Budding star Mejia represents future for Tribe
50-game hitting streak put young catcher on fans' radar
By Jordan Bastian / MLB.com | @MLBastian | 12:00 AM ET
CLEVELAND -- One by one, the names of the prospects the Brewers were going to receive surfaced in various reports. Soon, it became clear that, if Jonathan Lucroy was going to be donning an Indians uniform, catching prospect Francisco Mejia was a required part of the trade. Mejia was the centerpiece of the five-player deal, which ultimately fell apart on the eve of the Aug. 1 non-waiver Trade Deadline, when Lucroy used his no-trade clause to block the transaction. Mejia would have headed to Milwaukee as a prized prospect, and that grabbed the attention of Cleveland fans who knew little about this young catcher.

"Any time we can keep one of our guys," Indians assistant general manager Carter Hawkins said, "you have a lot of happy, happy player-development staff."

By keeping Mejia, Cleveland retained one of the game's rising stars, and one of the best stories to came out of the Minor Leagues last season. Following his breakout showing in '16, which included a 50-game hitting streak that was among the longest in Minor League history, Mejia jumped to No. 4 on the Indians' Top 30 prospects list, according to MLBPipeline.com. He is rated as the game's third-best catching prospect and is 84th on MLB's Top 100 chart. In November, Baseball America rated the 21-year-old Mejia as Cleveland's No. 1 prospect.

It is not hard to understand why so much praise surrounds Mejia. He is a switch-hitting catcher who posted a .342 average and .896 OPS between Class A Lake County and Class A Advanced Lynchburg, while throwing out 43 percent (30-of-69) would-be basestealers.

"I felt really good about this season," Mejia said through a translator at the Indians' fall development program in September. "Thanks to God, everything went really well."

Talk about an understatement.

**Longest Minor League hitting streaks**

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<th>Player</th>
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<td>Joe DiMaggio</td>
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<td>Jack Ness</td>
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<td>Johnny Bates</td>
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<td>Jack Leilvett</td>
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<td>Herbert Chapman</td>
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<td>Ducky Detweiler</td>
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<td>Frosty Kennedy</td>
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Who could have predicted that on May 27, when Mejia sent a pitch from Fort Wayne's Jerry Keel into center for a single, that the catcher would embark on a historic run? For the next 78 days, Mejia overcome some minor health woes and a promotion to Lynchburg, plus the distractions that go along with All-Star appearances and trade rumors, while stringing together his hitting streak.

"There's just so many things that he fought through," said Hawkins, who was the director of player development last season. "He repeated a level. That's a very tough mental blow for guys as well. Put all those things together, the consistency that he showed, despite what was a really, really big step for him mentally. We feel like it really helped a foundation that he's going to be able to jump off from for years to come."

The 50-game streak was tied for the fourth-longest in Minor League history, trailing the 69-game run by Joe Wilhoit in 1919, the 61-game streak by Joe DiMaggio in 1933 and a 55-gamer by Roman Mejias in 1954. Mejia's streak matched the 50-game run by Otto Pahlman in 1922. On top of that, Mejia had a single in both the Midwest League All-Star Game (June 21) and All-Star Futures Game (July 10) during his streak.

The last hit came with a bit of controversy.

On Aug. 13, Mejia left Lynchburg's 7-5, 10-inning loss thinking he went 0-for-3. More than an hour after the game's conclusion, the official scorer made a change that brought Mejia's streak to 50 games. In the third inning, Winston-Salem third baseman Gerson Montilla was initially given an error on a chopper up the line that bounced into left field. Mantilla made a backhand stab at the roller, but it is hard to tell on video if the ball struck his glove. Mejia was later credited with a double.

Asked if he felt it was a hit, Mejia cracked a smile.

"I thought it was," he replied. "It didn't hit his glove or anything."
Mejia went 0-for-3 the following game, bringing a decisive end to his incredible run.

"As the streak was getting longer, I was feeling more pressure to get a hit every single game," Mejia said. "I felt a lot less stress, a lot less pressure. [After it ended] I was able to go to the games more calm and just focus on what I've always been focusing on without feeling like, 'I have to get a hit.'"

Over the streak, Mejia hit .386 with eight homners, 15 doubles, three triples and a 1.013 OPS. During the run, he had three stretches in which he missed four or more games. He missed time for the All-Star events and sat out games with a flu bug. On July 31, Mejia was on the bench as the trade reports swirled.

Outfielder Greg Allen was also in the reported package that was going to the Brewers, along with Minor League shortstop Yu-Cheng Chang and reliever Shawn Armstrong. Allen was with Double-A Akron when Lucroy nixed the deal on July 31. Allen opened the year at Lynchburg, however, and witnessed Mejia record a hit in 13 games within his streak.

"It was special," Allen said. "I got to be a part of it for a couple weeks there. Just to see his improvement not only fundamentally as a hitter, but also his approach that he brought to the plate in day and day out, I think that's why he was able to be so effective and keep that streak for so long. It's because of the adjustments and the things he was able to improve on. It was special. It was fun to watch."

Consider that Mejia hit .243 with a .670 OPS in 2015 with Lake County. One year later, the catcher sported an average nearly 100 points higher and an OPS that flirted with .900 in his 102 games. Mejia finished 2016 with 11 homers, 29 doubles, four triples, 63 runs scored and 80 RBIs. Not only was he an outstanding defensive catcher, Mejia was now showing signs of turning a corner at the plate. No wonder Milwaukee saw Mejia as a future cornerstone player.

Mejia is happy that he can continue striving for that potential with Cleveland.

"I felt really good," he said. "I felt really happy to stay with my friends and stay with my teammates. I was going to have to make new relationships. I'm happy to stay with the relationships that I already have."

Jordan Bastian has cove

What impact did Rajai Davis' speed have on Cleveland Indians in 2016? Hey, Hoynsie

Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Do you have a question that you'd like to have answered in Hey, Hoynsie? Submit it here or Tweet him at @hoynsie.

Hey, Hoynsie: It doesn't seem like there's much of a chance for the Indians to re-sign Rajai Davis. With speed being his main asset, do you know how many additional runs Davis generated in 2016? How many times did he steal a base and score a run because of that steal? - Dan Bonder, Orange Village.

Hey, Dan: As you know, Davis led the AL in steals with 43, setting the tone for the Indians to lead the league with 134 steals. He was second in the league with an 87.76 percent success rate (43-for-49).

In his 43 steals, Davis scored 18 runs, meaning that there was a 42 percent chance of him scoring when he stole a base. The Orioles are reportedly interested. In writing about his 2016 season, Eduardo A. Encina of the Baltimore Sun tried to find a stat to quantify the impact of Davis' speed.

He used Fangraphs' baserunning stat BsR, which takes into account steals, caught stealing attempts, taking extra bases and getting thrown out on the bases. It quantifies that data into a plus-minus comparison to the average baserunner. Davis scored a 10.0 BsR, second only to Cincinnati speedster Billy Hamilton.

All I know for sure is that Davis was the fastest 35-year-old baseball player this side of Kenny Lofton that I've ever seen.

Hey, Hoynsie: Since the Indians forfeited their first-round pick in the June draft with the acquisition of Edwin Encarnacion, how does that affect how much money they have to spend in the draft? - Rich Nosse.

Hey, Rich: Each team receives a bonus pool to sign the players they select in the first 10 rounds of the draft. Each player in those 10 rounds has a predetermined dollar amount attached to him. Since the Indians won't have a No.1 pick in June, it means their bonus pool is reduced by the slotting price of their first-round pick.

When the Indians came to terms with Encarnacion, they had the 25th pick in the first round. Last year the Padres selected Kent State lefty Eric Lauer for $2 million with that pick. That gives you an idea of how money will be subtracted from the Tribe's bonus pool.

Hey, Hoynsie: Is there any concern among Indians' coaches and front office that Michael Brantley's shoulder injury is the same as Travis Hafner's? Hafner was never the same after injuring his shoulder following several great years of power production. - Keith Von Sup, Tannersville, Pa.

Hey, Keith: I don't think the injuries are the same. Brantley had a torn labrum repaired and the biceps tendon transplanted in his right shoulder in two operations. I don't remember Hafner's surgery as being that involved. Still, I think the Indians have to be concerned until they see what Brantley can do in spring training.

I know there are rumors about the severity of Brantley's injury and that he could miss part of the 2017 season after playing just 11 games last season. The Indians, however, have maintained that he is on course to be at full strength in spring training.

We'll just have to wait and see.

Michael Brantley expresses surprise over a report that says he'll miss significant playing time in 2017 because of his surgically-repaired right shoulder.

Hey, Hoynsie: While I understand that the holiday spirit is to be thankful for what you have, I can't help but want more. I know the Indians have come to terms with Edward Encarnacion, but is there any indication that the front office will go all in and pursue another big name such as Andrew McCutchen or Charlie Blackmon? - Brian J., Newington, Conn.

Hey, Brian: I'm not sure I want to go to Las Vegas with you if you don't think acquiring Encarnacion is going all in.

Hey, Hoynsie: Tell the Dolans thanks for a great Christmas present. - Robert Cooke.

Hey, Robert: I think you just did a good job of that all by yourself.

Chris Antonetti, Indians' president of baseball operations, and agent Paul Kinzer kept the Christmas spirit while negotiating the final terms of Edwin Encarnacion's deal on Thursday night.
Hey, Hoynsie: Tyler Naquin struggled with the high fastball last season once pitchers figured out he couldn't hit it. Even though he had a terrific season overall, he didn't show up late when they needed it. How much of a leash do you see the Indians giving him in 2017? - Shawn Marshall, Garfield Heights.

Hey, Shawn: Naquin did have a fine rookie season in 2016. I don't think you can blame him for not hitting that much in the postseason. He wasn't the only Indians hitter who struggled and if a team is counting on a rookie to carry the load in October, well, they're in more trouble than they care to admit.

The 25-year-old, who posted a .296/.372/.514 slash line in 116 games, provided a welcome presence at the plate for a team that desperately sought some stability in the outfield.

Just how much and where Naquin will play in 2017 depends on what the Indians do the rest of the off-season. Will he platoon with Abraham Almonte? Will the Indians re-sign Davis or another versatile outfielder who can help in center? There's still a long way to go before opening day.

Little Mermaid and Santa Claus can't stop Cleveland Indians from landing Edwin Encarnacion

Paul Hoynes, on December 24, 2016 at 9:40 AM, updated December 24, 2016 at 1:01 PM

CLEVELAND, Ohio - The Christmas holidays did not get in the way of the Indians coming to terms with free agent Edwin Encarnacion on Thursday night.

Paul Kinzer, Encarnacion's agent, told SiriusXM's MLB Radio Network that he was at Six Flags Amusement Park in Georgia with his grandchildren to see Santa Claus when the deal went down. Kinzer added that Chris Antonetti, Indians' President of Baseball Operations, made the deal while attending a performance of the Nutcracker with his family.

Antonetti later clarified that he and his family were at a live performance of Little Mermaid at the Beck Center in Lakewood when he closed the deal.

"It was somewhere between 'Under the Sea' and 'Part of Your World' (two songs in the show)," Antonetti texted.

Kinzer said the bidding came down to the Indians, Texas and Oakland with Billy Beane, the A's top baseball decision maker, forcing the issue.

Kinzer said Encarnacion picked the Indians for two reasons - location and his knowledge of the team.

"Edwin had just got done playing the Indians in the playoffs so he knew how good they were," said Kinzer.

Kinzer added that during the ALCS Encarnacion had some of the Indians' players over to his house for dinner. Recruiting calls from manager Terry Francona and Indians players helped as well.

Regarding geography, Kinzer said Cleveland is closer to the Dominican Republic than Oakland and that played a big part in his decision. They don't call Cleveland the best location in the nation for nothing.

How are the Indians going to use Edwin Encarnacion?

Perhaps Encarnacion did not want to return to Oakland, a team that non-tendered him in December of 2010 after claiming him off waivers from Toronto. Encarnacion was designated for assignment by the Blue Jays in November of 2010 after parts of two seasons as a defensively challenged third baseman.

The Blue Jays quickly re-signed him as a free agent, moved him to first base and watched him blossom into one baseball's most consistent power hitters.

The A's are also coming off a 93-loss season and need a serious rebuild, while the Indians reached Game 7 of the World Series last season.

"It ended up being a tough decision," said Kinzer. "We had the Rangers and Oakland in it until the last minute. When Billy Beane decided to play poker, he came all in. He came in and made it really tough.

"He threw out some (Yoenis) Cespedes type offers with higher AAVs (average annual value). Edwin turned down more money, but it wasn't anything against Oakland. With Edwin it's more about comfort and the travel with his family in the Dominican. That weighed heavily on his mind.

"It came down to location and the type of team Cleveland has."

Kinzer said Oakland offered Encarnacion a two-year deal with an option for a third. He also said Encarnacion would have an out clause in the deal.

The Indians and Encarnacion agreed to a three-year $60 million deal, pending his physical. The deal includes a club option for a fourth year worth $25 million. If the Indians don't pick up the option, Encarnacion will receive a $5 million buyout.

Kinzer said he was stepping off rides at Six Flags, while negotiating the deal on his cellphone. He said one time he had to step out of the room when his grandchildren were waiting to see Santa Claus.

"Chris actually stepped out (of the Little Mermaid) and I stepped off a ride and we talked," said Kinzer. "And I had to talk to Billy and Jon Daniels (Texas general manager). Billy Beane really brought this thing to a head. He heated up the situation to where it was time to make a decision.

"Billy almost pulled this off at the last minute."

Kinzer said the Indians did a good job of countering Oakland's late rush.

"Cleveland did some things to sweeten the deal at the end that don't necessarily show up immediately in the numbers," said Kinzer. "I can't go into them now, but they were creative and we were creative and bridged some gaps.

"Chris made it very obvious that Edwin was important and he wanted him there. Billy and Jon Daniel did too. All of this happened in a few hours. . . I had no idea that this was going to hit the fan (Thursday) night."

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 12.25.2016
CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The Cleveland Indians ownership has made a major statement about winning with the signing of free agent power hitter Edwin Encarnacion. Here are some key points:

1. Encarnacion's deal is $60 million guaranteed. I heard he will average about $18 million annually for the first three seasons. There is a fourth year worth about $20 million, with $5 million guaranteed.

2. Encarnacion gambled on finding a larger deal. His agent quickly turned down the $80 million, four-year offer to stay with the Toronto Blue Jays. That was not long after the season. When free agency first opened, the Houston Astros offered him $66 million for three years. When Encarnacion turned that down, the Astros quickly signed Carlos Beltran to a one-year deal. Most "experts" thought Encarnacion would receive a $100 million deal, and he was operating on that assumption.

3. The Indians quickly targeted Encarnacion. They knew the first baseman/DH liked the Indians. He wanted to stay in the American League. He saw how the Tribe played when they knocked his Blue Jays out of the playoffs. The Indians do have a realistic chance to return to the World Series, especially with his bat in the middle of the order.

4. At first, the Indians were offering a two-year deal with an option for a third season. About a week ago, ownership gave the green light to a third guaranteed season. The Indians wanted to limit the guarantee to about $60 million.

5. In the meantime, another team offered something close to the Tribe's $60 million. I heard it was the Oakland A's. The Indians were doing a good job recruiting Encarnacion. Anyway, there was another team, another three-year offer much like the Tribe. He picked Cleveland.

6. The Indians estimate their payroll will rise to about $135 million this season. They were at $98 million last season. The Indians were the only team not in the top 15 in payroll to make the playoffs in 2016. The only other team not in the top 15 (or top 50 percent) with a winning record in 2016 was Houston.

7. The Tribe's rise in payroll should put them close to the middle of the pack, although some experts have estimated the average team payroll will be about $140 million this season.

8. It's doubtful the Indians will do much else in free agency, unless it's a minor move. So they probably won't re-sign Rajai Davis unless the veteran comes back for far less than his $7 million contract in 2016.

ABOUT POSTSEASON MONEY

I was told the Indians received about $15 million to $20 million in postseason revenue. That sounded very small, but the reason is how baseball uses that cash.

I received this information from a top MLB financial guy:

1. There is something called the "players pool." It's cash that goes to the players who take part in the postseason. The Cubs divided up $28 million for winning the Series, the Indians chopped up $18 million.

2. This money comes from 60 percent of the revenue from the first three ALDS games, and the first four ALCS games. The longer the series, the better for the owners. But the Indians wiped out Boston in three games in the first round, and took out Toronto in five games in the ALCS.

3. Obviously, the Indians didn't care about not playing those extra playoff games -- it was their ticket to the World Series. But it's just how the system works.

4. The real money from making the World Series comes from selling merchandise and tickets sales for the next season.

ABOUT THE FANS

Now, the question is how will the fans respond?

The Indians have had four consecutive winning seasons.

They have a two-time Manager of the Year in Terry Francona. Their front office is considered one of the best in baseball. They went to the playoffs in 2013, and to Game 7 of the 2016 World Series.

They will be the favorite to win the AL Central Division, and you can be sure many experts will predict them to return to the World Series.

Ownership with the Dolan family and minority partner John Sherman have made a major commitment by signing Encarnacion and jacking up the payroll.

The Indians have not been higher than 28th in attendance since 2012.

Part of the narrative was, "Ownership won't spend."

Even as the Indians won 92 games in 2013 ... and had winning records after that ... it was the same thing, "The Dolans are cheap."

They made a significant addition to the payroll last year when they added Andrew Miller ($9 million annually through 2018). Now, it's Encarnacion.

They have signed Corey Kluber, Jason Kipnis, Carlos Carrasco and Yan Gomes to significant contract extensions.

EARLY RETURNS

I've heard the following about Tribe ticket sales:

1. Season tickets are approaching 9,000. They were at about 7,500 a year ago.

2. The Indians sold about 200 season tickets in the first 24 hours after word of Encarnacion's signing came out.
3. It's been at least 10 years since the Indians have sold 10,000 season tickets. That appears to be a very realistic goal right now.

4. Tickets in the lower bowl of Progressive Field have already sold out for some weekend games during the summer.

THE BASIC PAYROLL

Here's an estimate on what some of the top players will be paid in 2017:

Edwin Encarnacion: $18 million
Carlos Santana: $12 million
Jason Kipnis: $9 million
Chris Johnson: $9 million (being paid off as part of the Nick Swisher/Michael Bourn deal with Atlanta in 2014)
Andrew Miller: $9 million
Michael Brantley: $8.3 million
Cody Allen: $7.7 million (estimate)
Corey Kluber: $7.7 million
Carlos Carrasco: $6.5 million
Yan Gomes: $4.5 million
Bryan Shaw: $4.5 million (estimate)
Lonnie Chisenhall: $4 million (estimate)
Danny Salazar: $4 million (estimate)
Trevor Bauer: $4 million (estimate)
Josh Tomlin: $2.5 million
Brandon Guyer: $2 million (estimate)
Zach McAllister: $2 million (estimate)

That adds up to about $115 million, not counting players such as Jose Ramirez, Francisco Lindor and others who are not arbitration eligible -- and probably will make about $600,000 annually unless they sign extensions.

ABOUT GREG ALLEN

I was talking to some of the top people with the Tribe about Greg Allen, who emerged as one of their top prospects last season. He becomes even more important because it's not likely the Indians will bring back Rajai Davis after the signing of Encarnacion.

The 23-year-old Allen split the season between Class A and Class AA, batting .295 (.830 OPS) with 7 HR and 44 RBI. But here is the intriguing part:

Allen is a superb defensive center fielder.

He is a natural leadoff hitter. His on-base percentage was .416. He stole 45 bases.

He is a switch hitter.

Allen was part of the deal to Milwaukee for Jonathan Lucroy that fell apart. Baseball America rates Allen as the Tribe's No. 10 prospect, and its best defensive minor league outfielder.

There are no plans to open the season with Allen. He has yet to play in Class AAA. Along with Brad Zimmer, Allen was named to the All-Arizona Fall League team. He batted .269 (.829 OPS) with 12 steals in 14 attempts.

Zimmer batted .259 (.935 OPS) with 4 HR and 16 RBI, he was 8-of-9 in stolen bases.

Tyler Naquin and Davis played center last season for the Tribe.

FanGraphs rated the top 20 defensive center fielders in the American League in 2016. Naquin was No. 16, Davis was No. 10. Most scouts believe Naquin is best suited for right field.

Some of the Tribe's brass believe Allen is developing quickly, and he could be big league ready by the middle of the summer.

Meanwhile, the door will be wide open for Yandy Diaz to the make the team. He can play third and the outfield, and he is a potent right-handed hitter.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 12.25.2016

Jeff Schudel: Cleveland Indians hit a home run by signing Encarnacion

By Jeff Schudel, The News-Herald & The Morning Journal

One World Series trip has apparently whetted the appetite of Indians owner Paul Dolan for more.
Dolan opened his wallet after the Indians lost one of the most exciting World Series in recent memory and gave team president Chris Antonetti the green light to swing for the fences on a 3-0 count. Antonetti responded on Dec. 22 by signing slugger Edwin Encarnacion, the top free agent of the winter, to a three-year contract with a club option for a fourth. The deal is worth a reported $20 million a year.

This is big on many levels. First, it should shut up the naysayers who accuse the Dolans of being cheap owners. That was already proven at the trading deadline over the summer when the Indians traded with the Yankees for relief pitcher Andrew Miller, but this is much, much bigger.

Secondly, it shows once again the respect players have for Indians manager Terry Francona.

I would not be surprised to learn David Ortiz advised Encarnacion to sign with the Indians. The retired star from the Boston Red Sox played for Francona from 2004-11. Ortiz and Encarnacion are from the Dominican Republic and are close friends.

Netting the biggest fish in free agency also confirms how much great players want to play for a winning team. The city’s attractions might be a factor, but Cleveland offered something the Oakland A’s could give Encarnacion — a chance to win the World Series next year.

Mike Napoli will be missed in the clubhouse, but all reports about Encarnacion say he is a good clubhouse guy, too.

Beyond all that, Encarnacion makes the Indians lineup downright scary. Opposing starting pitchers might call in sick. They might develop soreness that won't show up in an X-ray when it's their turn to pitch.

Francona can parade Jason Kipnis, Francisco Lindor, Michael Brantley, Encarnacion, Carlos Santana and Jose Ramirez to the plate before the opposing pitcher has the chance to remove his cap and wipe sweat from his brow.

Brantley is the X-factor for the Indians. He played in only 11 games last year because of a nagging shoulder injury, but according to Antonetti he is on pace to make a full recovery. If Brantley returns to his 2014 and 2015 form it would be like signing another free agent for free, because he is already under contract.

Spring training begins in mid-February. The Indians don’t have to make another move. They are already vastly improved from the team that took the Cubs to the 10th inning of Game 7, primarily because injured players including Brantley plus pitchers Danny Salazar and Carlos Carrasco are getting healthy.

The window for any team to win a World Series is small. Key players are under contract for the next couple years, but that won’t last forever. Adding Encarnacion’s bat should make the Indians favorites in the American League to go back to the World Series.

Fans say they wanted to see proof the Indians are serious before spending money on tickets. Progressive Field was packed each game for the playoffs, but the real proof of fan support will come in June, July and August when school is out of session.

Dolan and Antonetti could not have delivered a better Christmas gift. The best part is fans will get to open it 162 times a season — and more often with the playoffs — for at least three years.

PROJECTED INDIANS 2017 OPENING DAY LINEUP

Jason Kipnis — second base
Francisco Lindor — shortstop
Michael Brantley — left field
Edwin Encarnacion — first base
Carlos Santana — designated hitter
Jose Ramirez — third base
Tyler Naquin — center field
Lonnie Chisenhall — right field
Roberto Perez — catcher
Corey Kluber — starting pitcher

Nick Cafardo / SUNDAY BASEBALL NOTES / Just in time for the holidays, Rusney Castillo is reunited with his mom and son

By Nick Cafardo

Who knows what angst Rusney Castillo has lived with the past three years? Oh, he’s a rich man, the Red Sox giving him a $72.5 million contract based on his unlimited potential after a successful career in Cuba.

But the last two-plus years have left doubts. Castillo, who has been taken off the 40-man roster, also has been banished to Pawtucket, becoming one of the highest-paid players in Triple A history. And he has been branded with the B-word — bust. But what if there has been a reason? What if Castillo has had to live with the fact that he had no idea when he’d reunite with his now-4-year-old son, Rusney Jr.? Or whether he’d ever see his mother, Taimi Peraza, again.

Last week, that angst came to an end. Attorneys Gregg Clifton and Matt Martinez of Jackson Lewis LLP in Phoenix facilitated a reunion for Castillo with his son and mother over the holidays in Florida. The attorneys were able to get a difficult-to-obtain visitor visa after they presented the case to the United States Embassy in Havana. After two long months of waiting, Castillo’s family obtained the temporary visas for this visit.

Visitor visas for Cuban citizens are not frequently granted, so this was a great win. Certainly it will be a very special holiday for Castillo and his family.
“It’s a heartwarming Christmas story,” said Clifton, who represented Tom Glavine, David Wells, Bronson Arroyo, B.J. Surhoff, and others during a long career as a player agent. “For Jackson Lewis, Matt, and me to be able to play a small role to put Rusney and his family together is just touching for all of us.”

Castillo was expected to be one of the most talented players to come out of Cuba. While the Red Sox never saw Castillo in a game before signing him, his workouts for scouts were phenomenal. It was thought by then-general manager Ben Cherington and his staff that Castillo had a great chance to become one of the top players in baseball. But Castillo’s assimilation to a new culture has been difficult. The anguish of being separated from his young son and not knowing when and if he’d be able to see him couldn’t have helped.

According to Clifton, Castillo’s family is only allowed to stay in this country through the holidays, but they can visit Castillo on limited stays for the next five years.

Red Sox president Dave Dombrowski said the organization has not decided whether Castillo will be in the major league camp next spring. The Sox are in a tricky situation with Castillo in that while he’s off the 40-man roster, his money doesn’t count toward the luxury tax threshold. It is the same with veteran righthanded hitter Allen Craig, who is scheduled to make $11 million next season at Pawtucket.

The Red Sox also could cut ties with both players, though they provide coverage for the Triple A roster, with the hope that one or both could eventually help the major league team.

Castillo played five seasons for Ciego de Avila in Cuba, hitting .315. In 2010, he hit .324 with a .928 OPS with 18 home runs, 79 RBIs, and 29 stolen bases. That was the player the Red Sox thought they were getting.

The one area in which Castillo has distinguished himself in the major leagues is on defense. He is a natural center fielder who can also play the corner spots well. In 317 major league at-bats, Castillo has hit .262 with seven homers, 35 RBIs, and a .679 OPS.

In spring training last season, Castillo was thought to be Boston’s starting left fielder. But he soon lost that job when he didn’t perform.

The prevailing opinion among many in the Red Sox organization, and some outside of it, is that Castillo needs a change of scenery and a fresh start. Whether the Red Sox attempt to move Castillo remains to be seen, as they’re paying him through 2020.

The Red Sox would love to see Castillo with his head on straight and reaching the potential they saw in him when they signed him. At the time, the Red Sox seemed to be reacting to losing out on Jose Abreu to the White Sox the year before, not wanting to be left out of the popular Cuban hitting market. But as Castillo started playing in games, there was that pit-of-the-stomach feeling that the Red Sox got the wrong guy.

They made up for it by signing fellow Cuban Yoan Moncada, who was coveted throughout baseball, but they traded him this month to the White Sox in the Chris Sale deal.

“I guess we’ll see if not having his family around has weighed on him,” said one American League executive of Castillo. “Boston gave him a lot of money, but it wasn’t as if other teams weren’t willing to step up for him. I’m not sure any teams ever got as high as Boston did, but there were substantial other offers out there for him. You never know how this family situation affects a kid like that. If his head is clear, who know if he performs better? I guess we’ll find out in 2017 if that had anything to do with it.”

WRITTEN IN THE STARS

Hoping book performs well

Rick Peterson is one of the true innovators in pitching. In his new book “Crunch Time,” written with human performance expert Judd Hoekstra, Peterson outlines leadership qualities and mechanisms that allow not only pitchers but people from all walks of life to perform at crucial times.

“What strikes me about Rick is just how open he is to new ideas and challenging traditional thinking,” Oakland Athletics vice president and general manager Billy Beane writes in the book’s foreword. “That’s what reframing is all about — choosing to see the world through a different lens that enables you to bring out the best in yourself and others. Rick reframed how to best achieve maximum pitching performance, especially in pressure situations. He showed that performing in the clutch is not a case of ‘you have it or you don’t.’ Rather, it can be learned.

“He successfully brought out the best in the budding young stars of our pitching staff — the Big Three of Barry Zito, Tim Hudson, and Mark Mulder. Perhaps even more importantly, he helped the other less-physically-gifted pitchers like Chad Bradford and Cory Lidle maximize their potential and their contributions to our team. Baseball is a game with razor-thin margins of victory. Being able to get all your players — from the top of your roster to the bottom — to consistently perform to their potential in pressure situations is frequently the difference between winning and losing.”

Peterson has been a major league pitching coach with the A’s, Brewers, and Mets, and has also worked for the Orioles as their minor league pitching director.

Apropos of nothing

1. The Indians are getting very close to being a superpower in the American League and should be a worthy challenger to the Red Sox for league hierarchy. They just got their hands on the premier free agent hitter in the game in Edwin Encarnacion, at three years and $60 million. He essentially replaces Mike Napoli as their first baseman/DH. Their pitching, if healthy, and it appears it will be (Danny Salazar and Carlos Carrasco both indicated they are 100 percent), isn’t glamorous like that of the Red Sox but is effective. The Indians now have an elite power hitter, a top starting rotation and bullpen, and a world-class manager and front office. The Indians were also very interested in Jose Bautista but may be out of that hunt with the signing of Encarnacion, who was also being pursued by the A’s.

2. When you hear things like this, you wonder what the player is thinking. Jason Hammel jumped ship from the reputable Octagon agency to Aces simply because he thought the process of getting him signed was slow. It appears Hammel’s expectations for a big contract were unrealistic. He had a very good year for the Cubs (15-10, 3.83 ERA), pitching only 166⅔ innings and going seven innings or more in only six of his 30 starts. But the market hadn’t developed for him yet compared to, for example, Rich Hill (three years, $48 million).

3. Red Sox first base coach Ruben Amaro Jr. really likes Josh Tobias, the second baseman acquired from the Phillies in the Clay Buchholz deal. Amaro was the Phillies’ GM when they drafted Tobias. “He’s not a guy you look at initially and say, ‘What a great prospect,’” said Amaro. “You watch him over a period of time and he just grows on you. He hits well. He does everything well. Dave [Dombrowski] asked me about him and that’s exactly what I told him.”
Normally, Christmas week isn't a busy time for baseball. The Winter Meetings have wrapped up, and a free agent signing here or there might last season, righthanded batters hit .282 with a .804 OPS. Lefthanded batters hit .277 with a .803 OPS. . . . Christmas happy birthdays to reliever Tyler Thornburg in 219 since that date to appear in at least 600 games. He has pitched 596 . . . Christmas happy birthdays to reliever Tyler Thornburg in 219 since that date to appear in at least 600 games. He has pitched 596 . . . Christmas happy birthdays to reliever Tyler Thornburg in 219 since that date to appear in at least 600 games. He has pitched 596 . . . Christmas happy birthdays to reliever Tyler Thornburg in 219 since that date to appear in at least 600 games. He has pitched 596 From the Bill Chuck files — “Since he began his career in 2008, new Marlins reliever Brad Ziegler has appeared in 604 games, the only pitcher because of the bat-flipping incident, but he makes the most sense for that lineup. The Orioles are seriously considering a Trey Mancini/Pedro Alvarez platoon. Dustin Pedroia, 2B, Red Sox — Pedroia, who had knee surgery after the season, has had no issues and has made very good progress in his rehab. He said in a text, “I’ll be ready, don’t you worry.” Pedroia had a superb season both at the plate and in the field, but injured his knee diving for a ball in Toronto. That occurred in August and he continued to play for the rest of the season. Jose Bautista, 1B/OF/DH, free agent — Interest in Bautista has come from the Rays and Indians (though that may have changed with the signing of Edwin Encarnacion). With newfound money after the Clay Buchholz deal, the Red Sox may resurface. The Rays never seem a likely destination, but the team has had a good relationship with the Octagon family of agents, who delivered injured All-Star catcher Wilson Ramos.Jose Quintana, LHP, White Sox — The White Sox are trying to make a similar deal for Quintana that they did with Chris Sale. The Pirates appear to be in the lead, even after signing Ivan Nova. If the White Sox can pull this off, the likely targets would be pitching prospect Tyler Glasnow and outfielder Austin Meadows. The White Sox could also have interest in first baseman Josh Bell, but they have Jose Abreu. There are reports of the Yankees being involved, but it would have to be for some of their more redundant prospects. They do have a lot of shortstops in their system. Quintana is only 27. Bobby Valentine, athletic director, Sacred Heart University — “Bobby V” said he’s received “a new education” since his name appeared as a possible ambassador to Japan for the Trump administration. Valentine does have a relationship with Donald Trump but has not said whether there has been official contact. He denied any contact with Trump’s transition team a week ago. Valentine spent parts of six years as manager of the Chiba Lotte Marines in Japan, and won a Japan Series. Extra innings
From the Bill Chuck files — “Since he began his career in 2008, new Marlins reliever Brad Ziegler has appeared in 604 games, the only pitcher since that date to appear in at least 600 games. He has pitched 596 innings and allowed only 23 homers, the same total as new Red Sox reliever Tyler Thornburg in 219 innings.” . . . Also, “Concern about too many lefty starters for the Red Sox seems overrated: At Fenway Park last season, righthanded batters hit .282 with a .804 OPS. Lefthanded batters hit .277 with a .803 OPS.” . . . Christmas happy birthdays to Hideki Okajima (41) and Rickey Henderson (58).
Memories of Christmas week past
Normally, Christmas week isn’t a busy time for baseball. The Winter Meetings have wrapped up, and a free agent signing here or there might be consummated. But not always.
Ken Davidoff / What we know about baseball’s 2018 bonanza might be wrong

By Ken Davidoff December 23, 2016 | 1:22pm

Already, you hear the chirping. Already, more to the point, teams are planning.

The free-agent class of 2018-19 is going to be one for the ages.


The Yankees, their offseason shopping done for now, are headed on a path that takes them below the luxury-tax threshold for 2018, which would reset their tax rate and allow them to go hog wild following the ’18 season while facing a far lesser penalty.

The Dodgers probably can’t get under the threshold any time soon thanks to their shopping spree this month, during which they re-signed Rich Hill, Kenley Jansen and Justin Turner. Yet they have many significant salaries coming off the books over the next two seasons — eight-figure (before the decimal point) earners Carl Crawford, Andre Ethier, Adrian Gonzalez, Scott Kazmir and Brandon McCarthy — that will give them some breathing and spending room when they will want that. Furthermore, their ace Kershaw, who right now looks like the best pitcher of the bunch, has an opt-out that he seems quite likely to utilize.

Let’s pounce on that “quite likely,” though. A lot can happen in two years, right? After all, we’ve been discussing this ’18-’19 class for a while already, and at one juncture, the top pitching earners figured to be Jose Fernandez, Harvey and Kershaw. But Fernandez died in a horrible boating accident in September, and Harvey has much to prove after undergoing surgery last summer for thoracic outlet syndrome.

What’s the value of talking about a free-agent class two years away? To try to answer that, I looked back at the industry’s prior elite free-agent group: Last year’s.

Last offseason, a total of 13 players earned contracts worth over $50 million; this offseason, as a point of reference, we’ve seen nine, including Thursday’s agreement between the Indians and Edwin Encarnacion. If we climb higher, we see six of last year’s group passed the $100 million mark; it sure looks like only Yoenis Cespedes will get to nine figures this time.

How precisely could we have forecast the 2015-16 crop following the 2013 season, just as we’re looking ahead to 2018-19 upon the conclusion of 2016?

The answer is: Somewhat precisely. It’s not a complete waste of our time. Yet we must appreciate how much can change in a two-year span.

With the help of Baseball Reference, I looked at the 2013 leaders in WAR and ranked all the players on target to become free agents after 2015. (I did not include those who were free agents after 2013 unless they signed a two-year deal that winter, nor did I include those set to enter the market after 2014.)

To match up with the 13 guys in who raked financially last year, here are the top 13 players in this category:

1. Miguel Cabrera, Tigers (7.3)
2. Hisashi Iwakuma, Mariners (7.0)
3. Chris Davis, Orioles (6.5)
4. Gerardo Parra, Diamondbacks (6.1)
5. Shane Victorino, Red Sox (6.1)
6. Jhoulys Chacin, Rockies (5.8)
7. (tie) Marlon Byrd, Pirates; Bartolo Colon, A’s; and Ben Zobrist, Rays (5.0)
10. Alex Gordon, Royals (4.2)
11. Juan Uribe, Dodgers (4.1)
12. Mike Napoli, Red Sox (4.0)
13. Zack Greinke, Dodgers (3.9)

Of those 13, only Greinke (Diamondbacks, six years, $206.5 million), Davis (Orioles, seven years, $161 million), Zobrist (Cubs, four years, $56 million) and Gordon (Royals, four years, $72 million) wound up among the top earners. Of the rest:

— Cabrera re-upped with the Tigers in spring training of 2014, on a monster deal.
— Iwakuma’s age (34 last winter) and durability decreased his earning power, and then he failed a physical with the Dodgers after agreeing on terms with them. He wound up going back to Seattle for a bargain deal.
— Parra’s strong defense in 2013 proved to be a fluke. He reverted to his previous levels in 2014 and 2015, and he signed a three-year deal with Colorado.
— Victorino faded fast after helping the Sawx win it all in ’13 and he didn’t even play in the major leagues in 2016.
— Arm injuries destroyed Chacin.
— The ages of Byrd (38), Colon (42) and Uribe (36) at the end of ’15 meant none could climb into baseball’s one percent. Only Colon made it active through 2016, and he got himself $12.5 million in November to pitch for the Braves next year.
— Napoli slowed down enough that he had to sign a one-year deal with the Indians, for whom he recorded a great 2016, and now he’s out there again.

What about the nine other 2015-16 free agents who passed $50 million? We can put these guys in a few different baskets:
Injuries that didn’t last: David Price got off to a rough start in 2013, went on the disabled list with a left arm ailment and rallied for a near-typical season; the Red Sox proceeded to reward him handsomely. Johnny Cueto made just 11 starts due to back problems that went away, and the Giants signed him for nine figures. Wei-Yin Chen’s right oblique sidelined him, and then very good 2014 and 2015 seasons made him a rich Marlin.

Poor performance: Cespedes tallied a .294 on-base percentage in his sophomore season, and folks wondered whether he had peaked as a rookie. He hadn’t. With a career high in innings pitched came a worse ERA for Jeff Samardzija, yet he showed enough in 2014 that the Giants overlooked his shaky 2015 and gave him big bucks. Ian Kennedy stunk for the Diamondbacks and got traded to the Padres, where he established his market value.

Youth and consistency: Jason Heyward, 26 after last year, and Mike Leake, 27 after last year, did perfectly well in 2013, just not quite well enough to make our list. They kept going and wound up with the Cubs and Cardinals, respectively. Justin Upton’s defense slipped in ’13, then recovered enough the next two years that, at age 28, he got a handsome deal from the Tigers.

OK, now that we’ve gotten a feel for the two-year look-ahead from 2013 to 2015, let’s try to do the same for two years from now. Which free-agent stocks should you buy and which should you sell?

Most likely to make the most: Machado. He’ll be just 26 by the time he gets out there, and three of his first four years have been elite. What a talent.

Most likely to be a Yankee: Harper. He sure seems to want it, and the Yankees still love guys with auras. You could argue Harper’s playing in the National League actually increases his appeal to the Yankees and their fans because they see him so infrequently — as opposed to, say, Machado, who comes to The Bronx three times a year.

Most likely to make the most for a pitcher: Kershaw. Remember Joe DiMaggio’s line about getting an ownership stake in a hypothetical negotiation with George Steinbrenner, had he put up his numbers in the free-agent climate of the 1980s? It feels like that will apply to Kershaw, who is on track to become one of the game’s all-time great pitchers, and the Dodgers.

Most likely to make nine figures in the fewest number of seasons: Donaldson. He’ll be 33, yet he probably can keep raking for two more years.

Most likely to break Aroldis Chapman’s record for a closer: Britton. Sinkers can make you rich.

Most likely to blossom into nine figures between now and then: Drew Pomeranz. He’ll be only 30, and he’s a left-hander. If he can hold his own in the American League East? He’ll be quite popular.

Most likely to make up for what should have already occurred: Wilson Ramos. A poorly timed major knee injury limited him to two years with the Rays. Look for the catcher to get his five-year deal when he comes out again at age 31.

Most likely to fall short of his dreams: Harvey. He now is working with Tommy John surgery and TOS on his record.

Most likely to fall by the time he gets out there: Murphy. He’ll be 34, and how will his defense look at that juncture? Too bad for both his sake and the Mets’ that he didn’t accept the Mets’ qualifying offer last year, put up his monster 2016 with the Mets and then become available again this winter.

Most likely to fade under $100 million: Center fielders Adam Jones and Andrew McCutchen. They’ll be 33 and 32, respectively. It’s hard to keep playing this demanding position and put up good offensive numbers at that age. Just ask Jacoby Ellsbury.

Most likely to pass on joining this group: David Price. He has an opt-out from his Red Sox deal, and he might be trending the wrong way too much to give up the four years and $127 million he’ll have left.

Most likely to sign an extension and stay off the market: Brian Dozier. Just a guess that he’ll re-up ahead of time with whatever team (the Dodgers?) acquires him from the Twins.