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Inbox: Will Rodon build on strong finish in ’16?
Beat reporter Scott Merkin answers questions from fans
By Scott Merkin / MLB.com | November 11th, 2016

CHICAGO -- What is the offseason plan for the White Sox? Has Carlos Rodon turned the corner? Beat reporter Scott Merkin addresses fans’ questions in the latest edition of the Inbox.

1. Reading between the lines of [general manager] Rick Hahn’s postseason comments, it seems they will pursue a rebuild. Agree?
   -- Rob, Connecticut

I agree. The White Sox have not announced whether they are rebuilding or going for it because it doesn't make sense to put forth such a statement. What if they don't receive what they want for players such as Chris Sale, Jose Quintana and Adam Eaton, as a few hypothetical examples? It then looks a little foolish to be in a rebuild and not make any big moves.

If it's a rebuild, the White Sox will go all-in while trying to build up controllable talent to help them consistently win in what they hope is the not too distant future. But the rebuild doesn't all have to take place this offseason. The White Sox might make a few moves prior to Spring Training and make more at the non-waiver Trade Deadline as the situation dictates. Think Major League ready or close to Major League ready talent as returns.

Is Carlos Rodon’s late-season success an indication that he has turned a corner in his development?
   -- Ken, Crestwood, Illinois

One thing to remember about Rodon is that his development took place at the big league level, unlike many top prospects. The first taste of consistent failure during Rodon's baseball life came at the highest level of competition on the biggest stage. So there was a great deal for him to adjust to right from the outset.

Rodon had the same strong finish in 2015, but he was unable to carry it into the start of ‘16. I don't think that situation will play out again in ‘17. Rodon seemed to be more at ease and comfortable with each
They will tender Gonzalez. He proved to be an excellent addition made by Hahn, not just on the mound but also as a clubhouse fit.

Any update on Charlie Tilson and does he have a chance to be the everyday center fielder?
-- Ricky, Chicago

Tilson is progressing nicely and remains on track to be without restrictions at the start of Spring Training per the White Sox. Tilson, who came over from the Cardinals in the Zach Duke trade at the Deadline, tore his left hamstring during his first game with the White Sox while trying to make a diving catch in right-center field at Comerica Park and then underwent season-ending surgery.

There's little doubt Tilson is in the picture regardless of the direction of the team. But he could be more of a featured player in center in a rebuild, with the White Sox letting their young core grow together.

Does anyone up there remember 2005 at this point? Some headlines I've seen seem to support "no"...
-- Randy, Norman, Oklahoma

Nobody forgot the amazing World Series championship run in '05, although it was somehow overlooked in a few graphics during the Cubs' incredible push to the 2016 title. I wrote a column a few weeks ago about this exact topic, in that both runs stand as historic accomplishments and neither one needs to be torn down to enjoy the other.

**Collins' two-run homer is game-winner for Glendale**
White Sox No. 2 prospect hits go-ahead shot in 4-3 victory
By Trisha Garcia / MLB.com | November 12th, 2016

GLENDALE -- White Sox No. 2 prospect and No. 80 overall Zack Collins stepped to the plate in the bottom of the sixth inning on Saturday against Angels prospect Eduardo Paredes with his Glendale Desert Dogs trailing the Scottsdale Scorpions by a run. The batter before him, Cardinals' No. 15 prospect Paul DeJong, had walked.

"The guy was leaving everything up and arm side to the hitter before me, then I got up there and he did the same thing to me," Collins said. "I was fouling balls back, getting under them a little bit."

With no outs and a full count, Collins sent the next pitch flying over the right-center-field wall. The Desert Dogs took the lead, 4-3, that would be how the game ended.

"It was 3-2 and [Desert Dogs manager Aaron] Rowand put on the steal sign, so I just told myself to get on top of it," the 6-foot-3 catcher said. "[DeJong's] going so there's gonna be holes open in the infield. I tried to get on top of it and that's what happened."

The two-run shot looked eerily similar to Collins' first home run in the Arizona Fall League on Nov. 1, also against the Scorpions. That long ball, a three-run homer to left-center field, also came in the bottom of the sixth inning and tied the game before the Desert Dogs hit a walk-off single three innings later.

"I guess I should just pinch-hit in the sixth inning," Collins joked. "But it felt good, it's always good to get a win out here."

The 21-year-old from Pembroke Pines, Florida, was the No. 10 overall Draft pick in 2016, selected by the Chicago White Sox out of the University of Miami. After being drafted, he started the season out in the Arizona Rookie League but was quickly moved up to Class A Advanced Winston-Salem.
With the Dash, Collins batted .258 with six home runs and 18 RBIs in 36 games. Through nine games in the Arizona Fall League, he is batting .227 with two home runs and five RBIs.

For the Desert Dogs, the win was especially important. They were 1 1/2 games behind the Peoria Javelinas and the Surprise Saguaros entering Saturday's games, as the Javelinas and Saguaros were tied for first place in the West Division. After Saturday, each team has four games left to decide who gets a shot in the championship game on Nov. 19 in Scottsdale.

"Now every win is definitely big for us because we got off to a slow start, and obviously we're trying to get to the championship," Collins said. "I think we were 1 1/2 games back now. I don't know about after this win, but there's just a couple games left so we just gotta win out."

The Saguaros recorded a win on Saturday against the Mesa Solar Sox to keep the Desert Dogs in third place for the time being.

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**White Sox slugger Jose Abreu could opt out of current deal, into arbitration**
By Dan Hayes / CSN Chicago | November 11th, 2016

Jose Abreu could opt out of his guaranteed contract and into arbitration eligibility sometime next week.

Whether the slugger does or not would make no difference to White Sox fans -- Abreu is still the team’s property for the next three seasons either way. Unless the White Sox trade Abreu, he’s set to earn $34 million from them over the next three seasons. White Sox general manager Rick Hahn said Abreu had a 10-day window to make the choice after the conclusion of the World Series, which ended Nov. 2.

Abreu -- who had a late season offensive surge and hit .293/.353/.468 with 25 home runs and 100 RBIs -- has a base $10.5 million salary next season. He would earn $11.5 million in 2018 and $12 million in 2019.

“That's the choice he has to make: Do I want the guaranteed money or do I want to go year-to-year through arbitration?” Hahn said Wednesday at the GM meetings in Scottsdale, Ariz.

The Cuban product received a six-year, $68-million contract from the White Sox ahead of the 2014 season -- the largest-ever for an international free agent. The deal included a $10 million signing bonus that could impact arbitration figures, MLBTradeRumors.com argued earlier this offseason. The site expects Abreu would opt out of his current deal.

Abreu has been an offensive force during his first three seasons in the league, blasting 91 homers and producing an .875 career OPS. He was a unanimous selection for American League Rookie of the Year in 2014 when he hit .317/.383/.564 with 36 homers and 107 RBIs.

Despite that production, Abreu potentially could take a loss in salary this season. If he opts into arbitration, Abreu is banking on continued production and increased salaries in the fifth and sixth years of his deal.

The risks of opting out include poor performance, which could lead to the White Sox later deciding to non-tender Abreu a contract and make him a free agent.

“He’s controlled for the next three years regardless,” Hahn said. “It’s whether he’s going to maintain the final three years of his contract or go year to year through arbitration. From a control standpoint, it’s no different. From a compensation standpoint, it could fluctuate.”

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**No ‘untouchable’ players offers endless offseason possibilities for White Sox**
By Dan Hayes / CSN Chicago | November 13th, 2016
A few years back, White Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf suggested that NBA legend Michael Jordan is the only player he’d never trade.

Given the direction the White Sox appear to be headed this offseason, the franchise’s philosophy could lead to a world of potential trade possibilities, including a deal for five-time All-Star Chris Sale.

While the White Sox have always honored an open-door policy and entertained other teams’ interest in their players, this time Rick Hahn may be more receptive. In the past, it was believed that to acquire Sale — on pace to be the best pitcher in franchise history — the White Sox would need to receive at least the baseball equivalent of the NFL’s Herschel Walker 13-for-5 trade.

Asked this week about the availability of his players, the White Sox general manager indicated his willingness has perhaps increased if the club decides to endure its first rebuild since making the White Flag trade in 1997.

“We’ve said over the years that none of our players are untouchable, and we have an obligation to listen to everybody, and in the end, it’s going to be about feeling like we got fair value back in exchange and did something that made sense for the long-term benefit of the organization,” Hahn said from the GM meetings in Scottsdale, Ariz. “That hasn’t changed. Perhaps there may be a heightened anticipation in the market that this time there may be a greater likelihood of a deal than in years past.”

The White Sox could find teams’ potential offers to be too good to bypass this winter.

One National League executive said earlier this week that the White Sox would find a “perfect market” if they entertained offers for Sale or fellow All-Star Jose Quintana because of a weak free agent class. New York Yankees general manager Brian Cashman said teams with superfluous starting pitching would “be the hunted” this offseason.

A shortage of dependable closers after a postseason dominated by bullpens could also increase the value of White Sox reliever David Robertson, who received little trade interest last July.

If the White Sox were so inclined, they might also be overwhelmed with interest for outfielder Adam Eaton. The two-time Gold Glove award finalist has a .362 on-base percentage and produced 12.8 f-WAR over the past three seasons. Eaton is also owed only $38.4 million through 2021 if his two team options are exercised.

Teams hungry for a middle-of-the-order threat could try to encourage the White Sox to part with Jose Abreu, who has three years left on his current deal. The White Sox potentially could also find takers for Todd Frazier, Melky Cabrera, Brett Lawrie and Miguel Gonzalez, all of whom are free agents in 2018.

No matter what, Hahn said he’ll continue to hear other clubs out this offseason and then determine what’s best for the franchise.

“Our approach hasn’t changed in that regard,” Hahn said. “We’ve always listened and we’ve always evaluated our options.”

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**Gregor: With desperate buyers, White Sox rebuilding ride could be a wild one**

By Scot Gregor / Daily Herald | November 12th, 2016

As Thanksgiving approaches and the baseball world continues to watch and wait on the Chicago White Sox, let's cut to a scene out of the epic movie “Planes, Trains and Automobiles” for some clarity.

Trying to get back home to Chicago for Thanksgiving, Steve Martin is stuck in New York City and he's not having any luck finding a taxi.
A cab finally approaches, and Martin appeals to the man who flagged it down first.

Martin initially offers $10 for the taxi and is rejected. He ups it to $20. The other man counters with $50 and after Martin reluctantly agrees, the response is: "Anyone who would pay $50 for a cab would certainly pay $75."

Martin wound up paying the exorbitant finder's fee because he was desperate.

As for the Sox, general manager Rick Hahn has been predictably vague about his off-season plans, specifically his willingness to trade starting pitchers Chris Sale and Jose Quintana.

Even before Hahn stepped out and correctly tagged the White Sox as being "mired in mediocrity" in late July, I had felt that trading Sale, Quintana, Jose Abreu, Adam Eaton, Todd Frazier and anyone else on the 25-man roster was the right direction for a franchise that last made the playoffs in 2008 and has stumbled through four straight losing seasons.

Hahn strongly hinted the Sox were interested in blowing it up and rebuilding in July.

"We have not ruled anything out, other than the rental acquisitions," the GM said. "We've spent a fair amount of time focusing on the here and now for the last few years and it hasn't paid off as handsomely as we hoped. So we have to stay open-minded."

The day after another agonizing disappointing season was in the books and bench coach Rick Renteria was named the White Sox's new manager, Hahn continued dropping hints of a forthcoming rebuild.

He was asked if the seemingly annual strategy of plugging roster holes and hoping for the best was still an option for the 2017 season.

"Frankly, we've been trying to do that over the last few years," Hahn said. "We've been committed to building through the draft, trying to retain some of our minor-league assets as we've accumulated them, but at the same time trying to win in Chicago. A lot of people have said that's a difficult errand to execute, it's a difficult path and one you don't tend to see throughout the game these days.

"You tend to see teams going for the full teardown. You saw many of them in the National League this year and you've seen clubs execute that strategy very successfully, including the Cubs. So I do feel that you see the template for picking one route versus the other, and you do run a risk of having half-measures so to speak when you try to serve two masters, when you try to serve the future as well as the present.

"We've tried that, and we've had obviously not the success we've wanted in Chicago going that path. We aren't going to shy away from it just because other clubs haven't done it. At the same time, we have to be fully aware and fully cognizant of the fact it hasn't worked thus far, and therefore something has to change."

From my perspective, as many of the Sox's trading chips as possible have to change uniforms this winter.

Based on their talent and club-friendly contracts, Sale and Quintana alone would return a boatload of needed young talent to the White Sox.

Trading Abreu would bring back at least two high-end prospects. And more young gold could be mined for Eaton, Frazier and possibly closer David Robertson and outfielder Melky Cabrera.

I thought the White Sox would move Sale or Quintana -- or very possibly both -- before the Aug. 1 nonwaiver trade deadline.
According to multiple reports, Hahn was asking interested teams like the Red Sox, Rangers and Dodgers for eye-popping packages in return.

The asking prices were obviously not met, which makes sense.

All three aforementioned teams were postseason bound and hesitant to take key players like Yoan Moncada (Boston), Julio Urias (Los Angeles) and Nomar Mazara (Texas) off their rosters.

That was then, and this is now.

Getting back to “Planes, Trains and Automobiles,” Hahn and the White Sox have a fleet of taxis and there are many teams that need rides.

If the Red Sox are willing to offer three can't-miss young players for Sale, surely they can add a fourth.

If the Dodgers are willing to offer two can't-miss players for Quintana, surely they can add a third.

Buckle up, White Sox fans, it's going to be an interesting ride.

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Many MLB stars available on trade market as GMs head home
By Associated Press | November 11th, 2016

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. (AP) — Big league general managers walked under seven palm trees and across the sun-splashed red stone courtyard of the Sonoran Desert resort where they had spent four days. Pulling their wheelie bags as guitar music played on speakers, they passed a sign that explained Montelucia, part of the hotel’s name, was Spanish for mountain of light.

While no trades were completed at the first meeting of the offseason, many found the session illuminating: a constellation of stars are in play.

Detroit will listen to offers for pitcher Justin Verlander, first baseman Miguel Cabrera, second baseman Ian Kinsler, right fielder J.D. Martinez and designated hitter Victor Martinez.

The Chicago White Sox would deal ace pitcher Chris Sale for the right price.

Pittsburgh outfielder Andrew McCutchen and New York Yankees catcher Brian McCann are available.

All All-Stars.

“I know that magnitude. Of course I do. That’s why we chose to be transparent,” said Al Avila, GM of the payroll-paring Tigers. “We chose to tell the players the possibility of things happening.”

When to make a swap is one of the key factors.

“In other deals that we’ve done, we’ve ended up getting as much if not more around the trade deadline than we would have in the prior offseason, because at the trade deadline there’s fewer players available,” Pirates GM Neal Huntington said as he left Thursday. “There’s more angst about competing.”

Many of the sport’s biggest agents also attended the session, eager to provide clubs with the latest statistics designed to present their clients in the best light. Scott Boras came up with a new acronym to describe former All-Star closer Greg Holland, rehabbing from Tommy John surgery in October 2015.

“Everybody wants the help pitcher, the High Level Performance Pitcher,” he said. “We’ve got our HLPP algorithm, and these guys create value.”
For some teams, leaving the comfort of their offices is a chore.

“It’s a necessary evil,” Yankees GM Brian Cashman said. “You fly out here, meet with everybody as much as you possibly can, go through your administrative meetings with MLB and fly home.”

There was a little news on the final day. R.A. Dickey, a 42-year-old knuckleballer, became the first of the 158 free agents to change teams, agreeing to a one-year contract with the Atlanta Braves that guarantees $8 million. St. Louis outfelder Matt Holliday became the final free agent when he and the Cardinals agreed to waive the provision in his contract that called for his $17 million option for 2017 to become guaranteed if he finished in the top 10 in MVP voting.

Higher-profile players in a relatively weak free-agent class are likely to take their time before striking deals, a group that includes closers Aroldis Chapman, Kenley Jansen and Mark Melancon; outfielders Jose Bautista, Yoenis Cespedes, Dexter Fowler and Mark Trumbo; and designated hitter Edwin Encarnacion.

Hoping to retain Cespedes, Mets GM Sandy Alderson would like a resolution by the end of the winter meetings, scheduled for Dec. 5-8 in National Harbor, Maryland.

White Sox GM Rick Hahn said he revisited trade discussions that began ahead of the Aug. 1 deadline for non-waiver deals and it was now time for “regrouping, prioritizing things and then following up in the coming weeks leading up to the winter meetings.”

“There’s been a lot of speculation about us, so a lot of the clubs are checking in and checking the veracity of those claims,” he said.

McCutchen, a five-time All-Star, is coming off a subpar season and is owed $14 million next year as part of a deal that includes a $14.75 million club option for 2018 with a $1 million buyout. Teams sense opportunity.

“They recognize that we haven’t been adverse to moving guys as their contract nears expiration. It’s a part of how we believe we need to do things to continue to be competitive and continue to give ourselves a shot to win,” Huntington said. “If they see his name out there, they do what we do. If a really good player’s name gets popped out there, we make a call just to make sure we do our due diligence and to see if there might be a fit.”

After helping the Cubs win their first World Series title since 1908, Chicago president of baseball operations Theo Epstein anticipates an easier time recruiting players.

“We might not need to send out a video now,” he said. “People are probably sick of seeing us on TV.”

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**The Saddest Club of All: The 99ers**

*By John Paschal / The Hardball Times | November 11th, 2016*

Readers of The Hardball Times and the diary under my mattress know that I am helplessly devoted to the baseball dreamboat known as Adrian Beltre. It was with great joy and many huzzahs, therefore, that I watched Beltre swat a two-run homer against the Athletics on Sept. 23 to notch not only his 99th RBI of the season but also his 100th.

Players say numbers don’t matter. Players are liars.

Numbers matter, and that one RBI dividing double digits from triple is of key aesthetic importance. Those three wee numbers — one zero zero — fare immutable and beautiful on the back of a baseball card.
Beltre himself knows the sting of 99. As a Mariner in 2004, back when he hit through a marine layer made entirely of cream of mushroom soup and toward outfield fences erected 2,000 miles away near the Aleutian Islands, he needed just one RBI in the final six games but got none, lining out in his last at-bat. Ouch.

He wasn’t the first, or the last, to become a 99er.

In 2015, Kris Bryant and Bryce Harper each entered the final day needing one RBI.

“Of course everybody wants to have the round numbers and make it look all pretty,” Bryant would say, truthfully, in 2016. “Last year after we kind of clinched a spot in the playoffs and I was looking at the scoreboard and seeing 98 and 99 RBIs, I put so much pressure on myself.”

Though both players joined the club that day, Bryant would earn Rookie of the Year and Harper MVP. For 99ers, there are happy endings. They’re just really rare.

Eddie Murray

Entering the stretch run in 1979, Eddie Murray had a hundred right in front of him. His three-run homer on Sept. 13 had given him 94 RBIs, and after stroking an RBI double the next day, he looked primed for his first century mark. He needed five ribeyes in the final fortnight. He could smell those steaks. In his previous two years, he’d notched 88 and 95.

But Steady Eddie began to wobble, going without an RBI in his next five games. It wasn’t his fault. Teammates weren’t getting on base. In a 7-3 loss to Cleveland on Sept. 22, he posted four hits but just one RBI. Ahead of him in the Orioles lineup, Mark Belanger, Ken Singleton and pinch runner/right fielder Mark Corey went a combined 0-for-8.

On Sept. 26, while sitting at 97 RBIs, he homered against Detroit. Like his homer six days prior, it led off an inning. In each case, teammate Ken Singleton had made an out to end the previous inning. And Singleton would post a .405 on-base percentage that year.

Timing, indeed, is everything.

In the final game and needing one RBI, Murray went hitless before singling in the eighth. Alas, he had led off the inning again. In the bottom of the ninth, with the O’s leading, 5-4, the RBI Gods intervened. The Indians tied the score and the game went into extra innings. In the 10th, Corey singled and stole second. What more could a guy want than a fast runner in scoring position? Kerplunk. Murray popped out. The Indians walked it off in the 11th.

Slated to bat third in the 12th: Eddie Murray.

Mickey Mantle

For all his Mickey Mantle-ness, Mickey Mantle posted just four 100-RBI seasons.

For comparison, note that Albert Belle, for all his Albert Belle-ness, had nine.

One reason for Mantle’s failure to reach five? It came in 1955. While legging out a bunt single in late September, he strained a hammy and left the game. Five days earlier he had notched his 99th RBI. Now he would miss the next seven games. He returned on the final day, in a doubleheader against Boston. In the fourth inning of game one, with the bases loaded and one out, he pinch hit. Standing on third base was Marv Throneberry. Though he had entered as a pinch runner, Marvelous Marv was hardly a thoroughbred. Across his seven-year career, he would steal three bases. Still, he represented Mantle’s 100th.
The Mick needed only a dink, a flare, a fly. He got it, sending a high drive to the Boston left fielder. It wasn't deep enough, however, to plate Throneberry.

The left fielder? Faye Throneberry, brother of Marv.

Three years earlier, in 1952, Faye had thrown out nine runners in 86 games. In fact, the Boston Herald had noted that Faye had "a much stronger arm than Ted." So, who knows? If Ted Williams had been playing in place of Faye Throneberry, Mantle might have gotten 100.

Harold Baines

Harold Baines posted 28 RBIs in September 1983.

In October he needed one more, and had two games to get it.

Oct. 1: In the fourth inning, the RBI Gods began to arrange things. Facing Mariners starter Matt Young, Chicago's Carlton Fisk hit a grounder to third baseman Darnell Coles. He booted it. Tom Paciorek then hit another grounder to Coles. He booted that one, too.

Baines stepped to the plate. Paciorek stole second base. With a blooper or bleeder, Baines could notch not only his 100th RBI but also his 101st, securing the notion that he hadn't crawled to 100 but had leapt beyond it.

Young delivered a wild pitch. Oof!

Fisk's run had erased Baines' shot at 101, but 100 remained a possibility in the form of Paciorek on third base. Baines needed a hit. Instead he whiffed.

The RBI Gods didn't surrender. Paciorek doubled to lead off the sixth and went to third on Greg Luzinski's sac fly. Baines stepped in with one out, but reliever Gene Nelson issued an intentional walk. Would Baines get another chance?

He would! The Gods had plans!

In the seventh, Paciorek stood on second after a double. Just 180 feet separated Baines from his 100th. Once again, the pitcher — in this case, Ed Nunez — intentionally walked him.

Still, after all these failures, the RBI Gods kept scheming. In the ninth, Baines stepped to the plate with one out and runners on first and second. Falling prey to the RBI Imps, he flew out. Ron Kittle then delivered a three-run homer to claim RBIs 97, 98 and 99 for himself.

Baines had company — on his own team.

Oct. 2: Hitless in two at-bats, Baines stepped to the plate in the sixth with Fisk on second. He promptly grounded out. The grounder did move Fisk to third base, though, and when Kittle delivered an infield single, Fisk scored.

A White Sox player had notched his 100th RBI, at last.

Baines would whiff in his final at-bat. It didn’t matter. Ahead of him, Mike Squires had been thrown out trying to stretch a leadoff double into a triple. Even the Gods had given up.

Ty Cobb

You don’t think of Ty Cobb as an RBI guy — great hitter, sure, but run producer?
In fact, Cobb led the AL in RBIs four times and posted seven 100-RBI seasons. He could’ve had nine. All he needed were two well-timed RBIs. On Sept. 25, 1915, Cobb logged his 99th RBI despite going hitless. Then the opposite happened — he got hits without plating a run. In the final three games he went 5-for-13 but posted no RBIs.

Another culprit: manager Hughie Jennings. On Sept. 27, he replaced Cobb in the lineup after two at-bats. Another culprit: record-keeping. It appears that in some of Cobb’s 156 games, the scorekeeper didn’t account for RBIs.

Record-keeping had improved by 1922, when all of Cobb’s 137 games were noted in the RBI column. With an RBI single in the penultimate game, he logged his 99th. He needed one more for his second straight 100-RBI year. Then in the final game, the manager lifted Cobb again, this time after one at-bat. Why did the skipper lift Cobb? One reason was that the skipper was Cobb himself, and Cobb probably placed more emphasis on a .400 batting average than on 100 RBIs. His first-inning single had put him at .401. He would stay there.

Mark McGwire

Coming off a 118-RBI season when he won AL Rookie of the Year, Big Mac entered 1988 with designs on debunking the “sophomore slump.” Triple-digit RBIs would help. The problem? He had two games to get five RBIs. In the third inning in game 161 he got his chance. Facing the Brewers’ Teddy Higuera with runners on first and second, he hit a deep drive to right field. Slow of foot, ironically named Rob Deer tracked it down. In the sixth, McGwire hit a two-run dinger, putting him at 97. In the seventh, with runners at second and third, he singled to center field. Dave Henderson scored from third. Behind him, Stan Javier headed for home. In center, Robin Yount fielded the ball and unleashed a throw to the plate….

The following day, in game 162, McGwire singled in the eighth to plate Lance Blankenship. Yount fielded the ball and threw it to second base. Had he done so a day earlier instead of throwing out Javier, McGwire would have finished with 100.

Arky Vaughan

Arky Vaughan never reached 100 RBIs. In 1935, he got as close as a guy can get.

Entering the final day, he sat at 98 ribeyes. In the first inning of that final day, his groundout scored the runner from third. He now had 99 steaks, with eight innings to go. He got his chance in the eighth: Teammate Paul Waner stood at third with no outs. All Arky needed was a bleeder, a flare, an infield chopper. He got none of those things.

But wait! His Pirates still had one more game! — the second of the doubleheader!

But no.

Manager Pie Traynor, for whatever reason, held Arky out of the lineup. As a player, Traynor enjoyed seven 100-RBI seasons. He couldn’t have let his shortstop go for one?

Jim Ray Hart

Jim Ray Hart had a lot of talent and just as much bad luck, at least when it came to counting stats. In the 1965 through 1967 seasons, he posted RBI totals of 96, 93 and 99.

Hart entered the final game of 1967 with 99 ribbies, but skipper Herman Franks held his third baseman out of the lineup. In the seventh, with the game scoreless and runners on first and second, Franks sent Hart to pinch hit. Here was his chance. On second base stood Downtown Ollie Brown. He wasn’t the fastest guy, having been thrown out on both stolen base attempts that year. The other problem? Hart was
facing future Hall of Famer Jim Bunning, who had struck out nine and allowed four hits and one run, unearned.

The outcome? Hart whiffed. He didn’t get his 100th RBI but did get his 100th strikeout.

Albert Pujols

Entering the final game of 2011, Albert Pujols needed two RBIs to notch his 11th straight 100-RBI season. He got a good start with a run-scoring single in the first. But the Cardinals weren’t playing for Pujols and his RBI string; they were playing for the Cardinals, gunning for the playoffs. And so Allen Craig, despite his chance to score, was held at third.

It worked. The Cardinals staged a five-run rally, won the game and made the playoffs.

In the ninth, Craig was a factor again. With one out and hitting ahead of Pujols, he represented his teammate’s 100th RBI in the form of a potential runner. He just needed to get on base. Instead he homered. Pujols, too, would need a solo shot.

He flied out. Season over, RBI string gone.

So, Allen Craig was to blame, yes? Not so fast.

A day earlier, Pujols sent a fly ball to right field in the first inning. David Freese tagged at third. Right fielder Brian Bogusevic caught the ball and fired to catcher J.R. Towles, who tagged Freese out at home plate. So, David Freese was to blame, yes? Not so fast.

Hank Sauer

Hank Sauer had posted just 16 RBIs in 42 games before the Reds traded him to the Cubs on June 15, 1949. He would post 80 in his next 95 games for the Cubs. Perhaps Cincinnati should have known better than to trade the left fielder for Peanuts Lowrey and Harry “The Hat” Walker. After all, Sauer had posted 97 RBIs the season before.

Now, with the Cubs, he entered the final game needing four RBIs. His manager, Frankie Frisch, understood. Frisch had posted exactly 100 RBIs 28 years earlier with an RBI single off future Hall of Famer Burleigh Grimes in the final game. In the ninth, teammates Herman Reich and Roy Smalley singled with two outs to give Sauer another at-bat. He took advantage, clubbing a home run off Cardinals starter Howie Pollet. It wasn’t enough.

The Gods couldn’t rig a grand slam.

Dave Kingman

In 1982, with the Mets, Dave Kingman notched RBI 98 in game 152. He needed two RBIs in the final 10 games to reach 100, a feat he had achieved just once despite clubbing 329 homers in 12 seasons. Then, suddenly, he went cold, going the next eight games without an RBI. In the penultimate game, against the Phillies, he plated George Foster with a fourth-inning single to notch RBI 99. Leading off the eighth, he needed a homer. Instead he K’ed.

In the bottom of the ninth, it appeared he might get another chance. Tied 3-3, the game looked primed for extra innings: two outs, full count on the batter. That batter, however, was Pete Rose, and his double plated the winning run. Kong would have one more game.

It would come against Steve Carlton. The result: three outs in his first three at-bats.
In the eighth, however, the RBI Gods gifted Kong another chance. Pinch hitter Bob Bailor reached on an Ivan de Jesus error and moved to second base on Ron Gardenhire’s single.

With a runner in scoring position, Kingman might owe his 100th RBI to an E6.

Thank you, de Jesus!

No. He popped up to the first baseman: Pete Rose.

Thanks a lot, Charlie Hustle.

Darryl Strawberry

Darryl Strawberry played only eight games in June 1991 due to injury. Now in late September, he was paying the time-missed penalty in the form of a mad dash for 100. After posting six RBIs in four games, he needed one in the final two. He didn’t get it in the penultimate game. In the final game, he was set to face Giants starter Trevor Wilson.

Bad news: Wilson, like Strawberry, was a lefty.

Through eight innings, Wilson had pitched a one-hitter. That hit: a bloop single.

To begin the ninth, Wilson struck out Brett Butler on three pitches. Mike Sharperson stepped to the plate, Strawberry to the on-deck circle. On a full count, Sharperson doubled. Sharperson had stolen just one base on the season but 15 the season before.

Would he have speed enough to score on a liner to the outfield?

It wouldn’t matter. Strawberry whiffed.

Each season’s end is a cause for retrospection. In the first inning of the season’s first game, facing Atlanta’s John Smoltz, Strawberry grounded out. No big deal, right? Let’s back up. Butler had singled to open the inning, and Smoltz had balked him to second. Next, Juan Samuel had bunted Butler to third, meaning an otherwise harmless groundout would give Strawberry his first RBI. Butterfly effect, alternate timelines and all that, but let’s review.

If Smoltz doesn’t balk, Strawberry doesn’t get the RBI. If he doesn’t get the RBI, he finishes the season with 98, not 99. For Strawberry, it might have made the season’s RBI total easier to bear, but it would have made his career total harder to bear. Why? Because he would have finished not at 1,000 but at 999.

Howard Johnson

On the final day of the 1987 season, the Mets had four players in the starting lineup — Keith Hernandez, Darryl Strawberry, Kevin McReynolds and Howard Johnson — who were or would become 99ers, plus another, Kevin Elster, on the bench. Also in the lineup was Gary Carter, who had finished the 1985 season with exactly 100 RBIs. As for Johnson, he entered the day needing one ribbie to join Carter in the Century Club. Hitless in his first three at-bats, he stepped up in the ninth with no outs and pinch-runner Keith Miller on first. Were the RBI Gods smiling? Miller had wheels; he’d stolen 28 bases in the minors one season and had a good shot at scoring on an extra-base hit. Facing the Cards’ Bill Dawley, Johnson stroked a double to right field. The speedy Miller rounded second and headed for third!

He stayed there.

It led to a five-run inning. McReynolds, who would become a 99er the following season, made the final out with Strawberry on second base. On-deck? Howard Johnson.
Dusty Baker and Davey Johnson

In 1973, Dusty Baker and Davey Johnson were teammates gunning for 100 on the final day. With Braves teammate Hank Aaron on first base in the first inning, Baker walked. Hitting behind Baker, Johnson grounded out. With Aaron again on first base in the fourth, Baker whiffed and Johnson flied out. With Aaron again on first in the sixth, Baker grounded into a double play and Johnson flied out. At last, in the ninth, Baker launched a triple.

This time, Aaron wasn’t on base.

Needing a blooper, a flare, a sac fly to make Baker jealous of his 100th, Johnson popped out.

Neither player would ever reach 100, or even come as close.

Lee May, et al

Eddie Murray wasn’t the only O to cry 99 tears.

If a player wanted to avoid the 99 virus, he’d have been smart to play anywhere but Baltimore. In the final game of 1964, Boog Powell stepped up in the bottom of the 10th with his 100th RBI on second base, but Tigers pitcher Fred Gladding proved uncooperative by intentionally walking Boog. On Sept. 24, 1971, Frank Robinson hit a three-run homer off Sam McDowell to notch his 99th RBI. He had a week to get one more. In the final game and still needing the RBI, he stepped up in the eighth and flied out with a runner on first. Robinson could console himself with the knowledge that his 99 RBIs had led the league.

Poor Lee May. Not only did he post 98 RBIs twice, he posted 99 twice. Give him four RBIs, apportion them strategically, and he’d own seven 100-RBI seasons. He entered the final game of 1977 with 97 RBIs. In the third inning, with Ken Singleton on first, he posted RBIs 98 and 99 with a homer. In the seventh, Singleton gave May another shot with a two-out single. May whiffed. In the ninth, Al Bumbry led off with a double and moved to third on a groundout, creating an RBI opportunity for Singleton. Instead, Boston’s Bob Stanley intentionally walked him to bring up May. With his 100th RBI 90 feet away, May hit a nubber in front of the plate. Bumbry sped for home as catcher Carlton Fisk sprang for the ball. He fielded it, lunged and tagged Bumbry, stealing May’s 100th by a fraction.

Also finishing with 99 RBIs? Ken Singleton.

Hitting behind May, Eddie Murray singled to plate RBI 88.

Two years hence, Murray himself would become a 99er.

The 99er club is an old one. In 1887, Joe Werrick of Louisville and Oyster Burns of — yup — Baltimore became charter members. In 1888, Dave Foutz of the Brooklyn Bridegrooms joined the club. Having posted 108 RBIs a year prior, he must have felt the pain.

In 1898, Boston Beaneaters shortstop Herman Long notched 99 RBIs but eased the sting a year later by posting exactly 100 RBIs. John Anderson became the first 99er of the new century when he did it for the Brewers in 1901, and in 1911 Fred Luderus reached 99 in part by becoming the first Phillie to hit two homers in one game. He should have hit three.

The year 1922 was big for 99ers. Tillie Walker, Carson Bigbee, Ray Grimes and Cobb each hit the mark. As for Walker, he went into the final day with 98 RBIs and homered, a solo job. Bigbee? The Pirates outfielder had the misfortune of facing Reds great Eppa Rixey in the final game. He went 0-for-3. Ray Grimes, nicknamed Bummer, entered the final game needing two RBIs. The Cubs first baseman managed an RBI single in four at-bats. Bummer.

The club didn’t close with Grimes.
In 1963, Ron Santo needed one RBI in the final game but didn’t get it. The reason was named Warren Spahn. In the final game of 1971, Willie Montanez’ 30th homer gave him 99 RBIs; later, his whiff left him there. In 1985, Cecil Cooper notched his 99th in Milwaukee’s 155th game. He then went 0-for-22 in the next five games. In the final game he got a gift: Boston catcher Rich Gedman had Paul Molitor picked off but threw the ball away. Molitor advanced to third. Cooper then hit a hard liner; second baseman Marty Barrett snared it.

Kevin Elster entered the final game of 1996 as an unlikely 100-RBI candidate. The shortstop had accrued just nine RBIs in his previous three major league seasons combined. Needing three RBIs to join Texas teammates Juan Gonzalez, Dean Palmer and Rusty Greer in the Century Club, Elster got a pair with a homer in the sixth. In need of a solo dinger in the eighth, he grounded out. A day prior, he had scored on a sac fly to give Greer his 100th RBI.

Carlos Delgado entered the final game of 2004 with 98 RBIs and logged one more on a sac fly. In the bottom of the ninth, with his Jays trailing the Yankees, 3-2, teammate Vernon Wells hit a deep drive to right field. Would it fall for a double? Nope. Right fielder Kenny Lofton tracked and caught it. Delgado finished the game, and the season, on-deck.

Likewise on-deck, in the sixth inning of 2009’s final game, David Ortiz watched as Jed Lowrie, batting ahead of him, clubbed a grand slam. Needing a solo homer, Papi whiffed.

Evan Longoria entered 2011’s last game needing five RBIs. After logging three with an eighth-inning homer, he stepped up in the bottom of the 12th against Yankees reliever Scott Proctor and pulled a two-strike liner just past the left-field pole to give Tampa an 8-7 win. With Boston having lost in — yep — Baltimore, Longo’s homer had put the Rays in the playoffs. In all likelihood, no player had ever been happier to notch his 99th and final RBI.