Craig Breslow worked his angles to get back with Twins
Phil Miller | Star Tribune | February 14, 2017

FORT MYERS, Fla. – His 2016 season consisted of a mostly lousy April in Miami, a demotion to the minor leagues, and two well-deserved releases within a month. So when Craig Breslow sat down and evaluated his 15-year pro career last August, it was obvious what most ballplayers would decide to do next.

But Breslow — Yale grad, molecular biophysics major, World Series champion — isn’t most ballplayers.

“I realized I was probably going to be out of baseball,” the 36-year-old lefthander said. “So I decided I had to make some changes.”

Six months later, he was choosing among 10 different contract offers, an unlikely bidding war for a one- or two-batter lefty specialist who hasn’t kept his ERA below 4.00 in three years. Breslow used his arm to create interest from MLB teams — but mostly, he used his head.

“When you’re home in August, you have some time to think about how to proceed,” Breslow said with a laugh. “I started thinking about this, planning this, figuring out how to approach it, which I did pretty methodically. Analytically.”

He didn’t have the physical gifts of baseball’s best pitchers, neither a blazing fastball nor an eat-you-alive slider, not even close. So after watching numerous recordings of great relievers, he decided to experiment with the height of his arm and the grip on the ball in order to create the greatest movement possible on his pitches. He retreated to his laboratory, in other words, and tried to turn his Jekyll pitches into Hyde weapons.

“I got this machine [called Rapsodo] which measures movement and spin rate and was able to quantify the changes I was making. I could measure how much the ball moves horizontally from each arm slot, and how much vertically, and how much better I was getting as I worked on it. And I could show teams, here’s how much my pitches used to move, and here’s what they do now,” Breslow said. “The difference was
sometimes five or six inches. That felt like it could be effective.”

He settled on lowering his arm angle to just above sidearm, and made another heartening discovery.

“There’s another piece of technology, a sleeve that you can wear that measures stress on your elbow,” Breslow said. “As I lowered my angle, the velocity went up and the stress went down. The obvious conclusion is, ‘Why didn’t I do this years ago?’ ”

Well, the technology is fairly new, but more important, so is the ability and willingness to utilize it. But Breslow could hardly have found a better match for his approach than in the Twins’ new front office, which intends to aggressively search for new ways to evaluate players and maximize their talents. Derek Falvey and Thad Levine were looking for bullpen help; Breslow not only offered it, but he had the data to convince them.

“It was very unique,” Falvey said of Breslow’s pitch to the Twins. “Anytime you can talk about an evidence-based approach, that’s what we’re trying to do with all our players. ... Not just data, but some evaluation that we feel has real evidence. ... When you make a bet on something, you want to make sure you have the information behind it.”

Breslow said he was offered more money by other teams, and could have signed with more likely contenders. But a player often billed as “the smartest man in baseball” made an intellectual connection with Falvey, who wanted Breslow for his leadership and experience as much as his pitching.

“I spoke to Derek for hours. He’s really innovative, he’s got a vision for where he wants to take this organization, and I think he’s going to be successful,” Breslow said. “It’s exciting and compelling to be a part of that.”

Breslow agreed to an incentive-laden minor league contract that could pay him as much as $2 million if he repeats the success that made him so important to the 2013 World Series champion Red Sox. Of course, that’s the great unknown in the Ivy Leaguer’s research.

“Yeah, the only thing [the data] doesn’t show is whether I can get hitters out,” Breslow said with a smile. “I can know how much the ball is moving, how fast it’s going, where it ends up, but I can’t tell how easily a hitter can pick it up. Or how easily does a hitter square it up. But that’s why we’re here.”

Former Twins manager Ron Gardenhire has prostate cancer
Phil Miller | Star Tribune | February 14, 2017

FORT MYERS, Fla. – Former Twins manager Ron Gardenhire has been diagnosed with prostate cancer and will undergo surgery in Minnesota sometime in the next few weeks, he announced Tuesday.

Gardenhire, hired last November to serve as bench coach for new Arizona Diamondbacks manager Torey Lovullo, will take a leave of absence, probably in mid-April, from his new team in April in order to begin treatment. Gardenhire, who intends to keep coaching until having surgery, broke the news in a clubhouse meeting with the Diamondbacks on Tuesday morning.

The 59-year-old isn’t the only longtime Twin battling cancer, either. Rick Stelmaszek, the Twins’ bullpen coach for a record 32 seasons, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in early December. Like his former boss’ case, the cancer was detected during an annual exam by Twins physician Dr. Vijay Eyunni.

“I’m going to fight and deal with it,” Gardenhire said. “It’s not how I envisioned starting spring training with a brand-new team, but it’s part of life. ... I’m lucky to have all the support I do. With the backing of this ballclub, we’ll get through it.”

Gardenhire’s cancer, confirmed by a follow-up MRI, was caught early, the longtime manager said, and his prognosis is good. Surgery will be performed after several weeks of preparation, and tests to confirm it hasn’t spread, by Dr. William Utz in Minneapolis, and chemotherapy will likely not be necessary. It’s possible he could return to his new team six weeks after the procedure; he should be in the dugout when the Diamondbacks visit Target Field on Aug. 18-20.

“Baseball is the perfect injector here. It gets your mind off a lot of things,” he said. “Having the support has been wonderful.”

He has the support of his former players, among many others.

“It’s bad news,” said Twins reliever Glen Perkins. “I’ve known him for a long time. You pray for him and hope that they catch it early and they are able to get him fixed up.
“He’s got a good sense of humor. He’s got a great attitude about everything. So, hopefully he’ll continue to have that. It’s not fun watching people go through cancer.”

Stelmaszek, a Twins coach from 1981-2012, the longest tenure in franchise history, remains in good spirits as he undergoes treatments near his Chicago home. He recently received a surprise visit from former Twins Tom Kelly, Kent Hrbek, Tim Laudner and Terry Steinbach, and vowed, as Gardenhire did, to “attack” the disease.

“That’s all you can do,” Stelmaszek said. “You have to keep the faith and plug away.”

Gardenhire managed the Twins for 13 seasons and owns the second-most victories in franchise history. Gardenhire went 1,068-1,039 in his 13 seasons leading the Twins, behind only his mentor, Tom Kelly, who went 1,140-1,244 in 16 seasons. Gardenhire guided the Twins to a Central Division title in his first three seasons as manager, and won six division titles in nine years.

Gardenhire finished second in Manager of the Year voting five times, and won the award in 2010, after the last of his Central championships. But the Twins were 3-19 in the postseason under the Okmulgee, Okla., native, and have lost 12 straight postseason games.

After four consecutive seasons of 90 or more losses, Gardenhire was fired following the 2014 season. He was hired last season as a special assistant and scout for Twins General Manager Terry Ryan, a position that ended with Ryan’s firing last summer. Gardenhire interviewed for managerial positions in Washington and San Diego before accepting Lovullo’s offer in Arizona for the 2017 season.

Twins’ day at camp: New boss making his presence known
La Velle E. Neal III | Star Tribune | February 14, 2017

FORT MYERS, FLA. – One difference between Derek Falvey and his predecessor, Terry Ryan: face time in the clubhouse during spring training.

Ryan entered the chamber only when he needed to conduct business. Falvey is making the clubhouse his business.

Falvey, the Twins’ new chief baseball officer, said Tuesday that he plans on being available to players and coaches as much as possible during camp. He will eat breakfast in the team dining room every day and will welcome feedback from players. Then he’ll head for the coaches room and talk about the upcoming day.

“Give them an opportunity to talk about anything they see fit,” he said. “I think, ultimately, I want to be part of that culture day in and day out. That’s the environment I grew up in.”

Falvey worked closely with manager Terry Francona and pitching coach Mickey Callaway while he was an assistant GM with the Indians. Francona praised Falvey for helping a pitching staff that led the Indians to the World Series.

Falvey was part of three-hour meetings Monday and Tuesday during which the staff broke down every player in camp. And the plan is to meet with every player in private during spring training.

Perkins on the hill

It was only 15 pitches, but it meant a lot to lefthander Glen Perkins.

“I felt good,” Perkins said. “I wasn’t able to do even that last year before I had surgery. So that’s progress to me.”

Perkins, who appeared in only two games last season, is making his way back from surgery to repair a torn labrum. He wanted to throw off a mound Friday but called it off because he wanted to work on his arm strength some more.

After working with assistant trainer Lanning Tucker over the weekend, Perkins felt much better and had no problems during his session.

“Tha’s a good first step,” Perkins said. “After not feeling like I can do that on Friday to feel like I could push it today is exciting. I was pretty down on Thursday after I played catch. I had to talk to Lanning and say that I wasn’t going to be able to throw a pen. He went to work on it and we got it better quick.”

Perkins will rest his arm Wednesday and go through long toss drills Friday. He’s still considered a long shot to be on the Opening Day roster.
Some Twins pitchers have thrown off a mound five to six times already.

Etc.

Falvey said he was not informed of any pitcher or catcher who failed to report Tuesday. So everyone will be on hand Wednesday for the first workout of 2017.

LET’S MEET

Niko Goodrum, infielder

Age: 24

2016 stats: .275 avg., seven HRs, 33 RBI in 55 total games between Class A Fort Myers and Class AA Chattanooga.

Acquired: Selected in the second round of the 2010 draft.

Role: Utility player at Chattanooga.

Did you know? This will be Goodrum’s eighth season in the organization, but his first time at major league training camp. ... He has played every infield position and center field during his minor league career. But he has spent the most time at third base.

Thoughts about the Twins as spring training kicks off in Fort Myers

La Velle E. Neal III | Star Tribune | February 14, 2017

In 1998, the Lee County Sports Complex didn’t include housing for minor leaguers, a performance hill or an expansive weight training center.

Hammond Stadium had one elevator that was used for humans and freight. And it broke down regularly.

There were no berms, no bars in the outfield or drink rails.

The area behind the outfield wall was one big pasture that was patrolled by cows. A helicopter once parked there and waited for Pudge Rodriguez to get his five innings in before he was whisked away to an event in Miami.

There was an alligator in the pond next to the stadium. Jayhawk Owens, in camp in 1998, was riding a bike to the stadium when he saw the gator sunning itself on the side of the pond and freaked out.

Sometimes, inhabitants of a nearby correctional facility would get out of a bus and clean up up the roadside along Hammond Stadium.

The Twins, in 1998, were headed into transition. Mike Morgan, Bob Tewksbury, Otis Nixon, Rich Aguilera, Ron Coomer, Greg Swindell, Terry Steinbach and a DH named Paul Molitor were part of a club that scared no one. Yet they all were interesting people to a certain scribe in his first season on the Twins beat.

I’m looking at spring training stats from that year and reading the names. Cletus Davidson, Ryan Radmanovich, Gary Rath, Keith LeGree, Jon Shave, Chris Latham, Dan Perkins. Wow.

That team went on to lose 92 games that season, but there was a lot to learn from a group of savvy players who tried every night to not embarrass themselves. They took their lumps, but they took the post. Tom Kelly was as demanding of the media as he was of his players, and one learned to be prepared before engaging T.K.

A lot of things have happened in Fort Myers since 1998. Cow pastures have been victimized by sprawl. The housing market has sailed, failed and sailed again. The Twins have built their complex up from solid to one of the best in Florida. And it’s now called the CenturyLink Sports Complex.

The team has come full circle. Tewksbury and his buddies were moved out for younger players in 1999 and 2000. It was ugly for a couple years, but the club was rewarded with six division titles in the 2000’s - although they won one playoff series during that stretch. Since 2010, the Twins have had just one winning season, fired Ron Gardenhire after 2014 and dismissed Terry Ryan midway through 2016.
What should be looked at as a tactical blunder, the Twins never admitted during this stretch that they were rebuilding. They maintained they were out to win, and have floundered under unrealistic expectations.

As pitchers and catchers report to camp today, the Twins are trying to get up off the floor. They have a promising young core of Miguel Sano, Jorge Polanco, Eddie Rosario, Byron Buxton, Max Kepler and Jose Berrios. The outfield of Rosario, Buxton and Kepler will save pitchers' ERAs with their range and arms. The key for Sano is to not give up a run with his glove for every run he produces at the plate. I'll be watching the outfield and the left side of the infield closely this spring.

Any rebuild - or should we use, reboot - won't be complete until the pitching is figured out. Ryan figured it out early in the 2000's, and the Twins won. He failed to figure it out during his second stint at GM - and is now a special assistant with the Phillies. It will be up to CBO Derek Falvey and GM Thad Levine (Falvine) to make tough and critical decisions about which arms - starters and relievers - to go with in the near future. With some hard -throwing prospects nearly ready, Falvine's work with the rotation will determine how quickly things can turn around here.

This team reminds me a little bit of the 2000 Twins, a team that, as the year went on, began to realize its potential. It led to 2001, when the Twins went 50-31 in first half before collapsing in the second half. Then they were ready to win in 2002.

Brian Dozier, coming off of a 42 homer season, is the face of the franchise. Ervin Santana is rock solid as a starter. Phil Hughes can boost the rotation if he pitches like it's 2014. Brandon Kintzler will likely open the season as closer and will get a chance to prove last year wasn't a fluke.

But I'll be paying the most attention to how the youngsters are developing in this camp - my 20th camp on the Twins beat.

Twins closer Glen Perkins encouraged after first bullpen
Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | February 14, 2017

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Nearly eight months after shoulder surgery, and almost nine months since last testing his left arm from a bullpen mound, Twins closer Glen Perkins came away encouraged by Tuesday’s 15-pitch side session.

“That’s a good first step,” Perkins said. “That was good to get out with probably a little more intensity than I imagined. To feel like I could push it is exciting.”

Set to take Wednesday off from throwing before long-tossing again on Thursday, Perkins had some anxious moments over the weekend after canceling a planned bullpen session on Feb. 10. He used air quotes around the word “setback,” but it wasn’t ideal when he felt soreness in his teres minor, one of the rotator cuff muscles involved in the external rotation of the shoulder joint.

“I think it had been bugging me longer than I thought,” Perkins said. “I just thought it was part of rehabbing and a little discomfort, but I think it had been lingering for a while, a month or so maybe. I forgot what it was like to feel good.”

Having hit every marker on his rehab calendar since June 23 surgery to repair a torn labrum, Perkins figures it was inevitable he’d have to back off at some point. The good news is Tuesday’s moderate-intensity throwing session presented no challenges, physical or otherwise.

“They say that when you have the front of your shoulder fixed, eventually you’re going to develop some sort of soreness or something in the back,” Perkins said. “It was bound to happen. It’s just how your arm works. It was a matter of time before something happened.”

Perkins, who threw as usual under the eye of rehab coordinator Lanning Tucker, noted he was able to get 7 1/2 months into an eight-month rehab schedule before he had to scale back a bit.

“I was lucky with that,” he said. “The whole thing had been laid out, and so you try to get through it that way and it doesn’t always work. I don’t think anyone’s ever done that. I had a little soreness, and it went away in a couple days.”

A three-time all-star set to turn 34 on March 2, Perkins is entering the last guaranteed year of a contract extension he signed in the spring of 2014. He anticipates throwing his next bullpen session on Friday or Saturday but will be careful not to look too far ahead.

“I’m taking it day by day. I’m not getting that far ahead,” he said. “I got too far ahead last week. I was thinking about that bullpen a week before I threw it. You’ve got to focus on something when you’ve gone that long. I’m not going to do that. I’m going to play catch on Thursday.”

The Twins will be careful not to rush Perkins, who hasn’t pitched since the opening week of the 2016 season. He figures to see his game action limited to back fields until the latter portion of spring training, and he said last month a season-opening stint on the disabled list is a possibility.
“I just want to continue to feel good,” he said. “That will be my goal every day for the season — to come in and feel good. That will be a success if that’s the case.”

Former Twins manager Ron Gardenhire battling prostate cancer
Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | February 14, 2017

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Popular former Twins manager Ron Gardenhire revealed Tuesday he was recently diagnosed with treatable prostate cancer and will temporarily leave his new post as bench coach for the Arizona Diamondbacks.

Gardenhire, 59, will travel back to Minnesota shortly before mid-April surgery, but the cancer was caught early and the prognosis is good for a full recovery. Gardenhire told the Arizona Republic he expects to return roughly six weeks after surgery but added on a conference call with reporters that he still must undergo additional tests to make sure the cancer hasn’t spread.

“I don’t think anybody can say 100 percent of anything when you’re dealing with cancer,” Gardenhire said. “In talking with the doctors, they’ve been pretty optimistic. I feel pretty confident, and they do too, that we’re going to go in there and take this thing out.”

The second-winningest manager in Twins history, Gardenhire spent last season as a special assistant under former Twins general manager Terry Ryan, himself treated for cancer in 2014. Gardenhire managed the Twins to six division titles in his 13-year run from 2002-14.

Even after getting fired after the 2014 season, Gardenhire continued to undergo annual physicals with Twins internist Dr. Vijay Eyunni. It was during a recent exam that Eyunni noticed Gardenhire’s elevated PSA levels and ordered more tests, which came back positive for prostate cancer.

“Not only is Dr. Vijay my doctor, he’s a very good friend,” Gardenhire said. “He wouldn’t let me go without getting a physical. If I didn’t show up when the rest of the guys do in January every year, he calls us and says, ‘Get in here.’ I tip my hat to him because he’s done that for a lot of people, not just me.”

Toby Gardenhire, the manager’s son, was recently hired to a full-time coaching role with the Gulf Coast League Twins after serving in a part-time capacity last season. The younger Gardenhire spent the past five seasons as head baseball coach at Wisconsin-Stout.

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appearance on April 10 with his shoulder injury.

"I felt good," Perkins said. "That's a good first step. After not feeling like I could do that Friday to feeling like I could push it today is exciting. I was pretty down on Thursday, when I had to tell Lanning I wasn't going to throw a 'pen. But he got to work on it, and it got better quick." Perkins didn't realize the extent his rotator cuff had been an issue while throwing in recent weeks until it was diagnosed that there was some soreness in the teres minor muscle in the back of his shoulder near his armpit. But after he threw on Monday and felt better, he realized what he had been dealing with while throwing in recent weeks.

"It was bothering me longer than I thought. I thought it was just part of rehab but it lingered about a month or so. I forgot what it felt like to feel good. Yesterday was the first time I threw, and it felt like it was supposed to. Now it's about continuing arm strength."

Perkins is scheduled to take a day off throwing before throwing long toss on flat ground again on Thursday. He'll throw another bullpen on Friday or Saturday, but said he's taking it one step at a time, as he got too far ahead of himself trying to plan his first bullpen, only to see it pushed back a few days.

"I don't want to get too far ahead," Perkins said. "I started to think about that bullpen a week ahead, and I don't want to do that anymore. I anticipate throwing my next bullpen and then go from there."

Twins pitchers and catchers report to camp
Rhett Bollinger | MLB | February 14, 2017

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- The Twins officially opened camp on Tuesday with all 37 pitchers and catchers reporting to the CenturyLink Sports Complex, although formal workouts don't begin until Wednesday.

Twins chief baseball officer Derek Falvey said the organization has been conducting meetings over the last two days leading up to the first workout, and that there haven't been any issues with players arriving late to camp. In fact, many position players are already working out at the complex, including Max Kepler, Byungho Park, Robbie Grossman and Jorge Polanco, even though the report date for the full squad isn't until Saturday.

"We're good -- I haven't had any phone calls so everybody should be in town," Falvey said with a smile. "I haven't heard anything different."

Falvey spent the last two days conducting meetings with the organization's entire Major League staff, including coaches, trainers and strength coaches to make sure they're all on the same page. They went over all 62 players scheduled to be in Major League camp to get a feel for each player and how the roster could look come Opening Day. They'll shift to more of a pitching summit over the next week to bring together the organization's pitching coaches to get a feel for how to improve the pitching system-wide.

Falvey will also meet individually with each player in camp along with manager Paul Molitor and general manager Thad Levine. Falvey said it's to give the players a feel for what's expected from them this spring and this season, and a chance for a player's thoughts to be heard. The individual meetings, which are scheduled to last 10 to 15 minutes, are a new wrinkle brought over by Falvey, who also plans to have breakfast with Molitor each morning in the clubhouse.

"I'm not sure how to compare it to how it's been in the past, but I'm a guy who looks to be around and accessible to the players and to the coaches daily," Falvey said. "I plan to be in the clubhouse quite a bit. Get breakfast with Paul, and be around the players."

Falvey, though, won't take center stage when the Twins host their first team-wide meeting on Sunday before the first full-squad workout. He said he'll leave it to Molitor to send a message to the players instead.

"I'm not much of a big speech guy," Falvey said. "We had our meetings as a staff and there were some opening remarks on how we want to operate, but with the players themselves, that's Paul's domain."

So while the Twins have more than 60 players in camp, Falvey said the Twins also might not be done, as they continue to look at pitching help. They've been rumored to be in the market for another bat, but Falvey essentially shot that down.

"I think we're probably more focused on the pitching side," Falvey said. "I think it would be unlikely [to sign a position player]. But anything can happen with waivers and things like that as other teams add guys. I wouldn't say impossible, but there are have been some non-roster guys we've been in contact with."
Gardenhire diagnosed with prostate cancer
Rhett Bollinger | MLB | February 14, 2017

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- By the time the news hit that former longtime Twins manager Ron Gardenhire was diagnosed with prostate cancer, reliever Glen Perkins was the lone Twins player still working out at the CenturyLink Sports Complex on Tuesday.

Gardenhire, hired by the D-backs to be their bench coach, announced at a news conference in Arizona that he was diagnosed with the disease and will have surgery the second week of April in Minnesota. Gardenhire said doctors caught the disease early, which improves his chances of a recovery, but it still hit Perkins hard, as he lost his grandfather to prostate cancer after it spread to his bones.

"It's bad news," said Perkins, who was managed by Gardenhire from 2006-14. "I've known him a long time. I'm just going to pray for him. Hopefully, they caught it early and they can get him fixed up."

Perkins is one of a few Twins veterans with extensive experience with Gardenhire, as he's the second-longest tenured Minnesota player behind Joe Mauer. Others who played for Gardenhire, who managed the Twins from 2002-14, include Brian Dozier, Eduardo Escobar, Danny Santana, Kennys Vargas, Phil Hughes, Kyle Gibson, Trevor May, Michael Tonkin and Ryan Pressly.

Gardenhire, known as a players' manager who is always quick with a joke, was well-liked by his players and the media during his time in Minnesota. Gardenhire showed that levity again during his conference call with Minnesota reporters, joking that he's been losing weight, but removing the cancer via surgery should help him drop another five pounds.

"He's got a good sense of humor and a great attitude about everything, so hopefully he can continue that," Perkins said. "It's not fun watching anyone go through cancer, and I've had too much experience with that lately. Hopefully, it turns out well and he's back on the field."

Gardenhire, who led the Twins to six division titles in his first nine years as manager, will coach throughout the spring, but will take a leave of absence for his surgery in April. The cancer was discovered during his annual physical with Twins physician Dr. Vijay Eyunni, as his blood levels were off. An MRI revealed the cancer and he'll continue to go undergo further testing before his surgery, which will be done by Dr. William Utz in Minnesota.

Gardenhire said he's had several people reach out to him who have overcome the disease, including D-backs owner Ken Kendrick and D-backs president Derrick Hall. He said the biggest thing that's helped him since he heard the diagnosis was the outpouring of support, especially those in the baseball community.

"There's been a lot of support from good friends and fans," Gardenhire said. "I lean on everything that I've learned as a manager. I've seen a lot of people go through things. I'll lean on every bit of that. I've seen all the good work the doctors do fighting this. So I'll lean on the memories I have of helping out others. I see what they were talking about. It's so nice to be supported. That's why baseball puts you in such a lucky position because you can help you and when it's your turn, a lot of people step up and offer their prayers and wishes."

Twins still looking at free agents, appear mostly focused on pitchers
Derek Wetmore | ESPN 1500 | February 14, 2017

FORT MYERS, Fla. — The Twins had their pitchers and catchers report to spring training Tuesday. By the time position players all file in, 62 players will be in camp this year.

Or it could be more .

The Twins continue to monitor the free-agent market, Chief Baseball Officer Derek Falvey said. But based on his comments Tuesday, it sounds more likely that they'll be looking for pitching than a big bat.

“There’s still a few guys out there that I think could potentially be fits for us,” Falvey said. He and Twins GM Thad Levine talk to agents each day, and he’s not ready to shut the door on adding some more help.

“I think we’re probably more focused on the pitching side. ... We have flexibility with a lot of the names that we have,” Falvey said, referring to a bunch of pitcher in camp that could be starters or relievers. “I’m going to be the person who probably seeks the flexibility in that group. I want to just keep all options and avenues open until we absolutely have to make decisions. We’ll leave ourselves that roster room.”

And while anything can happen — including waivers and available free agents — Falvey said he thinks it’s “unlikely” they’ll sign a DH-type hitter.
“I wouldn’t say ‘impossible.’”

The free agent pitchers that remain unemployed include relievers Joe Blanton, Tommy Hunter, Edwin Jackson, Luke Hochevar and Jonathan Papelbon, as well as starters Jorge De La Rosa, Doug Fister, Jon Niese, C.J. Wilson and Henderson Alvarez.

The free-agent hitters include Pedro Alvarez, Justin Morneau, Ryan Howard and Billy Butler.

**Wetmore’s updated 25-man roster projection for 2017 Twins**

Derek Wetmore | ESPN 1500 | February 14, 2017

FORT MYERS, Fla. — The Twins officially concluded an oddly quiet winter Monday. Pitchers and catchers report to spring training Tuesday and workouts begin Wednesday.

There will be 62 players in major league spring training this year, and looking at things from the outside, it looks like the final 25-man roster will be surprisingly similar to a team that lost 103 games last season (59-103).

I took a stab in mid-January at guessing a 25-man roster for Opening Day 2017. I fully expected the Twins to make more moves the rest of the winter — I even added a free-agent reliever to their bullpen — but it was more of a way to get our hands and heads around what the roster looks like after trimming the fat.

I’ll add that it’s totally possible the Twins will make more moves during spring training. There’s nobody stopping them from trading players or signing players that are still looking for work. Nothing but artificial deadlines drawn in the sand. But for now, with the dust has settled on the offseason, let’s take a swing at projecting the roster for opening day. After all, it’s only seven weeks away!

**Rotation (5):**

RHP Ervin Santana
RHP Phil Hughes
RHP Trevor May
RHP Kyle Gibson
LHP Hector Santiago

Probably the most controversial exclusion from my first crack at the 25-man roster was J.O. Berrios. I’m not here to change anybody’s mind if they disagree with this snub. I’ve said in subsequent columns and podcasts that I still think Berrios has star potential, and it’s not even out of the question that he could be the best starter in Minnesota’s rotation by the end of the year. It’s just that the evidence we saw last year told us he’s not ready to dominate in the majors the way he did in the minors, and a lot of people seem to want to ignore that body of work or to write it off as nerves.

Santana is a lock and if Hughes is healthy and has his real fastball back he’ll be an asset. I put May in here rather than the bullpen because if I was the Twins trying to fix a bad pitching staff, I’d want my most capable pitchers throwing the most innings, and I think May fits that description. I’ll have a column on that soon. Gibson finished second on the team in ERA last year but it was still north of 5.00. With some better luck and a return to his groundball ways, he’s a reasonable back-end starter, and he’s had stretches in the past where I was sure he could become more of a strikeout pitcher. One Twins evaluator I spoke with last year sounded sure that Gibson was capable of elevating his game to another level. So we’ll see. Santiago just agreed to a contract that will pay him $8 million this year, and the Twins are also paying Ricky Nolasco $4 million this year for the right to have Santiago instead.

Injuries can always happen, and so the odds are slim that this exact rotation breaks camp as the group. If anybody goes down, I’d expect to see Berrios next on this list, with others in consideration like Tyler Duffey, Adalberto Mejia and even Rule 5 pick Justin Haley, whom I view as more of a bullpen candidate.

**Bullpen (7):**

CL Brandon Kintzler
SU Ryan Pressly
LHP Taylor Rogers
LHP Ryan O’Rourke
RHP Matt Belisle
RHP J.T. Chargois
RHP Michael Tonkin

Undoubtedly it will raise eyebrows that I didn’t include Twins closer Glen Perkins on the list here. I’m not trying to stir up controversy, I’m trying to pick an opening day roster. As I write this, I think there’s a possibility that Perkins will open the year on the disabled list as he works his way back from a significant labrum surgery. Perkins said he has no doubt he’ll pitch this year. For this projection, I’ve gone with one potential backup plan for the first game in April. If that’s not the backup plan, I think Pressly would be a good option. Or heck, isn’t Joe Blanton still available?

In any case, Perkins back and at the height of his powers would be a big boost for this group.

The rest of the bullpen looks OK. And there are some intriguing arms that ought to be ready to break into this group this year. They signed Belisle as a veteran stabilizer, and he was surprisingly great against lefties last year. Kintzler acquitted himself well in a reserve closing duty last season. Pressly and Chargois are very live arms.

Rogers is a good lefty and according to some people I’ve talked to, O’Rourke’s surface numbers haven’t always done him justice.

Infield (6):
C Jason Castro
1B Joe Mauer
2B Brian Dozier
3B Miguel Sano
SS Jorge Polanco
DH Kennys Vargas

I made no changes to this group. Some people were surprised I left Byung Ho Park off my initial roster projection, and then the Twins in turn surprised me by taking him off their 40-man roster this month. They gambled on the fact that they’d be able to get his $9.25 million contract through waivers and it turns out they were right. It’s possible he still has a shot to make the team, but no matter what the Twins want to say about his roster situation, there’s no way he’s the favorite to be the opening day DH. You don’t risk losing somebody you’ve measured as an opening day DH so that you can sign a veteran reliever for the middle of the bullpen.

I have questions about Sano and Polanco defensively. They’ve been impressive offensively. That dynamic will be one of the main recurring storylines for the 2017 season. Another one to watch: how many games will Joe Mauer play this year?

Outfield (3):
LF Robbie Grossman
CF Byron Buxton
RF Max Kepler

I wrote at length about the Grossman/Rosario decision in my first roster writeup. Distilled: I believe in Grossman’s offensive skillset more right now than I believe in Rosario’s. And while there’s a step back defensively, I’m not sure it’s as dramatic as the split we saw last year, which analytics said was the worst defensive season in Grossman’s career. Rosario could totally prove me wrong here — and I’ve had conversations with multiple evaluators with the Twins who disagree with my take on this one. If Rosario doesn’t improve his approach at the plate, or at least his numbers, then what I’m seeing right now is a good fourth outfielder with tools. Right this moment, I don’t view him through the same lens I see Buxton and Kepler, two rising stars who should be impact players for years for the Twins.

Bench (4):
Eduardo Escobar (IF)
Eddie Rosario (OF)
Ehire Adrianza (IF)
Chris Gimenez (C)

Escobar is a good bat to have in an extra player. Rosario is a great fourth outfielder, and it’d be awfully surprising if he wasn’t a starting outfielder at some point this season. I’m taking Adrianza because the Twins don’t have any glove-first infielders, and I’m taking him over Danny Santana because I don’t see enough glowing qualities on either side of the game to make him more than an extra player at this point. The
backup catcher battle might be the toughest to call. I believe there’s more to John Ryan Murphy than what we saw last year, although in this book you’re guilty until proven innocent. Mitch Garver’s an interesting case because his minor league offensive numbers look worthy of a shot, and one evaluator said he’s made strides defensively. (Enough strides, apparently, that the Twins left glove-first catcher Stuart Turner unprotected and lost him this winter in the Rule 5 draft, while Garver got a roster spot.) Gimenez is a non-roster invite who has been with Derek Falvey and Thad Levine — at separate stops — before. Some will see this as a reach because he’s a career backup. I think that if the Twins start Castro most days against righties and swap in Gimenez against lefties, Paul Molitor could have a defensible catching platoon on his hands.

That’s a lot of hand wringing for some bench spots on a roster that had a .364 winning percentage last year. Like every season, these little roster quibbles won’t matter if the Twins don’t pitch better.

**Wetmore’s 5 thoughts: Sorting through Twins’ reported interest in finding a free-agent hitter**

Derek Wetmore | ESPN 1500 | February 14, 2017

Brian Dozier boldly proclaimed during a radio interview at TwinsFest that the Twins had their eyes on several big-name free agents still looking for work. Dozier said he’d like to see a big bat to plop into the middle of Minnesota’s batting order.

With Mike Napoli off the board, it doesn’t seem like that guy is out there in the free agent pond.

But Jon Heyman reports the Twins are still looking for some offensive help.

@JonHeyman

*after missing on napoli, twins still seek bat. they've talked about pedro alvarez. also free: lind, butler, howard, morneau*

UPDATE: Adam Lind reportedly signed with the Nationals

According to a different report, the Twins actually offered Napoli more money than the Rangers, but he took a one-year deal with a team option from Texas.

Chris Carter signed a cheap deal with the Yankees after he hit 41 home runs last year. Napoli and his career-high 34 home runs signed with the Rangers. And even premium sluggers like Jose Bautista and Edwin Encarnacion got less money this winter than many had expected. So it’s at the very least interesting that the Twins still want to improve their offense and that they’re shopping on the discount rack to do so.

Byung Ho Park cleared waivers and could open the year in Triple-A, so that might be one power bat option down the road. Those other names Heyman mentioned, though, let’s dig into those.

**Pedro Alvarez**

Alvarez bats left-handed and is 30 years old. Last year for the Orioles in a part-time role he batted .249/.322/.504 with 22 home runs in 376 plate appearances. He’s a much better hitter against righties than lefties, and there’s where the bulk of his work came under manager Buck Showalter (89% of his plate appearances).

His 117 Weighted Runs Created Plus (wRC+) could be a useful bat in the DH role, depending on what the Twins think of Kennys Vargas, who was much better against lefties last year. But a DH/1B three-way platoon with Alvarez, Vargas and Joe Mauer would require an extra roster spot, under a manager that appears to value positional flexibility among his bench players.

**Ryan Howard**

Howard is left-handed and 37 years old. Long ridiculed for his mega contract — which wasn’t his fault — Howard hasn’t had a productive offensive season since 2013. Even considering that, he did smack at least 23 home runs in each of the past three seasons, including 25 bombs in 362 plate appearances last year.

He’s been terrible against lefties the past two seasons, but hit well against them in 2014. With aging sluggers, I tend to focus more heavily on recent seasons.

I don’t know. Power is cheap these days. It would probably be hard for a lot of Twins followers to get over the fact that it’s Ryan Howard. It’s hard to see a DH-only left-handed bat that can’t hit lefties finding a place in Minnesota’s lineup.
Justin Morneau

Morneau is left-handed and 35 years old. It would make a great story. Twins fans know the Morneau saga well — from the MVP arc in 2010 to a knee-to-the-head concussion that altered the path of his career. Last year in a partial season for the White Sox he batted .261/.303/.429 with 6 home runs in 218 plate appearances.

He was really productive the two seasons before that in Colorado, though. The former hockey goalie batted a combined .316/.363/.487 with 20 home runs in 732 plate appearances for the Rockies in those two seasons.

Morneau told a handful of media members during the 2014 All-Star Game festivities at Target Field that he would be very open to a Twins reunion at some point in his career.

Billy Butler

Butler bats right-handed and is 30 years old. He'll be 31 in April. He batted .284/.336/.416 with 5 home runs in 274 plate appearances last season for the A’s and Yankees. As measured by wRC+, Butler’s been about a league-average hitter over the past three seasons, and was slightly above-average in a partial season last year. But among players who are limited to DH or first base, the offensive standard is higher, and he wasn’t quite up to that level last year.

The A’s released him for nothing in September and he signed with the Yankees for the final couple weeks of the season. Now the longtime Royal is looking for work in a market that just paid 41-homer Chris Carter $3 million.

MLB: AL Central Preseason Division Predictions
Matt Meffe | FOX Sports | February 14, 2017

Fourth Place: Minnesota Twins

Projected Record: 75-87

In the span of two years, the Minnesota Twins were a surprisingly good team, and a surprisingly disappointing team. In 2015, no one could figure out why this Twins team was as successful as they were. Then came the 2016 season, and the Twins changed completely, going from narrowly missing the MLB playoffs in 2015 to finishing as the worst team in baseball in 2016. The Twins are going into 2017 with slightly better expectations, but those expectations still aren’t that great. They still have an obliterated pitching staff from their rotation to their bullpen. Minnesota will enter the season without a set closer and many questions about their rotation.

Despite these issues, the team still has Joe Mauer, Miguel Sano, Kennys Vargas, Byron Buxton, and Brian Dozier. Max Kepler somewhat broke out last season, and the Twins did sign Jason Castro to a three-year deal to fill the catcher hole. Offensively, the Twins are in a pretty solid position, and that may be the key for their success. If the Twins do not look to be in the playoff hunt around the trade deadline, look for Brian Dozier to find his way elsewhere. If they are in the MLB playoff hunt, look for this offense to carry this Twins team in 2017.

StaTuesday: 2017 predictions for the Minnesota Twins
Dave Heller | FOX Sports | February 14, 2017

Ah, spring is in the air. Well, at least spring training.

With baseball back — or at least the preparation for the regular season — we have seen a few statistical predictions for the 2017 edition of the Minnesota Twins.

First, the predicted record.

Baseball Prospectus’ Player Empirical Comparison and Optimization Test Algorithm system — better known as PECOTA (see more on description and how it works here) — has Minnesota finishing with 77 wins (and it should be noted that historically that site is a little conservative in its projections, something to keep in mind below). Interestingly, that would put the Twins in second place in the AL Central in BP’s predictions. Other AL Central win projections from BP: Indians 91, Tigers 77, White Sox 75 and Royals 70.
USA Today also put out projected season standings — no word on how it came up with the numbers — and has the Twins with 66 wins. Others in AL Central: Indians 95, Tigers 85, Royals 83 and White Sox 68.

OK, now let’s take a look at some of the projections for players. These are from Baseball Prospectus and Fangraphs. It should be noted that Fangraphs’ “projections are a combination of ZIPS and Steamer projections with playing time allocated by our staff.”

(note: slash lines of batting average/on-base percentage and slugging percentage are used; also games played listed just to give a comparison)

**Byron Buxton**

BP: 153 games, 244/296/434, 17 HR, 16 SB

Fangraphs: 138 games, 243/398/411, 17 HR, 18 SB

Comment: Let’s first keep in mind that Buxton just turned 23 in December, but is this the year he breaks out? Both sites do see some increase in power in 2017. With all that speed he possesses, the steal totals might seem low, but Buxton only swiped 17 bases combined in 141 games with Triple-A Rochester and Minnesota.

**Jason Castro**

BP: 129 games, 239/313/404, 15 HR

Fangraphs: 100 games, 224/303/374, 11 HR

Comment: The projections here are pretty much in line with what Castro did in his last three years with Houston with a slight uptick.

**Brian Dozier**

BP: 154 games, 244/316/436, 25 HR, 15 SB

Fangraphs: 155 games, 248/330/450, 26 HR, 13 SB

Comment: Not quite the 42 homers he hit last year, but still decent numbers for Dozier, albeit a downtick in every category compared to last season (268/340/546, 18 SB).

**Max Kepler**

BP: 154 games, 256/327/435, 17 HR

Fangraphs: 137 games, 262/333/437, 17 HR

Comment: Kepler hit 235/309/424 last season, so both sites see improvement here — however the outfielder hit 17 homers in 113 games last season, so they don’t think there will much of a power increase.

**Joe Mauer**

BP: 144 games, 275/360/393, 9 HR

Fangraphs: 150 games, 273/361/402, 12 HR

Comment: While neither site sees Mauer getting back to his .300 form, both do see him hitting better than he has in the past two seasons. Interestingly, Fangraphs has him with 12 homers — Mauer hasn’t had more than 11 in any year since 2010. Of course, the 150-game projection helps that, too (Mauer has reached that mark just once in his career, in 2015, but to be fair, he played catcher up until 2014).

**Jorge Polanco**

BP: 154 games, 265/313/410, 14 HR, 11 SB
Fangraphs: 138 games, 270/320/400, 11 HR, 12 SB

Comment: Will Polanco’s production go down with increased playing time? He batted .282 for the Twins last year in 69 games and is a career .287 hitter in the minors.

**Eddie Rosario**

BP: 146 games, 257/286/433, 17 HR, 10 SB

Baseball Prospectus: 117 games, 259/292/412, 13 HR, 10 SB

Comment: The numbers here pretty much fall in line with what Rosario has done in his first two seasons in the majors (268/292/443 with 23 HR and 16 SB in 214 games).

**Miguel Sano**

BP: 151 games, 240/334/473, 31 HR

Fangraphs: 147 games, 241/333/474, 32 HR

Comment: Sano has a 162-game average of 36 home runs in his brief two-year career. For what it’s worth, Baseball Prospectus has Sano with 201 strikeouts and Fangraphs 196. Sano already is the only player in Twins history with 150+ whiffs in a season with 178 in 2016.

**Kennys Vargas**

BP: 136 games, 243/332/443, 22 HR

Fangraphs: 133 games, 247/332/441, 24 HR

Comment: Rumors have it that the Twins are looking for a veteran player to help fill the designated hitter role. Both Baseball Prospectus and Fangraphs seem to feel that Vargas will do just fine, at least in terms of power.

And now for the pitchers. Statistics included below are, in order: ERA, WHIP, walks per nine innings and strikeouts per nine innings.

**Jose Berrios**

BP: 4.23, 1.41, 3.6, 7.7

Fangraphs: 4.36, 1.33, 3.4, 8.4

Comment: Berrios’ rookie campaign did not go well, to put it lightly, so the projections above are actually a vast improvement in every category from what he did with the Twins in 2016. However, still a bit away from what Berrios did in Triple-A the past two seasons (2.62 ERA and 0.965 WHIP in 12 starts in 2015 and 2.51 and 0.988 in 17 starts in ’16). Berrios will turn 23 in May, so patience.

**Tyler Duffey**

BP: 3.92, 1.32, 2.6, 7.1

Fangraphs: 4.25, 1.31, 2.5, 7.0

Comment: Both sites see a return to his 2015 form, when he made 10 starts for the Twins and had a 3.10 ERA and 1.31 WHIP, rather than his disastrous 2016 (6.43, 1.50).

**Kyle Gibson**

BP: 4.19, 1.40, 3.3, 7.1
Fangraphs: 4.48, 1.41, 3.1, 6.1

Comment: Like Duffey, Gibson took a step back in 2016. For what it’s worth, Gibson’s career WHIP is 1.41, but he’s had extremes on both sides in his four years: 1.75, 1.31, 1.29 and 1.56. Both sites playing it safe here.

Phil Hughes

BP: 4.43, 1.35, 1.8, 6.9
Fangraphs: 4.77, 1.28, 1.7, 4.7

Comment: Before last year’s injury-marred season, Hughes posted ERA of 3.52 and 4.40 and WHIPs of 1.13 and 1.29 in his first two campaigns with the Twins.

Glen Perkins

BP: 4.01, 1.27, 2.3, 8.7
Fangraphs: 3.82, 1.21, 3.7, 8.6

Comment: How to project someone coming off an injury which basically cost him all of 2016? Both sites are taking a conservative approach. As Minnesota’s closer from 2013-15, Perkins had a 3.08 ERA and 1.10 WHIP with 1.8 BB/9 and 9.8 K/9. Can he get back to that form? Baseball Prospectus and Fangraphs don’t see it quite yet, at least not in 2017.

Ervin Santana

BP: 4.20, 1.30, 3.0, 8.0
Fangraphs: 4.47, 1.32, 2.8, 7.4

Comment: Interesting projections here as in the last four years Santana has posted ERAs of 3.24, 3.95, 4.00 and 3.38. He has had a WHIP of 1.30 or higher just twice since 2010 (1.32 in ’10 and 1.31 in 2014).

Hector Santiago

BP: 4.98, 1.45, 3.9, 7.9
Fangraphs: 4.95, 1.41, 3.8, 7.3

Comment: Both sites clearly see Santiago trending downward. While he struggled in his 11 starts (5.58 ERA, 1.42 WHIP) last year in Minnesota after being acquired from the Angels, Santiago’s combined 4.70 ERA between the two teams was the highest of his six-year career. His highest WHIP was 1.40 in 2013 with the White Sox. Santiago also has struck out 8.0 batters per nine innings over his career.

New blood gives Twins hope
Glenn Miller | Fort Myers Florida Weekly | February 14, 2017

The 2016 Minnesota Twins dug themselves such an impossibly deep hole early in the season they needed Sherpa guides to climb out of it and the Hubble Space Telescope to see first place.

They started the season 0-9, wound up April 7-17 and went 8-19 in May. Although they were out of the race, the Twins rallied to go 15-11 in July.

But it was a lost season in many ways. General Manager Terry Ryan was fired in July. The Twins wound up with a 59-103 record, finishing 35 ½ games behind the first place Cleveland Indians in the American League Central. Where is that telescope?

It was the most losses in franchise history since 1949, when the team was known as the Washington Senators and lost 104 games.
What happened? Well, the team ERA of 5.08 was ranked 29th in the majors and opposing teams hit .283 against Twins pitching, which was the highest in the majors.

Oh, and their .979 fielding percentage ranked 29th in the majors.

A closer look at the statistics shows the team ERA was the worst in the American League by more than half a run. The Oakland’s A’s had the league’s second worst team ERA, 4.51. The Twins also surrendered a league high of 221 homers.

The 2016 season was a stunner in the wake the encouraging 2015 season, when the team was 83-79 and showed signs of life.

Changes were made. They hired Indians assistant general manager Derek Falvey and named him executive vice president and chief baseball officer. They also hired Texas Rangers assistant general manager Thad Levine and named him senior vice president and general manager.

The new front office executives joined a franchise that was coming off an awful season but is blessed with talented young players who can help turn it around.

To help make that turnaround happen swiftly they signed veteran Houston Astros catcher Jason Castro, 29, to a three-year, $24.5 million deal.

Despite the most losses in franchise history since its 1961 move to Minnesota, there are reasons for hope beyond two new executives and a catcher.

Centerfielder Byron Buxton, 23, is a dynamic young talent who is showing signs of catching up to big-league pitching after struggles in the early going. Mr. Buxton started the 2016 season in the big leagues but after hitting .156 in 17 games and striking out 53 percent of the time he was sent back to the minors. He returned to the majors later in the season and lifted his average to .225.

He’s flanked by two other young outfielders, Max Kepler, 24, in right and 25-year-old Eddie Rosario in left. Mr. Kepler hit only .235 but popped 17 homers in 113 games. Mr. Rosario hit .269 with 10 homers in 92 games.

But when Twins fans talk about homers these days they have to talk about second baseman Brian Dozier, who belted 42 homers last year. The only Twins player to ever hit more in a season was Hall of Fame slugger Harmon Killebrew.

Joining Mr. Dozier on the right side of the infield is three-time batting champ Joe Mauer, who will turn 34 in April. Although he is still a career .308 hitter it’s been eight years since Mr. Mauer has won a batting title and his batting averages the past four seasons have dipped from .324 to .277 to .265 and .261 in 2016.

Can he reclaim the hitting magic in his mid-30s? He suffered a concussion in 2013 and has yet to regain the form that had him on a Hall of Fame career track.

The left side of the infield features two Dominicans, third baseman Miguel Sano and shortstop Jorge Polanco, who were childhood friends in San Pedro de Macoris.

The Twins tried the 6-foot-4, 260-pound Mr. Sano in right field last year. The experiment failed. He’s now back at his natural position.

Mr. Polanco, 23, had his first extended taste of the big leagues in 2016 and hit .282 with four homers and four triples.

Korean slugger Byung Ho Park is penciled in at DH but he didn’t do much slugging last year in his first big-league season. Mr. Park hit .191 with 12 homers in 62 games and at one pointed was exiled to the minors.

Then there’s the pitching. ...

It’s almost always about pitching of course, whether it’s Little League or the majors.

The rotation will likely include Ervin Santana, Hector Santiago, Kyle Gibson, Phil Hughes, Jose Berrios and Tyler Duffey.

Veteran closer Glen Perkins, who had more than 30 saves each season from 2013 to 2015, missed most of the 2016 season because of shoulder surgery. Brandon Kintzler replaced Perkins as the closer and had a 3.15 ERA and 17 saves in 54 games.
So, what does 2017 hold for the Twins?

Manager Paul Molitor returns for his third season at the helm.

The team was pretty good his first season and terrible his second season.

It can only improve on the 2016 season.

Heck, The Sporting News 2017 Baseball Yearbook is so confident the team will be better that it predicts a third-place finish in the five-team division.

Twins need rebound from Berrios, Duffey for ragged rotation
J. Scott Butherus | Associated Press | February 14, 2017

FORT MYERS, Fla. (AP) — If the Minnesota Twins are going to rebound from a 2016 season marked by a club-record 103 losses, they need their youngest starting pitchers to take the next step in their progression this spring.

Jose Berrios and Tyler Duffey were among the first players in the clubhouse on Tuesday, the reporting day for Twins pitchers and catchers. As the only two under-29 returning members of the rotation, their continued development will be vital toward improvement for starting staff that had a major league-worst 5.39 ERA last year. That was almost 2½ runs higher than the World Series champion Chicago Cubs.

"At some point the young guys are going to have to step up," Twins manager Paul Molitor said.

The 22-year-old Berrios has the highest expectations. The 32nd overall pick in the 2012 amateur draft struggled badly as a rookie, going 3-7 with an 8.02 ERA in 14 starts. He walked 35 batters and allowed 12 home runs in just 58 1-3 innings. He acknowledged that after tearing through the minor leagues, the jump to the mound at Target Field was a bit daunting.

"It was different playing in front of big crowds and a lot of fans. It was a big adjustment," Berrios said. "I learned a lot. I learned that you have to have confidence when you go out there to pitch. This year I feel more comfortable and more confident."

Berrios, who will miss part of camp to pitch for Puerto Rico in the World Baseball Classic, said he focused on his core muscles this offseason to improve his agility on the mound and help him maintain his velocity in later innings. Opposing hitters batted .368 off Berrios in the fifth inning or later.

"I really concentrated on my legs, my ankles, everything so that I could be better with mobility," Berrios said. "Hopefully I can improve consistency this year."

Duffey, who has been a teammate of Berrios at every professional level since being taken in the same 2012 draft (fifth round), also needs a bounce back from a poor 2016 in order to keep his spot in the rotation. Duffey, who had a strong rookie year (going 5-1 with a 3.10 ERA in 10 starts in 2015), took a step backward last season. The 26-year-old went 9-12 with a 6.43 ERA. Like Berrios, he was vulnerable to the long ball, giving up 25 home runs in 133 innings.

Duffey and Berrios are both part of a crowded competition at the back end of the rotation this spring that is wide open behind last year's opening day starter, Ervin Santana and late-season acquisition, Hector Santiago.

Returning starters Kyle Gibson and Phil Hughes, who is coming back from season-ending surgery that required removal of a rib to address a shoulder injury, will be given opportunities to reclaim their spot in the rotation. That leaves Berrios and Duffey in the mix with non-roster invitees Ryan Vogelsong and Nick Tepesch and Trevor May making the transition back from the bullpen.