICE, REDS

After a brief run as a minor-league pitcher, the 51-year-old spent a decade coaching in the Mariners' farm system before serving as pitching coach for the Mariners (2000-06), D'backs (2007-09) and Reds (2010-13).

MIKE MATHENY, CARDINALS

Ex-catcher whose career was cut short by concussions took the keys to a World Series winner and has reached the NLCS and World Series in his first two seasons despite no prior professional coaching experience.

WALT WEISS, ROCKIES

After 14 years as a shortstop in the majors, he was a Rockies adviser from 2002-08 and out of pro baseball altogether until taking the job in November 2012. The Rockies (74-88) finished last in the NL West last year.

ROBIN VENTURA, WHITE SOX

A college baseball legend and veteran of 16 years in the majors, he did some broadcasting in retirement before the Sox hired him. He finished 3 games out of first as a rookie skipper and dead last in 2013.

"I understand what my strengths and weaknesses are ... but that room represents what I believe in, as far as the importance of character, the importance of accountability, the importance of being optimistic, the ability to be honest with the players and the ability to make yourself available on behalf of the players. This has to be a selfless position."

— Bryan Price, Reds manager

MANAGERS

From page E6

thought Dunn, a lefty, stood a better chance than Rios against the Athletics' right-handed closer, Grant Balfour. Rios was 0-for-3 with a strikeout that night, but entered with an 11-game hitting streak and had three hits in each of the previous two games.

"Coming out of [spring training], I thought he was probably our best hitter," Ventura said. "But, he was scuffling at the time" — and the manager paused, shaking his head — "and I knew it when I did it."

Dunn took the first two pitches from Balfour before a pair of strikes knotted the count at 2-2. On the fifth pitch, Dunn lunged at a 91-mph fastball low and outside. The Athletics won.

Ventura immediately apologized to Rios and promised he would never make a similar mistake.

Earning respect from players may be the most crucial part of a manager's longevity, and such respect can be affected by more than game management. If a manager loses the clubhouse, he likely will lose his job.

"I think that part of it gets overlooked a lot," said Cubs pitcher Jeff Samardzija. "As long as you can relate with your players and you're putting your players first, and you have their backs, everything's going to go pretty smoothly."

"Obviously, everybody wants to play, everyone wants to start, everyone wants to be one of the guys, but what it all comes down to is when you respect your manager and you respect his decision, then you go out and give everything for him, it usually promotes a winning clubhouse."

Even small details can help. After Renteria was hired, he tried to make his phone calls to his new players as personal as possible. When Williams arrived at Nationals spring training in Viera, Fla., in February, he tried to enhance his players' accountability by writing motivational phrases on the clubhouse schedule.

"He obviously likes to have his thumbprint on everything that's going on," said Nationals first baseman Adam LaRoche. "He's very scheduled with what he's doing in spring training. Because of that, it has been a really crisp camp, been a little more of a workload than we've had in the past."

Houston Astros manager Bo Porter, the former Nationals third base coach, also had no managerial experience when he was hired



First-year Tigers manager Brad Ausmus, 45, is the youngest of this year's newcomers. He takes over for 69-year-old Jim Leyland, who retired after leading Detroit to three straight AL Central titles. ASSOCIATED PRESS

prior to last season. He quickly learned the importance of being patient: The Astros had the worst record in the majors at 51-111.

"When you have a track record, sometimes, it helps; if this player is struggling, you have something to resort back to," Porter said. "But our group last year, not many of them had a track record. They were just arriving at the major-league level trying to establish themselves, so the growing pains, from a manager's standpoint — you have to allow that to take its course."

Staying ahead

History has shown that not every new manager will win, and logic dictates it's impossible.

Ventura believes the pattern of hiring inexperienced managers ultimately will be just part of the normal cycle of baseball. When one of these teams moves in a different direction, it seems reasonable that the next manager would be someone with significant experience.

The White Sox regressed in 2013, finishing with 63 wins — their fewest in a full season since 1970. Matheny guided the Cardinals to 97 wins and a World Series appearance in his second year.

"We've had some success despite a lack of

experience, so I think that's probably a model," Matheny said. "That was the hope when I was given this position, and I'm pretty sure these other organizations are thinking the same thing."

That makes it hard to ever get complacent.

Price acknowledged that his weakness is in his experience. He doesn't command respect like Ventura, a two-time all-star who won six Gold Gloves. He is not Williams, who played with Barry Bonds and Jeff Kent and Curt Schilling.

He was a nondescript, 27-year-old minor league pitcher who was recovering from two elbow surgeries, had never prepared a resume and couldn't fathom a life without baseball. It was because of his naivete and his innocence that Price first turned to coaching.

"I was a minor-league pitcher," Price said. "I understand what my strengths and weaknesses are ... but that room represents what I believe in, as far as the importance of character, the importance of accountability, the importance of being optimistic, the ability to be honest with the players and the ability to make yourself available on behalf of the players. This has to be a selfless position."

● Brian McNally and Mike Harris contributed to this report.



Walt Weiss

BASEBALL 2014

Shifting their approach

Teams get defensive about positioning

By BEN WALKER
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Mike Scioscia moved his left fielder onto the infield dirt, then watched him start a double play. Matt Williams tried a similar trick — he put his right fielder on the grass behind the mound, only to see a bases-loaded triple fly into the vacated spot.



● Matt Martin is the defensive coordinator for the Tigers.

All over the majors this year, the shift is on. From the designer defenses taking over the game, to expanded replay, to opening day on a cricket ground in Australia, baseball is changing.

The scraggly beards on the world champion Boston Red Sox? Shaved off, mostly. Soon Derek Jeter will be gone, too.

“You can’t do this forever,” the Yankees captain said. “I’d like to, but you can’t do it forever.”

Ryan Braun and the Biogenesis bunch are back in, reckless crashing into catchers is an automatic out. Robinson Cano, Shin-Soo Choo and Japanese ace Masahiro Tanaka changed sides, as did Jacoby Ellsbury, Prince Fielder and Curtis Granderson.

Plus, there’s a rookie with real pedigree — sweet Hank the Dog got a second chance. He found a home in Milwaukee; no telling if he’ll later visit Petco Park.

This spring has been much rougher for others.

Even before the Dodgers and Diamondbacks started the season in Sydney, Major League Baseball’s first regular-season games Down Under, there were serious setbacks.

Kris Medlen, Brandon Beachy, Jarrod Parker and Luke Hochevar already are out for the year with Tommy John surgery, and Patrick Corbin may soon join them.

Aroldis Chapman likely will miss at least two months after getting hit on the head by a line drive. There was no defense for that, not even those protective caps now in play for pitchers likely would’ve saved the Cincinnati reliever.

Defense, though, has rapidly become a major focus in the majors.

Be it Dodger Stadium or Fenway Park or anywhere in-between, it’s easy to spot the trend taking over baseball: Creative ways that clubs are positioning



Blue Jays third baseman Brett Lawrie (center) sets up between first baseman Adam Lind and right fielder Moises Sierra in shallow right field as the team shifts to the right side during Carlos Pena’s at-bat in the second inning of a game against the Rays last season. Defensive metrics have caused a shift in how major league teams play defense today.

their fielders.

The Detroit Tigers even hired a defensive coordinator. Ever expect to hear about a defensive coordinator in baseball?

Matt Martin got that job, and pointed to the overloaded alignments Red Sox slugger David Ortiz sees on a daily basis.

“That’s not out of the norm now. That is the norm. With left-handers, if you’d have seen this 25 years ago, the way they play Big Papi — and 15, 20 guys in the league playing like that — you’d be, ‘What happened? Did I wake up and come to a softball game?’”

Makes perfect sense to Pittsburgh second baseman Neil Walker.

“The data is so undeniable, the defensive metrics are so prevalent,” he said. “You have so much more information, you should use it.”

“There were some times a few years ago when I felt out of place,” he admitted. “I was out there in right field and kind of like, ‘Where am I supposed to be?’ But

we practice it, I practice my throws from extreme angles and I’m comfortable.”

An hour later, Walker was standing in shallow right when Phillies slugger Ryan Howard batted in a spring training game. Walker made a diving stop on a hard grounder, scrambled to his feet, but threw the ball past first base.

“It’s not an exact science,” he said.

Fielding always lagged far behind pitching and hitting in statistical analysis, mainly because it was hard to quantify glove work. Teams are trying hard to play catchup.

Baseball Info Solutions tracks defensive shifts, and reports there were 8,134 instances in the majors last season. That’s way up from 4,577 in 2012, and far more than the 2,358 in 2011.

“It’s not as much fun as it used to be,” Tampa Bay manager Joe Maddon lamented. “Everybody’s using it.”

Maddon is a shifting maven, having employed four-man outfields and

routinely putting three players on one side of the dirt at different depths.

In a recent exhibition, with a runner on third base, Maddon overshifted his infield in the middle of an at-bat. No luck. A wild pitch scored the run.

Maddon has a theory on why it took teams so many years to shift around.

“They were afraid they might be wrong,” he said. “But it always made sense to adjust your fielders. Why would you play someone in a place where a guy never hits it?”

And if a big bopper tries to bunt down the unprotected third base line, that’s OK.

“There are times when I’m begging him to bunt against us,” Maddon said.

Scioscia’s strategy paid off this month for the Los Angeles Angels when his repositioned left fielder handled a grounder and began a bases-loaded DP in extra innings. Williams, Washington’s first-year manager, tried something with the bases loaded in the eighth and paid the price.

Offered San Diego manager Bud Black: “Yes, my thinking has changed.”

“We will move,” he said.

So will the Reds, after new Cincinnati manager Bryan Price talks to his men on the mound.

“Pitchers can be pretty temperamental about defensive alignment. We know that,” he said. “We want to have the discussion beforehand, not after.”

St. Louis general manager John Mozeliak wants to start earlier, letting his minor leaguers get accustomed to moving.

Minnesota’s Jason Kubel has been on the other side a lot.

The lefty hitter debuted a decade ago and rarely saw defensive shifts, if ever. Against the Yankees this month, he faced three fielders on the right side every at-bat.

“Now, I think it would be weird if I came up and saw that nobody was moved,” Kubel said.

Expecting to contend

By DAVID GINSBURG
ASSOCIATED PRESS

BALTIMORE | The transformation of the Baltimore Orioles clubhouse under manager Buck Showalter is complete.

No longer do the Orioles hope to win. They expect it.

When Showalter took over in July 2010, he inherited a team with the worst record in the majors. Having gone without a winning season since 1997, Baltimore could only hope Showalter’s knack for orchestrating quick turnarounds would take hold in a town that had switched its allegiance from baseball to football.

By 2012, the Orioles were back. Baltimore won 93 games, beat Texas in the wild-card matchup and took the New York Yankees to the limit before falling in the AL division series.

After missing the postseason last year, the Orioles are poised for a return. They maintained the nucleus of a team that went 85-77 and was in contention to the final week, then added right-handed starter Ubaldo Jimenez and slugger Nelson Cruz to an already potent lineup that led the majors in home runs in 2013.

“When you have talent, you have confidence,” right fielder Nick Markakis said. “Put them together and good things usually happen. We’ve got that right now. We know we have a good team and we’re going to roll with it.”

Although Jimenez and Cruz didn’t come aboard until after the start of spring training, Showalter never wavered in his belief that the Orioles would challenge the defending champion Boston Red Sox and retooled Yankees in the AL East.

“I felt that way whether or not we added Nelson and Jimenez,” he said. “That’s a poor reflection on me and

Culture change with Showalter in charge of O’s

my staff if we thought we needed more to win.”

Here are five things to know about the 2014 Orioles:

WAITING FOR MANNY: All-Star third baseman Manny Machado will start the season on the 15-day disabled list after undergoing offseason surgery to repair a torn ligament in his left knee.

The good news is that Machado could return by late April. The bad news is that the Orioles are scheduled to play seven games against Boston and three against the Yankees by April 21.

Ryan Flaherty will play third until Machado returns.

START ME UP: The addition of Jimenez solidifies a rotation anchored by 16-game winner Chris Tillman, who will start on opening day against Boston.

Jimenez went 13-9 with Cleveland last year, but his most impressive numbers are 31 and 32 — the number of starts he made in 2012 and 2013. Wei-Yin Chen and Miguel Gonzalez follow in the rotation, and the fifth slot will be filled by Bud Norris or Brian Matuz, who pitched out of the bullpen last year.

“We can run anybody out there and have a chance to win,” Tillman said. “We all trust each other, we rely on each other. What’s changed in the clubhouse is we all hold each other accountable. We’ve got a staff full of guys that are all capable of doing it, and that’s special.”

CLOSING TIME: The Orioles are counting on Tommy Hunter to develop into a solid closer after dealing Jim

Johnson (50 saves in 2013) to Oakland in cost-cutting move.

Executive vice president Dan Duquette initially attempted to fill the void with Grant Balfour. After Balfour flunked the physical, the job became Hunter’s.

Hunter doesn’t have much experience in the role, but he has a 100 mph fastball and plenty of confidence.

“He’s got all the tools to be a very successful closer,” pitching coach Dave Wallace said.

If Hunter can’t handle the chore, Ryan Webb and Darren O’Day will be likely get the call.

POWERFUL STUFF: The Orioles intend to distribute plenty of souvenirs this summer into the Camden Yards bleachers.

Even if Chris Davis doesn’t match the 53 homers he hit in 2013, the addition of Cruz and the maturation of Machado should keep the power numbers way up.

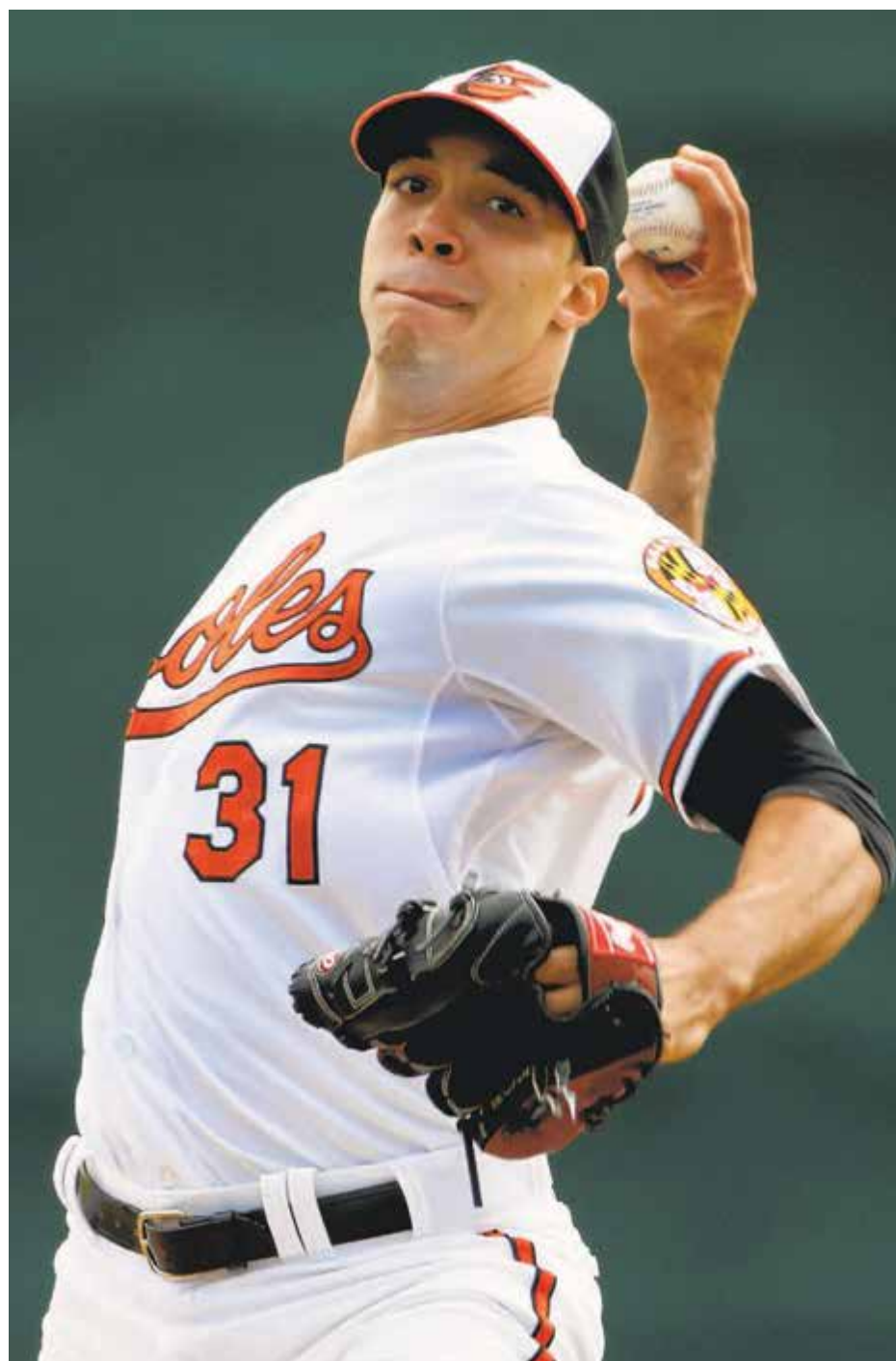
“Cruz should be able to help us,” Duquette said. “It gives you a 5-hole hitter, a legitimate hitter in the middle of the lineup. That will push some of our other guys into more appropriate spots in the order.”

Shortstop J.J. Hardy, who hit 25 homers last year, could bat cleanup for some teams. On this one, he could end up in the bottom third of the order.

FIELD OF DREAMS: Center fielder Adam Jones, Machado and Hardy earned Gold Gloves last season, and the Orioles led the majors in fielding percentage in 2013.

There should not be a drop-off this season, mainly because Showalter is adamant about team defense.

“You’ve got to catch the ball,” he said. “When we talk to our players about who we are, you can’t play here if you can’t defend.”



No longer content to be an also-ran in the powerful AL East, Buck Showalter’s Baltimore Orioles made a splash by adding Ubaldo Jimenez (above) and Nelson Cruz in the offseason.

BASEBALL 2014

Rookie reinforcements

By JAY COHEN

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Some of the young arms have arrived, and a few more will make it to the majors this summer. Either way, there are a lot of promising pitching prospects poised to impact the playoff races in 2014.

Check out these rookie pitchers, along with a couple up-and-coming position players.



Tanaka

RHP Masahiro Tanaka, New York Yankees:

The 25-year-old Tanaka went 24-0 with a 1.27 ERA last year, helping Rakuten to a Japan Series title. It was enough to convince the Yankees to hand over a \$155 million, seven-year contract in January, plus another \$20 million posting fee to his Japanese club team.

Tanaka looked good in spring training, displaying a terrific split-fingered fastball. He is slotted to make his debut April 4 against Toronto.

SS Xander Bogaerts, Boston:

Bogaerts made his major league debut in August, and then went on to help the Red Sox win the World Series. He hit .296 with two RBIs in 12 postseason games while spending most of his time at third base.

Now Stephen Drew is gone, and the 21-year-old Bogaerts gets to move back to his natural position of shortstop. He also joins a deep Boston lineup, making for ideal conditions for the Aruba native to shine.

RHP Yordano Ventura, Kansas City:

Ventura will begin the season as the Royals' third starter after a dazzling spring training. The 22-year-old righty has one of baseball's best fastballs, consistently 97-99 mph and touching 100 occasionally. He made his major league debut last summer, going 0-1 with a 3.52 ERA in three starts.

OF Billy Hamilton, Cincinnati: The time is now for Hamilton, who was handed the job in center after Shin-Soo Choo signed a big free-agent deal with Texas. There are concerns about Hamilton's ability to get on base, but his speed makes him one of most exciting players in the game. He had 13 steals in 14 attempts over 13 games last year with the Reds.

OF George Springer, Houston:

The New Britain, Conn., native was sent down to Triple-A Oklahoma City toward the end of spring training, but his major league debut is coming soon. He hit .303 with 37 homers and 108 RBIs over two minor league stops last season.

The Astros traded for center fielder Dexter Fowler over the winter, so Springer will make the transition to right field with the RedHawks. Should be no problem for the athletic Springer, who also had 45 steals last year.

3B Nick Castellanos, Detroit:

When the Tigers traded Prince Fielder to Texas in November, it created an opening in the lineup for Castellanos, who hit .276 with 18 homers at Triple-A Toledo last year. The 22-year-old Castellanos, who was selected with the 44th pick in 2010 draft, takes over at third base while Miguel Cabrera moves to first.

RHP Archie Bradley and SS Chris Owings, Arizona:

The elbow injury for Diamondbacks ace Patrick Corbin could accelerate the timetable for Bradley, who went 12-5 with a 1.97 ERA at Double-A last season. The 21-year-old right-hander, who has a mid-90s fastball and a big curveball, was competing for a spot in Arizona's rotation this spring.

Owings, 22, hit .330 with 12 home runs and 81 RBIs at Triple-A Reno last season. The Pacific Coast League player of the year was pushing slick-fielding Didi Gregorius for the starting shortstop job in camp.

RHP Jameson Taillon, Pittsburgh:

The second overall pick in the 2010



ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTOGRAPHS



Yordano Ventura (above) will start the season as the Royals' third starter. The 22-year-old boasts a fastball that occasionally reaches triple digits. Xander Bogaerts (left) takes over full time at shortstop in Boston this season.

draft will begin the season in the minors after he was shut down for two weeks in late March with elbow soreness. The 6-foot-5 Taillon could make his major league debut this summer, giving the Pirates a boost as they try for a second straight playoff appearance.

OF Oscar Taveras, St. Louis:

Taveras missed most of last season after ankle surgery and had hamstring

trouble this spring. He will begin the year at Triple-A Memphis, but remains the top prospect in one of baseball's most talent-rich franchises.

INF Javier Baez, Chicago Cubs:

It looks as if Baez could be on that first wave of prospects coming through Chicago's highly regarded minor league system. The shortstop drew attention for his bat speed during spring training

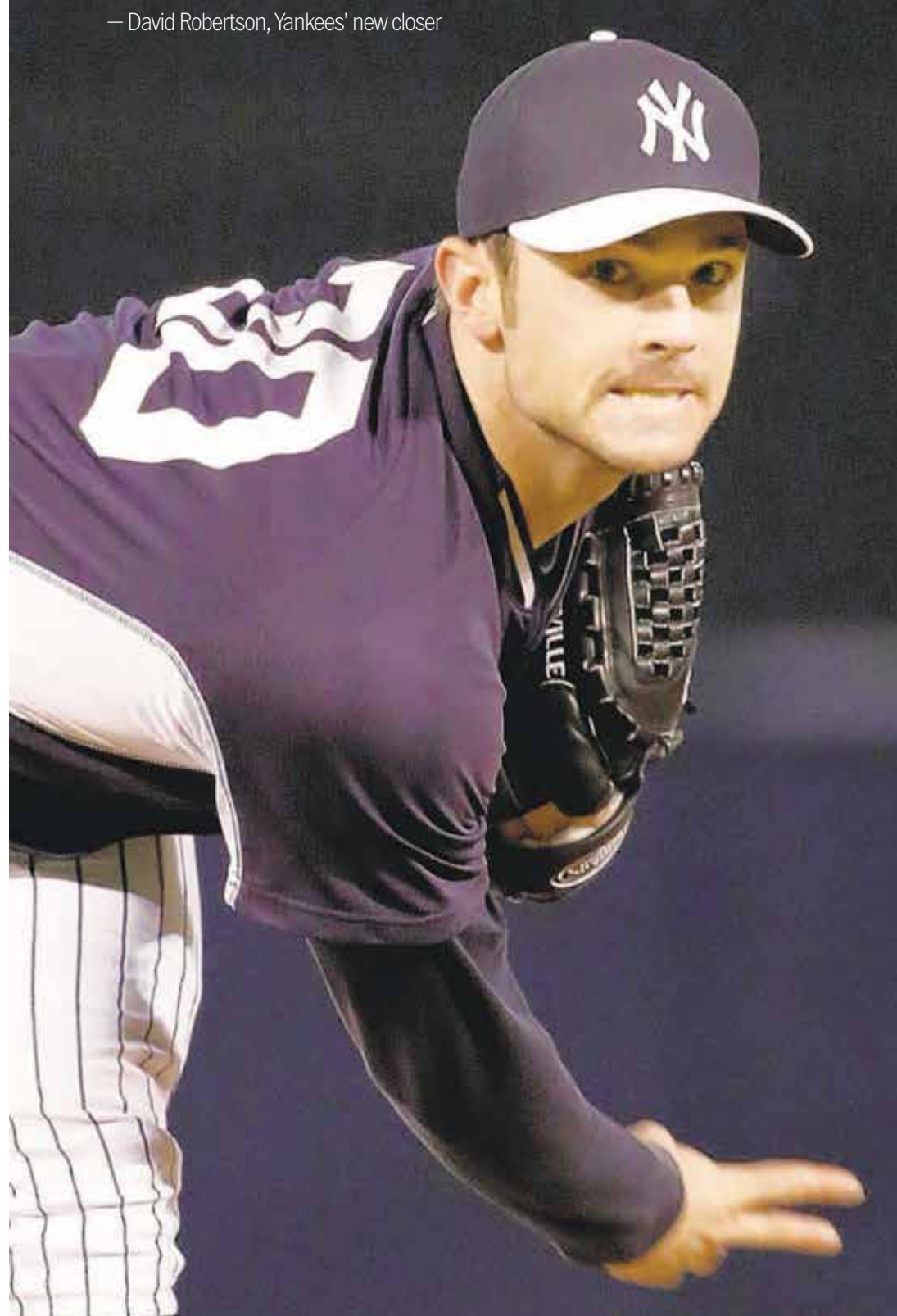
and could get promoted to the founding Cubs this summer.

RHP Taijuan Walker, Seattle:

Walker, who was slowed by a tender right shoulder in spring training, could give the Mariners one of the top rotation tandems in the majors when he's finally paired with Felix Hernandez. Walker was 5-3 with a 3.61 ERA for Triple-A Tacoma last year.

"I'm hoping [closing is] more fun. You get to high-five with everybody at the end of the game instead of just running in the dugout and going, 'OK, Mo's coming in. I'm going to go get undressed and get ready to high-five him when he comes in the clubhouse.'"

— David Robertson, Yankees' new closer



'Nature of the beast'

A few closers sustain success, but most increasingly struggle to remain relevant

By RONALD BLUM

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Some relievers thrive when they move into the huge ninth-inning spotlight and some fizzle. And others turn into one-year wonders.

They can be a Jimmy Fallon, earning raves, a Conan O'Brien deflecting razzes, or one of those single-season phenoms that's increasingly common, a bullpen Halley's Comet that gets all the attention one summer and disappears the next.

After a half-decade as Mariano Rivera's understudy in the New York Yankees' bullpen, David Robertson feels ready for his move to the big time.

"I'm hoping it's more fun," Robertson says. "You get to high-five with everybody at the end of the game instead of just running in the dugout and going, 'OK, Mo's coming in. I'm going to go get undressed and get ready to high-five him when he comes in the clubhouse.'"

Top closers are baseball's rock stars — tied to their entrance music and their oversized persona, whether of chaos or cool. It's hard to think of Rivera without Metallica's "Enter Sandman" or Trevor Hoffman divested of AC/DC's "Hells Bells."

But for every success there are multiple failures, especially these days when the managers and front-office executives feel intense pressure for their teams to produce right from the season's start and every single night.

Hence, the reliever who goes from obscurity to supremacy and back.

"In the case of relievers, if you check the history it's kind of a natural wave of things," Baltimore Orioles pitching coach Dave Wallace says. "A lot of guys have a real good year, or maybe two good years, and then the maybe hit a bump in the road for a year or two. That's what makes Trevor Hoffman, Mariano, those type of guys special because they've done it over a long period of time."

From 1969, when the save first became a statistic, until 2003 there was not a single occurrence of a pitcher who had exactly one 30-save season and no other, according to STATS.

Shawn Chacon became the first. An All-Star starter for Colorado in 2003, he was converted to closer the following year and had 35 saves — but also blew nine and became the first player in major league history with 30 saves and an ERA over 7.00.

Restored to the rotation for 2005, he struggled and was dealt to the Yankees. Chacon started for most of the remainder of his career, which ended in 2008, and got just one more save.

Toronto's Miguel Batista (2005) was the next with a one-time-only 30-save season, followed by Texas' Akinori Otsuka (2006) and Toronto's Jeremy Accardo (2007).

In the last three years, seven pitchers have reached 30 saves for the first time and it remains to be seen

whether they will do it again: Sergio Santos (2011), Drew Storen (2011), Jordan Walden (2011), Tyler Clippard (2012), Jason Motte (2012), Jason Grilli (2013) and Edward Mujica (2013).

"Some guys are built for it and some guys aren't," Miami Marlins manager Mike Redmond says. "If you can throw strikes and get guys out and save games you are going to have that job forever, but as soon as you don't they find somebody else who does, right? It's just the nature of the beast."

Koji Uehara had 13 saves for Baltimore in 2011, then had one save in each of the following two seasons. After opening last season in a setup role for the Red Sox, he got the big job when Joel Hanrahan tore an elbow ligament and Andrew Bailey struggled and needed shoulder surgery. By October, the 34-year-old Uehara was dominant, striking out St. Louis' Matt Carpenter to finish Boston's first World Series clincher at home since Babe Ruth's team back in 1918.

Tampa Bay manager Joe Maddon likened Uehara to Fernando Rodney, who saved 37 games for Detroit in 2009, served mostly as a setup man during two seasons with the Los Angeles Angels, then emerged as a top closer for the Rays before signing with Seattle. Rodney succeeded when he commanded his changeup and Uehara excelled when he mastered his splitter.

Rivera became baseball's greatest closer because of his cutter, which shattered bats of hundreds of left-handed hitters

"I have to believe the common thread is a great other pitch, which more than likely is going to be a changeup or a split," Maddon says. "The way that Rivera did it consistently for so many years, it seems it's difficult today to get relief pitchers to be consistent for that many consecutive years."

Rodney's changeup fell into place because of a change in his mechanics.

"A pitcher always lifts his foot. So I stayed in my slide step and got the same velocity, everything the same," he says. "I pitched really well in the Dominican Winter League and I came to spring training continuing to work. And I got a lot of positive results."

With Rivera's retirement, 39-year-old Joe Nathan becomes the active saves leader with 341. He's preparing for his first season with the Tigers.

Robertson, who turns 29 next month, has all of eight career saves to his credit.

Friends have texted him congratulations on taking over Rivera's role. He keeps saying it's no big deal, that he's approaching the ninth in the same manner he pitches the eighth.

"You blow a game, well, you're going to hear about it. No one wants to lose games," he says. "Believe me, I've done it in the eighth inning. I've lost games, a bunch of games. It's a little more pressure on you in the ninth, but I still think it's still a job. You're trying to do the same thing. You're trying to get three outs as quickly as possible. You want to minimize damage and make quality pitches and finish the game. End it."

BASEBALL 2014



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Adam Wainwright and the Cardinals are heavy favorites to once again win the Central, as they boast the division's best rotation. The league's best rotation, though, belongs to the Nationals, led by ace Stephen Strasburg (below).

By JAY COHEN

ASSOCIATED PRESS

NL PREVIEW

Stephen Strasburg leads a deep rotation in Washington. Matt Holliday and St. Louis are back again. And the loaded Los Angeles Dodgers think it's their time to shine.

Yes, it is a very familiar group of favorites. Throw in Freddie Freeman and Atlanta, and the NL list is practically complete. But there's always one team that crashes the party at the top; see MVP Andrew McCutchen and the 2013 Pirates.

With Arizona and Los Angeles starting the season Down Under in Australia, the race is on to see which teams will finish on top in the National League.

"Our team's really good," Dodgers pitcher Zack Greinke said. "We did really good, even with a bunch of injuries last year. We have some young guys about ready to come up if needed. I mean, the expectations should be really high here."

Washington was among the favorites last year, coming off a breakthrough season. But Bryce Harper was hurt and the Nationals underperformed in their final season under manager Davey Johnson, finishing 10 games back of NL East champion Atlanta.

Enter Matt Williams, who gets his first job as a major league manager after three seasons as Arizona's third base coach. The rotation is one of the best in the majors, with Doug Fister coming over in a December trade after winning 14 games for Detroit last season. Harper is healthy again, and Strasburg looks just fine following October elbow surgery.

Powered by another great season from Freeman, the Braves breezed to the division title last year. Atlanta has made it to the playoffs in two of Fredi Gonzalez's first three years as manager, but is still looking to advance for the first time since it lost to Arizona in the 2001 division series.

The rotation was beset by injuries in spring training, but Atlanta should be in the mix again — even after it lost right-hander Tim Hudson and catcher Brian McCann in free agency.

The Central belongs to St. Louis, which has won the division five times in the last decade. There's no reason to believe the Cardinals won't make it six times in 11 years.

Adam Wainwright and postseason darling Michael Wacha are part of the division's best rotation. The lineup remains stacked even after Carlos Beltran departed in free agency. All-Star slugger Allen Craig missed much of the postseason last year, and the Cardinals still made it to the World Series.

The real intrigue in the division comes after the Cardinals. The Central had both wild cards last season, with Pittsburgh making the playoffs for the first time in 21 years and Cincinnati another four games back in the third.

The Pirates and Reds each lost a key player in free agency, while the Brewers get Ryan Braun back from his season-ending, 65-game drug suspension. A.J. Burnett went from the Pirates to the Phillies after a productive two years in Pittsburgh, while the Reds lost leadoff hitter Shin-Soo Choo to a big contract with the Rangers.

"We're still hungry," Pirates catcher Russell Martin said. "We did some special things last year, but everybody was disappointed with how it finished. I don't know

what all the 'experts' are saying, but I consider myself an expert and I think we're going to do better than we did last year."

The muddled Central could mean another playoff slot for one of the West teams.

Los Angeles' biggest deal of the offseason was a \$215 million, seven-year contract for its own Clayton Kershaw, who won the NL Cy Young Award for the second time in three seasons. Kershaw, Cuban sensation Yasiel Puig and steady Adrian Gonzalez helped the Dodgers all the way to the championship series.

Health is one of the biggest concerns in Southern California, with Matt Kemp coming back from left ankle surgery.

If the Dodgers can keep the talented outfielder and shortstop Hanley Ramirez in the lineup alongside Gonzalez, look out.

Arizona made one of the biggest trades of the offseason, acquiring Mark Trumbo from the Angels in a three-team swap that also involved the White Sox. Trumbo hit 34 homers last year and should help protect Paul Goldschmidt in the lineup. The Diamondbacks also signed Bronson Arroyo to provide innings.

The Giants are another team that could surprise. Hudson joins a rotation that also includes 13-game winner Madison Bumgarner and Matt Cain, and Michael Morse should add some pop in left field.

"The way this team is put together, everybody has a job and everybody just does their job," Morse said. "History shows it, this is a winning organization."

A look at the NL in predicted order of finish:

EAST

Washington Nationals

Adam LaRoche plays great defense, but he slumped last year at the plate. That's why Zimmerman fielded some grounders at first this spring training. The plan is for Zimmerman to remain at third most days, but more time at the opposite corner might help him stay healthy.

The Nationals finished in the middle of the league in most offensive categories in 2013, and more games for Zimmerman could help improve those numbers. But the rotation is one of the best in baseball and left-hander Jerry Blevins, acquired in a December trade with Oakland, should help the bullpen.

Atlanta Braves

The 24-year-old Freeman hit .319 with 23 homers and 109 RBI last year, making the All-Star team for the first time. He was rewarded with the biggest contract in franchise history, a \$135 million, eight-year deal.

The Braves also agreed to multiyear deals with outfielder Jason Heyward, closer Craig Kimbrel and shortstop Andrelton Simmons. When Brandon Beachy and Kris Medlen reinjured their elbows, the Braves signed Ervin Santana to a \$14.1 million, one-year contract to bolster their rotation.

New York Mets

Help is on the way for the Mets; it just appears to be at least a year away. Pitching prospects Noah Syndergaard and Rafael Montero showed promise during spring training, and Matt Harvey is rehabbing his surgically repaired right elbow.

In the meantime, free-agent deals for pitcher Bartolo Colon and outfielders Curtis Granderson and Chris Young should be enough to keep New York on top of Philadelphia in third.

Philadelphia Phillies

Another year, another set of injury concerns for the aging Phillies. Cole Hamels could miss the first month of the season with left biceps tendinitis. Shortstop Jimmy Rollins and second baseman Chase Utley are each 35, and slugger Ryan Howard is 34, making another title run for the accomplished core even more questionable.

Miami Marlins

Giancarlo Stanton should have some more help in the lineup after the Marlins signed Jarrod Saltalamacchia, Garrett Jones and Rafael Furcal, but it likely won't be enough to move the Marlins out of the NL East basement. Miami has finished last in the division in each of the last three seasons.

CENTRAL

St. Louis Cardinals

Matt Carpenter moves from second to third base this season after leading the NL in hits (199), doubles (55) and runs (126) last year. Carpenter, who also batted .318 with 11 homers, is one of the key performers in a young Cardinals core that could keep the team in contention for years.

One of St. Louis' biggest offseason moves was a trade to acquire center fielder Peter Bourjos, who adds more speed to an already dangerous lineup. Shortstop Jhonny Peralta also shores up one of the Cardinals' weakest positions offensively.

Pittsburgh Pirates

Burnett is gone, but Pittsburgh still has Francisco Liriano and Gerrit Cole at the front end of the rotation. Liriano won 16 games last year in his first season with the Pirates, and the 23-year-old Cole looks like a star. Touted pitching prospect Jameson Taillon also could make it to the majors this summer.

With his mix of speed and power, McCutchen is one of the majors' most dangerous hitters. He had a .317 batting average last season to go along with a career-high 38 doubles and a .404 on-base percentage.

Cincinnati Reds

Billy Hamilton could be one of baseball's most exciting players this summer. He takes over for Choo in center field after batting .368 with 13 steals in a short stint with the Reds at the end of last year. The big question about the speedster is his ability to get on base, and he showed improved bunting

skills during spring training.

Milwaukee Brewers

Matt Garza returned to the NL Central for a big free-agent deal with Milwaukee, joining Yovani Gallardo and Kyle Lohse on top of an improved Brewers rotation. Garza went 6-1 in 11 starts with the Cubs last year before he was traded to Texas in July.

Chicago Cubs

The Cubs are hoping new manager Rick Renteria will have a positive effect on first baseman Anthony Rizzo and shortstop Starlin Castro after each young player had a disappointing 2013 season. The focus remains on the future, with slugging prospects Kris Bryant and Javier Baez attracting attention during spring training.

WEST

Los Angeles Dodgers

It's been a tough load for Alexander Guerrero, who is moving from shortstop to second base while adjusting to life in the United States. He defected from Cuba last year and agreed to a \$28 million, four-year contract with the Dodgers in October. He was sent to Triple-A on Tuesday. Puig made his major league debut last June and hit .319 with 19 homers in 104 games. Will it be a sophomore slump for the strong-armed outfielder, or more of the same? Stay tuned.

Arizona Diamondbacks

Arroyo has pitched at least 200 innings in eight of the last nine seasons, and he had 199 innings with Cincinnati in 2011. The durable right-hander also wins, recording at least 12 victories in five of the last six years.

The 37-year-old Arroyo has been bothered by a bulging disk in his back. And that was a relatively minor problem for the Diamondbacks compared to the injury Patrick Corbin, who could need season-ending surgery on his left elbow. At least Arizona has Archie Bradley, one of the majors' best pitching prospects.

San Diego Padres

The Padres have a promising rotation in Andrew Cashner, Ian Kennedy, Tyson Ross, Josh Johnson and Eric Stults. The hard-throwing Cashner, acquired from the Cubs in 2012 trade, went 10-9 last season with a 3.09 ERA in 31 games, 26 starts.

San Francisco Giants

Hudson broke his right ankle while covering first for Atlanta last July 24, ending his season. The Giants are counting on a full recovery for the 38-year-old right-hander after their rotation faltered last year. Hudson had 49 wins for Atlanta from 2010-12.

Colorado Rockies

No more Todd Helton; the longtime first baseman retired after 17 seasons in Colorado. Justin Morneau takes over, but the biggest key for the Rockies could be just keeping sluggers Troy Tulowitzki and Carlos Gonzalez on the field. Tulowitzki played in 126 games last year, while Gonzalez was limited to 110 games.



BASEBALL 2014

AL PREVIEW

By JANIE McCAULEY

ASSOCIATED PRESS

The big-spending AL West also-rans of recent years once more find themselves chasing those overachieving, low-budget Oakland Athletics.

Yet Bob Melvin's A's hardly consider themselves the favorite to win a third straight West crown, not in one of baseball's best divisions that appears to have gotten even better this offseason.

"Obviously they won the last two years, so they're the team to chase," Rangers third baseman Adrian Beltre said. "There are probably teams that probably don't take them seriously, but we do. They showed that they can get it done and as of right now, they're the champions of the West. So it's obviously that we're chasing them now."

While New York Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter tries to finish his Hall of Fame career in pinstripes the way he started it, with a World Series title, and the Detroit Tigers aim to unseat the defending-champion Boston Red Sox, the West looks to be one of baseball's top divisions again in 2014.

"I think you can make a legitimate case that all five teams are better," Rangers general manager Jon Daniels said. "You've got the Yankees and Dodgers and a number of clubs that made a lot of moves out there, Washington and others, but from a division-to-division standpoint, I don't know that any group was more active than the AL West."

Robinson Cano is the new star in Seattle — for the next decade, no less. Prince Fielder takes over in the middle of the Texas lineup after his trade from the Tigers. Sluggers Josh Hamilton and Albert Pujols have something to prove for the playoff-starved Los Angeles Angels, who are feeling the pressure after missing the postseason the past four years.

Sure, the A's have made their share of moves this winter — many via trade as general manager Billy Beane often does. But Oakland's changes are minor comparable to the acquisitions of Cano and Fielder.

"I think we're still trying to prove people wrong," A's center fielder Coco Crisp said.

Here's a look at the American League by division, in predicted order of finish:

WEST

Texas Rangers

Texas traded for Fielder, added Shin-Soo Choo for \$130 million over seven years and is determined to bounce back from last fall's early exit with Yu Darvish as its ace.

Ron Washington's Rangers (91-72) lost the AL wild-card tiebreaker to Tampa Bay and hope for a World Series return this year after runner-up finishes in 2010 and '11.

Oakland Athletics

The A's lost projected ace Jarrod Parker to a season-ending elbow injury that requires surgery, leaving another void to fill for a team that has done so well in recent years. While pitching depth has long been a focus for the organization, that will be tested early without Parker and also A.J. Griffin.

But with new closer Jim Johnson at the back end of a talented bullpen, Oakland still has plenty of confidence it can win if Crisp and the offense provides just enough support.

Los Angeles Angels

The pressure is on for manager Mike Scioscia, Hamilton and Pujols after a fourth straight season out of the playoffs, and Mike Trout can't do it all. Pujols was sidelined from July 26 on and batted .258 with 17 homers and 64 RBI in 99 games.

This team's pitching must be far better, period, not to mention stay healthy.

Scioscia and general manager Jerry Dipoto survived for one more chance from owner Arte Moreno following the club's worst season in a decade at 78-84 — its lowest win total since 2003 despite the high-profile, expensive roster.

"We're much better when our focus is in house," Scioscia said. "We have a terrific club and we have the makings of a championship team. No matter who you're playing, you're going to face a tough opponent. There are a lot of talented teams, not

only in our division but in our league."

Seattle Mariners

It's the Cano show at Safeco Field but Seattle's new \$240 million man is going to need help to give manager Lloyd McClendon — Jim Leyland's hitting coach in Detroit the last seven years — a successful first season in the Pacific Northwest.

Seattle will need steady production from the starting pitchers after Felix Hernandez and Hisashi Iwakuma — who is recovering from a finger injury on his pitching hand.

McClendon knows the A's are the team to beat.

"When I was with Detroit, we battled them every year in the playoffs," he said. "I don't take them lightly. This is a great division. There's a lot of talented teams in this division, including the Seattle Mariners."

Houston Astros

Manager Bo Porter welcomes the addition of new center fielder and leadoff hitter Dexter Fowler as the Astros begin their second season in the AL West trying to fight from the bottom of one of baseball's best divisions a year after losing a franchise-worst 111 games.

Houston has spent the spring trying to find the right combination for the rotation.

CENTRAL

Detroit Tigers

The Tigers have reached the AL championship series three straight years, but a World Series title has remained elusive since 1984.

New manager Brad Ausmus takes over a team that made a couple significant changes in the offseason, trading Fielder and right-hander Doug Fister. Even without Fister, Detroit may have the AL's best rotation — assuming ace Justin Verlander comes back strong after having core muscle surgery in January.

Miguel Cabrera hopes to be healthier than last year, when he was hobbled down the stretch but still won MVP honors for the second straight year. Max Scherzer gave Detroit two major award winners by winning the Cy Young.

Kansas City Royals

Kansas City's big move before last season — trading eventual Rookie of the Year Wil Myers for James Shields — did not help the Royals reach the playoffs, but their 86-76 record was their best since 1989.

The Royals acquired outfielder Norichika Aoki and second baseman Omar Infante this offseason, but Ervin Santana's departure could be costly.

Cleveland Indians

Cleveland rolled to 92 wins in 2013 in its first season under manager Terry Francona. The Indians made the playoffs for the first time since 2007 and finished only a game behind Detroit in the division.

The pitching will likely determine whether Cleveland makes a return appearance in the post-season. Ubaldo Jimenez left via free agency, and John Axford replaces closer Chris Perez.

Chicago White Sox

Even a brilliant season by left-hander Chris Sale wasn't enough to prevent 99 losses for the White Sox. Jose Abreu and Adam Eaton were brought in to boost the offense, and Adam Dunn is still around as a home run threat.

Chicago won 85 games in 2012 and nearly took the division, so the White Sox probably aren't as bad as last year's record suggests. But they have a lot of ground to make up if they want to contend again.

Minnesota Twins

Once the AL Central's model franchise, the Twins have lost at least 96 games for three straight seasons. Joe Mauer's move to first base could keep his bat in the lineup more often, but the starting rotation has been unreliable for a while.

Ricky Nolasco and Phil Hughes signed as free



ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Yankees get one last season out of Derek Jeter (right). Jeter won't play with Alex Rodriguez (left) in 2014 as A-Rod is serving a suspension that encompasses the entire season as a result of the Biogenesis investigation. In the West, the presence of \$240 million man and former Yankee Robinson Cano (below) in the Mariners' lineup is one of many challenges the low-budget Athletics face in trying to remain atop the division.

agents in Minnesota's latest attempt to improve its pitching staff.

Rakuten to its first Japan Series title.

Tampa Bay Rays

The Rays kept much of their 2013 roster together to make another run — including three-time All-Star and ace David Price. The 2012 AL Cy Young Award winner received a \$14 million, one-year deal.

First baseman James Loney received a new \$21 million, three-year contract, while new closer Grant Balfour signed for \$12 million over two years. Evan Longoria hit .269 with 32 homers and 88 RBI in a career-best 160 games last season, his first of a \$100 million, 10-year contract.

Baltimore Orioles

Buck Showalter can't count on Chris Davis to duplicate his sensational season in which he hit a majors-leading 53 home runs and 138 RBI, but Baltimore's manager will sure take something close to that kind of production.

The Orioles hope the addition of Nelson Cruz on a \$8 million, one-year contract will provide a boost in the lineup — and Cruz is eager for a fresh start following his 50-game suspension last year as part of the Biogenesis case.

Toronto Blue Jays

The Blue Jays need slugger Jose Bautista to stay healthy after he was sidelined to end the season for the second straight year. Bautista and Melky Cabrera are out to show they can be keys to a potent lineup, and Bautista hopes to return to the form of his 2010 season when he hit a club-record 54 home runs.

Also looking for a big rebound season: knuckleballer R.A. Dickey, the 2012 NL Cy Young Award winner who went 14-13 with a 4.21 ERA last year on the heels of his 20-win season for the Mets.

EAST

Boston Red Sox

The reigning World Series champion Red Sox will try to capture the magic again, minus many of those bushy beards this time. The pitching staff is led by a large group of experienced players such as Jon Lester, Clay Buchholz, John Lackey, Felix Doubront and Jake Peavy.

Boston lost Jacoby Ellsbury to the rival Yankees in free agency and must find its best fit in center field to replace him, and manager John Farrell has several options. Grady Sizemore would like to be the choice, hoping to stay healthy and play a full season to help complement slugger David Ortiz and Dustin Pedroia.

New York Yankees

Last year was closer Mariano Rivera's emotional farewell tour, but it ended without a playoff berth. Now, it's Derek Jeter's turn — and there's no Alex Rodriguez around to provide a distraction as the longtime captain looks for one last memorable October run.

Rodriguez, a three-time AL MVP and baseball's highest-paid player, was suspended for 211 games on Aug. 5 for violations of baseball's drug agreement and labor contract. An arbitrator in January cut the penalty to the 2014 season and postseason.

Joining Ellsbury — he got a \$153 million, seven-year contract — in the Bronx are fellow newcomers catcher Brian McCann, outfielder Carlos Beltran, and Japanese pitching star Masahiro Tanaka. Tanaka signed a \$155 million, seven-year contract in January. He was 24-0 with a 1.27 ERA last year while leading



2014 NATIONALS

	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	
HOME 1:35 pm Braves	AWAY March 31 1:10 pm Mets	M 1 7:10 pm Marlins	T 2 7:10 pm Mets	W 3 1:10 pm Mets	T 4 1:05 pm Braves	F 5 7:05 pm Braves	S 6 10:10 pm Padres	
A 1:35 pm Braves	M 7 7:05 pm Marlins	T 8 7:05 pm Marlins	W 9 7:05 pm Marlins	T 10 4:05 pm Marlins	F 11 7:35 pm Braves	S 12 7:10 pm Braves	S 13 8:15 pm Cardinals	
A 1:35 pm Braves	M 14 7:10 pm Marlins	T 15 7:10 pm Marlins	W 16 7:10 pm Marlins	T 17 7:05 pm Cardinals	F 18 7:05 pm Cardinals	S 19 1:05 pm Cardinals	S 20 7:05 pm Padres	
C 1:35 pm Cardinals	M 21 7:05 pm Angels	T 22 7:05 pm Angels	W 23 7:05 pm Angels	T 24 7:05 pm Padres	F 25 7:05 pm Padres	S 26 1:05 pm Padres	S 27 1:35 pm Padres	
S 28 8:10 pm Astros	M 29 8:10 pm Astros	T 30 8:10 pm Astros	APRIL				S 1 7:05 pm Phillies	S 2 7:05 pm Phillies
S 3 7:05 pm Phillies	M 4 7:05 pm Phillies	T 5 7:05 pm Phillies	W 6 7:05 pm Phillies	T 7 1:05 pm Dodgers	F 8 10:05 pm Athletics	S 9 9:05 pm Athletics	S 10 9:05 pm Athletics	
A 1:35 pm Braves	M 11 4:05 pm Athletics	T 12 9:40 pm D'backs	W 13 9:40 pm D'backs	T 14 3:40 pm D'backs	F 15 7:05 pm Mets	S 16 4:05 pm Mets	S 17 4:05 pm Mets	
A 1:35 pm Braves	M 18 1:35 pm Mets	T 19 7:05 pm Reds	W 20 7:05 pm Reds	T 21 4:05 pm Reds	F 22 7:05 pm Pirates	S 23 7:15 pm Pirates	S 24 7:15 pm Pirates	
P 1:35 pm Phillies	M 25 1:35 pm Pirates	T 26 1:35 pm Marlins	W 27 7:05 pm Marlins	T 28 7:05 pm Marlins	F 29 7:05 pm Rangers	S 30 7:05 pm Rangers	S 31 12:05 pm Rangers	
M 1 1:35 pm Rangers	T 2 7:05 pm Phillies	W 3 7:05 pm Phillies	T 4 7:05 pm Phillies	F 5 7:05 pm Phillies	S 6 10:10 pm Padres	S 7 10:10 pm Padres	S 8 4:10 pm Padres	
A 1:35 pm Braves	M 9 10:15 pm Giants	T 10 10:15 pm Giants	W 11 10:15 pm Giants	T 12 3:45 pm Giants	F 13 8:15 pm Cardinals	S 14 7:15 pm Cardinals	S 15 2:15 pm Cardinals	
C 1:35 pm Cardinals	M 16 7:05 pm Astros	T 17 7:05 pm Astros	W 18 7:05 pm Astros	T 19 7:05 pm Braves	F 20 7:05 pm Braves	S 21 7:15 pm Braves	S 22 1:35 pm Braves	
B 1:35 pm Brewers	M 23 8:10 pm Brewers	T 24 8:10 pm Brewers	W 25 2:10 pm Brewers	T 26 8:05 pm Cubs	F 27 4:05 pm Cubs	S 28 1:05 pm Cubs	S 29 7:05 pm Rockies	
C 1:35 pm Cubs	M 30 7:05 pm Rockies	JUNE						

	S	M	T	W	T	F	S
C 1:35 pm Cubs	M 6 4:05 pm Cubs	T 7 7:05 pm Phillies	W 8 7:05 pm Phillies	T 9 7:05 pm Phillies	F 10 7:05 pm Phillies	S 11 7:15 pm Phillies	S 12 7:15 pm Phillies
R 1:35 pm Rockies	M 13 6:05 pm Rockies	T 14 7:05 pm Orioles	W 15 7:05 pm Orioles	T 16 7:05 pm Orioles	F 17 7:05 pm Orioles	S 18 7:05 pm Orioles	S 19 7:05 pm Brewers
P 1:35 pm Phillies	M 20 8:40 pm Rockies	T 21 8:40 pm Rockies	W 22 8:40 pm Rockies	T 23 3:10 pm Rockies	F 24 7:10 pm Reds	S 25 4:05 pm Reds	S 26 4:05 pm Reds
M 1:35 pm Marlins	T 27 7:10 pm Marlins	W 28 7:10 pm Marlins	T 29 7:10 pm Marlins	F 30 12:40 pm Marlins	S 31 7:05 pm Phillies	JULY	
P 1:35 pm Phillies	M 1 7:05 pm Rockies	T 2 7:05 pm Rockies	W 3 7:05 pm Rockies	T 4 7:05 pm Phillies	F 5 7:05 pm Phillies	S 6 7:05 pm Phillies	S 7 7:05 pm Phillies
A 1:35 pm Astros	M 8 7:05 pm Orioles	T 9 7:05 pm Orioles	W 10 7:05 pm Orioles	T 11 7:05 pm Phillies	F 12 7:15 pm Phillies	S 13 7:10 pm Mets	S 14 1:10 pm Mets
M 1:35 pm Marlins	T 15 7:05 pm Braves	W 16 7:05 pm Braves	T 17 7:05 pm Braves	F 18 7:05 pm Braves	S 19 7:05 pm Braves	S 20 7:10 pm Marlins	S 21 1:10 pm Marlins
P 1:35 pm Phillies	M 22 8:40 pm Rockies	T 23 8:40 pm Rockies	W 24 8:40 pm Rockies	T 25 7:10 pm Reds	F 26 4:05 pm Reds	S 27 4:05 pm Marlins	S 28 1:35 pm Marlins
M 1:35 pm Marlins	T 29 7:10 pm Marlins	W 30 12:40 pm Marlins	T 31 7:05 pm Phillies	F 1 7:05 pm Phillies	S 2 9:10 pm Mariners	S 3 9:10 pm Mariners	S 4 10:10 pm Mariners
P 1:35 pm Phillies	M 5 7:05 pm Phillies	T 6 7:05 pm Phillies	W 7 12:35 pm Mets	T 8 7:35 pm Braves	F 9 7:10 pm Braves	S 10 7:10 pm Braves	S 11 7:10 pm Braves
M 1:35 pm Marlins	T 12 7:05 pm D-Backs	W 13 7:05 pm D-Backs	T 14 7:10 pm Mets	F 15 7:05 pm Pirates	S 16 7:05 pm Pirates	S 17 7:05 pm Pirates	S 18 7:05 pm Pirates
A 1:35 pm Astros	M 19 7:05 pm D-Backs	T 20 7:05 pm D-Backs	W 21 4:05 pm D-Backs	T 22 7:05 pm Giants	F 23 4:05 pm Giants	S 24 1:35 pm Giants	S 25 4:10 pm Mariners
P 1:35 pm Phillies	M 26 7:05 pm Phillies	T 27 7:05 pm Phillies	W 28 7:05 pm Phillies	T 29 10:10 pm Mariners	F 30 9:10 pm Mariners	S 31 9:10 pm Mariners	S 1 1:35 pm Marlins
M 1:35 pm Marlins	T 2 8:10 pm Dodgers	W 3 3:10 pm Dodgers	T 4 10:10 pm Dodgers	F 5 7:05 pm Phillies	S 6 4:05 pm Phillies	S 7 4:05 pm Phillies	S 8 1:35 pm Marlins
A 1:35 pm Astros	M 9 7:05 pm Braves	T 10 4:05 pm Braves	W 11 7:10 pm Braves	T 12 7:10 pm Mets	F 13 7:10 pm Mets	S 14 1:10 pm Mets	S 15 1:10 pm Marlins
M 1:35 pm Marlins	T 16 7:10 pm Braves	W 17 7:10 pm Braves	T 18 7:10 pm Marlins	F 19 7:10 pm Marlins	S 20 7:10 pm Marlins	S 21 1:10 pm Marlins	S 22 1:35 pm Marlins
P 1:35 pm Phillies	M 23 7:05 pm Mets	T 24 7:05 pm Mets	W 25 7:05 pm Mets	T 26 7:05 pm Mets	F 27 7:05 pm Mets	S 28 1:35 pm Marlins	S 29 1:35 pm Marlins
M 1:35 pm Marlins	T 30 7:05 pm Rockies	SEPT.					
C 1:35 pm Cubs	M 1 8:10 pm Dodgers	T 2 10:10 pm Dodgers	W 3 3:10 pm Dodgers	T 4 7:05 pm Phillies	F 5 7:05 pm Phillies	S 6 4:05 pm Phillies	S 7 10:10 pm Padres