Reusse: Hughes is healthier and determined to throw the change
Patrick Reusse | Star Tribune | March 14, 2017

FORT MYERS, FLA. – The story line on Phil Hughes last spring was that he had taken the Twins’ advice after a poor 2015, lost substantial weight and now had a chance to regain the excellence of the 2014 season, his first in Minnesota.

Then, the new, slimmer Hughes started pitching in exhibitions, and his fastball was not reaching 90 miles per hour. It’s difficult to be a fastball pitcher without your fastball.

Ripping Hughes became a popular pastime, particularly when the pitcher was working on a shutout at Detroit on May 17 and made manager Paul Molitor aware at midgame that he had a sense of fatigue with his right arm.

Hughes left with one out in the seventh, when a first run was charged, and the sneers aimed at him over the “fatigue” comment even reached the traditionally homerific FSN telecasts.

He was sent to the bullpen after a lousy start June 2. A week later, he made his first relief appearance vs. Miami, was smoked with a line drive by J.T. Realmuto and suffered a fracture of his left femur at knee level.

Early in his recovery from the broken leg, Hughes underwent tests on his right shoulder and it was discovered there was an impingement between his collarbone and first rib — aka, thoracic outlet syndrome.

This can cause many problems, including not being able to throw a fastball 90 miles per hour. The small, top rib was removed, and Hughes was done pitching for 2016.

Asked this week if he felt as if he was “ever” healthy last season, Hughes said: “I don’t think so, but the problem is, when you’ve been in pro ball for a dozen years and after all those innings …

“It’s hard to tell the difference between being hurt and the normal wear. When you’re 28, 29, now 30, you realize that your arm never is going to feel again like it did when you were a kid.

“You just keep pitching, unless it’s an obvious injury.”

Hughes had a shoulder problem that limited his season for the Yankees in 2011. Even with that, he had 220 appearances, 168 starts and 1,039 innings in the big leagues from 2009 to 2015.
That might not be Jack Morris, Bert Blyleven or Felix Hernandez, but it’s enough work to let a pitcher know that he’s not likely to again occasionally reach 95, 96 miles per hour that was there for him in 2014.

That’s why Hughes was feeling optimistic after his five-inning start vs. the Orioles on Sunday. There were several fastball readings of 92, a velocity he could not reach in the lost season of 2016.

“I’ll get three more starts in Florida and should find a little more velocity,” Hughes said. “In that start Sunday, it was easy to throw a good fastball. That wasn’t the case last spring.”

Hughes has his weight roughly where it was last season, and his shoulder feels as strong as it is going to be for a 30-year-old. So, the story line has changed in 2017:

Phil Hughes is working to add a changeup to go with his fastball, cutter and curve.

Yeah. That one again.

When was the Hughes/changeup story first written in spring training with the Yankees?

“Probably 2010,” he said.

Then, he smiled and added: “I still get texts from a couple of New York baseball writers after an exhibition start saying, ‘How many changeups did you throw?’

“They wrote that story a few times.”

Yes, but this time, Hughes really means it. He claims to be giving the changeup a full shot, knowing he needs it to combat hitters who have been too often correct when sitting on a fastball.

“[Pitching coach] Neil Allen is pushing me harder than I’ve ever been pushed to throw the changeup, to stick with it,” Hughes said. “I’m doing that — mixed results so far, but I’m optimistic.”

Against Baltimore, Hughes gave up three home runs, and two were off changeups that stayed up and were screaming “hit me.” There was also a changeup down for a strikeout and another for a ground ball double play.

“I’m throwing it with a split-fingered grip, but not a real wide split,” Hughes said. “Sometimes, I speed up the motion and that’s when it’s been high in the zone. Everyone says, ‘You have to have the same arm motion for a great change,’ but I might slow the arm a little to make sure the pitch is down.

“After 10 years, no hitter is going to go up there expecting to see a changeup from me anyway.”

Hughes paused and said: “I’m in. I’m going to throw the changeup this year.”

The writers from New York should get a few texts out of that.

**Ervin Santana asks to face United States on Saturday in WBC**

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

FORT MYERS, FLA. – Twins righthander Ervin Santana was summoned to join the Dominican Republic team and pitch on Tuesday against Puerto Rico in San Diego.

It worked well from a scheduling standpoint, as Tuesday was Santana’s day to pitch and he would remain on line to start Opening Day on April 3 against the Royals. Twins manager Paul Molitor said Monday that part of the discussions about Santana joining the team was to stay as close to his schedule as he could.

But Carlos Martinez was announced as the starter Monday night, which now throws Santana off schedule.
Santana, apparently, asked to start Saturday against Team USA. But the Twins are fine with it.

“He’s well built-up,” Twins Chief Baseball Officer Derek Falvey said. “Ervin will throw a side session either [Tuesday] or Wednesday.”

If he starts Saturday, Santana will have time to make two more starts — on or around March 23 and 28 — before the end of the month. He then would have four or five days before Opening Day.

Santana initially declined to pitch in the World Baseball Classic and remained in camp with the Twins. The Dominican Republic, in a group with the United States, Venezuela and Puerto Rico, is after a second consecutive WBC title.

“I think the [Dominican] players might have reached out to him,” Molitor said. “That’s kind of my feel.”

It has not been smooth sailing with some Twins pitchers and the WBC. In 2006, Carlos Silva was supposed to start for Venezuela but was used out of the bullpen, which rankled some club officials. In 2013, Samuel Deduno made three starts for the Dominican Republic as it won the title but reported back to the Twins with a groin muscle strain and did not pitch in the major leagues until May.

Also in 2013, Deolis Guerra had chest pains and a lack of circulation on his right side while with Venezuela. He was returned to Twins camp, and the Twins immediately had him airlifted to Tampa for emergency surgery.

Romero impresses

The Twins were very impressed with righthander Fernando Romero before was assigned to during his stay in the major league camp. Beyond the fastball that reached 97 miles per hour and secondary pitches, they liked his mound presence, his willingness to attack hitters and moxie.

They liked him so much that they kicked around the idea of using Romero as a reliever and fast-tracking him to this year’s bullpen.

“I can see him as a reliever,” Molitor said. “I think [other] people envision him being a high-end starter too. So we are going to stick with that in the short term and try to get him stretched out.”

Romero missed most of 2014 and all of 2015 because of elbow and knee surgeries. He was 9-3 with a 1.89 ERA between Class A Fort Myers and Class AA Chattanooga last season and has become a top prospect.

On deck

After their day off Tuesday, the Twins play host to the Cardinals on Wednesday at Target Field. Tyler Duffey will start for the Twins while Mike Leake starts for St. Louis.

Ervin Santana’s WBC stint becomes more problematic for Twins

Brian Murphy | Pioneer Press | March 14, 2017

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Ervin Santana’s World Baseball Classic participation is more difficult for the Twins than they initially believed.

The Twins’ ace right-hander agreed to join the Dominican Republic national team in San Diego for what was supposed to be a start on Tuesday, the same day he was scheduled to pitch five innings against minor-league hitters in Fort Myers.

Santana, however, is now slated to start Saturday against Team USA at Petco Park, complicating a spring regimen designed to make him the Twins’ Opening Day starter April 3 against Kansas City at Target Field.

That timeline has become muddled.

“While it is not ideal to push back Ervin’s start, we are confident that he is on track to be ready for the regular season,” Twins general manager Thad Levine said in a text message.

The Twins did not want their projected Opening Day starter to leave camp and travel across the country to sit in the bullpen and potentially pitch one or two innings in relief.

“Part of the conversations were about the fact we wanted him to stay as close to his schedule as we could,” Twins manager Paul Molitor said.
Monday. “That for us would have been Tuesday or Wednesday. You start moving it past those days, it makes it trickier for us to do what we need to do between now and Opening Day.”

Late Monday, Dominican Republic manager Moises Alou told USA Today that was not the plan.

Santana did not participate in three previous World Baseball Classics, and initially declined to play for the Dominican Republic this year, saying he wanted to focus exclusively on getting ready for the Twins season. But with the defending champions looking to supplement their pitching depth as they advanced, Santana and the Twins agreed to let him participate.

“It didn’t surprise me, the call,” Santana said Tuesday during a WBC news conference. “It wasn’t surprising because my agent told me that there was going to be a second round. Well, let’s see if they ask me to go, then I’ll go. I’ll let you know. And they asked me if I was ready for the second round, and I told them, yes, I was.”

Santana replaced Milwaukee Brewers right-hander Wily Peralta on the Dominican Republic roster. He is the Twins’ third pitcher to leave camp for the WBC. Right-hander Jose Berrios and lefty Hector Santiago each has started a game for Puerto Rico.

“I think he was real excited,” Molitor said. “My gut is those players on those teams probably talk a lot. I think players might have reached out to him — ‘C’mon, let’s have some fun.’”

Santana still spends part of his offseason in the Dominican Republic. He told reporters earlier this spring that he decided on his own to forego the WBC when teams were finalizing their rosters.

“I want to focus on this year and do a better job in the first half, try to throw 200 innings. That’s every starter’s goal,” he said on Feb. 27.

Santana has fallen short of that benchmark each of the past three years, the past two seasons with the Twins.

In 2015, his Twins debut was delayed by an 80-game steroid suspension, leaving him at just 108 innings in half a season’s work. Last year, he didn’t get rolling until mid-June after tweaking his back in April while shagging flies in the outfield at Nationals Park.

Roster questions getting answers at Twins’ camp
Rhett Bollinger | MLB | March 14, 2017

FORT MYERS, Fla. -- The Twins are more than halfway through Spring Training, and the roster competitions are starting to take shape, especially with the news Saturday that Trevor May was diagnosed with a torn right ulnar collateral ligament and is expected to miss the season.

May was the favorite for the fifth spot in Minnesota's rotation; now it's more of an open race, with Jose Berrios considered the slight favorite. Twins closer Glen Perkins, coming off left labrum surgery, is also not expected to be ready to start the year, which opens a spot in the bullpen.

Other non-roster players such as ByungHo Park, Chris Gimenez, Ryan Vogelsong and Craig Breslow have had strong showings, although it would require some maneuvering with the currently full 40-man roster for all of them to make the club.

With Opening Day looming on April 3, here is an updated breakdown of Minnesota’s projected Opening Day roster.

Catching: Jason Castro, Gimenez

Castro is a lock to be the Twins' starting catcher, but there remains a competition for the backup catching job between Gimenez, John Ryan Murphy and prospect Mitch Garver. Murphy was the pick before spring and has the advantage of being on the 40-man roster, but Gimenez has had a strong spring and Minnesota likes his ability to work with the pitching staff.

First base: Joe Mauer

Mauer has been eased into Spring Training this season, but nothing has changed with his status at first base, although Twins manager Paul Molitor has said he plans to sit Mauer more against tough lefties.

Second base: Brian Dozier

Coming off a 42-homer season, Dozier remains the club's most productive player, and he is also considered a leader in the clubhouse. There's
still a chance he could be traded during the season, but he'll be at second come Opening Day.

**Shortstop:** Jorge Polanco

Polanco still must prove he can stick defensively, but Molitor has said that he plans to have Polanco at short to open the year. His bat has never been the question mark, and his spring includes a grand slam on Sunday.

**Third base:** Miguel Sano

Sano has had some issues with strikeouts this spring, as he's working on new mechanics with his hand position lower and closer to his body. But defensively, he's been solid, which is a good sign.

**Designated hitter:** Park

Kennys Vargas was listed as the favorite at DH heading into Spring Training, but Park has been Minnesota’s best hitter this spring. Not only is he hitting .409 with three homers and two doubles, but he's catching up to higher velocity and has struck out six times compared to four walks. Vargas, who has been seeing limited action for Puerto Rico in the World Baseball Classic, could still play his way into a bench role, but he does have a Minor League option left.

**Starting outfield:** Eddie Rosario, Byron Buxton, Max Kepler

The Twins are going with their young and athletic outfield of Rosario, Buxton and Kepler, and the club is trying to take advantage of their range and plus arms by playing them shallower during certain situations. All three still have things to prove offensively, though.

**Bench:** Eduardo Escobar, Robbie Grossman, Danny Santana

It’s hard to predict how the bench will shake out, but Escobar, who is out of options, appears to have a leg up on the backup infielder role over Ehire Adrianza. Grossman is hurt by his troubles defensively and inability to play center, but he is coming off a strong season offensively and is ahead of non-roster outfielders such as Drew Stubbs and J.B. Shuck. Santana's hold on a bench spot is tenuous, but he's having a strong spring offensively and Minnesota is playing him in both the infield and outfield.

**Rotation:** Ervin Santana, Hector Santiago, Kyle Gibson, Phil Hughes, Berrios

The first four spots in the Twins' rotation are essentially locks, but there's a competition for the fifth spot, especially after May was diagnosed with the torn UCL. Berrios, who picked up the win for Team Puerto Rico by allowing three runs in five innings on Sunday, is the slight favorite.

Veteran Ryan Vogelsong has a real chance, while Tyler Duffey, Adalberto Mejia and Rule 5 Draft pick Justin Haley are also in the competition.

**Bullpen:** Brandon Kintzler, Ryan Pressly, Taylor Rogers, Matt Belisle, Breslow, Vogelsong, J.T. Chargois

Kintzler, Pressly, Rogers and Belisle are all expected to be on Minnesota’s roster, with Kintzler serving as closer if Perkins opens the year on the 15-day disabled list, as expected. Breslow has seen results this spring with his overhauled delivery, while Molitor likes Vogelsong’s leadership ability and is giving him a long look. Vogelsong, though, said he pitches better as a starter than a reliever. The last spot is hard to predict, and Haley could make the roster, while there are other candidates such as Michael Tonkin, Ryan O'Rourke, Buddy Boshers and potentially Duffey.

---

**Rosario throw nails Segura, erases DR threat**

Joe Trezza | MLB | March 15, 2017

Another World Baseball Classic game, another thrilling play at the plate.

Only this time, the Dominican Republic came up on the short end in Puerto Rico’s 3-1 win.

Puerto Rican right fielder Eddie Rosario helped wiggle starter Orlando Roman out of a massive first-inning jam by throwing out Jean Segura trying to score on a fly ball off the bat of Carlos Santana.

With the bases loaded with one out in the first, Santana lined a 1-0 fastball to Rosario, who fired a one-hop strike to catcher Yadier Molina from short right field. Molina applied a clean, easy tag to get Puerto Rico out of the inning, pumping his fist as he jogged to the dugout.
Molina then drove home the game’s first run with an RBI single off Carlos Martinez in the bottom of the inning.

Nelson Cruz homered off Roman in the top of the second to tie the score.

Rosario has a history of strong throws over his first two Major League seasons, both with the Twins. His average arm strength on competitive throws from the outfield last year was 95 mph, according to Statcast™. His best throw came in an August game against the Astros, when Rosario fired a 99.5 mph toss from center field to catch Alex Bregman at the plate.

**Among first wave of Twins cuts, a couple pitchers that could help soon, one to watch**

Derek Wetmore | ESPN 1500 | March 14, 2017

The Twins on Monday made their first wave of cuts, showing six players the door to the Major League clubhouse. Among those six players, there are at least two pitchers I could see helping out this year, and one who could be a special player in the future. There will be several more waves of cuts before the Twins have to start making some critical roster decisions.

First, here are the moves and a quick explanation for the language.

**LHP Mason Melotakis Optioned to Triple-A Rochester**

**LHP Randy Rosario Optioned to Double-A Chattanooga**

**RHP Felix Jorge Optioned to Double-A Chattanooga**

**RHP Fernando Romero Optioned to Double-A Chattanooga**

**LHP Stephen Gonsalves Reassigned to minor league camp**

**RHP Aaron Slegers Reassigned to minor league camp**

The reason some pitchers are “optioned” while others are “reassigned” is that the players on the 40-man roster need to have a minor league option remaining to be sent out of big league camp. Gonsalves and Slegers are not on the 40-man roster, so they’re free to be sent to the minors without burning an “option.” The upshot is basically the same for all six pitchers: they’re going from MLB camp to minor league camp.

That’s likely not the last you’ve heard from some of these guys, though. Gonsalves posted such strong numbers in the minors last year that it’s possible he’ll surface in the big leagues at some point this season. The Twins right now have taken a brief blow to their starting rotation – three pitchers are off pitching in the WBC and Trevor May might need Tommy John surgery — and last season they needed 11 different pitchers to make starts. (In 2015 they used 9 starters; in 2014 they used 12!)

And Melotakis, despite missing time this spring with an oblique injury, could be a factor in the bullpen. The left-handed relief is a bit of a mystery right now. I believe Taylor Rogers is the best bet to make the team given his performance last season, but earlier this spring manager Paul Molitor made a point to suggest that there were four jobs available in the bullpen. That would seem to suggest that only Brandon Kintzler, Ryan Pressly and Matt Belisle were assured of spots (with Glen Perkins likely headed to the disabled list to begin the year). If Rogers earns his keep, then there’s Ryan O’Rourke and veteran reclamation project Craig Breslow. Then I’d throw Rosario and Melotakis in the mix as potential lefties you could see at some point this season out the Twins’ bullpen. Melotakis is a ahead in that race, as he reached Double-A first and his full-season stats from last year are more impressive. Of course, if Perkins returns to full strength at some point it shores up a lot of questions about the back end of Minnesota’s bullpen.

Romero, if he maximizes his potential, has more upside than any of the other names on this list of cuts.

With J.O. Berrios moving onto the big leagues, Romero might be the best pitching prospect in the organization. Tyler Jay would have something to say about that for sure, but in any case, Romero’s numbers have been impressive. Between two levels of A-ball last year, Romero logged 90 1/3 innings with a 1.89 ERA and a 90:15 strikeout-to-walk ratio. He’s got a big fastball (mid-to-upper-90’s) and he’s working on his slider.

He was invited to MLB spring training, but it’s not a huge surprise to see him among the first wave of cuts. He got to dip his feet in the water and now he has a small taste for what it’s like competing for a job in the big leagues. We’ll have to wait and see if he continues to post eye-catching numbers as he climbs the minor league ladder, but based on what Romero’s done in the low levels of the minors, the 22-year-old has star potential.

He’s behind Berrios, for one example, in part because he’s already had Tommy John surgery and that wiped out some development time. If you’re into monitoring prospects, keep your eye on Romero this summer.
Chesapeake Sports Club prepares to hold annual jamboree
Erica Greenway | Chesapeake News 3 | March 15, 2017

CHESAPEAKE, Va. - The Chesapeake Sports Club is preparing to hold its annual jamboree next month.

This will be the sixth year for the event. It will take place Thursday, April 6 at 6 p.m. at the Chesapeake Conference Center.

Great Bridge High School graduate Michael Cuddyer is the keynote speaker.

Cuddyer is a former Major League baseball player who played for the Minnesota Twins, Colorado Rockies and New York Mets.

Click here for more information on the event and to purchase tickets.

How Craig Breslow Used Science To Engineer His Way Back Into Baseball
Hannah Keyser | Deadspin | March 14, 2017

Craig Breslow is a little surprised that the media has made such a big deal out of his offseason reinvention. After a decade of pitching effectively in the major leagues, 2016 saw him demoted to the minors in May and released by two different teams before the season’s end. The way he looked at it, if he didn’t want to be done with baseball—and he definitely didn’t—he had no choice but to make some major changes.

The 36-year-old free agent, who has a Yale degree in molecular biophysics and biochemistry, spent the winter remaking his delivery to feature a lower arm slot and tracking his spin efficiency with the help of a $3,000 3D camera. He mined PITCHf/x for data on what makes certain pitches—like Baltimore Orioles closer Zach Britton’s sinker and Cleveland Indians reliever Andrew Miller’s slider—so effective, and worked to emulate their movement.

It worked. Following a January showcase, Breslow received interest from 10 different teams. He reportedly turned down more lucrative offers to sign a minor league contract with the Minnesota Twins, whose chief baseball officer, Derek Falvey, sold Breslow on the opportunity to grow within the organization.

Deadspin caught up with Breslow at Twins camp in Fort Myers, Florida, a day after he threw a successful two-inning save against Team USA.

Is this something you just got into this year or have you always read BP, Fangraphs, looked at data?

I would say advanced metrics, analytics, have always been interesting to me, just being a pretty analytical guy with a science background. It’s not that I hadn’t espoused these ideas, it was more that I just didn’t find them particularly relevant to me while I was throwing well and healthy and having a lot of success. Then when I started to struggle—I would say in 2011 would be the first time—I took a little bit of a deeper dive. I was with Oakland, I was coming off two really good years, and felt like I was kind of going through a little bit of a rut. But I still felt like I was making good pitches, throwing the ball well, just kinda felt like, “I’m getting beat on choppers through the hole, these little shots the other way that are falling in. Is it time to make an adjustment or is this just a string of bad luck?” So I was able take a look at my batting average on balls in play, strikeout-to-walk percentages, swinging strikes, and look at a lot of those peripheral stats and say, “Those are right in line with where I’ve always been in my career, so it turns out this is just a stroke of bad luck and at some point it will normalize. It might be a week or a month or a season, but I think at this point trying to make some kind of wholesale change would be foolish.” And then, sure enough, in 2012, 2013, things did turn around. But then going into ’14, ’15, ’16, I started to endure some sustained struggles and realized that if I didn’t make some kind of dramatic change, I’d probably be out of the game.

Do you look at those sort of statistics for batters?

I haven’t yet figured out a way to combat some of those things. Obviously it’s good to know who swings at balls out of the strike zone. But beyond that, someone has a great year, usually a consistently a .280 hitter and now suddenly it’s .320 and their batting average on balls in play is like .360, you can look at that and say, “You got lucky, next year you’ll most likely regress back to your averages.” But I don’t know how you face someone who’s in the middle of this career year, cause I don’t think they’re controlling it. So long as they’re not striking out less frequently, or hitting line drives more frequently, they’re just doing what they’ve always done and now their balls are finding holes, I don’t know how to defend.

How did you settle on Zach Britton’s sinker and Andrew Miller’s slider?

So I think that’s probably something that’s gotten a little bit misunderstood. It wasn’t like I was like “I’m going to make Andrew Miller’s slider
and now I have it,” when I’m thinking, like, “What I’m doing and what I have been doing for the last couple years isn’t working anymore. I’m healthy, velocity is fine, I’ve got no other variable to blame it on, I’m just not being very successful anymore, I’m going to change something and I’m going to look to the best-in-class standards to do so.”

So it’s more about what makes a really good slider or a really good sinker?

Yeah. And it helps that those guys are left-handed relievers. I know Andrew Miller pretty well and I’ve talked to him about what he thinks about when he’s throwing a slider—the way he grips it, what kind of action he’s looking for. Another guy I’d throw into that mix is Rich Hill, my workout partner in the offseason. Has such a great breaking ball, and he’s helped me in terms of some of the nuances of a breaking ball. But yeah, it was just kind of like, it’s the same way if someone was trying to learn a cutter and they had access to Mariano Rivera, they should probably go there.

When you’re throwing now, can you tell based on feel if you’re maximizing spin efficiency or doing it correctly?

So, I feel like I can detect variability. I don’t know that I’ve thrown a pitch yet and been like, “That was the maximum spin efficiency,” or, “That was the best action I could get.” But I can definitely say, “That was better than where I’ve been,” or, “I know it needs to be better.” I threw a breaking ball yesterday to Christian Yelich that struck him out and that was one that I felt out of my fingers like, “This is shape I’m looking for, this is the spin I’m looking for.” And the pitch kind of followed those feelings.

Is that kind of getting more natural or is that still really conscious?

It’s still really conscious and getting more natural. So I think getting on the mound frequently, facing hitters, consistently getting work is going to be the best thing for me. I recognize that this is a process, the organization recognizes that this is a work in process. It’s not so much about the results right now as much as making progress with every outing. I’m getting more and more comfortable feeling when I’m kind of staying in the delivery that I want to be in and when I start to deviate.

How hard was it to change your delivery?

It was really hard! I remember the first time in the fall when I thought about doing this and I picked up a ball and threw and videoed it. I felt like I had dropped my arm slot two feet and it was probably closer to two inches. When you’re used to doing something for 25 years, trying to make a pretty drastic change can be really, really difficult. But I would say, I have a lot of support, a lot of incentive to do this. And also, some of the technology available to a guy like me today, as opposed to if I were trying to do this five or 10 years ago, is very different. And so that’s certainly facilitated, probably, the efficiency with which I can make adjustments.

Are you still using the [fancy camera device]?

I have the device. I didn’t want to show up at spring training and pop out this tripod with a camera on it.

You should have!

Well, you guys have made a big enough story of it that everyone is kind of aware of what’s going on. I think the organization actually met with the company to kinda get a feel for the device. I think it will be a really good tool to kind of keep me on this path. It probably wouldn’t be a bad idea to kind of throw a bullpen in front of it in a couple of weeks to just kind of say, “Where am I today and how does that compare to where I want to be and where I was?” I took some data in October when I first started, in December as a kind of progress report, and then later in January as closer to, not a finished product but the product I’d be taking to spring training.

Now, if you’re pitching in Major League games you’ll have even more data, access to all the Statcast stuff. Is that something you’ve thought about?

I need to use the tools that are available to me, but I need to use them smartly. I don’t need to paralyze myself because I’m so wrapped up in what I want something to be doing if it’s actually working. There’s going to come a time, Opening Day, where results are the only thing anyone cares about. So it doesn’t do me much good to say, “But my sinker’s dropping several inches more.” But I think at some point, I’ll probably get out of my delivery a little bit, or not get the break on the slider that I’m looking for, I now have this tool, I can get in front of it and say, “Why is that?”
Are you surprised that people have made such a big story out of it?

Um, a little bit. Only in that, I recognize that what I’m doing is novel in this industry, but it’s probably not in the universe for someone to say, “Oh you’re trying to change something, you’re going to use something that tracks and measures your change, you’re going to lay out some measurable goals and you’re going to see if you’re successful.” Like, scientists having been doing that for the last 5,000 years.

It’s interesting that with baseball, the people covering it have more data, or care more about the data, than the people playing it.

I agree. It’s a conversation that I’ve had with a number of people which is, organizations will start to evaluate players with data that players don’t have access to. And that seems like a pretty significant handicap. And I think teams now recognize the value in some of this data. But there’s probably a little bit of a disconnect between the front office personnel that are the staticians and the people that are analyzing the data and getting it to players in a way that they can digest and implement. But I think you’re starting to see, with the creation of these baseball analytics departments, a recognition of that need to take the information that someone who maybe has never played baseball, is calculating, and hand it off to someone who kind of bridges that gap and gets it to players in a way that they want to use it.

Do you see yourself as someone who kind of bridges that gap?

I think I could be. I’ve had that conversation with Derek [Falvey] before, about kind of being ... obviously being a player gives you some credibility, being a guy with a scientific background and who understands what this means is a layer of credibility, and if I can talk to guys who initially kind of shun this information and present it in a way that makes a lot more sense, then great.

Have any younger pitchers asked you about it?

There are guys who have asked about what I’ve been doing, why I’m doing it, how I’ve used the data. Kyle Gibson is a guy, we had a conversation a couple days ago. And for me, this information was part of the recipe for wholesale changes. But it doesn’t have to be. This information can be just as useful to identify what guys do really well relative to other pitchers and what they struggle with relative to other pitchers and what that means for who they should be as a pitcher. I think a lot of guys just believe, “Oh I should throw fastballs down in the zone, I should sweep breaking balls off the zone.” It’s like, “Well, wait a second, let’s take a look at your spin rate. Let’s think about perceived velocity and figure out maybe you should be pitching up in the zone.” I’m not changing who you are or what you do, I’m just asking some questions about how you can potentially be more effective if you optimize pitch usage.

How did you pick the Twins?

Probably for some of the same reasons I just touched on. Obviously the most important part to all of this was the path to making a team. The Twins are a team that struggled last year. They’re not hiding from that fact. I think that there’s some really young, talented core players here. And then from conversations, it was pretty clear that the new front office was coming here with a really refreshing perspective on the vision they have for this organization. The way that they’ll get there. Derek and I talked in length about an appreciation for the totality of my value. The idea that I could contribute beyond just getting outs through some of these things that we talked about, since I recognize that more than likely I wasn’t coming into spring training on day one in midseason form, the way that I would have in the past if I was were with a team. Given this offseason, Derek was pretty adamant about recognizing that this is a work in progress. What’s important is taking steps forward in my outings, kind of projecting where this is gonna look in June, July, August, and September and not February 15th. And that was important to me.

Do you see yourself filling a particular role in this organization?

I’ve always been willing to pitch in any role, I still am. When I took on this venture it was with the idea that I’d be tougher as a left-on-left reliever. As a left-handed reliever, above all else, I need to be able to dominate left-handed hitters and so I thought dropping the arm slot, getting a little bit more movement, would give me a little more deception, give me more of a true left-on-left breaking ball that has most horizontal and vertical movement, more swoop. I like the progress that I’ve shown in that regard. I also, throughout my career, have always been successful against righties, which is unusual. And it seems like that will still be the case, given that I’ve been able to throw my changeup from that lower spot. I’ll let the coaching staff figure out where they want to use me, but I feel comfortable really wherever.

You see to have a really healthy sense of self about strengths and weaknesses, is it psychically hard to remake yourself after so many years?

I don’t think at 36 years old, almost 10 years in the big league, you can not have a pretty astute awareness of yourself and be willing to completely reinvent yourself.
Yeah, that’s sort of what I mean, was it humbling, hard to admit?

It was. That’s, I think, the reason that I didn’t make this step earlier. I was a little banged up in ’13 and ’14, spent some time on the DL, so when I struggled, later on in ’14 and even into 2015, still could kind of point toward injury as a potential excuse-slash-explanation for this. But then 2016, I was healthy, I was healthy from Opening Day to the end of the season and struggled, spent some time in the minor leagues since 2007, I think. But still loved playing baseball and couldn’t imagine there being anything else that I wanted to do more. I wouldn’t necessarily call this a choice or an option because the alternative was to like, probably, put on khakis and go into an office. If I wanted to keep playing, this became, to me at least, apparent as the only avenue.

Do you think that’s why some guys are resistant to the advanced metrics, they don’t want to know what they’re bad at?

Possibly. I mean, egos are really sensitive. Especially in sports. I just think, a lot of people subscribe to the “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” adage. Especially in sports. And so we’re resistant to change, because the first thing that someone will typically respond with is, “Well, what if it makes me even worse?” As opposed to thinking this is what will take me over the hump or give me an advantage. And so I think we kind of resist change because feeling comfortable is so important to guys. But, I mean, you’re talking to a herd of people who show up to the field at the same time and eat the same thing and put on their uniform the same way, and now you’re asking them to embrace a potentially completely drastically different body of ideas.

Does it feel good to pitch from the lower arm slot?

It does. There’s the like, mental and mechanical component to this. Which, you know, I’m still wrestling a little with consistency. But physically, when I first started this and I lowered my arm slot, I used a device, a sleeve that measures stress, and the stress on my elbow actually went down as velocity went up. So the obvious question is kind of like, “Why haven’t I been doing it that way for the last 30 years?” But so, from a physical perspective, I think I can stay healthier, I think I use my body more efficiently from this delivery. And then the second part of this, I had a conversation with Zach a couple days ago, where we were just kind of talking about where I was in this whole process. It’s like, I think I’m getting to the point where I can have an answer to how do I get people out. Well, a sinker and a breaking ball. As opposed to having carved out almost like 10 years without really being able to answer that question. Like if you were to go to a scout and say, “How has Breslow gotten guys out for the last eight years?” I think they’d be like, “Pitchability ... command ... he’s a smart guy, maybe guile.” Like it’s nice to go out there saying, “I’ve got a left-on-left breaking ball that I can sweep across the plate and get some swings and misses. And I’ve got a sinker I can run in on them.” It’s really nice thing to be able to know what are your skills, and then I can tell you. So from that point, the confidence that I have to be able to go out there and say, “Here’s a pitch I can throw that I think can be effective consistently” is really refreshing and encouraging.