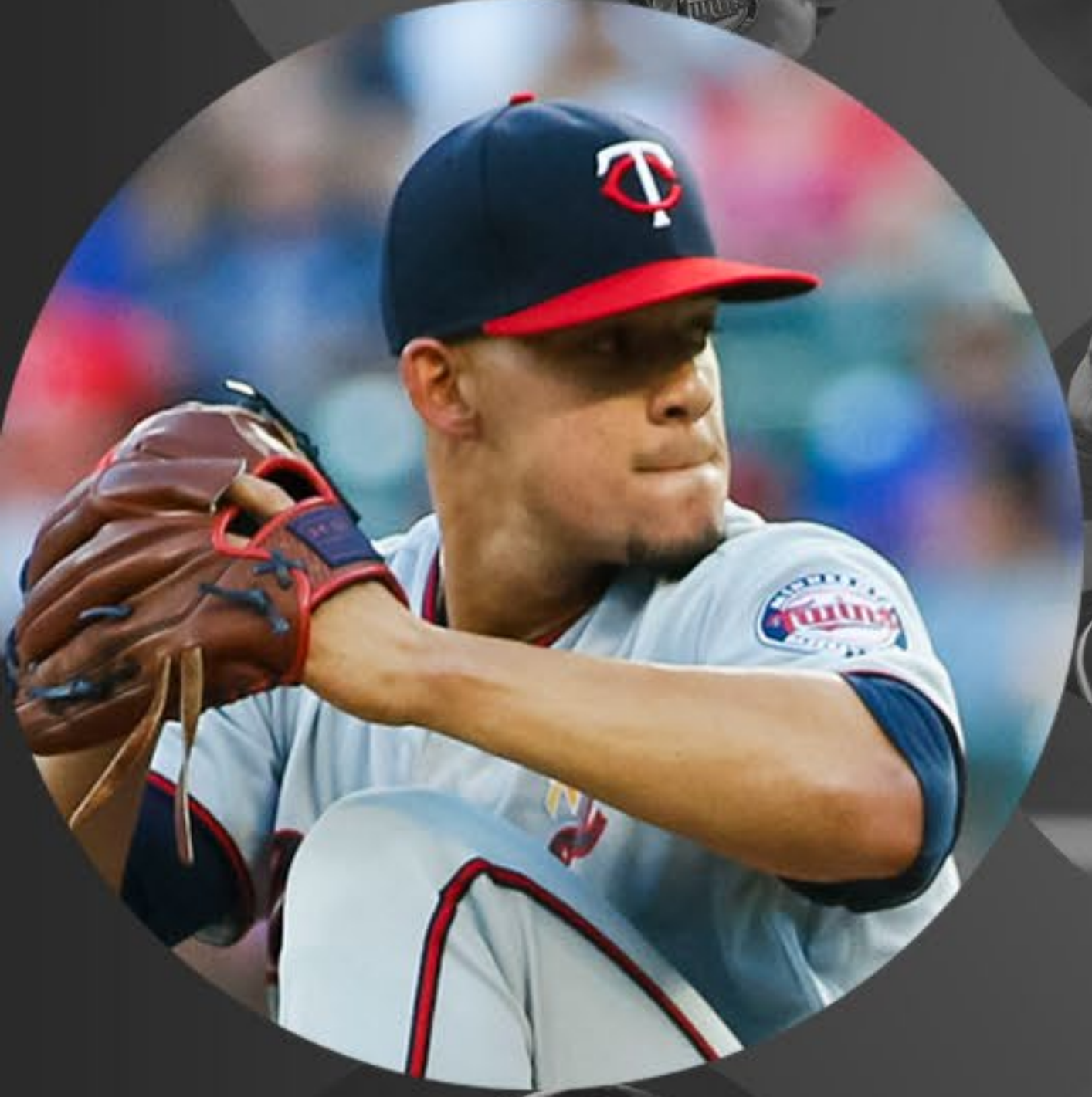
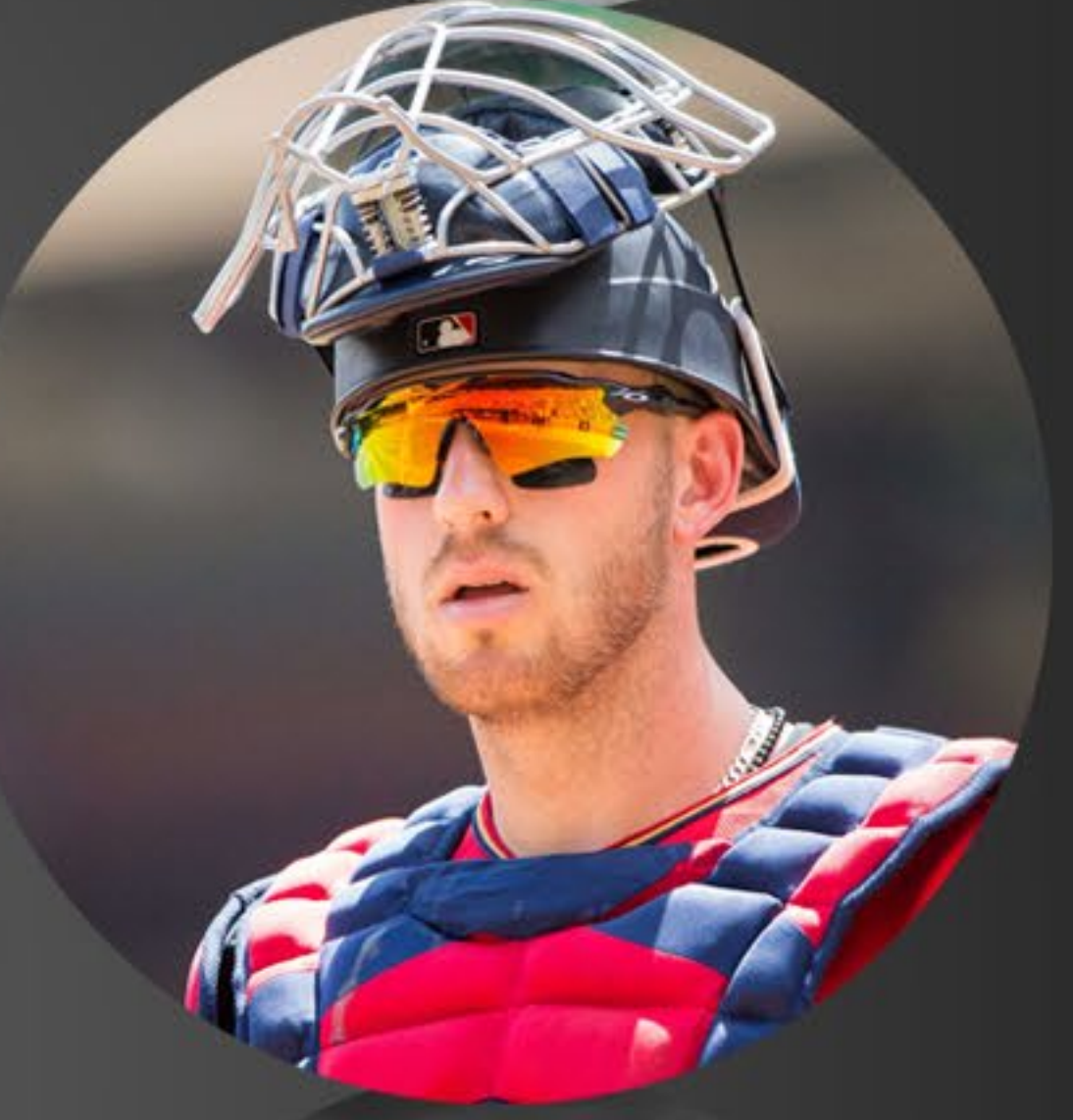




Twins Daily



Offseason Handbook 2019

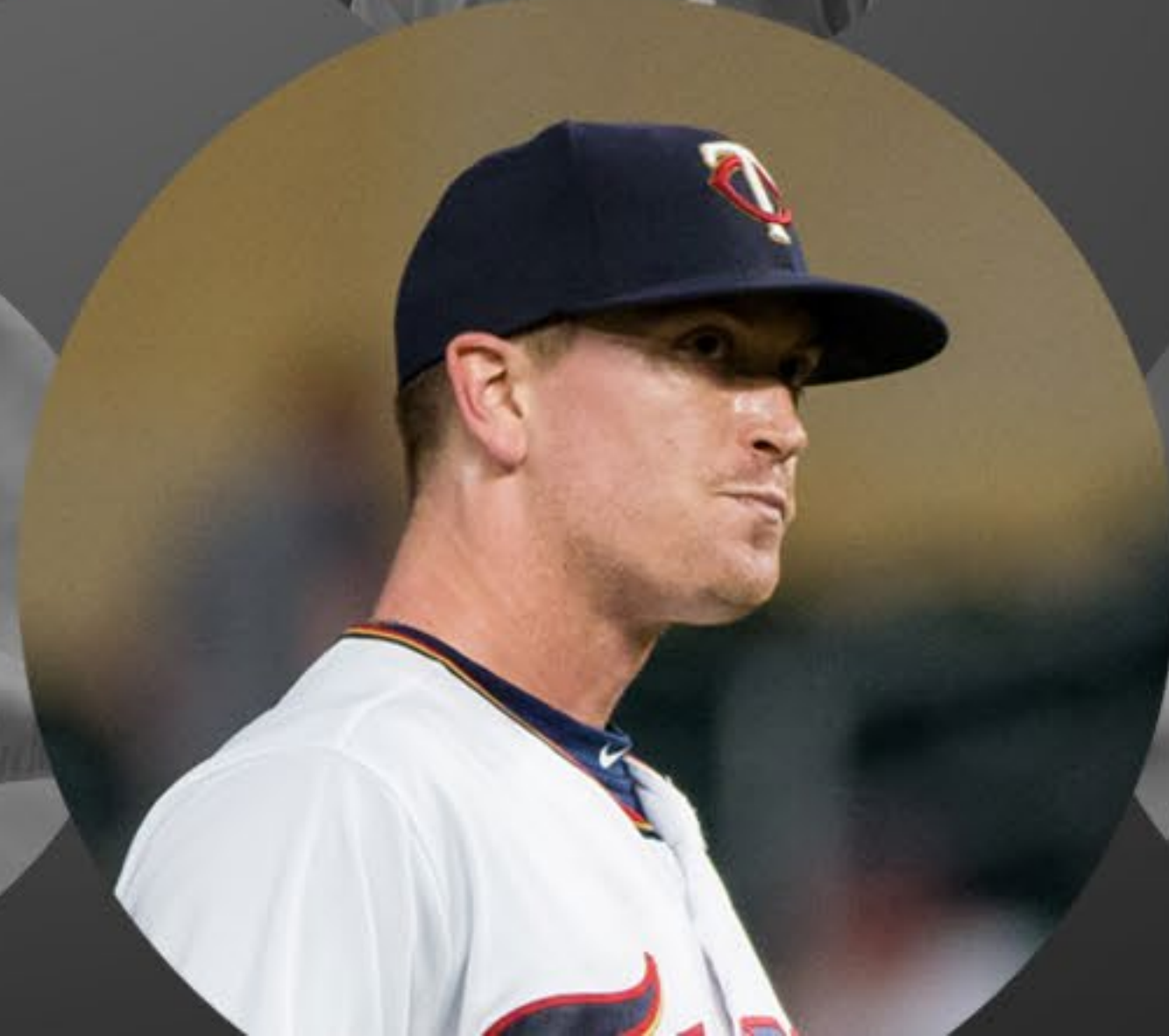


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Foreword

by Mike Bernardino,
Twins Beat Writer, Pioneer
Press (2013-2018)

Minnesota Twins offseasons typically haven't been like most others around the major leagues. Well-practiced stealth and ultimate frustration have mostly been their M.O., with far more tire-kicking than jersey-holding marking their frozen winters of so-called hot stove activity.

Oh, there was the wild week in late 2012 – just before I joined the St. Paul Pioneer Press as Twins beat writer – that saw both Denard Span and Ben Revere dealt away for young pitching prospects Alex Meyer and Trevor May, respectively.

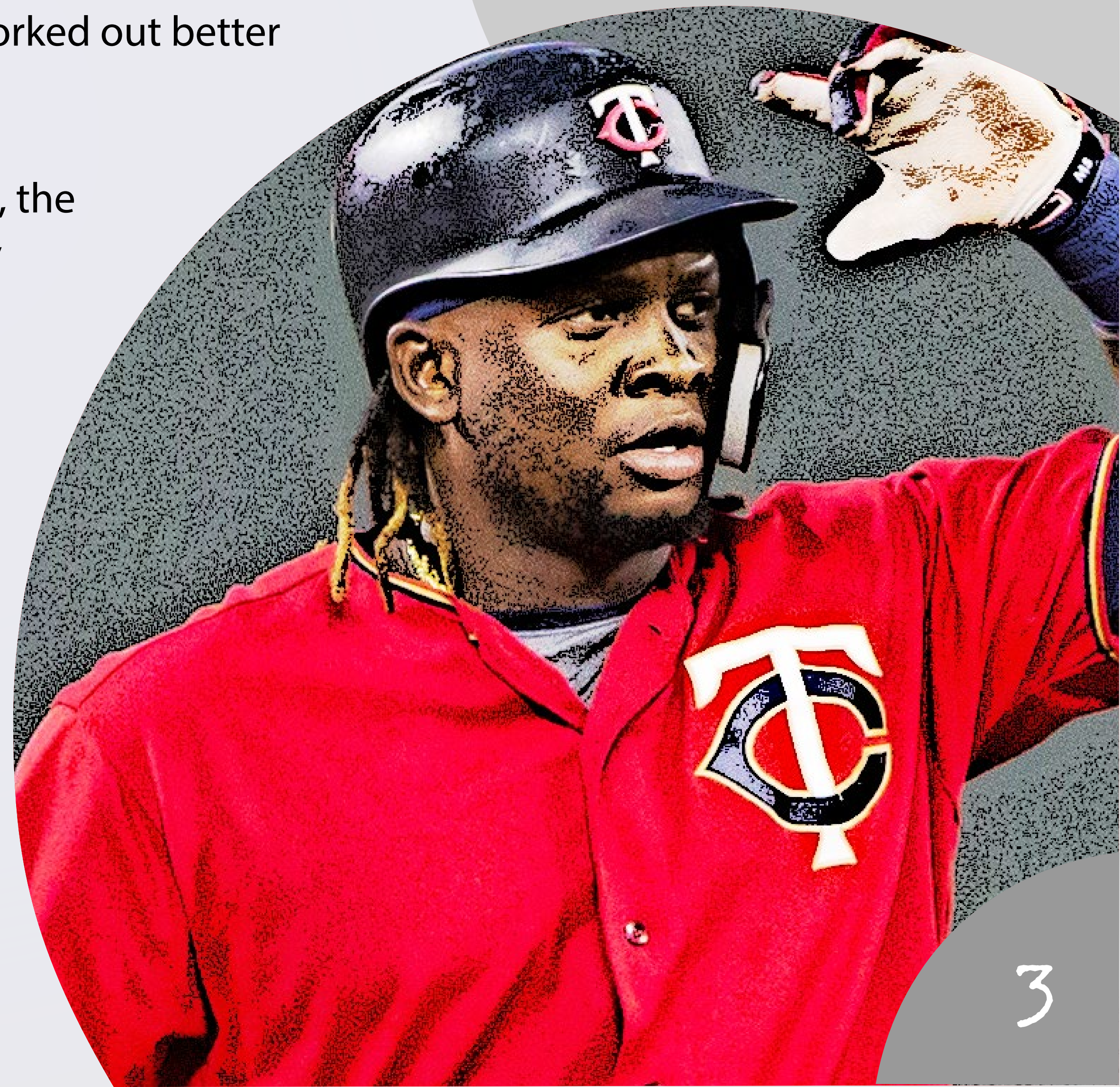
The winter of 2013-14 brought the two-pronged free agency push that lured veteran right-handers Ricky Nolasco and Phil Hughes to the Upper Midwest despite their Southern California upbringing.

And, of course, there was the signing of free agent right-hander Ervin Santana in December 2014 – a quick pivot after the failed pursuit of a Francisco Liriano reunion – that worked out better than most such investments did for the Terry Ryan regime.

Since the arrival of Falvine (imaginary trademark) in the fall of 2016, however, the Twins have been far more active during baseball's supposed downtime. They jumped in quickly and signed catcher Jason Castro away from the Houston Astros for three years and \$24.5 million shortly after taking over.

That, of course, was followed by the month-long Brian Dozier soap opera in which the slugging second baseman and team MVP was peddled around the league in hopes his historic 42-homer season would bring a cache of high-end prospects in return. (It didn't.)

Last winter, the slowest-developing offseason since the collusion days of the '80s, the Twins experienced their share of near-misses (bids for CC Sabathia and Yu Darvish) but ultimately reeled in the likes of Fernando Rodney, Zach Duke, Addison Reed, Logan Morrison and Lance Lynn, with



Foreword

by Mike Bernardino,
Twins Beat Writer, Pioneer
Press (2013-2018)

only Reed's deal guaranteeing more than a single year (the first multiyear reliever deal in club history for an outside free agent).

All those moves pushed the Opening Day payroll to a club-record \$128 million, although the subsequent shedding of this past July and August left them with just three players on the books for a combined \$31 million (including Hughes' dead money).

How will Falvine proceed this offseason in the wake of Paul Molitor's surprise firing and Joe Mauer's expected retirement? Which member or members of their young core will be the first to secure a multiyear deal and the security that comes with it?

Will they trade from surplus, pull the plug on Byron Buxton and/or Miguel Sano, move Jorge Polanco across the bag to second base? Which free agents will they attempt to lure?

It should be a fascinating Twins offseason, and the team at Twins Daily has once again taken on the challenge of examining the many possibilities that lie ahead. No group pays closer attention to the comings and goings of Twins personnel, from the lowest levels of the minors all the way up through the majors, than the gang at Twins Daily.

They provide an invaluable service to devoted Twins fans and media members alike. Even in my new role as Notre Dame beat writer for The Indianapolis Star, I know I plan to follow along from afar and see just how close their predictions come to hitting the mark this offseason.



Welcome to the offseason.

This is the ninth Offseason Handbook our crew has produced – a tradition that predates even the launch of our website, Twins Daily. When we released the sad-looking first version of this little passion project, the Twins had just completed a thrilling 2009 season, their last at the Metrodome.

That winter, they signed Joe Mauer – coming off an MVP campaign – to an eight-year, \$184 million extension. And in every iteration of the Handbook we’ve churned out since, that contract has been a constant reality, occupying roughly a quarter of the payroll.

The objective of these guides is to let you, the reader, put on your GM hat and plot your own course for the offseason (or, predict what the actual front office will do). Now, for the first time, you’re really going to have free rein. Not only is Mauer’s hefty contract off the books; the Twins have almost no firm commitments for 2019 or beyond.

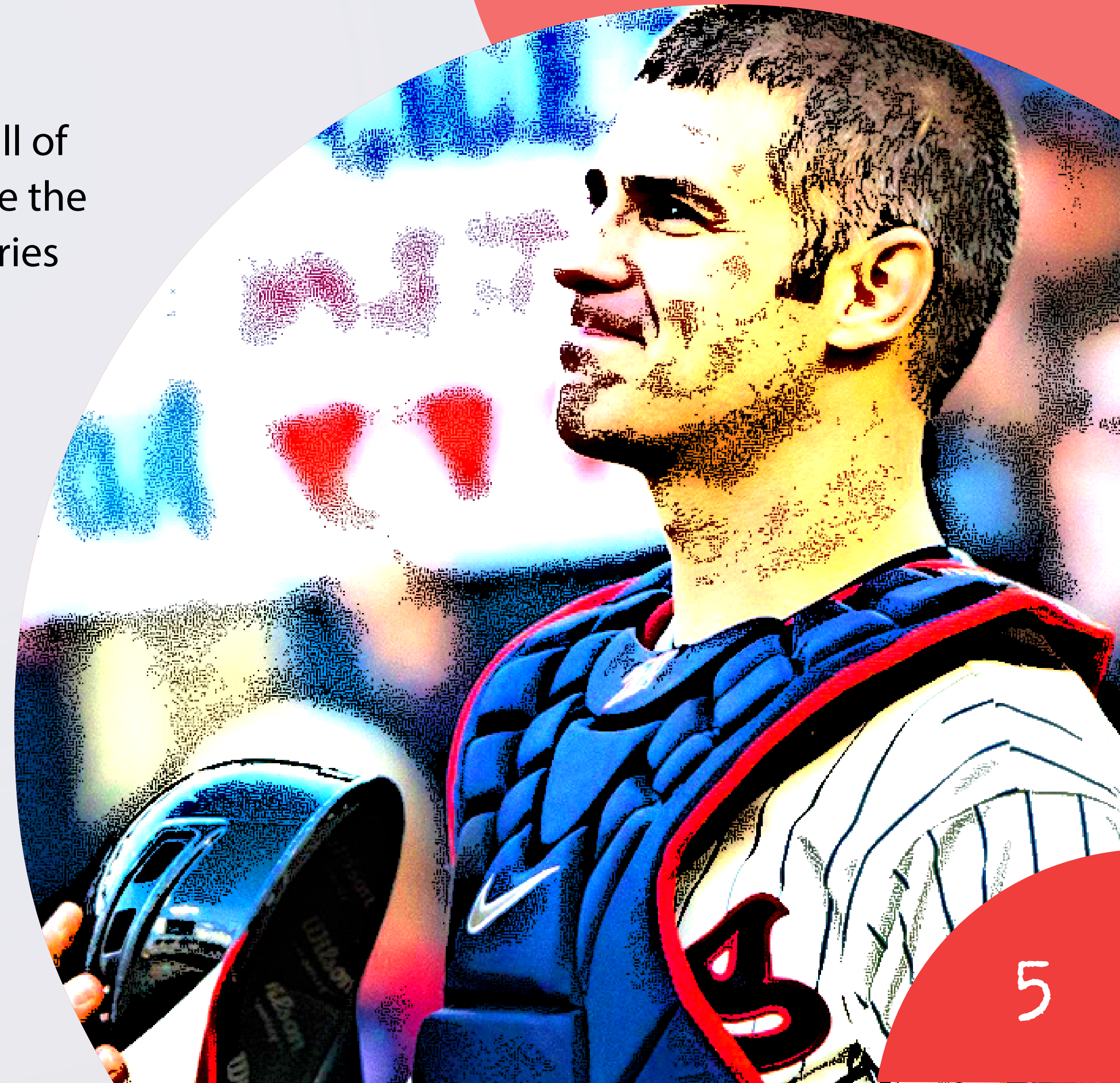
You’ve got unprecedented spending flexibility. A deep farm system, chock full of appealing assets and incoming difference-makers. A new manager set to take the reins. And you’ve got an entrenched young core that, while reeling from a series of setbacks, still carries immense promise.

In the following pages, you’ll find a comprehensive overview of the offseason landscape laid out through a TwinsCentric lens. Depth charts, free agents of interest, trade scenarios, payroll analysis, arbitration decisions, impact prospects: it’s all ahead.

The sky’s the limit. Let your imagination run wild. Can you build a contender for 2019?

Introduction

by Nick Nelson,
Twins Daily



Hitters

Ehire Adrianza, IF	Willians Astudillo, C	Tyler Austin, 1B	Byron Buxton, OF
Jake Cave, OF	Johnny Field, OF	Logan Forsythe, 2B*	Mitch Garver, C
Chris Gimenez, C*	Zack Granite, OF	Juan Graterol, C	Robbie Grossman, OF
Max Kepler, OF	Joe Mauer, 1B*	Gregorio Petit, IF*	Jorge Polanco, SS
Eddie Rosario, OF	Miguel Sano, 3B		

Pitchers

Matt Belisle, RHP*	Jose Berrios, RHP	Alan Busenitz, RHP
John Curtiss, RHP	Chase De Jong, RHP	Oliver Drake, RHP
Tyler Duffey, RHP	Kyle Gibson, RHP	Stephen Gonsalves, LHP
Trevor Hildenberger, RHP	Zack Littell, RHP	Matt Magill, RHP
Trevor May, RHP	Gabriel Moya, RHP	Jake Odorizzi, RHP
Addison Reed, RHP	Taylor Rogers, LHP	Fernando Romero, RHP
Aaron Slegers, RHP	Kohl Stewart, RHP	Lewis Thorpe, LHP
Andrew Vasquez, LHP		

60-Day Disabled List

Jason Castro, C	Adalberto Mejia, RHP	Logan Morrison, 1B*
Michael Pineda, RHP	Ervin Santana, RHP*	

*Free Agent

40-Man
Roster
(as of end of
2018 season)



Organization Depth Charts

by Seth Stohs,
Twins Daily

Position: C

Current Starter: Jason Castro

Backup: Mitch Garver

AAA: Willians Astudillo | **AA:** Brian Navarreto | **A:** Ben Rortvedt

Analysis: After just 19 games, Castro's 2018 season came to an end following knee surgery. Gradually Garver garnered more playing time and became a reliable bat in the lineup. The two could provide a solid offense-defense and lefty-righty platoon. The intriguing Astudillo is an option for the third catcher job, but likely playing in Rochester until there is a need.

Prospect Spotlight: Ryan Jeffers was selected in the second round in 2018 as a bat-first catcher. His bat was impressive in his pro debut (.344 AVG, .946 OPS in 64 G). He could be a prospect to watch if his defensive skills develop – no given.

Position: 1B/DH

Current Starter: Joe Mauer (FA)

Backup: Tyler Austin

AAA: Zander Wiel | **AA:** Brent Rooker | **A:** Lewin Diaz

Analysis: At some point, hopefully early in the offseason, Mauer will decide whether or not he wants to keep playing. If so, a conversation will be needed. Should he come back, or should the team move on from one of its all-time greats? Austin is out of options in 2019, so what role are you comfortable with him filling?

Prospect Spotlight: In his first full season of professional baseball, Brent Rooker knocked 32 doubles and 22 home runs. He struggled with consistency and struck out 150 times, but his righty power bat has the potential to fill a spot in the middle of a big-league lineup. He has played some outfield but seems to profile best at first.



Organization Depth Charts

by Seth Stohs,
Twins Daily

Position: 2B

Current Starter: Logan Forsythe (FA)

Backup: Ehire Adrianza (Arb)

AAA: Gregorio Petit | **AA:** Luis Arraez | **A:** Travis Blankenhorn

Analysis: Brian Dozier has been the man at second base going back to 2013. Forsythe could stay, but he's one of several free agent second basemen – including Dozier – who will be available this offseason. Nick Gordon, currently at shortstop, may be an option sometime in 2019, and Arraez is right on his heels.

Prospect Spotlight: Luis Arraez missed all but the first three games of the 2017 season due to knee injury. He led the Midwest League with a .347 batting average as a 19-year-old in 2016 and returned in 2018 to hit .310 between Ft. Myers and Chattanooga.

Position: 3B

Current Starter: Miguel Sano (Arb)

Backup: Ehire Adrianza (Arb)

AAA: Leonardo Reginatto | **AA:** Chris Paul | **A:** Jose Miranda

Analysis: The Twins certainly would like to see Sano get himself into shape and be able to play a quality (or at least adequate) third base for a few years before a shift across the diamond. Paul can be a stop gap, if needed, until Miranda and his power potential develops.

Prospect Spotlight: Jose Miranda was drafted as a shortstop out of Puerto Rico in 2016, but it was known that he would have to move. He played a lot at both second and third base, but people believe he will outgrow the middle infield and develop the power of a prototypical third sacker.



Organization Depth Charts

by Seth Stohs,
Twins Daily

Position: SS

Current Starter: Jorge Polanco

Backup: Ehire Adrianza (Arb)

AAA: Nick Gordon | **AA:** Jordan Gore | **A:** Royce Lewis

Analysis: Can Polanco play an adequate shortstop? He appears to have the bat, but his glove remains a question mark. Gordon might be next in line, but there are more questions about his shortstop defense than Polanco's, and he struggled in Rochester with the bat. He needs more time.

Prospect Spotlight: Royce Lewis is the Twins' top prospect, and one of the best in baseball. The supremely talented shortstop profiles to hit for average and showed more power than expected in his first full pro season. Though he finished the year at Single-A, he could move quickly, potentially with a debut in early 2020.

Position: LF

Current Starter: Eddie Rosario (Arb)

Backup: Robbie Grossman (Arb)

AAA: LaMonte Wade | **AA:** Luke Raley | **A:** Jacob Pearson

Analysis: Rosario emerged in 2017, but took a step toward stardom in 2018. He enters his first year of arbitration this offseason. Wade may be next in line behind, and presumably will be added to the 40-man roster, though he did struggle some in his Triple-A debut. Offensively, his approach is polar opposite to Rosario's. He exhibits a high level of patience and knowledge of the strike zone.

Prospect Spotlight: Luke Raley came to the Twins as part of the Brian Dozier trade from the Dodgers. He joined the Lookouts and impressed with his plate approach, hitting three homers with the Lookouts to give him 20 total for the season. He's not far off.



Organization Depth Charts

by Seth Stohs,
Twins Daily

Position: CF

Current Starter: Byron Buxton (Arb)

Backup: Jake Cave

AAA: Zack Granite | **AA:** Tanner English | **A:** Aaron Whitefield

Analysis: The assumption was that Buxton's name would be written in permanent ink here for the Twins. Unfortunately, injuries and struggles with the bat marred his 2018 season. Cave, acquired in spring training, came on with a strong rookie season, showing a good power-speed combination, though his glove might be better suited for a corner.

Prospect Spotlight: The top center field prospect is uber-athletic Akil Baddoo, who had 22 doubles, 11 triples, 11 homers and 24 stolen bases for Class-A Cedar Rapids. While he hasn't hit for average, he works counts and takes a lot of walks. Turned 20 in August.

Position: RF

Current Starter: Max Kepler (Arb)

Backup: Johnny Field

AAA: Edgar Corcino | **AA:** Jaylin Davis | **A:** Alex Kirilloff

Analysis: Kepler has been solid and consistent in his three MLB seasons, but he is yet to take the next step that many believe that he can. Still just 26 in 2019, Kepler remains the guy for now. Davis took a nice step forward in Ft. Myers and Chattanooga this year, and he'll represent the Twins in the AFL.

Prospect Spotlight: After missing the entire 2017 season due to Tommy John surgery, Alex Kirilloff came back and played as if he hadn't missed a day. Between Cedar Rapids and Ft. Myers (65 games each), Kirilloff hit .348/.392/.578 (.970) with 44 doubles, seven triples, 20 home runs and 101 RBI. An advanced hitter, he could surface in the big leagues as early as the second half of the 2019 season.



Position: SP

Current Starters: Jose Berrios, Kyle Gibson (Arb), Michael Pineda, Jake Odorizzi (Arb)

Backups: Adalberto Mejia, Aaron Slegers, Chase De Jong

AAA: Fernando Romero, Kohl Stewart, Stephen Gonsalves, Zack Littell, Lewis Thorpe

AA: Felix Jorge, Jorge Alcala, Tyler Wells, Dietrich Enns, Sean Poppen

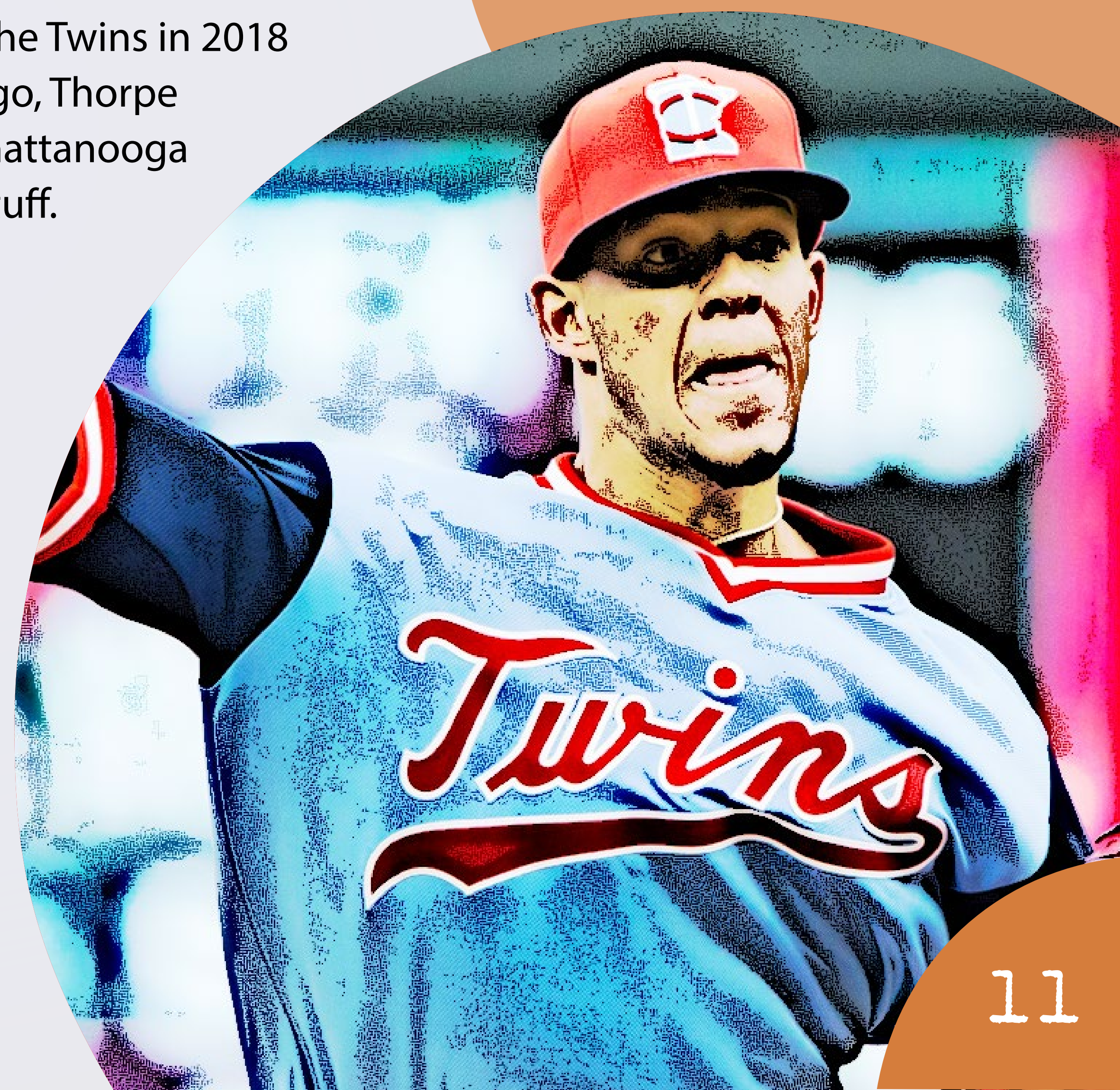
A: Brusdar Graterol, Charlie Barnes, Griffin Jax, Blayne Enlow, Jhoan Duran

Analysis: Berrios became an All-Star, and Gibson provided consistency throughout his best season in 2018. Odorizzi pitched well late. Pineda should be ready in 2019 after the Twins paid him to rehab from Tommy John surgery in 2018. After that, we saw a stable of young pitchers take their first knocks against MLB hitters. Romero, Stewart, Littell and Gonsalves are quality prospects who will hopefully learn from their lumps and progress in 2019. De Jong is a borderline hold.

Prospect Spotlight: The one top pitching prospect that did not debut with the Twins in 2018 was Australian southpaw Lewis Thorpe. Added to the 40-man roster a year ago, Thorpe spent most of 2019, his first full season back from Tommy John surgery, in Chattanooga before ending the season with a strong month in Rochester. He's got nasty stuff.

Organization Depth Charts

by Seth Stohs,
Twins Daily



Organization Depth Charts

by Seth Stohs,
Twins Daily

Position: RP

Current Starters: Trevor Hildenberger, Taylor Rogers (Arb), Trevor May (Arb), Addison Reed, Gabriel Moya, Matt Magill, Oliver Drake

Backups: Tyler Duffey, Alan Busenitz, Matt Belisle (FA)

AAA: Andrew Vasquez, John Curtiss, Nick Anderson, Jake Reed, Ryan Eades, Luke Bard

AA: Austin Adams, Sam Clay, Casey Crosby, Tyler Jay, Devin Smeltzer

A: Ryan Mason, Alex Robinson, Jovani Moran, Tom Hackimer

Analysis: The Twins have some depth of major-league ready relievers, but how many have the confidence of the manager and front office? Rogers quietly had a terrific season, and May finished strong in the closer role. There are several hard throwers, guys with really strong Triple-A numbers, but most have major-league question marks.

Prospect Spotlight: Andrew Vasquez was a late-round draft pick in 2015 from a Division 3 college. He began 2018 in Ft. Myers and pitched in the Florida State League All Star game. He moved up to Double-A Chattanooga for a month. He moved up to Triple-A Rochester for a couple of weeks, and then he received a big-league call up on September 1st. Over his three minor league stops, he had 108 strikeouts in 69 1/3 innings pitched.



An Overview of Key Offseason Decisions

The 2018-19 offseason is set up to be one of the most interesting ones in years for the Twins, who have plenty of payroll flexibility with several contracts coming off the books, including Joe Mauer (\$23 million) and Ervin Santana (\$13 million).

With roughly \$70 million in payroll commitments in 2019, the front office should be able to target roster holes via free agency even with 10 players eligible for arbitration raises. Here's a look at how the offseason could go for the Twins.

Who to protect from Rule 5 Draft

After the typical roster cleaning in October, the Twins have to decide who to protect from the Rule 5 Draft by Nov. 20. The Twins have a few no-brainers such as infielders Nick Gordon and Luis Arraez, outfielder LaMonte Wade and right-handed reliever Jake Reed, while several others are worth a look such as right-hander Nick Anderson, infielder/outfielder Zander Wiel, catcher Brian Navarreto and left-hander Tyler Jay. Anderson and Jay are both close to the Majors, so they're worth protecting, while Wiel and Navarreto are both interesting decisions. With the emergence of Willians Astudillo at catcher and as a utilityman, the Twins can afford to leave Wiel and Navarreto off the 40-man.

Who to non-tender

The Twins have 10 players eligible for arbitration: infielders Miguel Sano and Ehire Adrianza, outfielders Eddie Rosario, Max Kepler, Byron Buxton and Robbie Grossman, right-handers Jake Odorizzi, Kyle Gibson, Trevor May and left-hander Taylor Rogers. Of that group, only Adrianza and Grossman are non-tender candidates but I'd tender contracts to both and let them compete for jobs in Spring Training. Adrianza has versatility and Grossman finished the year strong, so I'd give them another look. I'd also consider trading Sano this offseason, but his value is so low it doesn't make as much sense.

Feature
Article

by Rhett Bollinger,
Twins Beat Writer, MLB.com



Feature Article

by Rhett Bollinger,
Twins Beat Writer, MLB.com

Who to bring back in free agency

This shouldn't be too difficult for the Twins, who are set to lose veterans such as Mauer, Santana, first baseman Logan Morrison, catcher Chris Gimenez and reliever Matt Belisle. The Twins will pay the \$1 million buyouts for Santana and Morrison and neither is expected back.

Who to target in free agency

The big names this offseason will be outfielder Bryce Harper and shortstop/third baseman Manny Machado. Neither make much sense for the Twins, although Machado would be a much better fit than Harper. Instead, it would be smarter to find a few infielders on short-term deals and focus more on pitching, especially the bullpen.

As far as infield options, versatility is an underrated asset, so going after Astros utilityman Marwin Gonzalez would make sense with Eduardo Escobar already off the market. Gonzalez would be a strong fit, even though he's coming off a bit of a down year after a breakout '17 campaign. He has experience at seven positions – all but pitcher and catcher – and could be used all over the diamond much like a Ben Zobrist.

A first baseman/designated hitter to push Tyler Austin would also be smart for the right price, although there's not much available on the free-agent market. Nelson Cruz would bring power, but can't really play the field, so I'd target more of first baseman such as Steve Pearce or Matt Adams. Pearce is right-handed but can also play some outfield, so he'd be my top target.

Starting pitching-wise, getting one quality starter should be a priority this offseason. There is some depth in free agency with big names including Clayton Kershaw, David Price, Charlie Morton, Dallas Keuchel, Patrick Corbin, J.A. Happ and CC Sabathia. Minnesota's rotation is right-handed dominant so finding a lefty could help. Keuchel would be my No. 1 target with Happ as a potential backup plan, but even overpaying Keuchel would really help to stabilize a rotation with Kyle Gibson, Jose Berrios, Jake Odorizzi and Michael Pineda.



Feature Article

by Rhett Bollinger,
Twins Beat Writer, MLB.com

Adding relief help, however, is even more important for the Twins, including finding a veteran closer. Top available closers include Craig Kimbrel, Sergio Romo and Jeury Familia while David Robertson also has experience in the ninth. Other intriguing free-agent relievers include Adam Ottavino, Andrew Miller, Tony Sipp and Joe Kelly. Robertson could make some sense, especially with the allure of closing again, while Sipp would be a much-needed lefty who shouldn't be too expensive. Buying low on former Indians closer Cody Allen in a setup role is interesting, as would be signing Miller. Both are coming off down years but the front office knows plenty about each player. Either way, signing three quality relievers should help shore up a bullpen that should be able to count on Trevor Hildenberger, Taylor Rogers and Trevor May next year.

Keep reading for breakdowns of the players Rhett mentioned above and much more.



The Mauer contract truthers have been looking forward to this offseason, finally getting their hands on the \$23 million that was holding this franchise back from glory. That's firmly tongue-in-cheek, but the truth is perhaps a little more bizarre: the Twins now have almost three times that much to spend, and how they spend it will determine if they reach championship caliber.

This offseason provides an unprecedented opportunity. A little back-of-the-napkin figuring suggests the Twins enter the winter with a spending budget of \$60-\$70 million, even after you factor in estimated arbitration raises. This not only gives them buying power in a strong free agent class, but leverage for offseason trades. They may also need to fill four to six spots in their lineup, so let's go through the projections and you can draw your own conclusions.

LINEUP & BENCH: Estimated Cost = \$23.75 million

Starters & Bench

C	Jason Castro	\$8.0m
1B		
2B		
3B	Miguel Sano	\$3.0m
SS	Jorge Polanco	\$600k
OF	Eddie Rosario	\$4.0m
OF	Byron Buxton	\$2.0m
OF	Max Kepler	\$3.0m
DH		
4th OF	Jake Cave	\$550k
C IF		
M IF	Ehire Adrianza	\$2.0m
C	Mitch Garver	\$600k
Other		

Total: \$23.75m

Options

OF	Robbie Grossman	\$4.0m
1B	Tyler Austin	\$550k
2B	Logan Forsythe	\$3.0m
1B	Joe Mauer	\$7.0m
C/OF	Willians Astudillo	\$550k



The young core is still relatively cheap, even though many are reaching their first year of arbitration – provided you want to trust them another year. However, there are three spots left to fill which are tentatively first base, second base and designated hitter. Of course, if you want to move Miguel Sano to first base or Jorge Polanco to second base, those open up other options.

Speaking of options, there are a couple of cheap in-house options for some of the spots if you fell in love with Tyler Austin or Willians Astudillo in September. Or maybe you prefer Robbie Grossman for his steady at-bats and veteran leadership. Or maybe you can convince Joe Mauer to come back for another year...

They'll each eat up a little of the available money, but probably not as much as some of the free agent options.

ROTATION: \$33.05 million

Rotation

SP	Jose Berrios	\$600k
SP	Kyle Gibson	\$8.5m
SP		
SP	Jake Odorizzi	\$10m
SP	Michael Pineda	\$8.0m
SP	Phil Hughes	\$5.95m

Total: \$33.05m

Options

SP	Adalberto Mejia	\$550k
SP	Kohl Stewart	\$550k
SP	Stephen Gonsalves	\$550k
SP	Zack Littell	\$550k
SP	Fernando Romero	\$550k

The bad news is that the Twins will still be paying Phil Hughes a portion of the salary they owed him for 2019, but they have freed up a lot of other money. Kyle Gibson and Jake Odorizzi's salaries are estimated arbitration-induced raises, so if you would like, you can release them and add that to the pool of money, though there is little suggesting the Twins will do so.



The 2019 Payroll

by John Bonnes,
Twins Daily

Did you forget that about signing Michael Pineda last year to a two-year deal so he could rehab in 2018 and pitch for the Twins in 2019? He probably slots in as more of a #2 or #3 starter if he stays healthy.

Finally, there are plenty of in-house options, including Fernando Romero, who showed flashes of dominance as a rookie, Kohl Stewart, who had somewhat surprising success at the end of the season, and Adalberto Mejia, who was a rotation staple in 2017. So if you want to not spend money on that fifth starting pitcher, you can give some combination of those guys the fifth spot.

THE BULLPEN - \$13.3 million

Bullpen

CL	Trevor Hildenberger	\$600k
RH MR	Trevor May	\$1.5m
LH MR	Taylor Rogers	\$1.5m
RH MR	Addison Reed	\$8.5m
LH MR	Gabriel Moya	\$600k
RH MR		
Swing	Matt Magill	\$600k

Total: \$13.30m

Addison Reed is under a two-year deal, and he's pretty much the only guy making any real money in the bullpen. You can decide how many arms you would like to add to the fill out that core.

TOTAL: \$70.1 million



The Twins entered last year with a payroll of approximately \$128 million, according to Cot's Contracts. If they match that, they have \$60M to spend, and if ownership approves a moderate raise in payroll, they have \$65M to \$70M to spend.

For years, both under Terry Ryan and under Derek Falvey/Thad Levine, we've heard that payroll isn't really a limiting factor; the Pohlads are always willing to spend on players when necessary. Regardless, the Twins have tended to shop in the Walmart section of the free agent market. They still might, but this is the kind of opportunity that happens to some teams once in a decade, and to a team like the Twins, not even that often. The count is in their favor. Now they need to swing big and make contact.

The 2019 Payroll

by John Bonnes,
Twins Daily



Arbitration Decisions

by Nick Nelson,
Twins Daily

After putting in three (or almost three) seasons of MLB service, players become eligible for arbitration. During this 3-4 year period, they have limited power to negotiate their own contracts. Usually the way it goes is: player submits request, team submits offer, and the two sides meet in the middle. Sometimes the case goes before a panel (it happened with Kyle Gibson last winter, for the first time in more than a decade).

This offseason, the Twins have an especially large class of players eligible for arbitration – 10, up from five last year. You have the option to retain them for roughly the amount projected below, or part ways via non-tender. For core pieces, arbitration signals the approach of free agency, presenting a ripe opportunity for extension negotiations.

Taylor Rogers, RP

1st Year Arb

2017 Salary: \$542K | 2018 Salary: \$565K | 2019 Estimate: \$1.5 million

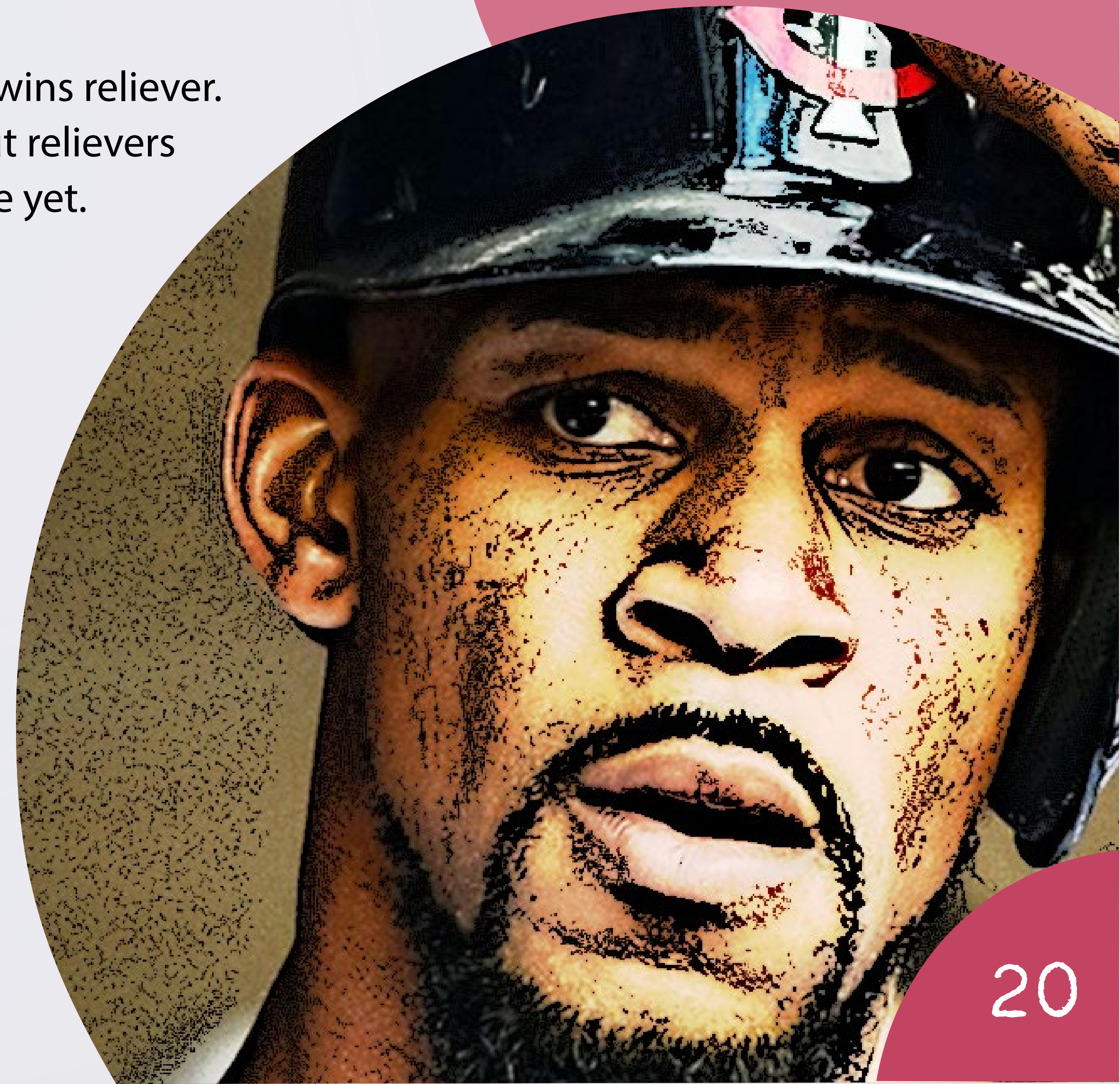
An unbelievable second half in 2018 solidified Rogers' standing as the best Twins reliever. He's been terrific pretty much since arriving in the majors three years ago. But relievers tend to get lower raises in general, so he won't be jumping to big bucks quite yet.

Byron Buxton, CF

1st Year Arb

2017 Salary: \$535K | 2018 Salary: \$580K | 2019 Estimate: \$2 million

Given that he produced poorly and finished the year on optional minor-league assignment, the Twins would be justified in giving Buxton a minimal raise in the \$1 million range. But after generating bad will by delaying his service clock in September, it might be wise to show some generosity here.



Arbitration Decisions

by Nick Nelson

Max Kepler, OF

1st Year Arb

2017 Salary: \$547K | 2018 Salary: \$587K | 2019 Estimate: \$3 million

Like Buxton and Rogers, Kepler qualifies for arbitration early as a “Super 2.” And while he’s been far more productive than Buck at the plate, he’s accrued roughly the same career WAR. Kepler has yet to prove himself as more than a middle-of-the-road right fielder, but he’s at least been healthy and consistent.

Miguel Sano, 3B

1st Year Arb

2017 Salary: \$572K | 2018 Salary: \$602K | 2019 Estimate: \$3M

He had a rough season and spent part of it in the minors. But on the merit of his full body of work (84 home runs by age 25), and in the interest of showing faith toward a potentially huge difference-maker, he’s deserving a sizable leap in Year 1 of arbitration.

Eddie Rosario, OF

1st Year Arb

2017 Salary: \$552K | 2018 Salary: \$602K | 2019 Estimate: \$4M

He cooled off after a monster first half but still put together a second straight very strong campaign. Among the four core players entering arbitration for the first time this winter, Rosario easily had the best 2018, meriting All-Star consideration. This is the prime time to explore an extension if you see him as part of the long-term picture.



Arbitration Decisions

by Nick Nelson

Trevor May, RP

2nd Year Arb

2017 Salary: \$555K | 2018 Salary: \$650K | 2019 Estimate: \$1.5M

May joined the team in late July after completing Tommy John rehab and showed sensational stuff out of the bullpen. But he only pitched for two months and is a reliever, so he may not reach \$2 million.

Ehire Adrianza, IF

2nd Year Arb

2017 Salary: \$600K | 2018 Salary: \$1M | 2019 Estimate: \$2M

The versatile backup infielder received more playing time than ever before in 2018 and held up reasonably well, handling several positions and hitting well enough. He'll still be relatively cheap and fills a fairly valuable role, but he's not irreplaceable.

Robbie Grossman, OF

2nd Year Arb

2017 Salary: \$552K | 2018 Salary: \$2M | 2019 Estimate: \$4M

A very strong second half pushed his overall numbers to a respectable level. But despite his continuing proficiency in the OBP column, Grossman remains a defensively limited corner outfielder with no power. Still not necessarily a bad deal at his projected salary, but he's a non-tender candidate to be sure.



Kyle Gibson, SP

3rd Year Arb

2017 Salary: \$2.9M | 2018 Salary: \$4.2M | 2019 Estimate: \$8.5M

Gibson and the Twins went before an arbitration panel last offseason to hash out their differences over his perceived value. This time around, it should be easier to find agreement. The righty had an indisputably excellent year, with career numbers across the board. An extension could be in play, if you see him as part of your long-term rotation plans.

Jake Odorizzi, SP

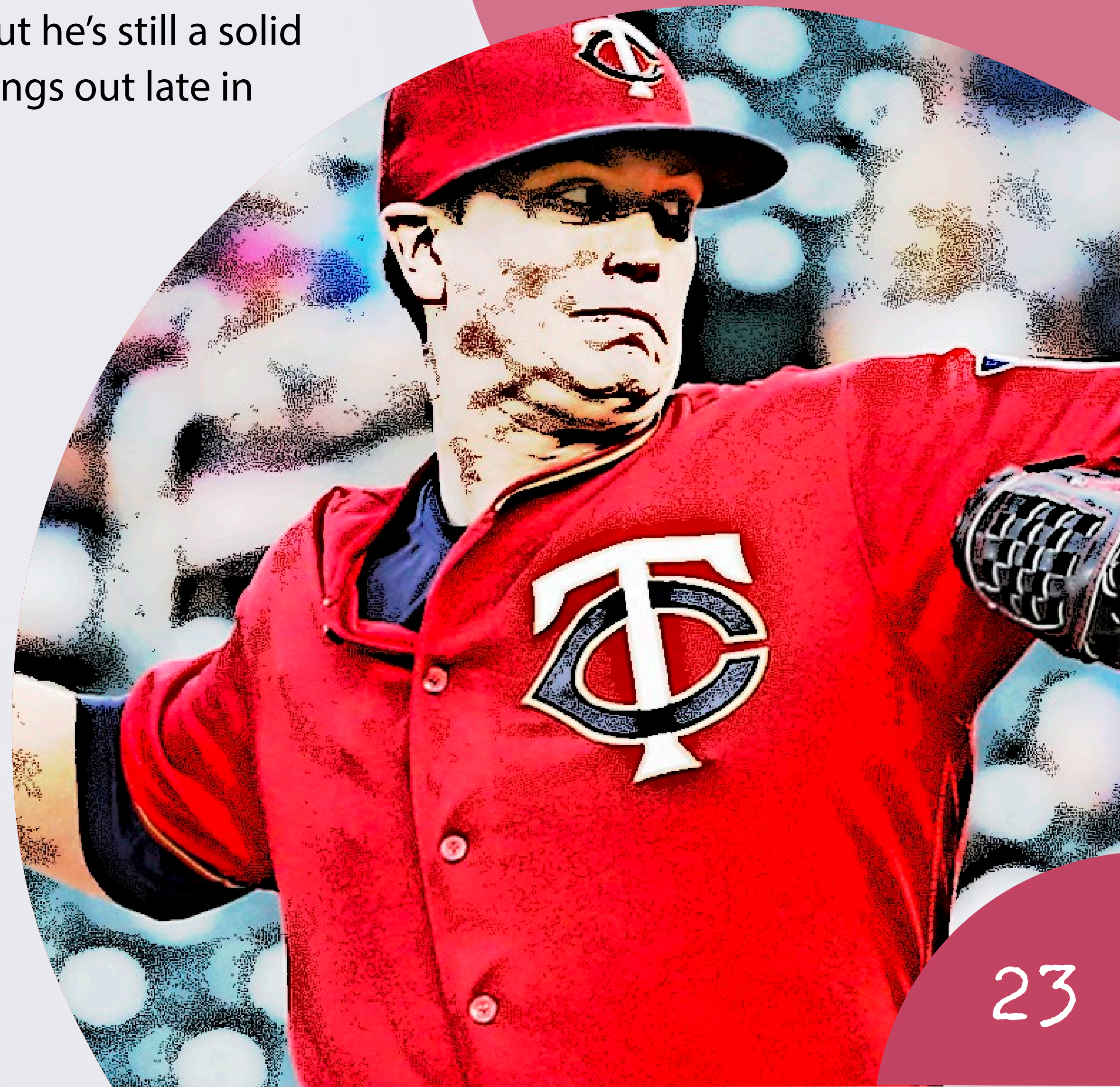
3rd Year Arb

2017 Salary: \$4.1M | 2018 Salary: \$6.3M | 2019 Estimate: \$10M

He was at his best down the stretch, making a strong case to stick around in 2019. Odorizzi can't confidently be viewed at this point as more than a back-of-rotation starter, but he's still a solid value on a one-year, \$10 million deal. The possibility that he figured some things out late in the season adds a little extra incentive to retain him.

Arbitration Decisions

by Nick Nelson



Baby Braves: Is Atlanta's Aggressive Promotion Schedule a Good Model to Follow?

Feature
Article

by Tom Froemming,
Twins Daily

The Atlanta Braves were one of the surprise teams of 2018, going from three straight losing seasons to a division title. A big part of that turnaround was thanks to aggressive promotions from their minor league system, led by Ronald Acuna Jr. Is Atlanta's model one to follow, or did they just manage to take advantage of a down year for the National League East?

Baby Braves

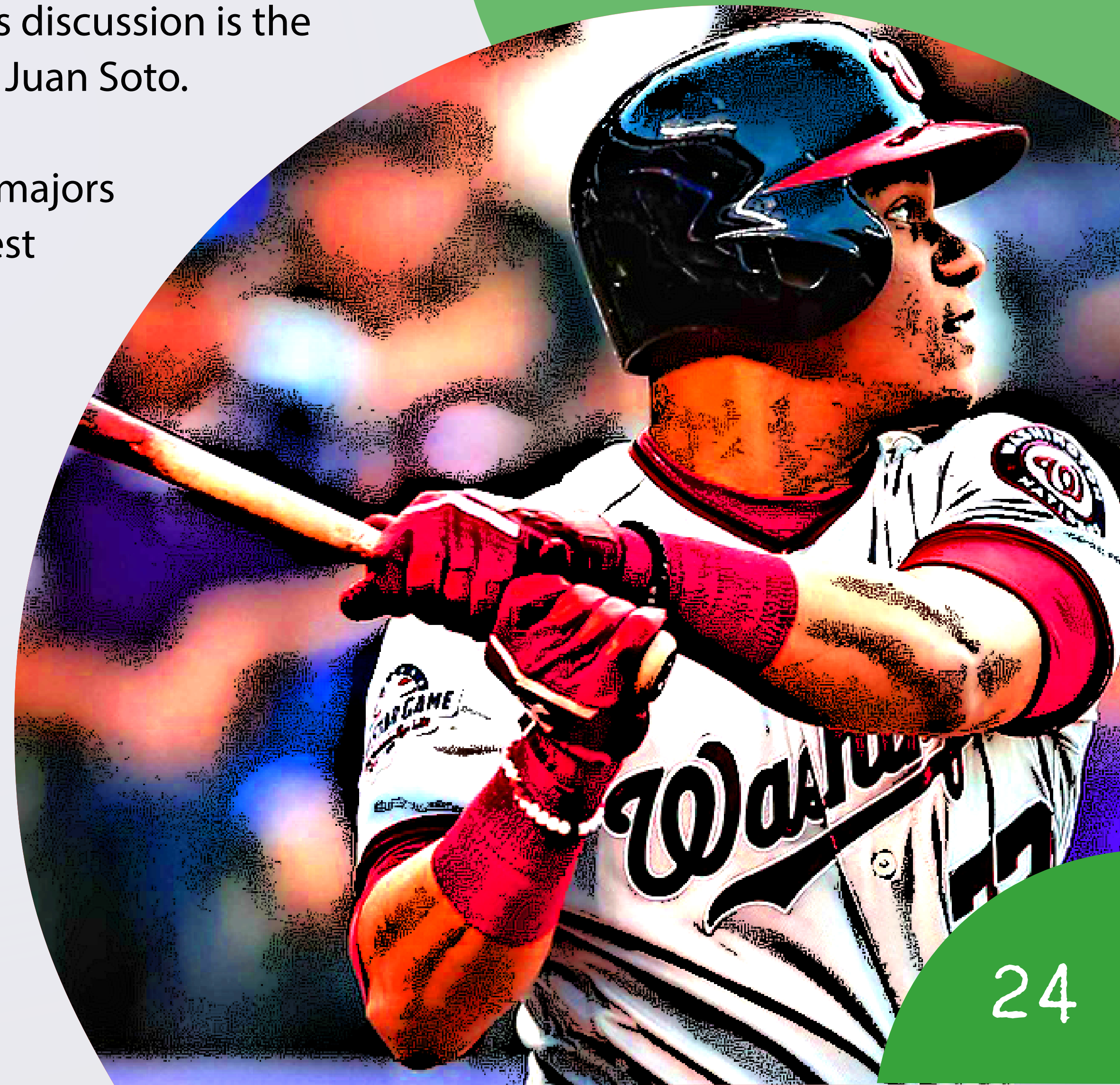
Atlanta had five of the top 10 youngest players to appear in the National League this season. They had 12 players make their Major League debut. The other five division-winning teams combined to have 17 players debut in 2018.

Acuna is the headliner, of course. Another important figure to consider in this discussion is the man who was Acuna's top contender for Rookie of the Year honors in the NL: Juan Soto.

The Washington Nationals outfielder is the youngest player to appear in the majors this season, playing the entire season at 19 years old. Prior to 2018, the highest level Soto reached was A-ball. He only got eight Double-A games under his belt, and did not make a single appearance in Triple-A prior to being called all the way up to Washington.

So it's fair to say the Braves aren't the only team taking an aggressive approach.

Back to Atlanta: many of their youngest pitchers who debuted were only up for a cup of coffee. Bryse Wilson, Kolby Allard and Mike Soroka all debuted at 20, but Soroka led that group with 25 2/3 innings pitched. Still, the other young Braves who have been big contributors only reached that point because they were aggressively pushed in prior seasons.



Feature Article

by Tom Froemming,
Twins Daily

Ozzie Albies, 21, was an All-Star second baseman this season. The Braves had him up at the end of 2017, getting him 57 games of MLB experience. This was already shortstop Dansby Swanson's third season in the majors. He's still only 24. Third baseman Johan Camargo, also 24, played 82 games last season.

Kyle Wright was selected just four picks after Royce Lewis in the 2017 Draft, and he's already arrived in Atlanta. Wright was a college guy, so it's not really fair to compare him to Lewis, but Wright making his arrival would be like if Brent Rooker had been called up to Minnesota. The Twins haven't even seen a player from their 2016 draft class debut, let alone 2017.

Going back a bit further, the Braves have had seven players reach the majors from their 2014-16 draft classes. The Twins have only had three: Andrew Vasquez (32nd round 2015), John Curtiss (sixth round 2014) and Trevor Hildenberger (22nd round 2014). Minnesota has had prep-heavy draft classes over that timeframe, but it's still a pretty striking comparison. The Braves have done a great job at injecting some youth not just into the organization, but to the major leagues.

But What About Acuna's Service Time?

Seeing so many players pushed hard and making their MLB debuts relatively early makes the Braves sound like they take some kind of a free-wheeling, "promote 'em when they're ready" strategy.

That's not who they are. They still manipulate service time just like everybody else.

Acuna, the No. 1 prospect in baseball heading into 2018, was sent to Triple-A for the first 23 games of the season in order for the Braves to gain another year of team control. And it's not like he went down and lit it up in Triple-A to earn his eventual promotion – Acuna hit .211/.297/.267 in 23 games prior to his promotion on April 25th.

But none of that changes the fact that Acuna made his MLB debut at 20 years old.



Feature Article

by Tom Froemming,
Twins Daily

The reason why Acuna was knocking at the door in the first place was because of how aggressive Atlanta was with him in 2017. Still just a teenager, Acuna opened the year at High-A, moved up to Double-A after just 28 games, and was only there for 57 games before being promoted all the way to Triple-A for the final 54 games of the season. They also sent him to the Arizona Fall League, giving him a grand total of 154 games played on the season.

The Braves may have delayed Acuna's arrival in 2018, but they did everything in their power to get him up through the system the year before.

To Be Fair, the Kids Didn't Do it Alone

A significant factor in Atlanta's success this season is the result of Washington's collapse. Had the Nats flirted with 100 victories again, none of this would have mattered much. In fact, it's likely the Braves would have held some of these young players back had they not been competing for a division title.

I still feel like this is an important team to take note of because it's not too difficult to envision the 2019 American League Central turning out just like how the 2018 NL East did. I'm guessing Cleveland will enter next year as heavy favorites in the division, but sooner or later — much like the Nationals — they're going to fall.

Another big part of Atlanta's success was also due to a renaissance season from Nick Markakis. He and Freddie Freeman were both excellent and played every day. Literally.

That veteran influence means the Braves aren't even among the top 10 youngest teams in baseball this season. Their weighted-average age of 27.4 ranked 13th, though they were the youngest team to qualify for the postseason. So while the Braves had several of the youngest players in the league, their overall roster composition in terms of weighted age is very similar to the Twins, who had a weighted-average age of 27.6.



Feature Article

by Tom Froemming,
Twins Daily

Still, Atlanta's turnaround was sparked by its farm system. The most significant move they made over the offseason was to unload Matt Kemp's salary. Their most impactful addition was Twins castoff Anibal Sanchez, who actually pitched very well for them.

So is Atlanta Really a Team to Emulate?

Seeing what the Braves were able to do in 2018 makes me take a look to the top of the Twins prospect rankings and wonder "Why can't Royce Lewis, Alex Kirilloff, Brusdar Graterol and Brent Rooker all make it to Minnesota in 2019? What are they waiting for?" The Twins could take the path of the 2018 Braves and commit to giving some prospects a shot to see what they can do in the majors.

What could go wrong? Well, just take a look at Byron Buxton and Miguel Sano.

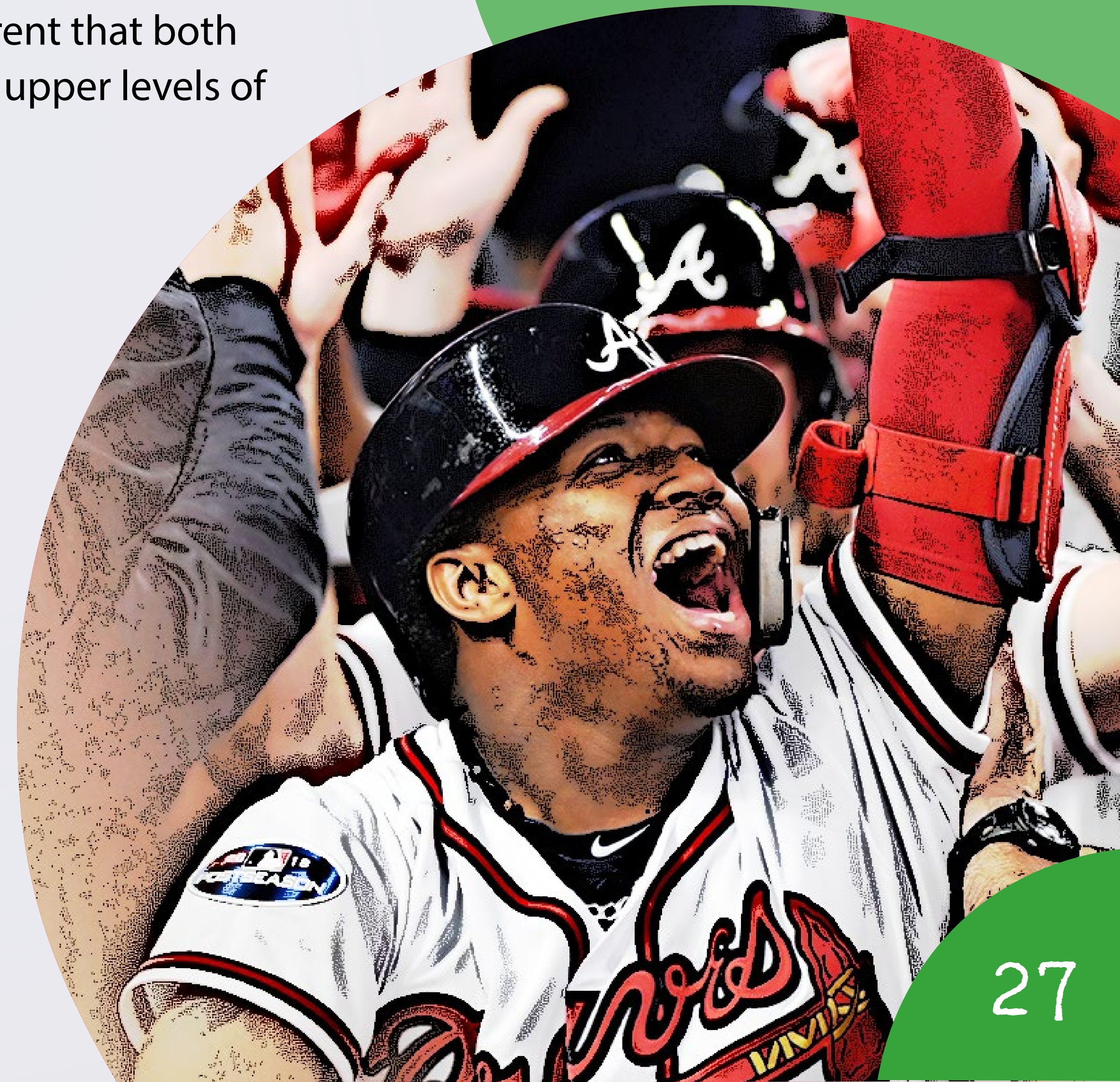
Both Buxton and Sano were promoted in 2015, earlier than they really needed to be. Both have shown the ability to star at the major-league level, but it has also been apparent that both suffered through growing pains that may have been better addressed in the upper levels of the minors.

Being aggressive can backfire.

Looking Back to Find Another Lesson

There's another takeaway from how this Braves franchise has turned things around.

Back in 2013, Atlanta won the NL East with a 96-win season. They got off to a strong start the next year, but faded down the stretch to finish below .500. Instead of trying to cling to their hopes of contending in a division that had a couple teams clearly on the rise, they did a complete makeover. Their general manager was fired and several of their star players were traded away over the offseason. The really interesting thing was the type of players they were moving.



Feature Article

by Tom Froemming,
Twins Daily

We're used to seeing a team trade away its veterans when things go south, but the Braves dealt several young stars in an effort to stockpile more talent. Between November of 2014 and December of 2015, Atlanta traded away Jason Heyward (25), Justin Upton (27), Evan Gattis (28), Craig Kimbrel (26), Alex Wood (24), Andrelton Simmons (26) and Shelby Miller (25), who was the key piece they'd acquired in the Heyward trade.

Deals on top of deals on top of deals.

The part that really muddies up the water over this five-year stretch is Atlanta also had four different general managers over that span. So no, the Braves are not a gleaming example of how to rebuild a baseball team. Instead of meticulously painting a masterpiece, they've been more like an abstract artist throwing paint upon a canvas in a flurry of action, stepping back periodically to see if there's anything of value coming out of their expression.

Building from the Ground Up

The Braves have followed the recent trend of teams bottoming out for a few years before becoming competitive again.

The Twins have bounced back-and-forth between good and bad years of late. Looking back at how this Atlanta team remodeled itself a few years ago makes me wonder, "Should the Twins trade away some of the guys like Buxton, Sano, Eddie Rosario, Max Kepler or Jose Berrios?"

In the end, the real lesson to be learned from looking at the Atlanta Braves is this: be bold. If you believe in your prospects, create opportunities for them. If you don't see a window of opportunity, be honest with yourself and set your sights a few years down the road.

Which of those scenarios applies to the Twins? That's a great question.



A cautionary tale...

Last year at this time, Yu Darvish looked like an almost ideal fit for the Minnesota Twins.

In his 2018 Offseason Handbook free agent profile, we warned that Darvish “posted the highest ERA and lowest strikeout rate of his career in 2017, so there’s some risk here,” but added that “Darvish certainly has the ability to slot as an ace.” Our blueprint suggested signing him, and the Twins did indeed end up pursuing the coveted right-hander, reportedly making a nine-digit offer.

He signed with Chicago, for a smaller sum than expected, and it looked like as though Minnesota missed out on a huge opportunity. As it turns out, they dodged a bullet.

Darvish’s first season with the Cubs was a nightmare. He logged only 40 innings amidst recurring elbow issues, and underwent surgery in September. He’s 32 and owed \$100 million over the next five years.

A large-market team with a virtually unlimited payroll can survive a blow like that. The Twins, less so. As such, even an armchair GM must understand the gravity of these investments. The underwhelming 2018 class of additions, which included Lance Lynn and Logan Morrison, served as another data point for the fickleness of free agency.

In the coming pages, you’ll find writeups on dozens of free agents who are available this offseason, categorized by areas of need for the Twins. As the Payroll section established, there’s plenty of flexibility to make a big splash or two, if you so choose. But buyer beware.

Free Agents: Overview



Free Agents: Corner Infield

To say the Twins lack clarity at the infield corners would be an understatement. Incumbent first baseman Joe Mauer is a free agent, for the first time ever. Incumbent third baseman Miguel Sano is coming off a brutal season bisected by a demotion to Single-A. The latter will be back (barring a trade) but in what capacity? Keep him at third, or move him to first (or even DH)? Up to you. And that decision will dictate planning here.



Joe Mauer, 1B

Age: 35

Previous Team: Twins

2018 Stats: .282/.351/.379, 6 HR, 48 RBI, 1.0 WAR

Mauer is coming off an underwhelming season that saw him turn in some of the worst numbers of his career. But he remains an excellent defensive first baseman and strong situational hitter with above-average OBP skills. If he returns, it'll be as a part-timer and frequent DH but with righty-swinging Tyler Austin on hand, that might fit. Mauer is contemplating retirement.

Estimated Contract: 1 year, \$7 million



Josh Donaldson, 3B

Age: 33

Previous Team: Indians

2018 Stats: .246/.352/.449, 8 HR, 23 RBI, 1.3 WAR

One year ago at this time, Josh Donaldson looked to be headed for a nine-digit deal in free agency this offseason. But much has changed in 12 months for the 2015 AL MVP. This season was a disaster for Donaldson, whose balky calf (a chronic hindrance) limited him to just 36 games and sapped his power. He produced nicely after a late-season trade to Cleveland, but hasn't been the same elite performer since 2016. Might be better suited for DH.

Estimated Contract: 1 year, \$15 million



Matt Adams, 1B

Age: 30

Previous Team: Cardinals

2018 Stats: .239/.309/.477, 21 HR, 57 RBI, 0.8 WAR

Looking for an apt platoon mate to complement the lefty-masher Austin? Adams might be your man. He's got an .815 OPS with 41 homers over the past two seasons, and is a career .279/.330/.495 hitter against righties. Can play outfield corners in a pinch.

Estimated Contract: 1 year, \$8 million

Other Options

Lucas Duda, 1B (33): A lesser version of Matt Adams. Owns a career .838 OPS vs. RHP and would be a cheap platoon-mate for Tyler Austin. *1 year, \$5 million*

Logan Morrison, 1B (31): He'll be very inexpensive and would be a good fit in his more productive state. Will hip surgery cure what ailed him in 2018? *1 year, \$2.5 million*

Steve Pearce, 1B (35): He can hit, but does his right-handed bat fit in the mix with Austin already on hand? *1 year, \$5 million*

Mike Moustakas, 3B (30): Moustakas and the Brewers have a mutual option for 2018, but if he does hit the market, he might fit at third opposite Miguel Sano. *3 years, \$42 million*

Eduardo Nunez, 3B (31): #OldFriend has lost some of his trademark speed, diminishing his appeal, but remains a spark plug with decent power. *1 year, \$6 million*

Mark Reynolds, 1B (35): Veteran slugger can still bring it with the stick. Role would likely be right-handed bench player. *1 year, \$2 million*

Free Agents: Corner Infield



Free Agents: Middle Infield

You've got options up the middle. Second base is wide open and needs to be filled, with prospect Nick Gordon not yet ready. Jorge Polanco returns after a solid second half in 2018, though his mistake-prone play at shortstop reinforced concerns around his viability at the position. So, you could add a second baseman, or sign a shortstop and slide Polanco to the other side.



Manny Machado, SS

Age: 26

Previous Team: Dodgers

2018 Stats: .302/.374/.545, 34 HR, 93 RBI, 6.2 WAR

A very lofty target, to be sure. Signing Machado would almost certainly require the largest contract in franchise history. But with scant commitments going forward, the Twins could feasibly afford to plunk down upwards of \$30 million annually on Machado as a centerpiece to build around. Is it likely? No. But not the preposterous notion it would've been in the past. Imagine that bat at the heart of this order.

Estimated Contract: 12 years, \$350 million



DJ LeMahieu, 2B

Age: 30

Previous Team: Rockies

2018 Stats: .284/.331/.455, 15 HR, 56 RBI, 2.0 WAR

He's a much more realistic option than Machado, and while not boasting nearly the same stardom, LeMahieu is a quality asset nonetheless. He's a two-time All Star and two-time Gold Glover who won the NL batting title in 2016. But like many products of Coors Field, there are questions about his offensive numbers translating elsewhere. His career OPS is 160 points lower on the road than at home.

Estimated Contract: 3 years, \$38 million



Asdrubal Cabrera, 2B/SS

Age: 33

Previous Team: Phillies

2018 Stats: .265/.315/.465, 23 HR, 75 RBI, 2.7 WAR

If the Twins seek a veteran mentor for Polanco, they could do worse than Cabrera. He's a 12-year veteran who's been to the playoffs four times. A switch-hitter, Cabrera remains very productive with the bat and is usable at short, though better suited for second. His age and quiet finish in '18 will equate to a smaller contract than those above.

Estimated Contract: 2 years, \$27 million

Other Options

Brian Dozier, 2B (31): Coming off a rough, injury-plagued season. Seems like this bridge is burned. *1 year, \$8 million*

Logan Forsythe, 2B (32): Showed some on-base skills (.356 OBP) and a good glove after coming to Twins. Would serve as a cheap stopgap but minimal upside. *1 year, \$3 million*

Jordy Mercer, SS (32): Steady 700 OPS guy who's plenty capable at short. *2 years, \$15 million*

Ian Kinsler, 2B (36): Clearly in decline, but still reasonably effective and probably available on a one-year pact. *1 year, \$10 million*

Daniel Murphy, 2B (34): Took a step back after elite production in 2016/17. Late bloomer has hit 60 HR and 105 doubles in past three years, will get paid handsomely. *2 years, \$25 million*

Freddy Galvis, SS (29): Among the youngest free agent infielders, Galvis has been an ironman with a stout glove, but has a .287 career OBP. *2 years, \$15 million*

Daniel Descalso, 2B (32): Versatile player with some patience and pop, coming off his best season. Underrated. *2 years, \$12 million*

Jed Lowrie, 2B (34): He's had a late-career awakening in Oakland, posting 800+ OPS in back-to-back seasons. First-time All Star in 2018. Switch hitter. *2 years, \$27 million*

Adeiny Hechavarria, SS (29): Good glove, weak bat. Could conceivably fit as a cheap, glove-first #9 hitter. *1 year, \$5 million*

Jose Iglesias, SS (29): A rich man's Hechavarria, more or less. Iglesias might be the best defensive SS available, but has a .678 career OPS. *2 years, \$18 million*

Free Agents: Middle Infield



The Opener: Passing Fad or the “New Normal”?

Contrary to popular belief, the Minnesota Twins did not create “The Opener” as a way to make Bert Blyleven and Jack Morris’s heads explode on the air.

No, this unconventional approach was devised for one simple reason: to get 27 outs. More specifically, it was devised to get 27 outs while avoiding all those pesky runs that can happen between recorded outs.

Statistically speaking, starting pitchers deteriorate over the course of a game. Perhaps due to familiarity or simply having their stuff wear down in the later innings, the advantage swings drastically to the hitter his third time facing a pitcher.

From 2013 to 2017, the first time facing a pitcher, hitters posted a .249/.310/.396 (.706 OPS) batting line. That means every hitter the first time through is like Oakland’s Marcus Siemen, who posted a .706 OPS in 2018. By the third time facing a pitcher, however, hitters posted a .271/.333/.443 (.776 OPS), which means now everyone is Houston’s All-Star George Springer.

Teams can combat that by swapping out the starter for a reliever, thus avoiding the dreaded third time through. After all, batters have hit .243/.317/.384 (.700 OPS) against relievers the first time facing them (hello, Cincinnati’s Tucker Barnhart).

Using the opener also has the secondary purpose of protecting the primary pitcher — the pitcher who follows the opener — from a lineup’s top of the order, where most of the best hitters reside. With an opener in place, if a team does opt to allow the primary pitcher to go through a third time, chances are they’re avoiding the top and middle parts of the order in that go round.

Feature
Article

by Parker Hageman,
Twins Daily



Feature Article

by Parker Hageman,
Twins Daily

In short, The Opener strategy: (1) limits a starter's exposure to a third time through the order, (2) protects them against facing the team's better hitters more than once, and (3) allows a manager to align a relief pitcher whose strengths better neutralize a lineup's top three hitters.

"Can't deny the logic," Twins director of player personnel Mike Radcliff says regarding the strategy. Baseball is a boat race to 27 outs and, on paper, the opener concept could yield favorable results.

While the Tampa Bay Rays were first to deploy the strategy, the Twins say they weren't copycats. In fact, the discussion dates back to last offseason in Fort Myers. And it is likely no coincidence that one key figure in this discussion used to be employed by the Rays.

Josh Kalk's reputation for maximizing pitching results looms large within the game. In the early PitchF/X era, Kalk was a renowned data wizard, dissecting arms, arsenals and strategies, then posting his findings publicly at The Hardball Times. The forward-thinking, budget-ballin' Rays scooped him up. Kalk's work has become so highly respected that reportedly 10 teams were vying for his services last winter when he left the Rays organization. The Twins were geeked when they landed him.

"He's clearly an impact guy," Falvey said of the Kalk hiring. "We had him down at our org meetings, meeting with our pitching coaches and staff. We feel like that's an area he has a certain level of expertise."

It was at those org meetings at the Fort Myers facilities — one dubbed the pitching summit — where the discussion of using a pitcher as a one-inning opener first began, according to Radcliff. At the core of the meetings, per Falvey, was answering the question: How do we get our young pitchers better.



Feature Article

by Parker Hageman,
Twins Daily

“We were wide-open to everything and anything,” Radcliff said of the organization. “We went in with the mindset that we are not afraid to try anything.”

Among contributors in the room were guys like Kalk sitting next to former players like LaTroy Hawkins and Bob McClure, new major-league pitching coach Garvin Alston, and minor-league pitching guys like Pete Maki and JP Martinez. Different eras and different viewpoints were represented.

The idea of the opener concept was floated, discussed, debated, argued and vetted. It seemed almost too simple — you protect your young pitchers by limiting their exposure as well as controlling the inning allotment. Minimize the risk and maximize the reward.

Not all of the ideas shared were unanimously embraced and the use of the opener strategy was one. In general, the difference of opinions during the summit did not faze Falvey. In reflecting on it, he viewed what transpired as healthy.

“We’re never going to agree completely,” he said. “If we do, that just means we are saying yes to one idea. If we can disagree and actually, genuinely, talk about different perspectives, we’ve got a chance to make up ground and be better.”

Ultimately the parties walked out of the room with an organizational pitching development strategy going forward, and the idea of the opener was back-pocketed.



Feature Article

by Parker Hageman,
Twins Daily

It wouldn't take long to see the strategy in action. On May 19th the Rays started closer Sergio Romo, allowing him to get the first three outs in front of their primary pitcher, Ryan Yarbrough. Tampa would use the strategy a total of 55 times in 2018.

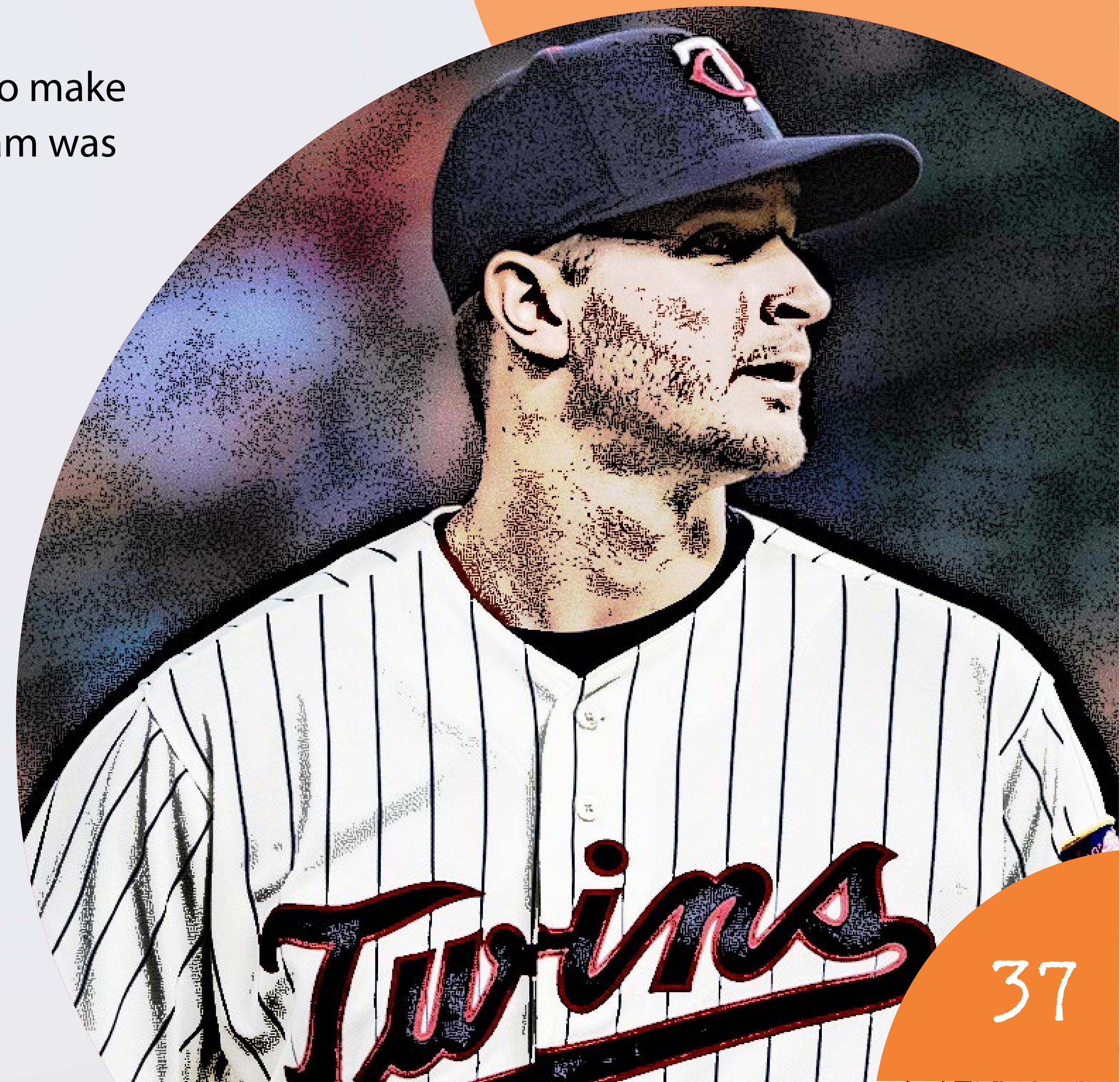
The results were decent enough for the Rays and their young pitchers — especially Yarbrough. Tampa would win 90 games and the 26-year-old rookie would finish the year 16-6, throwing over 140 innings despite making just six traditional starts. In either capacity — starting or primarying — Yarbrough faced the same hitter thrice on a given day just 83 times, one of the lowest totals of anyone who amassed 100 innings in 2018.

The Twins watched from afar as the Rays paired their young pitchers with one-inning openers. Unlike the Rays, the Twins were giving starts to veteran pitchers, such as Lance Lynn, Jake Odorizzi, Kyle Gibson, Jose Berrios and a few to Phil Hughes while waiting for Ervin Santana to heal. Injuries and ineffectiveness exposed cracks in that facade.

By June, Twins minor league director Jeremy Zoll was informed from above to make preparations for incorporating the strategy at Double-A and Triple-A. The team was planning for a scenario where some of the younger arms would be replacing veterans like Lynn, who would be traded at the deadline. There were also growing concerns that Santana may never make it back.

Zoll was tasked with providing justification to the minor league staff and players as to why the strategy would be beneficial, building a case for why they should embrace The Opener. The team wanted to work out all the kinks at the minor-league level. Zoll grabbed pitching summit alums Maki, Martinez and Kalk as well as Alex Hassan to create a data-driven presentation, which Maki would then barnstorm to Chattanooga and Rochester to deliver.

In Rochester, longtime pitching coach Stu Cliburn watched and listened as Maki made his pitch and nodded along. Cliburn had been with the organization for 27 years. He had never seen a plan like this and was



Feature Article

by Parker Hageman,
Twins Daily

impressed by the simplicity of the strategy, seeing exactly how this could help his players graduate to the next level. In mid-July, Chattanooga was the first team in the system to try it and Rochester wasn't far behind.

On July 22nd the Red Wings sent Trevor May to the mound in front of Littell against the Norfolk Tides to begin the grand experiment at the highest minor-league level. May navigated through five Tide hitters in the first and bequeathed the mound to Littell.

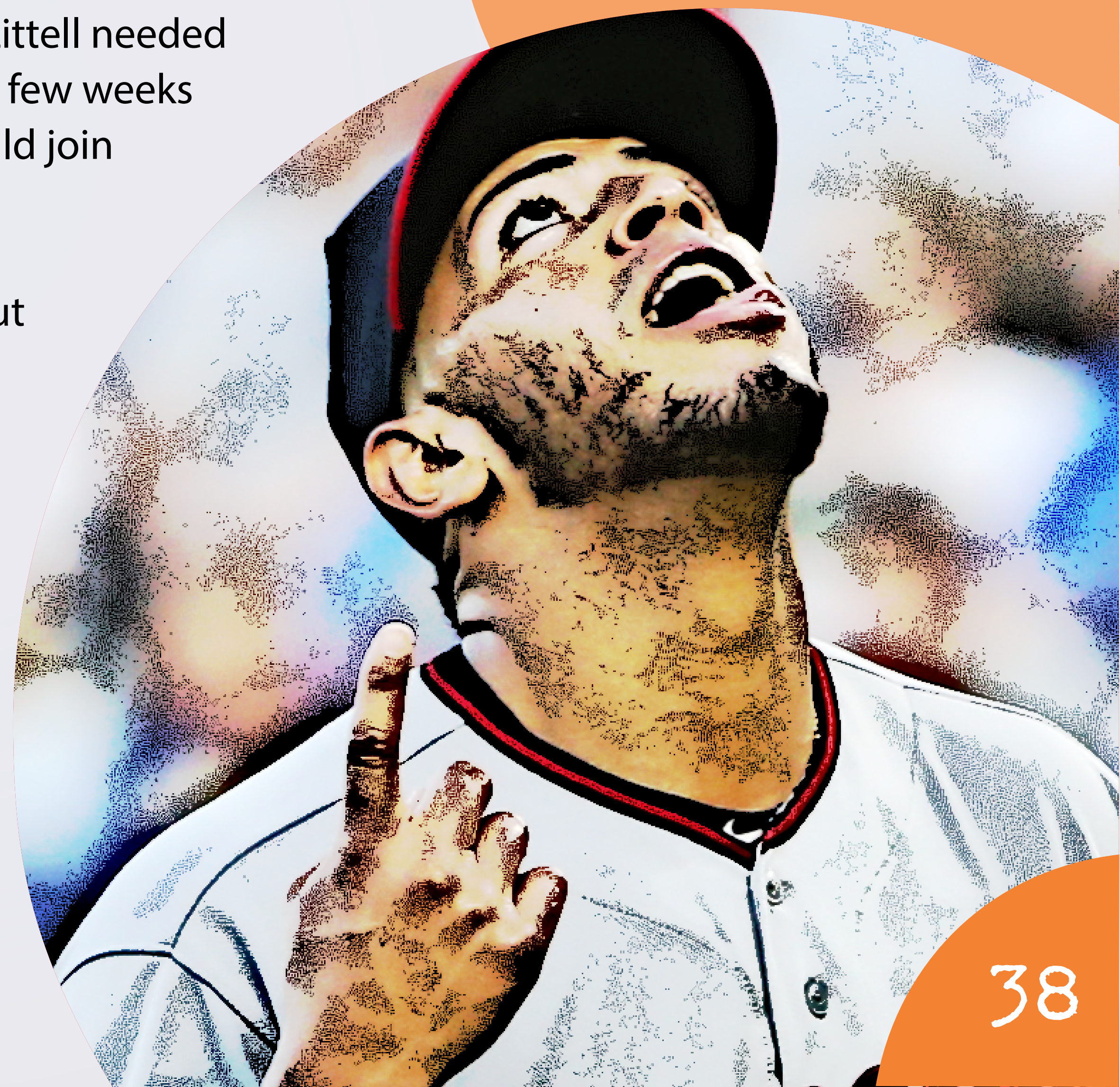
For five innings, Littell handled the lineup well, allowing just a pair of runs. In the seventh, however, the Tides lineup was about to turn over for the dreaded third time. The game log for that inning reads as such: strikeout, triple, single, fly out, home run, walk. Littell was excused from the game.

While the ultimate goal of the strategy was to avoid the meat of the order a third time, Cliburn said the development of arms would take precedence over going for a win. Littell needed to get his pitches in and needed to be exposed to quality bats. Over the next few weeks Stephen Gonsalves, Kohl Stewart, Chase De Jong and Fernando Romero would join Littell in the primary pitcher parade.

At first there were minor hiccups — like players not feeling comfortable about their new routines.

In one case, Cliburn said that one of Rochester's openers complained of feeling too full from the post-batting practice meal while pitching, something he never had to worry about as a late-innings reliever with ample time to digest.

"Routine adjustment is going to be big," Cliburn said regarding what the biggest challenge is for his players. "Sometimes routines can get disrupted for different reasons, rain and whatnot, but you just have to learn to adjust your program."



You know, like eat something sooner.

Zoll feels good about how it all unfolded. He felt that the coaches and players both saw the benefits of the practice. "At minimum, we prepared some guys to be able to perform at the major-league level and that was the goal," he said.

"Once you check your ego at the door," said Cliburn, "you realize we're trying to prepare you for the major-league level."

Introduction to the majors had been a mixed bag for pitchers in the Twins organization, as you probably know.

In August the Twins called Gonsalves and Stewart up to fill some recent vacancies in the rotation. Each made four conventional starts. The results were gross. Gonsalves allowed 19 runs on 24 hits in 12.1 innings. Stewart surrendered 12 runs on 24 hits in 16.1 innings. When the rosters expanded in September, the Twins front office decided it was time to buck convention.

On September 2nd, facing a Rangers squadron rife with left-handed hitters at the top of the order, the Twins sent lefty reliever Gabriel Moya to the mound in the first. Littell, meanwhile, would make Twins history as the team's first primary pitcher.

The game... did not go well. For five innings, Moya's two-run homer allowed and Littell's lone unearned run kept the offense in the game. In the sixth, however, all hell broke loose. Just like his first primary outing in Rochester, Littell was asked to get outs against hitters he faced for a third time. The game log for that inning begins: double, home run. Littell was excused.

Feature Article

by Parker Hageman,
Twins Daily



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by Parker Hageman,
Twins Daily

By the end of the sixth, the Rangers had 12 runs and the Twins had burned through four pitchers. And by the eighth, Minnesota had become presumably the first team in history to use an opener and a position player (Chris Gimenez) in the same game.

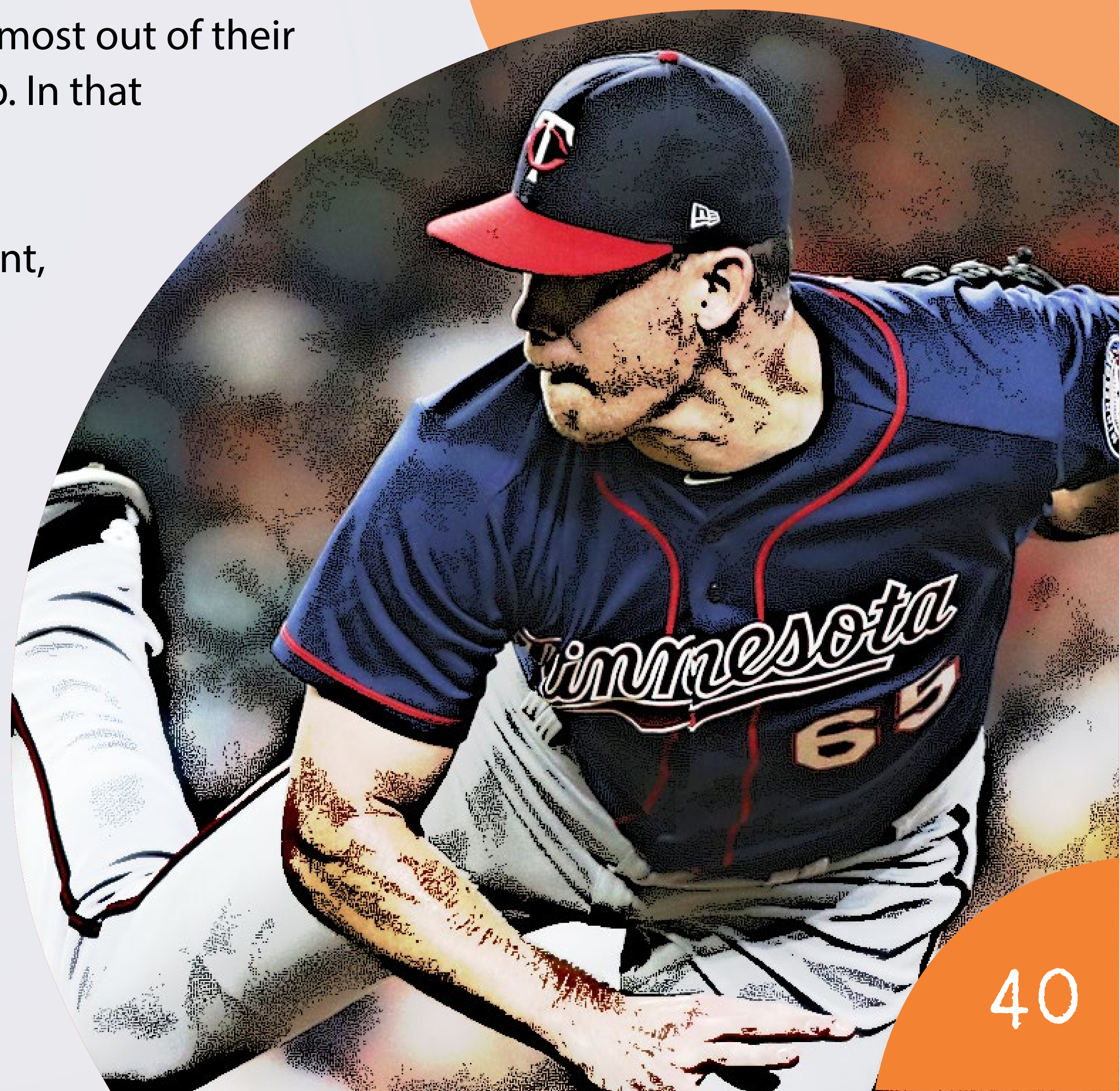
The outcomes improved in later attempts. Whereas Gonsalves and Stewart were battered as conventional starters, they thrived when being set-up by an opener. In four primary outings, Gonsalves worked another 12.1 innings and held opponents to three runs on four hits — a tidy .098 batting average allowed. Stewart added another 20.1 innings with only four runs allowed on 10 hits. In August the pair faced hitters a third time in a game 21 times in seven games. Opponents were 9-for-19 with three doubles (.473). In September, they faced a combined 10 hitters a third time (with Stewart squaring off against nine) and limited them to one hit. By shielding Gonsalves and Stewart from the better bats, the Twins saw, unequivocally, better results.

The opener strategy was clearly designed for the Twins (and Rays) to get the most out of their younger arms, protecting them from the big bad bats at the top of the lineup. In that regard, it worked. But what about the more veteran arms like Odorizzi?

If you were attempting to draw the perfect candidate for the opener treatment, the end result would be Jake Odorizzi. After all, among all qualified starting pitchers, Odorizzi had the highest OPS allowed (1.135) when facing a hitter the third time in a game — a stark contrast to his .648 OPS allowed in the first two meetings. Providing him with some cover would help both him and the team.

While that sound like a simple solution, Radcliff says there are definitely egos involved, both on the side of the player and the agent.

“Hold on a sec, I’m a starter,” Radcliff said, illustrating an altogether reasonable stance. “I’m going to get paid as a starter.”



Feature Article

by Parker Hageman,
Twins Daily

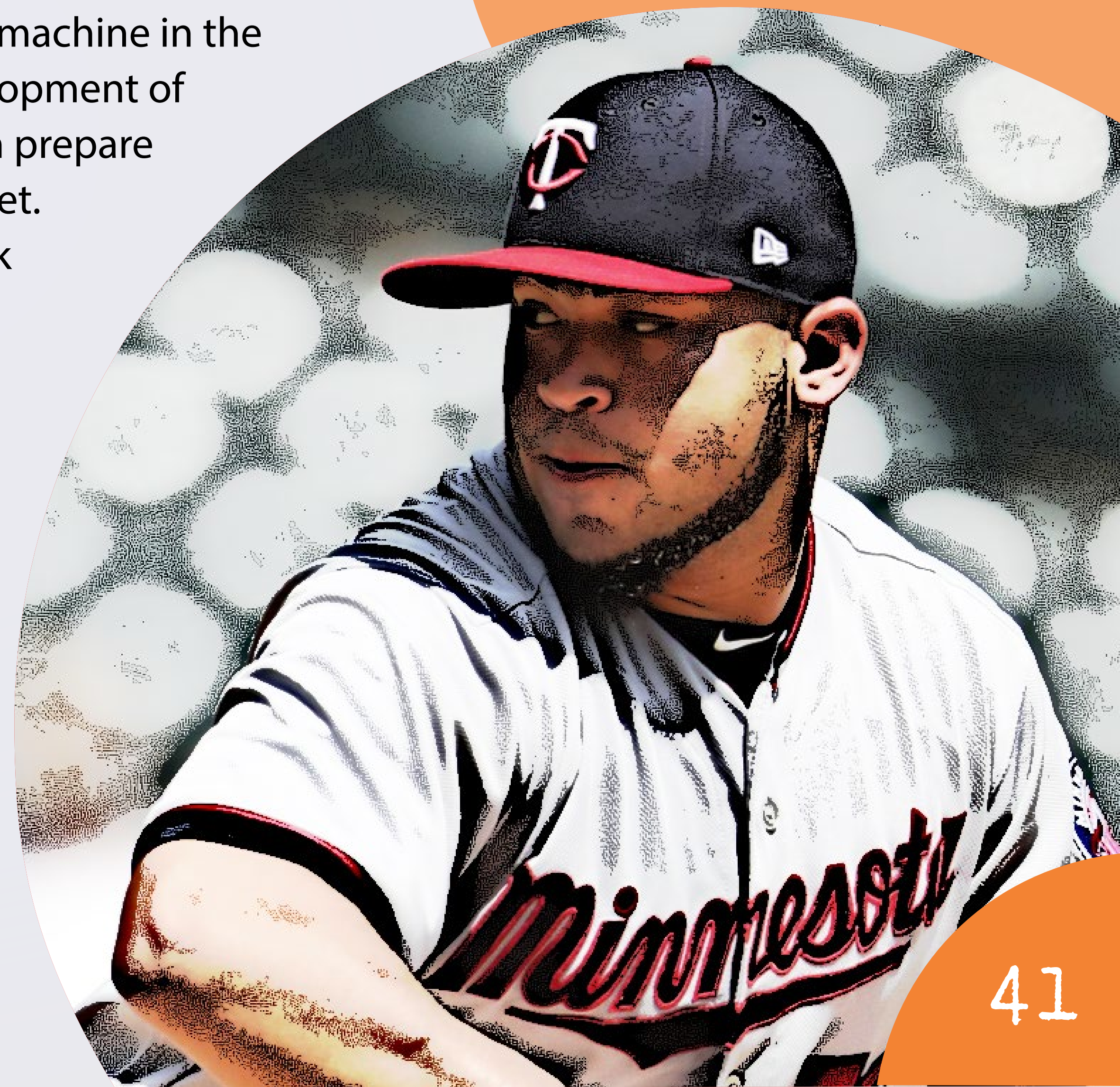
Odorizzi is due for his last turn at arbitration, and this system often doesn't know how to handle cases that involve unfamiliar innovations, like primary starters and openers. To the veteran players and their agents involved, suddenly it is a huge concern.

So where does the use of the opener go from here?

The Twins deployed the opener strategy a total of eight times in 2018, a distant third behind the Rays who used it 55 times and right behind the Oakland A's who sent an opener to the mound nine times during the regular season (and, regrettably, one more time in an elimination Wild Card game versus the Yankees). Radcliff pointed out that of the 10 teams to use the opener in 2018, the majority (7) were teams with winning records.

Rochester's pitching coach Cliburn believes the era of the "200-to-300 inning pitcher is over." He says it a little begrudgingly, as a baseball lifer is wont to do when the game pivots. Cliburn isn't someone stuck in the old ways. He raved about the addition of the Rapsodo machine in the Red Wings bullpen and believes this new tech is a valuable tool for the development of arms. He acknowledges the usefulness of the opener strategy and how it can prepare guys to make the step to the next level while supported by a bit of a safety net. He says he'll continue to make adjustments and still emphasize how to attack individual matchups without wasting bullets, regardless of what their overall role in a game is.

As for Zoll and his minor-league pitchers, he says he has not been given orders for handling the coming season, but that the organization will review the results and prepare another plan for 2019. The work he and his colleagues prepared has given them a good reason to continue to pursue the approach going forward.



From the player personnel side, Radcliff says he does not believe the strategy has fully ingrained itself in the game.

“I don’t think it has gotten to the new normal,” Radcliff said, “but it’s gaining steam.”

Radcliff envisions the strategy impacting the game in other ways as well — such as the case with arbitration or potentially influencing what types of pitchers teams target in the draft.

“Is it the new normal?” Radcliff asks himself. “No, but we are definitely heading that way.”

NOTE: All stats provided by ESPN/TruMedia

Feature Article

by Parker Hageman,
Twins Daily



Free Agents: Starting Pitchers

With Jose Berrios, Kyle Gibson, Jake Odorizzi and Michael Pineda all penciled in, the task here is fairly straightforward: fill that last rotation spot. One option would be to forego another addition and let the youngsters (Fernando Romero, Stephen Gonsalves, Kohl Stewart, etc.) duke it out. But reserving depth might be wise, especially given Pineda's checkered health history.



Patrick Corbin, LHP

Age: 29

Previous Team: Diamondbacks

2018 Stats: 3.15 ERA, 1.05 WHIP, 11.1 K/9, 2.2 BB/9 in 200.0 IP

Corbin is hitting free agency at the perfect time. He's got the rare combination of being under 30 and coming off a career year. You almost never see that guy reaching the open market. Arizona will definitely make a qualifying offer, but as the top available SP, that shouldn't matter much. He may not have the same name recognition as some of his counterparts, but there's a good argument Corbin is among the five best left-handed pitchers in baseball.

Estimated Contract: 5 years, \$120 million



Charlie Morton, RHP

Age: 35

Previous Team: Astros

2018 Stats: 3.13 ERA, 1.16 WHIP, 10.8 K/9, 3.3 BB/9 in 167.0 IP

What a find Morton was for the Houston Astros. After posting a 4.54 ERA over his first nine seasons, the righty blossomed, combining for a 3.36 ERA in two seasons with Houston. He had a career year in 2018 and became an All-Star for the first time. Sounds like a guy who should be excited to hit the open market, right? Well, Morton is actually considering retirement. If he rejects a QO and hits the open market, it sounds like a big motivational factor will be to play somewhere near his wife's family in Delaware. All that solidifies the Twins as clear outsiders in this pursuit, but things can change quickly.

Estimated Contract: 3 years, \$50 million



Dallas Keuchel, LHP

Age: 31

Previous Team: Astros

2018 Stats: 3.74 ERA, 1.31 WHIP, 6.7 K/9, 2.6 BB/9 in 203.2 IP

Keuchel went from Cy Young Award winner in 2015 to posting a 4.55 ERA in 2016. He followed with a 2.90 ERA in 2017, but jumped back up to 3.74 in 2018, allowing more hits than any other player in baseball in the process. On the plus side, that means he was both healthy and good enough to throw a lot of innings. Still, teams have to be wondering if he's due for another backslide in 2019 after the heavy innings total.

Estimated Contract: 5 years, \$100 million

Other Options

Trevor Cahill, RHP (31): He may not be a name that jumps off the page, but his 3.54 FIP ranked 14th among AL pitchers who threw at least 100 innings last year, topping both Charlie Morton and Dallas Keuchel in that category. *2 years, \$16 million*

Nathan Eovaldi, RHP (29): Missed all of 2017, but returned with what was arguably his finest season. One of only six AL pitchers to post a K:BB ratio of 5.0 or higher in 100+ IP. *4 years, \$58 million*

Gio Gonzalez, LHP (33): Want durability? This is your guy. He's made at least 27 starts in nine straight seasons. Gio was having his worst year with the Nationals, but turned things around after an August trade to Milwaukee. *2 years, \$21 million*

J.A. Happ, LHP (36): Among the older free agent starting pitchers, but his 3.44 ERA and 1.20 WHIP over the past three seasons in the AL East will certainly turn heads. Happ was dealt from Toronto to the Yankees in July and pitched very well down the stretch. *2 years, \$28 million*

Matt Harvey, RHP (30): Once among the best young pitchers in baseball, Harvey bottomed out with the Mets and was DFA'd. He was eventually traded to the Reds and managed to get himself back pointed in the right direction. A one-year pillow contract could make sense. *1 year, \$10 million*

Jeremy Hellickson, RHP (32): After appearing to have a breakout in 2016, he plummeted in 2017 before recovering with a solid performance with the Nationals this season. That inconsistency combined with the fact his innings have dropped from 189 to 164 to 91 over the past three seasons means there are plenty of question marks. *1 year, \$8 million*

Free Agents: Starting Pitchers



Free Agents: Starting Pitchers

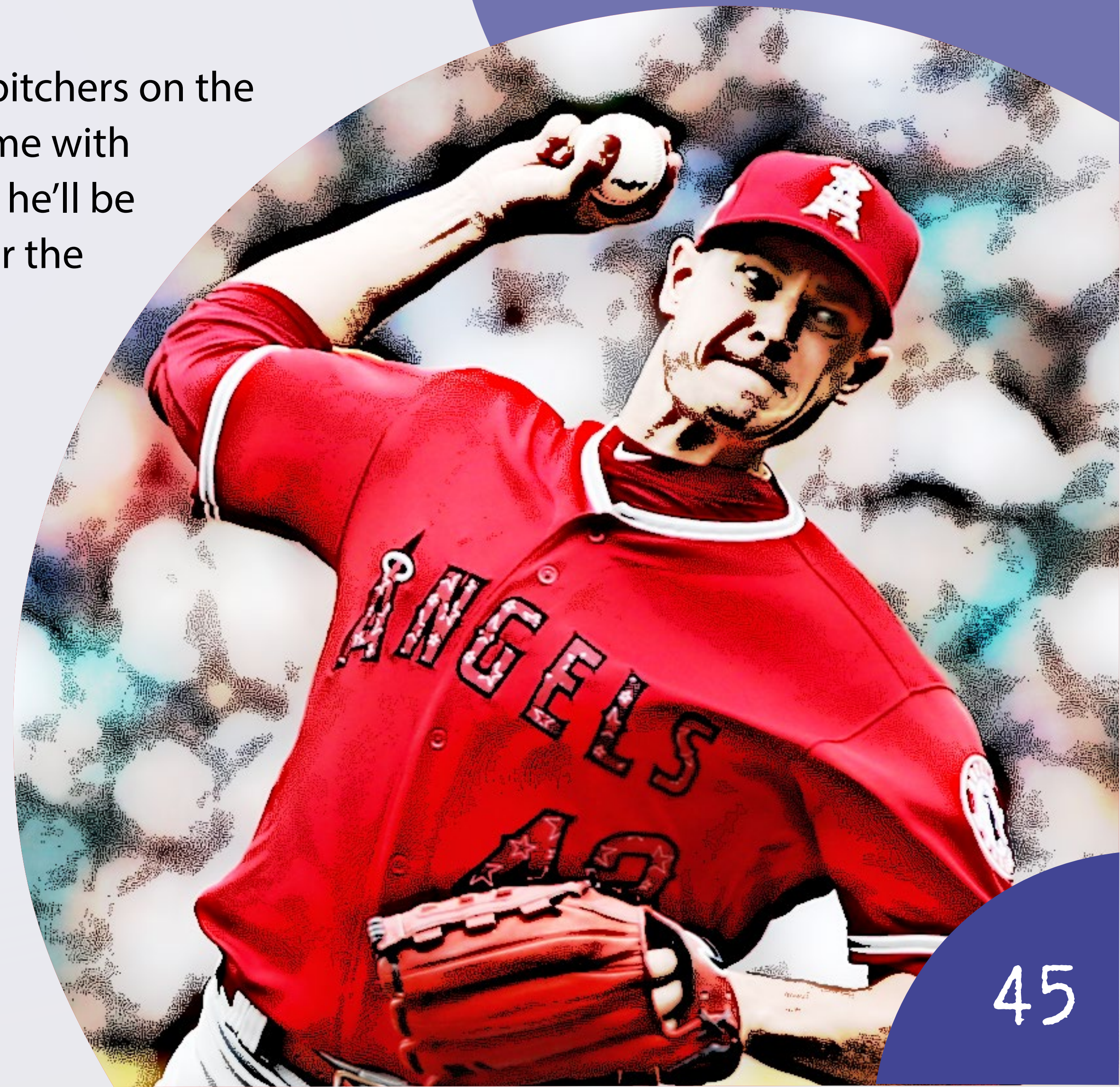
Derek Holland, LHP (32): Holland had a great comeback year thanks in large part to a career-high 8.9 K/9. The Giants shifted him to the bullpen for five appearances in July and Holland looked like a new pitcher when he returned to the rotation later that month, pitching to a 2.83 ERA and 1.26 WHIP after the break. *2 years, \$15 million*

Clayton Kershaw, LHP (31): Kershaw would clearly be the top pitcher on the market, but even if he opts out of the remaining two years and \$65 million on his current deal, it seems highly unlikely he'd be leaving LA. The Dodgers will have the opportunity to negotiate an extension between now and the deadline on that opt out if they see fit. *7 years, \$220 million*

Lance Lynn, RHP (32): It seemed apparent that Lynn never wanted to be with the Twins and carried over some resentment that he wasn't able to land a better deal last offseason. He had impressive peripherals after being dealt to the Yankees in July, but it would be surprising if a Minnesota reunion was on the table. *2 years, \$16 million*

Garrett Richards, RHP (31): The Twins showed they're not averse to signing pitchers on the mend last offseason when they added Michael Pineda. Could they do the same with Richards? He had Tommy John surgery in July, meaning there's no guarantee he'll be able to pitch at all in 2019. Richards also combined to make just 28 starts over the past three seasons, so he's a risky bet. *2 years, \$10 million*

Hyun-Jin Ryu, LHP (32): Barely managed to throw 200 innings combined over the past four seasons with the Dodgers. Still, this is a pitcher with a 3.20 ERA and 3.59 K:BB ratio over his career. When looking around at his left-handed counterparts on the market, maybe that lack of wear and tear isn't such a bad thing? *2 years, \$30 million*



Free Agents: Starting Pitchers

Anibal Sanchez, RHP (35): Had a 6.09 ERA the two seasons prior to 2018, but looked like a new man with Atlanta this season, shaving more than half of his ERA (2.83). The Twins brought him into spring training last year before ultimately going another direction, so it seems likely they'll have some level of interest. *1 year, \$10 million*

Ervin Santana, RHP (36): A known commodity who has been credited for his leadership skills, Ervin will certainly be on the Twins' radar, but at this point he's more of a reclamation project than a leader of a rotation. *1 year, \$5 million plus incentives*

James Shields, RHP (37): Bounced back in 2018 after a couple very rough years. He posted his lowest ERA (4.53) since 2015 and his lowest WHIP since 2014 (1.31) while reaching the 200-inning mark for the 10th time in his career. *1 year, \$5 million*



Ninth Wonder: The Search for a Closer

High velocity is a tremendous weapon, and a knee-locking changeup can win a lot of games. But Eddie Guardado, who knows something about relief pitching, believes the best closers possess an attribute that is more important than anything that can be measured by StatCast.

“If you’re the closer, you’ve got to have [guts],” Guardado said, though he used more vivid language to make his point. “You can’t be afraid to throw your pitches, no matter the situation. It’s hard for some guys to learn that, because it really comes from inside you.”

Guardado should know. In five seasons as a Twins’ closer, he never threw a pitch in the mid-90s, and never had a breaking ball that made a batter flinch. But by changing speeds, moving locations and directions, and especially throwing strikes no matter what, he saved 152 games for a team that won three division titles, including an AL-leading 45 in 2002. Guardado, the Twins’ bullpen coach since 2015, says he frequently sees closers who don’t have the, um, physical attribute necessary for the job.

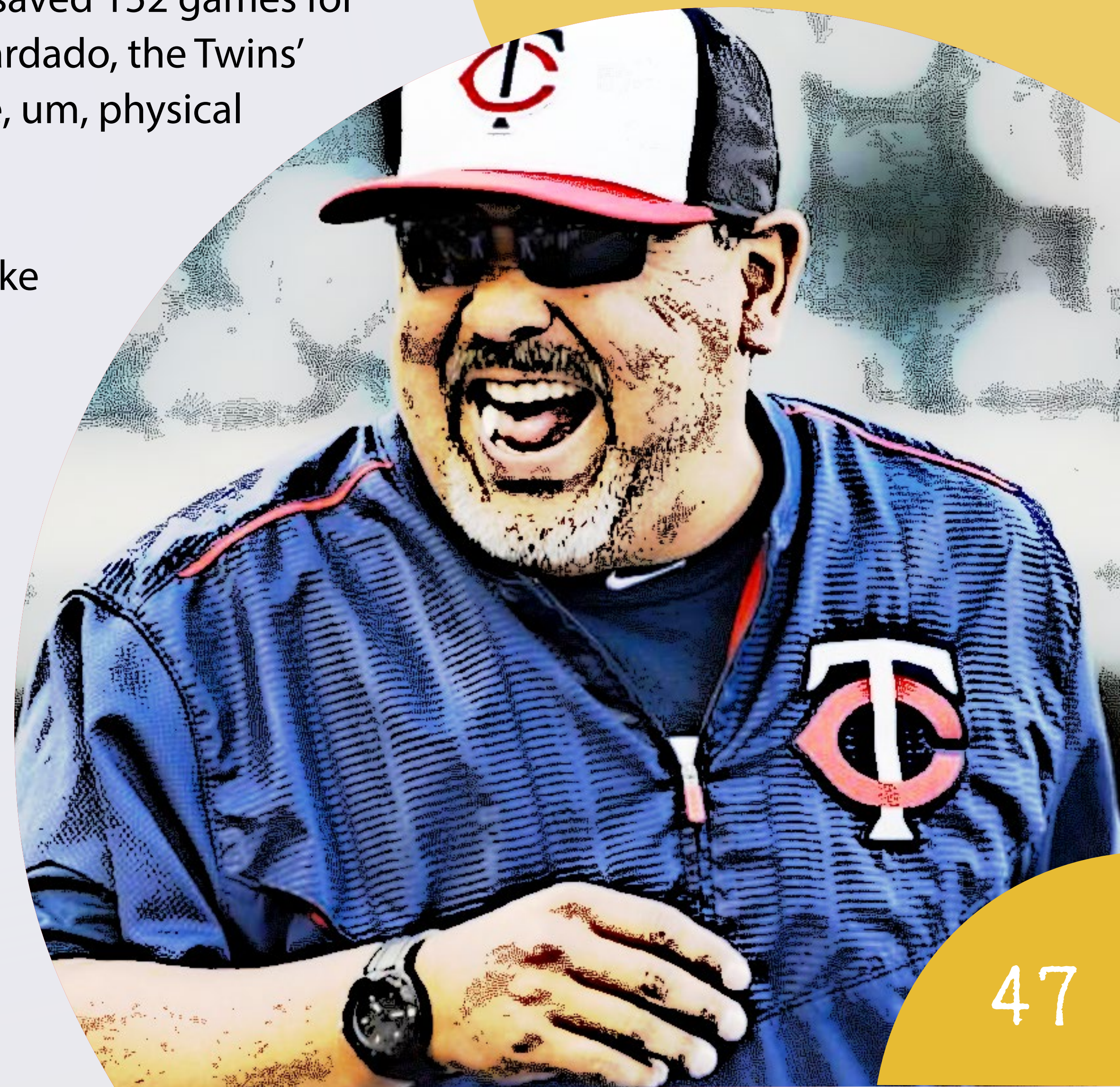
“You ever see a pitcher put guys on base in the ninth [inning], and he looks like he has no idea what to throw next? That’s how you know he’s not a closer,” Guardado scoffed. “A closer tells himself, ‘you got lucky.’ Even if he loses.”

But if it sounds like Guardado recognizes few pitchers with the cojones to preserve wins, the opposite is actually true. Too many teams limit their search for closers to pitchers who do little but throw 96-mph fastballs, the Twins Hall of Famer said. But Minnesota’s recent history illustrates that capable closers — like Everyday Eddie — sometimes come in far different packaging.

“Look at Brandon Kintzler — he was a guy who had a really good sinker, and a couple of so-so pitches. Nobody ever gave him a chance to close. He didn’t even make our team out of spring training” in 2016, Guardado

Feature
Article

by Phil Miller,
Twins Beat Writer,
Star Tribune



Feature Article

by Phil Miller,
Twins Beat Writer,
Star Tribune

said. “But when we needed someone to close games that year, he learned the mentality — slow it down, take your time, trust your stuff. He picked it right up because he wasn’t afraid,” and even made the AL All-Star team in 2017.

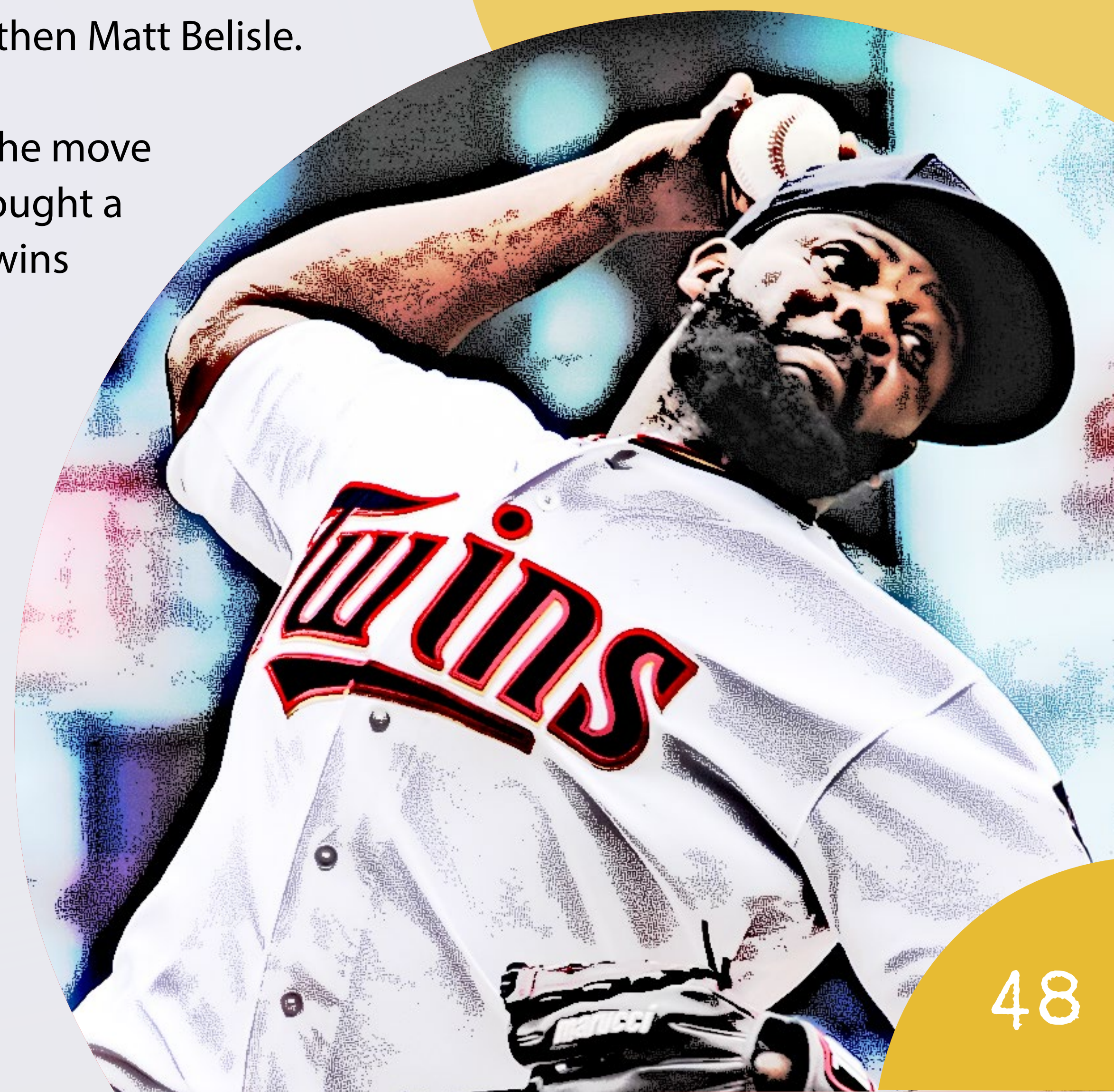
Kintzler is the best example of the Twins’ recent history of revolving closers. While some teams spend millions on established save leaders — Aroldis Chapman got \$86 million over five seasons from the Yankees, Wade Davis was guaranteed \$51 million by the Rockies, and Craig Kimbrel, finishing up a \$42 million contract with the Red Sox, figures to get even more this offseason — the Twins have mostly filled the job by training non-closers to do it.

That’s a history that goes back to Joe Nathan, the best closer in Twins’ history, who was a marginally successful starter and middle reliever for the Giants until being traded to Minnesota. After elbow surgery ended Nathan’s career, the Twins turned to another former starter, Glen Perkins, and watched him become an All-Star, too. An injury also eventually derailed Perkins’ career, and the Twins appointed Kevin Jepsen their closer, then Kintzler, and then Matt Belisle.

Minnesota signed 41-year-old Fernando Rodney for the job last winter, and the move was a success: Rodney, despite some early hiccups, saved 25 games, then brought a former third-round pitching prospect, Dakota Chalmers, in trade when the Twins stripped the team of assets at the deadline.

That’s five closers in four seasons for the Twins — and another one needed for 2019. The Twins will have a new manager, and perhaps a new philosophy about pitching the ninth inning.

“The way the game is evolving, the changes are speeding up. The possibilities for how pitchers are deployed, and how many, and for how long, all those are unknowns to a greater extent than ever,” the Twins’ former manager, Paul Molitor, said in September. “The ninth inning, you might not see that be the purview of just one pitcher as it is [with] most rosters today. But the importance of the ninth inning, to my mind, that’s



always going to be a little greater than the innings before it, just because of the effect [a blown save] can have.”

The Twins figure to be busy on the free agent market for relievers, but not necessarily established closers, who tend to be older and more expensive. Besides, they also have a handful of in-house candidates for the closer’s job in 2019.

Sidearmer Trevor Hildenberger saved seven games in 11 chances after Rodney was dealt, lefty Taylor Rogers didn’t allow a run over the season’s final two months, Addison Reed owns 125 career saves, though he pitched in only 14 games after the All-Star break due to a triceps injury. Rochester closer John Curtiss got a look in September, and minor-leaguer Jake Reed has always been considered a prospective closer if he could stay healthy.

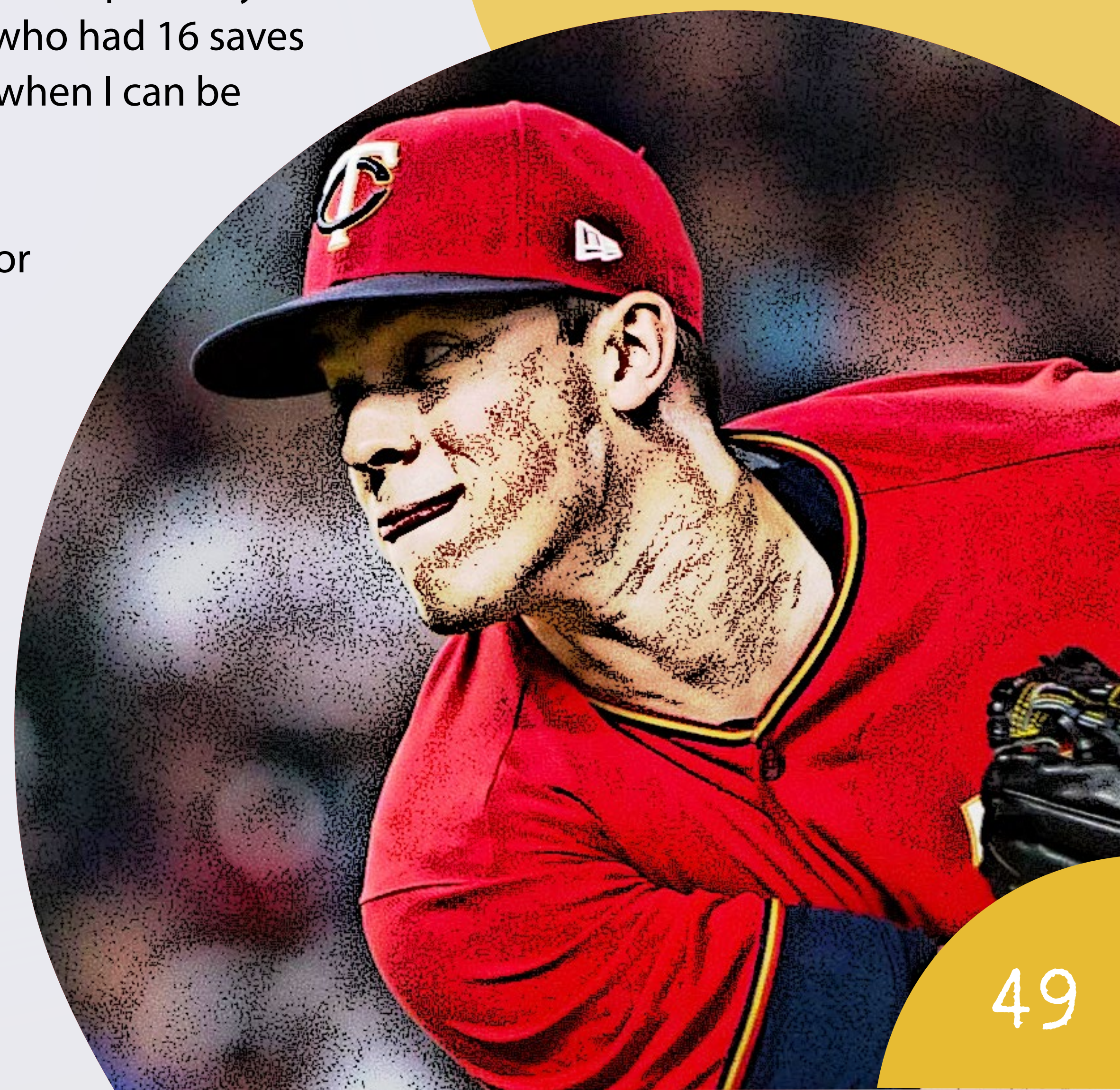
Hildenberger would like to retain the job, he said, but he understands that the bullpen may evolve another way. “I’m leaving that up to the manager,” said Hildenberger, who had 16 saves at Double-A in 2016. “The important thing is winning games. I want to pitch when I can be of the most help in doing that.”

The Twins’ most intriguing candidate may be another converted starter: Trevor May, who returned from Tommy John surgery on July 31 and kept improving over the final two months. By the finish, he was throwing 96 mph again, and had pulled his average for a four-seamer back up to 94.4 mph, or just slightly off his pre-surgery velocity.

May was restricted, recording six outs only twice, but 19 of his 24 appearances were scoreless. In the season’s final week, after Hildenberger endured a streak of five straight games being scored upon, Molitor gave May three save opportunities, and he converted each of them without allowing a hit.

Feature Article

by Phil Miller,
Twins Beat Writer,
Star Tribune



Does a ninth-inning role interest the 29-year-old right-hander?

"I've thought about it quite a bit, actually. If you throw in the back end of the bullpen, most guys who are setup guys or [earning] holds, they want to close eventually," said May, who still started five minor-league games this season. "If I'm going to be in the bullpen, the goal is to be throwing at the end of games. It's a satisfying feeling. I think I thrive off it. Baseball is meant to be fun, and this is fun for me."

Feature Article

by Phil Miller,
Twins Beat Writer,
Star Tribune



Free Agents: Relief Pitchers

Last winter, Minnesota made Addison Reed the largest free agent reliever acquisition in franchise history, fancying him a bullpen ace. Naturally, he went on to have a career-worst season, flashing a severely diminished fastball. If you're not too gunshy from the experience, there are definitely some intriguing options out there this year, and the unit could use the help since Reed can't be trusted as a high-leverage piece. Closer is technically vacant, though Trevor May looked capable.



Craig Kimbrel, RHP

Age: 31

Previous Team: Red Sox

2018 Stats: 2.74 ERA, 1.00 WHIP, 13.9 K/9, 4.5 BB/9 in 62.1 IP

With 333 saves, Kimbrel leads all active players and ranks 14th all-time. Another 30-save season in 2019 would put him inside the top 10. The only thing missing from his resume his postseason success. The only shot Kimbrel has of improving his legacy, to be mentioned among the likes of Mariano Rivera, would be to rack up the rings. It's difficult to imagine there's any mutual interest between Kimbrel and the Twins, but you never know.

Estimated Contract: 5 years, \$80 million



Jeurys Familia, RHP

Age: 29

Previous Team: A's

2018 Stats: 3.13 ERA, 1.22 WHIP, 10.4 K/9, 3.5 BB/9 in 72.0 IP

He averaged just under 77 appearances for the three seasons leading up to a poor 2017 that saw him accrue just 24 2/3 innings pitched. He bounced back nicely this season, performing well enough as Mets closer to warrant a July trade to Oakland. Familia registered a career-high 10.4 K/9 and boasts a career ground ball rate north of 55 percent. His walk rate over the past three seasons is a big red flag, however, and any team that signs him will surely have to answer questions regarding the 15-game domestic violence suspension he served in 2017.

Estimated Contract: 3 years, \$39 million



Kelvin Herrera, RHP

Age: 29

Previous Team: Nationals

2018 Stats: 2.44 ERA, 1.20 WHIP, 7.7 K/9, 2.0 BB/9 in 44.1 IP

Herrera may actually be a value, given that he's hitting FA at an inconvenient time. He struggled after a mid-June trade to the Nationals, posting a 4.34 ERA and 1.71 WHIP, though it was only a sample of 18 2/3 IP. Then his season ended early due to a torn ligament in his foot. He also spent time on the DL this season due to shoulder issues. If all goes well, Herrera is expected to be ready for spring. He was excellent during his tenure with the Royals.

Estimated Contract: 3 years, \$25 million

Other Options

Cody Allen, RHP (30): Took a nosedive from being among the best relievers in baseball (2.59 ERA from 2013-17) to being utterly unreliable in 2018. Still, the track record is enough to draw plenty of interest. *2 years, \$17 million*

Jerry Blevins, LHP (35): Has spent the last three seasons as a sturdy left-handed specialist for the Mets. In 2018, 37 of his 64 appearances lasted less than an inning. He's held same-sided hitters to a .216/.270/.316 (.586) batting line over his career. *1 year, \$6 million*

Brad Brach, RHP (33): Had established himself as a top-shelf setup man with Baltimore, becoming an All-Star in 2016, but this year got off to a rough start. Struggled through 42 games for the O's, but things turned around after a trade to Atlanta where he posted a 1.52 mark in 27 games. *1 year, \$6.5 million*

Zach Britton, LHP (31): Former Baltimore closer transitioned over to setup role after a midseason trade to Yankees. He's seen his K/9 rate drop from 10.4 between 2015 and '16 down to 7.3 over the past two seasons. *2 years, \$14 million*

Jesse Chavez, RHP (35): A rare bird in this era of baseball, Chavez spent the entire season in the bullpen, but also threw two or more innings in 23 of his 62 appearances for the Rangers and Cubs. He went three or more innings on six occasions, topping out with a five-inning performance, and had a 2.60 ERA. *1 years, \$6 million*

Greg Holland, RHP (33): Holland was a disaster for the Cardinals, pitching to a 7.92 ERA in 32 games, was released, and then looked like a new man with the Nationals. Finished out the year with a 0.84 ERA, 0.89 WHIP and 25 strikeouts in 21 innings for Washington. *2 years, \$15 million*

Free Agents: Relief Pitchers



Free Agents: Relief Pitchers

Shawn Kelley, RHP (35): Kelley was having a solid season for the Nationals, but really turned it up after an August trade to Oakland. His final numbers tell an impressive story: 2.94 ERA, 0.90 WHIP and 4.55 K:BB ratio over 49 innings. *2 years, \$13 million*

Joe Kelly, RHP (31): Stuff outranks his overall production. He's one of the hardest throwers in the game, but had a 4.39 ERA, 1.36 WHIP and 4.4 BB/9 for the Red Sox. Still, the triple-digit heat and 9.3 K/9 will make him an intriguing target. *2 years, \$14.5 million*

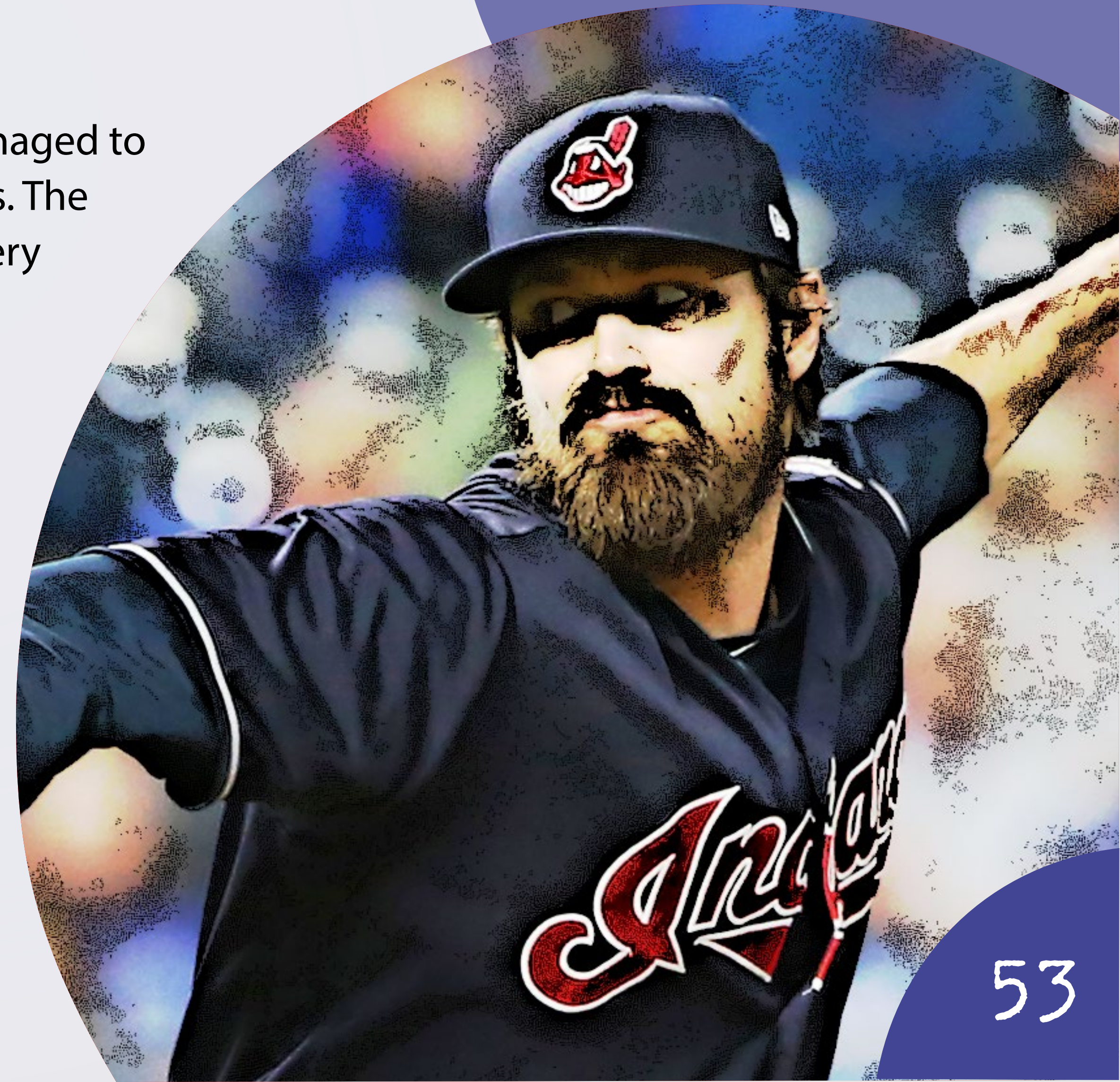
Andrew Miller, LHP (34): Went from being untouchable for a five-year stretch to looking merely human in 2018. It was a poor season by his standards, yielding a 4.24 ERA, but Miller wasn't often healthy and still managed an 11.9 K/9. *2 years, \$24 million*

Bud Norris, RHP (34): Norris transitioned to the bullpen fulltime in 2017 and has racked up 47 saves while pitching to a 3.91 ERA, 1.30 WHIP and 10.6 K/9. Second-half struggles put a great deal of uncertainty around him. *1 year, \$3.5 million*

Adam Ottavino, RHP (33): What a season this guy had in 2018. Ottavino managed to reach triple-digit strikeouts, 112 to be exact, despite only pitching 78 innings. The thing that may cause the Twins to look elsewhere is his sidearm delivery is very similar to Trevor Hildenberger, as you don't want your bullpen guys to have similar looks if possible. *2 years, \$20 million*

Martin Perez, LHP (28): His camp will probably seek a starting role, but Perez looks like a good fit as a lefty specialist. He pitched well after a demotion to the bullpen, and has held same-sided batters to a .242/.301/.349 (.651) line over his career. *1 year, \$4 million*

David Robertson, RHP (34): He's been incredible since his return to the Yankees. In 104 2/3 innings since being dealt from the White Sox last July, he has a 2.49 ERA, 12.2 K/9 and 34.2 K%. *3 years, \$42 million*



Free Agents: Relief Pitchers

Fernando Rodney, RHP (42): Oakland holds a \$4.25 million option for 2019, part of the deal Rodney signed with Minnesota. That's a reasonable price to pay for a veteran of his quality, but the cash-strapped A's might not be willing to pick up the tab. *1 year, \$4 million*

Sergio Romo, RHP (36): Romo helped Tampa Bay usher in the opener, as he made five starts for the Rays. On the down side, he gave up four runs over 4 1/3 innings in that role. As a whole, the former Giants closer posted a 4.14 ERA, 1.26 WHIP and 10.0 K/9 over 67 1/3 innings. *1 year, \$3 million*

Tony Sipp, LHP (35): Sipp was a valuable piece of the Houston bullpen and has never had the kind of a gap in his numbers between LHB/RHB that suggests he should be a specialist. On the other hand, he's been inconsistent over his career and has averaged less than 40 innings over the past three seasons. *1 year, \$5 million*

Joakim Soria, RHP (35): If the Brewers don't exercise his \$10 million option, he's a name worth targeting. Between Milwaukee and the White Sox in 2018, Soria had a 3.13 ERA, 1.14 WHIP and 11.0 K/9. *2 years, \$15 million*

Adam Warren, RHP (31): Over the past two seasons, Warren has a 2.72 ERA and 1.08 WHIP, yet the Yankees traded him to Seattle in late July for international bonus slot money. His left/right splits are nearly identical, making him appear to be an attractive longman. *2 years, \$10 million*

Justin Wilson, LHP (31): Wilson would be among the most dominant left-handed relievers in baseball if he could just limit his walks. Wilson has an 11.9 K/9 over the past two seasons, but that rise in strikeouts has been accompanied by his walk rate ballooning from 3.4 BB/9 over his first five seasons to 5.4 over the past two years. *2 years, \$14.5 million*



These three players aren't necessarily conventional fits for the Twins, given the current roster makeup, but each is intriguing for his own reasons, and it wouldn't be all that hard to make room for any of them.

Free Agents: Miscellaneous



Bryce Harper, OF

Age: 26

Previous Team: Nationals

2018 Stats: .249/.393/.496, 34 HR, 100 RBI, 3.5 WAR

The crown jewel of free agency. Generational talents like Harper don't often become available on the open market. By age 26, he already has an MVP, six All-Star nods, and 184 career homers. He'll receive one of the largest contracts in major-league history. You'd be buying a big controversial personality, and probably a decade of Hall of Fame production. One can dream.

Estimated Contract: 12 years, \$375 million



Marwin Gonzalez, OF

Age: 30

Previous Team: Astros

2018 Stats: .247/.324/.409, 16 HR, 68 RBI, 1.6 WAR

The ultimate utility man. In 2018 Gonzalez started at least 15 games at four different positions for the Astros (1B/2B/SS/LF) while contributing from both sides of the plate as a switch-hitter. He's been an underrated part of Houston's elite core over the past few seasons. His defense is sure to decline over the course of his contract, leading to diminished versatility, but he should still be nice piece to have around.

Estimated Contract: 3 years, \$33 million



Yasmani Grandal, C

Age: 30

Previous Team: Dodgers

2018 Stats: .241/.349/.466, 24 HR, 68 RBI, 3.6 WAR

You've got Jason Castro and Mitch Garver locked in for 2019, but the outlook beyond is murky. Grandal, one of the best offensive catchers in the game (.790 OPS and 89 HR since 2015) and a rock-solid defender, would theoretically upgrade and solidify the position for years to come. But you'd need to figure out how to make room initially.

Estimated Contract: 5 years, \$75 million

Contemplating Max Kepler's Upside and Future

The plan, heading into the 2016 season, was for 23-year-old Max Kepler to spend at least a couple months at Triple-A, smoothing out any remaining rough edges in his game after being named MVP of the Double-A Southern League the previous year. Instead, he played all of two games for Rochester before being summoned to Minnesota as an injury replacement, and then he returned to the Twins' outfield for good on June 1. His final tally at Triple-A? Thirty games, although he hit well (.282/.367/.455) and walked more (16) than he struck out (14), just like he had at Double-A in 2015.

Kepler squashed any criticism of him being rushed to the majors by holding his own right away, hitting .252/.324/.447 in his first full month with the Twins. He slumped down the stretch, but still finished his rookie season hitting .235/.309/.424 with 17 homers and 42 walks in 113 games. It was a promising debut, as Kepler displayed three of the key skills—plate discipline, power, and plus defense—that had made him a consensus top-100 prospect. He rated as a below-average hitter, but just slightly, posting a 96 OPS+ where league average is always 100. And his defense in right field was good enough to make him an above-average all-around regular at 23.

Predicting the futures of young baseball players is incredibly difficult. I've been writing about the sport as my profession for 15 years, with much of that spent ranking and analyzing prospects, specifically Twins prospects. I like to think I'm pretty decent at it, but there's a garage full of Bobby Kielty rookie cards that might not agree.

However, typically when a top-100 prospect has a rookie season like Kepler's—showing polish and raw skill, earning praise from coaches, and producing average-ish offense with plus defense at 23—the projection fog lifts. Above-average 23-year-old rookies tend to develop into stars. Two years later, Kepler hasn't moved an inch.

Feature Article

by Aaron Gleeman,
Editor in Chief, Baseball
Prospectus



Feature Article

by Aaron Gleeman,
Editor in Chief, Baseball
Prospectus

Year	AVG	OPS	OPS+	WAR/150G
2016	.235	.734	96	2.9
2017	.243	.737	95	2.1
2018	.224	.727	96	2.8

How rare is it for a young hitter to hold his own as an average-ish rookie like Kepler did and then basically show zero improvement? In the history of baseball, he's just the third corner outfielder to have three seasons with an OPS+ between 90 and 99 by age 25. The other two are Dayan Viedo, a once-promising White Sox slugger who washed out of the majors at 25, and Nomar Mazara, the current Rangers right fielder about whom someone in Texas is probably writing an article just like this one right now. Even finding corner outfielders who had two or more 90-99 OPS+ seasons by 25 is difficult. There are only a dozen of them, total, and only six since 1980.

Viedo was a bust. The jury is still out on Mazara, much like for Kepler. The other three are Phil Plantier, Von Hayes, and—you may want to sit down or at least hold onto something—Delmon Young. Plantier had just one standout full season, posting a 122 OPS+ with 34 homers for the Padres in 1993, and he was finished at 28. Hayes is the success story, by far. He debuted at 22, hit .250/.310/.389 at 23, got traded, and hit .265/.337/.370 at 24. He broke out at 25 with a 124 OPS+ for the Phillies in 1983, and was a star-caliber player for a half-dozen seasons. He hit just .267 for his career, but Hayes drew tons of walks, had 20-homer pop, and played good defense.

He's certainly not a precise comp for Kepler—for one thing, Hayes was a speedster, swiping as many as 48 bases in a season—but you can squint while looking at his career numbers and see Kepler following a similar path. I would not advise squinting at Delmon Young's numbers, and to save yourself the agitation I'd suggest not even looking at all. But if we're talking corner outfielders who initially hold their own in the majors and



Feature Article

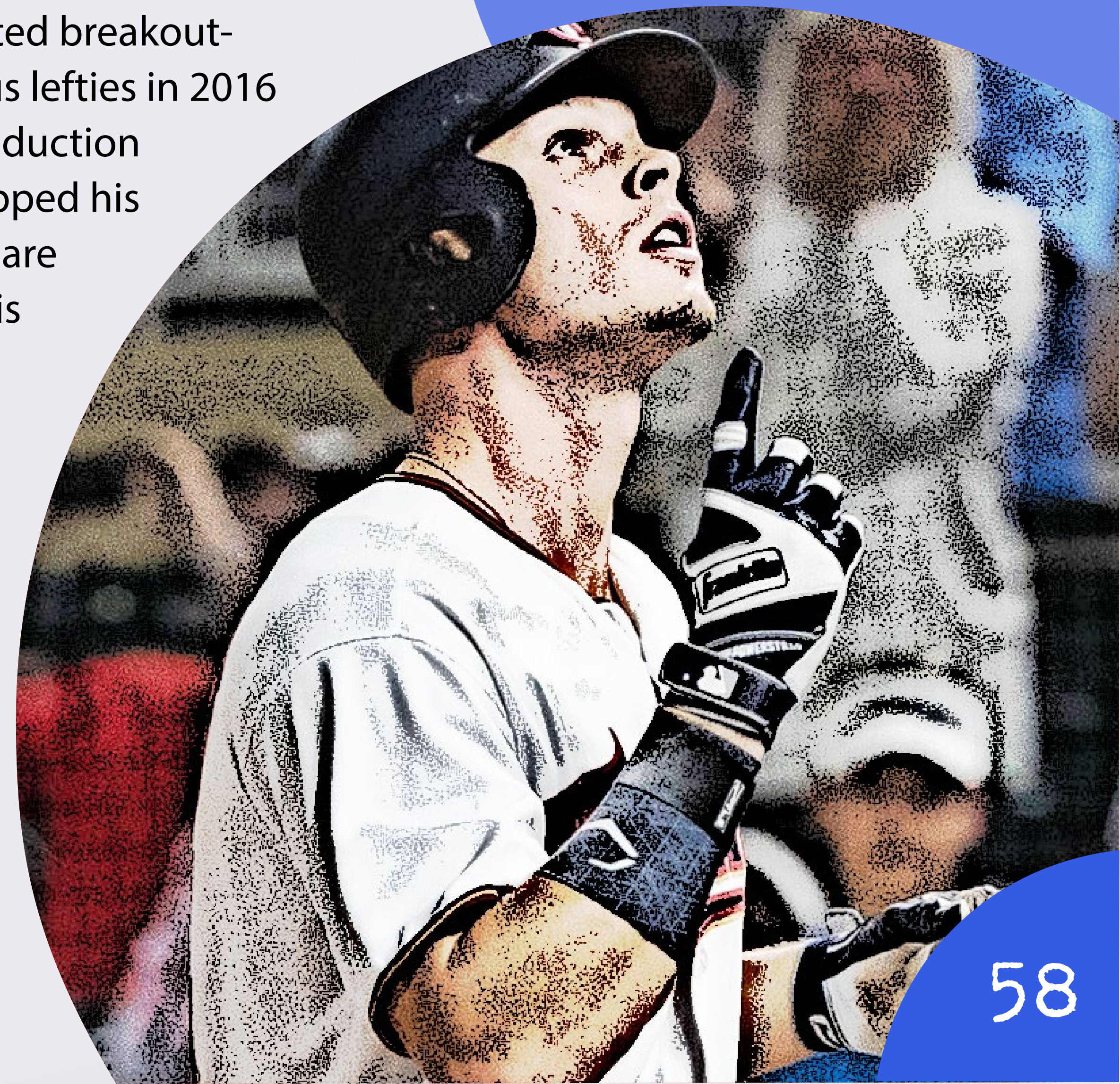
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Editor in Chief, Baseball
Prospectus

then show zero real improvement ... well, Delmon is the archetype. Kepler is not Delmon Young, of course, as a player (a million times better on defense, a billion times more plate discipline) or as a person (a trillion times less of a jerk).

Looking at it slightly differently, there are 13 corner outfielders since 1980 to log at least 1,500 plate appearances through age 25 while posting an OPS+ between 90 and 99. Kepler, Mazara, and Vicedo make that list too, along with some good names (Garret Anderson, Johnny Damon, Mark Kotsay), some bad names (Jose Tabata, Jeff Francoeur, Lastings Milledge), some blah names (Gerardo Parra, Roger Cedeno), and some other juries still out (Gregory Polanco, Avisail Garcia). It's certainly not an inspiring group, although in general they lacked the plate discipline and the defensive value that Kepler has already shown. His problems are different.

What's remarkable about Kepler's season-to-season "consistency" is that he's been incredibly inconsistent within those seasons, following up excellent stretches that created breakout-related optimism by slumping horribly for months. Kepler was helpless versus lefties in 2016 and 2017 before handling them well in 2018, but that also just meant his production versus righties slipped considerably. This year he cut his strikeout rate and upped his walk rate, posting an impressive 96/71 K/BB ratio at a time when MLB hitters are whiffing more than ever, yet his batting average fell from bad to awful and his batting average on balls in play was an AL-worst .236.

That last part is really the issue. Kepler does so many things well, for a young hitter or any hitter, but his inability to post a decent batting average wipes much of it away. Of the 137 players to log at least 300 plate appearances in the AL this season, Kepler ranked 34th in secondary average, which combines isolated power and walk rate. Matt Olson and Andrew Benintendi were directly in front of Kepler on the list, and the league leaders were Mike Trout, Jose Ramirez, and Mookie Betts. Within that same group, Kepler was 119th in AVG and 82nd in OPS. He hits the ball over the fence and draws free passes like a star, but collects singles like a scrub.



Feature Article

by Aaron Gleeman,
Editor in Chief, Baseball
Prospectus

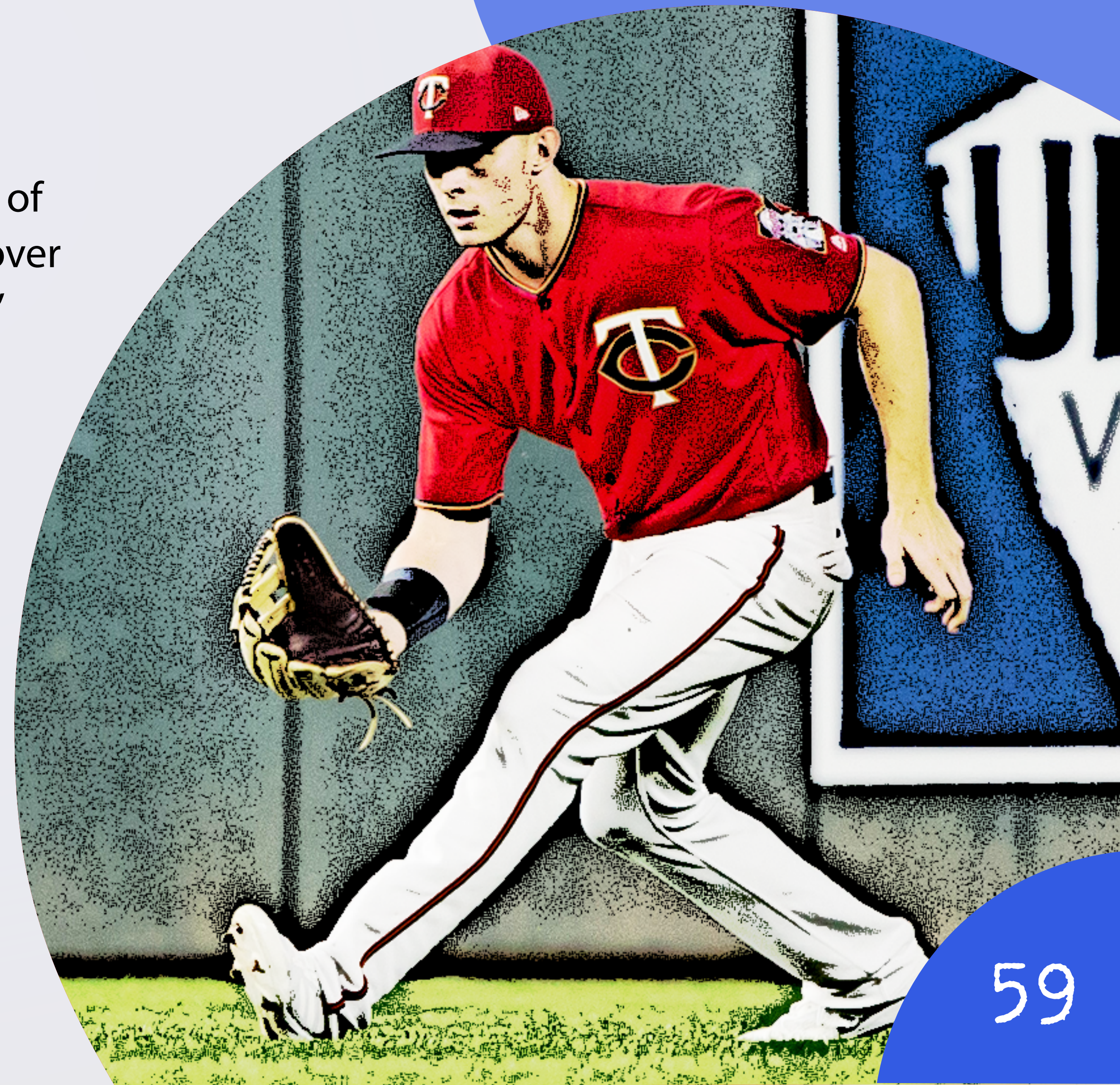
It can be difficult to evaluate young hitters with very poor batting averages. No matter how many other things they do well, seeing “.224” next to their name in the box score each day can’t help but cloud your judgment. It has a real impact on value too, as Kepler’s mediocre OPS despite high-end power and patience shows. Aaron Hicks is a recent Twins example of this in action, as his standout secondary skills were often overshadowed by an inability to hit for a decent batting average, all the way back to his prospect days. He hit just .248 for the Yankees this year ... and trailed only Trout in OPS among AL center fielders.

However, masking otherwise impressive secondary skills is just part of why evaluating a young hitter with a very poor batting average is difficult. That’s more of a perception issue, anyway. In terms of actually trying to project development, the real difficulty comes more from the fact that some, but not all, very low batting average on balls in play (BABIP) totals are truly unlucky. It’s natural to see a hitter like Kepler with one of the worst BABIP in the league, and just assume he got robbed of a bunch of hits. It happens. And if that’s true, it’ll mostly correct itself in the future.

But what if it’s not true, or at least not entirely true?

BABIP-driven analysis is much different for hitters than for pitchers, the latter of whom can more or less be counted on to drift toward league-average rates over a large enough sample. Hitters, on the other hand, have much more “control” over their BABIP, although certainly good and bad luck exists within that. It’s highly unlikely that Kepler will post a future BABIP as bad as his .236 mark this season, but that doesn’t mean he should be counted on to approach the MLB average BABIP of .300 either. His career BABIP over three-plus seasons and 1,633 plate appearances is now .257, including a sub-.280 BABIP every year.

Twins Daily’s own Parker Hageman has noted repeatedly over the years that Kepler’s approach at the plate and swing path are not conducive to producing good batting averages. Here’s what he said on the topic most recently:



Feature Article

by Aaron Gleeman,
Editor in Chief, Baseball
Prospectus

“Fundamentally, Kepler’s swing has a steep approach into the zone. Whereas hitters like Eddie Rosario or Khris Davis get the barrel down into the zone behind them, Kepler’s swing will have the barrel cut through downward in the zone right before the point of contact where it levels off. He’s trying to get to one contact point out in front. This leaves a smaller margin of error at the point of contact. ...

Simply put, Davis can be fooled by a pitch and still be able to drive it somewhere. With Kepler’s swing, if he is fooled he doesn’t have the same type of contact. Kepler’s steep approach ... is one reason why Davis (and to a lesser extent, Rosario) is significantly better at driving the ball the other way than Kepler—their swings can have a ball get deep and still drive it the other way.”

None of that rules out the possibility that Kepler has been unlucky, this season and throughout his career, but it does suggest that projecting a vastly improved future batting average isn’t as simple as assuming his luck will even out. Kepler is a patient hitter, and he’s capable of hitting the ball with authority on a regular basis, as evidenced by both his homer totals and advanced metrics like exit velocity. Unfortunately, so far at least he’s also been way too capable of popping up or grounding out weakly when presented with a hittable, damage-requesting pitches. If that doesn’t change, his long-term upside is capped short of what were once lofty expectations.

All of which presents the Twins with a series of questions, none of them easy to answer. Can his approach be “fixed” to address those issues and, if so, why hasn’t that happened already? If he can be fixed, is there still superstar potential? If he can’t be fixed, and is merely an average-ish regular, is he still a good enough all-around player to build around? Going one step further, if you still want to build around him, should signing Kepler to a long-term extension now, with his value low, be a priority? And if you no longer want to build around him, are there enough other front offices that still view Kepler as having big-time upside to make trading him profitable?



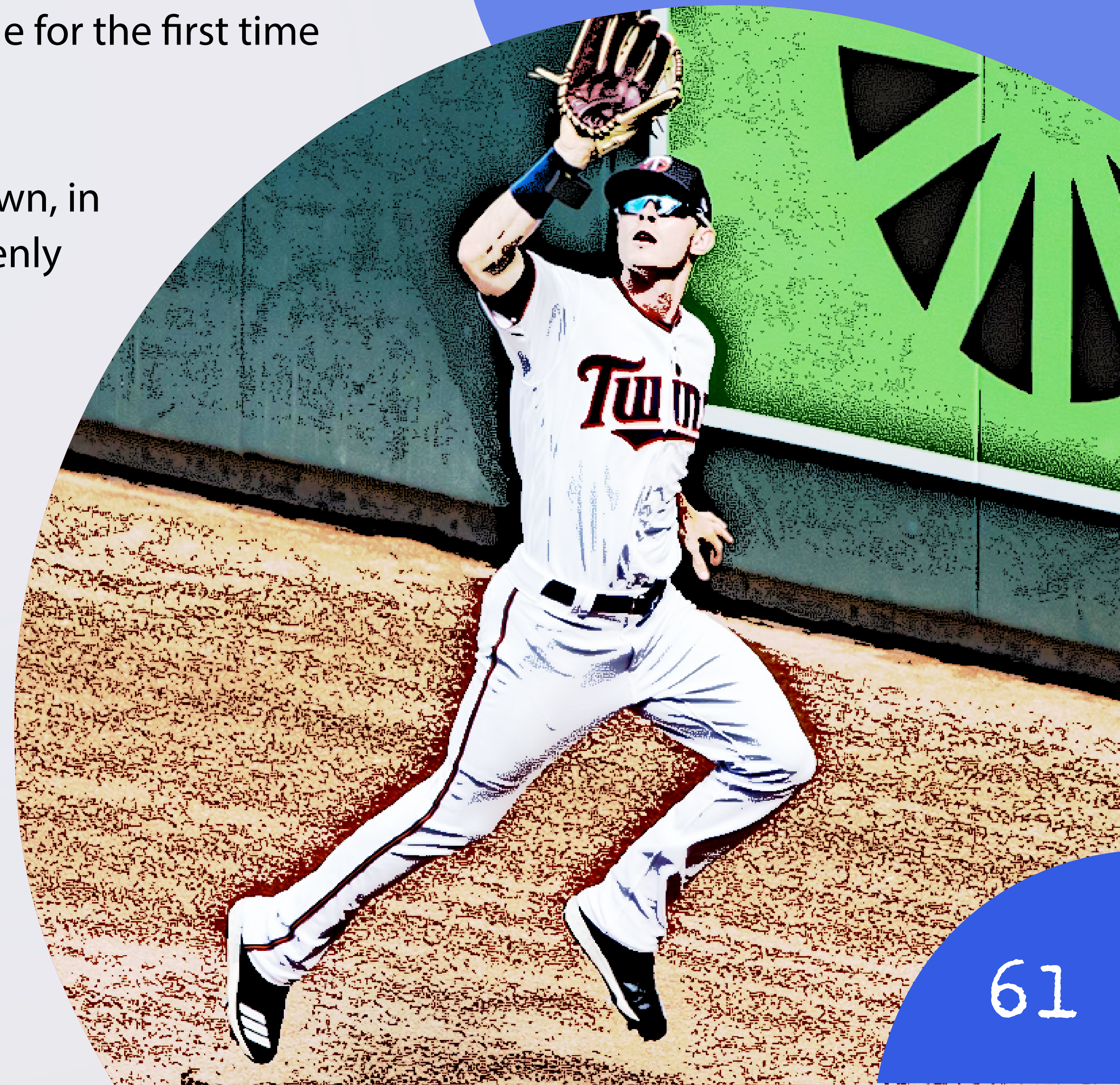
Feature Article

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Even if the Twins feel confident in their answers to those questions, his outlook is also tied to what the future holds for Byron Buxton, Eddie Rosario, and Jave Cave, not to mention the next wave of corner outfield prospects like Alex Kirilloff, Brent Rooker, and Trevor Larnach. You can trade Kepler and replace him with Cave for 2019, but only if Cave's strong rookie showing was not a fluke and Buxton doesn't leave a gaping hole in center field again. And by 2020 the Twins might be pushing Kepler aside for multiple high-upside prospects, but as we've seen plenty of times before—and are seeing with Kepler himself right now—that's far from a sure thing.

In many ways, Kepler's situation and the questions surrounding him are representative of the Twins as a whole this offseason. They need to figure out where their young building blocks now stand, why they collectively haven't developed as smoothly as hoped, and whether continuing to view them as foundational pieces is sound. Kepler is one side of that coin, and Miguel Sano and Byron Buxton are the other. In each case the decisions are being pushed by performance, by their aging well out of prospect territory, and by their becoming arbitration eligible for the first time as eventual free agency begins to loom.

Kepler has shown a floor that's much higher than Sano and Buxton have shown, in part due to his staying healthy and in part due to that dull consistency suddenly becoming a quasi-positive compared to what we saw from Sano and Buxton in 2018. But whereas both Sano and Buxton have displayed jaw-dropping ceilings—Sano as an All-Star in the first half of last season, Buxton as one of the 10 best all-around players in baseball in the second half—Kepler has stayed glued to that floor.



If you're diving into the trade market, you have two things working in your favor: a deep minor-league system stocked with attractive talent, and payroll flexibility to take on salary. Below we've laid out 11 candidates who seem likely to be made available (at the right price), and could fit your needs.

Marcus Stroman, SP

Team: Blue Jays

Contract Status: Arb in 2019, free agent after 2020

The diminutive 27-year-old puts up unparalleled 60% grounder rates for Toronto, and has had plenty of success in the past, but is coming off a career-worst season that ended with a bad blister issue. He certainly won't come cheap, with two years of control remaining, but this might be the right time to swoop in. The Jays have to know they can't realistically contend with the Yankees or Red Sox in the short-term and should be seeking young talent this offseason to complement baseball's finest prospect, Vladimir Guerrero Jr.

Blue Jays Team Needs: SP, 1B, OF

Alex Colome, RP

Team: Mariners

Contract Status: Arb in 2019, free agent after 2020

In 2019, Colome was again one of the AL's nastiest relievers. The Mariners acquired him from Tampa in May, shifting him from closer to setup man (ahead of Edwin Diaz) and he thrived in the role with a 2.53 ERA in 46 innings. Colome, 29 in December, led the league in saves in 2017 and was an All-Star in 2016. When Seattle traded for him, it only cost them a pair of unremarkable pitching prospects, but unlike the Rays, the M's probably are not motivated sellers.

Mariners Team Needs: SP, OF, C



Ken Giles, RP

Team: Blue Jays

Contract Status: Arb in 2019, free agent after 2020

Another experienced back-end reliever who may not require a huge return. Giles has faded quite a bit since his dominant early days in the Phillies bullpen, but he has excellent stuff (9.5 K/9 in 2018, 11.9 career) and 91 saves by age 28. He does have a record of struggling in the postseason.

Blue Jays Team Needs: SP, 1B, OF

J.T. Realmuto, C

Team: Marlins

Contract Status: Arb in 2019, free agent after 2020

Jason Castro is under contract for one more year. Mitch Garver looked solid as a rookie but Realmuto would be a sizable upgrade and perhaps the team's best player. His 4.8 WAR in 2018 ranked ninth in the National League and would've easily led the Twins. Turning 28 in March, he has gotten better every year and has held up physically. The idea of adding Realmuto and locking him up long-term is appealing, but to do so, you'll need to be ready to part with multiple top prospects.

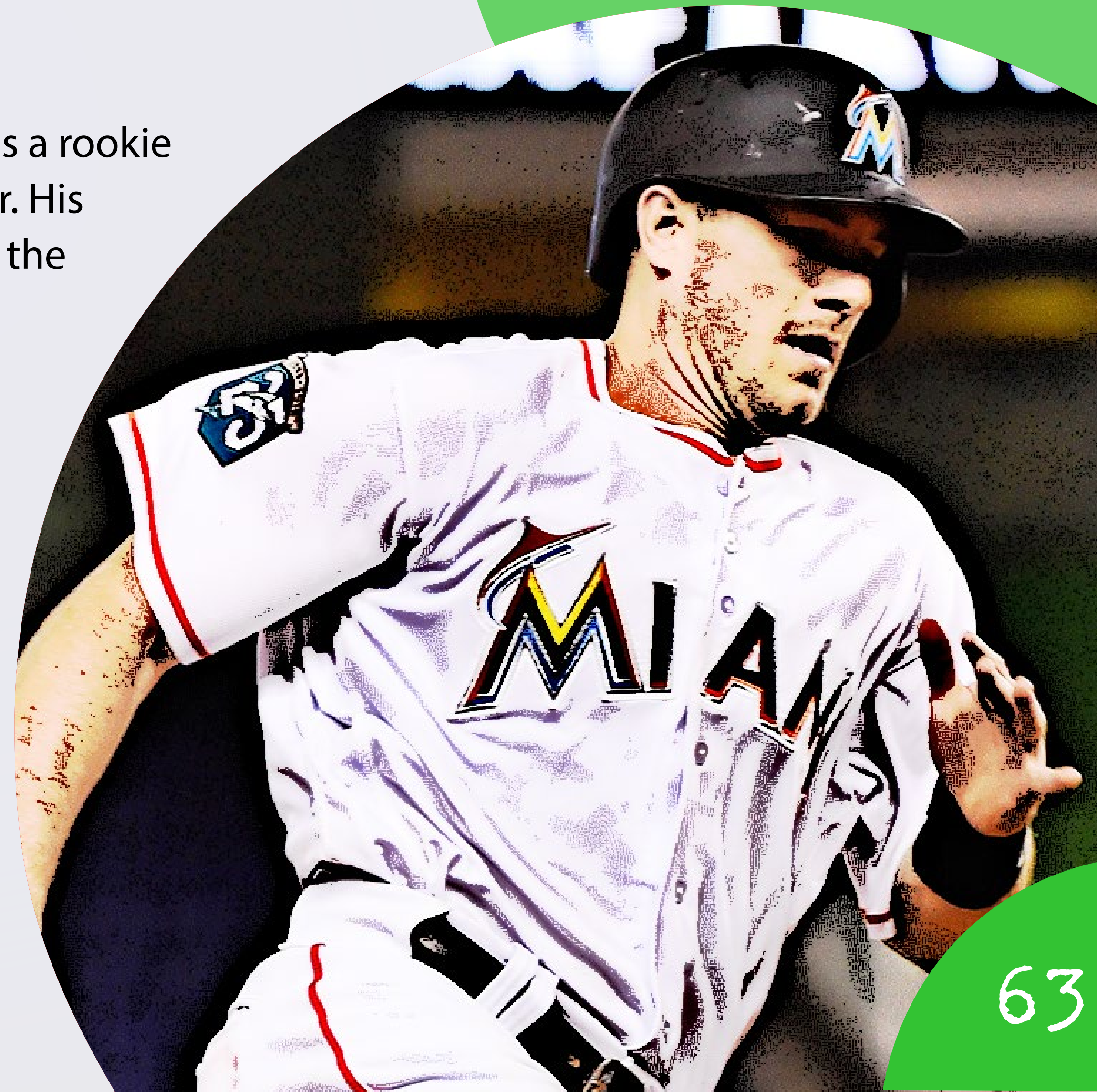
Marlins Team Needs: 1B, SP, SS

Raisel Iglesias, RP

Team: Reds

Contract Status: 2 years remaining at \$11.4M

Iglesias has quietly been an excellent bullpen arm and is on a relatively



team-friendly contract. That means the Reds haven't been antsy to part ways with their closer, but he also seems like an unnecessary luxury for a team that has endured five consecutive losing seasons. Iglesias has a 2.42 ERA, 1.08 WHIP and 10.2 K/9 in 163 career games as a reliever. He's also racked up 63 saves, meaning he could slide right into the closer role for the Twins.

Reds Team Needs: SP, OF

Nate Jones, RP

Team: White Sox

Contract Status: 3 years of options totaling \$15.8M

Similar to the situation with Iglesias and the Reds, the White Sox seem better served to flip Jones for some pieces that make more sense for a rebuilding club. Jones has been very good when healthy, posting a 3.11 ERA, 1.20 WHIP and 9.9 K/9, but has missed a great deal of time due to injuries. The 32-year-old has been in the league for seven seasons now, but has made fewer than 20 appearances in three of those years. He finished out 2018 healthy, however, and showed no indication of being damaged goods, averaging 97.2 mph on his sinker per Baseball Savant.

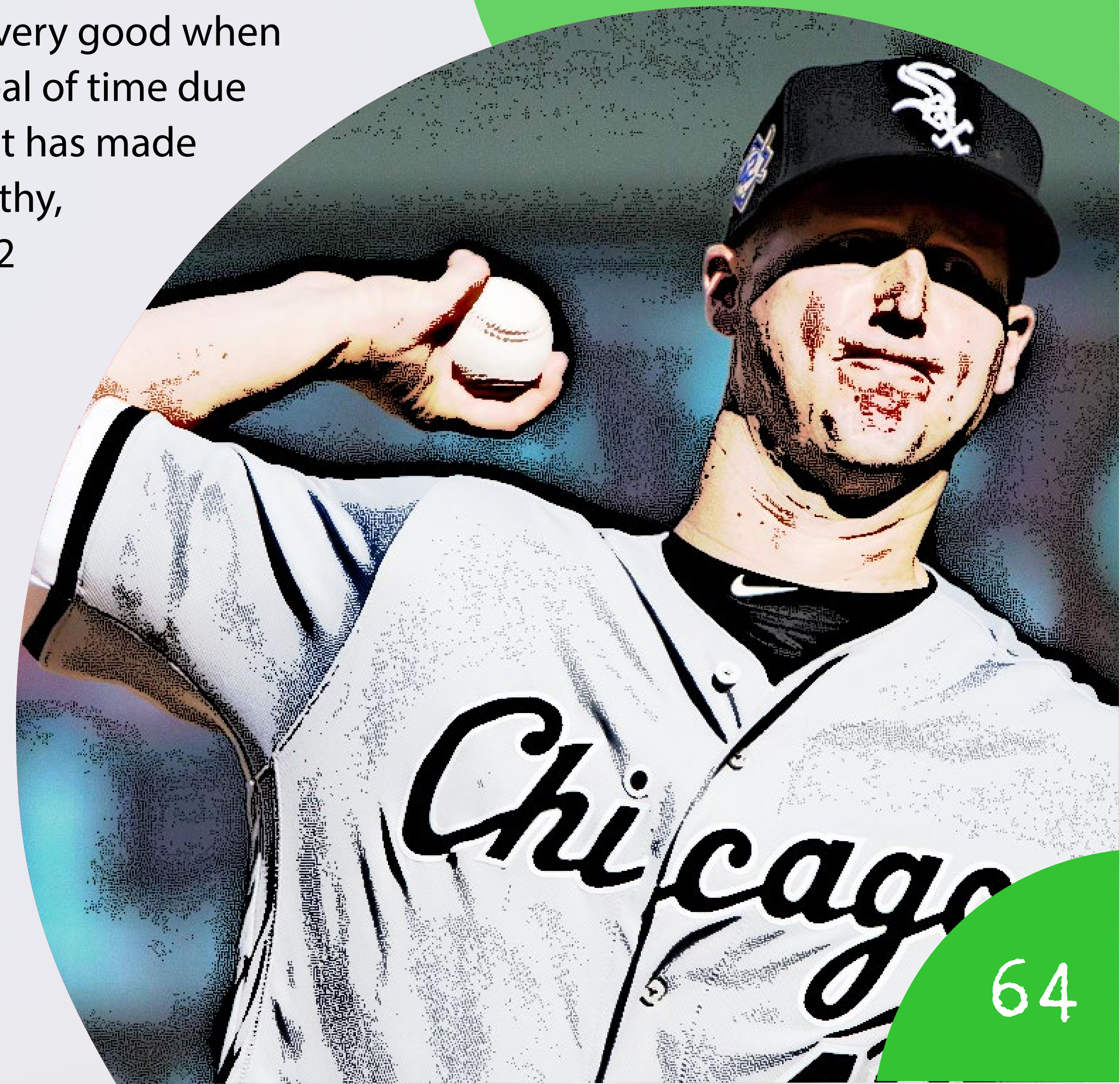
White Sox Team Needs: OF, 3B, SP

Yoenis Cespedes, OF

Team: Mets

Contract Status: 2 years years remaining at \$58.5M

The oft-injured Cespedes is among the highest-paid players in all of baseball, but is also one of the game's most dangerous hitters when healthy. He's only managed to play 119 games for the Mets over the past two seasons, but during that time he's hit .282/.343/.525 (.869). Cespedes



suffered from a calcification issue in both of his heels, had surgery in late-July, and is expected to be out until mid-2019. That certainly muddies up the waters, but with Michael Conforto and Brandon Nimmo appearing to be building blocks in the outfield, you'd have to imagine the Mets would be motivated to move Yoenis, and willing to eat some of the money left on his deal.

Mets Team Needs: C, RP

Justin Upton, OF

Team: Angels

Contract Status: 4 years remaining at \$90M

He was solid but unspectacular (30 homers and an .808 OPS) in Year 1 of a new five-year, \$106 million contract signed a year ago. That deal's still fresh, but it's possible the Angels will be looking to get out from under Upton's remaining commitment and go another direction. The Twins could take it on if they so choose, and wouldn't necessarily have to give up a ton in player capital to make it happen. But that's a big commitment at an outfield corner spot, with plenty of young talent — present and future — already in place for Minnesota.

Angels Team Needs: C, 1B, 3B

Zack Greinke, SP

Team: Diamondbacks

Contract Status: 3 years remaining at \$104.5M

The Diamondbacks are coming off a disappointing season. Greinke is coming off another very good one, in which he was an All-Star for the fourth time in five years, but he turns 35 in October and is still owed a ton of money. The Twins could theoretically afford to take it on without hurting



themselves too much — Greinke's deal expires right around the time several key young players will be eligible for free agency — and again, this is a situation where you lower the necessary return by taking on salary. But that's a lot to take on for a guy in his mid-30s.

Diamondbacks Team Needs: 3B, SP, OF

Jean Segura, SS

Team: Mariners

Contract Status: 4 years remaining at \$59.4M, \$17M option or \$1M buyout for 2023

Segura has quietly been a fine player the past three seasons. During that stretch, his 11.8 fWAR ranks 31st among all hitters and he's posted a batting line of .308/.353/.449 (116 OPS+). He can also hold his own at shortstop, rating 12th among the 22 qualified shortstops in UZR/150 last season. Dealin' Jerry Dipoto is always up for a swap, but Segura was granted no-trade provisions in the extension he signed, which may complicate things.

Mariners Team Needs: SP, OF, C

Robinson Cano, 2B

Team: Mariners

Contract Status: 5 years remaining at \$120M

We close with another possible salary dump opportunity. He's signed through age 40 at \$24 million annually, and missed half of the 2018 season with a PED suspension. But Cano continues to be a productive hitter, and hasn't posted a below-average OPS since 2008. He would emphatically fill the vacancy at second base while essentially replacing Joe Mauer's share of the payroll for the next half-decade.

Mariners Team Needs: SP, OF, C



How Can the Twins Play More Like Paul Molitor?

The Twins were playing Boston in Fenway Park early in August 1996. Paul Molitor was a couple of weeks away from his 40th birthday. He was having a phenomenal season as the Twins' designated hitter by any standard, and for a player his age it was incomprehensible.

Molitor would lead the American League with 225 hits, second in majors to Lance Johnson's 227 for the Mets. He batted .341, third in the American League and a fraction ahead of teammate Chuck Knoblauch. He also drove in 113 runs as the No. 2 hitter behind Knoblauch, who scored a Twins-record 140 runs.

That was the first chance for Minnesotans to see Molitor for a full season, rather than as a visitor with the Milwaukee Brewers or the Toronto Blue Jays. I had a chance to be there covering for the St. Paul newspapers when he had a record five hits in the first game of the 1982 World Series in St. Louis, and to be covering for the Star Tribune when he was 12-for-24 and the MVP of Toronto's six-game 1993 World Series win over Philadelphia.

Obviously, the admiration for Molitor as a ballplayer was enormous before he came back home to play for the Twins. I can't remember exactly when it was in that summer of '96 when I was moved to make this subtle pronouncement in a press box on Molitor:

"This son of a gun is better than I thought he was."

It might not have been "gun" and it might have been more a bellow than subtle, but over that season, it was more than Molitor's hitting that blew you away as a Minnesota baseball zealot:

It was the base running, and the thinking that went into everything he did on the field, that was astounding. It was a privilege to be able to go to the clubhouse and ask Molitor about those decisions.

Feature Article

by Patrick Reusse,
Columnist, Star Tribune



Feature Article

by Patrick Reusse,
Columnist, Star Tribune

On that August night at Boston, it was a conversation about a walk that Molitor had drawn in the eighth inning. Ball four was a pitch that went past catcher Mike Stanley and bounced toward the screen.

Molitor ran out of the box, made a hard turn around first, and then retreated, leaving a first-and-third situation.

"I thought the play there was to go for second and force Stanley to make that long throw," Molitor said. "If I had done that and Stanley had thrown, Rich Becker could have walked home from third. But there was only one out."

"If anything bad happened with me going to second, I didn't want to take us out of the inning."

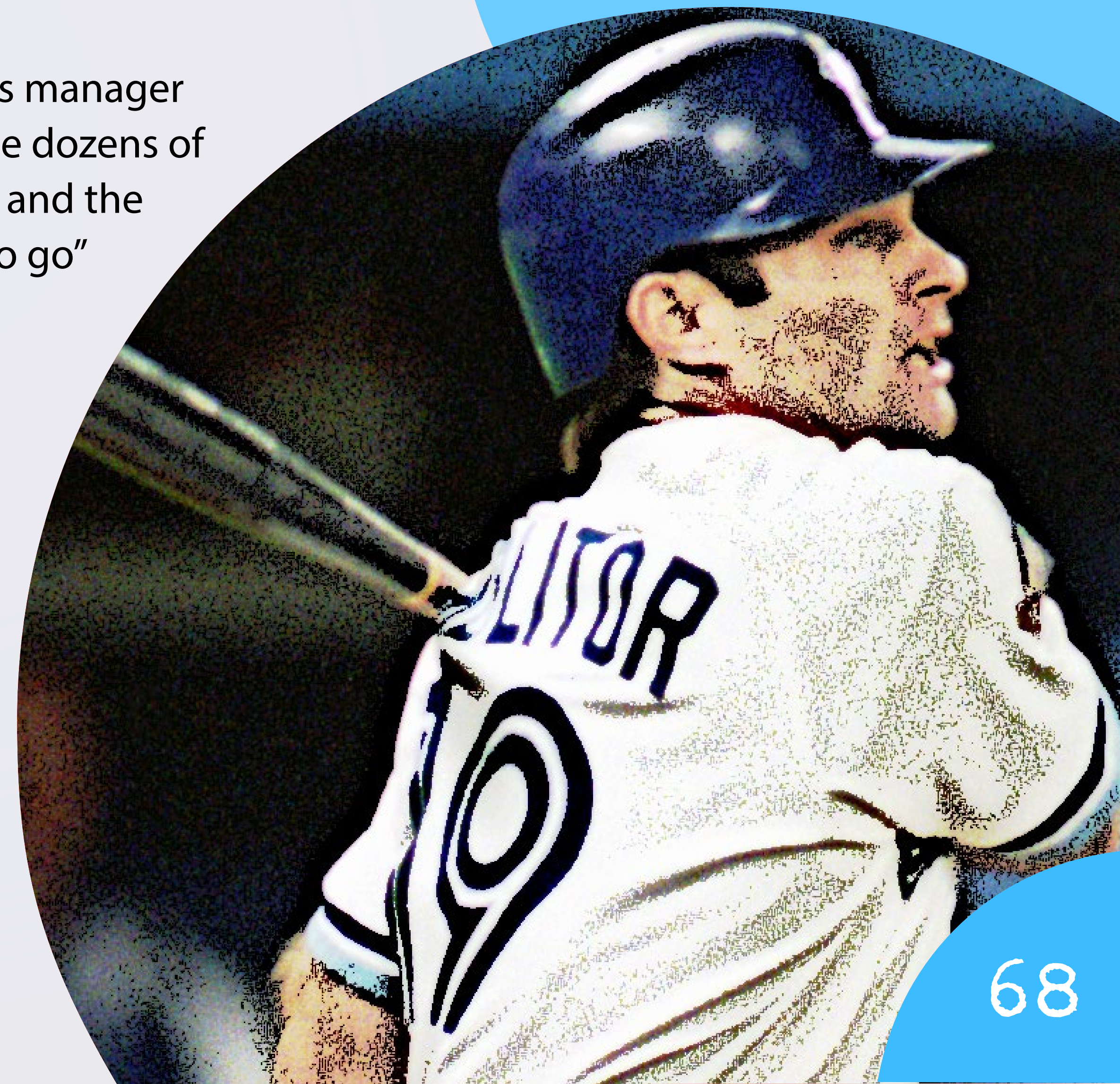
The Twins wound up scoring five runs in what eventually was an 11-10 loss. No matter.

I was looking through a ream of past Molitor copy after the Twins fired him as manager after this season, and ran across this snippet. I started contemplating all those dozens of times Molitor had implored Eddie Rosario and Byron Buxton and Max Kepler and the rest of the younger Twins to use those couple of seconds between "go and no go" to make astute, situational decisions.

My run as the St. Paul beat writer for the Twins started in 1974. I've been writing baseball with regularity since then. I've used the word "instincts" as a baseball writer as often as anyone in Twin Cities history.

Kirby Puckett, Kent Hrbek, Joe Mauer, Paul Molitor ... they had "great instincts" in scores of articles and columns that I've written. And scores of times we've heard TV analysts and scouts and other baseball people suggest that a player was just "born with it."

Instincts to do the right thing? Nah, you aren't born with those.



Feature Article

by Patrick Reusse,
Columnist, Star Tribune

Molitor's election to the Hall of Fame was announced in early January 2004 and there was a media session at the Metrodome. Tom Kelly, his manager with the Twins, was there and said:

"Best base runner I ever had. Remarkable. We were going through tough times. I tried to get the younger players to watch Paul on the bases. I would say to Richie Becker, 'Are you watching? It's a clinic.'"

"They can learn, improve, but to play the game like Paul ... it's something you start developing at a young age and it turns into an instinct."

That's it. Right there. You're not born with an instinct to make correct, split-second decisions on the bases or in the field. It's developed, but first it has to be an athletic kid that you're getting young — young and more hooked on doing the right thing on an actual baseball field than a life-like video screen.

The big leagues are too late for a player to add "instincts." Paul Molitor found that out as a manager every time his best hitter, Eddie Rosario, was out by 25 feet at third base.



Lighter Side: The Twins' Secret Trade Chip

(Editor's Note: This is a satirical piece from one of our favorite offbeat Twins writers. The quotes aren't real, nor is the mythical titular asset... to our knowledge.)

As this Handbook goes to press, there is no definitive word about Joe Mauer's future with the Twins or baseball in general, but one thing is very certain: his long-rumored hip-hop album is being used as a bargaining chip for prospective free agents.

"We don't expect to compete with the big money or nightlife of New York or Los Angeles, so we have to think differently," said Twins GM Thad Levine. "That extends to everything from scouting to roster construction to free agency. What can we offer a potential ace or power hitter that the Red Sox or Cubs can't? You can talk about a winning culture and endorsement deals until you're blue in the face, or you can tell them about the album."

"The album," once considered apocryphal or just a running bit with diminishing returns from local shock jock Dana Wessel, is a burned CD of a recording session Mauer laid down with some local hip-hop producers.

"You know the Wu-Tang Clan album that Silicon Valley twerp (Martin Shkreli) bought the only copy of?" asked Levine. "This is the Upper Midwest version of that. I think Method Man is even on one of the tracks here."

Mauer and his representatives did not respond to repeated requests for confirmation. Levine said he has listened to it all the way through and is convinced of its authenticity.

"The voice just sounds like Joe, and the lyrics consistently reference St. Paul landmarks, taking the ball the other way, getting in trouble with his mom even though it's his brother Jake's fault, etc."

Per Levine, eyes of both players and agents widen when he says the album is real, and he has a copy.

Feature
Article

by RandBall's Stu,
Columnist, TwinkieTown.com



“A silence settles over the room. They know we mean business. This negotiation just got real. Joe Mauer did raps.”

“Joe has this rep as a quiet guy, but he has a real respect for flow and sick beats,” added Levine. “He had the same T.I. song as his at-bat music for 100 years, instead of Jason Aldean or something. You can’t fake that. I guess he wanted to try his hand at emceeing.”

Although he declined to play any of the songs, Levine did provide some of the song titles.

“Respectful Disagreement (It’s Important)”

“The Whisper Song Pt. 2—That Looked Outside to Me, Blue”

“More Like Phil Scuzzy”

“Skim Milk and Other Lies”

“Ayd Mill Road (Can’t Pronounce It Right)”

“Shamrocks and The Nook Have The Same Menu But The Wait Is Shorter at Shamrocks (St. Paul Secrets)”

“Shut Your Butt Jake”

“Pretty Neat Deal”

“First Pitch Swingin’ (Don’t Do It)”

“I Don’t Like Highland Park. I Love It!”

“Joe Gon’ Give It to Ya” (a cover of DMX’s “X Gon’ Give It to Ya” with “Joe” replacing “X” and the graphic lyrics swapped out with a list of thoughtful items Joe plans to give his friends and family for Christmas)

Levine said he can’t comment on any specific players at this time, but confirmed that at least one free agent was interested in buying a CD player.

Feature Article

by RandBall's Stu,
Columnist, TwinkieTown.com



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