Sources: Twins hire Neil Allen as pitching coach

La Velle E. Neal III and Phil Miller / Star Tribune – 11/24/14

Neil Allen, who helped shepherd the minor league pitchers who form the nucleus of one of the American League’s best pitching staffs to Tampa Bay, is the Twins’ choice as their new pitching coach, three sources with knowledge of the hiring process confirmed Saturday.

Allen, a coach in the Rays system since 2007, including the past four seasons as pitching coach at Class AAA Durham, was informed of the decision on Friday night, the sources said. He was the pick over former Cleveland and Seattle pitching coach Carl Willis, the other finalist.

Unlike Willis, Allen has no major league coaching experience, making him an interesting choice for new manager Paul Molitor, who has never managed at any level. But he is well-regarded for his work in the minors, helping Tampa Bay consistently field an above-average pitching staff built largely from within.

One source, who did not want to be identified because the Twins have not announced the hiring, said of Allen, “He’s a smart guy with some really interesting ideas. And his pitchers work hard for him.”

With the Class AAA Bulls, Allen worked with such young pitchers as Chris Archer, Alex Cobb and Jake Odorizzi, each of whom won at least 10 games for the Rays this season, and hard-throwing closer Jake McGee, who saved 19 games.

Allen, 56, is a native of Kansas City, Kan., who now lives in Sarasota, Fla. He pitched 11 seasons in the major leagues from 1979 to 1989 with the Mets, Cardinals, White Sox, Yankees and Indians, posting a career 3.88 ERA with a 58-70 record and 75 saves. A righthanded pitcher, he was drafted by the Mets like his predecessor as Twins pitching coach, Rick Anderson, though he reached the major leagues six years earlier.
Asked to describe his pitching philosophy, Allen said in a 2010 interview with the Sarasota Herald Tribune: "I attack the zone. I’m not a guy, as you well know when I was a closer — I’m not a guy who picks and feels my way. I’m not afraid of contact. I don’t want them to be afraid of contact, I want them to put the ball in play. I don’t like base on balls."

He has come to the right place, because the Twins issued nearly 700 fewer walks than any other team in baseball during Anderson’s 13-year tenure under manager Ron Gardenhire. The Twins also struck out fewer batters than any team.

Allen joins a staff that already includes hitting coach Tom Brunansky, assistant hitting coach Rudy Hernandez and third-base coach Gene Glynn. Eddie Guardado is reportedly the team’s choice as bullpen coach, but the Twins have not yet announced that hire. A bench coach and a first-base coach are still to be hired.

Pitcher from afar?

The Twins might soon add a pitcher from an unexpected source. But it's news to them.

Yang Hyeon-jong, a righthander who went 16-8 with a 4.25 ERA for the Kia Tigers in the Korean Baseball Organization last season, can negotiate with the major league team that made the highest bid for that right, the Yonhap News Agency reported Saturday — as long as the Tigers accept that bid.

The Tigers, however, are disappointed with the high bid, the story said, and have not yet agreed to let Yang go. They will meet with Yang before making a decision.

Yoo Jee-ho, who wrote the story, tweeted that the Twins are “apparently” the high bidder. But multiple sources in Minnesota said Saturday that the Twins have not been notified of that and that no negotiations are underway. If the Tigers agree to accept the high bid, the winner will have 30 days to negotiate a contract with Yang; otherwise, he would return to the KBO.

Yang’s fastball has been timed between 89-92 miles per hour, and he was named the top Korean-born pitcher in the KBO last season. He is projected as a possible third starter, according to scouting reports cited by Yonhap.

**Twins’ TV ratings follow same downward slope as on-field product**

Phil Miller / Star Tribune – 11/22/14

The Twins suffered their fourth consecutive losing season in 2014, and not just on the field — in your living room, too.

The team’s broadcasting partner, Fox Sports North, lost viewers for the fourth consecutive year, its ratings show, and now routinely attracts barely more than 40 percent of the audience it enjoyed five years ago.

"I don’t think anyone could be too surprised. When the team wins, more people watch. It’s pretty simple," said Kevin Smith, the Twins senior director of corporate communications and broadcasting. "Fox Sports does a great job. They’re doing what they can, and beyond, to hold viewers, but it all comes down to wins and losses."

The Twins’ average rating for a prime-time game was 3.64, meaning that percentage of TV viewers at a given time were tuned to the ballgame, down 13.9 percent from the 4.23 rating that FSN drew in 2013, according to Nielsen measurements. Roughly 64,000 Twin Cities households tuned in to an average game, which is a 57.9 percent drop from the 152,000 households who were watching in 2010, when the Twins won their most recent division title during their first season at Target Field.

The 2014 Twins featured an improved offense and suffered far fewer blowouts — defined as losses by six or more runs — than in the previous three years. (After surrendering 23, 22 and 21 such blowouts from 2011 to ’13, the Twins actually went 15-12 in lopsided games last year.)

But the numbers, like the team’s declining attendance at Target Field, likely reflect a growing indifference toward the non-contending team.
“The thing is, it’s still a strong market. If you were to guarantee that 3.64 [rating] to a lot of other teams and say, ‘Would you take that?’ they would say, ‘Absolutely,’” Smith said. “Hopefully we’ll start to have more success on the field, and we’ll see those numbers rise to the top five-seven, where we’ve been before.”

The Twins are in the third year of a long-term contract with FSN that pays the team $29 million annually, which sounds good until you consider the Los Angeles Angels earn almost $150 million a year from local TV.

The Twins’ ratings slipped from the 11th-best in the major leagues to 13th, according to Forbes magazine, though they would have been 14th had the Dodgers not been ensnarled in a dispute that kept them off most cable systems in Southern California. That’s better, on a per capita basis, than playoff teams such as the Angels, Nationals and Athletics, and it gives the team reason to believe its viewership will rebound if the record does.

And while the viewership numbers have dropped, they also reflect the growing value of sports programming in an increasingly fractured media landscape. Even with the decline, Twins games routinely drew bigger audiences than the entertainment programming opposite them.

“I can count on one hand the number of prime-time network shows that out-rated us,” Smith said. “It’s all relative. We’d like our numbers to be better, but in boxcar numbers, we still had double the audience that most network programs get.”

Still waiting

There is no sign yet that the Twins have reached a decision about their next pitching coach, but one finalist said Friday he believes he will hear something soon.

“I don’t have anything to tell you yet, but I wouldn’t be surprised to hear something in the next few days,” former Indians and Mariners pitching coach Carl Willis said. “They’ve got a tough decision to make, but either way, I’m flattered to be considered. I really enjoyed interviewing with them, and we’ll see what happens.”

Willis, a relief pitcher on the Twins’ 1991 World Series championship team, is one of two finalists for the job, according to a source with knowledge of the search, along with Neil Allen, Tampa Bay’s pitching coach at Class AAA Durham. Willis spent 13 seasons as a coach in Cleveland and Seattle, and spent last season as a special adviser to the Indians.

So far, only hitting coach Tom Brunansky, assistant hitting coach Rudy Hernandez and third base coach Gene Glynn have been named to new manager Paul Molitor’s staff, but another former Twins reliever, Eddie Guardado, is expected to be appointed as bullpen coach soon.

**Minnesota Twins hire Neil Allen as pitching coach, source says**

Mike Berardino / Pioneer Press – 11/22/14

Three weeks after selecting Paul Molitor as their new manager, the Twins finally got around to picking a pitching coach.

“From all indications” Neil Allen has edged out fellow finalist Carl Willis for the position, according to a person close to the process.

Twins general manager Terry Ryan called Willis on Friday night to inform him he had been eliminated, the source said.

A source close to Allen, however, insisted the former big-league closer had been told "absolutely nothing" about his candidacy as of Saturday evening. Allen, the source reiterated, had "not heard a thing."

Allen, 56, is a former New York Yankees bullpen coach (2005) who spent the past eight seasons working in the Tampa Bay Rays system. The past four of those were as the pitching coach at Triple-A Durham, where he sent the likes of Chris Archer, Matt Moore, Jake Odorizzi and Jake McGee on to successful big-league transitions.
Sober since 1989, Allen overcame a bout with alcoholism that shortened his 11-year big-league pitching career. In September 2012, he lost his wife, Lisa, to an aneurysm.

Frank Viola, MVP of the Twins’ 1987 World Series championship run, and minor league pitching coordinator Eric Rasmussen also interviewed.

Rick Anderson held the role for the past 13 seasons under longtime friend Ron Gardenhire. But when Gardenhire was dismissed as manager on Sept. 29, Anderson was let go as well.

Allen was the New York Mets closer in the early 1980s, where he counted Gardenhire among his teammates.

Ryan was working in the Mets organization at that same time as Midwest scouting supervisor, but Allen met him only in passing. Willis spent the bulk of 11 seasons (2003-13) as a big-league pitching coach with the Cleveland Indians and Seattle Mariners. During his tenure, those pitching staffs produced three Cy Young Award winners and 12 combined all-star selections by eight different pitchers.

Willis also had ties to the Twins’ championship history, working as a setup man for the 1991 World Series winners during a five-year stint under former manager Tom Kelly. Willis spent 2014 working as a special adviser with the Indians.

Charley Walters: Torii Hunter, Twins have ‘common interest’ in reunion

Charley Walters / Pioneer Press – 11/22/14

Free-agent outfielder Torii Hunter told the Pioneer Press on Saturday that he favors the Twins among teams with which he is considering signing and that he could make a decision in a week or so.

“(Twins general manager) Terry Ryan and I have talked several times, and there’s definitely a common interest there, for sure,” Hunter said from South Bend, Ind., where he was to watch son Torii Jr., a freshman wide receiver for Notre Dame, play against Louisville.

Hunter, 39, was raised in the Twins organization and spent 11 of his 18 major league seasons in Minnesota. Last season, Hunter, a five-time all-star and nine-time Gold Glove winner, hit .286 with 17 home runs and 83 runs batted in for the Detroit Tigers.

Hunter would add class, character and heart to the Twins, who have lost at least 92 games in each of the past four seasons. But that’s not why Hunter is considering a return to Minnesota.

"I would come over to win," he said. "All that stuff everybody talks about, ‘a great guy in the clubhouse,’ that's extra -- that's not No. 1. The No. 1 thing is look at my numbers. They're still the same, one of the most consistent hitters in baseball over my career.

"But sometimes I guess my character and clubhouse presence and just that fire that I have, I think, overshadows a lot. But no matter what, if I didn't put up those numbers, I don't care what kind of personality or drive you have, not many people are going to want you. The only reason you’re going to want me is because of my play."

Hunter's next contract could be the last of a brilliant career. The Twins are intriguing to Hunter because that's where he began his career, and he's a big fan of new Twins manager Paul Molitor, who he said helped him immeasurably as a player, teammate and bench coach.
“There are so many reasons,” Hunter said. "You talk about the love from the fans and the love I have for the fans and the organization, growing up there. I came there as a young boy and came out a man. I always hold true to Minnesota Twins values I was taught.”

As a Twins reliever for 11 seasons, Eddie Guardado pitched with his heart as much as his left arm. He'll try to instill that passion as the Twins' new bullpen coach.

"It's not your ability, it's your mind-set," Guardado, 44, told the Pioneer Press on Saturday.

Guardado, who lives in Orange County, Calif., led the American League with 45 saves in 2002, when he was an all-star closer. He had 41 saves in 2003, when he repeated as an all-star. He appeared in a league-leading 83 games in 1996.

"I've always felt ability will take you so far, but your heart and your mind will take you even farther," Guardado said. "That's for everybody. Your talent will put you at a certain point, but how you will be successful for a long time is your mind and heart."

Twinsights: Neil Allen apparently gets the nod as Twins pitching coach

Mike Berardino / Pioneer Press – 11/22/14

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Twinsights: Andrew Albers in ‘limbo’ after rocky debut in Korean league

Mike Berardino / Pioneer Press – 11/22/14

What’s next for former Twins left-hander Andrew Albers after a rocky debut season in the Korea Baseball Organization?

“Great question,” Albers said Saturday by phone from Saskatchewan. “I have no idea. I’m kind of in limbo right now.”

In 28 starts for the Hanwha Eagles, Albers struggled to a 6-13 record and a 5.89 earned run average. In 151 1/3 innings, he allowed a whopping 200 hits (18 homers) and 40 walks while striking out just 107 in the offense-happy league.

Albers, 29, is open to returning for a second season in the KBO after making $700,000 this year. However, there has been a recent change in management for the Eagles, who posted another last-place finish (49-77-2) in the nine-team league and finished 29 1/2 games behind first-place Samsung.

“I haven’t really heard anything from the Korea side, so I really don’t know,” Albers said. “I’m waiting to see what happens. If I get the opportunity to go back, I probably will. Obviously, I didn’t have as good a season as I would have liked.”

Because the Korean Series was pushed back by the Asian Games (Sept. 19-Oct. 4), this is still a dead period for KBO free-agent imports as they assess their playing futures. Albers and his Toronto-based agent, Blake Corosky, hope to know more about 2015 options in another week or two.

The Twins left off on great terms with Albers, their 2013 Minor League Pitcher of the Year and a late-season sensation in the majors that year. Could they be an option for Albers should he prefer to return to North America next season?

“We’re not allowed to talk to teams in North America at this point, but certainly the Twins would be an option if I’m coming back,” Albers said. “They treated me extremely well, and I know the organization, obviously. I was very happy with them, but they also have a lot of young guys coming up, so you have to think about what would be the best fit as well. We’ll see what happens.”

Twinsights: Andrew Albers breaks down fellow KBO lefty Hyeon-jong Yang

Mike Berardino / Pioneer Press – 11/22/14

As a first-year import in the Korea Baseball Organization, Andrew Albers got a chance to watch Hyeon-jong Yang pitch in person on four occasions against the Hanwha Eagles this season.

Yang, a fellow left-hander for whom the Twins won negotiating rights on Friday, went 16-8 with a 4.25 earned run average in 28 starts for the Kia Tigers. Some reports have pegged him as a potential No. 2 starter in the major leagues, but Albers’ scouting report was a good bit more conservative.

“Could he pitch in North America? I think so, just going from my eye test,” said Albers, who went 2-5 with a 4.05 ERA in 10 starts for the Twins in 2013. “He’s not going to be an ace. I don’t think he’s a No. 1 or even a No. 2 for that matter. But his stuff is good enough to come over here and be a middle-of-the-rotation, back-end guy, for sure. It all depends on how he adjusts to the North American game.”

According to Albers, Yang pitches at 90-93 mph with his fastball and has a good changeup and slider. Some reports have had Yang touching 95 mph, which Albers said he “might touch every once in a while if he’s feeling good.”

The 6-foot, 187-pound Yang dealt with a “little bit of a hiccup” with his throwing shoulder at midseason, Albers said, noting his stuff appeared firmer in the first half of the season and “a little softer” down the stretch.

Yang had a 2.65 ERA through his first 10 starts in April and May, but struggled to a 5.31 ERA the rest of the way.
"His command was off and on, but he can throw all three pitches for strikes in whatever count," said Albers, the Twins’ Minor League Pitcher of the Year in 2013. "He’s not afraid to throw off-speed in fastball counts, not afraid to go after you that way."

Some reports have said Yang’s slider is a put-away pitch with two strikes, but Albers suggested it could still use some work.

"It’s a good pitch, but it’s not a wipeout slider," Albers said. "It’s not a Glen Perkins slider, where you see it and you go, ‘Holy smokes!’ Perkins’ slider is a plus-plus pitch. For Yang, his slider is not quite at that level, but when he locates it and keeps it down, it’s going to be tough on guys."

Yang threw 171 1/3 innings in the KBO season, which ended later than normal due to a midseason interruption for the Asian Games. He posted nine-inning rates of 8.6 strikeouts and 4.0 walks.

"He did get swings and misses, but guys are more willing to chase over there," Albers said. "Hitters are more aggressive with two strikes."

Yang won the inaugural Choi Dong-won Award as the top Korean pitcher in the KBO, but Albers said he was more impressed with Kwang Hyun Kim, another 26-year-old lefty who went 13-9 with a 3.42 ERA. The San Diego Padres bid $2 million to win the negotiating rights for Kim last week, but they have yet to work out a deal to bring him to North America.

The posting fee for Yang was projected to be as much as $5 million but could have ended up well below that figure, according to media reports in South Korea. The Kia Tigers were reportedly disappointed with the winning bid, but Yang is said to be eager to make the move to North America.

Albers, who struggled to a 6-13 record and 5.89 ERA in 28 KBO starts, knows first-hand how hard it can be to pitch in South Korea. A 4.25 ERA in South Korea might equate to about a 3.05 ERA in the majors — 18.4 percent below league average.

The overall ERA in the KBO was 5.21 this season. In the majors it was 3.74.

"Everything changes," Albers said. "It’s all about confidence, but yeah, it was hard to pitch over there. The offensive numbers skyrocketed and all those good things. The defense isn’t as good. I don’t want to say I’d be surprised if he went over to the U.S. and had a 3.00 ERA in the American League, but those would be awfully good numbers. If he’s doing that, he’d be a No. 1 or No. 2 guy."

"I’m not saying he can’t do that sort of thing eventually. He’s 26 going on 27 (on March 1), so there’s still room for improvement. He needs to get a little more consistent throwing strikes and getting ahead. I could see him pitching in the high threes or low fours (in ERA). High twos or low threes? He’s not there yet."

**Twinsights: Twins win bidding for Korean LHP Hyeon-jong Yang**

Mike Berardino / Pioneer Press – 11/22/14

The Twins have won the bidding for negotiating rights with Korean left-hander Hyeon-jong Yang and are closing in on a deal, a person familiar with the process told the Pioneer Press on Saturday.

Yang, 26, won the inaugural Choi Dong-won Award — the equivalent of the Cy Young Award in the Korea Baseball Organization — after going 16-8 with a 4.25 earned run average in 28 starts for the Kia Tigers.

According to the source, media descriptions of Yang’s arsenal — 92-95 mph fastball with a four-pitch mix and a plus slider — are accurate. Yang projects as a No. 3 or 4 starter in the majors.

Howard Norsetter, who coordinates international scouting for the Twins, was “close to getting it done,” the source said. The two sides have a 30-day window to work out a deal, according to Korean posting rules.

Yang is listed on the league web site at 6-foot and 187 pounds. In 171 1/3 innings this season, he allowed 162 hits (12 homers) and
77 walks while striking out 165.

His ERA was 18.4 percent lower than the league-wide ERA of 5.21. That equates to a 3.05 ERA in the major leagues, where the league ERA was just 3.74.

It’s unclear what the Yang acquisition would cost, but it’s expected to be relatively modest compared to the six-year, $36 million deal fellow lefty Hyun-jin Ryu signed with the Los Angeles Dodgers in 2012. The Dodgers paid $25.7 million to the Hanwha Eagles to win the negotiating rights for Ryu.

**Twinsights: Twins showing interest in veteran slugger Wily Mo Pena**

Mike Berardino / Pioneer Press – 11/22/14

As the Twins search for their next left fielder in a weak free-agent market, a new potential option has emerged.

Dominican slugger Wily Mo Pena, who has spent the past three seasons in the Japanese Pacific League, has been declared an international free agent after ending talks with the Orix Buffaloes, a person with direct knowledge told the Pioneer Press on Saturday morning.

Interest between the Twins and Pena is mutual, the source said.

The Twins hope to improve their outfield defense but also are considering a free-agent offer for five-time all-star Torii Hunter, who turns 40 next July and has seen his defensive metrics plummet in the past two seasons.

Pena, who turns 33 in January, is coming off a strong season in which he hit 32 home runs, drove in 90 and posted an .830 combined on-base/slugging percentage in 572 plate appearances. He played mostly first base and designated hitter for Orix in 2014.

Here’s a [video clip from September](#) showing Pena beating out a run-scoring chopper to third.

His last significant playing time in the outfield came in 2012, when he played 20 games in left field for Softbank, hitting 21 home runs and posting an .829 OPS.

The burly right-handed hitter was limited to 55 games with Softbank in 2013, when torn cartilage in his right knee was misdiagnosed in Japan. The injury eventually required arthroscopic surgery, and Pena bounced back to play 140 games this season.

Pena is said to be healthy and in good shape despite seeing his weight fluctuate between 255 and 270 pounds in recent years. He is believed to be in the 260-pound range currently.

Once considered one of the game’s most talented young outfield prospects, Pena last played in the major leagues in 2011 for the Arizona Diamondbacks and Seattle Mariners. Trouble hitting offspeed pitches cost him career momentum, but Pena was able to make a successful adjustment in the junk-balling Japanese league.

Pena saw regular playing time with the Cincinnati Reds and Boston Red Sox between 2004-07. He pounded 45 combined homers (in 647 at-bats) for the Reds in 2004-05 before being traded the following spring to Boston for right-hander Bronson Arroyo.

That was one of the first key moves made by then Reds general manager Wayne Krivsky, who later returned to the Twins’ front office as a special assistant to general manager Terry Ryan.

Pena could be an enticing platoon option for a big-league club. He has posted a career slash line of .275/.337/.455 in 650 plate appearances against left-handed pitching.

His numbers against right-handed pitchers are more modest: .236/.285/.439.
MINNEAPOLIS -- The Twins are close to adding a pitching coach from outside of the organization, as they're set to hire Neil Allen from the Rays' organization, according to a Major League source.

The Twins, however, have not made an official announcement. Minnesota also has yet to officially introduce Eddie Guardado as bullpen coach. But both are expected to be officially hired early next week.

Allen, 56, has been a coach in Tampa Bay's organization since 2007. He served as pitching coach at Triple-A Durham the last four seasons.

The Rays are known for their ability to churn out quality starting pitchers from within their organization, and Allen worked with several of Tampa Bay's top young starting pitchers such as Alex Cobb, Chris Archer, Jake Odorizzi and Matt Moore.

Allen, however, has no experience as a Major League pitching coach. He was reportedly chosen over former Twins reliever Carl Willis, who previously served as pitching coach for the Indians and Mariners.

Allen pitched for 11 years in the Majors for the Mets, Cardinals, Yankees, White Sox and Indians from 1979-89. He had a career 3.88 ERA in 988 1/3 innings.

Allen is the first coaching hire by the Twins from outside the organization to serve under new manager Paul Molitor. The Twins retained hitting coach Tom Brunansky, while third-base coach Gene Glynn and assistant hitting coach Rudy Hernandez were promoted from the Minor Leagues. Guardado has no professional coaching experience outside of serving as a Spring Training instructor for the Twins, but he pitched in Minnesota for 12 seasons and is a member of the club's Hall of Fame.

The Twins still have to hire a bench coach and a first-base coach. General manager Terry Ryan has said he'd like to have the coaching staff set by the Winter Meetings in early December.

The Twins have hired Neil Allen as the next pitching coach, according to a Star Tribune report. Allen replaces Rick Anderson, who had been the pitching coach since Ron Gardenhire took over as manager of the Twins in 2002.

Allen reportedly was one of two finalists, along with former Indians and Mariners pitching coach, Carl Wills.

Allen spent the past four seasons as the pitching coach for the Tampa Bay Rays' Triple-A affiliate, the Durham Bulls. He has no major league coaching experience.

Allen is the fourth known hire to Paul Molitor's coaching staff.
Here are the others:

Hitting coach: Tom Bruanansky

Assistant hitting coach: Rudy Hernandez

Third base coach/infield instructor: Gene Glynn

It's also expected that Eddie Guardado will be named the team's bullpen coach, although the Twins haven't yet announced that hire, either.