



Washington Nationals

Featured Media Clips – 2014

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Article #1

Matt Williams: Before the Washington Nationals, two jarring blows altered his path

By Adam Kilgore – Washington Post (2/7/14)

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — One fall afternoon shortly after the 1996 baseball season, Matt Williams sat in the back yard of his Phoenix home, fishing out of the pond he stocked with bass. The life ahead of Williams seemed so simple. He had done the hopeful calculation of a 30-year-old ballplayer convinced of the order of the world. By the time he turned 40, his career with the San Francisco Giants would be winding down. His three young children would be out of the house soon after, off to college and jobs. He would travel with his wife to all the places he had never seen: Ireland, Asia, anywhere he wanted. “You have these thoughts and these plans,” he said.

Baseball had made him a star — he collected Gold Gloves at third base, made all-star teams and once threatened the single-season home run record. His searing intensity won him a nickname, the Big Marine, and uncommon respect — players he intimidated would later call him one of their favorite teammates. He devoted himself to family — “I could tell when I first met him,” his wife, Tracie, had told a Sports Illustrated reporter two years earlier, “that this was a family man.”

Now, as he fished, the phone rang. The Giants’ general manager, Brian Sabean, told him he had been traded to the Cleveland Indians. He remembers, in his shock, hearing Sabean ask whether he could get to Cleveland for a news conference.

That February, he reported to Winter Haven, Fla., for spring training. Tracie flew in later to meet him, walked through the door and said she wanted a divorce.

“She told me that she had fallen in love with somebody else and that she was going to go in that direction,” Williams said. “When you get word like that, what do you say?”

The jarring, one-two punch altered Williams’s path. He thinks often about how his hardest, darkest year led ultimately to all that he has now. He would never have requested a trade to Arizona. He would never have met Erika Monroe, his wife for the past 11 years and the mother of 10-year-old daughter Madison. He would never have become the fifth manager of the Washington Nationals, the job he will begin this week, when spring training opens in Viera, Fla.

“I learned a lot about myself that year, and how resilient you can be,” Williams said. “And I also learned how fragile people can be, too. All that helps me with regard to this job. I think that was a very big moment in my life and my professional career, and it intertwined — which it seems to always intertwine. People try to separate work and family, but oftentimes you can’t. It kind of meshes together.”

One day this January, Williams grinned as he welcomed two guests into his Mediterranean ranch house just outside Phoenix. “How do you guys like this weather?” he gushed. As he walked toward the kitchen, he saw the miniature bulldog he bought for Madison squatting in the hallway.

“Clementine!” he yelled, laughing.

The Big Marine grabbed paper towels, knelt and cleaned his dog's mess.

At noon, Williams retreated to his office, where books fill shelves from ceiling to floor. He sat in a leather chair behind an oak desk. He called Mark Weidemaier, a close friend he hired to be the Nationals' defensive coach. They had been talking for two hours daily, pinning down a minute-by-minute plan for spring training. Already, Williams had mapped out all 41 days, but details remained. He expects he will stay at Nationals Park until 3 a.m. some nights this season, worrying about the next day, or the next series, or the next month. He cannot sleep if he feels unprepared, a remnant from his playing days.

"Humina-ha!" he said into the phone, by way of greeting. "Let's start through it. We've got to allow 15 minutes for the position players to sign autographs instead of 10. . . ."

Thinking and planning occupy much of Williams's time. He chuckles at how deeply he has considered ways to exploit the new rules concerning catcher collisions and replay reviews. He requested one idea remain private, because he wanted to run it by the players involved first. "They're going to think, 'You're out of your freakin' mind,'" Williams said.

His son, Jake, calls the piercing gaze that became part of his persona "the Marine Stare." He scared teammates and opponents alike. "You're not sure what's going on behind those eyes," said John Hart, the Indians' general manager who traded for him. "You go, 'I'm not sure I want to get lit up by this guy.'"

The stare comes from concentration, not intimidation. Erika sees it when he is trying to decide on the best way to replace a light bulb.

"I'm probably an introvert by nature," Williams said. "I think a lot, and don't necessarily verbalize."

An enforcer and a friend

Sally Williams and her husband, Arthur, whom everyone in tiny Big Pine, Calif., called Sandy, had raised three boys when their fourth was born. They named him Matthew Derrick. "I was the 'whoops,'" Williams said.

Williams idolized his brothers. "My objective," he said, "was to be them." They played eight-man football in Big Pine, a 900-person town on the eastern slope of the Sierras, and they all won the high school's award for best player. His youngest brother, Bart, was nine years older, so Matt spent time alone, like an only child, but also had an example to strive for.

Williams demanded of himself a purposeful, meticulous focus. He could not understand when others didn't think like him.

"Even back in high school, he could basically — he didn't have to say anything," said Bob Ayrault, a high school teammate who briefly pitched in the majors. "All he had to do was look at you, and you either knew he was [angry] or you did something good. It was like at home with your dad."

After Williams turned 9, Sandy's work took the family to Carson City, Nev. His brothers by then had graduated from high school, and Matt had more time by himself, to think. He poured himself into sports.

“When we were young, it was a one-McDonald’s town and one-movie-theater town,” said Charlie Kerfeld, a high school teammate who went on to pitch in the major leagues.

Fear, Williams said, drove him. Disappointing others worried him, so he berated himself after he struck out. Not being prepared gnawed at him, so he fielded extra groundballs until his legs ached and took batting practice until his fingers bled.

“I couldn’t let myself take a day off,” Williams said. “I used to get mad — really mad — when everybody else was itching for a day in the cage and not getting on the field. I’d get mad. All those fears would come to the forefront. I’d go, ‘I can’t take my groundballs, so I won’t be ready, and therefore I may make an error, and therefore we may lose the game.’ All that stuff started piling on.”

Early in his major league career, Giants teammate Kevin Mitchell told him to leave the batting cage. Williams kept hitting. The argument escalated until Mitchell told him to meet him in the parking lot. Once he finished hitting, Williams marched to the parking lot.

“Kevin was surprised Matt had showed up,” said Dusty Baker, then the Giants’ manager. “And then they became best friends.”

The pattern repeated: A teammate would be scared by Williams — and then bond with him. Williams never aimed to be a leader, but his consistency made him a natural clubhouse enforcer. He would yell at rookies for mistreating the Giants’ clubhouse attendant. And he would also yell at the best player in the game if need be.

Barry Bonds joined the Giants in 1993, and in an early season game that year, a right fielder named Mark Carreon dropped a flyball. Bonds chastised him. Williams approached Bonds, and by the time they reached the dugout, they were exchanging expletives.

“I stepped in and said, ‘Listen, this guy is pulling as hard for this team as you are. So knock it off. We’re not going to accept that around here,’ ” Williams said. “It’s one thing if he doesn’t hustle to first. But he misplayed a ball. It happens. I thought that was a little overboard, so I stuck up for Mark.”

Now, Williams calls Bonds a close friend. They lived near one another, and their children played together.

“Initially, there was an intimidation factor because of his intensity,” said pitcher Curt Schilling, Williams’s teammate for four years in Arizona. “He was probably one of my favorite teammates of all time, just because day in, day out, he never changed. He was always intense, but it was a good intensity.”

In his new role, Williams knows, he will need to alter his focus. He will want to be at every drill, pounding fungoes or throwing batting practice, but he understands he needs a wider lens. The time since his retirement as a player has already mellowed him. As a coach with the Diamondbacks, Williams learned to communicate more, to let his players know his thought process. When old teammates bump into Erika, they tell her, “Matt’s so happy.”

“I tend to take things very seriously,” Williams said. “I see people that are my friends or acquaintances that are just these happy-go-lucky folks, and I can’t understand how they do that. Because I can’t turn it on and off. When I show up to the ballpark at spring training at 5 o’clock in the morning, it’s all about that. I don’t

deviate very well from the path. Maybe that's it. Maybe I'm not happy-go-lucky in that regard. Probably because I have to concentrate on what I'm doing or I mess it up."

He likes losing himself in his work or in his family. Plotting which outfielders will take flyballs after stretching on Feb. 21 may sound like drudgery. Williams loves it.

"That's part of the joy," Williams said. "Part of the joy is concentrating and being whatever I am at that point. When I played, I didn't hear the crowd. Maybe that's my comfort zone because I've done it my whole life. So maybe I need to get into the place to be comfortable so I can in turn do my job right, try to do it well, maybe be happy within it."

Williams paused, sat back in a lounge chair next to his pool, and shrugged.

"I don't know," he said, laughing. "I need to talk to a doctor about it."

Quite a ride to Arizona

Williams has tamed his intensity, but as a rookie trying to stick in the majors, it nearly broke him. The Giants drafted him third overall in 1986 and only added to his natural propensity to apply pressure. The Giants' general manager then, Al Rosen, had been a star third baseman. In Williams he saw a protege, an odd relationship for a player and a general manager. Rosen ordered Williams's bats himself — Model 016, the same Rosen used. When Williams struggled, he would yell at him personally.

And Williams struggled. He played some 50 minor league games before the Giants, beset by injuries and infatuated with Williams's potential, brought him up in 1987. He couldn't lay off curveballs in the dirt, and his average remained under .200 all year. The Giants toggled him between San Francisco and their Class AAA team in Phoenix. The same shuttling happened in 1988 — Williams would be promoted to the majors, struggle, and find himself heading back to the minors.

In the spring of 1989, Giants Manager Roger Craig told Williams: "You're going to be my third baseman. Don't worry about it. I don't care if you hit .150." A month into the season, Williams was batting .130, and the Giants shipped him to Phoenix. After the flight, he called his parents. He considered walking away from the sport.

"I just don't know," Williams told them. "I don't know if I'm going to be able to be good enough."

"Make them rip the jersey off you," his dad said. "If you quit, you'll never know."

The reason it finally clicked still eludes Williams. Experience, he figures. When Williams returned to the majors that summer, he started to lay off curves in the dirt. Baker, his future manager but then the hitting coach, unlocked the power in his swing. In October, months after he told his parents he might quit, Williams played third base and shortstop in the 1989 World Series.

His career blossomed. He led the league in RBI in 1990. He won his first of four Gold Gloves in 1991. "He was the most sure-handed, accurate-throwing third baseman I ever had," Baker said. By 1996, he had made three straight all-star games. The 1994 strike interrupted his bid to break Roger Maris's home run

record — he had blasted a league-high 43 homers in 112 games. He was a star, and he started to plan the rest of his life.

And then the Giants traded him and his wife left him.

“What are you going to do?” Williams said. “In this game, one day you’re the hero, the next day you’re the goat. So you have to have a very short memory in everything. It’s different with family, of course. I just kind of took my baseball philosophy and moved forward. She wanted to go that direction. She decided to do that. What can you do about it, other than protect, as much as you can, your kids and your career? It wasn’t easy.”

Professionally, Williams cherished the Indians. He fit into the middle of a lineup that included Jim Thome, Manny Ramirez, David Justice and Sandy Alomar. (“We [expletive] boat-raced people, man!” he said, leaping from his chair.) He separated the strain of his personal life from his performance.

“It was common knowledge there were marital issues,” Hart said. “When he walked in that door at 11, you never knew it. This guy was a consummate, true professional. He was a star with blue-collar qualities. You never worried about Matt Williams. He carried weight in the clubhouse, but he didn’t throw it around.”

Personally, the time away from his kids ripped him apart. Williams’s children remained in Phoenix with Tracie, flying to meet him on weekends. Alysha was 8, Jake was 7 and Rachel was 5. He felt a fierce need to protect them, to make them know the divorce was not their fault. His kids would land in Cleveland on Friday, usually after a game had started; Saturday raced by; by Sunday’s day game, they were headed back to Arizona.

“He wanted to make sure when we came to Cleveland to make us comfortable,” Jake Williams said. “When myself and my sisters were at the ballpark, he was still Dad. He wasn’t the third baseman for the Indians.”

As the Indians advanced to the 1997 World Series and his divorce was finalized, the struggle to balance his career and his children wore on Williams.

After Game 7 of the World Series lurched into extra innings and the Florida Marlins won on a walk-off single, Williams met agent Jeff Moorad at the Fontainebleau hotel in Miami Beach, armed with two yellow legal pads. He made lists of reasons to stay in Cleveland and reasons to leave. Before 6 a.m., when both men had to leave and catch flights, Williams arrived at a decision: He needed to go home.

Williams told Moorad he wanted to be traded to the expansion Arizona Diamondbacks. If not, he would retire.

“Here’s one of my all-star clients who, for all I knew, was going to make a decision to walk away from the game as well as a contract that was paying him \$6 million a year,” Moorad said.

Williams will not offer every detail of why he felt so desperate to move back to Arizona. But a judge had been compelled to grant Williams — a ballplayer who traveled constantly — full custody. “There were a lot of reasons I needed to be there,” he said. “I had to come back here, because I had to protect the kids.”

Hart was stunned by Williams's decision but agreed to try to move him to the Diamondbacks. On Dec. 1, after two months of maneuvering, Cleveland traded him to Arizona for Travis Fryman, a prospect and cash. Like that, the longest year of his life had come to a close.

"I think in times like that, you need to prioritize what the real goals are," Williams said. "I don't think it changed me. Maybe it helped me be a little more a leader. You have to take responsibility at that point. It might have helped. I wouldn't recommend that for anybody to help them further themselves in their career. It was interesting, though. Everything was brand new all of a sudden. It was like a new chapter. Everything was new."

'Not my finest hour'

Williams viewed leaving a contender for an expansion team as a significant professional risk. But from the start, it was a thrill. The Diamondbacks sold out most every night their first season. Owners poured money into the team, and free agents flocked. During Game 7 of the 2001 World Series, Williams was standing on deck when Luis Gonzalez floated Mariano Rivera's cutter over the infield for the championship-winning run.

The year after the World Series title, Williams made a decision that, for a swath of baseball fans, sullied his career. During spring training in 2002, he was taking groundballs and his foot slipped and turned the wrong way. He dislocated his ankle and tore several ligaments.

During rehab, Williams bought \$11,600 worth of human growth hormone, steroids and other drugs from a clinic in Palm Beach, Fla. In November 2007, the San Francisco Chronicle uncovered the purchase through business records. Later that year, Williams was named in the Mitchell report, baseball's official documentation of the use of performance-enhancing drugs in the game.

Williams told the Chronicle he had tried HGH and steroids on the recommendation of a doctor. He also said he ceased using them after he did not like the side effects: Because his appetite increased and his injury made him sedentary, he got fat.

Williams said he tried the drugs only out of motivation to play again. He realizes that if people do not believe him there is nothing he can say to change their minds. He feared teams would not consider him for managerial jobs because of the incident, and he does not want his past steroid use to distract the Nationals.

He regrets it. He is embarrassed by it. He lives with it. He knows he will be referred to as the first manager — the highest-ranking on-field baseball official — to have admitted performance-enhancing drug use. He hopes, in time, he will be viewed as the man who led Washington to a championship.

"It's documented that I'm in the Mitchell report," Williams said. "It was 10, 12 years ago. It was certainly not my finest hour in baseball. I realize that, and everybody else realizes that. But I hope that in 10, 12 years, I'll be just known as a good manager, and that will be something that's in the past. I'm going to work hard every day to try to accomplish that goal."

The next adventure

Neither of them wanted to be there. Erika, a news anchor and show host, had just finished a day's worth of television, caked in makeup and cranky. Williams hated parties like this one, when you had to stand around and mingle with corporate sponsors. When Erika first spotted him, he was holding a glass of water and staring at his feet.

They talked for hours. She thought he was funny and articulate. He thought she was beautiful and smart. Williams left a voice mail the next day letting her know that he wanted to continue their conversation. She thought it was sweet, but she didn't want to date an athlete.

"But Matt was persistent," Erika said. "And we ended up finally, after a few months, going on a date. After that, it was over. It just took getting to that table."

When Williams — with a brief, second failed marriage behind him — invited Erika to meet his kids for the first time, the home struck her as a sanctuary. She admired how he protected them, cared for them. She and Williams were married within a year of their first date, and in the 11 years since, Erika can count their arguments on one hand.

Once Madison was born, in 2004, Williams knew there would be no traveling the world. He had just retired, he was 38, and he knew nothing but baseball. The Diamondbacks hired him for front-office work and broadcasting. Once he started to coach, he knew what he wanted for a career. As a coach, he arrived at the park earlier and stayed later than as a player.

"It's a grind," Williams said. "I love the grind part of it. I love doing all that."

The many phases of his career, Williams believes, prepared him to manage. He can relate to any player. He may never have had the raw ability of Bryce Harper or Stephen Strasburg, but he played with Bonds. Williams can be honest when he tells Danny Espinosa he knows what he's going through. He has chased records, been sent down, gotten released and nearly walked away.

"I'm genuinely interested in them as people and how they do," Williams said. "I want Bryce to become a Hall of Famer. I want Stephen to become a Hall of Famer. I want everybody on our team to reach every goal that they want. I can help them along way. Our staff can help them along the way. But I want to be there to experience that with them, too. The not-so-good times where you've got to make those decisions is going to be tough. But that's part of the job, too. I'll deal with it when I have to. But these guys have got to be our guys. These are our guys."

Williams also wrestled personal demons and kept playing. The upheaval from his first divorce has never totally ceased. But his grown kids — now 24, 23 and 21 — have found colleges and jobs they like. He's got a big house with a movie theater in the basement and a snoring puppy in the living room. Erika is busy and happy, and when Madison gets home from school, she rushes through the door and gives him a hug.

"Everything that happens in your life brings you to where you are now," Erika said. "I think Matt's been able to see that now."

What's next for Williams? He wants to win a World Series. He wants to make Washington home. He has never been to Europe, and he does not know if he will ever go, but Matt Williams doesn't make those kinds of plans anymore.

Article #2

Outtakes from our profile on Matt Williams

By Adam Kilgore – Washington Post (2/7/14)

In Sunday's Post, we ran our first big profile of new Nationals Manager Matt Williams. Along with a dozen or so complementary interviews, I spent a good chunk of two days with Williams, interviewing him at his home in Scottsdale, Ariz. As the story depicts, hopefully, Williams was thoughtful and open talking about how he got here.

Though the story ended up being long, there are still several tidbits, quotes and notes that didn't fit into the piece or got left on the cutting-room floor. If you're curious for more about Williams, here are some of them:

>>> Before General Manager Mike Rizzo called Williams and offered him an interview late in the fall, Williams had only interviewed for one other managerial job — the Rockies, last year. It's was a unique job interview. The bulk of the time was spent discussing how Williams would adapt to the altitude at Coors Field. With the Nationals, it was different. He spoke with a room full of ownership and front-office officials, about 12 people in all, with Rizzo leading the questioning.

"They asked me questions not about the team, but about how I would handle certain situations," Williams said. "Do you believe in the sacrifice bunt? Yeah, of course, I believe in the sacrifice bunt in the right situation. There's a lot of things to think about in that regard. How's the guy behind him been hitting? How's he match up against that particular pitcher? Where are we at in a winning or losing streak? I was at least prepared for those answers.

"Beyond that, the Lerner's asked me, what are your desires? What do you want to do? Is this a long-term commitment that you want to make? I want to do this. I want to be as good at this as I can possibly be. I'll tell you that not many first-time managers are provided this kind of opportunity. Nonetheless, it goes without saying, I was excited about that. But how can I help make this team better? How can I help this team get to the pinnacle of our sport? Given the talent of our team, given what they already accomplished two years ago. They asked me questions about what my goals are, which was really important to me and really refreshing to me because they wanted to understand me as a person and what my desires were, what I wanted to accomplish. Specifics on dealing with players. How do I give guys days off? What would I talk about with the club? What would I emphasize with the club? It was probably three or four hours of talking. I tried to give answers that were honest to me and how I would approach it."

Williams did not hear back from Rizzo until Oct. 25, the day the Nationals offered him the job. In between, there was "a lot of pacing the halls," Williams said. Reports started to leak early that morning that the Nationals planned to hire Williams — but he says he had no idea.

"It was really funny," Williams said. "That morning, I was asleep here. We're [three] hours behind. All of a sudden, my phone starts to go, bing-bing, bing-bing, bing-bing, bing-bing. All these people are going, 'Congratulations.' I'm going, 'What are you people talking about?' I had no idea.

"I hadn't heard from Rizz at that point. I didn't talk to Rizz until later in the day. People are calling me. 'Can we get a comment?' I'm going, 'I don't know anything yet, that they want me to take the job or anything yet.'"

>>> Much has been made, rightfully so, of Williams's attention to detail in his spring training schedule. He also wants to have a little fun with it. At the top of each daily schedule for spring training, Williams printed either a quote or a "word of the day." The quote for the first full squad workout, for instance, is: "Lead, follow or get the hell out of the way."

On other days, there will be a word of the day. Players may have to mix in, say, the word "violet" into interviews. Williams wants players to think in different ways and to embrace the long process of spring.

>>> On the first day we met with Williams, he wore a red polo with the Nationals' logo. Somehow, it came up that Williams had gone online at the team store to buy a bunch of shirts and gear himself, as opposed to the Nationals sending him it for free. Not sure why I found that so amusing, but I did.

>>> Williams's outlook on young players may be shaped by his own difficult acclimation to the majors. The Giants rushed him. They took him third overall in 1986. Williams played half a season at Class A and, by virtue of a clause in his contract, attended spring training in 1987. He played well enough that the Giants decided he would bypass Class AA and start the season at AAA Phoenix. In the first week of his season, the Giants' shortstop blew out his hamstring. Williams received a call from Wendell Kim, his Class AAA manager. "Pack your bags," he said. "You're starting in Dodgers Stadium."

"What?" Williams replied. "What the [expletive]?"

Wearing a No. 60 uniform with no name across his shoulder, facing Orel Hershiser, Williams felt overwhelmed. He hit .188 that season and .205 in 1988 as he toggled between the majors and minors. The reps he should have been receiving in Class AA or AAA instead came in the majors. Whereas Davey Johnson voted for aggression in promoting players, Williams's experience may make him a more conservative voice in that regard.

Williams also had a rough start because of the pressure he applied to himself. He realizes his career may have been smoother had he not beaten himself up after failure, but he knows, too, that he could not change his personality. The easy way was not his way, and he understands, as a manager, that he cannot force his players to take on new personalities. He has to work within the framework of each individual.

"In reality, it is who they are," Williams said. "So you have to work within those guidelines and try to nudge them one way or the other. To make wholesale changes, people just can't do that. It's their personality. It's what makes them who they are."

>>> Before Williams' family moved from tiny Big Pine, Calif., to less-tiny Carson City when he was 9, his mother, Sally, was a cop. She became the first female deputy in Inyo County. As part of her duties, Williams said, she processed the female members of the Manson family after authorities discovered their compound in Death Valley, which is located in Inyo County. "Kinda cool," Williams said.

>>> As a sophomore in high school, Williams's high school coach added him to the varsity team. But he played him at shortstop and chose to use the designated hitter for him instead of the pitcher. Williams's

father threatened to move the family to Reno. The Williamses ended up staying, and as a junior Williams won Nevada's state player of the year award.

>>> Williams decided he wanted to manage shortly after his coaching career began. When the Diamondbacks' third base coach job opened after the 2010 season, Williams was aggressive in letting Arizona manager Kirk Gibson know he wanted to shift from first base to third base. Gibson agreed. Immediately after the year, Williams made a rare decision: he traveled every day from Phoenix to Tucson, 90 minutes each way, to work as a third base coach in the Diamondbacks' instructional league. That's very much a Matt Williams anecdote. He has something like a compulsion in wanting to be prepared.

"Not many guys would do that," Arizona GM Kevin Towers said. "He's an animal. If I had to define Matt Williams, it would be A-N-I-M-A-L."

>>> The first Nationals player Williams named in our conversations was Danny Espinosa. We were talking about learning different personalities on the team and how he views his role as getting close to players. This is what he said:

"When I get down there, I need to spend a little bit of time with Danny Espinosa. Just got to spend some time with him. Not talk to him about his swing or anything like that. I just, I got to spend some time and understand him. So if there's something that we need to do during the course of spring or during the course of the season or whatever it is, then I have some reference and I can talk to him man to man. I think he needs to be and I think he's going to be a very important part of our team.

"I talked to Bryce. We all know Bryce. He's on Twitter. He's got his UFC belt and all that stuff and he takes the picture and his arms are huge and he's working out like a crazy man. Got to love that. But I also pick up the phone and talk to him. He opens up, and it's like, you realize this dude's only 21. He's in this bubble. Everybody expects great things from him — he's going to be this Hall of Fame player, all of that stuff. I want to just help him get through all of that so he can go play. That's my job. The intricacies of all the little stuff, I can't deal with anymore. Because I just don't have time. I got to take care of my guys. These are my guys. I got to make sure I'm there for support. I'm there to give advice if they want. I'm there to help them be as good as they can be. I struggle with that still. And that will be a process.

"It's a very unique situation he's got. But I also played with some guys that have that type of bubble. I played with Bonds. I played with Johnson. Randy Johnson cannot hide anywhere. He can't go out to a restaurant. He's 6-10 for crying out loud. Randy has been forced to put this wall up a little bit, because he just can't get away. Barry was the next Willie Mays from the time he left the womb. That's hard. I've had experience with guys that have had to live that. Bryce is a little bit like that. Stephen [Strasburg] is a little bit like that. There's a lot been put on them at a very young age. I think they've both handled it very well. My hope is to help them get through that and just go play. When they do that, they're really good."

>>> The great what-if in Williams's playing career is whether he would have set the single-season home run record if not for the strike in 1994. Williams had mashed 43 homers in 112 games when the season was shut down. Williams doubts that he would have made it to 62 — he actually thinks teammate Barry Bonds, who had 37 homers, had a better chance.

“It was interesting, because there wasn’t a whole lot of press about it, because everybody was talking about the strike,” Williams said. “Everybody thought, well, it’s not going to happen anyway, because they’re going to go on strike. So don’t worry about it. As it turns out, the strike happened.”

Let the record show: In the 162 games stretching from opening day 1994 and into 1995, Williams hit 62 homers — one more than Maris’s record.

“But I’m sure there would have been pressure,” Williams said. “I don’t know how I would have handled that.”

Williams doesn’t have any regrets about not getting the shot to break Maris’s record, largely because he didn’t think he was really having one of his best seasons. Despite all the homers, he had a .319 on-base percentage and just 16 doubles. He thought his homer outburst was fluky — and, indeed, he would never hit more than 35 in a full season.

“I’d hit the ball in the gap, and it would just be high enough,” Williams said. “I hit the foul pole I don’t know how many times.”

Williams looks back more ruefully on his 1995 season than the strike. That year, he said, he was hitting better than he ever had or ever would. In 76 games, Williams hit .336/.399/.647 with 23 homers and 17 doubles. At one point, he was leading the league in average. But his season was cut short when he fouled a ball off his foot and broke it.

“Man,” he said, “that could have been a good year.”

>>> The story of how Williams ended up in Arizona is amazing all around, one of the most fascinating trades in baseball history. Williams wanted to play for the Diamondbacks or retire because he felt the need to move close to his children after a surprise divorce. He asked the Indians to trade him. John Hart — who had gone into the offseason with a top priority of signing Williams to an extension — faced a high degree of difficulty. Williams had not only requested a trade; he had requested a trade to one specific team, and that specific team had yet to play its first game.

A lot of pieces needed to fall into place, and there were some nervous moments for Williams. Jeff Moorad, Williams’s agent at the time, was close with Joe Garagiola and Jerry Colangelo, who ran the expansion Diamondbacks. He quietly told them Williams could be had, and he urged them to draft specific players in the expansion draft who might be of interest to Cleveland.

As Williams waited for his future to be resolved, the Diamondbacks traded for Travis Fryman, a third baseman, from the Tigers. “Matty was crushed,” Moorad said. “Matty was like, ‘Am I done? Is this it?’ ”

It turned out the Fryman trade was actually a coup for Williams. The Diamondbacks flipped Fryman to Cleveland, the centerpiece of the trade that sent Williams back to his hometown.

Another incredible piece of trivia from the trade: Williams and Moorad flew to Cleveland to request the trade in person. The Indians sent an intern to pick them up at the airport. That intern was Josh Byrnes, who would become the GM of the Diamondbacks when Moorad owned a primary stake in the team.

>>> Williams has a monstrous basement in his home, which includes a wine closet, a movie theater with a dozen or so plush chairs and a game room with a pool table. The game room is where he keeps the mementos from his career, and he has some good ones — all-star jerseys, Silver Sluggers, a photograph of himself with Willie Mays. The items he tabbed as his most cherished reveal something about his defensive emphasis with the Nationals: He took the most pride in his four Gold Gloves.

>>> All the baseball people who played with Williams, played for him in Arizona or coached him believe he's going to succeed. He seems to have a way that inspires confidence in him. "There's no B.S.," Towers said. "He'll have a little bit of fun. But he wants to win in the worst way, man. His focus, the minute he walks into that clubhouse and the minute he leaves there, is all baseball."

No one showed more confidence than Ron McNutt, Williams's high school coach from Carson City. "I'm a gambling guy," McNutt said. "I've already put 20 bucks they're going to get to the end of the playoffs."

Article #3

Mike Rizzo's keys to the Jose Lobaton deal: pitching framing and Felipe Rivero

By Adam Kilgore – Washington Post (2/13/14)

As pitchers and catchers officially reported for spring training Thursday morning, the Nationals executed their final requisite roster addition of the offseason, acquiring a tested, viable backup catcher to place behind Wilson Ramos for a young pitcher while also replenishing their farm system.

The Nationals traded right-handed starter Nate Karns to the Tampa Bay Rays for backup catcher Jose Lobaton and two 22-year-old minor leaguers – left-handed starter Felipe Rivero and outfielder Drew Vetteson, both of whom Baseball America ranked among Tampa's top 20 prospects.

The Nationals sought to acquire a backup for Ramos all winter and eyed Lobaton, 29, as far back as the winter meetings. Lobaton appeared in 96 games last year for the Rays and hit .249/.320/.398 with seven homers. The Nationals coveted him for his ability to switch-hit and his defensive acumen, particularly his ability to frame pitches, which General Manager Mike Rizzo called "a key." The Nationals will also control Lobaton's contractual rights through the 2017 season.

"He fit the criteria we're looking for," Rizzo said. "Switch hitting is certainly a bonus. Our statistical analysis people rank all the catchers in baseball, and he ranks very well in the framing."

Lobaton woke up in his Orlando home at 7 a.m. Thursday morning, unable to sleep. Rumors of a trade had swirled the night before, and he did not know if he would report to the Rays or Nationals for spring training. "I told my wife, 'I can't sleep. I'm thinking too much,'" Lobaton said. "'If I'm going to be part of the Nationals or not. I just want to know. I just want to make sure I'm going somewhere.'" "

Lobaton received a call from the Rays around 10 a.m. with news of the deal. "I feel happy, because it's a new team, they've got faith in me." But he also had to say goodbye to his teammates from the past four years. Rays ace David Price called him and asked, "What happened?" He spoke with all of the Rays' starting pitchers.

His closeness with the staff speaks to Lobaton's priority. He views helping his pitching staff as his primary mission, ahead of his offensive production.

"I'm the kind of catcher, I like to talk to the pitcher," Lobaton said. "Whatever they want. I'm not the kind of catcher who is like, 'I want something, I'm going to call it.' I want to do whatever they want. He's got the ball. I'm not the kind of guy who is going to force what pitch I want. It's not like that. Communication, we worked a lot with the Rays on that. 'Just let me know' – that's all I say to the pitchers. Whatever you want, I'm going to do my best."

Lobaton arrived at Space Coast Stadium just before 1 p.m. and immediately sat next to Ramos. Ramos, incidentally, played with Lobaton in Venezuela, the home country of both players, in the winter of 2010.

"Good guy, good teammate," Ramos said. "Hopefully, he will help the team. That's what we want. He's good. He hits well both sides of the plate. He's got good defense, a good arm. He can call the games. He's a good catcher, man."

Lobaton planned to lean on Ramos to learn the Nationals' rotation, which he called "unbelievable." "It made me feel better that the team has faith in me, that you can handle those guys," Lobaton said. "It's a long spring training, and we've got time to get ready and be in that place that I want to be with them."

Karns reported to Space Coast Stadium aware of trade rumors involving his name. His agent notified him while he ate dinner Wednesday night. His mother called and asked him, "Is it true?" He replied, "I have no idea."

In 2013, Karns made his debut with the Nationals, the team that drafted him in the 12th round in 2009. He endured major shoulder surgery before the Nationals named their 2012 minor league pitcher of the year. In three big league starts, he allowed 10 earned runs in 12 innings, including five homers. He was eager to compete for the Nationals' fifth starter spot.

And then, before 10 a.m., Rizzo pulled Karns into an office and told him he had been traded. Karns had "no hard feelings." He stuffed his belongings into a big, black garbage bag. Across the room, Sandy Leon and Jhonatan Solano, the two young catchers who planned to compete to backup Ramos, wore long faces as they showed each other their phones.

"Like I said to Karns when I talked to him today, we're really proud of Karns," Rizzo said. "This was a 12th-round pick that had pretty major shoulder surgery and grinded through and battled back. A really good, young, upside pitcher that pitched in the big leagues for us. He's got a good mental makeup. He's a pitcher that's going to help Tampa Bay and was a guy that in our plans."

The Nationals, Rizzo said, would not have made the trade if Tampa had not included Rivero and Vettleson.

Rizzo was especially bullish about Rivero, a 22-year-old who last season posted a 3.40 ERA in 25 games (23 starts) at Class High-A. Rizzo considered him a replacement for Robbie Ray, whom the Nationals traded to Detroit as part of the package that landed Doug Fister. Baseball America ranked him the Rays' No. 17 prospect. "A huge-upside left-handed starter," Rizzo called him.

The Rays chose Vettleson with the 42nd overall pick in 2010. Last year at High A, Vettleson hit .274/.331/.388 with four homers. Baseball America rated him the No. 20 overall Rays prospect.

One American League scout called the Lobaton-Karns piece of the deal “even.” He saw Karns as a power arm who profiles eventually as a reliever and Lobaton as an experienced, switch-hitting catcher who will provide the Nationals what they need behind Wilson Ramos.

Lobaton looked forward to meeting his new teammates, with an assist from Ramos.

“I don’t know nobody,” Lobaton said. “Now it’s time to make new friends.”

Article #4

Nationals’ Doug Fister knows he can be of service

By Adam Kilgore – Washington Post (2/14/14)

VIERA, Fla — Doug Fister has always wanted to know how things worked. As a kid, he built cities out of Lincoln Logs and tinkered with Matchbox cars. Tired of her son dismantling her functioning appliances, Jan Fister let him fiddle with a broken vacuum cleaner. Without the benefit of a manual — to Jan’s great surprise — Fister fixed it.

In high school, Fister could take apart the front end of his father’s 1970 Monte Carlo and put it back together without instructions. In the minor leagues, Fister worked construction in the offseasons for extra income. He can afford a builder now, but for fun this winter he remodeled his bathroom.

“He’s got a mind that is just always going,” Larry Fister said. “He likes a challenge.”

The challenge before Fister, 30, as the Washington Nationals prepare to open official workouts for pitchers and catchers Saturday, is to convince his new team he really is not too good to be true. When the Nationals shipped utility man Steve Lombardozzi, lefty reliever Ian Krol and pitching prospect Robbie Ray to Detroit, they received in return a 6-foot-8 workhorse who throws a sinkerball that plunges as if made of cement.

They also got the son of a former Merced, Calif., fire captain and SWAT team member; a playoff competitor who stared down the eventual world champs after taking a line drive off the head; an athlete who played high school hoops and runs 10 miles between starts; and a burgeoning star who behaves like a regular guy.

“He’s going to sign something like a five-year, \$70 million contract one day,” said Mike Batesole, Fister’s coach at Fresno State. “I’m pretty sure he’s going to have \$70 million worth of jeans and T-shirts and a pickup truck with stock rims on it.”

Fister is the product, foremost, of generations of firefighters and cops. Fister’s paternal great-great-grandfather was a firefighter in the 1800s, his great-grandfather was a county sheriff in Nevada and his grandfather served in the Air Force. His uncle was on the police force, a sniper first and then a detective.

After playing football at Fresno State, Larry Fister worked as a police officer for 12 years, spending part of his career on the SWAT team, knocking down doors on raids. He rose to the rank of captain during 20 years with the Merced Fire Department.

Fister would practice shooting alongside his dad and flip pancakes at fundraising breakfasts for the fire department. He watched how the men bonded — if one firefighter needed his roof redone, the entire department spent Saturday at his house. Fister studied to be an elementary school teacher in college, but he figures he would have gone into law enforcement or firefighting if not for baseball.

“It’s amazing how many different areas it really has affected in my life,” Fister said. “From one, being a man, to two, baseball, to three, how camaraderie works. Brotherhood in firefighting and law enforcement is so big. And it’s a big thing here as a team. It’s a brotherhood. We’re basically a family here. That’s something I’ve witnessed for a long time, and it’s something I try to emulate.”

His father’s work also gave Fister a unique appreciation of what pressure really means. With his inquisitive mind, Fister asked his father how he stayed calm, how he didn’t get scared busting into a home.

“You will do under pressure what you’ve been trained to do,” Larry Fister said. “I don’t care if it’s law enforcement, a secretary answering the phone or a pitcher on the mound. Your mind is going to revert back to what you were trained to do.”

From his father and his uncle, Fister also learned the importance of staying in the moment. He dismissed bad pitches or home runs allowed as something no longer in his control. In the playoffs the past three seasons, Fister posted a 2.98 ERA over eight games. Under pressure, he did what he was trained to do.

“You can always tell when you get in the playoffs what kind of guy you got,” Tigers pitching coach Jeff Jones said. “He was always great in the playoffs.”

Fister’s career could have gone down a different path. The San Francisco Giants drafted him out of Merced Community College in the 49th round — as a first baseman. On the night the Nationals traded for Fister, he called his father, took a deep breath and said, “Well, I’m on the move again.” After he explained he was headed to Washington, Fister took another long breath. “It’s a new team and a new start,” he said, “but at least I get to swing the bat again.”

Fister had always told his parents he wanted to play Division I baseball, and so he spurned the Giants for Fresno State. He chose to stay in Fresno for his senior year even after the Yankees drafted him in the sixth round following his junior season. He finally became a professional when the Seattle Mariners took him in the seventh round in 2006.

It was not a smooth path to the majors. In 2008, the year before he debuted in the majors, Fister went 6-14 with a 5.43 ERA at Class AA. His failure convinced him to lean on his strengths — command and movement — and not try to please coaches with strikeouts and velocity. He succeeds with a sinker that induces bushels of groundballs even as it travels in the mid-80s.

“The difference came when he realized he had to stay within himself,” Larry Fister said. “He can throw it harder than he does right now.”

On Friday morning, Fister walked into the Nationals' clubhouse for the first time. He sat in a row of lockers among Stephen Strasburg, Gio Gonzalez and Jordan Zimmermann, the kind of rotation mates who may overshadow him. He doesn't mind.

"From Day 1, my father's always instilled in me not to speak about it, just go out there and work hard and let your actions show what you're all about," Fister said. "That's my mentality and the mentality that I try to take out to the ballpark every day."

Article #5

Adam LaRoche arrives at Nationals spring training seeking 'fresh start'

By Adam Kilgore – Washington Post (2/17/14)

Bearded and bulked up, with his ubiquitous 12-year-old son Drake trailing behind, Adam LaRoche strolled out of the dugout at Space Coast Stadium this afternoon and headed to the batting cage.

LaRoche had arrived at what could be his final Nationals spring training with what he termed a "fresh start" after the least healthy season of his 10-year career. He did not necessarily feel motivated by last season, when slumps and weight loss led to a .237/.332/.403 batting line, 20 homers and 62 RBIs. But he believes he can – and will – return to his career norm, closer to a 2012 season in which he finished sixth in the National League MVP vote.

"I don't know that it's about erasing the memory," LaRoche said. "We totally underachieved last year. No excuse there. Offensively terrible for the first three months, or whatever it was. You try to come back and pinpoint that and what we can do to correct it and get off to a better start. This is different for me personally from a couple years ago when I was hurt and it was really frustrating to play. But I physically felt fine last year. It was just one of those years. It was probably a combination of trying too hard and being streaky."

LaRoche started strong last season, an anomaly even compared to his best years. But his struggles started when he lost weight, a result of his ADD medication suppressing his appetite. He dropped to below 190 pounds, he said, his weight in college. LaRoche changed the release time of his medication at the all-star break, and he started to put weight back on.

LaRoche planned to continue his weight gain through lifting weights in the winter, but that plan skidded to a halt. In the final series of the season, LaRoche felt a twinge in his elbow. He underwent surgery in November to remove bone chips and couldn't touch a weight for two months. LaRoche started packing weight on after that, and he would like to add five more pounds during spring.

"I just physically feel a lot better," LaRoche said.

LaRoche insisted the bone chips had no effect on his 2012 season, that he could not even feel them until the final days of the season. He will not be bothered during the spring, either, barring an unforeseen setback. "So far, so good," LaRoche said. "It gets a little sore from time to time, especially now that I'm throwing a little more."

As LaRoche settled into his locker, he could peek over two stalls and see a first baseman's mitt in Ryan Zimmerman's cubby. "Does that mean I get to go play third?" LaRoche asked, laughing.

One reason for the mitt is that Matt Williams may choose to sit LaRoche in favor of Zimmerman against some left-handed starters. "That doesn't bother me," LaRoche said. For most of his career, LaRoche fared well against left-handed pitchers. Last year, he cratered against them, hitting .198/.254/.313.

Williams has no definite schedule for how often LaRoche will sit against lefties, or if he will sit at all. Williams believes LaRoche will shed last season – "he's too good of a player," he said – but he has considered a partial platoon at first base.

"I think it depends on how he's swinging," Williams said. "If he's seeing the ball well, it really doesn't matter.

How many days in a row he's played, all those things come into play over the course of the season. There's no set plan right now, but there will be times where we just 1) want to give him a day, and we pick that day because there's a lefty going or he doesn't match up well. And 2) if we want to stack the lineup against a lefty with right-handed hitters, we can do that, too."

As he hopes for different results, LaRoche will also sport a different look. A longtime friend and hunting partner of the "Duck Dynasty" Robertson clan, he decided this winter to grow a beard. It came in red with a white blotch under his chin. He employed a classic beard-growing strategy.

"I just didn't shave it for a while," LaRoche said. "And then I didn't shave it for a while longer. And then I just never shaved. Plus, the crew I hang out with, I'm the odd man out if I don't have a beard."

Article #6

Gio driven to reach higher level for Nationals

By Bill Ladson – Nationals.com (2/18/14)

VIERA, Fla. -- On Monday morning, Nationals manager Matt Williams decided to loosen things up in the clubhouse. A projection screen was put up in the clubhouse, and the players saw Instagram photos of left-hander Gio Gonzalez posing for clothing companies.

"It was Matt Williams having a good time, trying to show this team he is going to have some fun," Gonzalez said. "I think he broke the ice by cutting the tension. ... We are going to have fun, but at the same time, we are going to do our drills, we are going to do our stuff."

For a guy who has won 32 games for the Nationals in the last two years, Gonzalez wants to improve on the little things that can help a team win. For example, he would like to get better at covering first base. At times, that was a serious problem for Gonzalez last year.

First, there was the game against the Giants on Aug. 14. During the Nationals' 4-2 victory, Gonzalez found himself in a heated argument with right fielder Jayson Werth in the middle of the first inning.

Werth was upset that Gonzalez didn't get to first base in time for a potential inning-ending double play after Buster Posey hit a grounder to Adam LaRoche at first base.

"It was another reminder," Gonzalez said about the incident.

But it wasn't until Sept. 9 when he realized that that he wasn't doing the little things right. It was the day he threw a one-hitter against the Mets. The hit came in the seventh inning when Zach Lutz hit the ball past LaRoche for a clean single. As the ball went by LaRoche, Gonzalez stood on the mound, not even thinking that he should cover first in case LaRoche was able to grab the ball. Gonzalez called that moment a reality check.

"No-hitter is broken just standing on the mound," Gonzalez said. "I'm working on getting over -- just the basic stuff that I should have learned last year on my own. Other than that, I feel like I came into Spring Training strong, healthy, mentally prepared. I'm 28 years old. I'm a grown man now. I've had my journey, I had my fun. Now it's time to get it going."

During the offseason, Gonzalez had bullpen sessions every Tuesday at the University of Miami with former Yankees catcher Jorge Posada, who would help Gonzalez work on his mechanics. Posada would say something if Gonzalez's shoulder flew open.

Gonzalez put photos of him and Posada on Twitter and had some people believe that the former Yankees catcher was possibly making a comeback. But Gonzalez wants everybody to know that Posada will remain retired.

"[Posada] is full of inspiration," Gonzalez said. "He has great techniques, great methods to go by. It was fun. Sometimes you wish he would give a pointer or two to Wilson Ramos, Jose [Lobaton], Jhonatan Solano and Sandy Leon. That would be great to pick his brain."

Gonzalez is all about moving forward. Last year, at times, it was tough to move forward. It was a journey for Gonzalez starting in Spring Training. His name was attached to anti-aging clinic, Biogenesis. The Miami New Times reported that Gonzalez had a \$1,000 order for Aminorip, a muscle-building protein. However, none of the ingredients listed in Aminorip is on MLB's list of prohibited substances.

Gonzalez was later cleared by Major League Baseball. He said has turned the page from last year.

"I've come to Spring Training focused, prepared and driven," Gonzalez said. "This is probably the best that I've felt. I'm ready to go. I'm ready to play baseball, ready to put the past behind and move forward. ... The whole point that I'm doing now is get past that whole conversation we are having now. This is a new year for me. The past is the past. It's something you don't want to bring up any more. You want to move forward."

Article #7

Nationals' Ryan Zimmerman comes into spring training healthy, ready for what's next

By Adam Kilgore – Washington Post (2/18/14)

VIERA, Fla. — There is a difference between believing and knowing, and even as the warm, welcoming sun beats down on him Tuesday afternoon, Ryan Zimmerman could feel that gap. He fielded grounders and buzzed throws across the Space Coast Stadium diamond from third base. Some balls sailed. Some bounced. Most burrowed into a coach's glove. Strength has returned to his shoulder. He believes he will revive his old ability. But he doesn't know. How could he?

"For me," Zimmerman said, "I need to have a year like I used to have."

On the day the Washington Nationals required position players to report, Zimmerman took the field for the first time and joined about 20 teammates in an informal workout. He remained part of the franchise's heart. He left the black Rawlings first baseman's mitt in his locker and stayed on the familiar side of the diamond. But he began a spring in which he will become a part-time first baseman and try to replicate the final portion of his 2013 season.

Doubt shadowed Zimmerman last year. He arrived at spring training still recovering from offseason shoulder surgery. His mechanics deteriorated and he made 16 throwing errors. In May, he wondered if the Nationals would shift him across the diamond or bench him. Into mid-August, Zimmerman was hitting .266 with little power.

On Sunday, hitting coach Rick Schu walked up to Zimmerman in the clubhouse and extended a fist. "Every day like September," Schu said. It was a reminder of what he could be. He blasted 11 home runs in the final month. In the field, he made diving plays and accurate, clothesline throws.

September brought back confidence. But only one thing can provide Zimmerman certainty.

"Play third base like I know I'm capable of and like people expect me to play," Zimmerman said. "Then once I go a year doing it and being consistent, that's when you can really say the shoulder's fine. Until we go through this year, I don't think you really know."

Zimmerman also will learn a new position this spring. Manager Matt Williams met with him in December and notified Zimmerman he wanted him to learn first base. In the spring, Zimmerman will play third base "99 percent of the time," Williams said. But in early work and extra work, Zimmerman will learn the nuances of first base and view the game from the opposite side of the field.

Williams wants the option to play Zimmerman at first base to stack the lineup full of right-handed hitters against tough left-handed starters. In that scenario, Adam LaRoche would sit, Anthony Rendon could play third and Danny Espinosa would play second.

"He understands that he's our third baseman," Williams said. "It's on a temporary basis if we want to gain an advantage with our lineup. Nothing further than that."

From their initial conversation, Zimmerman approved. "He wants to win," Williams said. "If he helps us win by playing some first base, that's great by him, and certainly great by me. He's not worried about that."

"I don't know if I'm ready for 65-70 games over there, but you never know," Zimmerman said. "With the way I finished [last season] over there, the way my arm feels now, I think I can help this team win more games at third base. But if there's an opportunity for me to play 10-15 games at first base and it helps us win some of those games, then I'm down to help out any way I can."

Zimmerman has not played first base since Little League, when "if you can catch the ball, you play first base." Zimmerman plans to take groundballs at first base during batting practice, studying how the ball comes off the bats differently. He will work after practice to learn how to hold runners, catch pickoff throws and handle relays from the outfield. At 29, in his 10th season, Zimmerman will receive a new baseball education.

"No position on the field is easy at this level," Zimmerman said. "But for some reason, everyone just thinks that's where they put the adult softball guy and he can play big league first base, which is not the case. I'll work at it. He made it very clear, and I respect him for that, that he doesn't want me to feel uncomfortable or put me in any situation to fail."

Zimmerman bought a first baseman's mitt this winter. He's played catch with it a few times, and it didn't feel too weird. But he does not want to wear it permanently. "It feels all right," Zimmerman said. "It's a lot easier over there than third base, but I think I can still . . . if I can help the team at third, I'd like to stay there for a majority of the time for as long as I can. But we'll see. Things happen."

For Zimmerman to stay at third base for the remainder of his career, or at least the next few seasons, he will have to prove the start of last season was a surgery-related aberration. This winter helped. For the first time in three years, Zimmerman had no offseason surgery and he could begin his offseason workouts Nov. 1, on schedule. Last year, after the operation to heal fraying in his labrum, he couldn't lift weights until January.

"My shoulder's fine," Zimmerman said. "It's just a matter of going out there and playing like the last six weeks, seven weeks, whatever, of last season where I played good."

That would be a year like he used to have. That would let him stop believing and let him know he was back.

Article #8

Ross Detwiler is looking strong and throwing a cutter

By Adam Kilgore – Washington Post (2/21/14)

Only the grind of the season will allow Ross Detwiler to prove he can stay healthy. But already, after only one week of workouts, the lefty has proved he is healthy after back surgery last summer, and perhaps stronger than ever.

Detwiler entered spring as the most accomplished starter among those fighting for the fifth rotation spot. His performance early in camp – including the unveiling of a new cutter – has only reinforced his presumed status as a favorite.

“Detwiler is getting stronger every day,” said Livan Hernandez, who once pitched in the same rotation as Detwiler and is now serving as a spring instructor. “Detwiler is ready for this year. I wouldn’t be surprised if he wins a lot of games. I think he’s got the chance to win 15 or more games this year.”

Hernandez sees Detwiler’s fastball “exploding” more than it used to. He also raved about Detwiler’s cutter has looked.

Detwiler has never thrown a cutter before this spring. Coaches had told him the pitch may work especially well with his delivery. He also wanted a different pitch for his repertoire – he threw his fastball 80 percent of the time in 2012 and on 88 percent of his pitches last season.

But when Detwiler had tried to throw a cutter in previous offseasons, it never felt right. For reasons that remain beyond his grasp, throwing a cutter took this winter. In bullpen sessions, Detwiler has remained comfortable — “free and easy,” he said — throwing it.

“I’ve really thrown one pitch,” Detwiler said. “I had a few people tell me it would be good for my arm angle and everything. So I just kind of messed around with it a few times. Finally, this offseason I messed around with it a little bit. It actually felt good.”

Hernandez compared the way Detwiler could use his cutter to Al Leiter, a former teammate. But he thinks Detwiler has better overall control and command than Leiter did.

Like Leiter, Detwiler can use the cutter to jam right-handed hitters and keep them from diving over the plate. It will give him another measure of defense against righties, who have hit .274 against him in his career.

“It just puts something else in the hitters’ minds,” Detwiler said. “I’m not going to try use it too much, do too much with it.”

Article #9

Span hopes to pick up where he left off

By Mark Zuckerman – CSNWashington.com (2/21/14)

VIERA, Fla. — For all the discussion of Matt Williams' lineup decisions — whether Bryce Harper hits third or fifth, whether Jayson Werth hits second or fourth, etc. — the one spot in the Nationals batting order that isn't up for grabs might also be the spot with the most question marks.

Denard Span will hit leadoff, of that there is no doubt. But which Span will show up come Opening Day: The guy who struggled throughout the first half of 2013, or the guy who delivered baseball's longest hitting streak late in the season?

The Nationals are banking on the latter, believing Span's strong finish was an indication of things to come.

"I think there's an adjustment period that happens to every player," manager Matt Williams said. "I think you saw that in the second half last year. He figured out the guys he's facing on a regular basis, started to gain an idea what they're trying to do to get him out. And he had more success. And I think that will continue."

There's certainly some merit to the notion that it simply took Span time to adjust and get more comfortable to his first season in Washington, not to mention his first season in the National League.

Through his first 71 games, Span hit a disappointing .251, his on-base percentage languishing at .306. If he stepped to the plate four times on a given night, it felt like he rolled over weak grounders to the right side of the infield three times.

And then, things began to click. Over his final 87 games, Span hit .300, his OBP rising to .343. Did increased comfort correlate with increased offense?

"I think so," he said. "I think that played a part. I don't want to say that was the sole reason for the way I played at the start of last year. But yeah, just being more comfortable and making a few plays later in the season and seeing my teammates rally behind me made things go better towards the end of the season."

There were actual mechanical changes that Span made along the way that helped. Rick Schu, who took over as hitting coach in midseason, worked with Span on making his swing smoother, removing a gap between his front-leg plant and actual swinging motion.

"Last year, especially early when he came over, he looked like he was a 'two-piece' hitter," Williams said. "He would get his foot down really early, and then explode from there. Rick has been working with him about letting that flow a little better. So you'll see that in spring training; it's a little more of a subtle movement, instead of getting it down early and then using his hands. He's working on having that flow a little bit."

Combine better mechanics with a better frame of mind, and Span enters 2014 feeling much better about himself than he did midway through his first season in D.C.

"I was kicking myself in the butt for not getting it going sooner," he said. "But I was thankful for how I finished. I've always been taught that it's not how you start, it's how you finish. So it was good for me to finish strong."

Article #10

Desmond reflects on 10 years in organization

By Mark Zuckerman – CSNWashington.com (2/23/14)

VIERA, Fla. — Ian Desmond was among the first members of the Nationals to report for spring training earlier this month, early enough that the big-league clubhouse inside Space Coast Stadium wasn't yet fully up and running.

So on his first day in town, Desmond instead drove to the year-round, minor-league complex just down the street. That's when he realized it, that he had first walked through those same doors 10 years earlier, a 17-year-old Expos draft pick who had no idea what the next decade had in store.

"I walked up to the clubhouse, and it all just hit me real quick," he said. "Like, boom! I could remember my Gulf Coast League days when I reported in 2004. Everything just kind of flashed before my eyes. It was pretty cool."

Desmond hasn't had much reason to venture back to the minor-league clubhouse since making his big-league debut in Sept. 2009. He has developed into one of baseball's best shortstops. An All-Star. A Silver Slugger. A Gold Glove finalist. A multimillionaire who almost certainly will command a nine-figure contract (either from the Nationals or another franchise) sometime in the next two years.

It's easy to forget now just how far Desmond has come. He first entered the public's consciousness in March 2005, when as an 18-year-old he was given an opportunity to play in a couple of Grapefruit League games with the major-league club. After watching his young shortstop make a couple of spectacular plays at shortstop, then-GM Jim Bowden began comparing him to Derek Jeter.

Desmond's path to stardom, though, wasn't nearly as smooth (or as quick) as Bowden might have believed at the time. He languished in the minors for six years, appearing in a staggering 448 games with Class A Potomac and Class AA Harrisburg, never hitting better than .264 until 2009 and committing an average of 32 errors per season.

There were plenty of shaky moments during his early days in Washington, as well. Desmond was charged with 34 errors as a rookie in 2010, then posted a disappointing .298 on-base percentage and .656 OPS the following season.

Through it all, the Nationals stood behind Desmond. Mike Rizzo, who replaced Bowden as GM in 2009, turned down trade offers for his struggling shortstop. Former managers Jim Riggleman and Davey Johnson touted him as star-in-waiting and leader on the diamond.

"I do owe them a lot, because of the knowledge I got from them and the people they surround me with here is priceless," Desmond said. "They could have easily given up on me. They kept on running me out there. But I think the biggest thing is, I didn't give up on myself."

You know the rest of the story. Desmond, like the Nats, had a breakthrough performance in 2012, earning an All-Star nod, the first of his two Silver Slugger awards and MVP votes. And he nearly duplicated his numbers last season, despite the team's overall underachievement.

Along the way, Desmond became the heart-and-soul of the Nationals roster. He speaks for teammates after tough losses. He calls the occasional team meeting. He settles pitchers down when they lose focus. He leads, on and off the field, something Matt Williams previously saw from afar and now is seeing up-close.

"Talking to the guys this winter, to a man, the guys that were here from last year said: 'This is your guy. This is the guy that is your leader on the field from a baseball-playing perspective every day,'" the rookie manager said, adding: "He's one of those rare guys that sees everything that goes on. It's good, because he's aware and he's out there to be the leader and he relishes the role."

Desmond insists he never set out to be a leader. The role just comes naturally to him.

And given the long road he took to reach this point, he feels an obligation to help those now trying to realize the same success.

"I look and see guys like (minor-league shortstop) Josh Johnson, all the way at the end of the lockers in the clubhouse," Desmond said. "That used to be my seat. It kind of symbolizes it. I've come up all the way. I was the very last guy, and then I kind of crept my way up to the front of the lockers. And now I'm up here.

"I see guys like (outfielder) Steven Souza, who have battled through the minor leagues, have had their ups and downs. I think I kind of paved the way for them in this organization. There's not a level they've been to that I haven't been to. There's not an experience they've had that I haven't. I feel like I can really relate.

"You know, I didn't do everything right. I didn't do everything perfect. But I feel like I have a lot of experience to share with them. And it's cool to give that back to them, and that I'm here to be able to do so."

As he walked through the doors to the minor-league complex earlier this month, and as all those memories of his first days with the organization 10 years ago flooded his mind, Desmond couldn't help but pause to appreciate the path that brought him back.

"It's been a pleasure, to be honest," he said. "It went by really fast. I'm just proud to be a National."

Article #11

Nate McLouth's career has taken him from all-star to Class AAA to a talented Nats outfield

By James Wagner – Washington Post (3/6/14)

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — From where he stands, Nate McLouth can look back at his journey and smile. He has certainly earned it. The 32-year-old with slick blonde hair from Whitehall, Mich., has the job security of a two-year deal with the Washington Nationals worth \$10.75 million, plus a third-year option. The Nationals have playoff aspirations, and he is their first outfield option off the bench. He is in a comfortable place with teammates from other stops along his nine-year major league career.

Less than two years ago, he was nowhere close to any of this. The Pittsburgh Pirates released him and his .140 batting average on May 31, 2012. He had struggled the previous two-plus years, too, posting a .229 average with the Atlanta Braves. He was once an all-star and a Gold Glove winner, but that summer, after he was cut, he was back home in Knoxville, Tenn. He hoped to relax with his wife, Lindsay, and their two dogs, but he couldn't.

"It was strange," McLouth said earlier this week, seated at his locker inside the Nationals' clubhouse at Space Coast Stadium. "I thought I would enjoy relaxing at home. I wanted to enjoy it. But I wanted to get back. That's how I knew that I wanted to keep going."

McLouth did, and after three weeks he signed a minor league deal with the Baltimore Orioles and reported to their Class AAA affiliate, the Norfolk Tides. His career was reborn. He regained his confidence and started having fun again.

"As cliché as it sounds, just being myself and not doing things I'm not capable of doing," said McLouth, who started in center field against the Braves on Thursday night. "Literally, just enjoyed myself. When you play free like that, it's amazing how things work out."

At the plate, McLouth changed his swing and approach. Norfolk Manager Ron Johnson urged McLouth to be more aggressive. McLouth's body wasn't in position to hit. He was late on balls. His timing was off. His mechanics broke down. During those down years, especially during his mid-2009 to 2011 stint with Atlanta, McLouth felt pressure to perform after a big trade landed him there from Pittsburgh, his first team.

"I started some really bad habits and kind of snowballed," McLouth said. "I look back at myself on film from then and can hardly recognize my swing. Kind of went back and wiped the slate clean when I started with Baltimore and went to Triple-A. I'm happy with the way that's worked out."

McLouth posted a .244 average, .325 on-base percentage and .461 slugging percentage with 10 home runs in 47 games with Norfolk and forced the Orioles' hand. He had an opt-out clause in his contract for Aug. 4, 2012, and on that day the Orioles cleared a spot on the roster for him and brought him back to the major leagues. He hit .268/.342/.435 with seven home runs and 12 stolen bases, playing left field daily over the next two months. He helped Baltimore make a final push into the playoffs, their first postseason appearance since 1997.

"It was exciting," he said. "I started enjoying myself again on the field and having fun."

The Orioles re-signed McLouth to a one-year, \$2 million incentive-laden deal. Injuries to others forced him into near-everyday action in left field, and he produced again. He posted a .258/.329/.399 line with 12 home runs and 30 stolen bases in 37 attempts. According to some metrics, he was one of the best base runners in baseball. For his size, 5 feet 10, 190 pounds, McLouth is both strong (he has 100 career home runs) and speedy (129 career stolen bases).

“A good teammate, a good guy,” center fielder Denard Span said. “I was a fan of his coming up in the minor leagues when he was playing in Pittsburgh. He has a lot of knowledge, a lot of experience. He’s the only guy in the outfield that has a Gold Glove. I’m going to pick his brain — and I already have a little bit in spring training — and try to learn as much as I can.”

The Nationals coveted him for those reasons and because he could fill in at all three outfield positions should Bryce Harper, Jayson Werth or Span suffer any injuries or need regular days off. Werth missed 33 games last season and Harper 44, and the Nationals’ bench was one of the team’s biggest weaknesses.

At the time of McLouth’s signing, General Manager Mike Rizzo said the Nationals’ fourth outfielder averaged 80 games and between 380 and 425 at-bats a season over the past few seasons. McLouth has a career line of .250/.334/.418 and was an all-star with Pittsburgh in 2008, the same year he won a Gold Glove for his play in center field. The union between the two parties this offseason was logical.

“Nate would make sense for any team in that role,” Werth said. “I haven’t really looked at how his career has gone, but in my mind he’s close to an everyday guy as anybody. To have him as a fourth [outfielder] is good. And we have Scott [Hairston], too. You feel good not playing when you’ve got guys like that. They give your team a chance to win. Whereas there have been situations where it has not been that way.”

Before he signed with Washington, McLouth called former teammate and Nationals first baseman Adam LaRoche, whom he overlapped with in Pittsburgh and in Atlanta. He wanted to know about living in Washington and the city. “This is the place I wanted to be of all the teams I was talking to by far,” said McLouth, who could have received more playing time for other potential suitors.

So far, McLouth is fitting in with his new teammates. He knows several from previous stints. With the Braves in 2009, he played with relievers Rafael Soriano and Mike Gonzalez, who was with the Nationals in 2012 and signed a minor league deal with Washington this week. By then, McLouth was already a nearly fluent Spanish speaker, having honed the Spanish he learned in high school and in the minor leagues.

But one day, Gonzalez told Soriano about McLouth’s Spanish. At first, Soriano wasn’t sure what to believe until he heard McLouth speak the language for himself.

“He would say, ‘Soriano, the Americans all think I’m American, but I’m from there. From Santiago. They don’t know,’” Soriano recalled. “He would say, ‘I’m from the Dominican. My last name is Peralta. They just don’t know.’”

Asked about his Spanish and what he would say to Soriano, McLouth laughs. “I like surprising people,” he said.

Article #12

Talking shifts with new Nats defensive coordinator Mark Weidemaier

By Dan Kolko – MASNSports.com (3/10/14)

VIERA, Fla. - The Nationals have their first home night game of spring tonight, as they host the Astros in a game that will get under way at 6 p.m.

This means the typical morning schedule has been pushed back a little bit and players won't be reporting to Space Coast Stadium until mid-afternoon. This also means that reporters don't need to be at the facility until mid-afternoon.

Needless to say, I'm not too upset about this schedule.

If you've been here in Viera and have gotten a chance to watch the Nationals take batting practice or be put through the paces on defensive drills, you've probably seen Mark Weidemaier. You've most certainly heard him.

Weidemaier is the Nats' new defensive coordinator and advance coach, and is also as energetic and lively a guy as you'll find in any walk of life. He came to the organization from the Diamondbacks with manager Matt Williams, and this season will mark Weidemaier's first in 35 years in baseball that he'll be a uniformed coach in the dugout. He spent the last 18 years as an advance scout, traveling from city to city scouting opponents that his team would face next and building up an enormous database of information on pitchers, hitters, baserunners, defenders and even opposing managers.

The level of detail in Weidemaier's reports is beyond impressive. From information about each pitcher's tendencies, to how a specific infielder will indicate a pickoff is coming, to where to pitch a certain hitter when he has two strikes on him and a runner in scoring position. I'm talking pages upon pages of intense scouting information about every aspect you can imagine.

Now Weidemaier is in charge of improving the Nationals defensively, and he plans to use some methods that are new to the organization. I sat down with Weidemaier in the Nats dugout at Space Coast Stadium a few days ago, and while the below Q&A might seem lengthy, it's really only the tip of the iceberg. There is so much that we've yet to learn about how the Nats will compile data in their advance scouting efforts and how they'll use this data defensively, but hopefully my chat with Weidemaier will help give you a little glimpse into what we'll see this season.

I didn't want to leave anything out, so below is my full chat with Weidemaier.

It's probably been a bit of an acclimation process for you with a new organization and in a new position, but now that we're a few weeks into camp, how do you think things have been going?

"I think they've gone exceptionally well. First of all, I'm blessed to be here after 34 years of doing just about everything in baseball, including the last 18 advancing, even though I coordinated spring training for the Dodgers and the Diamondbacks and now here. To get to the big leagues is a dream come true, basically.

And also, since I had a chance to do it with Matt, who I have such a great relationship with, the trust factor is enormous and that makes it even more special, because it's not a stranger I'm working with. It's like I know what he's thinking before he says it. So we can play off each other really good."

"But as far as camp, we spent a lot of time this winter. He'd call me around 2:00 in the afternoon and sometimes we'd talk 'til 4:00, 4:30, 5:00. Every day, for the better part of November, December and then we came to the Winter Meetings together and then most of January. So we planned this thing out, not only from the daily schedule, but the early and extra work, to the fundamentals, to the defensive matrixes. The bunt plays, pop-up coverage. The gamut. And you always wonder how it's gonna be received, especially what we had heard the last couple years. Not that they weren't well-run, but they might not have had the up-tempo type of approach.

"So we were really happy to hear when players start coming to you telling you how much they enjoy it. I mean, a lot of people can talk, and it's eyewash. But when the players come to you, they tell you the truth. And more than one came to me and expressed that. And I'm talking about the big guys, big-name guys. So we're very happy about that.

You seemingly handle a lot of roles - helping to coordinate and schedule workouts, throwing batting practice, putting the team through defensive drills, working directly alongside Matt. What's been the focus so far?

"It's obviously a very talented team, and I was brought over here to help the defense. That's an area that ... they weren't brutal, but they certainly weren't good. Let's put it that way. (Matt is) a very defensive-minded manager. He was that kind of player, and that's one of the reasons I'm sure that they hired him here, because he sold the fact that we're gonna play better defense. That's a priority. So far, I've been pleased.

We had one sloppy outing against the Braves here that, it was a windy day, the infield was hard as hell, there were a lot of factors. But it's really unacceptable to make (five) errors. We're going to try and cut that down. And if we play good defense, with our pitching staff and our ability to score runs, why not? Why not us to go a long way? It's as talented a team as there is in the National League."

Based on what you know, how many teams have a defensive coordinator type of position like the Nationals now do with you?

"From what I've read online, it's interesting you ask that question, because it was Matt originally, and Mike Rizzo, that bought into it. We were the first. It was funny as hell, because there were a lot of copycats after the fact. (Brad) Ausmus (hired one in) Detroit. Matt Martin, he was a roving infield guy. I was with him with the Dodgers. (Rick) Eckstein got hired by the Angels in a very similar capacity. I think the major difference is those guys aren't going to be in uniform in the dugout. They're going to be more like an eye in the sky in the press box. As far as I know, I was thinking there might be one other club that did a similar thing. But as far as the defensive coordinator title theme, those two guys I know of. But it was like Matt started a trend, which is really interesting, because it's a different way of looking at the game. Everything is starting to open up on the defensive side of the ball that for years wasn't given a lot of credence. And you wonder why, because every major sport has that kind of focus. I mean, defense is key."

So why has baseball been so slow to adapt in that area?

"(Laughs) Baseball's been kind of slow to adapt to a lot of things, huh? It's a very traditional game. If you ever read the book, 'Men at Work,' by George Will, the polycracy involved for years in professional baseball, as opposed to democracy or meritocracy, he called it. It was ruling by old friends. Slow to change! There's no question about it. And don't get me wrong, we have (an analytics) group here, Sam Mondry-Cohen and the guys that do the (advanced metrics) stuff that are tremendous. I'm not wired along those lines. Now, I will take that information, because you'd be foolish not to. But I still think you watch the game, like Tony LaRussa told me one time - purposeful watching. You watch for a reason.

"And also, what I know in (my head) is not just a gut instinct or an educated guess, it's years of experience and seeing the players and having 18 years of an advance database. I've seen more baseball than most people ever would in three lifetimes. So you work it hand-in-hand. So we're going to use some spray charts, try to adapt that, actually, and devise one of our own in-house along with some of the outside sources that provide spray charts."

So you're making your own spray chart?

"Yeah, I gave it to (advance scouting coordinator Erick) Dalton and Rosie (advance scouting assistant Christopher Rosenbaum). Because really, what pitchers want, I found this out the hard way with Kevin Brown and the Dodgers, he said, 'Everything you're giving me is what the league does in general against what you're seeing. But I want to see where the ball's going when they're hit off of me.' So the only way to do that is to be at the game when your man's pitching. Well, it does make a lot of sense to specify it, if you do have a general spray chart and then devise one that's specific for your individual pitcher, it's got to give you some tendencies, right? That along with percentages of where a ball's hit."

So let's get down to the shifting. What types of shifts will we see you utilize this season?

"I think it's a little dangerous to overplay in the outfield because there's nobody behind them, but as far as overplaying and shifting in the infield, why not? If we can put guys in a better position to make a play, it's just common sense. Why wasn't it done here in the past? I don't know. Manager's preference, I guess.

Straight up's not a bad defense sometimes. But not all the time. So if we can put 'em in a better position with the athletes we have, we think there's some merit to it. I read an awful lot about the sabermetrics and this and that, and where do the numbers really enter into it other than the probabilities and percentages. You can see a spray chart where it's shaded where 60 percent of the balls on the ground are going here. Well, you have to look at that.

"But you still have to watch the game, because depending on what your pitcher's got on a given day, your initial alignment might not be where you want. Because this guy's fastball might not be as good, he's going to his changeup more. So that's where the players have to be able to, within the game, make in-game adjustments. You watch me during spring, I'm moving them all the time on the infield. And that's what I'm talking about with the in-game part of it. Before every game, I've got a note card where I list straight up, slight opp, pull, strong-middle, whatever. That's where they start. And they can adjust. And I work off of it, too."

Some teams, like the Pirates and Rays, end up using a lot of different infield shifts throughout the course of a game. In recent seasons, the Nats have barely used any. How often can we expect to see you guys shifting this season?

"Every day. Matt and I came up with a form where it lists our pitcher, the opposition's lineup, where we're going to play prior to two strikes and with two strikes, infield and outfield. Every player will get one every day. We'll have a meeting every day. We're going to have a pre-series advance meeting, which is pretty general for most teams, but we're also gonna have meetings every day with the starting eight, particularly the middle guys."

I would imagine not a lot of teams do that?

"No. We'll involve the pitchers as much as they want to be involved. Some of them probably don't want a lot of information. They're not gonna change the way they pitch. It's basically more of a defensive meeting that we know some certain strong tendencies on some guys, and we'll work off of that. Hey, we're trying to get an edge, and anything you can use to do it ... it's been proven with the Pirates, they've had success. There are teams that have done it well. So hopefully we'll be able to, as well."

We've all heard of the phrase "paralysis by analysis". Are you worried about some players feeling like they have too much information kicking around in their heads during a game?

"I don't worry about it, I just recognize who those people are so you don't overload them. Some people, like in anything, one of the worst terms we have in baseball is instinct. Human beings aren't born with an instinct to run the bases or catch a ground ball. My Labrador retrievers are born with an instinct to retrieve and swim in the water with webbed paws. You learn to play this game, you're taught to play this game. The difference being some people have better powers of observation, more aptitude, better listeners, better watchers, purposeful watching. Better aptitude. If there are certain individuals who are not geared towards (it), if their makeup isn't geared towards taking a lot of this data, we won't give them a lot of it. But the ones that would like to have it, it will be there for them."

So it'll be handled on a player-by-player basis?

"Probably more pitcher-by-pitch basis. The position players are going to get the information whether they want it or not. It's gonna be there for them. But we're not gonna tell a guy how to pitch. You've got to go to your strengths. We'll try to adjust off of that. I think that's where you find more of the individuals who wouldn't want the information."

How important is it, then, for your position players to buy into this and see it as something that can help them and the team?

"Well, certainly the middle guys. The spine of the diamond is key. Catcher, middle infielders and center field. That's the key. We're also lucky here to have (Adam LaRoche) at first base because he's got great awareness and guys will move with him. Like, he made the comment to me (recently) on a ball up the middle that Rendon almost caught. I had just moved Rochie more towards the 4-3 hole (the hole between the second and first baseman) and he said, 'If I would have taken Anthony with me, he would have made that play.' In other words, if he would've said, 'I'm moving, you move.' And he didn't. I thought he was pretty much shaded where he should've been, but if he had moved with him, we would've made that play."

Article #13

Washington Nationals' Jose Lobaton finds mastery of English as key to reaching MLB

By James Wagner – Washington Post (3/11/14)

VIERA, Fla. — In 2006, catcher Jose Lobaton was in his fourth minor league season. At 21, the native of Venezuela had all the budding skills for a successful professional baseball career in the United States except one: He was struggling with English. At that point, however, it didn't bother him.

"If I can hit, who cares if I don't speak English?" Lobaton, who is in his first spring training with the Washington Nationals, recalls thinking to himself.

Then came a game that changed his mind.

Playing for the Lake Elsinore Storm, a San Diego Padres minor league affiliate, Lobaton and the pitcher were told by their manager that he wanted to avoid throwing breaking balls inside on an opposing player. Lobaton heard the opposite, called for an inside pitch and the batter blasted it over the fence for a home run.

The pitching coach was furious. He told Lobaton he needed to learn English and that he would be fined if he misunderstood instructions again. Lobaton was angry at the pitcher for not correcting him and upset with himself for the language issue.

"That was the last time I ever had trouble with a pitcher," Lobaton said recently in Spanish, seated at his locker at the Nationals' clubhouse at Space Coast Stadium.

Lobaton's story isn't unique, but his struggles, and those of other Latin American players, can be easily forgotten when watching a baseball game. Last year, nearly 24 percent of players on opening day major league rosters and more than 45 percent of the expansive minor leagues were born in Latin America, according to Major League Baseball figures.

The majority of them are signed by major league clubs lacking all but rudimentary English — a gap that can hinder their careers.

"You need to speak English well not just to communicate with your teammates, but now you need to do radio and TV and express how you feel," said Dennis Martinez, who knew only a few words of English when he arrived from Nicaragua at 19 before becoming a four-time all-star pitcher and 1983 World Series champion with the Baltimore Orioles. "It's not easy. And unfortunately, English classes here aren't enough. The education where we're from sadly isn't the same as here. Kids sign at 16 or 17 and it takes them two or three years just to get adjusted before they can finally develop as a player and a prospect."

Transitions take time

Teams are mandated by league rules to provide and pay for language classes for non-native speakers if the players ask for them. The Nationals provide instruction at their baseball academy in the Dominican

Republic and mandatory programs throughout their minor league system, mostly by providing language software.

But for many Latino ballplayers, the transition to life in the United States can't be negotiated simply with language classes on a computer. It takes dedication and time.

"It's hard," Lobaton said. "We see a little English in classes growing up, but it's not the advanced English of here. They throw you right into the action and you freeze up. You don't know what even to say. It even happens to me now."

Lobaton, 29, grew up in Acarigua, a city in northwestern Venezuela. He is the youngest of four children. His father was a taxi driver and his mother stayed at home to tend to the family. In 2002, at the age of 17, Lobaton signed with the Padres for \$70,000, money that immediately helped his family.

"We were going through a rough time and this was a big help," said Lobaton, who will back up Wilson Ramos this year.

When Lobaton arrived in the United States the following year to play for the Padres' rookie team in Idaho Falls, Idaho, he spoke practically no English. He grew up playing shortstop but was moved to catcher with the Padres. That season, the switch hitter did well and posted a .272 batting average over 56 games. But a bad habit of ignoring his defense began developing.

"I didn't realize then how important defense was," he said. "For me, everything was about hitting. My defense, for the first four years of my career, was pretty bad. To adapt to that position, it took some time. I didn't think I could adapt. Blocking balls was just too hard. Moving, being smart calling the game, signs, that was a lot."

The Padres provided English classes twice a week and Lobaton said he took them seriously, but they weren't enough. He needed to develop confidence in using the language, not just what words to use.

In those early professional years, Lobaton would keep conversations short when he visited pitchers on the mound. All he would say was, "You okay? Okay, good," and quickly return to the plate. He felt he was lacking as a catcher and teammate by not communicating more. He wanted to ask more specifics and talk pitching strategy.

"I realized I need to talk to the pitchers more," he said.

Lobaton said he learned more English by pestering those around him for help with words than by studying. He still occasionally uses the language software on plane rides or at night in his hotel room during the season. He sometimes reads books in English given to him by his wife.

He may not finish many of them because it can become tedious constantly looking up words he doesn't know. "But I like reading," said Lobaton, who has an 8-month-old son. "That helps me relax and learn."

'Extraordinary opportunity'

It took Lobaton five years to be promoted to Class AA, which finally happened in 2008 when he was 23. He was called up from Class AAA and made his major league debut on July 5, 2009, but played only seven games over a month. He hit .176, was designated for assignment to make room for another player on the roster and was claimed off waivers by the Tampa Bay Rays. He worked his way back up from Class AA and hit .307 in the minors in 2011. He was back in the majors that season and appeared in 69 games for the Rays in 2012.

Last season was Lobaton's best. He was more confident as a player, appeared in 100 games, hit .249 with seven home runs. His hard work behind the plate, at the plate and with English broke through. He became a better game-caller and was well regarded by teammates.

In the offseason, the Rays traded for catcher Ryan Hanigan and re-signed Jose Molina, making Lobaton expendable. They traded him to Washington, where General Manager Mike Rizzo coveted his switch hitting and ability to frame pitches.

Today, Lobaton's English is stellar and he recently made an impressive and impassioned plea for peace during civil unrest in Venezuela in his second tongue. But he said he still stumbles over some words.

He is friendly but keeps mostly to himself and the Venezuelan players because he is so new. He said he knows about half of the pitchers' names now, but is leery of mispronouncing last names like "Stammen" or "Strasburg." He is soaking up as much as he can about his new team, and is excited to play for a team that plays in the nation's capital.

"This is an extraordinary opportunity," he said. "I don't know how often I'll play during the season or if I'll catch as much as I did last season with Tampa. But at this moment, I'm focusing on being ready and help the pitchers. I'll work, work, work and let them know that I'm here for them."

Article #14

Post-hype, Harper emerges as complete package

By Richard Justice – MLB.com (3/11/14)

VIERA, Fla. -- Bryce Harper is about to have a monstrous season, and remember you heard it here first.

You haven't forgotten Bryce Harper, have you?

"Time flies, doesn't it?" Nationals shortstop Ian Desmond said.

Yes, indeed. Two short years ago, we showed up at Spring Training to watch Harper's every swing and to record his every word. Incidentally, his batting practices are still incredible displays of power and quickness. Scouts who've seen thousands of games still marvel at the show Harper puts on.

Back to two years ago. Harper was 19 years old. He'd passed every test in the Minor Leagues. Back then, the only question was when the Nats would promote Harper to the big leagues.

Answer: April 28, 2012. Harper started in left field that night at Dodger Stadium, batted seventh and had a seventh-inning double off Chad Billingsley.

Cue the circus.

When Harper played softball on the National Mall, it became big news. When an opposing pitcher, Cole Hamels, plunked him for no apparent reason, it became even bigger news.

So did pretty much everything else Harper did.

Amid the hype, two defining story lines emerged.

Nationals general manager Mike Rizzo had constructed a model organization, and part of that model was having a tremendous core of veteran leadership. One reason it was safe for Rizzo to fast-track Harper through the Minor Leagues was because he knew his veterans -- Ryan Zimmerman, Adam LaRoche, Jayson Werth, etc. -- would wrap their collective arms around him.

More important, they would keep the atmosphere as normal as possible. If any team could make a 19-year-old wunderkind feel normal, it was this one. Everyone wanted a piece of Harper, but the Nats made sure that the bottom line was winning games. In the end, nothing else mattered.

"He's a big kid," Desmond said. "He's passionate. He wants to be older than what he is. He's 21. He's ready to be 28. He's ready for it. Time can't fly by fast enough."

Here's the other part of the Bryce Harper story, the one that sometimes gets lost, especially now with the emergence of Mike Trout and a bunch of other kid players. The Nationals got it right with Harper. Exactly right.

Harper was the 17-year-old No. 1 pick of the 2010 Draft because he had otherworldly talents. Strip everything else away, and he is right on track to be everything the Nats hoped he'd be.

"He's a special talent," Nationals manager Matt Williams said, "and he's looking forward to taking that next step to turn all that talent into that MVP candidate that everybody expects him to be. That expectation was there at 19, and that's a good thing.

"He's done all these things at a younger age than anyone else has done all these things. We still have to remember he's 21. He's a pretty special 21-year-old. We'll try to help him get to where he wants to go."

Last summer, Harper was the youngest National League All-Star starter in history at 20. He won the NL Rookie of the Year Award in 2012, and he and Tony Conigliaro are the only big leaguers with a pair of 20-homer seasons before their 21st birthday.

Harper may have had some growing up to do, but didn't we all at 19?

"What we've seen this year is a much more mature Major League player," Rizzo said. "He's not Bryce Harper the cover boy or Bryce Harper the prospect. He's Bryce Harper the middle-of-the-order hitter, Major League player. I think his teammates see him that way now. I think he sees himself that way.

"I've seen a different persona about him. He really takes care of business. He knows now it's a long season, a grinding season. His goal is to play 162 games, and if he does that, he feels he'll put up the numbers that he wants."

Harper has played 257 career games and has a .272 batting average with 42 home runs and an .834 on-base-plus slugging. Those are very, very solid numbers. If he's occasionally overlooked, that's because Trout has flown off the charts with two seasons that have established him as the best player on earth.

If Harper is fueled by any desire to take the best-player-in-the-game label from Trout, he won't say it.

"Trout's a great player," Harper said. "He's on the West Coast. I'm on the East Coast. I could care less what he's doing. I'm just going to do what I need to do to help my team win and get that ring."

Harper may not be simply saying what he's supposed to say. Some of the people who know him best, including Rizzo, believe Harper has always been driven to be the best he can be and that the things out of his control simply don't matter all that much.

"I think he's fueled by himself," Rizzo said. "He's fueled by being the best player he can be. He wants to be the best. I think that's what fuels him more than any comparison with another player."

Harper missed 31 games last season with a left knee that apparently ached all season long and required surgery in the offseason. He showed up this spring healthy and confident. If Harper can hit .274 on a bad knee, think what he can do with good health.

"I'm excited," he said. "I'm very excited to come into a year when my body feels great. My knee is 100 percent. It's nice to be able to hit with no pain and be able to play the game I love."

Harper's first two seasons are a testament to his enormous talent that he did more than just hold on. He contributed to winning teams. Now the world is about to see the finished product, and for Bryce Harper, after just the little bit we've seen of him, that's a huge statement.

"I just try to come out here and enjoy it every single day," Harper said. "I love coming out and playing with this game. We've got a great organization. We've got a great team. I know when I come into this clubhouse, I'm going to laugh, I'm going to smile, I'm going to have fun. That's the name of the game."

Article #15

Now a reliever, Stammen finding ways to thrive

By Andrew Simon – Nationals.com (3/14/14)

VIERA, Fla. -- When the Nationals sent Craig Stammen to the bullpen before the 2012 season, he harbored concerns more significant than his role on the pitching staff. He felt his career was on the line.

"I think when it happened, it was pretty much my last chance with the Nationals," said Stammen, who had spent parts of the previous three years with Washington. "So I couldn't be that disappointed because I needed to pitch well. And if I didn't pitch well, there was a good chance I was going to be in Triple-A for a long time. So it was kind of put-up-or-shut-up time."

For the past two seasons, Stammen has "put up" and solidified his place in the big leagues. He's done so by becoming something uncommon, yet valuable to a modern bullpen.

From 2012-13, the right-hander has gone 13-7 with a 2.54 ERA and nearly a strikeout per inning. But lots of relief pitchers are effective. Not many do so while taking on Stammen's workload.

His 170 innings pitched over the past two years are the most for any Major League pitcher who hasn't started a game, topping Colorado's Adam Ottavino by nearly 13 innings. While his ERA during that span ranks eighth among pitchers with 100 innings, nobody else above him on the list logged more than 130. Stammen also led the Majors by completing 49 outings of at least two innings, during which he posted a 1.63 ERA.

"I take pride in taking care of my body and being able to pitch every day," said Stammen, who turned 30 on Sunday. "I've been lucky to have a pretty resilient arm. It is a point of pride for me. I like being the workhorse, the bulldog. I think those are good qualities to have in the bullpen. It's a good thing to look back on the last two seasons, so hopefully I continue that the next couple seasons."

Thirty years ago, multi-inning ace relievers were common. From 1982-83, 22 relievers topped 170 total innings without starting a game.

But that number has dropped drastically over the years as bullpens have become bigger, more specialized and more reliant on matchups. While teams often do carry a long reliever, it's usually for the purpose of having somebody available to soak up innings in the event of a blowout, long extra-inning game or a starting pitcher getting knocked out early.

Stammen can do those things, but also has been effective enough to throw a single inning late in a close game when needed.

"Any time you have a guy like that out of the bullpen, it's a very good thing to have, a very strong tool to have, and not a lot of teams have that," said fellow Nats reliever Tyler Clippard, who went through his own journey from starter to long reliever to setup man.

In converting to the bullpen, Stammen underwent a transformation.

As a starter in his rookie year, he relied heavily on a four-seam fastball, with a curveball as his primary breaking pitch. These days, he goes after hitters primarily with a sinker and slider, with the curve as a third pitch. According to manager Matt Williams, Stammen's ability to throw any of those for a strike and generate quick outs with the sinker allows him to "roll through innings pretty quick."

Stammen, who said he never had prototypical mechanics, also decided to embrace his natural tendency to throw across his body rather than constantly try to stay on a perfect line. The motion adds some deception his delivery without compromising his ability to hit his spots.

The starter background, the refined repertoire and the delivery helped Stammen produce performances like the two he authored against the rival Braves last season in Atlanta. On May 31, he came in for an injured Stephen Strasburg in the third and threw four perfect innings, getting the win as the Nats prevailed, 3-2. On Aug. 17, he entered a tie game in the 12th and tossed three scoreless frames, picking up another "W" when Washington took a 15-inning victory.

"It does a lot of things," Clippard said of Stammen's ability to stretch out. "Obviously, it takes some of the workload off some of the guys that might have to pitch in some of those types of games that maybe they needed day off or whatever the case may be. But more importantly what it does is it keeps us in games."

Williams said that Stammen is likely to fill a similar role as he did the past two years under Davey Johnson. On Wednesday, he threw two innings and started a third in his fourth outing of the spring, building toward that point.

At this point, could Stammen build all the way back up to a starting rotation at some point?

"I think it's still in the back of my head that I wish I could do that," he said. "But again, on this starting staff, it's not going to happen. That ship has sailed with the Nationals. If I ever started again, it'd be for another team, but hopefully I'm with this team my whole career and I have a long, lustrous career in the bullpen."

Article #16

Relaxed as he needs to be, Rick Schu is the right fit as Nationals hitting coach

By Adam Kilgore – Washington Post (3/14/14)

VIERA, Fla. — Simplicity comes naturally to Rick Schu, and at the end of his playing career he saw his future clearly. "I knew I was a lifer," he said. He played baseball for as long and wherever he could, hitting homers in Japan and holding on in Class AAA. In the minors, he started coaching young hitters even before he stopped playing. Once he became a coach by title, Schu thrived. Teams offered him the chance to manage in the minors, but he always turned them down. All he wanted was some hitters.

The job Schu has now is the one he wanted all along. In the middle of last season, the Washington Nationals promoted Schu from minor league hitting coordinator, a role he held for three and a half years, to major league hitting coach. His new hitters, many of whom had worked under him in the minors, noticed an immediate change. First of all, when they walked into the batting cage, they heard music playing.

"It's a wide range, too," Nate McLouth said. "Every genre is covered." When Denard Span walks in, Schu flips Pandora radio to Jay Z. Adam LaRoche gets country. Hard rock for McLouth.

The beats and riffs are interrupted by horsehide meeting ash and Schu's patter. Banter outpaces mechanical tips. Pitch selection advice: "Hunt heaters!" Someone smacked a line drive: "Cables!" A string of well-hit line drives: "Be greedy!"

"He's the type of guy that just lets you hit," Bryce Harper said. "He's not going to come in and try to change you. He's going to let you play and do what works for you. He's going to be there for you, of course, but if you want his help, you got to ask him. He's here to help you out. He's not going to change you into the hitter he wants you to be. Having Schu come up last year, he was huge for us."

Late last year, the Nationals' schedule grew easier and the lineup grew healthier, but Schu's impact was undeniable. From opening day through July 21, the Nationals scored 3.7 runs per game and hit .240 with a .300 on-base percentage and a .383 slugging percentage. On that day, the Nationals fired Rick Eckstein and replaced him with Schu. After July 22, the Nationals scored 4.6 runs per game and hit .267/.331/.419.

From what minimal value spring training stats carry, the Nationals have carried over their strong hitting. They entered Wednesday ranked third in slugging (.443) and second in on-base percentage (.349) among Grapefruit League teams.

Nationals players are careful not to blame Eckstein. "We weren't going to hit as bad as we were for the whole year," third baseman Ryan Zimmerman said. "I thought [Eckstein] was great. He helped me do a lot of things. I've had a great relationship with him."

But they are also quick to credit Schu.

"He changed the atmosphere a little bit," shortstop Ian Desmond said. "He's a fun guy. He's serious, too. He was more light, more free and easy."

"He had a positive effect," General Manager Mike Rizzo said. "His energy, his approach, I think helped. His message, he knew a lot of those young guys throughout the minor leagues. He knew how to relate to them."

"He brings high energy every day," Span said. "Even if you aren't feeling good at the plate or feeling good in the cage, he will make you believe it's not as bad as what you think it is. Psychologically, he brought that sense of confidence to us offensively."

Schu succeeds at coaching hitters, really, because he likes hitters so much. He acts more like a hitting partner than a hitting coach. The word "positive" comes up a lot when players talk about Schu. "He's a real good dude," McLouth said.

Schu does not try to change hitters. He wants them to relax. He lets players watch video, but not if they only watch the outs they made. Eckstein, short and clean-shaven, carried a binder full of stats and tendencies. Schu, barrel-chested and goateed, carries a Fungo bat and a clipboard.

“There’s so much information out there, guys kind of get locked up,” Schu said. “ ‘He throws this in this count’ — the percentages. How about let’s just get a good pitch over the plate? Have an idea. Make them elevate the ball. And barrel it.”

When Schu arrived last season, he aimed to simplify the Nationals’ collective approach. He told them they should care less about a pitcher’s tendencies and more about looking for a fastball. He wanted them to think less and let their rhythm dictate an at-bat.

“Staying aggressive and hunting fastballs takes a lot of anxiety out of everything,” Schu said. “It takes mechanics out of there. It takes failure out of there.”

It’s not that Schu disregards mechanics. He keeps a list of “checkpoints” for each player. He studies classic swings, looking for a minor move that may help one of his hitters.

But he also knows each hitter needs to be instructed differently. Span likes feedback about his swing, and Schu gives it to him. Schu mostly steers clear of Desmond.

“He’s a guy I’m real careful talking to,” Schu said. “He’s been overcoached his whole life. It’s like every swing he takes, somebody is in his ear. He got bombarded, man. I just tell him, ‘Whenever you need me, I’m there for you.’ ”

Article #17

Staying healthy key for Harper

By Jerry Crasnick – ESPN.com (3/17/14)

VIERA, Fla. -- Bryce Harper is only 21 years old, but he seems exponentially more seasoned and mature than the kid who strode into Washington Nationals camp two years ago with that Sports Illustrated cover boy glow. Two hours before a spring training game, he sits at his locker with a growth of beard and his red Nationals cap turned backwards, thoughtfully sifting through a series of questions about his past, present and future in the game.

He's wearing a gray T-shirt with the words "PED Free" blazoned across the chest. You were expecting maybe "That's a clown question, bro"?

The beard grants Harper access to the hirsute brotherhood led by locker mates Jayson Werth and Adam LaRoche, who've gone full-throttle Zach Galifianakis this spring. And the T-shirt affirms that he will do things according to his own internal compass. If he's going to be anointed as a face of baseball moving forward, he might as well carry the designation with pride and never besmirch the Harper family name.

"Natural is the way to go," Harper says. "I've always said that. I work my butt off and I want to be as clean as I can forever. I pride myself on that. I have a great family and I would never want to put them or this organization through that."

It's been almost two years since Harper and Mike Trout arrived on the same momentous day (April 28, 2012) as bookend East and West coast sensations. While Trout recently made news with a pre-arbitration record \$1 million contract and is primed for a much more lucrative long-term deal after two straight MVP runner-up finishes in Los Angeles, Harper has been living a relatively serene existence in Florida. The Nationals play about an hour from the nearest Grapefruit League camp and their budding superstar is -- dare we say it? -- under the radar.

He's coming off a perfectly fine season that in many respects surpassed his Rookie of the Year turn in 2012. Harper's on-base percentage improved significantly (from .340 to .368), and he produced almost identical home run and RBI totals in exactly 100 fewer plate appearances than his first year.

But 2013 was more noteworthy for setbacks, injuries and some teachable moments, all of which coalesced into a YouTube staple during a 6-2 Washington victory at Dodger Stadium on May 13. Harper, pursuing a long fly ball by A.J. Ellis, lost his bearings and did a face plant into the wall before emerging groggy and with a cut on his neck. As a student of baseball history, Harper might have appreciated that the great Vin Scully did the narration.

The play ensured that Harper would continue to lead the majors in Pete Reiser and Aaron Rowand references. It also elicited the standard mix of admiration and concern from scouts, who love ballplayers with big motors but prefer that they remain concussion-free whenever possible.

Learning on the fly

Harper's good and bad experiences are gradually helping him find the right balance between aggressive and reckless. As he's quick to point out, he was a catcher and third baseman before breaking into professional ball as an outfielder with Hagerstown in the South Atlantic League in 2011. Less than 400 career outfield starts later, he knows he still has much to learn.

"I'm sure a lot of people thought, 'Oh, he was playing too hard and he ran into a wall,'" Harper says. "But it wasn't a matter of playing too hard. I had a terrible route and no clue where I was. My feet were messed up and my head was all over the place. It was a freak accident, and I hope it never happens again."

The knee is healthy now after offseason surgery, and Harper is swinging the bat with authority, running with confidence, and always a candidate to spring a surprise. After going hitless in two at-bats against Justin Verlander on Sunday, he came to the plate against Detroit lefty reliever Phil Coke in the seventh inning and tried unsuccessfully to beat out a bunt. Harper did it with the full blessing of manager Matt Williams, who told reporters, "It's a weapon that he has available to him when he wants to use it. It's an option for him at any time. To have that within his arsenal is good. It doesn't mean he has to do it all the time."

The knee injury -- which came with a side order of hip soreness -- did a major number on Harper's platoon splits last year. He posted a slash line of .214/.327/.321 against lefties, and his inability to push off his back leg put a significant crimp in his power.

"My knee gave out when I swung," he says. "Some days it would feel good and there were others when I couldn't walk to first base. I was in a lot of pain. It wasn't a lot of fun."

Oil changes, anyone?

Harper's belief that he can will his way through hard times with hard work is a family heirloom. Several years ago, when he was playing for the College of Southern Nevada, his father, Ron, told reporters that he still has to do his household chores like any other responsible son when he's living under the family roof. That arrangement remains in place even though young Bryce has graduated from teen to adult. When he went home to Nevada during the offseason, Harper took out the trash, pitched in with the yardwork and even mixed in an oil-and-filter change or two.

"Absolutely," he says with earnestness.

Most days, he's at the park by 7 a.m., so when the games are complete, he collapses on the couch at his spring residence with the TV remote and watches sports. In Viera, Harper spends as much time as he can hanging out with his older brother, Bryan, a minor league pitcher in the Nationals' system.

Harper has always had an excellent rapport with his Washington teammates. When he arrived as a hot-shot rookie, his work ethic and effort helped defuse potential resentment or eye-rolling. But two years ago, the media crush was so pronounced that he was destined to be an island unto himself on occasion. Now the vibe is more relaxed, and Harper is less a curiosity or a precocious little brother than a supremely talented peer. He's fortunate to be in a clubhouse with the likes of Ryan Zimmerman, Werth and LaRoche, who've helped round out some of his rough edges without killing his swagger.

"The game has changed a lot since I was 20 years old," Zimmerman says. "I got one-tenth the hype that Bryce or Trout got, deservedly so. Obviously, social interaction is great for the game and the fans, but this new generation also has to deal with a lot more pressure and attention than we ever did.

"People have to remind themselves that Bryce is young. He didn't go to [a major] college or spend a lot of time in the minor leagues, so he's basically learning at this level, which is hard to do. Sometimes this seems kind of unfair, but it doesn't matter if you're 18 or 21 or 30. When you've been in the big leagues for three years, you're expected to take that next step."

In contrast to, say, teammate Stephen Strasburg, who is generally friendly and accommodating but seemingly ill at ease with attention, Harper is in his element mingling with the media and the general public. He has an awareness and appreciation for baseball history that are refreshing by modern-day standards, and he understands his place in the big picture.

"I still have people coming up to me and asking me random stuff, and fans going crazy," Harper says. "I enjoy that. It's a blessing to have people ask me for my autograph. When they're not talking to you and asking for your autograph, that's when things go downhill from there."

Even though the expectations might be slightly lower this spring, and the media crunch is less pronounced, and Williams and new arrival Doug Fister are the most prominent storylines at Washington's camp, something is quietly churning beneath the surface in Harper's world.

"I think he loves the pressure and the hype, and when that hype goes down a little, he probably takes it personally," LaRoche says. "I can see him having a huge year if he's healthy. He just needs to be consistent and get to where that 0-for-8 or 0-for-10 doesn't turn into a 2-for-40. He'll mentally get strong to

where he knows how good he is and it won't even register what he's done in the past week. He'll have that kind of confidence where he's gonna put up some huge years."

After two impressive, productive, formative years in the majors, Bryce Harper's inner competitor tells him that he has something much bigger on the horizon. There's no better time to prove it than now.

Article #18

For Washington Nationals' Jayson Werth, hitting is a journey without end

By Adam Kilgore – Washington Post (3/18/14)

VIERA, FLA. — Jayson Werth holds tight to an idea about hitting. His close friend Raul Ibanez, the ageless outfielder now playing for the Los Angeles Angels, once told him, "If you can hit, you can do anything." Werth found it irrefutable, a simple edict spun from perfect logic.

"Because it doesn't work both ways," Werth said. "Just because you can do something else doesn't mean you can hit. If you can hit, you can do anything. Because it's the hardest thing to do. There's nothing harder. I can bake a cake. I could figure out a way to do algorithms. But a guy that knows how to do algorithms could never hit. It's literally the hardest thing to do. If you can do the hardest thing, you can do anything else."

For Werth, hitting is a ceaseless pursuit that fascinates and frustrates. Werth has swung a bat for 30-some years and taken 4,464 plate appearances in 11 major-league seasons. And still, hitting remains a fluid endeavor. It requires maintenance and vigilance over a career. It saps physical strength and mental energy over a season.

"There's nothing harder in the galaxy," he said.

And for that, Werth loves it.

Two months shy of 35 years old, Werth is entering a phase when players historically decline, and he's also coming off perhaps the best offensive season of his career. Despite missing a month because of an injury — another challenge he finds ever-shifting — Werth blasted 25 homers and posted career highs in batting average (.318) and slugging (.532) to go with a .398 on-base percentage.

Four seasons remain on the seven-year, \$126 million contract Werth signed in December 2010, and the Washington Nationals need him to continue producing in the middle of their lineup. Werth showed last year he could be the rare player who sustains success into his middle and late 30s.

He thrived, in part, because he embraces the unique technical challenge hitting presents. A basketball player's jumper or a linebacker's tackling form change seldom, if at all. Any hitter's swing is a work in progress. Despite his success, Werth has never stopped tinkering with his form or adjusting — and re-adjusting — to pitchers.

"I mean, it never ends," Werth said. He makes the struggle sound almost like a poker game.

“It’s better than poker,” Werth said. “I play poker. I know poker. This is way better.”

One afternoon last week, as the Nationals played the New York Yankees at Space Coast Stadium, Werth walked to the plate for his first at-bat. He dug into the box and held his hands close to his body, at a level even with his chest.

In his second at-bat, Werth moved the position of his hands, a subtle but noticeable change. Werth held them further away from his body and higher, about 10 inches in front of his ear.

“To get them up is like, ugh,” Werth said. “It’s like a chore. It’s definitely a more complicated swing.”

Werth has been grappling with that chore for years. At the start of the 2009 season, Werth batted with his hands extended and held high, as he had for most of his career. During the middle of the year, he moved them down. He clobbered 36 home runs and led the Philadelphia Phillies back to the World Series.

Werth tinkered with his hand placement over his first two years in Washington, but he always kept them in the same general area. Last year, he noticed how Bryce Harper held his hands at the plate, and it reminded him of his old self. He saw a picture of himself with his pre-2009 stance and decided he wanted to try it again.

“I think I can do more damage with them up,” Werth said. “It’s a commitment.”

And that covers only the hands. Maintaining the rest of swing — stride, rotation, moving hips and shoulders in concert — takes as much thought and work. Once that is in place, an army of scouts, coaches and pitchers start to pinpoint every exploitable weakness.

“As you adjust to the game, the game adjusts to you,” Werth said. “So then you have to adjust to the game. And then the game will adjust to you. It just never stops.”

Werth’s willingness and ability to tinker may not determine the length of his career. “I think that seven-year deal probably had more to do with my longevity,” he said. But it may help explain why he has persisted at a high level, and it may provide the Nationals hope he can continue into his late 30s.

“I took some jujitsu classes for a while in my life,” Werth said. “My Brazilian instructor would say, ‘For every counter, there’s a counter. And a counter. And a counter. And a counter.’ I was like, ‘Oh, it’s like hitting. This is great!’ I really got it.”

The daily toll requires an equal measure of preparation. Taking care of his body, Werth said, “is everything.” Knowing how much the season will chip away at his body, Werth tries to pack weight on in the winter. He believes it helps not only the physical demands, but also the mental.

Werth tinkers, too, with his offseason regimen, finding new ideas and circling back to old ones. He studies the individual way his muscles work, trying to balance the strength in complementary groups: He wants his quadriceps, for example, to be precisely as strong as his hamstring. He has found he is most susceptible to groin injuries, so he is careful not to strengthen it so much it can be torn easily.

"It's like you become a kinesiologist in a sense," Werth said.

Werth settled this offseason on heavy, Olympic-style weightlifting. He lifts as much weight as he can once or twice, trying to mimic the explosive, quick actions on a baseball field. He has tried exercises such as yoga, but he found it not quite right.

"I'm more of a meathead body-builder," Werth said. "There's a place for that stuff. I've done it in the past. I just didn't get the feeling I was looking for. I didn't like that stretched feeling. When you go to swing, it's violent. It's everything you got. Some guys have that nice, easy, sweet swing. Mine's like more of a chop down a tree. That's kind of how I train: one rep as hard and as fast as you can move."

Werth is ready to start another season, another year of countering pitchers and tweaking his swing. Few players sustain excellence into their mid-30s, but Werth thinks he can be the exception. After all, he can hit, can't he?

Article #19

Stephen Strasburg takes new approach, perspective into Nationals' 2014 season

By Adam Kilgore – Washington Post (3/22/14)

VIERA, FLA. — Baseball mattered too much to Stephen Strasburg. He suspects he always knew that, but until this winter he never confessed to himself. He shared the conclusion last week without hesi-ta-tion and with an unbridled smile, as he sat at his locker inside the Washington Nationals' spring training clubhouse. The grin surfaced once Strasburg talked about his baby daughter, 5 months old, happy and healthy and growing like a weed.

"I would never admit it," Strasburg said. "But now that I've had something that's more important, and the priority of being a good dad is more important to me, I think looking back, maybe I did put a little too much emphasis on baseball. Maybe it wasn't my only thing I was worried about. But it was definitely higher up there than I thought it was."

One week from Monday, on opening day, Strasburg will climb the mound at Citi Field in New York. He will carry with him a carefully revamped approach to the in-season preservation of his right arm, an elbow no longer stifled by a pair of bone chips and, most significantly, an altered perspective.

Strasburg, 25, became a father for the first time this winter. Teammates Ryan Zimmerman and Jordan Zimmermann also welcomed their first-born children, and it had varying effects on their professional outlook. "I can't golf as much as I used to be able to," Zimmermann said. "I feel like I'm the same person." For Strasburg, the difference was profound.

Since Strasburg entered professional baseball under the weight of massive expectation, internal and external, he grappled with his perfectionist tendencies. "It's always going to be a battle," Strasburg said. "It's going to be a process." When he thinks about his daughter, though, the burden melts. Now he places his most intense focus on something other than baseball.

“I want to go out there and be successful in this game and help this team win,” Strasburg said. “But that’s not my number one priority now. That’s being the best dad I can be. That’s awesome. It’s amazing how that changes your life. Just the little things. She rolls over a little bit or she makes a new noise, it’s amazing to see. You don’t want to miss any of it.”

Trying to be too perfect

Strasburg’s perfectionism drove him to morph from an out-of-shape high school kid to the best pitching prospect in a generation. At San Diego State, his pitching coach preached to him only winning the game mattered, whether he allowed no runs or eight.

He followed the edict, but dominance came easy in college; there were not many eight-run days. In the majors, against the best hitters in the world, demanding perfection ceased to drive Strasburg and began to consume him.

“I think I got away from that,” Strasburg said. “I slowly got in this habit of trying to go out there and do it all.”

Early last year, errors, bloop hits and missed pitches eroded Strasburg’s confidence and soured his body language. Last summer, after he brooded through a start, pitching coach Steve McCatty ordered him into a room with Zimmermann, one of Strasburg’s closest friends. McCatty asked Strasburg what he aimed to accomplish each start.

“To throw a no-hitter,” he replied.

McCatty turned to Zimmermann. “Do you try to throw a no-hitter?” he asked.

“The way I look at it, I give up a hit an inning on average,” Zimmermann replied. “If they don’t get a hit in the first inning, it’s probably going to come in the second inning.”

McCatty started laughing.

The conversation with McCatty and Zimmermann started to crystallize the problem for Strasburg.

“I think I’m a very visual learner,” Strasburg said. “I kind of play things out in my head a lot, before they happen. I think I’ve struggled in the past when things don’t go according to what I’ve envisioned in my head. That stresses me out, maybe gets me a little out of whack. I’ve been trying to switch the focus and not really worrying about that.”

The stress surfaces in his daily life. Strasburg chuckled as he admitted how irritated traffic makes him. His wife, Rachel, stays calm even in crisis.

“I’ve learned a lot from her, too,” Strasburg said. “If I’m in the car by myself, I’m pretty heated. If she’s in there, I’m like, ‘All right, just relax.’”

“We’re very opposite. She’s very easy-going. I need structure. The whole routine, starting and everything, it’s got to be the same every time. That’s where I feel like I’m trying to be willing to adjust, be willing to change a little easier and not get out of whack.”

Nationals teammates and confidants have noticed a difference in Strasburg this spring. He stands taller on the mound, in full command. He asks coaches questions with confidence, secure but not stubborn in his approach. He hungers to be better, not to be perfect. He continued the process he started last year. More so, teammates believe, as fatherhood helped him relax.

“He’s a more mature guy than he was a couple years back,” General Manager Mike Rizzo said. “I think he’s more comfortable in this environment. He’s just more comfortable with himself.”

A new comfort zone

Strasburg’s comfort may prove crucial to his health. Last season, after starts that did not meet his standard, he retreated to the bullpen to solve what he perceived as mechanical problems. Between starts, he would play long-toss and pitch off flat ground. He fired as many 60 pitches during some bullpen sessions.

By the end of the season, the Nationals skipped two of his starts after he copped to tightness in his forearm. He started on the season’s final weekend and never complained of any pain. In November, he learned what those mechanical problems really were: He had developed two bone chips in his elbow, and he needed surgery to remove them.

“I didn’t even know there was anything wrong with him until I read he had surgery,” Zimmermann said. “I was like, ‘What the heck?’”

The need for a procedure surprised Strasburg, too. He assumed it had only been inflammation, typical soreness at the end of the season. The surgeon showed Strasburg two bone chips that measured two centimeters each. “Wow,” he thought.

“They looked like two little eggs,” Strasburg said.

The second operation of his major league career led Strasburg to reevaluate his routine. This winter, he played catch and pitched at the same high school field as Kansas City Royals ace James Shields, one of baseball’s most reliable workhorses.

“He was the one who kind of reached out to help me,” Strasburg said. “Which was really cool. Because I’m kind of guy that doesn’t want to be bothering people.”

Shields told Strasburg to be mindful of every throw he made between starts. By the end of the season, Shields told him, all those throws accumulate. He could prevent wear if he trusted his arm and his mechanics. One bad start did not require an overhaul.

The pitchers Strasburg most admires throw 200 innings annually, and he listened to every word. Strasburg vowed to play catch less and to limit bullpen sessions to 25 pitches.

“I wasn’t able to make every start I should have last year, and the year before I got shut down,” Strasburg said. “I think I want to take a better effort and just save my bullets for out there in the game.”

By the end of the winter, Shields and Strasburg threw bullpen sessions side by side. More than his pure stuff, Strasburg's eagerness to learn and the measured seriousness he brought to his work struck Shields. But the stuff struck him, too. Shields joked one day that he would walk off the mound so he didn't have to compare his pitches to Strasburg's.

"He was really, really impressive in his bullpens," Shields said. "Way more impressive than I'll be in mine."

Strasburg made his impression with a new-and-improved arm. Fighting his elbow last year forced the ball to the outside or inside of the plate. He would inadvertently cut a fastball or change-up and think, "God, why is it doing that?" He would overcompensate and mistakenly fire a fastball at a hitter's head. He could not extend his arm perfectly straight or push his fingers into his shoulder when he flexed his biceps.

Now, he can do both. The few degrees of angle make all the difference. Extension and flexibility returned. When he releases a pitch, the ball spins exactly how he wants. He locates without effort. He added a slider to his repertoire.

"It feels so much better," Strasburg said. "I'm not trying to force a fastball away with my body. It just kind of happens."

Strasburg will enter his fifth major league season at the height of his immense powers. It all seems perfect. Inevitably, it will not remain that way. Strasburg has come to accept that, even to embrace it. When he leaves the park, he can leave baseball behind, knowing his favorite part of being a dad awaits.

"I think it's just coming home and making her laugh," Strasburg said. "That's the coolest thing. When they start to think you're funny, then it's over. Because you just want to make them laugh all the time."

He sat inside a clubhouse, dressed in baseball pants and a workout shirt. A few minutes later, Strasburg would pull on his jersey and head outside for practice. Another smile spread across his face. It was clear what mattered more to him, what the coolest thing really was.

Article #20

Ian Desmond has become the backbone of the Washington Nationals

By Adam Kilgore – Washington Post (3/31/14)

VIERA, FLA. — Once or twice every spring training, Ian Desmond walks into the clubhouse that houses the Washington Nationals' minor leaguers and searches for himself. He wants to talk to them all, to make everyone who enters the franchise feel at home. He answers questions. He forges relationships. He looks for kids who remind him of what he was at 18.

"I was never one of those guys, if somebody would walk in, I'd be the first guy up talking to him," Desmond said. "I was always kind of laying back, watching, observing. I try to look for that guy in there."

On Monday afternoon at Citi Field in New York, for the fifth consecutive opening day, Desmond will stand at shortstop for the Nationals, a team that existed in the abstract the first time he set foot in that minor league clubhouse. The franchise moved from Montreal to Washington months after it drafted him. A handful of employees — and just one player — remain. In her house, Desmond's mother, Pattie Paradise, keeps the Expos hat and uniform he wore as a minor leaguer.

Ten years have passed since Desmond joined the organization. He feels those years — the roots in Viera and Washington, the connections. If Ryan Zimmerman serves as the face of the franchise, Desmond is the face of the organization hidden from public view. He represents the low-level coaches, the community relations staffers, the minor league players who bustle below the surface. He may know more people in the organization than anyone. He binds them.

"There's men in this organization that have equally as much invested in me as my own parents," Desmond said. "I came here when I was basically a boy. They basically can take half the credit of who I've become."

'That guy's a leader, man'

Desmond, 28, has become an all-star shortstop and a Silver Slugger winner. He has become a husband to Chelsey, his sweetheart since age 10, and a father to two boys. He has become a board member for the Nationals Youth Baseball Academy and, away from the spotlight, a big brother to a kid fighting a rare and terrible disease. The organization made him a man. He gave the organization a conscience.

"He's gone from a very talented baseball player to becoming one of the better leaders we have on this team," Zimmerman said. "As you grow up and learn what's important to you, you do things off the field. I've known Desi for a long time, and I'm proud of the person he's become, the player he's become."

No one asks Desmond to make trips to the minor league clubhouse, and he wants no publicity for them. "I don't do it for me," Desmond said to a reporter. "I prefer to do stuff like that kind of under the radar. I don't even know how you found out about it."

Mention Desmond to someone within the Nationals' organization, though, and stories spill forth. In the winter, new Manager Matt Williams asked holdover coaches about team leaders. The response: "Desmond's your guy." Coaches in the farm system use Desmond as an example for how minor leaguers should hustle. He stands in front of his locker after every game, inviting reporters to talk to him so teammates can slip out the door.

"We were hitting" in the batting cage, bench coach Randy Knorr said. "Guys were standing around, and they would go, 'Boy, that guy's a leader, man. I'd follow him anywhere.' These are guys that have been here for a while. To have another player that has played longer than he has to say that is pretty impressive."

Desmond can lead, in part, because of the power of those 10 years. He feels comfortable speaking with any member of the organization, and all of them know they can talk to him. Both his parents still work "probably more than a millionaire son should let them," Desmond said. He sees himself as no different from them: blue-collar, regular.

"I try to be even with everybody," Desmond said. "I don't try to feel like I'm better than anybody. I don't try to feel like I'm below anybody. I try to just do my work and be relatable to everybody. When everyone does that, you get that community. I just try to do my job and treat people the way I want to be treated. Whether that's based on my faith or whatever, I just try to be nice to everybody. You know what I mean?"

'The big brother I never had'

Ethan Brown learned five years ago, at 16, he had contracted neurofibromatosis, a disease commonly known as NF. The disorder makes its victim dangerously susceptible to tumors, particularly in the brain, and in 2012 cancer assaulted Ethan's body. Before he began chemotherapy, he filled out a prayer request on the Christian Web site Unshamed Athletes.

Desmond frequents the Web site and noticed Ethan's story. He knew nothing about NF. The awfulness of the disease and Brown's resilience struck him. He started a correspondence with Brown through Twitter.

"It was kind of mind-blowing because I didn't ask for it," Ethan said in an e-mail. "He did it on his own."

In April that season, Desmond invited Ethan and his family, who live in South Carolina, to a game in Atlanta. Desmond bought them tickets and brought them on to the field. He asked Ethan whether he had brought a coat. Ethan insisted he would be fine. Desmond walked into the dugout, grabbed his team-issued jacket and gave it to Brown.

Desmond would not let the relationship fizzle. They texted, tweeted or talked two or three times each week. They send each other Bible verses. Their favorite is Proverbs 27:17: "As iron sharpens iron so one friend sharpens another."

"I'm the big brother I never had," Brown said.

Last year, Desmond invited the Browns to Nationals Park in midsummer. The game fell on a blistering afternoon, so Desmond bought tickets for seats in the shade. Before the game, Desmond toured Ethan through the clubhouse. When he introduced him to teammates, Desmond said, "This is my friend, Ethan."

"That made me feel very special," Ethan said.

This winter, Brown's condition worsened. Tumors formed on his brain stem, his spine and his hands. They surfaced inside and outside his body. They compressed his brain stem. He required three brain surgeries. The operations left him with symptoms of a stroke victim. He needs a wheelchair. His speech slurs. It is difficult for him to swallow.

At a Braves game last year, Ethan asked Desmond about his tattoos. Desmond asked Ethan if he had any, and Ethan told him he did not.

"Would you get one if I got one?" Desmond asked.

Ethan agreed. Desmond created a coat-of-arms design that held meaning for both of them: a shield made of four puzzle pieces, the symbol for NF research. Deer antlers because Brown loves to hunt. Baseball bats for Desmond. A cross. A motto: "End NF."

Desmond watched over FaceTime as an artist etched the tattoo on Ethan's biceps. Sometime this year, Desmond will have the same design inked on his body.

In May, NF Awareness Month, Desmond and the people who run Nats Archive — a fan blog Desmond befriended — plan to launch an Indiegogo campaign. Desmond wants to raise money for the Children's Tumor Foundation. More so, he wants people to know about his friend's disease.

Brown amazes and inspires Desmond. He laughs at Ethan's jokes and marvels at how he stays upbeat as he goes through hell. Daily frustrations make Desmond think of Ethan. His problems become so trivial they vanish. If his friend can keep smiling, Desmond thinks, so can he.

The weekend of April 11, the Nationals are playing in Atlanta, and the Browns are going back to Turner Field. "We don't care how we get there, if he has to use a wheelchair," said Rick Brown, Ethan's father. "He's going."

'There's no show about him'

In the summer of 2010, Desmond's rookie season, a group of local businessmen came to Nationals Park. Marla Lerner Tanenbaum, the chair of the team's charitable wing, the Washington Nationals Dream Foundation, would pitch them on donating to the Nationals Youth Baseball Academy, a place for disadvantaged youth that remained in the infancy of construction. A Nationals player would increase cachet, maybe help raise funds.

Desmond volunteered. At 12, Desmond joined an AAU team called the Sarasota Snappers. Two men without children coached the team, and they made him fall in love with baseball. He played 150 games a season "at least," he says.

"Those guys basically kept me off the streets, kept me out of trouble," Desmond said. "My eyes were set on becoming a good baseball player. They obviously taught us how to be men. I really owe a lot to them. We had kids on our team that were pretty outcast. They needed this. That's what we can provide to these kids in D.C. A safe place to go. Why would you not want to help out a kid if he has no love at home or if he's sleeping on the ground? Not eating dinner? That's stuff this academy can offer. That's awesome. I'll do whatever I got to do for that."

As Desmond shared his story at the meeting, Tanenbaum knew she wanted Desmond to join her cause. "When it came time to ask a player to be on the board," Tanenbaum said, "it was going to be Ian."

During the season, Desmond rarely has time to sit at meetings. He receives group e-mails sent to all the board members. Tanenbaum knows he reads them because he asks her specific questions.

Desmond persuaded Mizuno, the equipment company that sponsors him, to donate gloves to every kid in the academy. This summer, he will launch Ian's Academy All-Stars. Each month, 15 kids and 15 parents from the academy will come to Nationals Park, stand on the field for batting practice, sit in the lower bowl and receive vouchers for concessions.

“Ian’s paying for all of that,” Tanenbaum said. “That was his thing. He didn’t want them sitting in the upper bleachers. He wanted them down below.”

Tal Alter, the academy’s executive director, received a text message from Desmond in the middle of the night last summer. The Nationals had lost two games in a row to the Phillies. “I can’t sleep,” Desmond wrote to him. “I’m thinking about the academy.” He suggested that the third and fourth graders spend time around sixth and seventh graders, so they can see something to strive toward. Alter put the idea into practice.

Desmond sometimes calls or texts Alter and says, “I’ve got some free time today. Take me to meet with some kids.” Desmond makes his visit without fanfare and even without the team’s knowledge. He prefers not to wear his uniform, to make the connection person-to-person, not player-to-fan.

“There’s no show about him,” Alter said. “It’s all real. He treats everyone like a normal human being.”

‘I’m completely grateful’

The simple answer is, Desmond wants to play the rest of his career in Washington. With age, Desmond has learned the complexity of baseball’s business side. In January, after negotiations on a longer deal fell through, Desmond signed a two-year, \$17.5 million contract extension.

“That’s a ton of money,” Desmond said. “I don’t really ever think I really deserve it.”

And yet a simple conclusion gave to complex reasoning. Desmond and the Nationals struck the deal only after Desmond turned down a long-term contract offer that, based on reports Desmond will not verify, would have paid him almost \$90 million over seven seasons.

Desmond states his position in a humble manner. “I don’t pretend like I’m some college graduate with a masters in finance,” he said. “I got a high school education. I may or may not have deserved the diploma.” But Desmond is also entrenched in his nuanced stance. He is not greedily demanding more money. He is sacrificing comfort and risking security in the name of players before for him and for the sake of those to follow.

“If you said, ‘Hey, Ian, we want you to play here for the rest of your career.’ Okay. Yeah, absolutely. Duh. Where do I sign up?” Desmond said. “At the same time, there have been a lot of people that have come through this game that have sacrificed a lot for us, the players that are coming through now. I don’t want to sign a deal — and this isn’t to say they’ve offered me this — but I don’t want to sign a deal that is so bad that a future shortstop gets screwed because I signed a terrible deal. I’m not going to be that guy, that kink in the chain. I’m going to get a fair deal, or I’m just going to wait.”

For Desmond, the easy choice would have been to accept the Nationals’ offer. But the Texas Rangers signed Elvis Andrus to an eight-year, \$120 million contract two years ago. Desmond did not want to depress the market, no matter how difficult.

“Someone says, ‘Here’s X dollars,’ and you’re sitting there going, ‘Man, I couldn’t ever spend this in my whole life.’ How do you turn that down?” Desmond said. “That’s neither here nor there. My focus is here.

I've got two more years. They've obviously paid me the \$17.5 million for the next two years. I'm completely grateful. That's security enough for my lifetime."

"He'll probably give half of it away," Knorr said.

'We are becoming a family'

Desmond likes to point out that, for all his success, he has spent more time in the minors than the majors. Minor league baseball, to him, is "beautiful." He loves the purity of young players chasing a livelihood and old players hanging on. Ribald bus rides and hotel card games remain some of his fondest memories.

His early days in the majors were miserable. The kinship from his time in the minors disappeared. Players bolted from the stadium after losses. The clubhouse lacked brotherhood. "If this is what the big leagues is like, I don't want to be here," Desmond told his mom. "I want to go back to the playing in the minor leagues."

Desmond worked to change that. Before he proposed to Chelsey, Desmond explained requirements for life in baseball.

"I was like, look, I'm going to be early to the field — way earlier than you think is necessary," Desmond said. "I'm probably going to come home way later than you think is necessary. I said, that's just part of what I do, and that's how I do it. So if you can accept that, that's good."

Chelsey nodded. Today, if Desmond heads to the field late, Chelsey asks him, "What are you doing?" When he comes home early, she asks, "What happened?"

"The culture here has completely changed," Desmond said. "We are becoming a family."

Standing in the middle of the diamond, Desmond cultivated that. Knorr, whom Desmond considers a father figure, once told Desmond in Class A he would make the majors strictly because of how he plays the game. He connects to people. He treats them like equals.

"He's what you would want your son to grow up to be like," Rick Brown said.

Ten years in one place allows so much to happen. A group of people can turn into a family. A city can learn the measure of a man. And an 18-year-old boy can find himself.

Article #21

Danny Espinosa's ninth-inning walk

By Adam Kilgore – Washington Post (4/2/14)

NEW YORK — Danny Espinosa never took a day in the major leagues for granted, he said, so Monday morning failed to infuse him with any kind of special appreciation. His first day back since last summer's demotion filled him instead with replenished excitement. He missed the preparation, the team bus rolling to a visiting stadium, playing in front 40,000 people. He missed the stakes.

Espinosa watched from the dugout for three hours as the Washington Nationals and New York Mets scrapped. Then he provided the fulcrum of the afternoon. He came to the plate with two outs in the ninth inning. The Nationals trailed by one run. Those 40,000 people frothed for him to make the final out. He reminded himself to stay calm.

Espinosa's role will evolve over the season. The Nationals know for certain only that he will contribute. In Monday's 9-7 opening day victory, they asked him to keep the game alive, and he gave them what teammates considered the most important plate appearance of the afternoon. Espinosa's hard-earned, eight-pitch walk underscored both his new approach and the reason the Nationals have kept their faith in him.

"I was just trying to get on base right there," Espinosa said. "It's nice to be the hero. But I was just trying to extend the inning."

One year ago, Espinosa began the season entrenched as the starting second baseman. But the Nationals banished him to Class AAA after two dismal, strikeout-packed months. They view him now not as trade bait, reclamation project or broken player. They view him as a utility infielder who will play "regularly," Manager Matt Williams said. They view him, simply, as a crucial member of their team.

"I've been telling you guys all winter I think he's a valuable piece to this club," Williams said. "He brings a lot to the table, not just defensively but offensively for us. He's able to play all around the diamond, plays Gold Glove-caliber defense wherever he plays. That's a big part of our team. I think he came in focused. I think he came in with the idea he wanted to make the club and he worked very hard. That's good for him. I like to see that."

The Nationals since last fall have received ample opportunity to cast Espinosa away. Despite his .158 batting average/.193 slugging percentage/.272 on-base percentage, rival teams wanted to acquire him purely for his defensive value. General Manager Mike Rizzo refused to sell low.

He still saw not just the fielder who could win a Gold Glove, but also the player who hit 21 homers his rookie year and stole 20 bases the next season.

"There was quite a lot of interest in him, especially early in spring and mostly through the winter," Rizzo said. "We made it clear that he wasn't someone we were trying to trade. If there's a good trade to be had, value-for-value, we're open-minded about any of our players. We weren't looking to trade him. We didn't

make any phone calls to trade him. We received a lot of calls. That shows the type of ability he has and the importance of his skill set.”

This year, he needed to mobilize that skill set. The calm, controlled approach Espinosa used to draw his pivotal walk surfaced all spring. By mid-March, Nationals evaluators pointed to five examples of at-bats Espinosa extended with foul balls or other contact that last year would have ended in strikeouts.

In January, Espinosa ranted to reporters about the opportunity to “win back my job” and blamed the organization for misdiagnosing a hand injury that derailed him in 2013. By the start of spring training, he had narrowed his focus. Teammates noticed his quiet dedication. Espinosa said he didn’t think about his status. He did not dwell on his competition with Anthony Rendon.

He just played.

“Whatever is fueling his fire right now, I love it,” shortstop Ian Desmond said Monday. “I love where he’s at. In the clubhouse, he’s great. On the bench, he was great today. It’s not going to be an easy road for him, but it looks like he’s up for the challenge.”

In the ninth inning Monday, Desmond stood on first with two outs as Espinosa strode to the plate. With a low-90s fastball, Bobby Parnell had induced a pop-up from Adam LaRoche and struck out Rendon looking. The crowd rose in anticipation the game would end.

Espinosa set an immediate tone for the at-bat when he fouled away a 92-mph fastball. Parnell tried a change-up, low and inside, the kind of pitch Espinosa so often flailed at last season. Here, he spit on it. Espinosa chased a fastball just outside the zone and fouled it away. One more strike, and the game would end.

“I tried to keep the at-bat at my pace,” Espinosa said. “Two strikes, just making him come to me rather than hitting his pitch. Making him continue to come to me.”

Espinosa looked at one fastball — 2-2 — and fouled away another. Parnell twirled a curveball in the dirt, and Espinosa held back. Espinosa rifled a 3-2 fastball down the first base line, just foul. On the second 3-2 pitch, Parnell fired a fastball over the plate, an eyelash below the knees. Espinosa took it. Ball four.

Denard Span’s double drove in Desmond with a game-tying run, but the Nationals agreed Espinosa’s at-bat won the game. In the clubhouse afterward, someone said to Espinosa, “Dude, I was swinging in my head. I don’t know how you took those.”

And so, the most important at-bat of the Nationals’ opening day victory came when Espinosa drew a walk while batting left-handed against a right-handed pitcher. Would he have had the patience and the plate discipline last season? “I don’t know,” he said. But we do know this: In 130 big league, left-handed plate appearances in 2013, Espinosa walked three times.

“He’s been locked in, man,” Span said. “He’s been locked in since day one. He came to spring training and you could just see he’s grown a lot.”

The process will continue all season. He will adjust to a new role, coming off the bench and spelling regulars. "I'll have to adapt as I go," Espinosa said. "I've never had to do deal with it. It's going to be a process that I'll kind of learn as I go along."

The coming season will not always seem as exciting and as fun for Espinosa as opening day. But he has made changes necessary for the Nationals to welcome him back. He has allowed himself to redeem 2013. Who could not appreciate that?

Article #22

Rafael Soriano working on new pitches

By James Wagner – Washington Post (4/2/14)

During spring training, Nationals closer Rafael Soriano fiddled with a new pitch and he is considering adding it to his repertoire this season. However, he is coy about it and won't commit to how much he will use it. He does admit that his aunt's husband, who played baseball, showed him a new grip this winter in his native Dominican Republic. And when he threw it this way, the ball behaved similar to a sinker.

"I started throwing it like that," he said. "It felt good. It's a fastball but it moves differently."

Soriano said he also threw a change-up in spring training. He said he the last time he threw a change-up was during his Seattle Mariner days, when he was last a starter in the majors in 2002. The 34-year-old closer ditched the pitch when he became a reliever.

But this spring, in which he allowed nine runs in 5 2/3 innings, Soriano used both. He wouldn't say if either will be used in the regular season. According to Pitchf/x data, Soriano threw a two-seam fastball in the last two seasons, but he said the sinker-like fastball would be a new pitch. He said it moves down and away from left-handed batters.

"I don't know how I'm going to use it," he said. "If I'm going to throw it, I'm not going to say. If I am going to throw a new pitch that they haven't seen, I'll stay quiet and not saying anything. If it works, I should use it. If not, no. If it works, why not? It's another pitch."

Either pitch could help Soriano against left-handed batters, breaking down and away from the hitters. Last season, left-handed batters hit .274 with a .785 OPS against Soriano. In his career, left-handers hit .237 with a .713 OPS against him. The biggest reason for those struggles, Soriano said, was his troublesome slider.

In his dominant 2012 season with the Yankees, Soriano saved 42 games and posted a 2.26 ERA. He used his slider 40 percent of the time. Last season, he used it only 15.5 percent, relying more on fastballs and cut fastballs. In 2012, left-handers hit .217 against his slider, but last year it spiked to .471. Soriano said he has focused heavily this offseason and in bullpen sessions this spring to improve the slider. He felt he was dropping his arm angle too much when throwing it. And when the pitch struggled early, he lost confidence in it and used it less.

"It was one of my problems early on," he said. "I didn't use it like I used when I pitched [in New York]. I know there's only pitcher who saved all his games mostly with one pitch: Mariano [Rivera]. I can't be like him. As a pitcher, if I throw one pitch, I always throw the fastballs and slider. If I don't have one of those pitches, it gets harder."

Despite a lackluster spring training, which Soriano said he never puts any stock into because it is spring training, he said he feels ready for the season. He is happy with the work on his slider, and the other new pitches, despite the results.

"The good part is that I'm feeling good about my arm," he said. "That's most important. The rest, as long as I feel good with my arm, that's the only thing I can worry about. That was spring training. When the turn on the lights, then we'll talk."

Article #23

Second To None

By Howard Megdal – Sports On Earth (4/7/14)

Sure, it's easy to look at the eight professional games Anthony Rendon played at second base before debuting there in the big leagues for the Washington Nationals and come to the conclusion that the team threw him into the position with no previous experience.

This ignores the years he spent at the position earlier in his career. Much earlier.

"When I was about six to eight [years old], six to nine, my younger years, I was always the smallest kid," Rendon told me when we chatted in front of his locker, prior to Wednesday night's Nationals game against the Mets. "And I didn't have the strongest arm in the field, so I couldn't play shortstop. Didn't make the good throw across. So they just threw me at second base. That's where I kind of learned, started playing the infield."

The circumstances are slightly different for Rendon's new tenure at second base this time around. He's 23 now, not six. He's playing the position in the major leagues, not Little League. Nor is the switch due to any physical limitations. Rendon now possesses a strong arm, and profiles as a major league third baseman. But the Nationals have this guy, Ryan Zimmerman, signed through 2019, and while first base may be Zimmerman's future home, that's at least another year or two away.

So the Nationals decided to play Rendon at second base instead. He'd played a handful of games there while starring at Rice University, but hadn't had extended time at the position until he was approached, in April 2013, with the idea while playing for Double-A Harrisburg. He alternated positions throughout the early season, a few games at third, then one at second, another few at third -- taking ground balls at the position he was to play that day -- before getting three straight at second base following a promotion to Triple-A Syracuse. Days later, he was in the big leagues, playing second for the Nationals from June on.

Rendon loves to play third. But he was well aware of the circumstances in the organization he's playing for, and viewed the change as an opportunity, not a problem. Nor was he surprised.

"I knew it was a possibility," Rendon said of the position switch. "Coming up in the minor leagues, you want to get up to the highest level possible, and you want to play any position possible. So I was ready to play outfield, ready to play catcher, ready to play first base, ready to play anywhere I could when I got up here. And I guess I landed on second base."

What's been fascinating to watch, regarding Rendon, is that his natural desire to get to the big leagues as quickly as possible, and into the lineup by any means necessary, is obviously shared by the Nationals as well. Rendon was the sixth overall pick in the 2011 draft, but didn't begin playing professionally until 2012. And he's logged a total of 79 minor league games. It's not as if Rendon languished in the minor leagues.

Moreover, this doesn't speak to a dearth of overall talent on the team that won 86 last year and 98 in 2011, nor at the positions where Rendon fits best, with Zimmerman at third and Danny Espinosa, an elite defender, looking more like his healthy self this season after a rough 2013.

The general consensus is, Rendon's bat is going to be that good.

"He's one of the better hitters in terms of strike zone discipline, swinging at good pitches. I don't know the stats on it, but I'm sure he's pretty high at percent of pitches swung at in the strike zone," his double-play partner, Ian Desmond, told me by his locker prior to Wednesday's game.

Desmond had the stats right, by the way. Rendon swung at 21.3 percent of pitches outside the strike zone, good for fourth-best in baseball last year among players with at least 350 plate appearances. Desmond noted how much stronger Rendon looks this year than he did at the end of the 2013 season, one in which it should be noted Rendon still managed to provide roughly league average production while learning second base in real time.

"The work he put in this offseason is fantastic," Desmond said. "I think he put on 15 pounds of muscle, which, I don't know if you saw him last year, but he was a pretty little guy. He looked little, skinny. After his first season, it's long, I think he was probably a little worn down. But he looks great.

"I think he's just a good hitter," Desmond continued. "He's hit everywhere he's been. I don't think he's ever had an off year in his life. It's just a gift. He's got an unbelievable eye, hands, good swing. The hitch kind of reminds me of Zimmerman when he was younger. I saw Zimmerman when he first signed, and the resemblances are there."

Accordingly, there wasn't much of anything Rendon put into place to alter his mechanics this winter. If the raw slash line -- .265/.329/.396 -- merely hinted at his potential, things like that selectivity, and a process that led to line drives on his batted balls more than a quarter of the time, suggested that the approach is working just fine.

"I'm not too worried about the numbers," Rendon said. "I squared up a lot of baseballs last year at the plate. I'm just trying to barrel up the ball. If I barrel up the ball with the bat, make hard contact, I'm happy with that at-bat. It's a successful at-bat, the best chance I could with getting a hit off that pitcher."

So instead, he spent the winter getting stronger. He pointed out that "it's called the offseason for a reason, you've got to get your mind off baseball for a little bit." Then Rendon went to work at his offseason home in Houston.

"Ben Fairchild, my trainer back home, and I wanted to put on as much muscle mass as possible, get stronger for the season, since last season was my first full professional season, and the longevity of the season -- experiencing that, and realizing it's a very long season, it's a grind on your body," Rendon said. "So he knows that as well. And we put together a nice meal plan, a good workout regimen, try to put on as much mass as possible."

Rendon's meal plan comes prepared, based on a calorie count, with specifics on what to eat and when to eat it. It's the kind of thing that helps during a long season, when players don't have the time or inclination to cook for themselves.

"You just heat it up in the microwave when you get home," Rendon said. "Instead of going home, taking out the cooking stuff, put it in the pan, all that stuff." Rendon's specialties -- he says he makes "a mean spaghetti"-- will be put aside for now.

So will third base, with Rendon focusing his attention on getting better at second this season, taking pregame reps there. Interestingly, the man tasked with getting Rendon ready for the position, manager Matt Williams, spent the bulk of his career not at second, but at third base.

Of course, Williams did play three games -- one in 1987, two in 1988 -- at second for the Triple-A Phoenix Firebirds. Rendon was surprised to hear it.

"I guess I've got to ask him about that," Rendon said, laughing. "Like, how you gonna hold that back from me?"

The partnership is one that not only clicked immediately, according to all who are witnessing it, but has a history, too.

"He's been awesome," Rendon said. "I actually had a little taste of him, he was my manager in the [2012 Arizona] Fall League. And he's really hands-on.

"He has this little drill that he does that I love, actually, where he hits fungos, one-hoppers at you. You're on your knees on the outfield grass, but you're still on the dirt. And it's a picking drill. You make sure you get your glove angle -- he tells us to be doing it like tweezers. Soft, and just tweezing the ball. He first taught me that in Arizona -- I was like 'Hey, it makes sense!' So I've actually been doing that more often now."

Rendon said he kept that in mind throughout his 2013 season, even without Williams around.

"And then we're doing this in spring training, and it was like, 'Hey, I've done this before!'," Rendon said, smiling.

And while Williams may not have had Roberto Alomar's career at second base, his time as a natural third baseman with experience at second allows him to know precisely the difficulties Rendon will face making such a leap.

"When you play on one side of the diamond, and you move to the other, it's not as easy as people think it is," Williams said Wednesday during his pregame interview session. "Because everything's backwards... So

I understand, when he wants to turn to his left, and all of the sudden he's got to turn to his right to make a throw, it's wrong, according to what he's played all these years.

"But he works hard at it. There were a lot of early sessions this spring, there's going to continue to be sessions during the season, when we get a chance. He's improving. He's getting better at it."

Desmond, too, says he's noticed Rendon's defensive evolution.

"He's made a lot of great plays at second base," Desmond said. "He made a pretty unbelievable play the other day," referring to a diving stop Rendon made on Monday.

Oh, and he also homered to ice that game. Then he went out and got two hits on Wednesday night. As Williams acknowledged, the only real question Rendon has to answer is how well he can play the field at his new spot.

Or as Desmond put it, "There's no reason to doubt he'll hit. He's got it, man. You watch him play for a week, you'll see it."

Rendon, for his part, can't point to a specific moment where it all clicked in the field. But he says he feels like a second baseman this year, rather than a third baseman moonlighting at second.

"I don't know if there's a certain game," Rendon said. "I think it's just being out there. It doesn't hit you, like, one out, bottom of the fifth, this ground ball, oh I'm comfortable now!", he said, laughing. "I think just being out there, and the next thing you know, you're not worrying about things. You're just going out there, playing baseball.

"And I think I got that, near the end of the season last year. Okay, I'm out there, and I'm not worrying about things, overthinking things, oh, I've gotta do this, I've gotta do that. It's a little more natural. I'm used to taking that route to that ball now. I'm used to lining up in that position on a ball hit to the outfield. So it's a much more natural basis now, it's muscle memory, it's getting more comfortable there."

Kind of like how it was for little Anthony Rendon, back in Little League.

"It's kind of funny how I started here," Rendon said of playing second. "And now I've ended up back here. Kind of funny little twist."

Article #24

Reliever Jerry Blevins understands his role in the Washington Nationals' bullpen

By Adam Kilgore – Washington Post (4/10/14)

Jerry Blevins finds one personal trait of particular importance to his career and, without getting too philosophical about it, his life: honest self-evaluation. At some point this weekend, Blevins likely will jog from the left field corner of Turner Field to face two “large human beings.” The thought that crosses his mind will not burden him. It will reinforce an understanding.

“You know going in, ‘This is the reason that I’m here. These are the guys I need to get out,’ ” Blevins said. “As a grown man, you understand what your job is. I understand I have to get left-handed hitters out.”

The Washington Nationals searched this winter for a left-handed reliever, in part with the Atlanta Braves in mind. They acquired Blevins in a trade with the Oakland A’s by sacrificing sprinter-quick outfield prospect Billy Burns. The success of that deal hinges on Blevins’s ability to neutralize Freddie Freeman and Jason Heyward, Atlanta’s two best left-handed hitters.

Blevins’s encounters with Freeman and Heyward in crucial, late-game situations may determine the outcome of the three games starting Friday night in Atlanta. Any one game may determine the season series. And the season series may decide whether the Braves repeat as division champions or the Nationals take back the title.

Blevins has held left-handed batters to a .223 batting average in his career; Freeman has hit .261 against lefties, Heyward .230. Over a season that could bring a dozen matchups between them, each side will try to dial those percentages to its advantage.

“It’s a chess match, and it’s fun,” Blevins said. “That’s the part of the game that I really love. The longer guys get to know each other as hitters and pitchers, it becomes more challenging. I really thrive on that.”

From December through the spring, Blevins studied rosters to identify which batters he would face most often. He researched more lesser known lefties — Miami’s Garrett Jones, for example — than stars. “Heyward and Freeman, those guys are easy because they’re on TV a lot,” Blevins said. “You get to see them.”

Blevins looks up left-handed hitters’ performance against specific pitches from left-handed pitchers. Freeman is better than the league average against curveballs, for example, but below average against sliders.

That may have informed Blevins’s decisions already. In both his at-bats against Freeman so far, Blevins started him with a slider for a strike. In each meeting, though, Freeman overcame the hole. On Saturday, he ripped an 0-1 curveball to the gap for a double.

On Sunday, the count settled at 2-2 after Freeman chased a two-strike sinker far outside and still managed to flick it away foul. Blevins tried to make Freeman chase another slider. Freeman chased, except he still demolished it. Denard Span tracked down the line drive at the warning track in center field, sparing Blevins.

Freeman, Blevins said, “doesn’t have a singular weakness.” He marveled at how he can guard against inside pitches with arms long enough to reach — and drive — pitches off the outside corner.

“Freeman is a lot better hitter than advertised,” Blevins said. “He just signed a big deal and you hear a lot about him, but he lives up to the hype. Heyward is right on his heels. He’s a different kind of player. He relies a little bit more on speed than his power supply. But Freeman comes as advertised.”

Blevins handled Heyward on Sunday, setting him up with a curveball over the outside half of the plate, then striking him out with a slider over the middle of the plate.

The Braves bat Heyward first and Freeman third with a right-handed hitter separating them, ostensibly to punish the opposing manager for bringing in a lefty reliever to face them both. But Manager Fredi Gonzalez’s No. 2 hitter, B.J. Upton, provided little deterrent. Upton hit .184 last year, and he has started this season 5 for 33 with 14 strikeouts and no walks. On Wednesday, Gonzalez substituted Andrelton Simmons — career on-base percentage: .305 — in the second spot.

Until the Braves solve their lineup, Blevins should be able to face Heyward and Freeman with impunity. Over the course of a season, Blevins’s style should help him see the same hitters over and over.

Most relievers feature one pitch and use one other pitch to complement it. Blevins throws four pitches, giving him more patterns and sequences to choose from. Blevins throws two fastballs, one that cuts away from left-handed hitters and one that sinks toward them. He can also throw either a slider or curveball, so when a lefty identifies that the ball coming at him is about to break over the plate, he still can’t be sure whether it will loop slowly or dart away from him.

“I think having four pitches gives me the advantage long term because I can always mix it up,” Blevins said. “I’ll never have to do the same thing twice. I might. But I don’t have to, because I have the ability to work back and forth with different pitches.”

Pitching coach Steve McCatty diminished the importance of adjustments. “In this game, there are no secrets,” McCatty said. “We know their weaknesses. They know we know their weaknesses. They know what that guy is going to throw. It’s up to the pitcher to execute the pitch. It’s up to them to hit it.”

Blevins stands behind the mound before every pitch to gather himself and sort information in his head. He evaluates the last pitch and the way the hitter reacted. He considers how the count may change the plan he carried into an at-bat.

“Mostly, it’s thinking about what just happened and evaluating and not rushing, taking my time and understanding what I want to do,” Blevins said. “The number one thing you can do as a pitcher is throw whatever pitch it is with conviction.”

Conviction helped Blevins reach the majors. In the minors, he threw 97-mph fastballs past hitters. Over the 2008 and 2009 seasons, his velocity settled to its current state, around 90 mph. He learned that the way he approached hitters mattered more than sheer power. “It happened slowly,” he said, “but the realization clicked.”

It will aid Blevins every time he sees Freeman or Heyward at the plate this season. He knows why he is here.

Article #25

Tyler Clippard's splitter and kinship with Koji Uehara

By Adam Kilgore – Washington Post (4/15/14)

In the middle of July 2012, Tyler Clippard held a firm grasp on the Nationals' closer role, a job he always wanted that had taken him years to attain. His chance came after Drew Storen needed surgery and Henry Rodriguez imploded. He saved 14 games in his first 14 chances. He had been passed over for harder-throwing relievers, but once circumstance gave him his shot to close, Clippard seized it.

And then, he lost it. Clippard had thrived on his changeup-fastball combination with curveballs mixed in. Suddenly, he lost the ability to throw his curveball, which reduced the efficacy of his two primary pitches – without a third option to keep hitters honest, it mattered less how good they were on their own. In 29 appearances, Clippard posted a 6.04 ERA, lost three games and blew four saves. Before the playoffs, the Nationals moved Storen back to the ninth inning.

“Pretty much lost the closing job because of that little stretch,” Clippard said last week. “It was because I became just strictly fastball-changeup. I didn’t have a curveball to go to. I completely lost that pitch. I saw the ill effects of me not being able to have another pitch in the arsenal. For me, it’s very important that I can do those things. If not, I can get exposed.”

The ordeal led to Clippard's newest pitch. Clippard toyed with a splitter for several seasons, unveiled it last fall and early this year he incorporated the pitch into his repertoire. He still uses it only as a complement to his fastball-changeup combo, throwing once every 20 pitches or so. But it forces hitters to consider another pitch while giving him a fallback if his curveball escapes him.

“It’s a normal part of my repertoire at this point,” Clippard said. “I mean, I still have to find the right spots to throw it. I’m not going to be just fastball-split. It’s definitely my third or fourth pitch. But it’s something that I’m going to use consistently.”

“As you progress in your career, you do have to re-invent yourself a little bit,” Clippard added. “I think that’s what that pitch is going to do for me. It’s going to help me put something else in their head. And I think if I can do that on a consistent basis, I’ll be that much tougher to face.”

The splitter will help ensure hitters cannot use Clippard's durability against him. The Nationals have leaned on Clippard for the past four years, and divisional opponents such as Jimmy Rollins, Giancarlo Stanton, David Wright, Chase Utley and several others have faced him at least 15 times.

Last Tuesday, Clippard threw a splitter to Stanton, and the slugger swung over it for strike three. The next afternoon, a reporter approached Stanton to ask him about the new splitter Clippard had been throwing. “I didn’t know that until last night,” Stanton said with a wry smile.

“With guys that have faced him and know how to plan against him, to throw in a new pitch like that, that’s a good pitch, it’ll definitely throw you off,” Stanton said when asked to elaborate. “Now that I know he has that, it’s a new scheme that I have to have in the back of my mind, to be prepared for something else.”

The splitter, for Clippard, has been a simple pitch to add. He grips the ball wider than the seams and otherwise throws it the same as he would a fastball. It takes less maintenance than his curveball, which matters for relievers who, once the year starts, have little opportunity to hone their pitches between appearances, needing to save their bullets for games.

Clippard’s ability to thrive in the late innings with a variety of looks, and not overpowering velocity, makes him rare. But he is not alone. Last year, Koji Uehara dominated the ninth inning as the closer for the World Series champion Red Sox, using two different kinds of splitters as his primary attack. Clippard said he enjoys watching Uehara succeed with a fastball that typically hums less than 90 miles per hour.

“I think at the end of the day, his splitty kind of works like my changeup,” Clippard said. “The way I throw the splitty is different from the way he throws it. He throws it more for command and for a strike. I’m throwing it for a swing-and-miss pitch or a groundball pitch. But, you know, I have the changeup, too. Maybe there’s a comparison there – I throw my changeup for strikes, where he has different types of splits. It’s kind of the same idea. But I definitely like watching him throw.”

“I remember watching him in Baltimore thinking that, ‘This guy can probably close.’ His batting average against numbers were always really good. He doesn’t walk guys. For me, that’s the biggest thing I try to do, is bring my walk totals down. It’s pretty impressive.”

Clippard also found a kinship with Uehara because of the path he took. Uehara started the season as a set-up reliever, and it took three injuries for the Red Sox to tab Uehara as their closer.

“That’s the constant battle that I’ve dealt with in my career,” Clippard said. “I’ve gotten passed up numerous times for guys that threw harder than me. Not necessarily that put up better numbers. Just the fact that they threw harder, and the manager felt more confident with those guys in the ninth inning. Throughout my career, I’ve witnessed that. Not just from a personal standpoint. But from everyone else in the league. At the end of the day, it works itself out. But it takes too long. It takes longer than it should. The writing is on the wall, most of the time. Human nature is human nature. You see that 99 up there, you think, ‘Wow.’ That’s not everything.”

Clippard argued that his modest velocity should actually be considered a plus. He has been the most durable reliever in baseball since 2010, throwing more than 20 innings more than any other relief pitcher. He believes prototypical closers come and go because their arms cannot withstand the strain. When they naturally lose their velocity, they have nothing to fall back on. Clippard could lose a few miles per hour off his fastball, and he would still be essentially the same pitcher.

“Very rarely have I seen guys for seven to 10 years consistently throw 98-plus miles per hour,” Clippard said. “It just doesn’t happen. You got to know how to pitch. [Craig] Kimbrel might be the exception. He’s really been consistent with his velocity. It just doesn’t happen.”

And so Clippard, as he tries to pitch his way back to a closer’s job, will try to find new ways to stay adapt. He and pitching coach Steve McCatty have had frequent conversations about how much to use the splitter.

McCatty doesn't want Clippard to go away from his fastball-changeup combo too much. But he's fine with Clippard using the splitter, too.

"If he throws the one that he threw to Stanton, he can throw it every pitch as far as I'm concerned," McCatty said. "That was a good one."

Article #26

It's time for Nate McLouth's closeup

By Adam Kilgore – Washington Post (4/28/14)

In the dead of winter, Nate McLouth seemed like a luxury. The Nationals signed him to a two-year, \$10.5 million contract, maybe a bit heavy for a fourth outfielder. But the Nationals knew their team could contend, and they knew they had two outfielders in Bryce Harper and Jayson Werth — one young and maybe reckless, the other aging and perhaps prone to injury — who required some sort of insurance

Today, McLouth seems like a necessity. From now until Harper returns from the disabled list, an amount of time to be determined by his visit to a second hand specialist in Cleveland, McLouth will be the Nationals' primary left fielder. Manager Matt Williams said Tyler Moore and Kevin Frandsen will also get some time in left, but as the left-handed portion of a platoon, McLouth will get the most time.

The Nationals anticipated they would need McLouth. And now they do.

"The way he plays, things like that can happen," McLouth said. "And I mean that in a good way. It's unfortunate. He plays in such a way that things like that can happen. It's kind of a freak thing. His finger kind of caught on the base. Hopefully, I'll be able to hold down the fort until he gets back."

Cosmetically, McLouth's start seems to suggest he'll have a hard time replacing Harper. He was rock-solid last year as an everyday player in Baltimore. To start this year as a part-time player, McLouth has gone 4 for 34, including the solo homer he crushed Sunday off Joaquin Benoit.

Dig deeper, though, and McLouth appears poised to break out. He has struck out six times and drawn six walks, an indication that he's rarely getting fooled. Entering Sunday, he had a .120 batting average on balls in play, a sign he's been hitting into rotten luck. He also had seen 4.28 pitches per plate appearance, an indicator he's stayed patient.

McLouth has insisted all month his at-bat have been better than his results. Even before he hit the homer Sunday, he didn't waver.

"Hits aren't falling yet," McLouth said. "But I've felt like I've had competitive at-bats. It's not like I'm going in there rolling over the first pitch or striking out a bunch. That happens sometimes. It's just happened at the beginning of the season. My timing doesn't feel off. I haven't been having a ton of consistent at-bats. My timing has felt okay. I haven't had much luck or had many hits fall in yet."

"I have felt lost the plate before. I haven't felt like that. It'll happen. What you can't do, and what I've tried to do many times in the past, you can't go up there and try to get a hit. You can't control that. You got to go about the process, trust that it's going to happen over the long run."

McLouth will have an opportunity to test that out, because Harper's injury means he will receive enough at-bats. The Nationals hope Harper misses around 15 days, but they fear he may have suffered an injury that keeps him out more than a month. Either way, the Nationals will need to count on McLouth in the role they hoped wouldn't come, but still expected he would fill.

Article #27

Harper's engine in the shop again, but his time will come

By Ken Rosenthal – Fox Sports (4/30/14)

He plays too hard. He doesn't play hard enough. Amid the constant debate surrounding Washington outfielder Bryce Harper, let's not forget that he is 21, the youngest player in the majors. He would be the youngest player on the Nationals' Triple-A club and the youngest on their Double-A club, as well.

Let's also not forget this: Harper, at 6-foot-3, 229 pounds, is not your normal 21-year-old. His agent, Scott Boras, compares Harper's body to a "very big engine" — an engine that isn't easy to steer, manage or otherwise control.

Yes, Harper ripped up his thumb sliding headfirst into third base Friday night, suffering an injury that will sideline him until July. But, please, let's not turn this into another referendum on how the kid plays the game.

Youngsters who see themselves as invincible — Harper, the Dodgers' Yasiel Puig, et al — aren't the only players who slide headfirst. Respected veterans such as Boston's Dustin Pedroia and Philadelphia's Chase Utley hurt themselves doing the exact same thing. The Angels' Mike Trout, the yin to Harper's yang, said he will not abandon the practice because it is something he has always done.

As Harper matures, he will learn how to better harness his engine and protect his body. He also will learn to temper his disappointment when he does not perform well, run through the bag even on weak groundouts to the pitcher, and stay in the clubhouse to celebrate victories with teammates even on nights when he goes 0 for 4.

But overall? People need to relax. No, Harper is not Trout. Heck, Mickey Mantle might not have been Trout. And while the comparisons between Harper and Trout are inevitable — and, for those of us following them, rather fun — the expectations on Harper right now are just too extreme.

Part of that is Harper's own doing — perhaps you've seen his Gatorade commercial and other endorsements. Part of it also is because of his early success, the cover of Sports Illustrated at 16, the National League Rookie of the Year after his age-19 season. Part of it is because of Harper's own ambition — in the words of a teammate, "The bar is always raised, and he wants to conquer it."

One day, he just might reach that potential — Mel Ott, Ty Cobb and Al Kaline were the only players to earn more Wins Above Replacement than Harper before they turned 21, according to Fangraphs. But for now, it would be wrong to view Harper as a hothead, a joker, a villain, a spoiled brat. Those with the Nationals who know him best say that he is a smart, decent kid who will learn as he goes along.

Oh, there will be bumps along the way; Nationals manager Matt Williams had little choice but to remove Harper from a game for failing to run hard on April 19. Just two days before, in a team meeting, Williams had told his players that such conduct was unacceptable. Never mind that Harper was nursing a sore quad, and reportedly battling the flu. He was in the lineup, wasn't he? If Williams had done nothing, treated Harper as a teacher's pet, he would have lost the respect of his clubhouse.

Williams' willingness to discuss Harper's transgression with the media at length was less understandable — the manager already had sent his message, there was no need to humiliate the player further. But Williams, who is managing for the first time, also is learning as he goes. Five days later, when Harper ran slowly and then accelerated in time to beat out a grounder that the Angels' Albert Pujols mishandled at first base, Williams toned down his rhetoric considerably.

"He was safe at first base. That's all I care about," Williams said. "We are not asking him to go 100 percent all the time — as fast as he could possibly go, every single moment. Not everybody does. But what we expect is for him to give us a chance, and he gave us a chance on that play."

No two superstars are alike, OK? Trout plays the game in a breezy, jaunty manner, looking almost happy-go-lucky as he bounds across the field, letting his talent flow. Harper, as we've seen, will pout on occasion, put too much pressure on himself. Ken Griffey Jr. showed some of the same traits at a young age, and in an age of social media and 24-hour sports coverage, Harper is under an even greater microscope today.

Really, the trick once Harper returns will be for him simply to stay on the field — he had gotten off to a slow start coming off knee surgery, but had produced a .950 OPS in his previous 65 plate appearances at the time he injured his thumb. The big engine was purring, all right. Harper just needs to moderate it to the pace of the game, realizing that if he could just make 700 plate appearances in a season, his production would be nothing short of absurd.

It's a fine line, of course, a lot to ask of a 21-year-old. But Williams, a former All-Star third baseman, rightly told MLB Network Radio that he did not want Harper to curb his aggressiveness and possibly diminish his ability. Harper is going to be Harper. Asking him to tone it down would be foolish.

For Harper, it's all about managing that massive engine, learning to steer it, to pull off the gas at the right times. He's not Trout. No one is. But check back in five years, and that engine will be rolling down the highway, forcing nearly everyone to get out of the way.

Article #28

New stance and more weight help Adam LaRoche achieve surprising April success

By James Wagner – Washington Post (5/1/14)

Few Washington Nationals faced as many questions entering this season as Adam LaRoche. The first baseman had the least productive non-injured season of his career in 2013. As he struggled to keep up his strength — and consequently his offensive production — his batting average flirted near his dropping weight.

At 34, he entered this season as the second-oldest hitter in the lineup and facing the prospect of occasionally sitting against tough left-handed pitchers so Ryan Zimmerman could gain experience at first base.

On opening day against the New York Mets, LaRoche batted seventh.

As injuries to key hitters mounted, LaRoche inched up to the cleanup spot. He has been the Nationals' most consistent hitter not named Anthony Rendon, surprising because LaRoche typically is a slow starter. Instead, he broke his career-best mark for hits the first month of the season with 29. He is second among regulars with a .312 batting average and first with a .907 on-base-plus-slugging-percentage. He looks like a different hitter from last year, more reminiscent of the strong season he enjoyed in 2012.

"It feels good," said LaRoche, who is expected back Friday against the Philadelphia Phillies after resting a sore quadriceps muscle Wednesday. "It's still real early. We've still got a lot of work to do. I've still got a lot of work to do. But regardless of what you did the year before, it's always nice to get off to a good start. The last thing guys want to do is get off in a hole and kind of spend two, three, six months digging back out, which, unfortunately, I've been in a lot in my career."

With Bryce Harper, Zimmerman and Wilson Ramos out because of hand injuries, the Nationals have needed LaRoche more than ever. And LaRoche has delivered, thanks to adjustments he made to his swing in spring training and to his ability to maintain his weight. Despite the injuries, the Nationals have scored the sixth-most runs in baseball, in part, because of LaRoche, who has hit four home runs and driven in 17 .

"He's really balanced out the lineup," right fielder Jayson Werth said. "It's been great. I tell you: This game is tough. It'll beat you down. And when it starts to steamroll sometimes, it's hard to stop. Sometimes you need a winter off to regroup and get back to who you are. You can't figure these things out. He's been great. I would say he's been very similar to a majority of his other seasons. It's good to see."

LaRoche was healthy last season, other than bone chips in his throwing arm that emerged in the final series and were removed over the winter. Over his career, LaRoche has been a streaky hitter and it doomed him last season.

He finished with a .237 batting average, .332 on-base percentage and .403 slugging percentage, 20 home runs and a career-low .735 OPS. His plunging weight didn't help.

Since 2006, LaRoche has taken medication to combat Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder . Each year is a struggle to keep weight on, but last summer for LaRoche was particularly difficult because the medicine killed his appetite. Most players lose weight during the season, particularly the summer months, and LaRoche dropped to 190 pounds, his weight in college and about 20 pounds less than he would prefer. He even stopped taking batting practice before games out of fear of shedding more pounds.

LaRoche entered this season bigger than last season.

He is listed at 205 pounds. He felt better after he switched his medication after the all-star break last season and is sticking with the newer one. Before games, he is lifting weights, which he used to do after games, and believes it is helping keep his strength up. The true test, however, will be this summer.

"I feel really good," LaRoche said. "I'm keeping the weight on. Of course, it hasn't gotten hot yet but we'll see."

LaRoche has come to the plate with a better approach and improved mechanics. During spring training, LaRoche and hitting coach Rick Schu looked over video of his 2013 at-bats and noticed that he was moving his head too much as he swung and landing too forcefully on his lead foot.

"He was getting down hard because he was late and jumping," Schu said. "Now he's down soft and early and his head stays stiller that way."

To combat both problems, LaRoche went to the other extreme in the batting cages and during batting practice, which was awkward at first. He keeps his head still, starts his swing earlier and lands more softly on his front foot. With a less rushed swing and an unmoving head, LaRoche can better identify pitches and react.

"I know in the game with some adrenaline it's going to move a little bit more and the front foot is going to be a little bit harder, a little bit longer stride," he said. "But I try to exaggerate that to cut back as much as possible."

As a result, LaRoche is better able to hit balls to all fields, which Manager Matt Williams has said will be a key to his success. Last year, 33 of LaRoche's 121 hits were to left field. This season, 10 of his 29 hits were in that direction, including a walkoff single to left on April 23.

LaRoche's plate discipline has also improved. Through the end of April, he has swung at 18.4 percent of pitches outside the strike zone, according to FanGraphs.com, far below his career average of 25.9 percent and his 26 percent rate last season. He is averaging 4.32 pitches per plate appearance, better than his career mark of 3.92 pitches. He has drawn nearly as many walks (16) as he has struck out (21).

"A little more of having a plan and not going up and just kind of flailing away," LaRoche said. "Going up with a little bit of a game plan. And if [the pitcher] happens to leave something up, a good pitch to hit early, great. If not, be patient in there and wait for it."

Despite his encouraging April, LaRoche believes there is still room for more. As he continues to hone his timing, he thinks he will be able to pull more balls for power.

“There are certain pitches I’m chasing that I need to be a little more patient with or pitches in the zone I’m fouling off,” he said. “That is part of the game but I know when I’m really, really locked in those pitches are being driven. I can’t say that I feel bad by any means because I do feel good and comfortable.”

Article #29

Roark no longer lets small stuff weigh him down

By Bill Ladson – Nationals.com (5/1/14)

Right-hander Tanner Roark has become one of the best pitchers on the Nationals. In his last two starts, for example, he hasn't allowed a run in his last 15 2/3 innings. Roark's next start is Saturday night against the Phillies.

Of the two starts, Roark's best game was this past Saturday, when he pitched a three-hit shutout against the Padres at Nationals Park. Before the game, Roark, 27, had a bullpen session that made him believe he could possibly have the game of his life.

"I was staying on the ball command-wise," Roark said. "You have those games where you don't know where the ball is going and then you have a great feel of every pitch. That's how I felt that day."

Although Roark is one of the talented pitchers on the Nats, two years ago, it seemed doubtful he would ever have a big league career. He was with Triple-A Syracuse and having his worst season of his professional career. Roark lost 17 games in 2012 and was blaming everybody but himself. He would get upset over the littlest things. If there were a couple of bloop hits, for example, Roark would get upset.

It seems hard to believe Roark had that attitude with Syracuse, because as a member of the Nationals, he is shy and humble around the local media. He always talks about his family in Illinois.

But then Roark had a heart-to-heart talk with assistant general manager Doug Harris, then-manager Tony Beasley and then-pitching coach Greg Booker. The trio told Roark to start thinking about making each pitch and not worry about anything else. They told Roark that since he can't control what happens behind him, he might as well not worry about it.

"I was being selfish, I guess," Roark admitted. "Little things would happen -- bloop hits. I would be getting it in my own head and saying, 'Why is he getting on?' I was trying really hard. We all sat down, it was an emotional meeting. We talked it through ... I never went through anything like that before. It was good for me. That's what turned my career around -- the mental aspect of the game."

"It was about him understanding who he was, what he needed to do to be successful," Harris said. "Tanner did a terrific job, taking and applying [what we said]. He was in a funk. He really did a nice job battling his way out of it. He really found himself."

The talk even helped Roark change his life off the field.

"I'm not letting little petty things get to me," Roark said.

Roark worked hard during the offseason of 2012 and had his best season in '13. He went a combined 16-4 with a 2.60 ERA for Syracuse and Washington. That made Roark a candidate for the rotation this year, and he was on the Opening Day roster after teammate Doug Fister suffered a strained lat before the start of the regular season.

Now, Roark is an integral part of the rotation.

"He has a terrific understanding of who he is and what he needs to do to be successful," Harris said. "That was probably the biggest thing that got him over the hump. He finally began to trust who he was and that he was capable of getting people out with his stuff."

Article #30

Nationals Put Trust in Strasburg, Even When He Falters

By Tyler Kepner – New York Times (5/7/14)

WASHINGTON — When the question came to him, with the cameras on, Stephen Strasburg chose calculated sarcasm. How often does he have all his pitches working the way he did Wednesday?

"Every time," he said, expressionless, after the Washington Nationals beat the Los Angeles Dodgers, 3-2. "It just depends on if they hit it or not."

Later, privately, Strasburg explained that he was only kidding, that of course there are days when his fastball, curveball and changeup are not behaving as they should. But he has to use them, has to trust that the brilliance will reveal itself. Otherwise, he said, he would have no chance.

This is what the Nationals must do with Strasburg, too. They have seen enough, in 83 major league starts, to understand how few peers can match his mastery of three pitches. They must believe in where his talent can take him.

Steve McCatty, the Nationals' pitching coach, mentioned four pitchers — Clayton Kershaw, Cliff Lee, Justin Verlander and Felix Hernandez — as capable as Strasburg of commanding three dominant weapons.

"There's not a lot," McCatty said. "I'm sure I'm missing somebody, but not a lot."

The difference is that all of those pitchers have won a Cy Young Award, and Strasburg has never received a vote. Something always gets in the way.

As a rookie, in 2010, Strasburg tore his ulnar collateral ligament and needed reconstructive elbow surgery. He recovered in 2011 and made five starts. In 2012, he pitched in the All-Star Game and helped Washington win the National League East but was shut down before the playoffs to limit his innings. Last season, he was 8-9, largely because of low run support.

"I hear it was a down season; well, whatever his record was, he had a 3 E.R.A.," McCatty said, accurately. "That's not really down. Except wins and losses, everything was better than the year before. But that was a down season."

The most comparable pitchers to Strasburg, historically, offer compelling visions of his best and worst career outcomes. According to baseball-reference.com, the pitcher with the most similar statistics is Mark Fidrych, known as the Bird, a 1970s rookie sensation who was undone by injuries. But the most similar pitcher through age 24 is Ferguson Jenkins, a Hall of Famer.

Strasburg, now 25, started on opening day despite the presence of Jordan Zimmermann and Gio Gonzalez, two older starters who have also been All-Stars. It was a signal from the Nationals' new manager, Matt Williams, that Strasburg was still the focal point, still the ace above the rest.

On Wednesday, Williams treated him that way. Strasburg labored in the first inning, losing a riveting 10-pitch duel with Adrian Gonzalez, who singled past the hobbled first baseman Adam LaRoche for the game's first run. It was part of a stretch of four successive singles, which led to two runs.

This highlighted two problems for Strasburg: his struggles in the first inning and his bad luck. Entering the game, opponents had a .396 average when they put the ball in play off Strasburg, a figure about a hundred points above the norm. He also had a 7.71 earned run average in the first inning, and a 2.73 mark thereafter.

For the rest of the day, everything normalized. Strasburg allowed no more runs. He struck out Gonzalez twice: on a neck-high, 95-mile-per-hour fastball in the third inning, and on a wipeout changeup in the dirt in the sixth. He pumped 96-m.p.h. heat past Justin Turner to end the seventh.

The Nationals led, 3-2, and Strasburg had thrown 102 pitches. Typically, that has been enough. In his career, he had 19 starts of precisely seven innings, but just five starts that went beyond that.

This time, though, Strasburg took the mound for the eighth. A bunt single, a flyout and a walk chased him, but the point was clear: The Nationals are letting Strasburg, the first pick in the 2009 draft, take the final step in his development.

"I mean, he's our horse," Williams said. "He's a guy that can go 120. We don't want to do that every time, but in a game like today, he's got the lead, and we want to show confidence in him that we're willing to send him back out there and protect that lead."

Strasburg, who finished with 114 pitches, has actually never thrown 120 pitches in a game. (His career high is 119, in June 2012.) He said he welcomed the chance to push the boundaries.

"That's the position I want to be in," he said. "I think that's going to make me a better pitcher in the long run. Every time out, I want to go as deep as I can and keep it close."

Strasburg entered the game leading all qualifiers in strikeouts per nine innings, with 13.1. His average fastball is 94.3 m.p.h., according to Fangraphs, down by 3 m.p.h. from 2010. Even so, his stuff generates fouls and swings and misses. He is prone to high pitch counts, even when he tries for the opposite.

“Since he first got here, that’s one thing we’ve always stressed: learning how to pitch to contact,” McCatty said. “And that’s what he wants to do. But he just has that ability.”

Strasburg is 3-2, and his 3.42 E.R.A. is not among the leaders. But that ability is captivating on days like Wednesday, when Strasburg seems capable of doing whatever he wants, like one of the greats.

“We give lofty comparisons to tell him he should be them,” McCatty said. “He’s not them, never will be them. He’s going to be what Stephen Strasburg is. He’s going to be as good as he possibly can be, and that always takes a little time.”

Maybe, perhaps, that time is now.
