2015 MLB Preview

Jon Lester and the Cubs are winning the World Series*

*but not for a few years

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Bettina Hansen – The Seattle Times

How to build a champion

The 2015 Baseball Preview is here; let this be your guide to the season from advanced stats to prospects and how to build a winning team.

We are now nearing in on a decade worth of baseball previews, which is hard to believe at times. This year's edition comes in at 67 pages and continues to build off of last year's stat-heavy issue with a couple new twists.

The big difference for this preview is that much of the team write-ups is based around how to build a champion. For each team, I look at how they were built, why they made the decisions they've made, and how they will move forward. Of course, that all the usual analysis and prospect scouting reports will be included as well.

My predictions for the playoffs can be found on page 67 with my top 50 overall prospects. Additionally, since these advanced statistics will be heavily featured again, I've brought back a sabermetric glossary, found on page 3, to help explain terms like wRC+ to the uninitiated.

Although I'm not going in depth about my new RAWS system, I've included a quick reintroduction to this Retroactive Analysis of Wins System on page 4.

I hope you enjoy this year's baseball preview; I know I've definitely enjoyed working on this for the past five months. And as always, I hope your favorite team does well this season.

This Baseball Preview is written by Ben Weinrib.

Sabermetric Glossary

This year's baseball preview can read a little dense if you're not familiar with a few advanced statistics. Here is your translator for all things Sabermetrics:

AAV Average Annual Value

AAV is the average annual value of a contract.

AVG/OBP/SLG

This is the order in which basic batting statistics are given.

BABIP Batting Average on Balls In Play

BABIP is batting average on balls hit in the field of play (everything but Strikeouts and home runs). League average BABIP is .300, and there is little year-to-year correlation, suggesting it is more luck than skill.

FIP Fielding Independent Pitching

FIP is one of the premier pitching statistics that is meant to imitate ERA (pitchers had a total ERA and FIP of exactly 3.74 last season). This stat uses just strikeouts, walks, and home runs – statistics only pitchers and batters control – to evaluate pitchers without considering his defense behind him.

Pythagorean Record

Bill James came up with this formula to determine what a team's record should have been based off runs scored and allowed. It tries to remove luck from the equation.

WAR Wins Above Replacement

WAR measures the overall value of a player in terms of number of wins better an the average Triple-A player. It accounts for hitting, fielding, baserunning, and positional value. 4-5 WAR is considered All-Star level.

wOBA Weighted On-Base Average

wOBA imitates OBP (league average OBP was .314 last year, while league average wOBA was .310). It weighs each plate appearance proportional to its observed run values. For example, Andrew McCutchen had a .412 wOBA last year and Stephen Drew had a .238 wOBA.

wRC+ Weighted Runs Reacted Plus

Similar to wOBA, wRC+ weighs every plate appearance differently, synthesizing them into one number. 100 is average and every point above that is one percent above league average. For example, Troy Tulowitzki had a 171 wRC+ and Jackie Bradley Jr. had a 47 wRC+ last year.

Billie Weiss – Billy Weiss Photography

Reintroduction to RAWS

In last year's baseball preview, I introduced RAWS, which stands for Retroactive Analysis of Wins System. One year later, I wanted to check back in to take a look back at last season and how good the teams actually were.

RAWS was created under the premise that teams are not always as good as their record indicates and gives the record the team should have had based on their production.

The equation is derived from Bill James' Pythagorean winning percentage and WAR. Pythagorean winning percentage is derived from runs scored and runs allowed, which is production on a team level. Alternatively, WAR is production on an individual level, so RAWS combines the two.

The record RAWS gives is not a prediction for the following season; it indicates how good a team actually was based on their production. While it is not the be-all and end-all, teams whose RAWS record is exceptionally different from their actual record are likely headed towards regression.

According to RAWS, the Nationals were the best team last year based on production. The Cardinals were the biggest overachieving team with 7.2 extra wins, and the Rockies were the biggest underachieving team with 10.6 less wins.

Chart Key

The first set of columns has runs scored, runs against, and Pythagorean record.

The second set of columns has total team WAR and then their record based on WAR.

The third set of columns has the official 2013 RAWS projected records.

The fourth set of columns has the actual 2013 record for the team.

The final column is the difference between the projected record and actual record in 2013.

Teams in red overachieved and teams in green underachieved.

2014 Season Projected Record

	R	RA	Pyth%	PythW	PythL		WAR	WAR%	WARW	WARL		**ProjW**	**ProjL**	**Proj%**		W	L	Win%		Diff
WAS	686	555	0.596	96.5	65.5		48.2	0.614	99.5	62.5		**0.593**	**95.9**	**66.1**		0.593	96	66		-0.1
LAA	773	630	0.593	96.0	66.0		45.7	0.599	97.0	65.0		**0.584**	**94.4**	**67.6**		0.605	98	64		-3.6
OAK	729	572	0.609	98.7	63.3		39.9	0.564	91.4	70.6		**0.574**	**93.0**	**69.0**		0.543	88	74		5.0
LAD	718	617	0.569	92.2	69.8		45.8	0.600	97.1	64.9		**0.572**	**92.6**	**69.4**		0.580	94	68		-1.4
BAL	705	593	0.578	93.7	68.3		43.4	0.585	94.8	67.2		**0.570**	**92.2**	**69.8**		0.593	96	66		-3.8
DET	757	705	0.533	86.3	75.7		43.9	0.588	95.3	66.7		**0.548**	**88.7**	**73.3**		0.556	90	72		-1.3
KC	651	624	0.519	84.1	77.9		42.5	0.580	93.9	68.1		**0.537**	**87.0**	**75.0**		0.549	89	73		-2.0
TOR	723	686	0.524	84.9	77.1		38.1	0.553	89.7	72.3		**0.527**	**85.2**	**76.8**		0.512	83	79		2.2
SEA	634	554	0.561	90.9	71.1		30.8	0.510	82.6	79.4		**0.523**	**84.7**	**77.3**		0.537	87	75		-2.3
PIT	682	631	0.535	86.8	75.2		35	0.535	86.7	75.4		**0.523**	**84.6**	**77.4**		0.543	88	74		-3.4
SF	665	614	0.536	86.9	75.1		32.4	0.519	84.1	77.9		**0.516**	**83.4**	**78.6**		0.543	88	74		-4.6
CLE	669	653	0.511	82.8	79.2		36.1	0.541	87.7	74.3		**0.514**	**83.2**	**78.8**		0.525	85	77		-1.8
STL	619	603	0.512	82.9	79.1		35.1	0.535	86.7	75.3		**0.512**	**82.8**	**79.2**		0.556	90	72		-7.2
TB	612	625	0.490	79.4	82.6		36.3	0.543	87.9	74.1		**0.504**	**81.6**	**80.4**		0.475	77	85		4.6
NYY	633	664	0.478	77.5	84.5		35.5	0.538	87.1	74.9		**0.496**	**80.2**	**81.8**		0.519	84	78		-3.8
MIL	650	657	0.495	80.2	81.8		31.3	0.513	83.1	78.9		**0.492**	**79.6**	**82.4**		0.506	82	80		-2.4
ATL	573	597	0.481	78.0	84.0		32.6	0.521	84.3	77.7		**0.489**	**79.1**	**82.9**		0.488	79	83		0.1
MIA	645	674	0.480	77.7	84.3		32	0.517	83.7	78.3		**0.486**	**78.7**	**83.3**		0.475	77	85		1.7
NYM	629	618	0.508	82.3	79.7		25.2	0.476	77.1	84.9		**0.480**	**77.6**	**84.4**		0.488	79	83		-1.4
BOS	634	715	0.445	72.1	89.9		34.7	0.533	86.4	75.6		**0.477**	**77.2**	**84.8**		0.438	71	91		6.2
COL	755	818	0.463	75.1	86.9		30.5	0.508	82.3	79.7		**0.473**	**76.6**	**85.4**		0.407	66	96		10.6
MIN	715	777	0.462	74.8	87.2		30.7	0.509	82.5	79.5		**0.473**	**76.6**	**85.4**		0.432	70	92		6.6
CIN	595	612	0.487	78.9	83.1		25	0.475	77.0	85.1		**0.469**	**75.9**	**86.1**		0.469	76	86		-0.1
CHC	614	707	0.436	70.6	91.4		32.1	0.518	83.8	78.2		**0.464**	**75.1**	**86.9**		0.451	73	89		2.1
SD	535	577	0.465	75.4	86.6		21.7	0.455	73.7	88.3		**0.448**	**72.5**	**89.5**		0.475	77	85		-4.5
PHI	619	687	0.452	73.3	88.7		22.8	0.462	74.8	87.2		**0.445**	**72.0**	**90.0**		0.451	73	89		-1.0
CWS	660	758	0.437	70.8	91.2		23.9	0.468	75.9	86.1		**0.440**	**71.3**	**90.7**		0.451	73	89		-1.7
HOU	629	723	0.437	70.7	91.3		22.6	0.461	74.6	87.4		**0.436**	**70.6**	**91.4**		0.432	70	92		0.6
TEX	637	773	0.412	66.8	95.2		24.1	0.470	76.1	85.9		**0.429**	**69.4**	**92.6**		0.414	67	95		2.4
ARI	615	742	0.415	67.2	94.8		22.1	0.458	74.1	87.9		**0.424**	**68.6**	**93.4**		0.395	64	98		4.6

American League

AL East		
Team	W-L	GB
Red Sox	93-69	--
Blue Jays	89-73	4
Orioles	84-78	9
Yankees	78-84	15
Rays	75-87	18

AL Central		
	W-L	GB
Tigers	90-72	--
Royals	84-78	6
Indians	83-79	7
White Sox	82-80	8
Twins	66-96	24

AL West		
	W-L	GB
Athletics	90-72	--
Mariners	89-73	7
Angels	87-75	9
Rangers	71-91	20
Astros	66-96	34

Dominic DiSaia – ESPN The Magazine

1. Boston Red Sox

Lineup	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR	Pos
Mookie Betts	.291	.368	.444	5	7	1.9	CF
Dustin Pedroia	.278	.337	.376	7	6	4.4	2B
David Ortiz	.263	.355	.517	35	0	2.4	DH
Hanley Ramirez	.283	.369	.448	13	14	3.4	LF
Pablo Sandoval	.279	.324	.415	16	0	3.0	3B
Mike Napoli	.248	.370	.419	17	3	2.5	1B
Shane Victorino	.268	.303	.382	2	2	0.0	RF
Xander Bogaerts	.240	.297	.362	12	2	0.4	SS
Ryan Hanigan	.218	.318	.324	5	1	1.1	C
Allen Craig	.215	.279	.315	8	2	-1.4	OF
Rusney Castillo	.333	.400	.528	2	3	0.9	OF
Brock Holt	.281	.331	.381	4	12	2.3	IF

Pitchers	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR	L/R
Clay Buchholz	5.34	4.03	0.39	270.2	232	2.2	RH
Rick Porcello	3.43	3.68	1.23	204.2	129	3.1	RH
Wade Miley	4.34	3.98	1.40	201.1	183	1.7	LH
Justin Masterson	5.88	4.50	1.63	128.2	116	0.3	RH
Joe Kelly	4.20	4.37	1.35	96.1	66	0.6	RH
Koji Uehara	2.52	3.09	0.92	64.1	80	1.4	RH
Junichi Tazawa	2.86	2.94	1.19	63.0	64	1.2	RH
Edward Mujica	3.90	3.70	1.38	60.0	43	0.4	RH

Rick Schultz – Getty Images

Hitting your way out of failure

After alternating between the bottom and top of the league, the Red Sox spent big on offense to rise back to the top of the American League.

This seems like a broken record, doesn't it? The Red Sox come off an incredibly disappointing season that began with high expectations and returned with a flurry of off-season moves to instill a high sense of confidence in the team and the fan base.

Last time it was 2013, and the Red Sox came off a 69-93 record, 7th-worst in the majors. They were still reeling from the embarrassing September collapse of 2012 that featured fried chicken and beer the year before and tried to change the clubhouse culture with the additions of Mike Napoli, Shane Victorino, Stephen Drew, and Ryan Dempster, and the exit of Bobby Valentine. The end result: their third World Series title in 10 years.

Now the 2015 team is coming off a 71-91 record – 27 wins less than the previous World Series season – which was the 6th-worst record in the league. To mask their shortcomings last year, they've acquired of Hanley Ramirez, Pablo Sandoval, Rusney Castillo, Rick Porcello, and Wade Miley.

But how similar are these two stories? Worst to first to worst to first sure sounds like an intriguing storyline. But how long has it even been since a team with as bad of a pitching staff as Porcello-Clay Buchholz-Miley-Justin Masterson-Joe Kelly won a title? Well, it might be surprising, but the 2014 San Francisco Giants won it all with the 3rd worst pitching staff in the league, according to WAR. They also happened to have the 6th-best offensive WAR, but many expect Boston's offense to surpass that with a newly bolstered lineup.

Boston's clear strength this year will be the lineup, which may be stronger than it has ever been in franchise history. This may remind some of 2011 and 2012, when the additions of Adrian Gonzalez and Carl Crawford drew over-the-top comparisons of the team to the 1927 Yankees. The 2011 team did live up to the billing with a league-leading 35.6 offensive WAR, but the 2012 team couldn't quite do the same because of a lack of depth.

The 2012 and 2014 Red Sox teams fell apart because the offenses stopped

1. Boston Red Sox

working. Those two teams had a combined OBP of just .316, and the 2013 team created more offensive WAR than those two losing seasons combined. Once injuries struck, the two losing teams had nothing to turn to.

This season's Red Sox team will have no such problems with depth. GM Ben Cherington spent heavily to load up on offensive players, and the bench will include potentially impact players such as Allen Craig, Shane Victorino, Brock Holt, and Jackie Bradley Jr.

Not only will the added depth help, the most obvious bonus will come from strong veteran additions in the form of Ramirez and Sandoval, who combined for 6.4 WAR last year. While production at the end of their 4- and 5-year deals are not guaranteed, they will be much more dependable than the bevy of young players Boston played last year.

The overwhelming dependence on youth last year became a big problem, which is likely a big reason the Red Sox spent liberally in free agency. Between Xander Bogaerts, Will Middlebrooks, and Jackie Bradley Jr., the Red Sox were relying on three players with a combined going into 817 career plate appearances last season. As many young players do, none of the three swam when thrown in the deep end. None of the three posted a .300 OBP, and they combined for a -0.5 WAR over the season. If not for Mookie Betts, who produced 1.9 WAR in 213 plate appearances, the entire rookie class would have been a failure.

But now that the players have a year of experience under their belt to develop, they should see substantial improvements in their production. Most notably, Betts and Bogaerts, who only amassed 2.3 WAR last year and are still regarded by scouts as future All-Stars, if not more, should see the largest improvements, or they may not see much of the field.

Although there is no bona fide ace to anchor the rotation, this team will ride on the tails of incredible depth in their lineup and even rotation. With so much turnover among teams at the top of the AL last season, there is no one team with a target on their back, so the Red Sox are deservingly going into the season as odds-on favorites to win the pennant. And if they feel like they do need to find that bona fide ace to complete a championship puzzle – say a Cole Hamels – they have more than enough pieces to pull of another blockbuster trade.

Strengths of the System

The sheer amount of depth in Boston's system is pretty staggering. In Triple-A alone, they are going to have five to six of their top ten prospects to go with lower-tiered guys like Deven Marrero, Sean Coyle, and Edwin Escobar.

Besides the players on the brink of the majors, there are plenty of high-upside prospects in the lower minors, making it very easy to pull off a trade for an impact player. Since they may be headed for a 40-man roster crunch, with Henry Owens, Brian Johnson, Marrero, Manuel Margot about to be Rule 5 eligible, expect some of the depth to be unloaded soon.

Weaknesses of the System

Despite the strength of the overall system, the Red Sox have been rather poor drafters lately. While we won't know how good the players will actually become for several years, the early returns have not looked good.

With the seventh pick in the 2013 draft, they took Trey Ball ahead of top 50 prospects like Austin Meadows, J.P. Crawford, and Hunter Renfroe. The big lefty has consistently struggled with his command and has not lived up to his $2.75 million signing bonus. Other top picks receiving bonuses over the last two years like Teddy Stankiewicz, Jon Denney, Pat Light, and Ty Buttrey have not amounted to much of anything.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Yoan Moncada	2B	A-
Did not play	20	--
Every tool but defense is plus, and he switch hits. Top Cuban teenager since Jorge Soler.		
Blake Swihart	C	A-
.293/.341/.469, 13 HR, 8 SB	23	AAA
Defense has caught up to highly-touted bat. Athletic switch-hitter with growing power.		
Henry Owens	LHP	A-
2.94 ERA, 9.6 K/9, 3.3 BB/9	22	AAA
Deception and changeup cover up average velocity. Projectable frame, future #2 starter.		
Manuel Margot	CF	B+
.293/.356/.462 12 HR, 42 SB	20	High-A
With game-changing speed and defense to go with solid power, he could be a star.		
Rafael Devers	3B	B+
.322/.404/.506, 7 HR, 5 SB	18	Rookie
Big-time power with an advanced approach. Body isn't great, but suffice on defensively.		
Eduardo Rodriguez	LHP	B+
3.60 ERA, 8.1 K/9, 2.8 BB/9	22	AA
Off-speeds are merely average but could be much more. Velocity ticked up to 97.		
Garin Cecchini	3B	B
.263/.342/.377, 8 HR, 11 SB	24	MLB
Although his stock is down from last year, Cecchini still has the best bat in the system. He changed his approach at the plate last year, but since that didn't net any more power, he will go back to his old form, which should bring up his disappointing numbers. He's smart and out-performs his tools.		
Matt Barnes	RHP	B-
3.95 ERA, 7.5 K/9, 3.3 BB/9	25	MLB
Hits the upper 90s, but with off-speeds and control just okay, a starting role is unclear.		
Brian Johnson	LHP	B-
2.13 ERA, 8.3 K/9, 2.4 BB/9	24	AA
Lacks much upside, but he's a safe back-end starter with four pitches and plus command.		
Michael Chavis	SS	B-
.269/.347/.425, 1 HR, 5 SB	19	Rookie
Undersized but has a plus arm, power, and max effort. Likely shifts to third or second.		

2. Detroit Tigers

Lineup						Pos
	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
Anthony Gose	.226	.311	.293	2	15	CF 1.3
Ian Kinsler	.275	.307	.420	17	15	2B 5.4
Miguel Cabrera	.313	.371	.524	25	1	1B 5.4
Victor Martinez	.335	.409	.565	32	3	DH 4.4
J.D. Martinez	.315	.358	.553	23	6	LF 3.7
Yoenis Cespedes	.260	.301	.450	22	7	RF 3.4
Alex Avila	.218	.327	.359	11	0	C 2.1
Nick Castellanos	.259	.306	.394	11	2	3B -0.5
Jose Iglesias	.313	.349	.327	3	5	SS 1.8*
Rajai Davis	.282	.320	.401	8	36	OF 1.4
Andrew Romine	.227	.279	.275	2	12	IF 0.0
James McCann	.250	.250	.333	0	0	C -0.1

*2013 Statistics

Pitchers						L/R
	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
David Price	3.26	2.78	1.08	248.1	271	LH 6.1
Justin Verlander	4.54	3.74	1.40	206.0	159	RH 3.3
Anibal Sanchez	3.43	2.71	1.10	126.0	102	RH 3.4
Alfredo Simon	3.44	4.33	1.21	196.1	127	RH 0.9
Shane Greene	3.78	3.73	1.40	78.2	81	RH 1.2
Joe Nathan	4.81	3.94	1.53	58.0	54	RH 0.2
Joakim Soria	3.25	2.09	0.99	44.1	48	RH 1.5
Al Alburquerque	2.51	3.78	1.17	57.1	63	RH 0.2

Leon Halip – Getty Images

Nearing the end of a dynasty

Led by all sorts of star power, Detroit has run the AL Central for years, but perhaps they're nearing the end as age catches up with them.

Over the past four seasons, the Detroit Tigers have monopolized the American League Central. Their level of regular season dominance – four straight division titles – is unparalleled recently, as the Cardinals and Dodgers have the next longest division title streaks at two apiece. Detroit's average of 91.5 wins per season over that stretch also tops the league.

Part of their dominance – especially in their division – is due to the rest of the Central being particularly weak. During the Tigers' dominant stretch, no division has had a lower winning percentage (.486), and the rest of the teams won an average of just 75.5 games per season. Not only did the Tigers have little competition for the division crown, they also got to play nearly half their games against fairly weak competition, which helps pad their record compared to the rest of the league.

Of course, the soft schedule isn't the only reason for their success. They've also had more star power than about any other team. Three of the last four MVPs is just the tip of the iceberg. Although Prince Fielder and Max Scherzer have moved on to Texas and Washington, the Tigers still have plenty more stars left. Just the quartet of Miguel Cabrera, Justin Verlander, David Price, and Victor Martinez has 24 All-Star appearances between them.

That sheer amount of talent – to go with other quality contributors like Ian Kinsler, Anibal Sanchez, and Yoenis Cespedes – is what has guided this team to so much success. But at the same time, that core group of players is why this team is rapidly headed for a steep, precipitous decline, and no one wants to talk about it.

It's not that it's a bad thing to keep the core of a winning team together. Dynasties generally keep their best players together. That strategy becomes an issue when a team fails to bring in younger talent and depends on older, injury-prone players for too long.

And the Tigers have made some smart personnel decisions to consistently have young players in their prime and approaching it. Unfortunately, while the processes behind

2. Detroit Tigers

many of those moves to acquire younger players were sound, the Tigers' returns so far have been spotty at best.

Because the Tigers sign so many big ticket free agents, they have fewer draft picks because of compensation rules. They've only kept their first round pick in two of the past five drafts, although one of their biggest gems has been Nick Castellanos, who they signed for an over-slot bonus in the Compensation round. But despite being one of the top third base prospects in the game, he's produced -0.7 WAR in his 551 plate appearances in the majors. Castellanos just turned 23 in March and is poised for a breakout season, but to date, he has yet to live up to expectations.

The Tigers also had high hopes for former top prospect Jose Iglesias, whom they acquired for Boston two trade deadlines ago. The slick-fielding shortstop had always been touted for his defense and had a breakout year in 2013 with the bat, hitting .302 before the trade. However, he only hit .259 for the rest of the season and missed all of 2014 with stress fractures in both his legs discovered in Spring Training.

The Tigers had developed a handful of quality young players in Austin Jackson, Drew Smyly, and Rick Porcello, but they traded the first two for David Price – who was brought in to replace Max Scherzer – and the latter for Yoenis Cespedes. Detroit is filling the hole Jackson left by acquiring another former top prospect, Anthony Gose, but his bat looks far from major league ready with a 75 wRC+ over parts of three seasons.

This Tigers team is strikingly reminiscent of the dynasty Phillies of the late 2000s with all kinds of star power – especially pitching. Philly's first playoff team had an average age of 28.8 when then won 89 games. Both numbers kept rising until their 102-win 2011 team had an average age of 31.4, when they completely collapsed the next season and haven't had a winning season since. Detroit isn't at that age yet – they're at 29.8 the last two seasons – but they could be on the verge of a collapse if their best young asset remains J.D. Martinez. These aging Detroit stars won't be good forever; we've already seen the beginning of the end of elite Verlander, and Cabrera and Victor Martinez have been banged up this spring. It's not for a lack of trying, but if Detroit doesn't develop better young talent, it could be heading the way of the Phillies.

Strengths of the System

A large proportion of the Tigers' system is either close to the majors or has a high probability of at least cracking the major league roster. James McCann will be Detroit's backup catcher, and Steven Moya and Tyler Collins have already spent time with the big league team.

The Tigers could get even more immediate help if they decide to pull the plug on using some of their pitching prospects as starterse. Buck Farmer, Kevin Ziomek, and Kyle Lobstein could all be used to supplement a bullpen that finished last in the majors with -0.4 WAR this past season.

Weaknesses of the System

After Derek Hill there is a severe lack of high-upside talent in the system at all. Part of that has to do with the lack of first-round picks the Tigers have had recently, but Detroit has also opted to draft a lot of lower-upside college arms that are closer to the majors.

As a result, essentially every prospect in the entire system projects to be a backup or reliever. Hill and Steven Moya are the only hitters right now who look like they have a chance to be everyday players. The other two prospects they've had recently who project to be regulars, Devon Travis and Willy Adames, were traded.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Derek Hill	CF	B+
.208/.296/.295, 2 HR, 11 SB	19	Low-A
Plus plus speed, great defense, promising bat and power. Cousin of Daryl Strawberry.		
Steven Moya	RF	B
.278/.307/.552, 35 HR, 16 SB	23	AA
Huge frame and power but has had contact issues. Rather athletic for his 6'7" frame.		
Kevin Ziomek	LHP	B
2.27 ERA, 11.1 K/9, 3.9 BB/9	23	A
Weird deliver and multiple breaking balls allows him to dominate. Low risk/reward.		
Buck Farmer	RHP	B
3.67 ERA, 9.5 K/9, 2.5 BB/9	24	MLB
Workhorse frame with three above-average pitches. Safe back-of-the-rotation starter.		
Austin Kubitza	RHP	B-
2.34 ERA, 9.6 K/9, 3.0 BB/9	23	A
Plus sinker, slider get lots of ground balls. Rice pitchers have bad track records, though.		
Tyler Collins	LF	B-
.262/.333/.421, 19 HR, 12 SB	25	MLB
All of his tools grade as average to fringy. He has the makings of a solid 4th outfielder.		
Grayson Greiner	C	B-
.322/.394/.444, 2 HR, 0 SB	22	A
Giant frame could be troublesome, but he has a great arm and above-average power.		
Drew VerHagen	RHP	B-
3.75 ERA, 5.2 K/9, 2.2 BB/9	24	MLB
6'6" with a hard, heavy sinker. No one out pitch, but he should be able to eat innings.		
James McCann	C	B-
.294/.341/.424, 7 HR, 10 SB	25	MLB
High probability as a backup, but neither his bat nor power grades as even average.		
Dixon Machado	SS	B-
.286/.375/.404, 6 HR, 10 SB	23	AA
Like so many of the Tigers prospects, he doesn't project to be a regular, but a great glove should allow him to at least be a utility infielder. Machado gets the nod ahead of similar prospects like Hernan Perez and Javier Betancourt because of an improved back and solid plate discipline.		

3. Oakland Athletics

Lineup	Pos					
	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
Coco Crisp	LF					
	.246	.336	.363	9	19	0.9
Ben Zobrist	2B					
	.272	.354	.395	10	10	5.7
Josh Reddick	RF					
	.264	.316	.446	12	1	2.3
Billy Butler	DH					
	.271	.323	.379	9	0	-0.3
Ike Davis	1B					
	.233	.334	.378	11	0	0.3
Brett Lawrie	3B					
	.247	.301	.421	12	0	1.7
Stephen Vogt	C					
	.279	.321	.431	9	1	1.3
Marcus Semien	SS					
	.234	.300	.372	6	3	0.6
Sam Fuld	CF					
	.239	.321	.342	4	21	2.8
Craig Gentry	OF					
	.254	.319	.289	0	20	1.4
Eric Sogard	IF					
	.223	.298	.268	1	11	0.3
Josh Phegley	C					
	.216	.211	.514	3	0	0.2

Pitchers	L/R					
	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
Sonny Gray	RH					
	3.08	3.46	1.19	219.0	183	3.3
Scott Kazmir	LH					
	3.55	3.35	1.16	190.1	164	3.3
Jesse Hahn	RH					
	3.07	3.40	1.21	73.1	70	1.1
Kendall Graveman	RH					
	3.86	1.42	0.86	4.2	4	0.1
Drew Pomeranz	LH					
	2.35	3.77	1.12	69.0	64	0.7
Sean Doolittle	LH					
	2.73	1.71	0.73	64.1	89	2.4
Tyler Clippard	RH					
	2.18	2.75	1.00	70.1	82	1.5
Ryan Cook	RH					
	3.42	3.35	1.08	50.0	50	0.3

Jason O. Watson – Getty Images

Shuffling a winning hand

The Athletics have always been known to shake up their team, and this year is no different. But how much will the changes actually help?

Billy Beane is man who cannot stand still. Whether it is his precarious payroll situation or his personality, Beane and the Oakland A's refuse to stand pat.

Last season was supposed to be the year for Oakland. After two straight 94-plus-win seasons, the A's got off to yet another blistering start, going 53-33 with a solid 6-game playoff cushion. Still, they traded their top prospect Addison Russell and promising Billy McKinney for Cubs ace Jeff Samardzija.

For the most part, the Athletics are perpetually in a state of restocking: never quite bottoming out but still adding assets and competing. The 2014 season was the outlier for Beane because he traded a good deal of future assets for short-term players.

Beane wasn't done once he added Samardzija, though, as he traded Yoenis Cespedes for Red Sox ace Jon Lester. By stacking his rotation with the two new pitchers to go with Sonny Gray and Scott Kazmir, Beane was hoping to go further in the playoffs than he ever before, making it past the dreaded first round elimination game.

In his 17 years as general manager, Beane's teams have made the playoffs eight times. Six times, Oakland lost in Game 5 of the ALDS. The one time his team made it to the second round, the Tigers swept them in the ALCS. And then there was 2014 when they lost in the Wild Card play-in game.

Despite holding a two-game lead over the AL West while on pace for 100 wins at the time of the Lester trade, the A's stumbled to a 22-33 finish, still good for the final Wild Card. But in the game for which the A's acquired him, Lester gave up 6 runs in 7 1/3 innings, the team blew two save situations, and they headed home empty-handed yet again.

Another year with a playoff team gone to waste. This one was different, however. This one, more than others, came with a high price at the end of the year.

Their big fish acquisition Lester was gone to free agency, and they couldn't even get compensation for him by extending a qualifying offer since they acquired him mid-

3. Oakland Athletics

season. Oakland retained most of the players from the 2014 team, but like he always seems to do, Beane kept shuffling his deck of cards that most people call a roster.

What originally looked like one of the most confusing off-seasons in recent history can be easily explained by what Beane has been doing on a regular basis for a while now: restocking, not rebuilding.

Things all started with quickly snagging Billy Butler in free agency for 3 years and $30 million, which signaled making another playoff push. Beane saw a potentially undervalued asset that mashes against lefties, and the A's have championed the platoon recently.

Then things took a strange turn when the A's traded off Josh Donaldson, Brandon Moss, and Derek Norris (three of their four leaders in offensive WAR) plus Samardzija in a three-week span. But each of these moves can be easily explained.

The A's got a younger Brett Lawrie for Donaldson plus three key young players, making them more flexible in the future. Moss was easily replaceable with in-house options and was getting too expensive. Samardzija was set to be a free agent, and Beane favored a new starting shortstop in Marcus Semien with six years of control to one year of Shark. And finally, Norris is a potentially overvalued asset because of the All-Star moniker whom Beane sold high on.

Everything Beane does makes sense when you look at the entire off-season through the scope of restocking.

With all these extra assets, Beane was able to flip top prospect Daniel Robertson to the Rays for Ben Zobrist and Yunel Escobar, the latter of which he in turn flipped for Tyler Clippard. After all sorts of re-arranging and drawing and discarding, the hand Beane now holds mostly resembles last year's dominant team – just in a different suit.

The names are totally different – just two opening day starters from 2014 are returning – but expect the results to be the same. This is still a team based on a strong bullpen, good defense, underrated young talent, and, as always, an incredible amount of depth in the lineup and rotation. The A's are making plenty of bets on buy-low candidates, but they have a diverse enough portfolio of them that something good will shake out. And if not, we know Beane is more than happy to reshuffle his deck.

Strengths of the System

Power is at a premium these days, and the Atheltics have two of the better power prospects around with the potential for a third. Matt Olson and Renato Nuñez's home run totals are inflated because the Stockton Ports' ballpark and the California League are very hitter friendly in general, but the duo has extremely real power.

Matt Chapman doesn't have close to their power potential right now, but that's partially because his swing is designed more to get hits than to hit the ball out of the park. He may never change his swing, but the strength is there for future power.

Weaknesses of the System

Oakland seemingly always has great pitching, often that is young, but the pitching pipeline is almost dry after consistently focusing on hitters in the draft. Kendall Graveman will crack the opening day rotation, but he doesn't have much of an upside because he lacks a knockout pitch or much more projection. Sean Nolin may join him in the rotation as well, but much he shares many of the same warts.

The one high-upside arm in the farm system is Raul Alcantara, but he's coming off Tommy John surgery, so it's no guarantee that his fastball will continue to touch 95 and his command will stay as strong as it was.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Franklin Barreto	SS	B+
.311/.384/.481, 6 HR, 29 SB	19	Low-A
Very good defender no matter his position. Advanced bat with plus speed despite size.		
Matt Olson	1B	B+
.262/.404/.543, 37 HR, 2 SB	21	High-A
Big three true outcomes guy. Poor mobility and big size limits hit to first, hides plus arm.		
Renato Nuñez	3B	B
.279/.336/.517, 29 HR, 2 SB	21	High-A
Aggressive hitter with plus bat speed and power. Defense is improved but not good.		
Matt Chapman	3B	B
.246/.291/.401, 5 HR, 2 SB	22	AA
Outstanding defender and arm. Aggressive approach and line drive stroke hides power.		
Raul Alcantara	RHP	B-
2.29 ERA, 4.6 K/9, 2.3 BB/9	22	AA
Recovering from Tommy John, but above-average arsenal, command are promising.		
Dillon Overton	LHP	B-
1.95 ERA, 12.9 K/9, 1.0 BB/9	23	Low-A
Overton dominated at Oklahoma, where he started ahead of Jonathan Gray, where he was hitting up to 95. But after Tommy John surgery, his fastball is in the high-80s. His breaking pitches and command are back to where they were before, but a lasting loss in velocity would really tank his value.		
Yairo Munoz	SS	B-
.298/.319/.448, 5 HR, 6 SB	20	Low-A
Plus speed and arm with a bat that should at least be average. Should stick at short.		
Kendall Graveman	RHP	B-
1.88 ERA, 6.2 K/9, 1.6 BB/9	24	MLB
Lacks a knockout pitch but generates a ton of grounders. Low ceiling, possible reliever.		
Sean Nolin	LHP	B-
3.59 ERA, 8.4 K/9, 3.4 BB/9	25	MLB
Big frame but more of a finesse than power pitcher. Good control of average 4-pitch mix.		
R.J. Alvarez	RHP	B-
1.23 ERA, 12.3 K/9, 3.2 BB/9	24	MLB
Reliever all the way; power arsenal will kill righties. Possible closer if he walks less.		

4. Toronto Blue Jays

Lineup	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR	Pos
Jose Reyes	.287	.328	.398	9	30	3.3	SS
Russell Martin	.290	.402	.430	11	4	5.3	C
Jose Bautista	.286	.403	.524	35	6	6.3	RF
Edwin Encarnacion	.268	.354	.547	34	2	3.6	1B
Josh Donaldson	.255	.342	.456	29	8	6.4	3B
Justin Smoak	.202	.275	.339	7	0	-0.3	DH
Michael Saunders	.273	.341	.450	8	4	1.9	LF
Dalton Pompey	.231	.302	.436	1	1	0.2	CF
Devon Travis	.298	.358	.460	10	16	--*	2B
Kevin Pillar	.267	.295	.397	2	1	0.6	OF
Maicer Izturis	.286	.324	.314	0	1	0.2	IF
Dioner Navarro	.274	.317	.395	12	3	2.0	C

Pitchers	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR	L/R
Drew Hutchison	4.49	3.85	1.26	184.2	184	2.6	RH
R.A. Dickey	3.71	4.32	1.23	215.2	173	2.1	RH
Mark Buehrle	3.39	3.66	1.36	202.0	119	3,5	LH
Aaron Sanchez	1.09	2.80	0.70	33.0	27	0.6	RH
Daniel Norris	5.40	6.13	1.50	6.2	4	-0.2	LH
Brett Cecil	2.70	2.34	1.37	53.1	76	1.2	LH
Aaron Loup	3.15	3.83	1.17	68.2	56	0.5	LH
Chad Jenkins	2.56	3.48	1.26	31.2	18	0.2	RH

John Rieger – USA Today Sports

The third time's the charm

After two straight seasons of disappointment following huge off-season spending sprees, the Blue Jays are going for it once again.

Two winters ago, the Blue Jays made a giant playoff push with the most aggressive off-season in franchise history. GM Alex Anthopoulos, part trade ninja and part sleepless baseball cyborg, pulled off trades for Jose Reyes, Josh Johnson, R.A. Dickey, and Mark Buehrle while acquiring Melky Cabrera as a side note.

There was tremendous buzz surrounding the team, and rightfully so: they mortgaged the future in Noah Syndergaard, Travis d'Arnaud, Jake Marisnick, and Justin Nicolino for a chance to win the World Series.

But as things tend to go, they didn't win. Not at all. Injuries decimated the team, players underperformed, and the Jays only improved by one game, stuck in the cellar of the AL East. Things corrected themselves in 2014 as Reyes was healthy, Dickey and Cabrera played better, and the team improved by 9 wins to 83-75, but they were still short of the playoffs.

But despite the fact that the team still underperformed last season – according to RAWS said their production should have led to an 85.2-76.8 record and they were 15-20 in one-run games – another go-around with the same team would not be enough for Anthopoulos.

Enter: off-season spending spree, part 2.

The first shoe to drop was giving out by far the biggest contract in Anthopoulos' regime to hometown legend Russell Martin. Martin's 5-year $82 million contract is more than five times as large as Melky Cabrera's then-record deal, which was $16 million over 2 years. Toronto didn't have a hole at catcher with Dioner Navarro having a very solid year, but there was no one at DH, and Martin is among the very best defensive catchers in the league.

Martin should be especially valuable as he deals with Toronto's rather young pitching staff. After Dickey and Buehrle, the rest of the rotation will be filled out with players under 25. Although they will sorely miss Marcus Stroman, who is out for the year with a torn ACL, Aaron Sanchez, Daniel Norris, and Drew Hutchison all have tremendous upside and could use veteran

4. Toronto Blue Jays

guidance.

The next move was far more surprising: Toronto acquired Josh Donaldson, who has the third highest WAR in baseball over the past two seasons, for Brett Lawrie and a handful of prospects. The Blue Jays may end up missing high-upside shortstop Franklin Barreto down the line, but the time to win for the Blue Jays is now.

Acquiring Donaldson gives Toronto one of the most formidable tops of the lineup of any team in baseball. Reyes, Martin, Bautista, Edwin Encarnacion, and Donaldson combined for 25 WAR last season, and that's even while the group missed a combined 115 games. No team can brag that much right-handed pop in a lineup, and most of the players are above-average defensively as well.

But just like the Martin signing, acquiring Donaldson did not fill a need for the club, except to just acquire a superior player with more years of control left. While Lawrie had yet to live up to his top prospect hype, he was hardly the problem north of the border. The Jays still have a hole at second base that they have been unable to fill since trading Aaron Hill in 2011 and uncertainty in the outfield.

With Cabrera and Colby Rasmus hitting free agency, Anthopoulos didn't have the budget or assets to acquire another star-level player after the first two big moves. But what he was able to do was swap a redundant piece in Anthony Gose (an older, lower-upside version of prospect Dalton Pompey) for a potential answer at second base: Tigers' top prospect Devon Travis. With Pompey now cleared to have a starting job and the underrated signing of Canadian Michael Saunders, who should benefit from leaving spacious Safeco Field, the Jays now have a semblance of a promising outfield.

The Blue Jays had the talent to win the World Series two years ago, and their luck fell by the wayside. Last season, they returned almost the identical team, and while they underachieved again, they were knocking on the door of the playoffs. This 2015 team is the most talented of the three and poses a threat to make serious noise in the playoffs. The American League is deep with talented teams, but unlike the National League, there are no clear frontrunners. This may just be the Blue Jays year. The third time may be the charm.

Strengths of the System

Some people value high-risk, high-reward prospects lower because of the chance that they end up producing nothing in the majors. But when a team has as many high-ceiling pitchers as the Blue Jays do, essentially having a diversified portfolio of upper-90s arms takes away the risk of getting no value out of the group as a whole.

Daniel Norris and Aaron Sanchez have already emerged from the group as players who will make an impact in the majors, as they will both make the Opening Day rotation. Time will tell if Jeff Hoffman, Miguel Castro, Roberto Osuna and Co. end up reaching that level or are just power relievers.

Weaknesses of the System

Teams will often have their top prospect lists filled with shortstops because they are generally the best athletes at a young age. Of course, not all of them stick at short – Miguel Cabrera came up the Marlins system at that position but clearly grew out of it. This is not the case for Toronto.

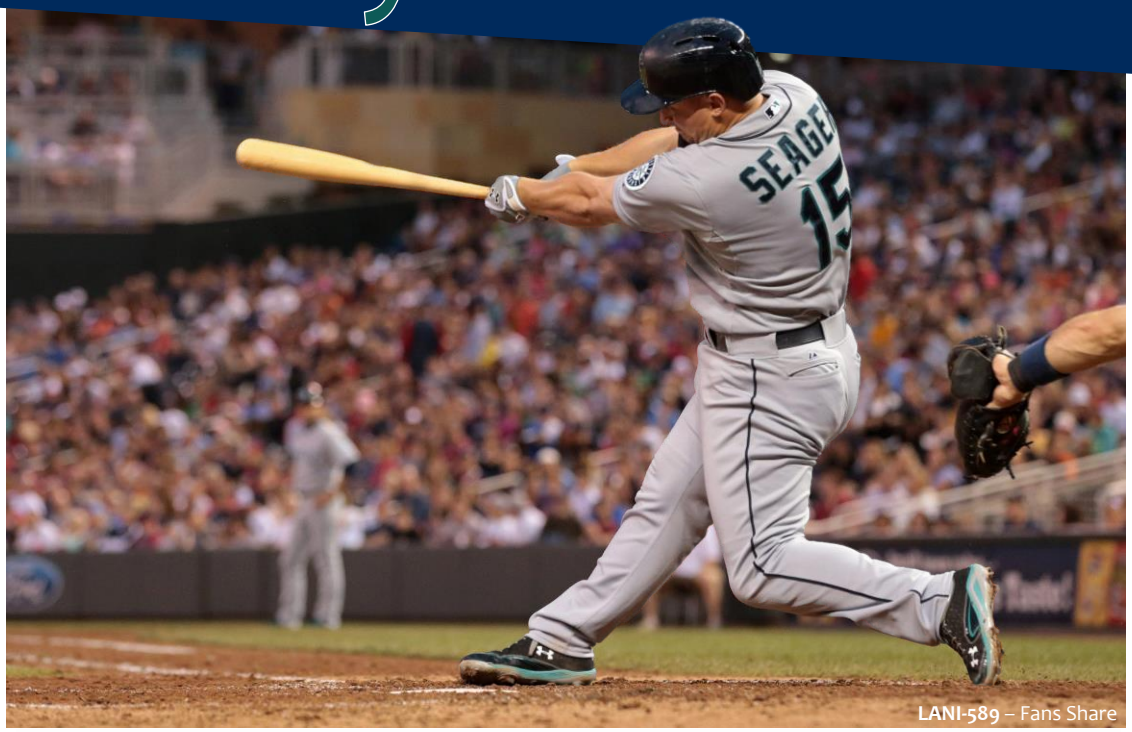
After trading Franklin Barreto as part of the package to acquire Josh Donaldson, the Blue Jays are left thin at this key position. Richard Urena is an excellent defender, but his looks too weak to start right now. There are a couple second basemen (Devon Travis and Dwight Smith) but neither have a chance to play shortstop.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Daniel Norris	LHP	A-
2.57 ERA, 11.4 K/9, 3.3 BB/9	22	MLB
Finally able to access his electric stuff with a sounder delivery. Command still wobbles.		
Aaron Sanchez	RHP	B+
3.24 ERA, 6.1 K/9, 4.5 BB/9	22	MLB
Power arsenal gets more ground balls than whiffs. Shortened stride hurts his command.		
Dalton Pompey	CF	B+
.304/.381/.454, 10 HR, 44 SB	22	MLB
High floor with great speed and defense. Power is a question mark, but bat is solid.		
Jeff Hoffman	RHP	B+
Did not play	21	--
Recovering from Tommy John surgery but he had a top-notch arsenal. Throws gas.		
Max Pentecost	LHP	B
.324/.330/.419, 0 HR, 2 SB	22	Low-A
Great athlete whose arm strength hopefully won't be hurt by surgery. Bat before power.		
Miguel Castro	RHP	B
2.68 ERA, 8.7 K/9, 3.4 BB/9	20	High-A
Up to 98 and still filling out 6'5" frame. Will need slider or control to improve to start.		
Roberto Osuna	RHP	B
7.39 ERA, 12.0 K/9, 3.3 BB/9	20	High-A
Has four average or better pitches, but his command isn't back since Tommy John.		
Devon Travis	2B	B
.295/.358/.460, 10 HR, 16 SB	24	AA
Only the hit tool is plus, but he's a gamer who gets the most out of tools, small size.		
Matt Smoral	LHP	B-
3.19 ERA, 11.7 K/9, 5.5 BB/9	21	Low-A
Smoral was a highly touted prep arm but missed his senior year with a foot injury and faced blister and fingernail issues in the pros. He's been able to dial it up to 96 with a plus slider and great size at 6'8". If he can stay healthy with improved control, he could quickly rise to the top of this list.		
Jairo Labourt	LHP	B-
2.53 ERA, 9.8 K/9, 6.0 BB/9	21	A
After shedding some baby fat, his arsenal played up a bit, but he remains wild at times.		

5. Seattle Mariners

Lineup	Pos					
	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
Austin Jackson	CF	.257	.308	.347	4	20	1.0
Seth Smith	RF	.266	.367	.440	12	1	2.6
Robinson Cano	2B	.314	.382	.454	14	10	5.2
Nelson Cruz	DH	.271	.333	.525	40	4	3.9
Kyle Seager	3B	.268	.334	.454	25	7	5.5
Logan Morrison	1B	.262	.315	.420	11	5	1.0
Dustin Ackley	LF	.245	.293	.398	14	8	2.1
Mike Zunino	C	.199	.254	.404	22	0	1.7
Brad Miller	SS	.221	.288	.365	10	4	1.4
Justin Ruggiano	OF	.281	.337	.429	6	2	0.4
Chris Taylor	IF	.287	.347	.346	0	5	1.4
Rickie Weeks	Util	.274	.357	.452	8	3	1.1

Pitchers	L/R					
	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
Felix Hernandez	RH	2.14	2.56	0.92	236.0	248	6.2
Hishashi Iwakuma	RH	3.52	3.25	1.05	179.0	154	3.2
James Paxton	LH	3.04	3.28	1.20	74.0	59	1.3
Taijuan Walker	RH	2.61	3.68	1.29	38.0	34	0.4
J.A. Happ	LH	4.22	4.27	1.34	158.0	133	1.3
Fernando Rodney	RH	2.85	2.83	1.34	66.1	76	1.2
Danny Farquhar	RH	2.66	2.86	1.13	71.0	81	0.9
Brandon Maurer	RH	4.65	3.49	1.33	69.2	55	0.7



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Completing the rebuild

It took them a year longer than it should have, but the Mariners have finally gone all-in on their push to the playoffs.

Many were quick to cast aspersions on the Mariners' front office last winter when they dropped nearly a quarter billion dollars on Robinson Cano. They had only won 71 games the season before, and it's been well-documented that long-term deals, especially those over $100 millions or for 10 years, do not tend to work out.

But lo and behold, the Mariners went from bottom-dwellers to contenders, finishing just one game behind the Kansas City Royals for the last playoff spot. They did all this while still being incredibly unlucky. The Mariners were just 18-27 in one-run games, far worse than one would expect for a team that won 53.7% of its games.

Maybe it was karma for their poor off-season execution.

Signing Cano wasn't the bad idea, though. For a team on the verge of contention to make a big splash to push them into the 87-90 win range is perfectly reasonable. The poor off-season execution was following up the Cano signing with bringing in just a handful of marginally talented players.

The one thing teams can't do when running a team is half-ass a strategy. If a team is going to rebuild, they need to sell off all of their veteran players with value, not just a handful of them (cough cough, Phillies). If a team is going to make a run for the playoffs, they cannot stop at acquiring just one talented player. And that's exactly what the Mariners did.

While they did bring in Fernando Rodney, Logan Morrison, and Corey Hart, none of those three are game-changers. That trio combined for 0.7 WAR in 2013 and barely improved to 1.0 WAR last season. Those aren't the kind of moves that will help push a team over the edge. A move that could have pushed them over the edge would have been acquiring David Price, whom they were rumored to have had their eyes on last winter.

Another option that could push them over the edge is exactly what they ended up doing this winter.

It came 12 months later than it should

5. Seattle Mariners

have, but the Mariners finally doubled down on their playoff push strategy. After acquiring Austin Jackson for valuable spare part Nick Franklin at the trade deadline (ironically as part of a three-way deal involving David Price), Seattle brought in one of the premier right-handed power hitters Nelson Cruz in on a four-year deal. Adding Seth Smith and Justin Ruggiano in right field will go under the radar but will be a very effective platoon with a combined .358 wOBA – right on par with Matt Holliday.

The Mariners are intriguing because they have a fairly young team and have finally supplemented it with strong veteran players. Last season we saw Kyle Seager burst onto the scene from an above-average regular to a bona fide All-Star, and there are several other players on the verge of taking the next step for Seattle.

Mike Zunino is an interesting case because he's received such high marks for both his offense and defense, but he's had next to no success at the major league level. Not just that, but he hasn't been particularly effective above Double-A. The former third overall pick spent two months in Triple-A, where he hit .227/.297/.478 before getting the call to the bigs, where he's hit .203/.265/.383 over a season and a half.

Obviously the results aren't there yet, but he's extremely young, and the offensive baseline for catchers is so low that even a marginal improvement could put Zunino in the All-Star conversation. Brad Miller is in a similar situation with his production not living up to his tools at shortstop. And similarly again, the offensive baseline for shortstops is rather low, so despite his .290 wOBA last year, he should make steps forward to being one of the better players at his position.

Had the Mariners made a stronger commitment to their strategy of a playoff push earlier, they likely would have actually achieved their goal. Who knows, maybe they would have even had a Royals-type run and made it to the World Series. But they have corrected their mistakes this winter with a handful of smart short-term decisions (thinking of Nelson Cruz in three years is a bit painful), which they should be commended for. And with less bad luck in close games, natural progression among their young position players (not to mention pitchers like Taijuan Walker and James Paxton), this team is about to become very dangerous.

Strengths of the System

Outfield is a big position of strength for the M's. Between Alex Jackson and Gabby Guerrero, they have two high-upside power hitters with a long development path to the majors. In Austin Wilson, they have a high-upside power hitter slightly closer to the majors.

Things get interesting because all three of them play right field currently, although any of the three could easily shift to left field. In the off-chance that all three of them reach their ceiling, especially if they do so before Nelson Cruz' contract runs up, they will have several nice trade chips to pick up another asset.

Weaknesses of the System

Sports tend to be cyclical, and that is the case with the Mariners' farm system as well. Seattle used to have more pitching that about any other team between Taijuan Walker, James Paxton, Danny Hultzen, and a couple other strong arms. But Walker and Paxton graduated, and Hultzen regressed, leaving them rather devoid of pitching.

Unfortunately, Victor Sanchez passed away in a tragic accident in March, so Seattle is now left with Edwin Diaz and Luiz Gohara. Both pitchers have good stuff but need to improve on their command if they want to stick as starters.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Alex Jackson	RF	B+
.280/.344/.476, 2 HR, 0 SB	19	Rookie
Bat, power, and arm are very real. Moved off catcher to make it to the majors faster.		
D.J. Peterson	3B	B+
.297/.360/.552, 31 HR, 7 SB	22	AA
Thick frame leads to big-time power, but limited mobility may force him to first base.		
Austin Wilson	RF	B
.301/.384/.543, 13 HR, 2 SB	23	A
Wilson has great tools and a huge frame to work with (6'4" 250). His raw power hasn't been completely tapped into yet because his swing was somewhat messed up at Stanford, although it's made big progress. Small injuries have slowed his development, but he's a hard worker of high character.		
Gabby Guerrero	RF	B
.307/.347/.467, 18 HR, 18 SB	21	High-A
Like his uncle Vlad, he's a free swinger with big power and a strong arm. Lanky frame.		
Ketel Marte	SS	B
.304/.335/.411, 4 HR, 29 SB	21	AAA
Switch-hitter with plus speed, improved bat, fringy defense. Needs to be more patient.		
Edwin Diaz	RHP	B
3.33 ERA, 8.6 K/9, 3.3 BB/9	21	A
Added weight allows fastball-slider combo to play up more. Delivery is cleaned up too.		
Luiz Gohara	LHP	B
6.66 ERA, 9.5 K/9, 4.7 BB/9	18	Low-A
Big body type can be concerning given his age. Velocity is good and curve is promising.		
Patrick Kivlehan	3B	B-
.295/.363/.507, 20 HR, 11 SB	25	AA
Former football player with good power. His position is in the air with fringy speed.		
Tyler Marlette	C	B-
.297/.349/.517, 17 HR, 9 SB	22	AA
Strong arm, but he's had receiving issues. Offense will carry him with plus bat speed.		
Danny Hultzen	LHP	B-
Did not play in 2014	25	AAA
Back after multiple big injuries. Mid-rotation potential when healthy with a big changeup.		

6. Los Angeles Angels

Lineup	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	Pos / WAR
Kole Calhoun	.272	.325	.450	17	5	RF 3.6
Mike Trout	.287	.377	.561	36	16	CF 7.8
Albert Pujols	.272	.324	.466	28	5	1B 3.3
Matt Joyce	.254	.349	.383	9	2	DH 1.9
David Freese	.260	.321	.383	10	1	3B 2.1
Erick Aybar	.278	.321	.379	7	16	SS 4.1
Josh Hamilton	.263	.331	.414	10	3	LF 1.1
Chris Iannetta	.252	.372	.392	7	3	C 2.9
Johnny Giavotella	.216	.268	.324	1	0	IF 0.1
Collin Cowgill	.250	.330	.354	5	4	OF 2.1
Josh Rutledge	.269	.323	.405	4	2	2B -0.9
C.J. Cron	.256	.289	.450	11	0	1B 0.0

Pitchers	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	L/R / WAR
Jered Weaver	3.59	4.19	1.21	213.1	169	RH 1.5
Garrett Richards	2.61	2.60	1.04	168.2	164	RH 4.3
C.J. Wilson	4.51	4.31	1.45	175.2	151	LH 0.6
Matt Shoemaker	3.04	3.26	1.07	136.0	124	RH 2.1
Hector Santiago	3.75	4.29	1.36	127.1	108	LH 0.7
Huston Street	1.37	2.80	0.94	59.1	57	RH 1.0
Joe Smith	1.81	2.85	0.80	74.2	68	RH 1.0
Vinnie Pestano	2.89	3.24	1.23	18.2	26	RH 0.2

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Oh, to be young again

Many of the key players for the Angels are getting older, and in response, the Angels have made an effort to get younger, especially with pitching.

Despite having the best player in baseball and one of the top payrolls in the league, the Angels haven't been as successful as one might expect. Although they did lead the league in wins last season, they missed the playoffs the two years prior, winning an average of just 83.5 games per season.

Much of the reason for their relative struggles was their poor spending habits. Josh Hamilton has been a complete disaster with declining power, poor contact, and spotty health. Albert Pujols has been far from his normal self but rebounded from a near-replacement level 2013 to show he still has gas left in the tank. But those two are still owed $272 million, which has hamstrung the Angels' ability to spend.

Just as important as the failings of their older players has been their noticeable lack of pitching. Even when they had Zack Greinke two years ago, the rotation was rather shoddy, and when they let him go in free agency (instead signing Hamilton), their ERA rose from 4.02 to 4.24, 24th in the league.

The financial inflexibility caused by signing so many busted free agents – including starter C.J. Wilson, whose ERA ballooned to 4.51 last season, the Angels' only course of action to acquire more pitching was to go young. That's the route they went, and wouldn't you know it: it worked.

Oddly enough, the highest profile acquisition last winter for the Angels was the least effective. Tyler Skaggs, originally drafted by the Angels and traded for Dan Haren, was reacquired for Mark Trumbo. The lefty posted a 4.30 ERA over 113 innings, but unfortunately required Tommy John surgery last August and will miss this entire season. While the final chapter of his book is far from finished, his talent was not what turned the rotation around to create the 7th most pitching WAR in the league at a 3.56 ERA.

Instead, one of the key factors was the other pitcher in the Trumbo trade: Hector Santiago. Although he doesn't have great size or throw particularly hard, the young

6. Los Angeles Angels

lefty has found great success already, thanks in part to his rare screwball. In each of his three full seasons, he's posted an ERA under 4.00.

But without a doubt the biggest boon to the rotation came from young fireballer Garrett Richards. The homegrown talent saw his velocity spike (his fastball trailed only Yordano Ventura), and in turn saw less ground balls and more strikeouts, fly balls, and pop outs. The end result was nearly a Cy Young award-quality performance, a 2.61 ERA over 168 innings, had his season not been cut short by knee surgery.

With such great results coming from young pitching, the Angels decided to double down on that strategy. Seeing as their offense led the league in scoring, they traded from a position of strength (extra hitters) to supplement an area of weakness (pitching).

The first shoe to drop was relatively small: trading backup catcher Hank Conger to the Astros for Nick Tropeano. Once considered their top prospect, Conger never panned out, and Los Angeles was comfortable rolling with Chris Iannetta behind the plate. Tropeano is no future ace, but he tore up Triple-A at just 23 last year and was alright in four spot starts in Houston.

More important was the next trade a month later that was very reminiscent of the Skaggs deal a year prior. The Angels traded an established starter, this time Howie Kendrick, to the Dodgers for one of the premier left-handed pitching prospects, this time Andrew Heaney. Although Kendrick didn't have the deep-seated flaws Trumbo had, he was entering his contract year, and getting six years of a promising lefty is exactly what the Angels were in need of.

The two major additions to the pitching staff may not make an impact until later in the season because established older players are currently holding down the five rotation spots, but LA's pitching should still be better. The worry with this team, though, is that several key players are getting old. Jered Weaver has seen his ERA slowly rise from 2.41 in 2011 to 3.59 in 2014 as his fastball velocity has slowly dropped from 89.1 mph in 2011 to 86.3 mph in 2014, and we already know the concerns about Pujols and Hamilton. Ultimately, this team will be in the thick of the playoff hunt with seven other contenders, and if the young pitching keeps improving, this could be a scary team.

Strengths of the System

The Angels system has been revitalized lately with an influx of arms. Although he graduated from the minors last year, Tyler Skaggs will be a fixture in the rotation for years to come after being reacquired from Arizona, as will Andrew Heaney, who was acquired from the Dodgers.

Heavy emphasis in the draft has also been key with the additions of Sean Newcomb, another lefty who could quickly reach Heaney and Skaggs' level, and Joey Gatto in the latest draft. This strategy didn't work out so well in 2013, though, when their top pick was prep lefty Hunter Green, who has faced all sorts of injuries.

Weaknesses of the System

Similarly to the Tigers, the Angels don't have many hitters who project to be everyday regulars. They took a step to correct that problem by giving up on high-upside 17-year old lefty Ricardo Sanchez for Kyle Kubitza, but Kubitza isn't going to be any better than an average regular at best. Roberto Baldoquin, the other big hitting prospect, has a high risk coming from Cuba.

Taylor Featherston will make the major league roster because he was a Rule 5 draft selection from the Colorado Rockies, but looks like a utility infielder. Alex Yarbrough has a similar ceiling as well.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Andrew Heaney	LHP	B+
3.73 ERA, 8.8 K/9, 2.3 BB/9	24	MLB
High probability starter with three above-average pitches. Low slot but good control.		
Sean Newcomb	LHP	B+
6.14 ERA, 11.0 K/9, 3.7 BB/9	22	A
Big frame, 2 possibly plus off-speeds. Stuff could play up as he's a cold weather guy.		
Joey Gatto	RHP	B
5.33 ERA, 5.3 K/9, 3.00 BB/9	20	Rookie
Nice velocity to go with a projectable frame and a plus curve. Prep arm needs polish.		
Roberto Baldoquin	SS	B
Did not play	20	--
Good athlete with plus arm and bat. Hasn't played in a year, got $8M bonus from Cuba.		
Kyle Kubitza	3B	B
.295/.405/.470, 8 HR, 21 SB	24	AA
Solid tools across the board but nothing too special. Less power than one would expect.		
Nick Tropeano	RHP	B
3.26 ERA, 8.2 K/9, 2.6 BB/9	24	AA
Fastball has nice run and changeup is plus. Developing slider to determine if he'll start.		
Chris Ellis	RHP	B-
6.89 ERA, 9.2 K/9, 4.6 BB/9	22	Rookie
Works in the low-90s, and a much improved breaking ball raised his stock. Ex- reliever.		
Victor Alcantara	RHP	B-
3.81 ERA, 8.4 K/9, 4.3 BB/9	22	A
The Angels do not have many high-upside players, but Alcantara has as high of upside as anyone. His fastball has hit 100 before, but both off-speeds are not yet average. Those pitches, along with his command, will need to improve for him to reach his high ceiling. Otherwise he's a reliever.		
Cam Bedrosian	RHP	B-
3.36 ERA, 14.3 K/9, 4.2 BB/9	23	MLB
Reliever all the way, but his fastball is now up to 97. Curveball misses plenty of bats.		
Hunter Green	LHP	C+
Did not play in 2014	19	Rookie
A back problem kept him out of 2014, but his projection, fastball, and curve are exciting.		

7. Baltimore Orioles

Lineup	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR	Pos
Alejandro De Aza	.252	.314	.386	8	17	1.4	LF
Manny Machado	278	.324	.431	12	2	2.5	3B
Adam Jones	.281	.311	.469	29	7	5.4	CF
Chris Davis	.196	.300	.404	26	2	0.5	1B
Steve Pearce	.293	.373	.556	21	5	4.9	DH
Matt Wieters	.308	.339	.500	5	0	0.9	C
J.J. Hardy	.268	.309	.372	9	0	3.4	SS
Travis Snider	.264	.338	.438	13	1	1.7	RF
Jonathan Schoop	.209	.244	.354	16	2	0.6	2B
Delmon Young	.302	.337	.442	7	2	0.9	OF
David Lough	.247	.309	.385	4	8	1.9	OF
Caleb Joseph	.207	.264	.354	9	0	0.8	C

Pitchers	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR	L/R
Chris Tillman	3.34	4.01	1.23	207.1	150	2.4	RH
Wei-Yin Chen	3.54	3.89	1.23	185.2	136	2.6	LH
Miguel Gonzalez	3.23	4.89	1.30	159.0	111	0.6	RH
Bud Norris	3.65	4.22	1.22	165.1	139	1.5	RH
Kevin Gausman	3.57	3.41	1.31	113.1	88	2.1	RH
Zach Britton	1.65	3.13	0.90	76.1	62	1.1	LH
Tommy Hunter	2.97	3.15	1.10	60.2	45	0.8	RH
Darren O'Day	1.70	3.32	0.89	68.2	73	0.9	LH

Joy R. Absalon – USA Today Sports

A team full of mysteries

The Orioles have bounced between the playoffs and mediocrity the past three years, and it's still very unclear how good their players even are.

One of the most surprising general manager hires of the past decade was the Orioles' hiring of Dan Duquette in late 2011. After being out of Major League Baseball for 10 years, the Orioles swiped up the former Red Sox general manager, leaving most to wonder what exactly Baltimore's plan was, considering most other teams went after young, analytic minds instead of older retread front office members.

But lo and behold, Duquette found success again. The 93-win 2012 team seemed like a bit of a fluke because the team went a stunning 29-9 in one-run games and 16-2 in extra innings, but he still managed to field a winning team coming off five straight seasons of less than 70 wins.

With essentially the same team, Duquette's Orioles only won 85 games in 2013, 6.5 games out of the playoffs. Regression to the mean caught up to Baltimore in close games, and the team's lack of moves didn't help its case.

Finally, the front office made moves before the 2014, but the two major ones were a hit and a miss. Nelson Cruz for $8 million was a steal, but Ubaldo Jimenez already looks like a lost cause one year into his $50 million deal. Yet despite the spotty transaction record, the Orioles did better than ever with a 96-win mark, second-best in the majors thanks to a 42-24 second half finish.

But for the second time in three winters, Duquette stood absolutely still in the off-season. Sure, he brought in Travis Snider for an A-Ball pitcher, but the former Pirates' pinch hitter won't push the needle much. So with almost the exact same roster as the past three seasons, this ushers in the age-old question with a Duquette Orioles team: how good is this team actually going to be?

One of the major reasons that it's so hard to tell how good the team is as a whole is that it's hard to tell how good the individual players on the roster even are. So many players have gone from career years to let downs and irrelevancy to contributing that it's hard to make clear which players are even going to be contributing.

7. Baltimore Orioles

The clearest example of this is Chris Davis, who hit 53 home runs two years ago and produced 7.1 WAR. Despite being the first person in three years to cross the 50-home run barrier, Davis' bat disappeared in 2014 as he just hit .196 with 26 home runs.

So which is the real Davis? He's always had tremendous power but wasn't able to hit for average until Texas traded him to Baltimore. In fact, for five of his seven major league seasons, he's had a WAR under 1 (with three being negative) before he finally broke out in his first full season in Baltimore. He's certainly not as good as his near-MVP 2013 season, but he's probably not going to hit below the Mendoza line. As is the case most of the time, the truth lies somewhere in between.

On the other side of the coin is Steve Pearce, the former Pirates top prospect who fizzled out so badly he switched teams six times since 2011. After never even generating 1 WAR in his first seven seasons, Pearce finally broke out at 31 with 4.9 WAR as he finally tapped into his plus raw power. Even though he did that in just 102 games and should be getting a full-time role this year, most don't expect him to keep up that production. At the same time there's a good chance he's evolved past the replacement level production he had before this season. The truth lies somewhere in between.

The rest of the roster pretty much follows the same trend with unpredictable contributions from all over the board. Matt Wieters saw his batting average slip for three straight seasons before he missed most of 2014 with Tommy John surgery. Manny Machado had knee surgery in August but was otherwise very productive. Jimenez posted a 4.81 ERA after having a 3.30 the year before in Cleveland.

There's just so much uncertainty surrounding this Orioles team, making them one of the harder teams to predict. Losing Cruz and Nick Markakis will hurt, but young players like Kevin Gausman, Machado, and Jonathan Schoop should improve. Ultimately, this team is too inconsistent for my taste, and the AL will be extremely competitive. Between the Red Sox, Tigers, Athletics, Blue Jays, Mariners, Angels, and Royals, there are seven other teams likely more qualified and certainly less volatile than this team. It's going to be a brutal race for the five playoff spots, but I'm betting on the more consistent teams.

Strengths of the System

Teams can never have too many arms, and Baltimore has a potentially the best trio of young right-handed arms around. A general rule of thumb is that for every three pitching prospects, one turns out good, one turns out bad, and one gets injured. Dylan Bundy already underwent Tommy John surgery, but his book is far from written, and all three could possibly pan out.

Kevin Gausman is no longer eligible for this list, but he appears ready to take over a rotation spot for a full season. Hunter Harvey has similar stuff and upside to the other two but is just two and four years younger.

Weaknesses of the System

The bats in this system are rather thin, as is the system as a whole after Bundy and Harvey. Christian Walker is on the verge of the majors, but he has several red flags as a first base-only prospect. He's undersized and a right-handed hitter, and his power grades above his hit, which could prevent his power from playing up. The same is true for Chance Sisco's bat, although he's much better defensively and is younger by a presidential term.

As a whole, this system is filled with lower-upside players. Even the pitchers mostly project as relievers or back end starters at best after the top two names.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level

Dylan Bundy — RHP — A-
3.27 ERA, 8.1 K/9, 3.5 BB/9 — 22 — MLB
His ace stuff played up later in the season as he was coming off Tommy John surgery.

Hunter Harvey — RHP — A-
3.18 ERA, 10.9 K/9, 3.4 BB/9 — 20 — A
Great velocity despite thin frame to go with killer curve. Faced elbow issues last year.

Chance Sisco — C — B
.340/.406/.448, 4 HR, 15 SB — 20 — A
Defense progressing well having changed positions. Bat is strong but light on power.

Christian Walker — 1B — B-
.284/.352/.485, 27 HR, 2 SB — 24 — MLB
Power is blossoming, but all other tools are average at best. Great feel at the plate.

Jomar Reyes — 3B — B-
.285/.333/.425, 4 HR, 1 SB — 18 — Rookie
Bonus baby ($350k) whose hulking frame will move him off third. Huge raw power, ceiling.

Tim Berry — LHP — B-
3.51 ERA, 7.3 K/9, 3.0 BB/9 — 24 — AA
Berry leads a group of pitchers who likely end up in relief but have a chance to be back-end starters with Zach Davies and Mike Wright. Berry gets the edge because he's lefty and has a more projectable frame than Davies. He lacks a knockout pitch but makes up for that with command.

Josh Hart — CF — B-
.249/.294/.283, 1 HR, 13 SB — 20 — A
Has yet to find success in pro ball, but plus speed, defense, athleticism should carry him.

Zach Davies — RHP — B-
3.05 ERA, 8.8 K/9, 2.8 BB/9 — 22 — AA
Tiny frame and poor velocity will make it hard to stay a starter, but changeup is plus.

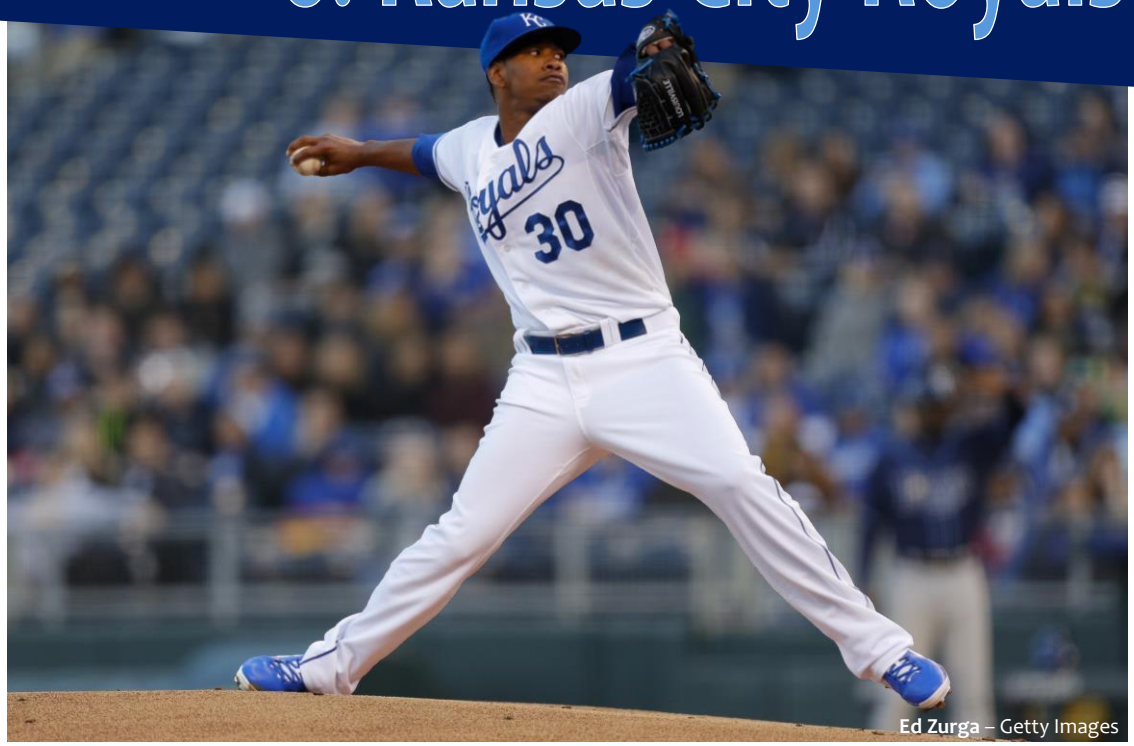
Mike Yastrzemski — OF — B-
.288/.346/.490, 14 HR, 18 SB — 24 — AA
A grinder who gets the most out of average tools. At worst is a quality fourth outfielder.

Mike Wright — RHP — C+
4.61 ERA, 6.5 K/9, 2.6 BB/9 — 25 — AAA
Big frame with a solid fastball and several okay off-speeds. Control before command.

8. Kansas City Royals

Lineup						Pos
	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
Alcides Escobar	.285	.317	.377	3	31	SS 3.4
Alex Gordon	.266	.351	.432	19	12	LF 6.6
Lorenzo Cain	.301	.339	.412	5	28	CF 4.9
Eric Hosmer	.270	.318	.398	9	4	1B 0.2
Kendrys Morales	.218	.274	.338	8	0	DH -1.7
Alex Rios	.280	.311	.398	4	17	RF 0.2
Salvador Perez	.260	.289	.403	17	1	C 3.3
Mike Moustakas	.212	.271	.361	15	1	3B 0.9
Omar Infante	.252	.295	.337	6	9	2B 0.5
Jarrod Dyson	.269	.324	.327	1	36	OF 3.1
Christian Colon	.333	.375	.489	0	2	IF 0.7
Erik Kratz	.218	.243	.391	5	0	C 0.4

Pitchers						L/R
	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
Yordano Ventura	3.20	3.60	1.30	183.0	159	RH 2.8
Danny Duffy	2.53	3.83	1.11	149.1	113	LH 2.2
Edinson Volquez	3.04	4.15	1.23	192.2	140	RH 0.7
Jason Vargas	3.71	3.84	1.27	187.0	128	LH 2.6
Jeremy Guthrie	4.13	4.32	1.30	202.2	124	RH 1.5
Greg Holland	1.44	1.83	0.91	62.1	90	RH 2.3
Wade Davis	1.00	1.19	0.85	72.0	109	RH 3.1
Kelvin Herrera	1.41	2.69	1.14	70.0	59	RH 1.4



Ed Zurga – Getty Images

On the outside looking in

Kansas City had a two-year window to win a World Series, and their chances at returning to that level are looking slim after a strange winter.

The Royals were a team that no one gave a realistic shot. Two winters ago, they mortgaged their future – all-world prospect Wil Myers – for a two-year window at winning the World Series with a rotation anchored by James Shields.

For the most part, their bet paid off. They won 86 games in their first season and won three more games last year, leading to them shocking the baseball world with eight straight wins and a World Series appearance. But unfortunately for Kansas City, midnight struck and Cinderella had yet to dance with Prince Charming. Mostly because Prince Charming turned out to be Madison Bumgarner and his 0.43 ERA over 21 innings.

So was the Shields-Myers trade a success? If you base your answer purely off of rings, the answer would be no, but it's hard to see the Royals being as competitive as they were in the past two seasons with an extra bat instead of a dependable arm.

The reason Kansas City only had a two-year window to win a World Series is because Shields was only under contract for two years at a very reasonable $22.5 million. And once he hit the open market just as Pablo Sandoval caught Salvador Perez's foul pop up for the 27th out of Game 7, he was gone. Even after Shields sat out on the market until mid-February and settled for a four-year $75 million contract with San Diego, the Royals were never going to be able to afford to bring back their ace.

All of a sudden, the Royals are looking a lot more like their teams from 2012 and earlier than their teams the last two years. With no anchors in the rotation and a collection of question marks in the lineup, the Royals still have the potential to be a contending team, but they've taken several major steps back.

Because they could not afford another pitcher in the price range of Shields ($18.75 million), the Royals signed two pitchers for $14.5 combined per season: Edinson Volquez and Kris Medlen. Volquez was excellent with the Pirates last year, but his FIP was over a full run higher than his ERA, so along with his abnormally low BABIP (.263 compared to his

8. Kansas City Royals

career average .298), he is a major candidate for regression. Medlen, on the other hand, was lights out with the Braves from 2012 to 2013 with a 2.47 ERA, but he missed all of last season recovering from his second-ever Tommy John surgery. Both players have seen recent success, but both of them are far more volatile than Shields has ever been in his career.

Unfortunately, the small pockets of a mid-market team extended into the lineup as well – or at least the team chose to make interesting financial decisions – with the departures of Nori Aoki and once-building block Billy Butler.

Butler was one of the first dominos to fall in the off-season after signing a three-year $30 million deal with Oakland. Butler wasn't anything special last season with career lows in batting average, on-base percentage, and slugging percentage, but he was a homegrown talent who consistently produced 2 WAR per season the past five seasons. Worse yet was that they replaced him with a similarly priced Kendrys Morales, who also set career lows in all three categories and had the second-worst WAR in the league despite playing less than 100 games.

Perhaps even more head scratching was the decision to let Aoki walk, seeing as he only cost the Giants $4 million for one season. Instead, they brought in Alex Rios for $11 million after he, you guessed it, suffered one of the worst offensive outputs of his career. While Rios has far better tools than Aoki, his defense has been quickly deteriorating, which doesn't fit in well with the Royals emphasis on defense, and his declining power in one of the most hitter-friendly ballparks is far from encouraging as he reaches his mid-30s.

It's certainly possible that the Royals could make another postseason run, and as we've seen even last season with 88- and 89-win teams meeting in the World Series, anything can happen in the playoffs. But without their rotation anchor, there just appear to be too many question marks surrounding this team. They ended up spending more money on Morales, Volquez, Rios, and Medlen than they would have on Butler, Shields, and Aoki, so maybe sticking with the old team could have been the answer all along. Or maybe the Royals didn't think last year's team was good enough to win a World Series in the first place. Maybe they really didn't have a realistic shot after all.

Strengths of the System

Excellent drafting over the past few years has left the Royals system overflowing with young talent. Of course, drafting at the top will allow you to easily pick up premier talent, but they've also been creative in terms of how they've been able to squeeze the most value out of their picks.

In 2013, they drafted Hunter Dozier 8th overall and signed him to an under-slot bonus, allowing them to also sign Sean Manaea. In 2014, they drafted a lot of college seniors at the end of the first 10 rounds, which allowed them to give the bigger bonuses to prep stars like Foster Griffin, Chase Vallot, and Scott Blewett that they demanded.

Weaknesses of the System

For all the talent they have in their system, the Royals don't have power. Jorge Bonifacio has the capacity to hit 20+ home runs, but his approach at the plate and new stance have held him back. Dozier doesn't have the power of a prototype third baseman, although his bat should carry him enough to still profile at the position.

Vallot is the wild card here. Prep catchers have a high bust rate because they have so much to work on from the defensive side alone that their bat often regresses. With that in mind, the Royals may opt to move him to right field so he makes it to the majors faster, as they did with Wil Myers.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Kyle Zimmer	RHP	A-
2.51 ERA, 12.6 K/9, 5.0 BB/9	23	AA
Great fastball, curve, command and solid slider and changeup. Shoulder injury in 2014.		
Raul Mondesi	SS	B+
.211/.356/.354, 8 HR, 17 SB	19	High-A
Defense, arm, speed are plus or better, but bat struggles against far older competition.		
Sean Manaea	LHP	B+
3.11 ERA, 10.8 K/9, 4.0 BB/9	23	High-A
Power lefty with big frame and plus fastball, slider, promising changeup. Lots of whiffs.		
Brandon Finnegan	LHP	B
1.32 ERA, 9.5 K/9, 1.3 BB/9	22	MLB
Finnegan played a big role out of the bullpen in the World Series run but was a starter in TCU's College World Series run. Although he has the stuff to be a starter (three good pitches and solid command), there are major concerns surrounding his height and mechanics that will likely keep him a closer.		
Miguel Almonte	RHP	B
4.25 ERA, 8.1 K/9, 2.9 BB/9	24	AAA
Fastball command wobbled, but he has plus control of a great changeup and okay curve.		
Hunter Dozier	3B	B
.251/.350/.369, 8 HR, 10 SB	23	AA
Tools are all at least average with a strong frame. Struggled against advanced pitching.		
Jorge Bonifacio	RF	B
.230/.302/.309, 4 HR, 8 SB	22	AA
New stance stunted his plus power coming from bat speed and strength. Very toolsy.		
Foster Griffin	LHP	B
3.21 ERA, 6.1 K/9, 3.9 BB/9	19	Rookie
Three pitches and command are all solid and fastball has great life. Very projectable.		
Scott Blewett	RHP	B
4.82 ERA, 9.3 K/9, 4.8 BB/9	19	Rookie
6'6" cold weather prep arm has all sorts of untapped potential. Curveball is promising.		
Chase Vallot	C	B-
.215/.329/.403, 7 HR, 0 SB	18	Rookie
Defense is raw, although he has good arm strength. Big power and lots of strikeouts.		

9. Cleveland Indians

Lineup	Pos					
	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
Michael Bourn	CF	.257	.314	.360	3	10	0.4
Jason Kipnis	2B	.240	.310	.330	6	22	1.0
Michael Brantley	LF	.327	.385	.506	20	23	6.6
Carlos Santana	1B	.231	.365	.427	27	5	3.1
Brandon Moss	RF	.234	.334	.438	25	1	2.3
Yan Gomes	C	.278	.313	.472	21	0	4.6
Nick Swisher	DH	.208	.278	.331	8	0	-1.6
Lonnie Chisenhall	3B	.280	.343	.427	13	3	1.9
Jose Ramirez	SS	.262	.300	.346	2	10	1.8
David Murphy	OF	.262	.319	.385	8	2	-0.5
Ryan Raburn	OF	.200	.250	.297	4	0	-1.1
Mike Aviles	IF	.247	.273	.343	5	14	-0.3

Pitchers	L/R					
	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
Corey Kluber	RH	2.44	2.35	1.09	235.2	269	7.3
Carlos Carrasco	RH	2.55	2.44	0.99	134.0	140	3.2
Trevor Bauer	RH	4.18	4.01	1.38	153.0	143	1.3
Danny Salazar	RH	4.25	3.52	1.38	110.0	120	1.8
T.J. House	LH	3.35	3.68	1.32	102.0	80	1.1
Cody Allen	RH	2.07	2.99	1.06	69.2	91	1.2
Marc Rzepczynski	LH	2.74	2.85	1.33	46.0	46	0.6
Nick Hagadone	LH	2.70	3.26	1.03	23.1	27	0.3

Chuck Crow – The Plain Dealer

Operating in a small market

There's no denying some of the talent on the Indians, but Cleveland is trying to find a way to compete with restrictions in their budget.

Simply put, the Cleveland Indians are the quintessential small market team. They've consistently been able to develop young talent, but time after time, they are held back by an inability to spend.

Back in 2007, the Indians had a mini-dynasty going with an abundance of talent. CC Sabathia, Cliff Lee, Victor Martinez, Grady Sizemore, Travis Hafner, and that was just the beginning. But over time, the small budget team couldn't hang on to all of the stars.

Sabathia was traded to Milwaukee for Michael Brantley and a handful of other prospects. Lee went to Philadelphia for Carlos Carrasco and a few other young players. Martinez was traded to Boston for Justin Masterson and change. And although Sizemore and Hafner weren't traded, they ended their careers on sharp declines, departing as free agents, and the team never got a return for them.

The only two big free agent contracts Cleveland handed out turned out to be total disasters, too. Michael Bourn and Nick Swisher were brought in for the 2013 season on four-year deals worth $48 million and $56 million, respectively, but they have combined to produce just 3.2 WAR in their first two seasons together, including -1.0 WAR in 2014 alone.

Once snakebitten by high-risk free agent deals, smaller market teams can tend to shy away from taking similar risks in the future. That has left the Indians to turn to developing from within to improve, which they've actually done a good job with. The problem with that, though, is it restricts flexibility if the team were to want to make a push for the postseason.

But despite the low payroll and 68-win season in 2012, Cleveland still made the playoffs in 2013. Sure, winning 92 games seemed a bit fluky considering how ridiculously well they were in one-run (30-17) and extra inning games (10-2), but it was still an impressive leap. However, after losing Ubaldo Jimenez and Scott Kazmir to free agency, the team fell down to 85 wins, three games out of the playoffs.

9. Cleveland Indians

Still, even without making the playoffs, the Indians have an incredibly intriguing roster because of how talented they are considering the low payroll. Cleveland actually had the highest WAR between one pitcher and one hitter in Michael Brantley and Corey Kluber (13.5 WAR), and the duo only cost the team a shade over $2 million. Even the rest of the big contributors barely cost anything with Yan Gomes, Carlos Santana, Carlos Carrasco, and Danny Salazar costing a hair over $5 million and creating 12.5 WAR.

The team was on the verge of the playoffs last year, and with so many young players, natural progression could guide the team to that 88-90 win playoff barrier. With a free agent addition or two, this team really could have secured its spot in the playoff hunt.

But whether still reeling from the ugly Bourn and Swisher contracts or already having reached the budget constraint, Cleveland didn't make a splash in free agency. Instead, the team made a B-level move, adding slugger Brandon Moss through trade.

Although he doesn't bring any defensive value and spent most of the past three years at first base or DH, Moss should be a positive impact in right field. Certainly, he can't be worse than Swisher, and his 20-30 home run power will be much appreciated in a lineup void of power after Santana, Gomes, and Brantley.

The problem, though, is that the Indians didn't do quite enough to bolster their playoff hopes. One can hope that Swisher, Bourn, and Jason Kipnis can create more than -0.2 WAR in 2015 and young pitchers like Carrasco and Trevor Bauer will continue to improve, but it's also unlikely that Brantley and Kluber will continue at their white hot rates when their previous career highs in WAR were 2.7 and 2.8, respectively.

When it comes down to it, the Indians need to make one or two more moves before they will be a true playoff threat, and not pursuing options in free agency makes it much tougher to improve the team. They do have plenty of assets in the minors having drafted well over the years, but it's time to decide when they want to compete: when Francisco Lindor, Bradley Zimmer, and Clint Frazier are in their prime or now with Kluber and Brantley. It's time to make a move, even if free agency can be a scary place.

Strengths of the System

Outfield bats on outfield bats. The Indians continue to take the best player available at the top of the draft, but for the past three years it's been a center fielder (Tyler Naquin, Clint Frazier, and Bradley Zimmer) with a polished college bat in left field (Mike Papi). Plus they traded for former first-rounder James Ramsey. It will be interesting to see how they develop defensively, especially if Frazier and Zimmer stay at the same level.

All four of the outfielders carry intriguing packages of toolsand could give Cleveland some good trade assets should they want to make a playoff push at the trade deadline.

Weaknesses of the System

With a focus on outfield bats in the draft, the pitching in the system is fairly non-existent. Justus Sheffield has mid-rotation upside, but he's far away from contriguting with the major league team. The same is the case for former second-rounder Mith Brown, who fell of the prospect radar after a disastrous first season in full-season ball in 2013.

To be fair, most of the rotation in the majors is young and includes former top prospects Trevor Bauer, Carlos Carrasco, and Danny Salazar, but they could really use more depth in the minors. There aren't even any notable hard-throwing relievers in their system, which most teams have.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Francisco Lindor	SS	A
.276/.338/.389, 11 HR, 28 SB	21	AAA
Switch hits and every tool is plus but power. One of the lowest-risk prospects in baseball.		
Clint Frazier	CF	B+
.266/.349/.411, 13 HR, 12 SB	20	A
Insane bat speed leads to great power. Has some speed, may be able to stick in center.		
Bradley Zimmer	CF	B+
.302/.400/.492, 6 HR, 12 SB	22	A
Deceptively fast for his size the potential to have five tools rating average to plus.		
Justus Sheffield	LHP	B
4.79 ERA, 12.6 K/9, 3.9 BB/9	19	Rookie
Undersized but with three potentially plus pitches and good control, he's fairly safe.		
Tyler Naquin	CF	B
.313/.371/.424, 4 HR, 14 SB	24	AA
When he was drafted in the first round, many labeled him as a tweener: not good enough defensively to play center and not good enough of a hitter to play right. But Naquin has removed those doubts where fellow prospect James Ramsey hasn't with plus defense, speed, and good bat control.		
Mike Papi	LF	B-
.181/.301/.271, 3 HR, 2 SB	22	A
Polished college bat with above-average power and hit tools. Patient, low ceiling.		
Bobby Bradley	1B	B-
.361/.426/.652, 8 HR, 3 SB	19	Rookie
Advanced feel for his age with big power. Body type leaves him small margin for error.		
Mitch Brown	RHP	B-
3.31 ERA, 8.2 K/9, 3.6 BB/9	21	A
Improved delivery helped him raise ground ball and strikeout rates. Curveball is plus.		
Francisco Mejia	C	B-
.282/.339/.407, 2 HR, 2 SB	19	Low-A
Plus plus arm strength and switch hits, but small stature, iffy bat are concerning. Raw.		
Giovanny Urshela	3B	B-
.280/.334/.491, 18 HR, 1 SB	23	AAA
Glove and arm are plus or better. Lacks the offensive upside of other Indians prospects.		

10. Chicago White Sox

Lineup	Pos					
	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
Adam Eaton	CF	.300	.362	.401	1	15	2.7
Melky Cabrera	LF	.301	.351	.458	16	6	2.6
Jose Abreu	1B	.317	.383	.581	36	3	5.3
Adam LaRoche	DH	.259	.362	.455	26	3	1.6
Alexei Ramirez	SS	.273	.305	.408	15	21	3.3
Avisail Garcia	RF	.244	.305	.413	7	4	-0.4
Connor Gillaspie	3B	.282	.336	.416	7	0	1.2
Tyler Flowers	C	.241	.297	.396	15	0	1.8
Micah Johnson	2B	.294	.351	.403	5	22	--*
Dayan Viciedo	OF	.231	.281	.405	21	0	-0.7
Emilio Bonifacio	Util	.259	.305	.345	3	26	2.1
Geovany Soto	C	.250	.302	.363	1	0	0.4

*Minor League Statistics

Pitchers	L/R					
	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
Chris Sale	LH	2.17	2.57	0.97	174.0	208	5.4
Jeff Samardzija	RH	2.99	3.20	1.07	219.2	202	4.1
Jose Quintana	LH	3.32	2.81	1.24	200.1	178	5.3
John Danks	LH	4.74	4.76	1.44	193.2	129	0.8
Hector Noesi	RH	4.75	4.83	1.37	172.1	123	0.5
David Robertson	RH	3.08	2.68	1.06	64.1	96	1.7
Zach Duke	LH	2.45	2.14	1.13	58.2	74	1.4
Jacob Petricka	RH	2.96	3.60	1.37	73.0	55	0.6

Brian Kersey – Getty Images

The classic White Sox rebuild

Kenny Williams used his aggressive mentality to quickly take a Chicago team from the bottom to contention in just two years.

There are about a million ways to construct a winning team. Even if you have an older team that just won 85 games, there are innumerous ways to build that team into a contender.

Under Kenny Williams' watchful eye – whether as the General Manager or Executive Vice President – the White Sox have been one of the most aggressive teams in terms of making trades to avoid a complete rebuild. As such, his teams haven't had consecutive losing seasons since the turn of the century when he was hired – that is until last season.

But although the White Sox won just 136 games between the last two seasons, their lowest total over two years since 1969-70, Chicago has managed to keep their limit their rebuild to just two years and are on the verge of the playoff picture. It's an amazing turnaround considering just how weak their farm system was in 2012, but Williams appears to have done it again.

Although the 2012 team finished just three games out of the division lead, the team was getting old. Paul Konerko, A.J. Pierzynski, and Adam Dunn were reaching the twilight of their careers, and Jake Peavy, Francisco Liriano, and Kevin Youkilis were reaching free agency. Instead of trying to ride out the veteran players and bring back the core that finished eighth in the American League, as they had done in the past, the White Sox decided to sell off older players to collect assets.

But they weren't bottoming out like the Astros and their seven-year rebuild; Chicago instead decided to rid itself of the older players and build around its biggest asset – Chris Sale – on the fly. Quickly, Peavy was traded for Avisail Garcia, Alex Rios was traded for Leury Garcia, Hector Santiago was traded for Adam Eaton, and the White Sox let all their older free agents go. The most notable move of the off-season, though, was signing Jose Abreu for $68 million because he ended up finishing 4th in the MVP after leading the league in slugging percentage.

While the moves Chicago made helped the team incrementally in wins, they were

10. Chicago White Sox

still 15 games out of the playoffs and in need of another injection of talent.

Considering that RAWS saw last seasons output equivalent to that of a 71.3-90.7 team, one could say that they need to make up a 15-20 win gap to be in realistic position to make the playoffs.

Williams and general manager Rick Hahn decided it was time to step on the gas again and complete the rebuild, in typical fashion, and the sheer amount of talent they brought in – while still operating with a thin farm system – is impressive.

The White Sox needed to round out their rotation, which was pretty shaky after Sale and Jose Quintana. John Danks, Hector Noesi, Scott Carroll, and Andre Rienzo made 89 starts, essentially combining to be the 3rd through 5th starters, and only amassed 0.1 WAR. Chicago only made one move to solve that issue, but it was a big one: acquiring Jeff Samardzija. Although he only has one year remaining on his contract, the price was extremely low: Marcus Semien (when the White Sox have a glut of middle infield prospects) a handful of low-quality prospects.

Earlier in the off-season, the White Sox had already revamped their middling bullpen, which actually finished 2014 as one of three teams with a negative WAR. By bringing in Zach Duke and David Robertson for just over $60 million combined, Chicago acquired two quality relievers from both sides, although they did pay a slight premium for Robertson, since he is a "proven closer."

As if that weren't enough, Chicago brought in two more under-the-radar players in Melky Cabrera and Adam LaRoche for $42 million and $25 million apiece. While they've combined to average just under 2.0 WAR per season over the past four years, they're both large upgrades over the poor production the White Sox got out of Dayan Viciedo and Adam Dunn last year.

Chicago was certainly bold in their moves this past winter, and they should be commended for how quickly they pulled off a major rebuild. But the Samardzija trade indicates they're trying to go for it all this year, which may not exactly be feasible. The team's five major acquisitions only amassed 11.2 WAR last year, and the White Sox needed to improve by at least 15 wins to reach that playoff threshold. Kenny Williams rarely rests, but this team is still a move or two away from a rebuild to the playoffs.

Strengths of the System

As always, the White Sox are full of great athletes, something they've emphasized in the recent past. Tim Anderson looks like he's going to be the best player Williams drafted in recent memory in that great athlete mold with an intriguing combination of speed, defense, and a solid bat.

The jury is still out on guys like Courtney Hawkins, Micah Johnson, and Trey Michaelczewski, but there are so many great athletes in the lower minors, as well, that one or two are bound to pan out. On the pitching side, Frank Montas is another lottery ticket with great athleticism that looks to be panning out.

Weaknesses of the System

Aside from Carlos Rodon and Johnson, there aren't too many players on the verge of helping this team compete. A lot of this is due to the burnout rate of some of their prospects, such as Trayce Thompson and Matt Davidson, and drafting a lot of high school players, many of which have not panned out.

Additionally, there is very little power in the system. Hawkins could be a middle-of-the-order bat if his hit tool catches up, but the rest of the hitters in Chicago's farm system are more speed and average guys. Micker Adolfo could be a power bat, but, like Hawkins, his hit tool could use some improvement.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Carlos Rodon	LHP	A-
2.49 ERA, 13.7 K/9, 5.4 BB/9	22	AAA
Fastball and slider are plus plus, but he's a surefire ace if his changeup returns to form.		
Tim Anderson	SS	B+
.301/.327/.481, 9 HR, 10 SB	22	AA
Plus speed and defense. Athleticism should help carry bat despite poor plate discipline.		
Spencer Adams	RHP	B
Did not play	19	--
Athletic with 3 potentially above-average pitches. Great command for a prep arm.		
Frank Montas	RHP	B
1.44 ERA, 8.4 K/9, 2.8 BB/9	22	AA
Hits triple digits and has a plus slider. His delivery is low effort but mechanics are off.		
Courtney Hawkins	RF	B-
.249/.331/.450, 19 HR, 11 SB	21	High-A
Hawkins is Chicago's toolsiest prospect, but his all-out approach holds him back at the plate. He hasn't tapped into his big-time raw power due to an inability to lay off breaking balls, but if he can put it all together, he's a plus defender who can make an impact in across the board with a low average.		
Micah Johnson	2B	B-
.294/.351/.403, 5 HR, 22 SB	24	AAA
Elite speed, but with no power, he must improve his defense or bat to be a starter.		
Trey Michalczewski	3B	B-
.262/.340/.403, 10 HR, 7 SB	20	High-A
No one great tool now, but he's got a great swing from both sides of the plate. So raw.		
Tyler Danish	RHP	B-
2.08 ERA, 7.2 K/9, 2.3 BB/9	20	High-A
Small frame, weird mechanics, and no plus pitch. But his heavy sinker gets the job done.		
Micker Adolfo	RF	B-
.218/.279/.380, 5 HR, 0 SB	18	Rookie
Huge bonus baby with power and a strong arm. Strikeouts are an issue, but he's young.		
Jacob May	CF	B-
.258/.326/.395, 2 HR, 37 SB	23	High-A
Great speed and bloodlines. AA will be a great test to if he can make enough contact.		

11. New York Yankees

Lineup	Pos					
	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
Jacoby Ellsbury	CF	.271	.328	.419	16	39	3.6
Brett Gardner	LF	.256	.327	.422	17	21	3.2
Brian McCann	C	.232	.286	.406	23	0	2.3
Mark Teixeira	1B	.218	.313	.398	22	1	0.8
Carlos Beltran	RF	.233	.301	.402	15	3	-0.5
Chase Headley	3B	.243	.328	.372	13	7	4.2
Alex Rodriguez	DH	.244	.348	.423	7	4	0.5*
Stephen Drew	2B	.162	.237	.299	7	1	-1.1
Didi Gregorius	SS	.226	.290	.363	6	3	0.3
Chris Young	OF	.222	.299	.385	11	8	0.4
Brendan Ryan	IF	.167	.211	.202	0	2	-0.7
Garrett Jones	1B	.246	.309	.411	15	0	0.2

*2013 Statistics

Pitchers	L/R					
	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
Masahiro Tanaka	RH	2.77	3.04	1.06	136.1	141	3.2
CC Sabathia	LH	5.28	4.78	1.48	46.0	48	0.1
Michael Pineda	RH	1.89	2.71	0.83	76.1	59	2.2
Nate Eovaldi	RH	4.37	3.37	1.33	199.2	142	3.0
Chris Capuano	LH	4.35	3.91	1.39	97.1	84	0.8
Dellin Betances	RH	1.40	1.64	0.78	90.0	135	3.2
Andrew Miller	LH	2.02	1.51	0.80	62.1	103	2.3
Adam Warren	RH	2.97	2.89	1.11	78.2	76	1.4

Charles Wenzelberg – New York Post

Life without Jeter and youth

With the retirement of their longtime captain, the Yankees' roster still has big names, but age is catching up with many of them.

These aren't your father's Yankees. They aren't even your older brother's Yankees. Although they still have one of the highest payrolls in baseball – over $200 million for the seventh time in eight years – New York just doesn't have the roster we've come to expect.

The obvious departure from the norm is that none of their Core Four is still with the team. Jorge Posada retired in 2011, Andy Pettitte and Mario Rivera retired in 2013, but Derek Jeter finally hanging up his spikes last season means the Yankees have officially moved on to the next generation of pinstriped players.

Of course, it's next to impossible to replace Jeter, but New York didn't exactly do a good job of replacing him. With no one immediately able to contribute from within the system, the Yankees traded young starter Shane Greene to the Tigers in a three-way trade for Didi Gregorius. While he's a slick fielder and only 25, Gregorius was so bad offensively last year (.287 wOBA) that he was banished to the Minors by the lowly Diamondbacks, who had the worst record in the league by three games.

In reality, though, the shift from Jeter to Gregorius won't hurt the team too much on the field because Jeter's last hurrah was also far from his best season, but the Yankees did not do enough elsewhere to combat their aging roster.

Just this season alone, the Yankees have invested $96.6 million in Jacoby Ellsbury, Brian McCann, Mark Teixeira, Carlos Beltran, and Alex Rodriguez, who combined to produce just 6.2 WAR last season. That's not even mentioning the $239 million they still owe that group, all of whom are over 30 years old and declining.

In the past, New York has found success by heavily investing in free agents, such as the 2009 season when they brought in CC Sabathia, Mark Teixeira, and A.J. Burnett for nearly a half billion dollars. They won the World Series that year and at least 95 games through 2012. But after years of success and squeezing all the value of those three, Father Time has come back to get his pound of

11. New York Yankees

flesh.

The Yankees have so many players in the back end of nine-figure contracts and the twilight of their career that it has become increasingly difficult for them still to be able to contend.

And the casualties are fairly brutal. Sabathia, whose ERA had hovered around the low 3's nearly his entire career, has sported a bloated 4.87 ERA over the past two seasons thanks to his fastball velocity plummeting below 90 mph this season and various injuries. Teixeira missed almost the entire 2013 season with a wrist injury, and even when he was healthy, he was barely above the Mendoza line with far less power than normal. Really, the only player to take steps forward offensively was Brett Gardner, who suddenly developed power to go with his good speed and defense.

The Yankees have made an effort to combat their aging roster, but the moves haven't all worked out as planned so far. For instance, the Bombers spent $175 million on Masahiro Tanaka, who was outstanding in his rookie year but was sidelined in July with a partially torn UCL.

All those massive contracts the Yankees have handed out handcuffed them this off-season from acquiring more All-Star talent. They chose to sit out the pursuit of the biggest free agents like Max Scherzer, James Shields, and Hanley Ramirez, and instead settled by spending $52 million to bring back Chase Headley and dropping $36 million to replace David Robertson with Andrew Miller. That, and bringing in veterans Chris Young and Garrett Jones to shore up their bench.

There is still clearly a lot of talent left on this Yankees team, but so much of it is well past its prime or has faced injuries in the past. Specifically, their rotation is just a cornucopia of hospital patients. Tanaka narrowly avoided Tommy John surgery, Michael Pineda is coming off Tommy John surgery, Ivan Nova is recovering from Tommy John surgery, and Chris Capuano and Sabathia have been banged up throughout Spring Training. Since they are the Yankees, it's impossible to be in any mode other than "Acquire Talent and Make a Playoff Push" mode, but this team is so far removed from playoff contention because of the aging superstars. If nothing else, there are few moves more depressing and symbolic of this upcoming season than searching around for a second baseman and finally settling on re-signing Stephen Drew and his .162 batting average for $5 million.

Strengths of the System

More so than they've had in past years, the Yankees are well stocked with high-upside players. The 2013 draft is starting to pay dividends with Aaron Judge, Ian Clarkin, and Eric Jagielo all improving their stock and looking like potential regulars.

Even more exciting, though, is the improvement of Latin players Luis Severino and Jorge Mateo. Although he only signed for $50,000, Severino has vastly improved his repertoire and has the makings of a front-line starter if he can improve his command. Slightly higher touted, Mateo, who signed for $250,000, looks like Derek Jeter's eventual replacement.

Weaknesses of the System

Although the pitchers are intriguing, none of them are close to guarantees to stick as starters. For as good of stuff as Severino has, he has a slight build that could be problematic. Domingo German will hit the upper-90s but his command comes and goes and neither breaking ball is a knockout pitch. Jacob Lindgren has the best stuff, but he is a reliever all the way.

Clarkin has the best chance of sticking in the rotation, but he has the worlst stuff out of the group. None of his pitches grade out as plus yet, but he has the chance for three average pitches with solid command, making him a solid number 3 or 4 starter.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Aaron Judge	RF	B+
.308/.419/.486, 17 HR, 1 SB	23	High-A
Surprisingly compact swing, contact rate for 6'7" size. Plus power, arm, solid speed.		
Luis Severino	RHP	B+
2.46 ERA, 10.1 K/9, 2.1 BB/9	21	AA
Very good fastball-change combination, but his lack of size and delivery raise concerns.		
Jorge Mateo	SS	B
.276/.354/.397, 0 HR, 11 SB	20	Rookie
80-grade speed with a bat, arm, defense that may end up average or even better.		
Greg Bird	1B	B
.271/.376/.472, 14 HR, 1 SB	22	AA
Plus power or better with a solid bat, but he's not too athletic or adept defensively.		
Gary Sanchez	C	B
.270/.338/.406, 13 HR, 1 SB	22	AA
Flashes major tools (70 arm and power), but he has still yet to improve his receiving.		
Ian Clarkin	LHP	B
3.12 ERA, 9.00 K/9, 2.8 BB/9	20	High-A
Mid-rotation starter potential with great control and a nice fastball-curve 1-2 punch.		
Jacob Lindgren	LHP	B
2.16 ERA, 17.3 K/9, 4.7 BB/9	22	AA
I'm generally not in favor of ranking pure relievers this high, but this is a combination of just how good Lindgren is and how weak the system is. He could likely help the big league club right now with his great fastball-slider combination that wipes out batters. He's a likely dominant closer soon.		
Eric Jagielo	3B	B-
.256/.351/.461, 18 HR, 0 SB	23	High-A
He already has power, and if he can get his bat and glove to be average, he's a starter.		
Rob Refsnynder	2B	B-
.318/.387/.497, 14 HR, 9 SB	24	AAA
A weird swing still yields good results. The rest of his tools are just average or fringy.		
Domingo German	RHP	B-
2.48 ERA, 8.2 K/9, 1.8 BB/9	22	A
Great fastball with iffy secondary pitches. High upside if he can put it all together.		

12. Tampa Bay Rays

Lineup	Pos	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
John Jaso	DH	.264	.337	.430	9	2	1.5
Logan Forsythe	2B	.223	.287	.329	6	2	-0.2
Asdrubal Cabrera	SS	.241	.307	.387	14	10	1.7
Evan Longoria	3B	.253	.320	.404	22	5	3.4
James Loney	1B	.290	.336	.380	9	4	0.9
Steven Souza	RF	.130	.231	.391	2	0	0.0
Desmond Jennings	LF	.244	.319	.378	10	15	3.3
Kevin Kiermaier	CF	.263	.315	.450	10	5	3.8
Rene Rivera	C	.252	.319	.432	11	0	3.0
David DeJesus	OF	.249	.344	.403	6	0	0.3
Brandon Guyer	OF	.266	.334	.367	3	6	1.6
Nick Franklin	IF	.160	.222	.247	1	2	-0.2

Pitchers	L/R	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
Alex Cobb	RH	2.87	3.23	1.14	166.1	149	2.7
Matt Moore	LH	2.70	4.73	1.50	10.0	6	0.0
Chris Archer	RH	3.33	3.39	1.28	194.2	173	3.1
Drew Smyly	LH	3.24	3.77	1.16	153.0	133	2.3
Jake Odorizzi	RH	4.13	3.75	1.28	168.0	174	2.0
Jake McGee	LH	1.89	1.73	0.90	71.1	90	2.6
Brad Boxberger	RH	2.37	2.84	0.84	64.2	104	0.9
Grant Blafour	RH	4.91	3.95	1.44	62.1	57	0.0

Kim Klement – USA Today Sports

Moving on and moving down

The Rays lost two of the masterminds behind their turnaround and are left with one of the most barren rosters they've had in years.

It seems like a tradition for the Rays: develop a tantalizingly talented player until he nears free agency and trade him off for another prime talent. Wash, rinse, repeat.

Out with Matt Garza in with Chris Archer. Out with James Shields in with Wil Myers. Out with David Price in with Drew Smyly.

Between the young players the Rays have acquired over the years and the players already developing in their farm system, Tampa has been able to have a continuous flow of talent that led to a 6 year stretch with an average of 92 wins per season. Only the Yankees were able to top that.

But that string of success may be over with their massive changes across the board. Not only are the masterminds behind the Rays' transformation from bottom dwellers to contenders, GM Andrew Friedman and manager Joe Maddon, gone, but there have been drastic changes to the roster that leave the team with less talent than there has ever been since the pre-playoff days.

Things started to unravel for the Rays when they dealt Price to the Tigers for what appeared to be a lesser bundle than he was worth. Tampa was just 6 games out of the playoffs on August 1 and had won 11 of 13 games but decided they favored contending over the long haul compared to going for a 2-year window for a World Series with Price.

The haul for the former Cy Young Award winner wasn't overwhelming. Smyly had been an effective starter for Detroit but only had three years of control left and is a future mid-rotation starter at best. Nick Franklin was once considered a top prospect for Seattle but could not crack their mediocre staring lineup. Finally, Willy Adames, potentially the biggest piece in return, is a very talented shortstop but only 18 years old in A-Ball.

Tampa likely would have been in the mix for a Wild Card bid had they held the team constant in the off-season, but they kept meddling.

Out with Matt Joyce, good for 2 WAR per season over the last five years, for middle reliever Kevin Jepsen. Out with Wil Myers, traded for Steven Souza, who, while

12. Tampa Bay Rays

talented, is actually older and far less proven than the reigning Rookie of the Year. Out with Ben Zobrist, second in baseball in WAR since 2009, and Yunel Escobar for prospect Daniel Robertson and the return of John Jaso.

Clearly each of the players they traded away had some flaw. Joyce and Zobrist were a year from free agency. Escobar hasn't hit for three years and saw a precipitous decline in his defense. Myers had a hugely disappointing season, and perhaps the Rays knew something the rest of the industry didn't know and got out while he still had value. But from all signs, this team could have competed with the team they had in November, and they could have gotten more value for most if not all of those players.

Without Friedman and Maddon, the Rays have a ways to go in terms of re-establishing their brand of baseball. Since they won't be able to out-spend any team in their division – let alone the rest of baseball – they'll have to pick up a new strategy with new manager Kevin Cash and new GM Matthew Silverman.

To be fair, Tampa Bay will be able to cling onto their strategy of holding onto and developing young pitchers. While they lack a seasoned workhorse like they had in the past with Price, Shields, and Garza, they do have Alex Cobb, who has an ERA under 3 the past two seasons. Furthermore, Archer and Matt Moore have come into their own lately, although the latter will be out until June or July coming off Tommy John surgery. Beyond that, they have Jake Odorizzi, Nate Karns, and Alex Colome waiting in the wings.

More interesting is their emphasis lately on pitch framing in catchers. While they had defensive-minded Ryan Hanigan and Jose Molina last year, they released Molina and traded Hanigan in the Myers deal for Rene Rivera. Interestingly enough, Rivera rates as good as Molina in pitch framing with a slightly better bat.

Additionally, Tampa puts an emphasis on pitchers with less sink on fastballs to get more strikeouts, pop-ups, and fly balls in their spacy ballpark. They've made an effort to sign players who fit the mold like Ernesto Frieri and ship out guys who don't like Jeremy Hellickson and Cesar Ramos.

These are likely market inefficiencies the Rays are exploiting to gain a competitive edge, and there certainly are additional trends Tampa Bay is looking at. They'll need them, too, because they won't be competing soon based on raw talent alone.

Strengths of the System

It's rare to find elite players that play up-the-middle positions, which is what makes them so valuable. The Rays have five of them in their top 10 with several more intriguing guys like Andrew Velazquez, Ryan Brett, and Hak-Ju Lee further down the list.

The Rays' top two prospects are both shortstops with advanced bats, and the other shotstop could be their top prospect soon. Robertson will likely shift to second base soon, but the intriguing guy is Adrian Rondon, who was considered by some the best 16 year old signed last year. Justin O'Conner could see a cup of coffee this year as a backup catcher.

Weaknesses of the System

For as high praise as the Rays have gotten over the years, they have been fairly awful at drafting in the first round, which is why they haven't had a top prospects besides Wil Myers (whom they traded for) in years.

Take a look at their first-round picks since 2008: Tim Beckham, LeVon Washington, Josh Sale, Justin O'Conner, Drew Vettleson, Taylor Guerrieri, Mikie Mahtook, Jake Hager, Brandon Martin, Taylor Goeddel, Jeff Ames, Blake Snell, Kes Carter, Grayson Garvin, James Harris, Richie Shaffer, Nick Ciuffo Ryne Stanek, and Casey Gillaspie. That's a lot of names that nobody knows.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Willy Adames	SS	B+
.271/.353/.429, 8 HR, 6 SB	19	A
Plays above his tools, which are all at least average. Bat is advanced for his young age.		
Daniel Robertson	SS	B+
.310/.402/.471, 15 HR, 4 SB	21	High-A
Fantastic on base skills with limited power. Fringy speed likely moves him to second.		
Taylor Guerrieri	RHP	B+
0.00 ERA, 9.6 K/9, 1.9 BB/9	22	A
Great size, fastball, curveball combination. Finally recovered from Tommy John surgery.		
Steven Souza	RF	B+
.332/.415/.566, 20 HR, 28 SB	26	MLB
The Rays gave up on Wil Myers to acquire Souza, so they clearly think highly of him. He has 20-20 potential, but none of his tools are better than plus. It's worth noting that in the last ten years, players with 20-20 seasons have averaged 5.0 WAR. Then again, he's 25, which is concerning.		
Justin O'Conner	C	B
.278/.316/.466, 12 HR, 0 SB	23	AA
Crazy strong arm, but receiving needs work. Mechanical issues with swing seem fixed.		
Blake Snell	LHP	B
3.19 ERA, 9.3 K/9, 4.4 BB/9	22	High-A
Great frame and a fastball up to 97. Two off-speeds are nice, command lags behind.		
Adrian Rondon	SS	B
Did not play	17	--
Advanced bat, strong arm. Considered the top bonus baby of last year ($2.95M bonus).		
Alex Colome	RHP	B-
3.36 ERA, 7.2 K/9, 3.4 BB/9	26	MLB
Stuff is electric, but at this age, his control, durability may not improve for him to start.		
Brent Honeywell	RHP	B-
1.07 ERA, 10.7 K/9, 1.6 BB/9	20	Rookie
Intriguing arsenal with a screwball and his command is rapidly improving. Projectable.		
Nick Ciuffo	C	B-
.224/.289/.333, 4 HR, 1 SB	20	Rookie
Sickness ruined his season, but he remains a strong defender with power potential.		

13. Texas Rangers

Lineup	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR	Pos
Leonys Martin	.274	.325	.364	7	31	3.5	CF
Elvis Andrus	.263	.314	.333	2	27	1.3	SS
Shin-Soo Choo	.242	.340	.374	13	3	0.2	RF
Adrian Beltre	.324	.388	.492	19	1	5.8	3B
Prince Fielder	.247	.360	.360	3	0	-0.3	1B
Mitch Moreland	.246	.297	.347	2	0	-0.5	DH
Robinson Chirinos	.239	.290	.415	13	0	2.4	C
Ryan Rua	.295	.321	.419	2	1	0.6	LF
Rougned Odor	.259	.297	.402	9	4	0.5	2B
Jake Smolinski	.349	.391	.512	3	0	0.7	OF
Adam Rosales	.262	.328	.378	4	4	0.9	IF
Carlos Corporan	.234	.302	.376	4	1	0.4	C

Pitchers	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR	L/R
Yovani Gallardo	3.51	3.94	1.29	192.1	146	1.7	RH
Derek Holland	1.46	2.19	1.05	37.0	25	1.3	LH
Martin Perez	4.38	3.70	1.34	51.1	35	0.8	LH
Colby Lewis	5.18	4.46	1.52	170.1	133	1.1	RH
Ross Detwiler	4.00	4.16	1.41	63.0	39	-0.2	LH
Neftali Feliz	1.99	4.90	0.98	31.2	21	-0.1	RH
Tanner Scheppers	9.0	6.74	1.78	23.0	17	-0.3	RH
	0						
Shawn Tolleson	2.76	4.23	1.17	71.2	69	0.1	RH

Rick Yeatts – Getty Images

Bad luck can ruin the process

The Rangers were all set for a deep post-season run until far too many untimely injuries ruined what appeared to be a great strategy.

One of the most interesting aspects of sports is the chasm between process and result. More so than almost any other aspect of life, sports is one of the most results-driven realms.

Take for example the World Series last season. The Giants and Royals reached the Fall Classic with 88 and 89 wins respectively, and most people considered them the two best teams in the league. Were San Francisco and Kansas City really the two best teams from each league when they won so few regular season games? The Angels and Nationals won 98 and 96 wins during the regular season, and 162 games is a much more representative than a 17 game playoffs.

Similarly to the results at the end of the season, trades and free agent acquisitions can be seen through the same lens. Think about the vaunted Alex Rodriguez-Alfonso Soriano trade. The Yankees included a player to be named later in the swap, which ended up being Joaquin Arias. Arias never panned out, and most people would say the Yankees got the better end of the deal. However, the Yankees almost included a young prospect named Robinson Cano in the deal. Had that happened, Texas would have come out way ahead of the Yankees; the two prospects were fairly equally valued, the processes would have been the same, but the results would have been drastically different.

This brings us to the Rangers, who made a giant playoff push last season, only to finish with the second-worst record in baseball. Clearly the results were not there, though the process could have been easily defended.

The major move Texas made was trading away beloved second baseman Ian Kinsler to Detroit for Prince Fielder. With a critical mass of middle infield prospects nearing the majors (Jurickson Profar, Rougned Odor, and Luis Sardinas) in addition to Elvis Andrus, Kinsler was easily moveable, and the Rangers were in desperate need of power with Josh Hamilton and Mike Napoli's departure. Of course, Kinsler put up the second-highest WAR total of his career at age 32, and Prince Fielder only played in 42 games with very

13. Texas Rangers

little power before being shut down with neck surgery. The process was there, but the results didn't match.

When they decided to go all-in on making a playoff push, the Rangers doubled down on their spending by bringing in Shin-Soo Choo for $130 million over seven years. Although he was coming off a season in which he had a .423 on-base percentage, the veteran only reached base at a career-low .340 clip, producing just 0.1 WAR. The process was there, adding a proven bat to a suddenly deep lineup, but the results did not come through as planned.

Last year's team was supposed to do so well. They were set up for all kinds of success. But sometimes things are just not made to be, as it appeared with the injury bug infestation in Arlington. Profar tore a muscle in his right shoulder in Spring Training and re-injured it during rehab, forcing him to miss the entire season. Fielder missed most of the season with the neck surgery. Derek Holland suffered a freak knee injury playing with his dog and could only make five starts. Martin Perez needed Tommy John surgery in May, and even Yu Darvish and Adrian Beltre spent time on the DL.

Now the Rangers are returning most of the same team that many – including myself – thought would contend for the division and even a World Series title. Although they lost Alex Rios and Geovany Soto and replaced them with walking embodiments of replacement level players in Ryan Rua and Robinson Chirinos, the talent is still there. That was until the injury bug that sunk the 2014 season came back to bite them again.

Profar re-aggravated his shoulder injury and will now have to undergo surgery on it after rehabbing it all of last season. Now he won't play a single game in 2014 or 2015. After spending the final six weeks of last season on the DL with right elbow inflammation, Darvish had to have Tommy John surgery and will miss at least this entire season.

Even with the acquisition of Yovani Gallardo and the return of most of those injured players, this team seems destined for another long year in Arlington. There's no solace in the idea that Texas' moves the past two years have been good in theory when the team is winning 60-odd games, but the team isn't losing for a lack of effort. It's possible that the results could catch up to the process soon, but with the compiling injuries, it seems more like a distant dream.

Strengths of the System

The sheer amount of tools and upside in the Rangers system is tremendous, not to mention recent graduates like Jurickson Profar (R.I.P. his shoulder) and Rougned Odor. The Rangers love drafting raw high school talent with lots of tools.

You can read in the top ten prospects' scouting reports about how much potential they have, but the theme continues to prospects in the 11-15 range as well. Ti'Quan Forbes has great size, blazing speed, and a strong arm out of a Mississipi high school. Travis Demeritte has plus raw power with great bat speed. Even Josh Morgan is another promising prep bat.

Weaknesses of the System

As mentioned before, with great power in prep prospects often comes great whiffs. Two seasons ago, the quintet of Joey Gallo, Nomar Mazara, Jorge Alfaro, Lewis Brinson, and Nick Williams combined for 726 strikeouts at a 31.0% strikeout rate. Things went slightly better in 2014 with 659 strikeouts in 163 more plate appearances – good for a 26.3% strikeout rate.

Those figures are still far too high, but some players are making big progress. Brinson dropped his strikeout rate from 38.0% to 24.9%, and Gallo, Mazara, and Alfaro all saw their rates drop by at least 3.5 percentage points.

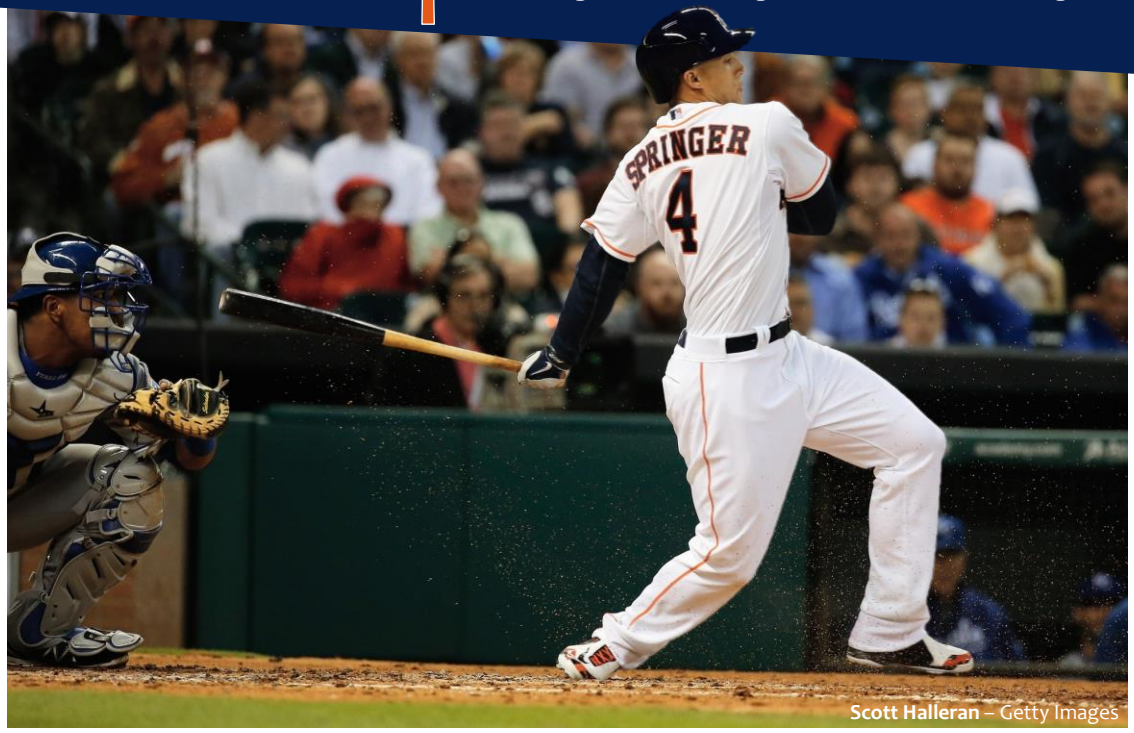
Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Joey Gallo	3B	A-
.271/.394/.615, 42 HR, 7 SB	21	AA
Beyond incredible power, long swing leads to strikeouts. Cannon arm, average range.		
Nomar Mazara	RF	B+
.271/.362/.478, 22 HR, 4 SB	20	AA
Advanced for his age with a great approach, bat speed, power. Good arm but not fast.		
Alex Gonzalez	RHP	B+
2.66 ERA, 7.3 K/9, 2.7 BB/9	23	AA
Throws 4 potentially plus pitches above 85 mph with slider, sinking fastball already plus.		
Jorge Alfaro	C	B+
.261/.323/.440, 17 HR, 6 SB	22	AA
Contact and mechanical issues may hold his plus plus power and throwing arm back.		
Jake Thompson	RHP	B
3.12 ERA, 9.0 K/9, 3.3 BB/9	21	AA
Big frame with a plus fastball and slider, and his stuff plays up even more in relief.		
Lewis Brinson	CF	B
.288/.354/.458, 13 HR, 12 SB	21	High-A
Extremely athletic with plus defense, speed. Discipline improving, may hold back power.		
Luis Ortiz	RHP	B
1.77 ERA, 8.4 K/9, 2.7 BB/9	19	A
Not much projection left for a prep arm, but his command is solid with two plus pitches.		
Nick Williams	LF	B
.283/.331/.462, 13 HR, 6 SB	21	AA
Great contact with absolutely no discipline. Fringy defense, but plus power and speed.		
Delino DeShields Jr.	CF	B-
.236/.346/.360, 11 HR, 54 SB	22	AA
DeShields, the 8th overall pick in 2010, was snatched from the Astros in the Rule 5 Draft, which leaves him in an interesting scenario. DeShields has top-notch speed, which makes him a valuable utility man at second base and outfield. His bat, though, is far from major league ready this year.		
Anthony Ranaudo	RHP	B-
3.07 ERA, 6.4 K/9, 3.6 BB/9	25	MLB
6'7" with a knockout fastball, curve, but his change or command must improve to start.		

14. Houston Astros

Lineup	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR	Pos
Jose Altuve	.341	.377	.453	7	56	5.1	2B
George Springer	.231	.336	.468	20	5	1.4	RF
Evan Gattis	.263	.317	.493	22	0	2.3	DH
Chris Carter	.227	.308	.491	37	5	1.7	1B
Jason Castro	.222	.286	.366	14	1	1.2	C
Jed Lowrie	.249	.321	.355	6	0	1.8	SS
Colby Rasmus	.225	.287	.448	18	4	0.6	LF
Luis Valbuena	.249	.341	.435	16	68	2.7	3B
Jake Marisnick	.249	.281	.326	3	3	0.8	CF
Robbie Grossman	.233	.337	.333	6	9	1.0	OF
Marwin Gonzalez	.277	.327	.400	6	2	0.8	IF
Hank Conger	.221	.293	.325	4	0	0.4	C

Pitchers	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR	L/R
Dallas Keuchel	2.93	3.21	1.18	200.0	146	3.9	LH
Scott Feldman	3.74	4.11	1.30	180.1	107	1.6	RH
Asher Wojciechowski	4.74	4.85	1.45	76.0	59	--*	RH
Collin McHugh	2.73	3.11	1.02	154.2	157	3.3	LH
Roberto Hernandez	4.10	4.85	1.39	164.2	105	0.0	RH
Chad Qualls	3.33	3.13	1.15	51.1	43	0.6	RH
Pat Neshek	1.87	2.37	0.79	67.1	68	1.8	RH
Luke Gregerson	2.12	3.24	1.01	72.1	59	0.9	RH

*Minor League Statistics



Scott Halleran – Getty Images

Considering trying to win

Houston is well-known for blowing up their entire team in favor of a long rebuild, but they've finally started making moves towards winning now.

Many people like to draw a comparison between the Houston Astros and Philadelphia 76ers. Both teams have had historically bad stretches of losing seasons that were brought on by full-scale, burn-everything-to-the-ground rebuilds and led by analytic-heavy front offices.

But their strategies are not entirely the same. The 76ers want absolutely no part of winning and will go out of their way to draft players who will not be able to contribute right away, sign no free agents of value, and trade for useless players with massive contracts all in the name of collecting assets. The Astros, on the other hand, have shown that they are willing to entertain that entire possibility of, you know, winning, by even trading away prized prospects for lower-ceilinged players who can help right away.

The Astros' wealth of young assets has been well documented over the years. Between pawning off every player of value on roster and picking at the top of the draft for the past four seasons, it's easy to see where all their young talent came from.

Some prospects have already made it to major leagues. Although Jonathan Singleton has yet to establish himself as a major league regular, George Springer took the league by storm in his half-season in the majors. There are even a few lesser prospects trickling their way up to Houston like Jake Marisnick and Domingo Santana, showing that the tsunami of talent is about to hit the big stage.

Yes, some of the prospects, notably Carlos Correa and Vince Velasquez, are far from the majors, and they do have two of the first five picks in the upcoming MLB Draft, but Houston's front office saw enough out of its youngsters to decide to pull the plug on the full-on rebuild.

What started in December with the signing of two quality relievers, Pat Neshek and Luke Gregerson, for 5 total years and $31 million to go with the reuniting with Jed Lowrie for three years and $23 million was suspicious but not quite a giveaway. Although most losing teams do not spend above market value for relievers, the Astros did need to fill out a depleted pen, and

14. Houston Astros

Lowrie was familiar with the team and is on a fairly affordable contract.

The giveaway move for Houston was acquiring Evan Gattis. Not only is Gattis the most high-profile addition of the group with 43 homers in 783 career plate appearances and the 12th-best ISO in the league over the past two years – a fantastic fit in Minute Maid Park – they traded away two valuable prospects to get him. Mike Foltynewicz had an electric arm and would have challenged for a rotation spot, and Rio Ruiz was one of their more promising hitters with a sweet left-handed swing and three plus tools.

Acquiring a slugger is an acceptable move for a team in just about any phase – rebuilding, going for it all, or pulling a Brewers and just hanging out around .500. But acquiring a slugger at the cost of two premium prospects is a signal that this front office thinks they can compete very soon. They made that especially clear by signing Colby Rasmus the less than a week later. While young, he won't be a long-term asset because he's on a one-year deal, but he produced 4.8 WAR two seasons ago and clearly can help this team win.

The decision to cut short their massive rebuild is an interesting one for the Astros. They're stuck in a suddenly-competitive division with three other teams more than willing to shell out big bucks along with the most innovative team in baseball. The Mariners broke the bank for Robinson Cano and have a ton of young talent; the Angels have deeper pockets than all but three teams and happen to have the best player in the game; and the Rangers have spent big, only to see their stars injured. Then you have the ever-changing A's who always seem to find a way to win. It would seem that the best way for the Astros to catch up would be to hoard as many prospects as possible and hope they all develop around the same time to hit the jackpot.

That's not what the Astros did, though, and it could potentially ruin what has been to date a successful rebuild. Considering the rest of the division, shortchanging the rebuild is an extremely risky proposition. Houston's front office, which takes more risks than about any front office, has put its trust in the team succeeding now. If nothing else, maybe this can be turned into an interesting challenge: which team will be successful sooner and to a higher degree: the long-term rebuilding 76ers or the Astros, who are willing to change their plan on the fly.

Strengths of the System

The strength of the Astros' farm system is in the hitters, and the strength of the hitters comes in the outfield. Although all-world prospect George Springer is starting to tear up major league pitchers, another prospects came out of nowhere: Brett Phillips. Very athletic, his tools finally came together to put up a productive season, and his speed and defense should allow him to be a great 4th outfielder if his bat doesn't progress at all.

Draft pick Derek Fisher has impressed right away as well, and Teoscar Hernandez and Domingo Santana are oozing with tools.

Weaknesses of the System

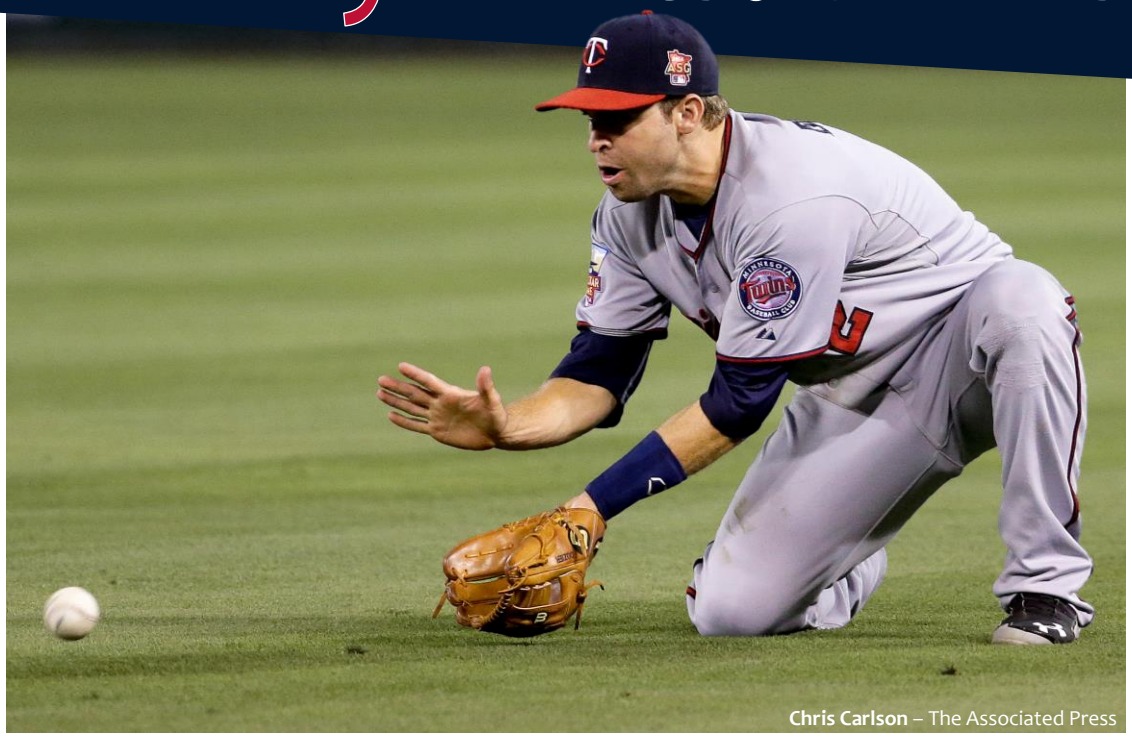
Although still strong, the Astros' farm system looks weaker than it's been in years, which goes to show how well they've been collecting assets. However, after a mishap at the draft signing deadline and an off-season trade, Houston doesn't have the same depth it used to.

Houston used the first pick in the draft on prep lefty Brady Aiken, but when issues arose relating to his elbow, the Astros chose to not sign him. With the complicated draft rules, they also wouldn't be able to sign 5th rounder Jacob Nix. Also traded Mike Foltynewicz and Rio Ruiz for a DH is somewhat of a questionable decision.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Carlos Correa	SS	A
.325/.416/.510, 6 HR, 20 SB	20	High-A
Every tool is above average; power, hit, and arm are 70s. Big size may move him to 3B.		
Mark Appel	RHP	B+
5.74 ERA, 8.0 K/9, 2.5 BB/9	23	AA
Results didn't match his great stuff until AA promotion. Top-of-the-rotation potential.		
Vince Velasquez	RHP	B+
4.06 ERA, 12.1 K/9, 3.2 BB/9	23	High-A
Three potentially plus pitches, but various injuries have slowed down his development.		
Brett Phillips	CF	B+
.310/.375/.529, 17 HR, 23 SB	21	High-A
High-energy athlete with a huge arm, plus speed, range. If his bat improves, he's a star.		
Derek Fisher	LF	B
.310/.386/.419, 2 HR, 17 SB	21	Low-A
Not great defensively, but speed and power are already plus and his bat could be too.		
Lance McCullers Jr.	RHP	B
5.47 ERA, 10.7 K/9, 5.2 BB/9	21	High-A
Power fastball-curveball combination but change or command must improve to start.		
Michael Feliz	RHP	B
4.03 ERA, 9.7 K/9, 3.2 BB/9	21	A
Huge frame with two to three plus pitches. His delivery has been problematic at times.		
Domingo Santana	RF	B
.285/.373/.456, 16 HR, 6 SB	22	MLB
As one could predict from his 6'5" frame, Santana has huge power and arm strength. He made the majors at 21, but his contact issues reared their ugly head: as he went 0-for-17 with 14 strikeouts. With fine defense and speed, his future will depend on if he can make necessary adjustments at the plate.		
Teoscar Hernandez	CF	B
.292/.362/.535, 21 HR, 33 SB	22	High-A
Athletic with all five tools at least average, but contact issues could hold him back.		
Colin Moran	3B	B
.296/.344/.397, 7 HR, 1 SB	22	AA
High floor, low ceiling prospect who should hit for average, little power. Unspectacular.		

15. Minnesota Twins

Lineup	Pos	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
Danny Santana	SS	.319	.353	.472	7	20	3.2
Brian Dozier	2B	.242	.345	.416	23	21	4.6
Joe Mauer	1B	.277	.361	.371	4	3	1.9
Torii Hunter	RF	.286	.319	.446	17	4	0.3
Kennys Vargas	DH	.274	.316	.456	9	0	0.4
Trevor Plouffe	3B	.258	.328	.423	14	2	3.5
Oswaldo Arcia	LF	.231	.300	.452	20	1	0.9
Kurt Suzuki	C	.288	.345	.383	3	0	2.0
Jordan Schafer	CF	.238	.310	.305	1	30	0.4
Aaron Hicks	OF	.215	.341	.274	1	4	0.0
Eduardo Escobar	IF	.275	.315	.406	6	1	2.3
Josmil Pinto	C	.219	.315	.391	7	0	0.1



Chris Carlson – The Associated Press

Ruined by big bad contracts

The Twins have sunk $287 million into three different players who may not live up to their contracts, leaving it hard for them to compete.

There are a few problems associated with small market team. Most importantly, it's hard for them to spend much money, and that point is split up into two categories: it's hard to re-sign superstars, and it's hard to sign free agents.

Pitchers	L/R	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
Phil Hughes	RH	3.52	2.65	1.13	209.2	186	6.1
Ervin Santana	RH	3.95	3.39	1.31	196.0	179	2.8
Kyle Gibson	RH	4.47	3.80	1.31	179.1	107	2.5
Ricky Nolasco	RH	5.38	4.30	1.32	159.0	115	1.2
Tommy Milone	LH	4.19	4.69	1.40	118.0	75	0.4
Glen Perkins	LH	3.65	3.10	1.18	61.2	66	1.1
Brian Duensing	LH	3.31	4.51	1.33	54.1	33	-0.2
Casey Fien	RH	3.93	3.45	1.47	63.1	53	0.9

The Minnesota Twins have had the seventh-lowest payroll over the past three years, and they haven't splurged much over the franchise's history. For the most part, the Twins really haven't been big spenders. For instance, former franchise cornerstone Torii Hunter ended up leaving the team because they wouldn't match his 5-year $90 million offer from the Angels in 2008.

But the Twins ended up breaking the bank in 2010 for hometown hero Joe Mauer and his 8-year $184 million contract. They were stuck between a rock and a hard place with their former first overall pick about to enter free agency but ultimately ended up agreeing to by far the largest contract in franchise history.

Not surprisingly, much of Mauer's value came from the fact that he played catcher, which he only did for three years of the contract. According to FanGraphs, the switch from catcher to first base, Mauer's new position, is a 2.5 WAR difference, meaning that Mauer is costing his hometown team 12.5 WAR over the course of his contract with the switch.

Not only that, but Mauer hasn't exactly lived up to his $23 million per year deal. Over the four years he's played, he's only amassed 13 WAR. Assuming that a majority of the value of Mauer's contract will come from the front end, the Twins are in trouble because at this point they have paid over $7 million per WAR, which is slightly above the going rate for money spent per WAR. And if they're overpaying for Mauer while he's in his prime, they certainly won't be content with how much they're spending when he's on the decline.

The other main problem for small market teams is that the margin for error is so small. If you mess up on a major investment – as is likely with the end of the Mauer's contract – the team is basically done for. And if they mess up on another single free agent, the

15. Minnesota Twins

franchise is sunk for years to come.

The Twins will likely have trouble with Mauer's deal soon, but they've somehow found money for a pair of free agent pitchers too. Last winter, the Twins brought in Ricky Nolasco for 4 years and $49 million, but in just the first year of his contract, Nolasco posted his worst ERA of his career over a full season.

Over 159 innings, the former Marlin had a 5.38 ERA with just 115 strikeouts and 38 walks. His FIP was far lower than his ERA (1.08 points lower), but that's been the case his entire career and at this point that's not going to change.

The Twins are hoping that a similar downward trend will not be in store for new free agent acquisition Ervin Santana, who signed a deal with the Twins almost identical to what Nolasco signed. After a 3.24 ERA campaign with the Royals over 211 innings, Santana posted a mediocre 3.95 ERA with the Braves, yet still got $54 million over 4 years from Minnesota.

The Twins are already working with thin margins because of how much they're spending on Mauer, but considering the likely scenario that neither Nolasco and Santana live up to their contracts, especially considering Santana's 80-game PED suspension, there's a very good chance that this team will not win for a long time.

Really, it's a shame that the Twins are putting so much on the line with their two free agent starter acquisitions. There's not much they stand to gain if both pitchers turn out well – the rest of their current roster is not nearly talented enough to contend for a Wild Card spot and their prospects won't be ready for a few more years – but there's so much downside. There's huge potential for wasting $100 million and rendering the team unable to sign other players once the rest of the team is ready to compete.

The Twins have an incredible amount of talent in the minor leagues between Byron Buxton, Miguel Sano, and the variety of other highly touted prospects, but the major league team still has plenty of reason for concern. Although they didn't have much of a choice whether or not to re-sign Mauer, they haven't exactly been frugal or wise on the free agent market, and that could be cause for concern in the future. Because even as bright as the future may be for the future Twins, if the front office keeps spending recklessly as they have been, Minnesota won't be able to capitalize on their boon of talent coming up the pipeline.

Strengths of the System

Although the top two guys are hitters, the Twins strength of their farm system comes from their depth of pitching in all different forms. With the high attrition rate of pitching prospects, this much talented depth is of great value.

The Twins have guys close to ready to contribute – out of the bullpen now or potentially as a starter if their command clicks – in Alex Meyer and Trevor May. They've got high-upside arms in the lower minors in Kohl Stewart and Lewis Thorpe. They've even got a college closer who can hit triple digits and help out this year in Nick Burdi.

Weaknesses of the System

There really isn't anything to complain about with this system because the talent is so well rounded. Having the top prospect in baseball doesn't hurt, but they've got pitching from both sides, speed, power, and up-the middle talent.

If I had to nitpick, one issue with their prospects is that they've faced some injury issues over the past two years. Miguel Sano missed the entire 2014 season with Tommy John surgery, so we will see how his Ruthian power is post-recovery. Byron Buxton gets dinged up every now and then, and Thorpe had a slight elbow scare late last season.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Byron Buxton	CF	A
.234/.307/.395, 4 HR, 6 SB	21	AA
5-tool prospect with everything but power being plus plus. Injuries are a minor concern.		
Miguel Sano	3B	A-
.280/.382/.610, 35 HR, 11 SB*	22	AA
Prodigious power and arm will make him a star. Recovering from Tommy John surgery.		
Jose Berrios	RHP	A-
2.76 ERA, 9.0 K/9, 2.4 BB/9	21	AAA
Although undersized, his four plus pitches, solid command make him a near sure thing.		
Nick Gordon	SS	B+
.294/.333/.366, 1 HR, 11 SB	19	Rookie
Plus arm, hit, speed, field make him a keeper. Great bloodlines: related to Tom and Dee.		
Kohl Stewart	RHP	B+
2.59 ERA, 6.4 K/9, 2.5 BB/9	20	A
Very athletic with plus velocity and curve plus 2 other promising pitches. Big ceiling.		
Alex Meyer	RHP	B+
3.52 ERA, 10.6 K/9, 4.4 BB/9	25	AAA
With a frame size, velocity, slider, he's got a place in MLB, but command holds him back.		
Lewis Thorpe	LHP	B-
3.52 ERA, 10.1 K/9, 4.5 BB/9	19	A
Projectable size and solid velocity. Good changeup and solid breaking ball for his age.		
Eddie Rosario	2B	B-
.243/.286/.387, 8 HR, 9 SB	23	AA
The book on Rosario has always been that he could flat out hit. While that is still true, his development was stunted by a 50-game suspension for a drug of abuse. There are growing concerns about his attitude and fit with Brian Dozier entrenched at second, but he should find a place in the outfield.		
Trevor May	RHP	B-
4.44 ERA, 8.6 K/9, 3.8 BB/9	25	MLB
He struggled in his MLB trial run, but a solid 4-pitch mix will keep him around the majors.		
Jorge Polanco	SS	B-
.289/.355/.400, 7 HR, 17 SB	21	MLB
If he can stick at short, he's an everyday starter. Good bat and a lot of solid tools.		

National League

NL East		
Team	W-L	GB
Nationals	95-67	--
Marlins	84-74	9
Braves	76-86	17
Mets	72-90	21
Phillies	63-99	32

NL Central		
Team	W-L	GB
Cardinals	90-72	--
Pirates	88-74	2
Cubs	83-79	7
Reds	76-86	14
Brewers	74-88	16

NL West		
Team	W-L	GB
Dodgers	93-69	--
Padres	88-74	5
Giants	84-78	9
Rockies	70-92	23
D-Backs	65-97	28

Jeanine Leech – Jeanine Leech Photography

1. Washington Nationals

Lineup	Pos					
	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
Denard Span	CF	.302	.355	.416	5	31	3.8
Anthony Rendon	3B	.287	.351	.473	21	17	6.6
Jayson Werth	LF	.292	.394	.455	16	9	4.8
Bryce Harper	RF	.273	.344	.423	13	2	1.3
Ryan Zimmerman	1B	.280	.342	.449	5	0	1.2
Ian Desmond	SS	.255	.313	.430	24	24	4.1
Wilson Ramos	C	.267	.299	.399	11	0	2.0
Yunel Escobar	2B	.258	.324	.340	7	1	0.2
Michael Taylor	OF	.205	.279	.359	1	0	0.1
Danny Espinosa	IF	.219	.283	.351	8	8	0.6
Tyler Moore	1B	.231	.300	.385	4	0	0.3
Jose Lobaton	C	.234	.287	.304	2	0	0.6

Pitchers	L/R					
	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
Max Scherzer	RH	3.15	2.85	1.18	220.1	252	5.6
Stephen Strasburg	RH	3.14	2.94	1.12	215.0	242	4.3
Jordan Zimmermann	RH	2.66	2.68	1.07	199.2	182	5.2
Doug Fister	RH	2.41	3.93	1.08	164.0	98	1.3
Gio Gonzalez	LH	3.57	3.03	1.20	158.2	162	3.1
Drew Storen	RH	1.12	2.71	0.98	56.1	46	0.9
Craig Stammen	RH	3.84	3.19	1.27	72.2	56	0.6
Casey Janssen	RH	3.94	4.14	1.18	45.2	28	0.1

Andrew Harnik – The Washington Times

Washington is still too big to fail

The Nationals had one of the most talented teams in the league last year, and now they've added the top free agent on the market.

Plain and simple, this has to be the Nationals' year.

That seems like a weird statement considering how young the Nationals are, how much star power they have, and the financial wherewithal they possess, but the planets are aligning for this season in a way they won't be again for a long time.

By any measure, the Nationals were one of the best teams last year. Although the Angels won the most games last year, Washington's production was on par with that of a 95.9-66.1 team according to RAWS, tops in the league by nearly two games.

While the team would have been an immediate World Series contender again this season with no personnel losses, save for Adam LaRoche, they did not choose to stand still. Instead, they doubled down on what could be the most talented and balanced roster in baseball. And a large reason behind this was because they have a tidal way of players hitting free agency soon.

Jordan Zimmermann, Doug Fister, and their 2.82 combined ERA in 2014 will be hitting the market this winter. Ian Desmond and Denard Span could leave holes in the lineup, as they are also free agents-to-be as well. Even Stephen Strasburg only has two years left on his contract.

Yes, they do have Michael Taylor ready to take over for Span and high-upside prospects down the road to replace the others, but the Nationals may not have a better time to win than now, considering they won't be able to re-sign all their free agents.

With that in mind, Washington decided to go all-in on this season, dropping $210 million on the top free agent available: Max Scherzer. While that record-breaking figure appears to be staggering, the Nationals worked some financial magic to make the contract possible, while still giving them flexibility to re-sign their own players in the future.

Half of Scherzer's contract is deferred so that he will be paid $15 million annually over 14 years instead of the regular $30 million over seven years. The $210 figure is an eye-

1. Washington Nationals

popper, but the net present value of $210 million over 14 years is roughly equivalent to $170 million over seven years. So while the Nationals aren't paying nearly what the price tag appears to be, they will still likely be able to sign one of their two other aces – Zimmermann and Strasburg – in the near future.

The scary thing for other teams is that the Nationals already created the most pitching WAR last year before adding one of the most dominant pitchers in the league. Zimermann was a revelation, Strasburg stayed healthy, Gio Gonzalez was steady, and Doug Fister had the lowest ERA of his career despite lows also in strikeout rate and velocity. The pitcher Scherzer will be replacing, Tanner Roark, had a breakout 3.0 WAR sophomore campaign, although he will certainly get plenty of starts when a starter inevitably goes on the shelf.

It's going to be extremely hard for any team to compete with this rotation, especially come playoff time, when teams will be pairing their third and fourth starters against potential All-Stars. That's not to say the offense is any kind of weakness, though, even with down years for Bryce Harper and Ryan Zimmerman the team was fifth in the league in offensive WAR, and given their overall youth, that's likely to only improve.

Everything is coming together for the Nationals. Young players like Anthony Rendon and Desmond are bona fide stars just entering their prime, and the only serious regression candidates due to age are Zimmerman – who wasn't particularly good anyway last year – and Jayson Werth. Their defense is among the best in baseball and will only be helped with the addition of Yunel Escobar, Zimmerman's shift to first where he won't have to throw, and the return of Rendon back to his natural third base. Washington just has so much talent across the board that it's too big to fail. The kicker here is that even if they need one more bullpen arm or face a slew of injuries, they have enough assets in the minor leagues to make one more push at that elusive World Series ring.

There's an economic thought that spending big to improve a team from 95 wins to 98 wins isn't efficient because once you hit the playoffs, it's a glorified free for all. But for a team that has yet to win a title in franchise history, a chance for glory rightfully comes before typical economics.

Strengths of the System

If you like power arms, this is the team for you. Lucas Giolito is the top right handed pitching prospect in the game, and the other five solid pitching prospects have similar stuff.

Erick Fedde is an interesting case because like Giolito, he also underwent Tommy John surgery, which allowed him to slip to the Nationals in the late teens. It will be a while before the team sees the fruits of his labor, but other guys like A.J. Cole and Joe Ross to some extent are much closer to contributing in the majors. Those four plus Reynaldo Lopez could all be front-line starters or power relievers should the rotation fill up.

Weaknesses of the System

The Nationals don't nearly have enogh hitters in their farm system, and the ones they do have all have one wart or another. Michael Taylor has excellent tools but has had trouble identifying pitches, and Trea Turner won't be able to join the club until June because of arcane rules about when draft picks can be traded.

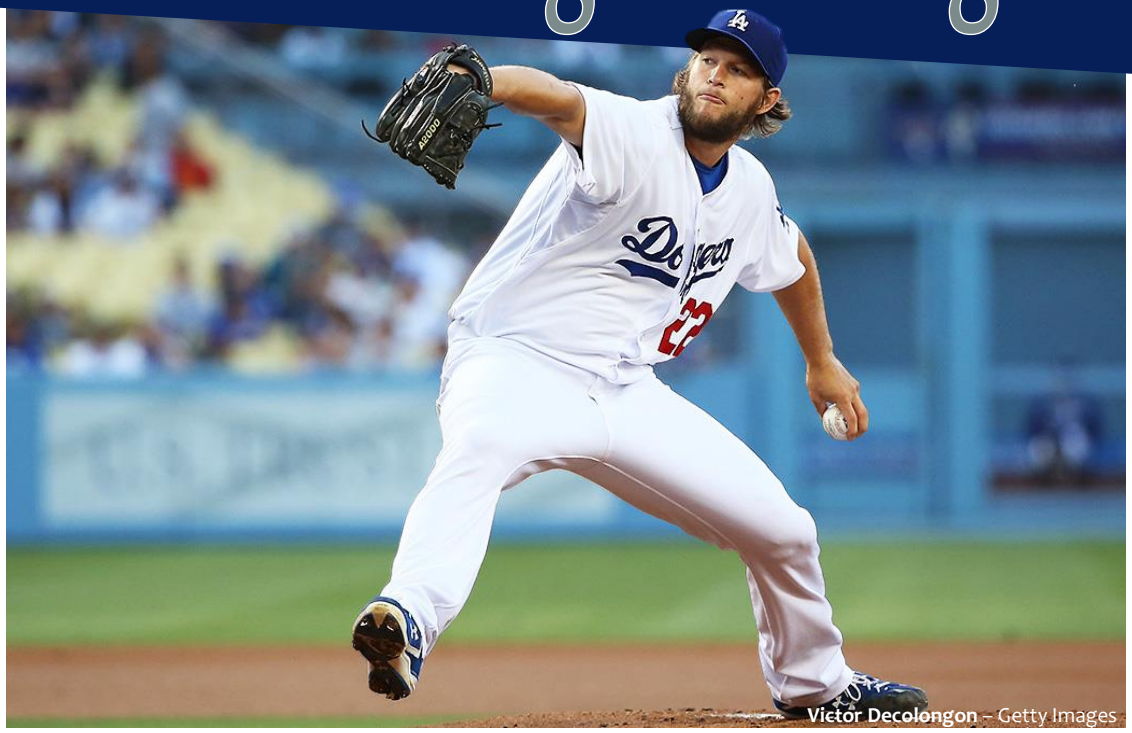
Brian Goodwin has disappointed since he got to Triple-A as his bat has regressed and his approach at the plate doesn't let his plus tools play up enough. Other position players like Drew Ward, Jakson Reetz, and Pedro Severino just don't have that great of upsides.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Lucas Giolito	RHP	A
2.20 ERA, 10.1 K/9, 2.6 BB/9	20	A
Plus plus fastball, curve, size, and improving changeup. Ace if he avoids more injuries.		
Trea Turner	SS	B+
.323/.406/.448, 5 HR, 23 SB	22	A
Top-notch speed with good defense and a solid bat. Has had injury/mechanical issues.		
Michael Taylor	CF	B+
.296/.381/.512, 24 HR, 37 SB	24	MLB
It's easy to fall in love with Taylor because of his tools (only his bat rates below plus). The bat can be problematic, though, since he can have trouble with breaking pitches. If his bat falls through, he'll be a very good 4th outfielder; his stellar defense gives him a high floor to go with the high ceiling.		
Erick Fedde	RHP	B+
Did not play	21	--
Like Giolito is recovering from Tommy John surgery and has great fastball/breaking ball.		
A.J. Cole	RHP	B
3.16 ERA, 7.5 K/9, 2.2 BB/9	23	AAA
Great size and velocity, a good changeup, and average breaking balls. A solid starter.		
Reynaldo Lopez	RHP	B
1.08 ERA, 7.6 K/9, 2.8 BB/9	21	A
Undersized with two currently average off-speeds, but he can hit 100. High risk/reward.		
Joe Ross	RHP	B
3.92 ERA, 7.8 K/9, 2.2 BB/9	22	AA
Athletic with a great fastball, but on-and-off secondary pitches mess with his command.		
Brian Goodwin	CF	B-
.219/.342/.328, 4 HR, 6 SB	24	AAA
Great defender with speed, but his bat took a step back last year. Passive at the plate.		
Drew Ward	3B	B-
.269/.341/.413, 10 HR, 2 SB	20	A
Big upside with his power, but he's maxed out physically. May not even stick at third.		
Wilmer Difo	SS	B-
.315/.360/.470, 14 HR, 49 SB	23	A+
Strong line drive swing from both sides of the plate with blazing speed. Late bloomer.		

2. Los Angeles Dodgers

Lineup	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR	Pos
Jimmy Rollins	.243	.323	.394	17	28	3.6	SS
Carl Crawford	.300	.339	.429	8	23	2.5	LF
Yasiel Puig	.296	.382	.480	16	11	5.1	RF
Adrian Gonzalez	.276	.335	.482	27	1	3.5	1B
Howie Kendrick	.293	.347	.397	7	14	4.6	2B
Yasmani Grandal	.225	.327	.401	15	3	1.1	C
Juan Uribe	.311	.337	.440	9	0	3.8	3B
Joc Pederson	.143	.351	.143	0	0	0.1	CF
Scott Van Slyke	.297	.386	.524	11	4	2.8	OF
Andre Ethier	.249	.322	.370	4	2	0.8	OF
Justin Turner	.340	.404	.493	7	6	3.2	SS
A.J. Ellis	.191	.323	.254	3	0	-0.4	C

Pitchers	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR	L/R
Clayton Kershaw	1.77	1.81	0.86	198.1	239	7.2	LH
Zack Greinke	2.71	2.97	1.15	202.1	207	3.9	RH
Hyun-Jin Ryu	3.38	2.62	1.19	152.0	139	3.5	LH
Brandon McCarthy	4.05	3.55	1.28	200.0	175	3.0	RH
Brett Anderson	2.91	2.99	1.32	43.1	29	1.1	LH
Kenley Jansen	2.76	1.91	1.13	65.1	101	2.0	RH
J.P. Howell	2.39	3.30	1.14	49.0	48	0.3	LH
Brandon League	2.57	3.40	1.46	63.0	38	0.1	RH


Victor Decolongon – Getty Images

Money can buy you brains

Already the largest-spending team in the league, the Dodgers have now brought in one of the brightest baseball minds to run the team.

The Los Angeles Dodgers have always had a leg up on other teams because of their seemingly infinite payroll. $215 million for Clayton Kershaw? Why not. $42 million for an unproven Yasiel Puig? It's monopoly money. Take on $262 million in a trade for Adrian Gonzalez and Carl Crawford? Pocket change.

Ever since the Dodgers' new ownership group took over in May of 2012, the team's payroll has skyrocketed to astronomical levels. After having a payroll of just $105 million in 2012, the team entered the 2014 season with a league-leading $229 million payroll and ended the season having spent a whopping $277 million.

These new Dodgers have always been able to stay ahead of the game by spending money – they've won the division in back-to-back seasons – but now they have the luxury of having one of the brightest minds in baseball to combine with their limitless pockets. Their biggest off-season acquisition wasn't a player who will impact the team directly on the field – it is a man who will be sitting in the Dodger Stadium suites all season: new President of Baseball Operations Andrew Friedman.

Prior to this season, the Dodgers' GM had been Ned Colletti, who above all had been known as the guy who acquired as many stars as possible by any means necessary. That plan worked for him as long as his payroll was $30 million higher than any other team and $55 million higher than any other National League team, but anything short of a World Series would not be enough for this new ownership group.

Enter Friedman, the brainchild behind the Tampa Bay Rays sudden resurgence since he was hired at the age of 28 as their GM in late 2005. Friedman is widely considered one of the smartest baseball minds in the business, largely because of how successful he has been able to be with one of the tightest payrolls in the sport.

After two years of rebuilding, Tampa Bay finally vaulted into the World Series, which was a stunning development considering they had only left the basement of the AL East once to reach fourth place in their 11

2. Los Angeles Dodgers

years of existence. From there, they went on to reach the playoffs three more times, winning an average of over 89 games over that seven-year stretch.

Despite having to trade off several of his biggest stars for financial reasons, Friedman was still able to assemble one of the most successful teams in baseball. And now that he doesn't have to worry about such monetary restraints, Los Angeles hopes he will be able to use his creative, innovative mind to bring them their first World Series since 1988.

And fairly quickly after joining just his second organization, Friedman made his mark on the Dodgers. In a 9-day span in mid-December, Friedman completely changed his team's look.

On the final day of the MLB Winter Meetings, Friedman traded 26-year old All-Star Dee Gordon and aging Dan Haren for Miami's top prospect Andrew Heaney, whom he immediately swapped cross-town for Howie Kendrick. Five days later, he solidified the rotation with Brandon McCarthy on a team-friendly four-year contract.

But things kept changing three days later when he traded former franchise cornerstone Matt Kemp – helping clear the team's outfield logjam – to the division rival Padres for young catcher Yasmani Grandal and prospects. Of course, he would in turn use those prospects to help acquire Jimmy Rollins from the Phillies to fill the vacancy left by free agent Hanley Ramirez.

After shuffling Los Angeles' deck over and over, Friedman is left with a team that will easily compete for the NL pennant – a result they had yet to see under Colletti. In Kershaw, Zack Greinke, Hyun-Jin Ryu, McCarthy, and buy-low signing Brett Anderson, the Dodgers have one of the strongest and deepest rotations in baseball. Combine that with their collection of young talent – Yasiel Puig, potential Rookie of the Year Joc Pederson, and Grandal to go with their strikingly strong farm system – and the Dodgers have one of the most dangerous teams in the majors.

Hardly any team can compete with the Dodgers in terms of payroll, and now with the new direction taken by their front office, this club is a force to be reckoned with. There's so little competition in the NL West that the Dodgers should run away with the division crown, and if they run into trouble early, Friedman should have an extra trick or two up his sleeve.

Strengths of the System

Although they aren't able to flex their financial muscles through the draft anymore because of new draft rules, the Dodgers have been able to capitalize on high-upside prep players like Corey Seager and Grant Holmes.

Even more importantly is that the Dodgers can use their deep pockets to bring in premier talent from Cuba, where they just spent $62.5 million on 29-year old Hector Olivera. They've already dropped $97 million on Yasiel Puig, Alex Guerrero, and Erisbel Arruebarrena, and although their success rate has been mixed, their endless payroll gives them very wide margins.

Weaknesses of the System

After their top three prospects, the system gets very thin, which is what will tend to happen when a large portion of the draft budget goes to the first player. The problem isn't just that there aren't many players with high projections currently; besides Holmes and Verdugo, few other players have the potential to be top-50 prospects.

Players like Zach Lee and Chris Anderson may very well become starters, but they don't have the stuff right now to reach the level of a Seager, Urias, or Pederson. So once that trio graduates to the majors in two or so years, this farm system could become rather barren.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Corey Seager	SS	A
.349/.402/.602, 20 HR, 6 SB	21	AA
Thunderous swing with a plus arm, power, and bat. Eventually will have to shift to third.		
Julio Urias	LHP	A
2.36 ERA, 11.2 K/9, 3.8 BB/9	18	High-A
Dominates competition 6 years older than him with 3 plus pitches and great command.		
Joc Pederson	CF	A-
.294/.430/.556, 33 HR, 30 SB	23	MLB
Intriguing power-speed combo with great defense. Strikeouts are only a minor issue.		
Grant Holmes	RHP	B
3.72 ERA, 10.8 K/9, 2.4 BB/9	19	Rookie
Maxed out frame with a great fastball and curve. Control is far ahead of his command.		
Alex Verdugo	RF	B
.353/.421/.511, 3 HR, 11 SB	19	Rookie
Tools are at least average across the board. Not worried about supposed maturity issues.		
Zach Lee	RHP	B-
5.38 ERA, 5.8 K/9, 3.2 BB/9	23	AAA
Lee's star has fallen since he was given a $5.25M bonus to not be LSU's quarterback. After sitting in the low- to mid-90s with a plus slider, Lee changed his delivery, taking a grade off both pitches. His command and change are better, though, and his other two pitches may return to their old forms.		
Chris Anderson	RHP	B-
4.62 ERA, 9.8 K/9, 4.2 BB/9	22	High-A
Change back to old mechanics helped fringy command, change improve. Power arsenal.		
Jose De Leon	RHP	B-
2.22 ERA, 13.9 K/9, 2.5 BB/9	22	A
Command of electric stuff ticked up, making him a potential starter. Great movement.		
Darnell Sweeney	2B	B-
.288/.387/.463, 14 HR, 15 SB	24	AA
Speedy, good pop for his skinny frame. Can also play center field or shortstop in a pinch.		
Julian Leon	C	B-
.332/.420/.565, 12 HR, 1 SB	19	Rookie
Defense is a little rough around the edges, but the bat and power are very promising.		

3. St. Louis Cardinals

Lineup	Pos					
	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
Matt Carpenter	3B	.272	.375	.375	8	5	3.8
Jason Heyward	RF	.271	.351	.384	11	20	5.1
Matt Holliday	LF	.272	.370	.441	20	4	3.8
Matt Adams	1B	.288	.321	.457	15	3	1.9
Jhonny Peralta	SS	.263	.336	.443	21	3	5.4
Yadier Molina	C	.288	.312	.457	15	3	1.9
Jon Jay	CF	.303	.372	.378	3	6	2.5
Kolten Wong	2B	.249	.292	.388	12	20	2.0
Peter Bourjos	OF	.231	.294	.348	4	9	1.6
Randal Grichuk	OF	.245	.278	.400	3	0	0.6
Pete Kozma	IF	.304	.385	.435	0	0	0.3
Tony Cruz	Util	.200	.270	.259	1	0	-0.5

Pitchers	L/R					
	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
Adam Wainwright	RH	2.38	2.88	1.03	227.0	179	4.5
Lance Lynn	RH	2.74	3.35	1.26	203.2	181	3.1
John Lackey	RH	3.82	3.78	1.28	198.0	164	2.8
Michael Wacha	RH	3.20	3.17	1.20	107.0	94	1.8
Carlos Martinez	RH	4.03	3.18	1.41	89.1	84	1.2
Trevor Rosenthal	RH	3.20	2.99	1.41	70.1	87	1.0
Jaime Garcia	LH	4.12	3.82	1.05	43.2	39	0.3
Marco Gonzales	LH	4.15	4.75	1.53	34.2	31	-0.1

Ronald Martinez – Getty Images

Enough pitching is hard to beat

As it always seems, the Cardinals have more young pitching than they can use, so they traded some of it to help in areas of weakness.

Few teams have had as much success over the past six years than the Cardinals. Although they don't have the three World Series the Giants do, they've won 90.3 games per season over that stretch, 18 more in total than San Francisco over that stretch.

With one of the best farm systems over the past decade consistently churning out young, quality pitchers, they've been able to overcome even losing franchise cornerstone Albert Pujols to free agency.

But although they broke the 90-win barrier again last season, there appear to be cracks showing in their shield last season. Ninety wins looks good, but the peripheral numbers indicate that the team wasn't actually that good last season.

Using RAWS, the Cardinals' production last season was only equivalent to that of an 82.8-79.2 team. The 7.2-win difference between their actual and projected record was the largest negative difference in baseball. A large part of that difference was because the Cardinals only scored 16 more runs than they gave up last year. St. Louis was barely above average in terms of runs differential last season; they happened to be lucky in how the runs were sequenced – win a lot of close games (32-23) and lose a lot of blowouts (19-19).

Just in terms of production last season, the Cardinals were the 13th-best team in the Majors, according to RAWS. While that's not the end-all-be-all for how good they actually were last year, it raises red flags about their future potential.

Interestingly enough, the Cardinals were one of the least active teams over the winter. However, the one move they made was one that rocked the baseball world. Capitalizing on the Braves' sudden fire sale, the Cards traded two young pitchers for one of the best young hitters in the game: Jason Heyward.

Heyward hasn't quite lived up to his potential yet, which is amazing considering he has the second-most WAR over the last five seasons for players under 25 years old. Because he is entering the final year of his contract, he came relatively cheap – costing

3. St. Louis Cardinals

Shelby Miller (meaning the Cardinals didn't totally forget he existed) and Tyrell Jenkins. Whether or not the Cardinals will be able to re-sign him this off-season when he assuredly will command a high nine-figure contract is another question, but he makes this team far better after the tragic loss of Oscar Taveras.

Beyond the acquisition of Heyward, St. Louis figures to improve because their team is so young, especially on the mound. They were able to ship out one of their five starters because they have so much pitching they actually don't have space for all of them and end up wasting arms. The current rotation figures to feature Adam Wainwright, Lance Lynn, John Lackey, Michael Wacha, and Carlos Martinez. Last season, Martinez couldn't even crack the rotation and was forced to have a role out of the bullpen, wasting his electric arm. This season, Marco Gonzales and Jaime Garcia are on the outside looking in at the rotation and would normally start on any other team. That's not even mentioning Tim Cooney, who is on the verge of reaching the majors.

Just like the rotation, the lineup is also incredibly young and should improve as key players reach their prime. Although Yadier Molina and Jhonny Peralta are 32 and Matt Holliday is 35, the rest of the lineup has an average age of just 26.8.

We've already seen Kolten Wong take a massive step forward after his cup of coffee in 2013 to have a very solid rookie year. Heyward has seen his defense and on-base percentage improve each season with his strikeouts dropping. Matt Adams is making more hard contact with a rapidly rising line drive percentage and rising batting average to boot. Ranging from 24 to 26 years old, these three especially are just entering the primes of their career and will surely improve from their combined 9 WAR.

There's plenty to be excited about with these Cardinals because of their youth and acquisition of a superstar. But be cautious in assuming that they will be 5 wins better than their 90-win output last season because that's not an accurate representation of how good they were. More realistically, they were a mid-80s-win team and will improve from there with the addition of Heyward and the young players' progression. Don't get it twisted, the Cardinals are still one of the three best teams in the NL; they're just a tad behind the Nationals and Dodgers.

Strengths of the System

As always, the Cardinals are stocked with young pitching, even after trading Tyrell Jenkins and Shelby Miller for Jaso Heyward. Additionally, what's great about their pitching depth is that it's a fairly even mix of power arms and command pitchers.

Marco Gonzales and Tim Cooney are on the verge of cracking the major league rotation, and although they don't have blow away stuff, their ability to locate solid arsenals should work well. Then you have power arms like Alex Reyes and, to some extent, Jack Flaherty and Luke Weaver, and the next crop of Cardinals arms should be impressive as ever.

Weaknesses of the System

The lack of infield prospects – in any form – is concerning for St. Louis. It took them years to fill a hole at shortstop when they finally signed Jhonny Peralta for $53 million, but he will be 35 when his contract expires. The only shortstop prospect the Cards have vaguely on the radar is Edmundo Sosa, but he may not have the tools to stick at shortstop long-term.

The good news is that St. Louis does have an abundance of outfielders, including Randal Grichuk, who is good enough to make the major league team but will struggle for playing time buried behind Heyward, Jon Jay, and Matt Holliday.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level

Alex Reyes — RHP — B+
3.62 ERA, 11.8 K/9, 5.0 BB/9 — 20 — A
Projectable frame, easy delivery with a plus fastball, curve. Command not worrisome yet.

Stephen Piscotty — RF — B+
.288/.355/.406, 9 HR, 11 SB — 24 — AAA
High floor since he hits and fields well, but the power doesn't yet match the big frame.

Marco Gonzales — LHP — B+
2.18 ERA, 8.5 K/9, 2.8 BB/9 — 23 — MLB
Only the changeup grades as plus, but he has 3 average pitches and good command.

Jack Flaherty — RHP — B
1.59 ERA, 11.1 K/9, 1.6 BB/9 — 19 — Rookie
Flaherty went to high school with Lucas Giolito and Max Fried, where he was a third base prospect until his senior year. so considering how little he's thrown, his command is great. Throw in an above-average slider and changeup and little wear and tear; he could shoot up this list.

Rob Kaminsky — LHP — B
1.88 ERA, 7.06 K/9, 2.8 BB/9 — 20 — A
Undersized with a weird delivery, but a knockout curve and excellent pitchability.

Luke Weaver — RHP — B
7.71 ERA, 11.6 K/9, 3.9 BB/9 — 21 — High-A
Velocity is down, but his fastball, changeup, and command all remain above-average.

Magneuris Sierra — CF — B-
.386/.434/.505, 2 HR, 13 SB — 19 — Rookie
Could end up with all five tools. Swing built more for line drives than power currently.

Tim Cooney — LHP — B-
3.47 ERA, 6.8 K/9, 2.7 BB/9 — 24 — AAA
Commands his solid arsenal well led by an above-average changeup. Low risk/reward.

Carson Kelly — C — B-
.248/.326/.366, 6 HR, 1 SB — 20 — A
Converted third baseman quick to improve on defense. Good raw power and bat speed.

Charlie Tilson — CF — B-
.289/.333/.389, 7 HR, 12 SB — 22 — AA
Good speed and defense, solid arm. Won't hit for power, but good contact, discipline.

4. Pittsburgh Pirates

Lineup	Pos					
	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
Josh Harrison	3B	.315	.347	.490	13	18	4.9
Gregory Polanco	RF	.235	.307	.343	7	14	0.2
Andrew McCutchen	CF	.314	.410	.542	25	18	6.8
Neil Walker	2B	.271	.342	.467	23	2	3.7
Starling Marte	LF	.291	.356	.453	13	30	4.1
Pedro Alvarez	1B	.231	.312	.405	18	8	-0.2
Jordy Mercer	SS	.255	.305	.387	12	4	2.0
Francisco Cervelli	C	.301	.370	.432	2	1	1.3
Sean Rodriguez	Util	.211	.258	.443	12	2	-0.1
Jung Ho Kang	IF	.356	.459	.739	40	3	--*
Corey Hart	1B	.203	.271	.319	6	2	-1.2
Chris Stewart	C	.294	.362	.331	0	0	0.9

*Korean Baseball Organization Stats

Pitchers	L/R					
	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
Francisco Liriano	LH	3.38	3.59	1.30	162.1	175	1.6
Gerrit Cole	RH	3.65	3.23	1.21	138.0	138	2.1
Charlie Morton	RH	3.72	3.72	1.27	157.1	126	1.6
A.J. Burnett	RH	4.59	4.14	1.41	213.2	190	1.0
Jeff Locke	LH	3.91	4.37	1.27	131.1	89	0.1
Mark Melancon	RH	1.90	2.09	0.87	71.0	71	1.9
Tony Watson	LH	1.63	2.69	1.02	77.1	81	1.3
Jared Hughes	RH	1.96	3.99	1.09	64.1	36	-0.4

Justin K. Aller – Getty Images

Teaching a team to win

The Pirates lost a key member of their playoff teams, Russell Martin, but they should still be able to continue their winning ways without him.

It almost seems like a distant memory now, but the Pirates used to have one of the longest playoff droughts in baseball history. Almost like an 18-year old that has been driving for two years, it nearly feels natural to see the Pirates driving their playoff bandwagon.

The Pirates have now made the playoffs in consecutive years, although they've yet to make it out of the Divisional Round. The team has a different feel about it despite the roster hardly changing between the 79-win 2012 team and 94-win 2013 team.

One of the major changes, though, was the addition of Russell Martin for an economical 2-year $17 million contract. The backstop had averaged nearly 3 WAR per season with the Dodgers and Yankees but had also made the playoffs in five of his seven seasons. While the effects of a player who consistently is on playoff teams – as some people call them "winners" – has not exactly been quantified, Martin certainly had an effect on the young team.

One of the better defensive catchers in the game, Martin helped the pitching staff improve from 10.8 WAR and a 3.91 ERA in 2012 to 17.9 WAR and a 3.27 ERA the next year. Clearly the addition of Francisco Liriano and the promotion of Gerrit Cole helped, but A.J. Burnett, Charlie Mortin, and Wandy Rodriguez's ERA all improved by 0.40 runs between the two seasons.

But not only was his pitch calling and defensive impactful – in addition to whatever winning attitude you factor in – Martin had two of his better offensive seasons while in Pittsburgh. Last season, Martin was one of four players to have an on-base percentage over .400, which ultimately got him a 5-year contract worth $82 million in Toronto.

So now that the Pirates have lost one of the key players who helped them transition to a winning franchise, are they going to be much worse off? Well much like a teenage driver who had been working with a Driver's Ed teacher, the young Pirates have gotten their taste of winning and are ready to succeed on their own without the person who first taught them.

4. Pittsburgh Pirates

Of course, the Pirates will still feel the loss of their star catcher, but the loss is not insurmountable. While neither Francisco Cervelli nor Chris Stewart is close to capable of replacing Martin on their own, Pittsburgh will be able to make up the difference between the rest of the roster.

One of the things that made the Pirates so successful the past two years – and also made them take so long to reach relevancy – is that their roster is almost completely homegrown and young. Former MVP Andrew McCutchen, Gerrit Cole, Pedro Alvarez, and Neil Walker were all former first-round picks, Gregory Polanco and Starling Marte were signed in international free agency, and Josh Harrison was acquired just a year after he was drafted by the Cubs.

All that youth indicates that the Pirates are likely to improve each year even while standing still over the off-season, something older teams like the Yankees, Phillies, and Giants cannot say. Polanco, for instance, only got to play for half of last season and was widely considered a top-15 prospect in baseball at the time. Given more time to adjust to major league pitching and just get more reps will help him immensely this season. With every starting position player under 30, the players are all either approaching their primes or just entering it.

Between the entire lineup entering its prime years and plenty of assets to acquire greater talent, it's a bit of a mystery why the Pirates weren't more aggressive this off-season. The NL is fairly weak in the middle, and considering how nice it is to avoid the Wild Card play-in game, this could have been a golden opportunity for the Bucs to cash in.

Instead, their only major transactions were trading for Vance Worley and Francisco Cervelli, bringing back Burnett, and signing Jung Ho Kang. Fortifying a rotation that finished fourth-to-last in pitching WAR last year will be welcomed, but neither Worley nor Burnett is impact starter at this point. And while Kang's 40 home runs in the Korean Baseball Organization last year may sound impressive at first, keep in mind that Major League washouts Eric Thames and Yamaico Navarro hit 37 and 31 home runs apiece in the same league last year.

Still, in a crowded middle class of the NL, the Pirates hold an advantage over the Padres, Giants, and Cubs with playoff experience and youth. Even if Russell Martin is no longer around.

Strengths of the System

Years of good drafting and international signing have given the Pirates one of the better farm systems around, but the thing that's really helped them is developing big power pitchers. Drafting Jameson Taillon with the second overall pick was the easy one, but Pittsburgh turned 6'8" Tyler Glasnow and 6'5" Nick Kingham into future starters with power arsenals by harnessing their delivery to improve their velocity and command.

Pittsburgh is hoping the same will happen to prep arms Mitch Keller (6'3") and Trey Supak (6'5"), who have a long way to develop but upside similar to Glasnow and Kingham.

Weaknesses of the System

It's very to pick out a problem with the Pirates system, and if you include Gregory Polanco in this group, it's outstanding. The only thing they are lacking is an impact left-hander, but with so many good pitchers in general, that's not going to be an issue.

Instead of nitpicking more, I'd just like to lament that Josh Bell's value is being tanked by him shifting to first base, which is sad. He could pull off an adequate right field, but because the Pirates have center field-quality defenders already between Andrew McCutchen, Gregory Polanco, Starling Marte, and Austin Meadows, first base is his easiest path to the majors.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Jameson Taillon	RHP	A-
Did not play in 2014	23	AAA
Coming back mid-season from Tommy John surgery. Good command of 3 plus pitches.		
Austin Meadows	CF	A-
.317/.394/.488, 3 HR, 2 SB	20	A
Bat, power, and speed are all plus and he should stick in center despite a weak arm.		
Tyler Glasnow	RHP	A-
2.01 ERA, 11.1 K/9, 4.3 BB/9	21	High-A
Upper 90s fastball and a plus curve. 6'8" size gets nice plane but holds back control.		
Josh Bell	1B	B+
.325/.375/.459, 9 HR, 9 SB	22	AA
Plus bat and power aren't in doubt, but a shift to first lowers his margin for error.		
Alen Hanson	SS	B
.280/.326/.442, 11 HR, 25 SB	22	AA
Despite his small stature, Hanson has a very strong offensive profile because he makes consistent strong contact from both sides of the plate. He's able to use his speed well on the basepaths, and it helps make up for his fringy arm in the field. He's an impact player even if he has to shift to second base.		
Reese McGuire	C	B
.262/.307/.334, 3 HR, 7 SB	20	A
His glove is good enough to get him to the majors. Makes good contact but it's all weak.		
Nick Kingham	RHP	B
3.34 ERA, 6.7 K/9, 2.9 BB/9	23	AAA
Great command and size with two solid off-speeds and a plus fastball. Low risk/reward.		
Cole Tucker	SS	B-
.267/.368/.356, 2 HR, 13 SB	18	Rookie
Excellent defender despite 6'3" size, but he still can grow into power. Plus speed, eye.		
Mitch Keller	RHP	B-
1.98 ERA, 9.5 K/9, 4.3 BB/9	19	Rookie
Cold weather prep arm up to 95 with room to grow. Curve nearing plus, bit of a project.		
JaCoby Jones	SS	B-
.288/.347/.503, 23 HR, 17 SB	23	A
Great athlete and surprisingly good defense. Nice power-speed combo but contact issues.		

5. San Diego Padres

Lineup	Pos					
	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
Wil Myers	CF	.222	.294	.320	6	6	0.1
Yonder Alonso	1B	.240	.285	.397	7	6	0.8
Matt Kemp	LF	.287	.346	.506	25	8	1.8
Justin Upton	RF	.270	.342	.491	29	8	3.9
Will Middlebrooks	3B	.191	.256	.265	2	1	-0.8
Jedd Gyorko	2B	.210	.280	.333	10	3	0.0
Derek Norris	C	.270	.361	.403	10	2	2.5
Alexi Amarista	SS	.239	.286	.314	5	12	0.9
Cameron Maybin	OF	.235	.290	.331	1	4	0.5
Will Venable	OF	.224	.288	.325	8	11	0.9
Clint Barmes	IF	.245	.328	.294	0	1	0.3
Yangervis Solarte	3B	.260	.336	.369	10	0	1.5

Pitchers	L/R					
	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
James Shields	RH	3.21	3.59	1.18	227.0	180	3.3
Andrew Cashner	RH	2.55	3.09	1.13	123.1	93	1.9
Tyson Ross	RH	2.81	3.24	1.21	195.2	195	2.6
Ian Kennedy	RH	3.63	3.21	1.29	201.0	207	2.9
Brandon Morrow	RH	5.67	3.73	1.65	33.1	30	0.3
Joaquin Benoit	RH	1.49	2.32	0.77	54.1	64	1.2
Kevin Quackenbush	LH	2.48	2.65	1.10	54.1	56	0.7
Brandon Morrow	RH	5.67	3.73	1.65	33.1	30	0.4

Alex Brandon – Associated Press

Jumping on an opportunity

New GM A.J. Preller saw a National League landscape that was relatively weak in the middle, and saw a chance to quickly build a contender.

It wasn't too long ago that the Padres were out of the realm of contention, finishing 77-85 and 11 games out of the playoffs. It also wasn't too long ago that the Padres fired general manager Josh Byrnes in favor of Rangers Assistant GM A.J. Preller.

But oh, how the times have changed.

San Diego's roster has undertaken a massive overhaul since the new regime took over in August; there's so much turnover that the team is nearly unrecognizable from before now that it is firmly in playoff contention.

Preller inherited a team that was one of the worst teams in Major League Baseball, but he has quickly turned into a contender by mortgaging the future – in terms of a long-term rebuild – in favor of a rapid rebuild.

What originally started with a just discounted trade for Matt Kemp and an innoxious trade for Derek Norris in mid-December turned into an all-out restocking that featured the additions of former Rookie of the Year Wil Myers, two-time All-Star Justin Upton, and "Big Game" "5.46 Postseason ERA" James Shields.

In the blink of an eye, the Padres starting lineup will only feature three returning starters and should be rapidly improving because of an incredible influx of talent.

But how much of a difference will that influx of talent actually make considering many of the new additions' unavoidable deep-seeded flaws?

Kemp is uncomfortably injury-prone, having played 110 games in only one of the last three seasons. Myers couldn't break a .300 OBP last season with more strikeouts and less power, and he's only played nine major league games in center field. Upton has struck out in well over a quarter of his plate appearances over the past two years. Norris has consistently graded as a below-average defender. Shields is a 33-year old starter with incredible mileage on his arm. Even Will Middlebrooks, their new starting third baseman, has a career .302 wOBA, and playing in PETCO Park shouldn't help his raw power play up any more than it did at hitter-friendly Fenway Park.

Admittedly, many of the Padres'

5. San Diego Padres

acquisitions will not make them better.

Middlebrooks has a ways to go before he can prove he is an everyday third baseman, let alone be an upgrade Chase Headley and Yangervis Solarte's 2.0 combined WAR last season. Now-departed Rene Rivera and Seth Smith led the team with a combined 5.6 WAR and are being replaced by two All-Stars in Norris and Upton, who only had a combined 6.4 WAR last season.

But much of the Padres' game plan banks on hopes that go beyond last season's production. Even with as much as the Padres improved their lineup over the off-season, perhaps the most important acquisition was their final major one: the addition of Shields.

San Diego entered the off-season with Andrew Cashner, a bona fide ace when healthy, but also a pitcher who has only amassed 409.2 career innings over five seasons. Beyond that, they had freshly-minted All-Star Tyson Ross and the suddenly resurgent Ian Kennedy. While that could be solid, the addition of Shields quickly shores it up the pitching staff immensely.

Although those four alone could make a potentially formidable rotation, potentially the biggest impact of the Shields addition shows up at the end of the rotation. San Diego brought back Josh Johnson and brought in Brandon Morrow on incentive-laden contracts, and now they will be competing with Odrisamer Despaigne and Robbie Erlin for the final spot. Should any of them falter, there are plenty of other options in the rotation and plenty of spots at the end of the bullpen.

The Padres have clearly mortgaged a good deal of their future by dealing high-level prospects Max Fried, Trea Turner, Joe Ross, and Zach Eflin. Yet A.J. Preller has appeared to come out ahead of the game his first off-season by acquiring an incredibly talented new outfield and the second-best pitcher on the market without giving up his top three prospects in Hunter Renfroe, Austin Hedges, and Matt Wisler. It's a real mystery where San Diego came up with all this extra money to bring in star players –the answer is likely that they won't re-sign pending free agent Upton – but they picked a good year to gun for one of the two Wild Card spots: only Washington, Los Angeles, and St. Louis appear to be postseason favorites, and after that the NL seems wide open for a team – such as the Padres – to claim a postseason spot.

Strengths of the System

While no one can top Daniel Norris' story of being a truly unique story of living out of a van outside a Walmart throughout Spring Training, but Hunter Renfroe has a crazy story of his own. He hasn't confirmed yet, but this story is way too cool to not share.

Allegedly, Renfroe once chased down a deer in a meadow, killed it, and then ate it for dinner that night. He also is apparently good at catching spiders. With tremendous power and arm strength, Renfroe fits the mold of a mountain man, just like Norris, except he was raised in Mississippi, not the Appalachians. Still, how can you not love the guy?

Weaknesses of the System

After A.J. Preller's massive amount of wheeling and dealing this off-season, he managed to hold onto a few very good prospects but completely destroyed the depth of his system. Keeping Renfroe, Wisler, and Hedges was no small feat, but seeing guys like Franchy Cordero, Cory Spangenberg, and Zechariah Lemond at the bottom of a team's top 10 list is not good.

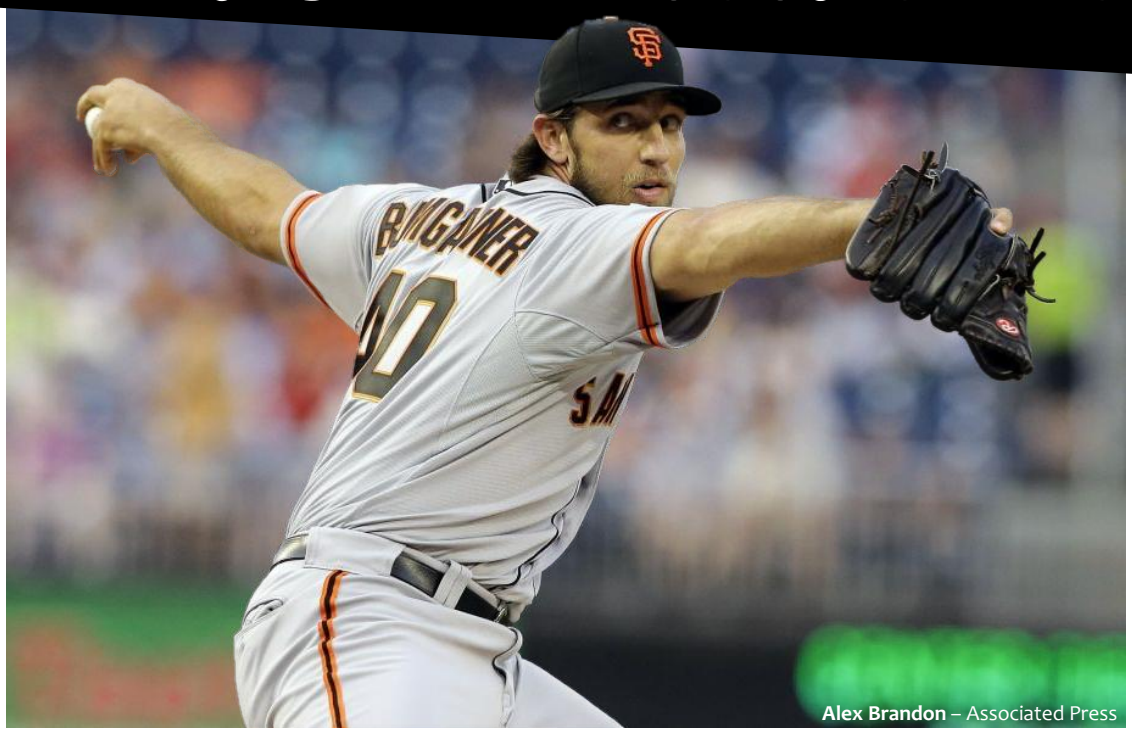
Part of the reason for the lack of depth is that Preller used a lot of medium-level prospects to acquire Upton (Jace Peterson, Mallex Smith, and Dustin Peterson) instead of including another top prospect with Max Fried, which is fine.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Hunter Renfroe	RF	A-
.267/.342/.470, 21 HR, 11 SB	23	High-A
Well-built with plus power, arm and good speed, defense. Aggressive but still hits well.		
Matt Wisler	RHP	B+
4.42 ERA, 8.3 K/9, 2.6 BB/9	22	AAA
Solid four-pitch mix and a fairly safe skillset. Yet to fill out thin frame; nearly MLB ready.		
Austin Hedges	C	B
.225/.268/.321, 6 HR, 1 SB	22	AA
Glove is already premium, but his bat has serious issues led by an inconsistent swing.		
Rymer Liriano	RF	B
.277/.353/.432, 15 HR, 24 SB	24	MLB
Good speed despite built frame. Plus arm and arm, but his bat will determine value.		
Michael Gettys	CF	B
.310/.353/.437, 3 HR, 14 SB	19	Rookie
70-grade speed, arm, and power, but since he hasn't settled on a swing, his bat suffers.		
Casey Kelly	RHP	B
2.21 ERA, 7.5 K/9, 0.4 BB/9	25	MLB
At his peak, Kelly has three above-average pitches and above average command, but we haven't seen him at that level in a while. He missed 2013 recovering from Tommy John surgery and most of 2014 with more elbow issues. If he can stay healthy, he has the potential to be a #3 starter or better.		
Jose Rondon	SS	B-
.315/.363/.404, 1 HR, 13 SB	21	High-A
Excellent defense and bat tools make him fairly low-risk. Some speed but no power.		
Franchy Cordero	SS	C+
.255/.305/.400, 9 HR, 16 SB	20	A
A bit oversized and may shift to third base. Good power, but he swings at everything.		
Cory Spangenberg	2B	C+
.313/.347/.455, 4 HR, 20 SB	24	MLB
Bat, speed are plus, but all other tools are lackluster, likely leaving him a utility man.		
Zechariah Lemond	RHP	C+
3.43 ERA, 7.7 K/9, 1.1 BB/9	22	AA
Ground ball pitcher with solid fastball, slider. Rice history and weird delivery are red flags.		

6. San Francisco Giants

Lineup	Pos					
	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
Nori Aoki	LF	.284	.349	.360	1	8	2.3
Joe Panik	2B	.305	.343	.368	1	0	1.6
Buster Posey	C	.311	.364	.490	22	0	5.7
Hunter Pence	RF	.277	.332	.445	20	13	4.7
Brandon Belt	1B	.243	.306	.449	12	3	0.7
Angel Pagan	CF	.300	.342	.389	3	16	1.9
Casey McGehee	3B	.287	.355	.357	4	4	2.0
Brandon Crawford	SS	.246	.324	.389	10	5	2.7
Gregor Blanco	OF	.260	.333	.374	5	16	2.0
Joaquin Arias	IF	.254	.281	.301	0	1	-0.2
Travis Ishikawa	1B	.252	.311	.393	3	0	0.5
Hector Sanchez	C	.196	.237	.301	3	0	-0.4

Pitchers	L/R					
	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
Madison Bumgarner	LH	2.98	3.05	1.09	217.1	219	3.6
Matt Cain	RH	4.18	4.58	1.25	90.1	70	-0.3
Tim Hudson	RH	3.57	3.54	1.23	189.1	120	1.7
Jake Peavy	RH	3.73	4.11	1.28	202.2	158	1.9
Tim Lincecum	RH	4.74	4.31	1.39	155.2	134	-0.2
Santiago Casilla	RH	1.70	3.18	0.86	58.1	45	0.4
Jeremy Affeldt	LH	2.28	2.86	1.10	55.1	41	0.4
Sergio Romo	RH	3.72	3.94	0.95	58.0	59	-0.3



Alex Brandon – Associated Press

Watching the winning days end

No team has had more success than the Giants recently, but as they watch their players leave without adding anyone, the winning is likely over.

No team in Major League Baseball may have had as interesting a five-year stretch as the Giants have had. San Francisco has gone from World Series champions to eight games out of the playoffs to World Series champions to a 76-win team to a World Series champions once again.

Perhaps the most interesting part was that last season's World Series title was far from expected. The Giants snuck into playoffs as the final seed in the National League before ripping off 12 wins in 17 games to take home their third title in five years.

Despite what their postseason success would indicate, the team wasn't even that good. Over 162 regular season games – far more representative than the playoffs' sample size that was one tenth the length – the Giants had the third-worst pitching in the league. This, while including World Series demigod Madison Bumgarner and his 2.98 ERA over 217.1 innings.

San Francisco had departed from its winning strategy between 2010 and 2012 of having an incredibly deep rotation, yet still found success. Ryan Vogelsong was incredibly average, Tim Hudson was above-average, Tim Lincecum's arm continued to deteriorate, and Matt Cain was injured, although Jake Peavy was a valuable mid-season pickup. This time around, the Giants found success through building a strong defense, which helped them overcome a just passable offense.

Among teams with top-10 defenses last year, only the Orioles, Nationals, and Giants posted above-average offenses. San Francisco's wasn't particularly impressive – their wOBA was just .308 – but their defense led by Brandon Crawford, Buster Posey, and Pablo Sandoval made up for their deficiencies in other categories.

Although they did end up winning it all, the Giants were a deeply flawed team last year. That an 88-win team beat an 89-win team in the World Series goes to show that anything can happen in the playoffs, so it's too bold to come to any conclusions about how good this team actually was based on a 17-game stretch.

6. San Francisco Giants

It's even likely that last season's 88 wins were a bit of an overachievement. If one were to estimate the Giants record last year based off of run differential and WAR – using my RAWS system – San Francisco would only have been expected to win 83 games.

So with the Giants already being a flawed team that likely overachieved last season, what can be expected in their campaign to defend their title? Well, considering the talent they lost over the off-season, it may not be that much.

One of the Giants biggest strengths over the past half dozen years has been developing home grown talent. From Cain to Lincecum to Sandoval to Posey to Brandon Belt, the Giants have had a continuous flow of young talent. But Sandoval finally hit free agency this winter and signed with the Boston Red Sox for five years and $95 million, unlike the others who have re-upped to massive contracts. At the same time, they haven't had any impact players come up the pipeline recently and don't have any more for the foreseeable future, save for Andrew Susac, who is buried behind Posey on the depth chart.

It's certainly possible, if not likely, that Sandoval will not live up to that massive contract, especially as he ages in his less-than-ideal body type. But while San Francisco may be smiling that they won't have to pay him four to five years down the road, their lineup and defense will sorely miss him over the next two to three years. The big switch hitter logged 20 WAR over the past five years and is being replaced by a near replacement level player: Casey McGehee.

Besides the addition of McGehee, the only other personnel change the team made was signing Nori Aoki away from the World Series runner-ups. And while he is valuable, he's only a marginal upgrade (0.3 WAR) over the incumbent starter, Gregor Blanco. Instead of getting creative or taking more steps to acquire additional talent, the Giants stood still as a cornerstone walked away.

And that is the big issue with the Giants. They are banking on their younger players such as Joe Panik and Belt to improve further than most experts think they will. Even while some expected Belt to reach the ranks of Anthony Rizzo and Paul Goldschmidt, that's a lofty wish that they will need to have fulfilled if they want to make a run at the playoffs. A flawed team becoming more flawed is not a recipe for success.

Strengths of the System

As always, it seems, the Giants are stocked with a lot of arms. Kyle Crick retains his spot atop the prospect list despite his command wavering at times, and the addition of the Tyler Beede through the draft will provide a big boost.

While the rest of the pitchers aren't at the same level as those two yet, many of them have the stuff and potential to reach that level eventually. The two most notable names are Keury Mella and Michael Santos, who are different in terms of where they are on the developmental curve. They both have electric stuff, but Mella is much more advanced.

Weaknesses of the System

There's a serious dearth of high-upside position players, not that there are many high-upside pitchers in the farm system anyway. Andrew Susac could be a very solid starter somewhere, but he's blocked by Buster Posey and Brandon Belt, making it hard for him to develop in the majors leagues.

After that, Christian Arroyo and Mac Williamson are then next best hitting prospects, and neither one is likely to be a everyday player. Williamson has had some contact issues, while Arroyo is nothing special defensively. Then you're looking at hitters like Michael Duffy. Yikes.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Kyle Crick	RHP	B+
3.79 ERA, 11.1 K/9, 6.1 BB/9	22	AA
Plus plus fastball with three solid off-speeds, but delivery and command are problematic.		
Tyler Beede	RHP	B+
2.93 ERA, 11.6 K/9, 4.1 BB/9	22	Low-A
Top-of-the rotation stuff when he's on, but command tends to wobble. Athletic build.		
Andrew Susac	C	B+
.269/.365/.455, 13 HR, 0 SB	25	MLB
None of his tools blow you away, but he controls the game defensively, hits enough.		
Keury Mella	RHP	B
3.45 ERA, 12.1 K/9, 8.7 BB/9	21	A
Plus fastball with heavy sink that generates plenty of grounders. Promising off-speeds.		
Adalberto Mejia	LHP	B
4.67 ERA, 6.8 K/9, 2.6 BB/9	22	AAA
Added bad weight, and is looking for one plus pitch, but command, fastball are good.		
Clayton Blackburn	RHP	B
3.53 ERA, 8.5 K/9, 1.6 BB/9	22	AA
Innings eater with good ground ball rates and 3 solid off-speeds. Curve is best pitch.		
Mac Williamson	RF	B-
.318/.420/.506, 3 HR, 6 SB	24	High-A
Williamson missed most of 2014 because of Tommy John surgery, which really hurt his development because he was already old to repeat High-A. Power is still his calling card with a strong arm and athleticism, but the question is if his bat will improve enough to let him tap into that impressive power.		
Christian Arroyo	SS	B-
.291/.330/.404, 6 HR, 7 SB	20	A
Somewhat fringy defensively and will likely shift to second. Hit tools has to carry him.		
Chris Stratton	RHP	C+
4.80 ERA, 8.9 K/9, 3.5 BB/9	24	AA
Clock is ticking as his command or a third pitch must improve for him to be a starter.		
Michael Santos	RHP	C+
2.56 ERA, 7.5 K/9, 2.0 BB/9	20	A
Plus fastball with a frame to dream on. His command is solid, off-speeds need work.		

7. Miami Marlins

Lineup						Pos
	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
Dee Gordon	.289	.326	.378	2	64	2B 3.1
Christian Yelich	.284	.362	.402	9	21	LF 4.3
Giancarlo Stanton	.288	.395	.555	37	13	RF 6.1
Mike Morse	.279	.336	.475	16	0	1B 1.0
Martin Prado	.282	.321	.412	12	3	3B 2.6
Marcell Ozuna	.269	.317	.455	23	3	CF 3.7
Jarrod Saltalamacchia	.220	.320	.362	11	0	C 1.3
Adeiny Hechavarria	.276	.308	.356	1	7	SS 0.6
Ichiro Suzuki	.284	.324	.340	1	3	OF 0.4
Donovan Solano	.252	.300	.323	3	1	2B 0.4
Don Kelly	.245	.332	.288	0	6	Util -0.3
Jeff Mathis	.200	.263	.274	2	0	C 0.1

Pitchers						L/R
	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
Jose Fernandez	2.44	2.18	0.95	51.2	70	RH 1.6
Henderson Alvarez	2.65	3.58	1.24	187.0	111	RH 2.2
Mat Latos	3.25	3.65	1.15	102.1	74	RH 1.5
Jarred Cosart	3.69	3.77	1.36	180.1	115	RH 2.1
Dan Haren	4.02	4.09	1.18	186.0	145	RH 1.0
Steve Cishek	3.17	2.17	1.21	65.1	84	RH 2.0
Mike Dunn	3.16	3.06	1.21	57.0	67	LH 0.9
Aaron Crow	4.12	5.40	1.29	59.0	34	RH -0.9

Steve Mitchell – USA Today Sports

The calm before the storm

The Marlins started another one of their famous postseason pushes with a big off-season, meaning their next fire sale is just around the corner.

Few teams in baseball are as intriguing as the Marlins. As long as the franchise has been around, they have always had an abundance of young talent; it's just been a question of how long that talent remains on the team before they are auctioned off in an infamous fire sale.

But every once in a while, the Marlins will go on a spending spree when the time is right. Owner Jeffrey Loria is widely known as one of the biggest penny pinchers in the league, but he has shown the willingness to break the bank if his team thinks it's in position to win a World Series.

In 2003, for example, he brought in Ivan Rodriguez on a one-year $10 million contract and traded for new leadoff man Juan Pierre. They even acquired Jeff Conine at the trade deadline, which helped push them over the edge for their second World Series title in seven years. Of course, the core of that team was quickly done away with; by 2006 only Miguel Cabrera and Dontrelle Willis remained from the World Series team.

However, these quick playoff pushes and rebuilds haven't always worked for the Marlins. Most famously, as the team was making the transition from the Florida Marlins to the Miami Marlins in 2012, they spent $191 million to bring in Jose Reyes, Mark Buehrle, and Heath Bell. Of course, Miami's season went bottom up when pretty much every big-name acquisition fell flat and injuries struck, as they finished 69-93.

But Miami did stick to its fire sale plan with a series of moves all too reminiscent of the Red Wedding. Reyes, Buehrle, and Josh Johnson were traded to Toronto, Hanley Ramirez was traded to the Dodgers, Heath Bell was traded to Arizona, and Anibal Sanchez and Omar Infante were traded to Detroit. Loria and Co. is willing to spend, but only for a playoff push that lasts one season.

Now the Marlins have a different general manager at the helm than they had in either of their two aforementioned playoff pushes turned fire sales, but the unique strategy continues with Dan Jennings.

Miami was surprisingly competitive parts of 2014, although injuries derailed that hope.

7. Miami Marlins

Young ace Jose Fernandez made his final start on May 9, the last day the Marlins were atop the NL East, and after he underwent Tommy John surgery, the team went 57-69. Things got even worse when an errant pitch hit Giancarlo Stanton in the face, forcing the slugger to miss the last 17 games of the season, and the team went 7-10.

But with Stanton back healthy and Fernandez expected back around midseason, the Marlins found themselves nearing contention. Still a relatively young team with cornerstones like Stanton, Christian Yelich, Marcell Ozuna, Fernandez, and Henderson Alvarez all 25 or younger, they are bound to naturally improve, but a little veteran push could put them square in the playoff race. In classic Marlins fashion, that's exactly what they did, but not quite in the way we've seen in the past.

Although there was no giant free agent acquisition like in 2012, the Marlins did re-write the record books with the largest contract in baseball history awarded to Stanton at $325 million over 13 years. While those numbers are staggering, the least Marlins-like thing about the contract is the fact that they gave Stanton a no-trade clause, something Loria had never done before. Stanton does have an opt-out after 6 years, but for better or worse it will be awfully hard to start a full rebuild with their best player on the books for good.

Beyond the mega-contract, the Marlins also traded top prospect Andrew Heaney to the Dodgers for All-Star Dee Gordon and Dan Haren, solidifying a young rotation and getting Donovan Solano's meek bat out of the lineup. Miami also picked up Martin Prado and Michael Morse, solid upgrades over Casey McGehee and Garrett Jones.

Although Miami's front office has never been particularly analytic or into advanced stats, they've always been creative in how they approach re-stocking their team. It's clear that they think they are almost ready for another playoff push – look at dealing promising Colin Moran and Jake Marisnick for a proven commodity in Jarred Cosart – but the team just doesn't quite look as promising as the 2003 or even 2012 team. In a weak NL, they may be on to something, but the Marlins still have a move or two to go since they were a whopping 11 games out of the playoffs last year. But if nothing else, you can never expect the Marlins to stand still.

Strengths of the System

The Marlins' official farm system has become rather thin because of trades and graduations, but their young talent is among the best in the league. Jose Fernandez may be the best young pitcher in the game, and Giancarlo Stanton may be the best non-Mike Trout player in the game.

That's not even mentioning recent graduates Christian Yelich, Marcell Ozuna, and Adeiny Hechavarria. The Marlins don't really have to worry about the lack of depth down the road because they are pouring all of their assets into winning this season. That is, until they start a fire sale in a year or two.

Weaknesses of the System

The Marlins aren't deep, but they don't even have many high-upside players. Tyler Kolek is far and away the best prospect on the team, but after that, it's an amalgam of back-end starting pitchers and second-division starters in the field.

A good example of this is J.T. Realmuto, who finally broke out this season in his second go-around in Double-A. It looks like he will reach his max upside, but he still only projects to be an average major league starter. There's nothing wrong with that, but if he's the team's third-best prospect and best offensive prospect, that's from a good sign.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Tyler Kolek	RHP	B+
4.50 ERA, 7.4 K/9, 5.3 BB/9	19	Rookie
Kolek is a mountain of a man at 6'5" 270, which helps his fastball consistently reach 100. Playing high school ball in a small town, he didn't need to use his off-speed pitches much, as he likely won't in the lower minors, but his success in the majors will depend on his changeup and curve improving.		
Justin Nicolino	LHP	B
2.85 ERA, 4.3 K/9, 1.1 BB/9	23	AA
All of his pitches are average, but he pitches very efficiently with great command. Safe.		
J.T. Realmuto	C	B
.295/.362/.453, 8 HR, 18 SB	24	MLB
Great athlete. His defense has improved to plus, and his bat could soon reach average.		
Jose Urena	RHP	B-
3.33 ERA, 6.7 K/9, 1.6 BB/9	23	AA
Easy delivery that reaches 97. Lacks great command of his three off-speed pitches.		
Trevor Williams	RHP	B-
3.12 ERA, 6.5 K/9, 2.2 BB/9	23	AA
Velocity has dipped a bit, but he still has three average pitches and solid durability.		
Avery Romero	2B	B-
.320/.367/.423, 5 HR, 10 SB	22	High-A
Slimmed down a bit with good power for his size. Quick stroke, aggressive approach.		
Brian Anderson	2B	B-
.300/.363/.496, 11 HR, 1 SB	22	A
Every tool has the potential to be average except the glove at second. Weird leg kick.		
Jarlin Garcia	LHP	B-
4.38 ERA, 7.5 K/9, 1.4 BB/9	22	A
Projectable with 3 developing off-speeds. Doesn't walk batters despite funky delivery.		
Isael Soto	RF	C+
.251/.302/.426, 7 HR, 1 SB	18	Rookie
Both his arm and power could end up plus plus. Power comes from bat speed, not size.		
Adam Conley	LHP	C+
5.92 ERA, 6.9 K/9, 3.9 BB/9	25	AAA
Elbow injury hurt his stuff and command. Health concerns, arm angle signal reliever.		

8. Chicago Cubs

Lineup	Pos	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
Dexter Fowler	CF	.276	.375	.399	8	11	1.4
Jorge Soler	RF	.292	.330	.573	5	1	0.7
Anthony Rizzo	1B	.286	.386	.527	32	5	5.6
Starlin Castro	SS	.292	.339	.438	14	4	2.9
Miguel Montero	C	.243	.329	.370	13	0	1.2
Chris Coghlan	LF	.283	.352	.452	9	7	2.2
Mike Olt	3B	.160	.248	.356	12	0	-0.6
Arismendy Alcantara	2B	.169	.227	.324	9	5	-0.8
Matt Szczur	OF	.226	.273	.355	2	0	-0.1
Junior Lake	OF	.211	.246	.351	9	7	-1.0
Tommy La Stella	IF	.251	.328	.317	1	2	-0.1
Welington Castillo	C	237	.296	.389	13	0	2.2

Pitchers	L/R	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
Jon Lester	LH	2.46	2.80	1.10	219.2	220	6.1
Jake Arrieta	RH	2.53	2.26	0.99	156.2	167	4.9
Jason Hammel	RH	3.47	3.92	1.12	176.1	158	1.7
Travis Wood	LH	5.03	4.38	1.53	173.2	146	1.0
Kyle Hendricks	RH	2.46	3.32	1.08	80.1	47	1.5
Hector Rondon	RH	2.42	2.26	1.06	63.1	63	1.5
Pedro Strop	RH	2.21	2.66	1.07	61.0	71	1.0
Neil Ramirez	RH	1.44	2.61	1.05	43.2	53	0.8

Brian D. Kersey – Getty Sports

Pump the breaks on the hype

The Cubs have a lot of extremely talented players beginning to reach the majors, but they aren't quite ready to compete yet.

Theo Epstein has been with the Chicago Cubs for three seasons now, but no season has had more hype than this upcoming one.

The beginning of Chicago's tidal wave of young talent has reached the majors, and they've succeeded. Jorge Soler hit .292/.330/.573 in 97 plate appearances, Javier Baez burst onto the scene with three home runs in his first three games, and even Starlin Castro and Anthony Rizzo had breakout years.

Oh, and the Cubs signed Jon Lester.

Chicago has been stockpiling young hitters for as long as Epstein has been at the helm, and they finally brought in a top-of-the-line pitcher. While some thought the Cubs would trade several of their prospects for an established pitcher – and they still may do that – they instead opted to sign one of the most established left-handed pitchers in the league and someone Epstein is especially familiar with from his days in Boston.

But the Cubs didn't just stop at the Lester acquisition, they also added relatively young position players in Miguel Montero and Dexter Fowler. While the Cubs could have stayed put with the young talent they had and the new ace they acquired, they doubled down with two former top prospects who have established themselves as major league regulars.

With the mass hysteria surrounding the horde of prospects coming up the Cubs' pipeline, one would almost expect that the Cubs would be postseason contenders with the addition of an ace to the pitching staff. Even consider the fact that their production last season, according to RAWS indicated that they should have won two games more than their 73-89 record.

But although the buildup to this season will almost being unavoidable, this is not the Cubs' year.

Although the top three teams in the National League have far and away separated themselves from the rest of the middling league, the Cubs still have a ways to go before reaching that level. And it would be in their best interest to dampen as much hype as possible.

The Cubs ended last year with just 73

8. Chicago Cubs

wins, which is approximately 15 wins short of the usual cutoff for the final playoff spot. Lester is approximately a 5-win pitcher, which means that the rest of the roster would have to make up at least 10 wins. The additions of Montero and Fowler should help, although they only produced 0.2 more WAR than Welington Castillo and Arismendy Alcantara last season, but this puts a lot of pressure on the young Cubs to produce.

Depending on young, talented players is not necessarily a bad thing. Few teams can brag as much talent as Soler, Baez, and Alcantara with Kris Bryant and Addison Russell on the way and Anthony Rizzo and Starlin Castro both just 25 years old. Most of them will likely become great stars, but few teams have ever won a World Series with so many young players in key roles.

For instance, take a look at the Red Sox, who won the World Series in 2013 and depended on three highly-touted youngsters in the following year. Xander Bogaerts, universally considered one of the top few prospects in the league, struggled to a .294 wOBA. Jackie Bradley Jr., an elite defender with a promising bat, couldn't even hit .200 and was sent down to the Triple-A in August because of his struggles. Even Will Middlebrooks, in his third season, couldn't even come close to sticking with the major league club and had a wRC+ of 44.

Although they weren't the only contributing factors to last season, the Red Sox did not come close to repeating as champions, let alone making the playoffs. And that is just one example, but winning with so many young players – who are by nature far more volatile than veterans – is far harder to do that it is to win with an older team. The Cubs will enter the season with an average age in the starting lineup of under 27 years old. No team has won the World Series with a team that young since the 1969 Amazin' Mets.

There is plenty of reason for the Cubs to be optimistic. Even at the major league level, the team is slowly but surely getting better, and uber-prospects Bryant and Russell have still yet to reach the majors. Yes, it will be several years until they are close to reaching their peaks, but there's also a good chance that one or more will be dealt for an established star. The Cubs are in prime position to compete soon, but the expectations set by the Lester signing may be too much to handle now.

Strengths of the System

Where to start? There's so much hitting across the board, especially in the all-important up-the-middle positions. If you include Javier Baez, Arismendy Alcantara, and Starlin Castro, the Cubs have five impact youngsters in the middle infield which is just an embarrassment of riches.

It's the same thing in the outfield, too, with Jorge Soler, Albert Almora, Kyle Schwarber, and Billy McKinney. Surely not all of them will pan out, and they will all be ready to reach the majors at different times, but the Cubs may have to get creative with how to give them all playing time. What a problem to have.

Weaknesses of the System

There still isn't a ton of pitching in the system, although it is being overshadowed by the massive amount of bats. Additionally, the Cubs may end up flipping a position player or two for a pitcher.

C.J. Edwards has been consistently putting up great numbers, but there are still fears that his 6'2" 160 pound frame won't be able to handle 200-inning loads. There are definitely high-risk high-reward players in the system like prep arms Carson Sands and Dylan Cease, but the concern is there are no arms on the brink of the majors leagues. And, of course, pitching is the big need for the major league squad.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Kris Bryant	3B	A
.325/.438/.661, 43 HR, 15 SB	23	AAA
Huge power coming from compact swing. Athletic, improving defender; low risk star.		
Addison Russell	SS	A
.295/.350/.508, 13 HR, 6 SB	21	A
Every tool is above average with a great bat. Will stick at short despite questions.		
Jorge Soler	RF	A-
.325/.403/.661, 20 HR, 1 SB	23	MLB
Classic power-arm profile with plus speed. Explosive athleticism, but routes need work.		
Albert Almora	CF	B+
.270/.291/.392, 9 HR, 6 SB	21	AA
Almora was known out of the draft as one of the most polished prep bats, although the results haven't matched yet. He's lived up to the hype defensively, but he refuses to take a walk and a hamate injury zapped his power. I'm still betting on a toolsy center fielder with a low floor from the defense.		
Kyle Schwarber	LF	B+
.344/.428/.634, 18 HR, 5 SB	22	High-A
Bat and power are not in doubt, but he can't catch and won't be very good in left.		
C.J. Edwards	RHP	B+
2.23 ERA, 8.8 K/9, 4.3 BB/9	23	AA
Stuff is great with lots of life, but his frame may be too thin to allow him to be a starter.		
Gleyber Torres	SS	B
.297/.386/.440, 2 HR, 10 SB	18	Low-A
Super advanced bat with all tools average and hit, defense, arm strength even better.		
Duane Underwood	RHP	B
2.50 ERA, 7.5 K/9, 3.2 BB/9	20	A
Athletic with electric stuff that he needs to be able to harness all at the same time.		
Billy McKinney	LF	B
.264/.354/.412, 11 HR, 6 SB	20	High-A
Bat remains plus, but fringy arm most likely puts him in left. Plays above average tools.		
Pierce Johnson	RHP	B
2.54 ERA, 8.7 K/9, 5.0 B/9	24	AA
Fastball, curve are plus, but injury, delivery issues aren't good. Walks are problematic.		

9. Cincinnati Reds

Lineup	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR	Pos
Billy Hamilton	.250	.292	.355	6	56	3.5	CF
Joey Votto	.255	.390	.409	6	1	1.1	1B
Todd Frazier	.273	.336	.459	29	20	4.7	3B
Brandon Phillips	.266	.306	.372	8	2	1.8	2B
Devin Mesoraco	.273	.359	.534	25	1	4.4	C
Jay Bruce	.217	.281	.373	18	12	-1.1	RF
Marlon Byrd	.264	.312	.445	25	3	1.9	LF
Zack Cozart	.221	.268	.300	4	7	1.2	SS
Skip Schumaker	.235	.287	.308	2	2	-1.3	OF
Kris Negron	.271	.331	.479	6	5	1.9	Util
Chris Dominguez	.059	.111	.235	1	0	-0.4	CI
Brayan Peña	.253	.291	.353	5	2	-0.6	C

Pitchers	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR	L/R
Johnny Cueto	2.25	3.30	0.96	243.2	242	4.1	RH
Homer Bailey	3.71	3.93	1.23	145.2	124	1.3	RH
Mike Leake	3.70	3.88	1.25	214.1	164	1.9	RH
Tony Cingrani	4.55	5.37	1.53	63.1	61	-0.3	LH
Anthony DeSclafani	6.27	3.77	1.36	33.0	26	0.1	RH
Aroldis Chapman	2.00	0.89	0.83	54.0	106	2.7	LH
Sam LeCure	3.81	4.24	1.52	56.2	48	-0.3	RH
Jumbo Diaz	3.38	3.33	1.24	34.2	37	0.3	RH

Jamie Sabau – Getty Images

Slowly slipping from contention

The Reds have kept their core of young players together, but as budget concerns forced them to sell of pitchers, things are looking dreary.

Coming off a four-year stretch in which the Reds averaged nearly 90 wins, the Reds were poised to make another playoff run in 2014. Their biggest concern was going to be how to replace Shin-Soo Choo, who posted 5.2 WAR and departed via free agency.

They didn't make the playoffs, though. They fell far from it. However, losing Choo wasn't the reason for that. In fact, the decision to let him go was one of their saving graces in an otherwise lost season that leaves 2015's future rather murky.

Cincinnati replaced Choo with the tantalizing Billy Hamilton. He, of the famed 150-steal minor league season, had an incredible rookie season. Although he didn't hit much after the All-Star Break, his defense and speed was so valuable that he garnered 3.5 WAR. Compare that to Choo, who missed a quarter of the season due to injuries and posted just 0.2 WAR while healthy, and the Reds clearly came out on top.

Instead, what did the Reds in was an incredible amount of bad luck in the form of close losses and injuries.

Last season, the Reds went just 22-38 in one-run games. Regardless of their record, teams tend to win about half their one-run games, so Cincy's .367 winning percentage immediately catches the eye as an outlier. If they had won half their one-run games, they would have had an 8-win improvement to 84 wins. If they had the same winning percentage in one run games as they did in every other game (.529), they would have gotten an extra two wins added on to that total.

But the even aside from that the Reds fell victim to a slew of injuries at inopportune times. Despite missing Mat Latos until mid-June and Jay Bruce for several weeks in May to a pair of knee injuries and missing Joey Votto for several weeks in May with strained quadriceps, the Reds still stayed competitive through the All-Star Break. In a crowded National League, they were just one game out of the playoffs.

The team would continuously bend, but they finally broke when Votto reaggrivated the injury in July and missed the second half

9. Cincinnati Reds

of the season. Coming out of the break, they lost nine of ten games and never quite looked the same. Losing Homer Bailey for the final two months of the year didn't help any either.

It's tough to assume complete or even partial health for a team following a season that kept the team doctors so busy. Moreover, it leaves a wide variety of possibilities for the upcoming season.

We've seen just how talented the Reds are and how good they can play. When healthy, Votto is a premier hitter in the game, Bruce has consistently shown 30-home run power, Brandon Phillips is as steady as anyone defensively with above-average power for his position, and Todd Frazier and Devin Mesoraco finally broke out as All-Stars.

But it's so rare that the stars align for a team where every player plays up to his potential and has a career year at once. It's more likely that players will continue to show their warts that held back the team last year.

Votto, for example, has always hit for a high average until last season when injuries zapped his power and led to a batting average 40 points lower than his previous low. Bruce, on the other hand, has never hit for a high average and bottomed out last year with a .217 average and -1.1 WAR. Even Phillips has seen his OBP and power slowly decline each of the past three seasons, and and Mesoraco and Frazier only hit .235 and combined for 3.5 WAR two seasons ago.

But perhaps more concerning than the variable offense is the lack of pitching. After surrendering fewer runs than any team from 2012 to 2013, the team plummeted to 27th in pitching WAR in 2014. And instead of supplementing the rotation with more arms this winter, they traded off Latos and pleasant surprise Alfredo Simon for chump change to save money, which they quickly spent on another aging hitter: Marlon Byrd.

There's certainly a possibility that the Reds will have a bounce back season if they can reverse the regression facing aging stars Votto, Bruce, and Phillips. This team has the wherewithal to compete in a mediocre second tier of NL teams, just as we saw last year before injuries struck. But with no big additions to an aging team that certainly won't become any less injury-prone, it looks like this team is headed for mediocrity. With that in mind, it really makes you wonder what on Earth the Reds' plan this winter was to fix their problems that sunk the team last year.

Strengths of the System

Cincinnati has a lot of flexibility with its pitching. A lot of that has to do with their history of spending many of their top draft certain types of pitchers. Interestingly enough, three of their top arms are all converted relievers: two of them from college and one of them from Cuba.

Robert Stephenson has established himself as a premier pitching prospect for a while now, but at least one of Michael Lorenzen, Raisel Iglesias, and Nick Howard could soon join him at that level. And if worst comes to worst, each of them has proven they can be dominant late-inning guys.

Weaknesses of the System

Going into last season, one of the Reds big strengths was their outfield hitting. Billy Hamilton and Phil Ervin looked like future leadoff hitters, Jesse Winker looked like a middle-of-the-order hitter, and Yorman Rodriguez's tools were finally starting to come together and produce. But things have changed in a year.

Hamilton graduated and played very good his rookie season, Winker continued to improve, but Ervin and Rodriguez took big steps back. This sort of underlines the bigger problem with the farm right now: there's not a ton of high-probability hitters or high-upside hitters left.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Robert Stephenson	RHP	A-
4.74 ERA, 9.2 K/9, 4.9 BB/9	22	AA
Top-of-the-rotation stuff with a few kinks that need to be ironed out in the delivery.		
Jesse Winker	LF	B+
.287/.399/.518, 15 HR, 5 SB	21	AA
Advanced bat with a great eye at the plate. Defensive value is limited but bat will carry.		
Michael Lorenzen	RHP	B
3.13 ERA, 6.3 K/9, 3.3 BB/9	23	AA
Converted closer whose stuff has held up over longer stretches. Grounders before Ks.		
Raisel Iglesias	RHP	B
0.00 ERA, 9.0 K/9, 3.9 BB/9	25	Rookie
Relieved in Cuba, will get a chance to start. Slider and fastball flashes plus, 4-pitch mix.		
Nick Howard	RHP	B
4.00 ERA, 6.3 K/9, 3.3 B/9	22	A
Another college closer now starting. How his stamina and command hold up is key.		
Alex Blandino	SS	B
.283/.367/.480, 8 HR, 7 SB	22	A
Even if he doesn't stick at short, his power, bat, speed are solid and may improve soon.		
Nick Travieso	RHP	B
3.03 ERA, 7.2 K/9, 2.8 BB/9	21	A
Velocity is up as weight is down. If change, control stagnate, could be dominant reliever.		
Aristides Aquino	RF	B
.292/.342/.577, 16 HR, 22 SB	21	Rookie
Huge 5-tool potential with room to fill out his 6'4" frame. A bit aggressive at the plate.		
Amir Garrett	LHP	B-
3.65 ERA, 8.6 K/9, 3.4 BB/9	23	A
Although he's 23, Garrett is at the start of the developmental curve since he spent the last four years playing basketball. He's a great athlete at 6'6" with a plus fastball and slider. Since he's on the 40-man roster already, he may not have time to develop as a starter before he runs out of options.		
Phil Ervin	CF	B-
.237/.307/.376, 7 HR, 30 SB	22	A
Showed better speed than expected but a wrist injury hurt his bat, made him pull-happy.		

10. Atlanta Braves

Lineup	Pos					
	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
Nick Markakis	RF	.276	.342	.386	14	4	2.5
Jace Peterson	2B	.113	.161	.113	0	2	-0.6
Freddie Freeman	1B	.288	.386	.461	18	3	4.2
Jonny Gomes	LF	.234	.327	.330	6	0	-0.3
Chris Johnson	3B	.263	.292	.361	10	6	0.5
Melvin Upton Jr.	CF	.208	.287	.333	12	20	0.4
Christian Bethancourt	C	.300	.364	.500	0	0	0.1
Andrelton Simmons	SS	.244	.286	.331	7	4	2.3
Eric Young Jr.	OF	.229	.299	.311	1	30	1.3
Todd Cunningham	OF	.250	.250	.250	0	0	-0.1
Alberto Callaspo	2B	.223	.290	.290	4	0	-1.1
A.J. Pierzynski	C	.251	.288	.337	5	0	-0.4

Pitchers	L/R					
	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
Julio Teheran	RH	2.89	3.49	1.08	221.0	186	3.2
Mike Minor	LH	4.77	4.39	1.44	145.1	120	0.2
Alex Wood	LH	2.78	3.25	1.14	171.2	170	2.5
Shelby Miller	RH	3.74	4.54	1.27	183.0	127	0.2
Wandy Rodriguez	LH	6.75	7.41	1.69	26.2	20	-0.8
Craig Kimbrel	RH	1.61	1.83	0.91	61.2	95	2.2
David Carpenter	RH	3.54	2.94	1.26	61.0	46	0.6
Jason Grilli	RH	4.00	3.37	1.33	54.0	57	0.4

David Manning – USA Today Sports

Championship or bust

Atlanta had a chance to compete for a wild card spot this season but instead opted to gun for a World Series a few years down the road.

The Braves were placed in a precarious situation entering this off-season. They clearly had a good deal of young talent but were also far behind the three behemoths of the National League: the division rival Nationals, Dodgers and Cardinals.

At that point there were two choice: roll the dice that they could win one of two Wild Card spots and luck out in the playoffs or blow the team up and rebuild for a couple years down the line.

We've seen before that anything can happen once you make the playoffs – assuming the team makes it past the Wild Card play-in game – but there was another key factor for Atlanta. Two of the teams most talented players, Jason Heyward and Justin Upton, were up for free agency at the end of the year.

The Braves' front office decided that a one-year run at a title wouldn't be worth it, since their pockets wouldn't be deep enough to re-sign both or even one of those players. After all, they had just shelled out $267.7 million to lock up their young core of Freddie Freeman, Andrelton Simmons, Craig Kimbrel, and Julio Teheran the winter before.

While they likely would have been a postseason favorite, although far from a lock, the Braves opted to sell off three of their biggest assets that weren't locked up with long term deals: Heyward, Upton, and Evan Gattis. And after adding a handful of solid free agents, the team ended up with a massively restocked farm system and a major league team not so far out of contention.

They key part of that last sentence, though, is a massively restocked farm system. Entering the off-season, the Braves only had about five average or better prospects headlined by speedster Jose Peraza and former first-rounders Lucas Sims and Braxton Davidson. But by the end of the winter, they had one of the deepest farm systems in the majors, even if they lack many top-of-the-line prospects.

The first shoe to drop was the Heyward trade, which netted the Braves four years of control of Shelby Miller and six years of control of Tyrell Jenkins. Although Miller

10. Atlanta Braves

disappeared down the stretch for the Cardinals each of the past two seasons, he has a career ERA of 3.33 with two plus and two average pitches. Jenkins, although farther away from the majors, has the stuff to be an impact pitcher.

A month later, the second shoe dropped with Upton traded for Max Fried and three lottery ticket prospects. While Fried will miss the next season recovering from Tommy John surgery, he has the potential to be a top-of-the-rotation starter, and at least one of Dustin Peterson, Jace Peterson, and Mallex Smith should be an impact major leaguer.

Perhaps the most interesting trade, though, was the Gattis one. After trading the two outfielders, the Braves had clearly tossed in the towel, yet the least talented of the three brought back perhaps the most lucrative loot. The low-OBP slugger brought back hard-throwing Mike Foltynewicz, who will likely see time as a starter this season and high-upside third baseman Rio Ruiz from Houston.

So while the Braves gave up on being a World Series contender this season, they also didn't completely send the team into a total rebuild like other teams have done in the past. Many of the prospects they acquired will be ready to contribute in the majors soon, and the nearly $24 million they saved trading away the three power hitters allowed them to bring in more players for the present.

Most notably, the Braves brought in Nick Markakis on a rather affordable four-year, $44 million deal. While he's far from his 20-homer 2008 self, he's going to be a solid contributor, having averaged 1.7 WAR over the past five years, and the Braves had to spend their budget somewhere.

Perhaps more intriguing is the additions of bullpen arms Jason Grilli and Jim Johnson. The former closers who both imploded to a combined 5.54 ERA last season after racking up 83 saves the year before only cost $5.6 million, which is a bargain on the ballooning relief market. The real value in them, though, is that it allows the Braves to trade Kimbrel if need be, since having a shutdown closer isn't nearly as valuable to a team out of playoff contention.

Atlanta won't win a World Series this year, although they probably weren't anyways with their roster construction going into the winter. These recent moves, though, put them in a great position to win in just a few short years.

Strengths of the System

The hype surrounding the depth of this farm system is palpable. When trading Jason Heyward, Justin Upton, and Evan Gattis, the Braves didn't pick up any blue chip prospects, but they picked up a ton of players in the tier right below. They're now so deep that guys like Jason Hursh and Mauricio Cabrera can't crack the top 10.

Also very underrated was the trade of Kyle Kubitza for Ricardo Sanchez. Kubitza was a low-risk low-reward hitter who could start at third next year, but he won't push the needle much in their rebuild. Sanchez has the potential to be a big difference maker down the road.

Weaknesses of the System

Aside from not having a top-30 prospect in baseball, there's not much to complain about the Braves' minor league squads. The only real complaint about the prospects is that there are no legitimate outfield prospects.

Atlanta is trying to make Braxton Davidson work in right field, but chances are that his range will not be appropriate for that position. After that, the team is left with Mallex Smith, a player with top-rated speed who has struggled with the finer points of route running and approaches at the plate. This could be an issue later on, since none of the outfielders on the major league roster are long-term pieces.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Jose Peraza	2B	B+
.339/.364/.441, 2 HR, 60 SB	21	AA
Fantastic speed with a bat, arm, and defense that all could end up above-average tools.		
Max Fried	LHP	B+
5.06 ERA, 8.4 K/9, 4.2 BB/9	21	A
Fried would be at the top of this list had he not suffered the same fate as his high school teammate Lucas Giolito: Tommy John surgery. He'll lose a lot of development time missing 2015, but the high probability of return off surgery make his plus fastball, curve, solid change a future #2 starter.		
Mike Foltynewicz	RHP	B+
5.11 ERA, 8.6 K/9, 4.4 BB/9	23	MLB
Up to 100 with a great curveball. He'll need to brush up iffy command to reach ceiling.		
Lucas Sims	RHP	B
4.19 ERA, 6.2 K/9, 3.3 BB/9	21	High-A
Three above-average pitches could develop into more as he fills out projectable frame.		
Ozhaino Albies	SS	B
.364/.446/.445, 1 HR, 22 SB	18	Rookie
Tiny frame but excellent approach at the plate and all the tools but power. Upside.		
Rio Ruiz	3B	B
.293/.327/.436, 11 HR, 4 SB	21	High-A
Has three above-average tools (hit, power, arm), but none plus yet. Very disciplined.		
Christian Bethancourt	C	B
.274/.300/.375, 8 HR, 8 SB	23	MLB
Although he may never hit well, his defense (chiefly an 80 arm) will get him a starting job.		
Braxton Davidson	RF	B
.224/.387/.299, 0 HR, 0 SB	19	Rookie
Huge raw power, solid approach. Has a plus arm but lack of speed may keep him at first.		
Ricardo Sanchez	LHP	B
3.49 ERA, 10.0 K/9, 5.1 BB/9	18	Rookie
Bonus baby with raw potential but a small frame. Advanced with calling card curve.		
Tyrell Jenkins	RHP	B
3.02 ERA, 5.9 K/9, 3.0 BB/9	22	High-A
Extremely athletic. Injuries held him back, but improved control is key with good stuff.		

11. Milwaukee Brewers

Lineup	Pos					
	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
Carlos Gomez	CF					
	.284	.356	.477	23	34	5.9
Jonathan Lucroy	C					
	.301	.373	.465	13	4	6.3
Ryan Braun	RF					
	.266	.324	.453	19	11	1.2
Aramis Ramirez	3B					
	.285	.330	.427	15	3	2.1
Adam Lind	1B					
	.321	.381	.479	6	0	1.6
Khris Davis	LF					
	.244	.299	.457	22	4	1.8
Jean Segura	SS					
	.246	.286	.326	5	20	0.3
Scooter Gennett	2B					
	.289	.320	.434	9	6	1.8
Gerardo Parra	OF					
	.261	.308	.369	9	9	0.1
Logan Schafer	OF					
	.181	.278	.276	0	2	-0.1
Elian Herrera	IF					
	.150	.190	.200	0	0	0.0
Martin Maldonado	C					
	.234	.320	.387	4	0	0.8

Pitchers	L/R					
	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
Kyle Lohse	RH					
	3.54	3.95	1.15	198.1	141	2.0
Matt Garza	RH					
	3.64	3.54	1.18	163.1	126	2.5
Wily Peralta	RH					
	3.53	4.11	1.30	198.2	154	1.5
Jimmy Nelson	RH					
	4.93	3.78	1.46	69.1	57	0.8
Mike Fiers	RH					
	2.13	2.99	0.88	71.2	76	1.6
Francisco Rodriguez	RH					
	3.04	4.50	0.99	68.0	73	-0.6
Jonathan Broxton	RH					
	2.30	3.37	1.02	58.2	49	0.5
Will Smith	RH					
	3.70	3.25	1.42	65.2	86	0.5

Scott Paulus – Milwaukee Brewers

Stuck in the middle

For three years now, the Brewers have been sitting in the middle of the National League but have refused to try to win or bottom out.

In professional sports, the worst place to be is right in the middle – too bad to be good but too good to be bad. Although it sounds counterintuitive – most fans despise losing – it's very tough to go from the middle of the pack to the top of the league. That's especially the case for a team devoid of young talent coming up the pipeline.

And that's exactly where the Brewers find themselves. They've been a cycle of despair the past three seasons, winning between 83 and 74 games along the way. They've been pretty active during free agency, too, spending $129 million on Aramis Ramirez, Matt Garza, and Kyle Lohse, but nothing they've done has brought them out of the dregs of mediocrity.

The biggest reason the Brewers have been unable to improve is that they have had almost no talent whatsoever in the minor league system. With very little impact talent arriving from the minor leagues, the Brewers don't have many cost-efficient players and don't have the ability to flip young players for established veterans. Getting value out of cheap, young players is how smaller market teams typically become successful.

What put the Brewers in trouble was their incredible ability to squander first round draft picks. No first-round pick since 2005 is still on the team with the best picks (Jake Odorizzi and Brett Lawrie) traded for long-since departed Shaun Marcum and Zack Greinke.

Recently, Milwaukee has replenished its farm system by investing in high-upside draft picks like Tyrone Taylor, Monte Harrison, Devin Williams, and Jacob Gatewood, but with the high potential comes high risk and a long timeline before they reach the majors. And because of that long wait, the Brewers face a decision with two options: empty the farm for a push at the playoffs or blow up the veteran core to initiate an actual rebuild instead of this half-assed partial rebuild.

Even before looking at the team's roster to see how viable winning is, it's important to look at the context of where Milwaukee is competing. The team is stuck in one of the toughest divisions between the Cardinals

11. Milwaukee Brewers

(who are good and have a lot of young talent), Pirates (who are almost as good and have slightly more young talent), Cubs (who aren't good yet but have unbelievable amounts of young talent, and even the Reds (who were great two years ago but are short on young talent). Basically, the way the talent is staggered in the division, there's going to be one – if not two – talented teams at all times.

Because the NL is fairly weak after the Nationals, Dodgers, and Cardinals, making an all-in push for the playoffs may not be a bad option. Ryan Braun, Jonathan Lucroy, and Carlos Gomez are all legitimate cornerstones and Jean Segura and Khris Davis have shown promise. While the rotation is more of a collection of #3 starters more than anything else, Milwaukee could package a couple of their high-upside prospects for another impact pitcher or even explore their options in free agency. Although it would most likely be a one-year experiment because they don't have nearly enough assets to acquire a long-term asset, it would assure them a shot at the playoffs.

Alternatively, the Brewers could opt for a long-term rebuild in an attempt to be better for longer. Lucroy, and Gomez hold a lot of trade value, and a contender would love to have Braun. The team as currently constructed is too short on talent and resources to contend for a World Series, so if that is their ultimate goal, they need to blow up the team and trade away ancillary pieces like Lohse and Garza.

But the Brewers didn't choose either option this past off-season. Instead, they decided to stick with the same old plan they've been running with over the past three off-seasons. Don't make a push to be better than average, and don't bottom out to collect assets.

The Brewers almost signaled the start of a rebuild by trading former rotation anchor Yovani Gallardo to Texas for a solid but unspectacular prospect in Luis Sardinas. But they then followed that up by signing Francisco Rodriguez and refused to trade off any other players. If the Brewers are content with treading water and staying in the middle of the National League, they're on the right track. But they won't be leaving this sort of sports purgatory any time soon until they make a plan and commit to it – rebuilding or going all in. There's only so much a team whose biggest acquisition was Adam Lind can do.

Strengths of the System

The Brewers finally started adding high-upside pieces to their farm system. Impressively, a loot of it has come from taking gambles after the first round and giving higher bonuses to prep players.

Just in the second round alone of the past three drafts, Milwaukee has picked up three of it's top four prospects. Tyrone Taylor, Devin Williams, and Monte Harrison all have great tools, and that is starting to translate into great production. The Brewers are also making a similar bet on Gilbert Lara, considered by some the top international free agent from last signing period.

Weaknesses of the System

With all this betting on highoupside high school athletes, the Brewers haven't done anything to change their lack of prospects close to the majors. Taylor Jungmann is probably an injury away from cracking the major league rotation, but he doesn't have the upside originally anticipated when the Brewers took him 12th overall in 2011.

After that the prospect landscape in the upper-minors is barren. Wei-Chung Wang was a Rule 5 pick last season who was up to 96 out of relief and probably should stick to that. The Brewers are going to try him as a starter, where his velocity dips a lot, but it's probably a lost clause.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Orlando Arcia	SS	B+
.289/.346/.392, 4 HR, 31 SB	20	High-A
Great defender with speed. Bat continues to impress even against older competition.		
Tyrone Taylor	CF	B
.273/.326/.388, 6 HR, 23 SB	21	AA
Former running back with game-changing speed. Power or patience needs to improve.		
Monte Harrison	RF	B
.261/.402/.339, 1 HR, 32 SB	19	Rookie
Superb athlete; approach is beyond his age. Bat, power may end up plus with arm, speed.		
Devin Williams	RHP	B
4.48 ERA, 9.0 K/9, 2.7 BB/9	20	Rookie
Projectable frame and all three pitches flash plus. High upside, athletic, and low mileage.		
Clint Coulter	RF	B
.287/.410/.520, 22 HR, 6 SB	21	A
Will make it to the majors faster after being moved off catcher. Plus power, strong arm.		
Gilbert Lara	3B	B
Did not play	17	--
Top bonus baby last year with easy power, bat speed, and arm strength. Wild swing.		
Kodi Medeiros	LHP	B
7.13 ERA, 13.5 K/9, 6.6 BB/9	19	Rookie
Despite going 12th overall in the 2014 draft, there are major questions about whether or not Medeiros will start. Although he gained 2 inches on his previously 6' frame, his sidearm delivery draws concerns. At the same time, it gives him great deception and movement to go with a fantastic slider.		
Jacob Gatewood	SS	B-
.249/.279/.279, 3 HR, 7 SB	19	Rookie
Crazy power with contact issues. Defense much better than expected from 6'5" size.		
Jorge Lopez	RHP	B-
4.58 ERA, 7.8 K/9, 3.0 BB/9	22	High-A
Still has plenty of room to fill out his frame. Lacks a swing-and-miss off-speed for now.		
Taylor Jungmann	RHP	B-
3.57 ERA, 8.6 K/9, 3.6 BB/9	25	AAA
Gets average velocity but great sink from his 6'6" frame. High probability low upside.		

12. New York Mets

Lineup	Pos					
	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
Daniel Murphy	2B	.239	.332	.403	9	13	2.8
Michael Cuddyer	LF	.332	.376	.579	10	3	1.5
David Wright	3B	.269	.324	.374	8	8	1.9
Lucas Duda	1B	.253	.349	.481	30	3	3.0
Travis d'Arnaud	C	.242	.302	.416	13	1	1.6
Curtis Granderson	RF	.227	.326	.388	20	8	1.0
Wilmer Flores	SS	.251	.286	.378	14	3	1.3
Juan Lagares	CF	.281	.321	.382	4	13	3.8
Kirk Nieuwenhuis	OF	.259	.346	.482	3	4	0.9
Ruben Tejada	IF	.237	.342	.310	5	1	1.2
Dilson Herrera	IF	.220	.303	.407	3	0	0.2
Anthony Recker	C	.201	.246	.374	7	1	0.8

Pitchers	L/R					
	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
Bartolo Colon	RH	4.09	3.57	1.23	202.1	151	2.1
Matt Harvey	RH	2.27	2.00	0.93	178.1	191	6.0*
Jacob deGrom	RH	2.69	2.67	1.14	140.1	144	3.0
Jon Niese	LH	3.40	3.67	1.27	187.2	138	1.6
Dillon Gee	RH	4.00	4.52	1.25	137.1	94	0.4
Jenrry Mejia	RH	3.65	3.73	1.48	93.2	98	0.2
Bobby Parnell	RH	9.0	4.13	3.00	1.0	1	0.0
		0					
Jeurys Familia	RH	2.21	3.07	1.18	77.1	73	0.5

Carlos M. Saavedra - Getty Images

Going for it too soon

Early in the off-season, the Mets decided to make a playoff push, but the cost was high, and they are probably still short on talent.

A large misconception about baseball – and sports in general – is that every win is worth the same.

One of the least valuable wins in baseball is an extra win for a team at the bottom of a division. There's no real difference between 65 wins and 66 wins; both records will leave the team over twenty games out of the playoffs.

Far more valuable is a win for a playoff team. While a 94-win team and 95-win team will both certainly make the playoffs, that extra win could be the difference between winning a division and going to the Wild Card playoff or even home field advantage.

The most important wins, though, come in the range of 87 to 91 wins. With the addition of the second Wild Card, the final playoff teams usually end up with around that many wins, so getting to that point is crucial. And once you reach the playoffs, anything can happen.

The purpose of this exercise is to show that teams will act irrational in the long run to reach those crucial wins. Think of the 71-win Mariners signing Robinson Cano or the 72-win Royals trading for James Shields. Both teams thought they were on the brink of contention and needed one last piece to be in the playoff picture. The Mariners finished just one game out of the playoffs last season, and the Royals finished just one game short of a World Series title.

This brings us to the Mets, who, in all likelihood, believe they are on the brink of contention. Going into the off-season, they saw a relatively weak middle tier of the National League and decided it was time to mortgage the future for a shot at the playoffs. Not twelve days after the Giants won the World Series, the Mets made the first major splash of the off-season, bringing in Michael Cuddyer on a two-year deal.

Cuddyer didn't come cheap, though. Although his contract is only worth $21 million, he had been extended a qualifying offer by his former team, the Colorado Rockies, meaning that the Mets forfeited their 15th overall pick to bring in the aging slugger.

12. New York Mets

But Cuddyer doesn't exactly fall under the same category as Cano and Shields. At 36, he's seen his best days already. Yes, he's hit .331 over his past two seasons, but his numbers at Coors Field are inflated, and he missed 113 games last season due to two hamstring injuries and a broken shoulder. Missing time due to injuries isn't even something knew, as he's only played an average of 111 games per season in the 12 years he's been a full-time starter.

Pursuing another slugger to pair with David Wright and Lucas Duda would be a good idea, but signing Cuddyer is not the kind of move that will solely flip the script on this team. Since they were already giving up their first round pick, the Mets could have pursued another one or two free agents with a qualifying offer tag on them, such as Shields or Ervin Santana.

Of course, although New York did not make any other notable additions through free agency or trade, they will get a big piece back that was missing all of last year: Matt Harvey. The young starter absolutely tore through his first season and a half in the Majors – he currently owns a nifty career 2.39 ERA – but sadly fell victim to a torn UCL and had to have Tommy John surgery. Assuming he returns to three-quarters of what he was before (potentially bold for his first year back), he forms a brilliant young core of pitchers including Zack Wheeler, Jacob DeGrom, and soon Noah Syndergaard. Unfortunately, Wheeler will not be able to contribute this year as he, too, fell victim to Tommy John surgery.

But for now, the Mets are left with a team that, as currently constructed, just doesn't have the talent to compete with even the Pirates and Padres of the National League. They do have intriguing young talent like Wilmer Flores, Travis d'Arnaud, and a whole bunch of pitchers, but by the time they are reaching their prime, Cuddyer will be long gone and that draft pick will belong to a different team. Not only that, but older players like Curtis Granderson will have almost entirely fallen off the map.

The Mets decided to make a run at that tipping point to force their way into the playoffs, and just like the Mariners and Royals, they acted irrationally in the long run. But unlike those teams, they didn't add a player who would help much in the short run. Sometimes you have to be bold to make it to the top, but the Mets pulled the trigger too early on a target that isn't quite good enough.

Strengths of the System

The strength of the team as a whole is clearly the young pitching. Matt Harvey and Zach Wheeler have already made their mark in the majors, living up to exactly what scouts saw as their ceiling. Unfortunately, Harvey missed all of last season with Tommy John surgery and Zach Wheeler will face the same fate this year. That goes to show the fickle nature of young pitchers.

Noah Syndergaard has a similar profile to the first two hard-throwing right handers, as does Steven Matz from the left side. Even Marcos Molina could join them, although he's still very raw overall.

Weaknesses of the System

Despite having several good prospects in corner positions, the Mets have a real lack of players with high power potential. Dominic Smith and Michael Conforto were drafted in large part because of their relatively polished bats, but Smith could not hit last year and Conforto had only limited power in half a season.

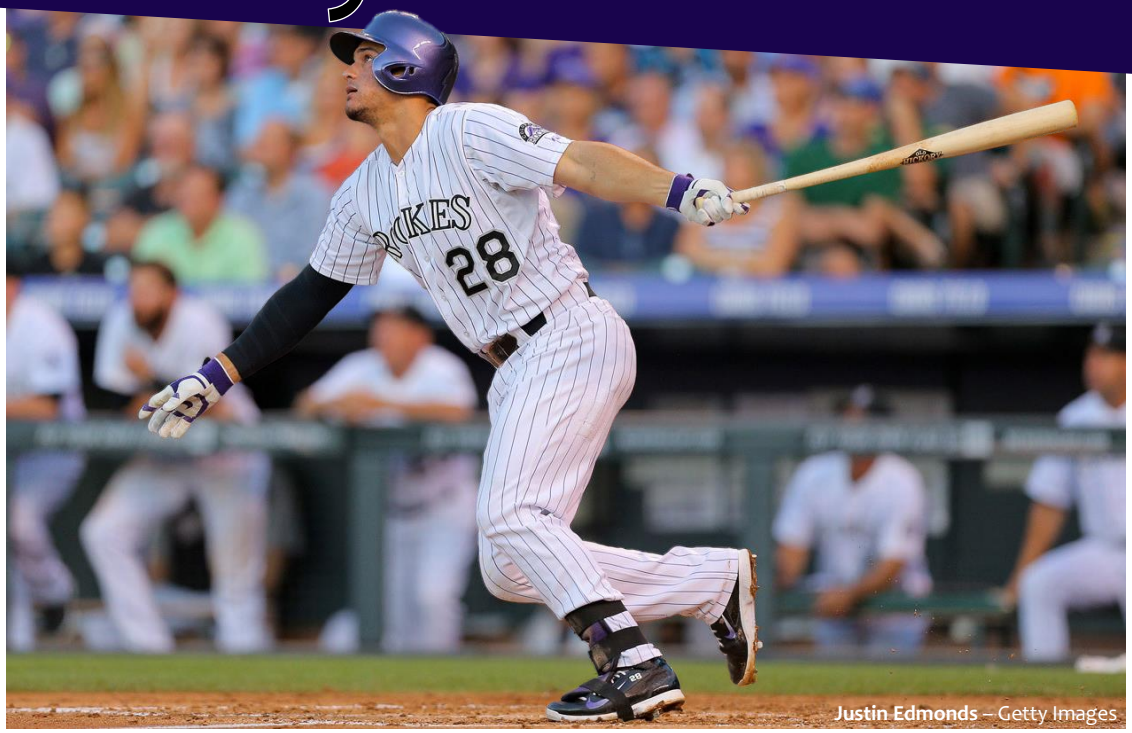
The lack of power shouldn't be a gigantic concern, though, since there are so many quality position players in the system. Guys like Kevin Plawecki and Brandon Nimmo are going to be above-average regulars, even if they never hit more than 20 home runs in their peak seasons.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Noah Syndergaard	RHP	A-
4.60 ERA, 9.8 K/9, 2.91 BB/9	22	AAA
Power arm, good stuff, and command to back it up. Pitched well in a hitter's league.		
Steven Matz	LHP	B+
2.24 ERA, 8.4 K/9, 2.2 BB/9	24	AA
Power lefty with average off-speeds, control. Tommy John surgery slowed development.		
Brandon Nimmo	RF	B+
.278/.394/.426, 10 HR, 14 SB	22	AA
Great approach makes up for middling power despite athletic frame. 5 tool player.		
Amed Rosario	SS	B+
.274/.320/.372, 2 HR, 7 SB	19	A
Bonus baby ($1.75M) can do everything and held his own against older competition.		
Michael Conforto	LF	B
.331/.403/.448, 3 HR, 3 SB	22	A-
Advanced bat with plus hit, power. Defense is nothing special. Does strike out too much.		
Kevin Plawecki	C	B
.309/.365/.460, 11 HR, 0 SB	24	AAA
Good defender who will hit for average but not much power. Good feel for the game.		
Dilson Herrera	2B	B-
.312/..371/.472, 16 HR, 23 SB	21	MLB
Swing can get long and he's undersized, but he's a grinder and advanced quickly.		
Marcos Molina	RHP	B-
1.77 ERA, 10.7 K/9, 2.1 BB/9	24	MLB
Huge upside play with great size, a fastball up to 97. Off-speeds a raw but promising.		
Rafael Montero	RHP	B-
3.66 ERA, 8.9 K/9, 4.0 BB/9	24	MLB
Undersized and fly ball-prone, but his solid arsenal plays up, and he can contribute now.		
Dominic Smith	1B	B-
.271/.344/.338, 1 HR, 5 SB	20	A
Smith was tabbed as the best pure hitter in the 2013 draft but struggled in A-ball. His numbers are deceiving, although still bad, because of his large home ballpark, and with his advanced approach at the plate, it's far too early to give up on him. He's got a fine glove, but his future depends on his bat.		

13. Colorado Rockies

Lineup	Pos					
	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
Charlie Blackmon	CF	.288	.335	.440	19	28	2.0
Corey Dickerson	LF	.312	.364	.567	24	8	2.6
Troy Tulowitzki	SS	.340	.432	.603	21	1	5.1
Carlos Gonzalez	RF	.238	.292	.431	11	3	-0.3
Nolan Arenado	3B	.287	.328	.500	18	2	3.1
Justin Morneau	1B	.319	.364	.496	17	0	2.5
Wilin Rosario	C	.267	.305	.435	13	1	0.7
D.J. LeMahieu	2B	.267	.315	.348	5	10	0.8
Drew Stubbs	OF	.289	.339	.482	15	20	2.5
Brandon Barnes	OF	.257	.293	.425	8	5	0.1
Daniel Descalso	IF	.242	.333	.311	0	1	-0.1
Nick Hundley	C	.243	.273	.358	6	1	0.3

Pitchers	L/R					
	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
Jorge De La Rosa	LH	4.10	4.34	1.24	184.1	139	2.1
Kyle Kendrick	RH	4.61	4.57	1.36	199.0	121	0.9
Jordan Lyles	RH	4.33	4.22	126.2	126.2	90	1.6
Tyler Matzek	LH	4.05	3.78	1.39	117.2	91	2.0
Eddie Butler	RH	6.75	5.69	1.88	16.0	3	0.0
LaTroy Hawkins	RH	3.31	3.39	1.20	54.1	32	0.8
Adam Ottavino	RH	3.60	3.10	1.28	65.0	70	1.3
John Axford	RH	3.95	4.34	1.45	54.2	63	-0.5



Justin Edmonds – Getty Images

Things actually aren't so bad

Despite finishing with the second-worst record in baseball last season, things aren't as bad as they appear for Colorado.

It's easy to see no hope in the Rockies, who finished with the second-worst record in baseball last season. They're buried in a division with the World Series Champion and a team with a bankroll that would make Scrooge McDuck jealous, not to mention a suddenly resurgent Padres team. The team just lost Michael Cuddyer to free agency, and former ace Jhoulys Chacin was so bad he had to be released.

But despite all the bad news, things should be actually looking up for the Rockies soon. It doesn't show up in their record, but below the surface numbers lie peripherals that indicate the Rockies are much better than they appear. Not very good, mind you, but far better than the bottom of the league.

Although they nearly had the worst record in the league, the Rockies actually produced on the level of a team much closer to the middle of the pack. Using run differential and WAR totals, RAWS predicts that the Rockies production last season was equivalent to that of a 76.6-85.4 team, which would have been the 21st-best record in the league. That 10.6-win difference between their production and actual record was the largest difference last season by four wins.

A large part of that was the offense, which scored the third-most runs in the league last year. Clearly a large part of that had to do with Coors Field, which had by far the highest park factor for runs last year (Chase Field was a distant second at 1.154 to Coors' 1.501), but the lineup also had a good number of breakout stars.

Nolan Arenado already established himself as an elite defender in a successful rookie year, but his bat caught up to glove in an even better sophomore campaign. Another nice surprise was the re-emergence of Justin Morneau, whose career appeared to be derailed by concussions, at age 33. Potentially even more surprising was the development of Corey Dickerson from near-anonymity to hitting .312/.364/.567 in left field. Now, his wOBA is .148 higher at home and .098 higher versus righties, but he appears to be another above-average regular to add to this lineup, which was key with the

13. Colorado Rockies

the egg Carlos Gonzalez laid last season.

But as good as the offense was, the pitching was utterly dreadful. Colorado was the only team to allow more than 800 runs on the season, and no single pitcher on roster created even 2.0 WAR. Developing pitching has always been a problem for the Rockies, going back to the days of free agent Mike Hampton's $121 million albatross of a contract, as Colorado hasn't been in the top half of the league in pitching WAR since 2010.

Even after trying to invest in more ground ball pitchers to counteract the fly ball effects in the high elevation of Coors Field, the Rockies still couldn't keep the ball in the park last year. Now that Brett Anderson and his 61.0% ground ball rate has moved on to the Dodgers, that strategy doesn't figure to work any better for the Rockies.

But after disasters in the past spending on free agents like Hampton, the Rockies have decided to go in another route by investing in a lot of young pitching. Each of the last three seasons, the Rockies have spent a first-round pick on a college arm, and two of them could be potentially helping them out this season.

Eddie Butler, who was the 46th overall pick out of Radford in 2012, is a great fit for Coors Field because he generates a lot of ground balls with a fastball up to 98 with lots of sink out of a three-quarter arm slot. With a promising slider and changeup to go with it, Butler has the potential to be a front-line starter down the road, although he was wild in his three starts at the end of last season.

More highly touted is Jonathan Gray, the 3rd overall pick out of Oklahoma in 2013. With a fastball that has reached 100 at times and a plus slider, he has the makings of a top-of-the-rotation starter as well, although he's a bit more fly ball prone than Butler, which won't work well in Coors Field.

Even depending on young pitchers and former top prospects Jordan Lyles and Tyler Matzek could be a boon for the Rockies as they slowly approach their prime. With Colorado's poor history of free agent signings, going with youth appears to be the best option at this point. But even if the quartet of young pitching improves along with young hitters like Arenado, Dickerson, and Charlie Blackmon, this team is still far from contention. They won't be at the bottom of the league again, but there's reason for optimism.

Strengths of the System

The power pitchers close to the majors are obviously great, but one of the most intriguing aspects of the Rockies' farm system is how toolsy all the hitting prospects are. Almost all of them have plus speed and bat tools, which are great ones to build around. David Dahl and Raimel Tapia both have a chance to be five-tool prospects in center field, and several other players have at least three plus as well.

With so many tools infield prospects as well – Rosell Herrera, Forrest Wall, Ryan McMahon, and Trevor Story – it seems very likely that at least one or two will live up to their ceiling.

Weaknesses of the System

For as toolsy as many of the prospects are, very few of them have good approaches at the plate. Some have to do with overly aggressive approaches, while some just don't want to take a walk.

McMahon has the biggest issue with this, striking out 143 times in 552 plate appearances last season. His power will help off-set the swings and misses, but it gives him a smaller margin for error if his bat tool doesn't keep improving. Wall is probably has the best approach at the plate, walking way above the average rate in rookie ball, where his advanced approach at the plate really stood out.

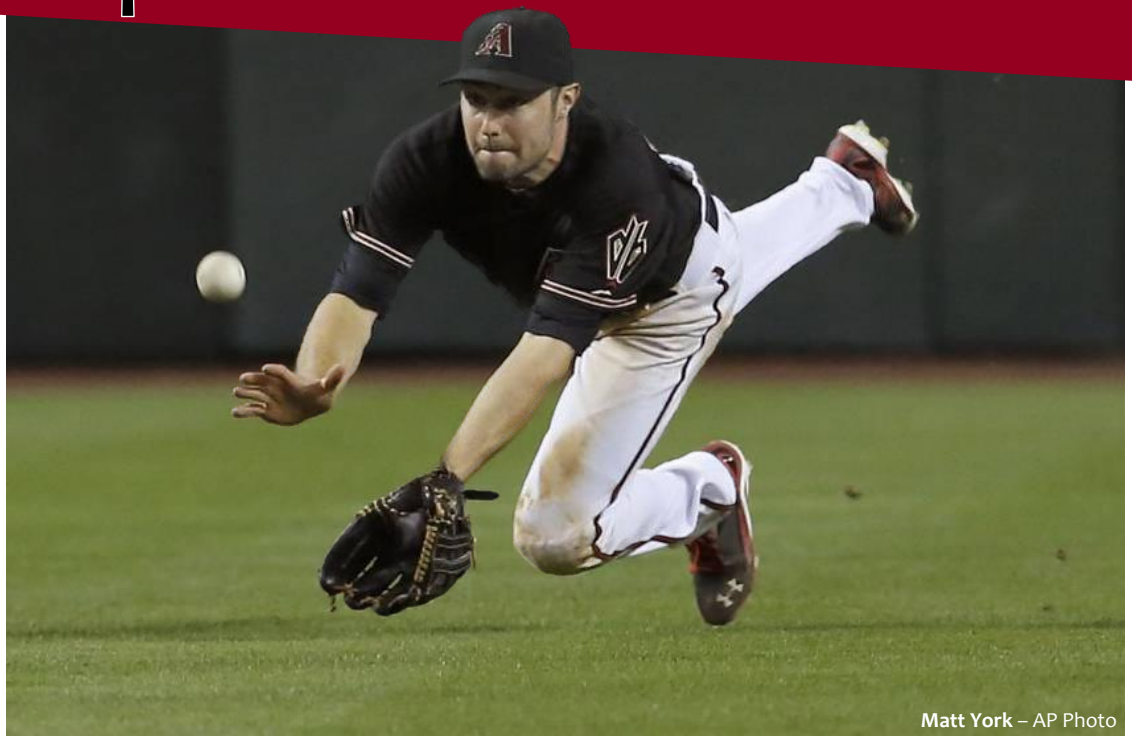
Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Jonathan Gray	RHP	A-
3.91 ERA, 8.2 K/9, 3.0 BB/9	23	AA
Fastball rarely reaches 100 anymore, but it has more run now. Ceiling remains huge.		
Eddie Butler	RHP	A-
4.32 ERA, 4.9 K/9, 3.0 BB/9	24	MLB
Incredible movement on all his pitches. Only thing holding him back is durability, injuries.		
David Dahl	CF	A-
.299/.335/.492, 14 HR, 21 SB	21	High-A
A true five-tool talent if his power sets in all the way. Injuries have been only concern.		
Kyle Freeland	LHP	B+
1.15 ERA, 7.62 K/9, 1.4 BB/9	22	A
Low arm slow adds deception to plus slider. Good command, but some platoon worries.		
Raimel Tapia	CF	B+
.326/.382/.453, 9 HR, 33 SB	21	A
Speedy defender, nice bat. Power could set in as he adds weight if he changes his stance.		
Ryan McMahon	3B	B+
.282/.358/.502, 18 HR, 8 SB	20	A
Plus power potential from the left side. Good athlete, mechanics are sound defensively.		
Forrest Wall	2B	B
.318/.416/.490, 3 HR, 18 SB	19	Rookie
Plus speed and bat. Shoulder injuries have held back otherwise good defensive tools.		
Rosell Herrera	SS	B
.244/.302/.335, 4 HR, 9 SB	22	High-A
A toolsy player, Herrera finally broke out in 2013 at hitter-friendly Asheville and came back down to Earth when he was hampered by a wrist injury in High-A. He's probably not as good or bad as either season, so his bat will still carry him whether he sticks at short or switches to third base or center.		
Tom Murphy	C	B-
.213/.312/.415, 5 HR, 0 SB	24	AA
Looks like a prototype catcher with a thick build. Injuries hampered power, throwing.		
Tyler Anderson	LHP	B-
1.98 ERA, 8.1 K/9, 3.0 BB/9	25	AA
Finesse; 4 fringy to above-average pitches. Bizarre leg kick in delivery is mesmerizing.		

14. Arizona Diamondbacks

Lineup	Pos					
	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
A.J. Pollock	CF	.302	.353	.498	7	14	3.3
Aaron Hill	2B	.244	.287	.367	10	4	-0.7
Paul Goldschmidt	1B	.300	.396	.542	19	9	4.4
Mark Trumbo	RF	.235	.293	.415	14	2	-1.3
Yasmany Tomas	3B	.350	.391	.525	2	3	–*
David Peralta	LF	.286	.320	.450	8	6	1.2
Chris Owings	SS	.261	.300	.406	6	8	1.8
Tuffy Gosewich	C	.225	.242	.310	1	0	0.1
Ender Inciarte	OF	.278	.318	.359	4	19	2.9
Jake Lamb	3B	.230	.263	.373	4	1	0.0
Cliff Pennington	IF	.254	.340	.350	2	6	1.5
Jordan Pacheco	C	.255	.299	.333	0	0	-0.9

*Cuban National Series Statistics

Pitchers	L/R					
	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
Josh Collmenter	RH	3.46	3.87	1.13	179.1	115	2.0
Jeremy Hellickson	RH	4.52	4.15	1.45	63.2	43	0.3
Rubby De La Rosa	RH	4.43	4.30	1.49	101.2	74	0.9
Chase Anderson	RH	4.01	4.22	1.37	114.1	105	0.8
Vidal Nuño	RH	4.56	4.51	1.26	161.2	129	0.9
Addison Reed	RH	4.25	4.03	1.21	59.1	69	0.0
Evan Marshall	RH	2.74	2.89	1.36	49.1	54	0.7
Oliver Perez	LH	2.91	3.23	1.26	58.2	76	0.6



Matt York – AP Photo

Making the most of a wasteland

Kevin Towers and Kirk Gibson left the Diamondbacks one of the most oddly-constructed rosters that will take a long time to fix.

In most situations, it's hard to blame an entire franchise's downfall on one or two people. There's often too many variables: players getting injured, other teams making surprising improvements, sound strategies failing with players not living up to their expectations. However, in the case of the Diamondbacks, the blame pretty squarely lies on two men's shoulders.

General Manager Kevin Towers and manager Kirk Gibson took over in Arizona before the 2011 season, and at first their old-school strategies worked. After inheriting a 65-win team, they won 94 games the next season thanks to a re-invigorated bullpen and an emphasis on striking out less.

But Towers and Gibson doubled down on their strategies and got too cute, selling off players they didn't deem tough or gritty enough for less-talented players who fit their mold. Out with Justin Upton, Trevor Bauer, and Dan Haren. In with Martin Prado, Didi Gregorius, and Joe Saunders. Things even got so out of hand that Towers fired his pitching coach Charles Nagy after the 2013 season because he wouldn't teach his players to throw at opposing batters, as if to say that kids these days were too soft.

And the more Towers and Gibson embraced their old-school strategy, the less things worked out. After winning 94 games, they took a tumble to .500 for two years before the duo went out with a bang, finishing with the worst record in baseball in 2014 and being relieved of their duties days before the end of the season.

All of this is not to say that old-school strategies can't win. The Royals have one of the most notorious old-school coaches in Ned Yost, who loves sacrifice bunts more than Kanye West loves himself, and yet they came within a game of winning a World Series. What I am trying to say, though, is that failing to innovate and keep up with the rest of the league on the fly will cause the demise of any franchise or front office member.

New general manager Dave Manager now inherits one of the most bizarrely constructed teams in major league baseball.

14. Arizona Diamondbacks

For starters, they have potentially the most depressing opening day battery: Josh Collmenter and Tuffy Gosewich, the idea of a replacement level player in human form.

Another notable aspect of the roster is that it is almost completely devoid of power, which is odd considering that Chase Field had the second-highest park factor for runs last year. Arizona traded away Miguel Montero to clear out salary, leaving them with only two starters that hit more than 10 home runs last year: Paul Goldschmidt, who missed the last two months of the season with a broken hand, and Mark Trumbo, whose poor defense and .293 OBP led to a -1.2 WAR.

Part of the reason Trumbo's defense is so bad is that he is ill equipped to play right field, one of the main reasons Towers' acquisition of him was so strange last season. Trumbo naturally plays first base or DH, but first is taken by their MVP candidate Goldschmidt, and the DH doesn't exist in the National League. Arizona's quest to add power at the expense of defense did not work out, which makes their big move this off-season even more of a head-scratcher.

Although the team made lots of small additions (Jeremy Hellickson, Rubby De La Rosa, and Allen Webster), by far their biggest move was a 6-year $68.5 million investment in 24-year old Cuban slugger Yasmany Tomas. After the recent success of Yoenis Cespedes, Yasiel Puig, and Jose Abreu, the Diamondbacks saw this as a chance to add the next great Cuban star. While his bat is not in doubt, he currently is slated to start at third base, where all indications are he is not capable of succeeding. Even if he hits like the other Cuban stars have, he could run into a Trumbo situation where his negative value in the field negates his intriguing power.

Rebuilding these Diamondbacks will be no small task for Stewart. After Towers inherited a 65-win team, he was able to turn things around but then he became too hardened in his ways, creating his own downfall. It's now Stewart and Tony La Russa's job not to fall into the same trap as their predecessors after inheriting a 64-win team. There's still talent on the team with young players like Chris Owings, Goldschmidt, and Ender Incarte (who if nothing else has an unforgettable name), but this transition will be much tougher without guys like Upton on roster. It's going to be a long road ahead.

Strengths of the System

The number of power arms in Arizona is very exciting, and they're almost all close to the majors, as well. Archie Bradley has been on the brink of joining the major league rotation for over a year now, and, although he has lower upside, Aaron Blair may be ready to help before him.

Just as exciting are two arms further away from the majors: Touki Toussaint and Yoan Lopez. Lopez is a bit of a mystery, since he has only been seen limited times since coming from Cuba, but scouts have seen mid-rotation projection from him. Toussaint has the best stuff in the system but can be wildat times.

Weaknesses of the System

Arizona is fairly devoid of position player prospects, and the ones they have don't project to be above-average starters. Jake Lamb has a good chance to play at third with a great spring and Yasmany Tomas' struggles defensively, but his below-average hit tool could keep his power from blossoming.

The most exciting hitting prospect in the system is Marcus Wilson, who has an athletic 6'3" build that still can be filled out, boding well for his future power. He has a ways to go as far as figuring out his mechanics at the plate, but if he can harness his raw tools, he will shoot up this list fast. Overall, there just aren't many impact hitters here.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
Archie Bradley	RHP	A-
4.92 ERA, 7.8 K/9, 5.4 BB/9	22	AAA
Bradley had an elbow injury at the start of 2014, which took a grade off his pitches and hurt his command. When healthy, though, he has top-of-the-rotation stuff led by a killer fastball-curveball combo. Expect his stuff to return to normal, especially if he ever irons out his imperfect delivery.		
Braden Shipley	RHP	A-
3.86 ERA, 9.1 K/9, 2.9 BB/9	23	AA
3 plus pitches, great athleticism leave little doubt he'll be a top-of-the-rotation starter.		
Touki Toussaint	RHP	B+
8.48 ERA, 10.1 K/9, 5.7 BB/9	19	Rookie
Crazy good stuff and great athleticism. All-out delivery may raise command concerns.		
Aaron Blair	RHP	B+
3.56 ERA, 10.0 K/9, 3.0 BB/9	23	AA
Plus fastball, change with a much improved curve. Big frame, nearly a finished product.		
Brandon Drury	3B	B
.299/.326/.510, 23 HR, 4 SB	22	AA
Great hit tool with nice power that doesn't fully show because of his line drive swing.		
Yoan Lopez	RHP	B
Did not play	22	--
Live fastball, nice frame, promising breaking pitches. Got a then-record $8.25M bonus.		
Jake Lamb	3B	B
.303/.375/.519, 19 HR, 3 SB	24	MLB
Lots of power and whiffs. A bit aggressive at the plate and a strong arm in the field.		
Marcus Wilson	CF	B-
.206/.297.275, 1 HR 4 SB	18	Rookie
Plus runner with good defense; swing has holes. Athletic frame that can be filled out.		
Sergio Alcantara	SS	B-
.206/.297/.275, 1 HR, 4 SB	18	Rookie
Excellent defender with a rocket arm. Won't hit for power, but has great on-base skills.		
Cody Reed	LHP	B-
2.20 ERA, 11.0 K/9, 3.3 BB/9	19	Rookie
Great 3-pitch mix, but needs to get in better shape. Hopefully that won't hurt his velocity.		

15. Philadelphia Phillies

Lineup	Pos					
	AVG	OBP	SLG	HR	SB	WAR
Ben Revere	LF	.306	.325	.361	2	49	2.0
Odubel Herrera	CF	.315	.383	.388	2	21	–*
Chase Utley	2B	.270	.339	.407	11	10	4.1
Ryan Howard	1B	.223	.310	.380	23	0	-0.3
Domonic Brown	RF	.235	.285	.349	10	7	-1.7
Cody Asche	3B	.252	.309	.390	10	0	0.4
Carlos Ruiz	C	.252	.347	.370	6	4	3.2
Freddy Galvis	SS	.176	.227	.319	4	1	-0.3
Darin Ruf	OF	.235	.310	.402	3	0	0.4
Grady Sizemore	OF	.233	.299	.354	5	6	-0.6
Cesar Hernandez	IF	.237	.290	.281	1	1	-0.6
Cameron Rupp	C	.183	.234	.250	0	0	0.0

*Minor League Statistics

Pitchers	L/R					
	ERA	FIP	WHIP	IP	K	WAR
Cole Hamels	LH	2.46	3.07	1.15	204.2	198	3.8
Cliff Lee	LH	3.65	2.96	1.38	81.1	72	1.7
Aaron Harang	RH	3.57	3.57	1.40	204.1	161	2.5
Jerome Williams	RH	4.77	4.16	1.40	115.0	82	0.3
David Buchanan	RH	3.75	4.27	1.29	117.2	71	0.6
Jonathan Papelbon	RH	2.04	2.53	0.90	66.1	63	1.7
Ken Giles	RH	1.18	1.34	0.79	45.2	64	1.7
Jake Diekman	LH	3.80	2.65	1.42	71.0	100	1.1

Jeff Hanisch – USA Today Sports

Realizing one's own downfall

Ruben Amaro Jr. is finally beginning to deconstruct his team years after the rest of the league realized he needed to.

It's been a while since the Phillies have been in contention, and it will be a while longer until they return to meaningful September baseball. These are fairly widely accepted truths in the baseball community. Everyone seems to have realized that except for Phillies GM Ruben Amaro Jr.

To his credit, Amaro has slowly but surely picked up on this development. Although it doesn't appear that he is fully ready to commit to a rebuild, Amaro has begun the process of finally deconstructing the team that won a World Series seven seasons ago – the year before he took over as the GM.

With Philadelphia having won just 73 games each of the past two seasons, there was no more pretending that this team had the potential to make the postseason as currently constructed. And with a complete lack of young talent to use in trades, Amaro was hamstrung into only one option: sell off any older players of value.

The Phillies had already lost Roy Halladay to retirement and Jayson Werth and Shane Victorino to free agency, but even after that, Amaro continued to build the team with the goal of making a postseason run. The point at which it appeared Amaro accepted his team's fate finally came this December when he shipped off perhaps the most iconic baseball player in the city of Philadelphia since Mike Schmidt: Jimmy Rollins.

After 15 seasons in the City of Brotherly Love, Rollins was still a productive player. Although he hit a career low .243, his speed, defense, and power helped him to 3.6 WAR, which is fourth in the league among shortstops. Still, though, he turned 36 last year and only had one year left on his contract, so it made sense to send him off into the sunset to a team that had a chance to make the playoffs.

The return for Rollins was actually fairly substantial, too; right-handed Zach Eflin and left-handed Tom Windle are two talented buy-low prospects. But unfortunately, that was the end of Amaro's firesale.

Some pieces on the roster are immovable, though, most notable of which is Ryan Howard. Amaro wishes he and the $60

15. Philadelphia Phillies

million remaining on his contract would be gone, and he even said as much: "It would probably bode better for the organization not with him but without him. With that said if he's with us, then we'll work around him." Amaro later apologized publicly saying that, but the sentiment remains.

Still, much of the roster could be quickly traded for a tangible return. Jonathan Papelbon and Chase Utley both have a year left on their contract and could easily provide value to a contender, yet they remain on roster. Carlos Ruiz has two years left with a $4.5 million option afterwards and could be grouped in with the two before as well.

Perhaps most surprisingly, both Cole Hamels and Cliff Lee remain untouched. Although Hamels has 4 years and $96 million remaining on his contract, he would easily fetch that much money if he were on the open market now, considering his 3.00 ERA in 1064.2 innings over the past five seasons and is only 31. Lee would be slightly harder to move at 36 with two years and $62.5 remaining on his deal, but he's been effective enough to warrant trade value despite lingering elbow issues.

But the problem isn't just that Amaro refuses to launch his team into a full-on rebuild, it's that he also makes moves that counteract a rebuild. While he didn't make any moves as strange as signing Marlon Byrd and A.J. Burnett last season for $42 million, the moves he made were still questionable. Instead of pursuing young talent, Amaro went out and signed 30-year old Chad Billingsley, who has only pitched 12 innings in the past two seasons, and 36-year old Aaron Harang.

Amaro's tenure as general manager has certainly had success. He won an average of 97.3 games his first three seasons but hasn't made it back to the postseason since. The team has been unable to adapt as its players have gotten older, in no small part because they are perhaps the least analytic and sabermetric-friendly teams in baseball. There are a variety of changes that need to take place for this team to ready to compete again, changes that would be more likely to occur under a new, more progressive front office. At this point, Amaro's shtick is clearly not working with this team, and it is time to move on before all the talent on this team goes to waste, and what talent they have in the upper minors reaches a barren wasteland of talent.

Strengths of the System

There aren't many strengths to this team's farm system, but the good news they'll be picking at the top of the draft for years to come, so there should be an influx of high-caliber players soon. The Phillies added Aaron Nola with the 7th pick in the last draft, and they'll be picking 10th this June.

Between losing their first-round picks to free agent compensation rules and relatively poor drafting, the Phillies haven't had much success through the draft until recently with J.P. Crawford. But if they continue to pick in the top 10 the next few years, they'll have a much higher chance at success. One would think.

Weaknesses of the System

Like many other teams like the White Sox and Rangers, the Phillies like to make bets on great athletes. But unlike those teams, they have not had a high success rate of those guys panning out, whether because of bad luck or poor player development.

Crawford is the exception to that notion, but the Phillies have seen especially bad results from their outfield prospects. Two-way prep players like Cord Sanberg, Kelly Dugan, and Larry Greene have flopped, and even Dylan Cozens has yet to show superb results. The Phillies need to re-examine their player development program for these types of prospects.

Top 10 Prospects	Pos	Grade
Key Stats (over multiple levels)	Age	Level
J.P. Crawford	SS	A
.285/.375/.406, 11 HR, 24 SB	20	High-A
Although no tool is outstanding, he's a top-notch athlete who consistently impresses.		
Aaron Nola	RHP	B+
2.93 ERA, 7.3 K/9, 1.6 BB/9	22	AA
Advanced college arm with great command of plus 3-pitch mix despite a weird motion.		
Maikel Franco	3B	B+
.249/.289/.407, 16 HR, 3 SB	22	MLB
Big-time power; quick hands make up for long swing. Discipline will determine value.		
Zach Eflin	RHP	B
3.80 ERA, 6.5 K/9, 2.2 BB/9	21	High-A
Workhorse starter with a plus changeup. Generates grounders with downhill angle.		
Roman Quinn	CF	B
.257/.343/.370, 7 HR, 32 SB	22	High-A
Top-notch speed will help him learn a new position. Bat is questionable; injury prone.		
Jesse Biddle	LHP	B-
4.58 ERA, 8.8 K/9, 4.9 BB/9	23	AA
Biddle's entire 2014 was lost when he got a concussion in a freak accident when he was struck in the head by hail. Although he was never the same, Biddle has three above-average pitches and a projectable frame. He's downgraded from last year but not as much as numbers would indicate.		
Matt Imhof	LHP	B-
2.98 ERA, 8.5 K/9, 2.3 BB/9	21	A
Funky delivery helps his fringy arsenal, and his 6'6" frame and young age help his case.		
Ben Lively	RHP	B-
3.04 ERA, 10.2 K/9, 3.1 BB/9	23	AA
Deceptive delivery with a solid frame, but he lacks an out pitch in his four-pitch mix.		
Dylan Cozens	RF	C+
.248/.303/.415, 16 HR, 23 SB	21	A
Former defensive line prospect; premier athlete (speed, power, arm) but very raw.		
Franklyn Kilome	RHP	C+
3.12 ERA, 5.6 K/9, 2.5 BB/9	20	Rookie
Up to 96 as he starts to fill out his lanky 6'6" frame. Lottery ticket; has a long way to go.		

Top Prospects and Predictions

Here is my list of Top 50 prospects across baseball. You can find scouting reports for each player on their team's page.

1. Byron Buxton, Twins CF
2. Kris Bryant, Cubs 3B
3. Carlos Correa, Astros SS
4. Corey Seager, Dodgers SS
5. Addison Russell, Cubs SS
6. Lucas Giolito, Nationals RHP
7. Francisco Lindor, Indians SS
8. Julio Urias, Dodgers LHP
9. J.P. Crawford, Phillies SS
10. Yoan Moncada, Red Sox 2B
11. Carlos Rodon, White Sox LHP
12. Joey Gallo, Rangers 3B
13. Archie Bradley, D-Backs RHP
14. Miguel Sano, Twins 3B
15. Blake Swihart, Red Sox C
16. Dylan Bundy, Orioles RHP
17. Jameson Taillon, Pirates RHP
18. Noah Syndergaard, Mets RHP
19. Daniel Norris, Blue Jays LHP
20. Kyle Zimmer, Royals RHP
21. Jonathan Gray, Rockies RHP
22. Henry Owens, Red Sox LHP
23. Joc Pederson, Dodgers CF
24. Austin Meadows, Pirates CF
25. Tyler Glasnow, Pirates RHP
26. Hunter Harvey, Orioles RHP
27. Jorge Soler, Cubs RF
28. Eddie Butler, Rockies RHP
29. David Dahl, Rockies CF
30. Hunter Renfroe, Padres RF
31. Robert Stephenson, Reds RHP
32. Braden Shipley, D-Backs RHP
33. Jose Berrios, Twins RHP
34. Mark Appel, Astros RHP
35. Tyler Kolek, Marlins RHP
36. Eduardo Rodriguez, Red Sox LHP
37. Aaron Sanchez, Blue Jays RHP
38. Jose Peraza, Braves 2B
39. Max Fried, Braves LHP
40. Taylor Guerreri, Rays RHP
41. Alex Jackson, Mariners RF
42. Alex Reyes, Cardinals RHP
43. Nick Gordon, Twins SS
44. Raul Mondesi, Royals SS
45. Aaron Nola, Phillies RHP
46. Nomar Mazara, Rangers RF
47. Aaron Judge, Yankees RF
48. Dalton Pompey, Blue Jays CF
49. Josh Bell, Pirates 1B
50. Andrew Heaney, Angels LHP

Postseason Predictions

Wild Card Round

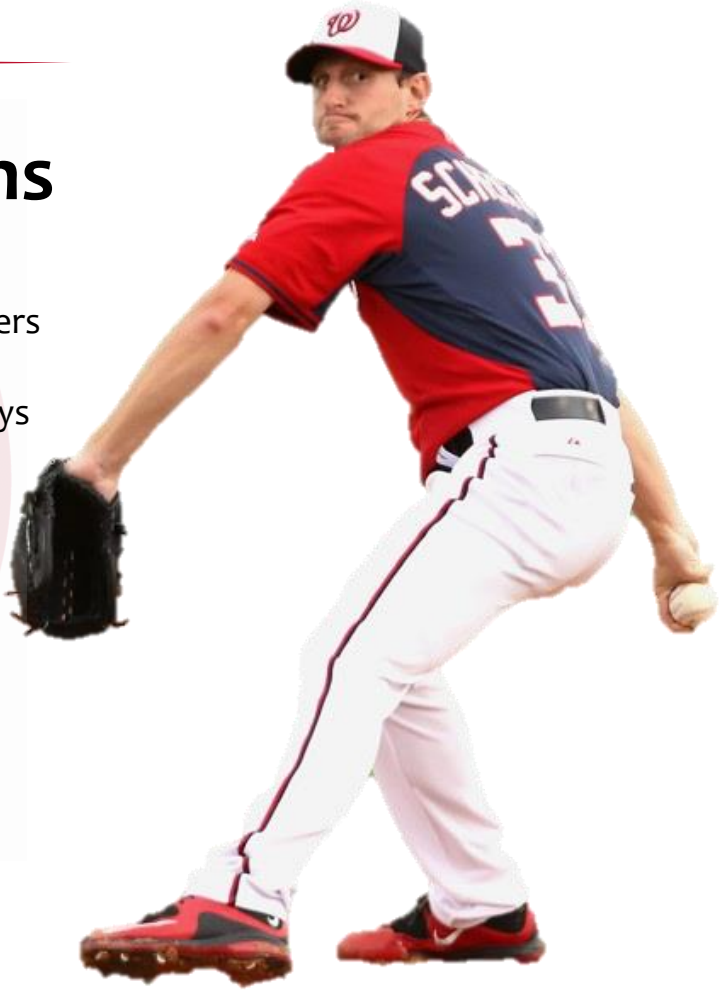
Pirates over Padres Blue Jays over Mariners

Divisional Series

Nationals over Pirates Red Sox over Blue Jays

Dodgers over Cardinals Tigers over Athletics

Championship Series

Nationals over Dodgers Red Sox over Tigers

Nationals over Red Sox in 6