Inbox: Do Twins need to add an ace? MLB.com (Bollinger) p. 1

It's been quiet for the Twins recently, as they've yet to make any major moves after trading for catcher John Ryan Murphy and signing Korean slugger Byung Ho Park early in the offseason.

The Twins could head into Spring Training with their current roster, but they are still eying relief help, as there are several bullpen arms available in free agency or trade.

• Submit a question to the Twins Inbox

There are always plenty of questions about the roster this time of year with Spring Training only weeks away, and, with that in mind, here's this week's Twins Inbox:

Over the last few years, it seems like the Twins are finally able and willing to spend money to keep players and sign free agents. Do you see them willing to finally spend money on a top-tier pitcher within the next two years to lead the staff with all of the young talent emerging from the Minors?

-- Chris F., Modesto, Calif.

For all their strengths, including a young core of position players and a top farm system, the Twins lack a legitimate ace in their rotation. They have some top pitching prospects -- including Jose Berrios, Tyler Jay and Kohl Stewart -- but it’s hard to project how they’ll fare once they reach the Majors and if they can become front-line starters.

An ace would be a major boost for the Twins, who have lacked one since the days of Johan Santana, but it also shows how few No. 1 starters there are in the Majors. That scarcity comes with a cost, and it’s one the Twins aren’t likely to pay via free agency.

The Twins did sign Phil Hughes to a five-year deal worth $58 million, Ricky Nolasco to a four-year deal for $49 million and Ervin Santana to a four-year pact for $55 million in recent years, but it’s hard to see them shelling out more than $200 million like David Price and Zack Greinke received this offseason. And next year’s free-agent market for starting pitching is a bit thin with Stephen Strasburg as the headliner.

It’s much more likely the Twins use their farm system to trade for an ace-type starter, potentially even during the 2016 season if they’re in contention. The Royals went that route last year, acquiring Johnny Cueto before the non-waiver Trade Deadline, and while he went through some struggles, he still helped them win the World Series.

Who do you see as the Twins’ primary leadoff hitter next season? It seems with Brian Dozier’s power and high number of strikeouts he’d be better suited hitting lower in the lineup. Would the Twins try Byron Buxton there? Or is Dozier the likely candidate again next season?
With Aaron Hicks out of the mix after his trade to the Yankees, Dozier is the most obvious candidate to be the club's primary leadoff hitter to open the season. Dozier led off 102 times last year, and he hit .246/.313/.499 with 22 homers, 29 doubles, 56 RBIs, 69 runs and eight stolen bases in those games atop the lineup.

So while Dozier is not a prototypical leadoff hitter with his power and low batting average, he's still productive and is the club's best choice to lead off until Buxton is ready. Buxton fits the mold as a speedy leadoff hitter who can get on base, but until he proves he can handle Major League pitching, he's more likely to hit later in the lineup, and perhaps even ninth early in the year.

Who on the 40-man roster aside from Oswaldo Arcia and Michael Tonkin are out of Minor League options? Both Arcia and Tonkin are players with great potential whom the Twins would most likely lose were they to try to clear them through waivers on the way to the Minors.

Outside of Arcia and Tonkin, shortstop/outfielder Danny Santana is the only other notable Twins player to be out of options for the first time in 2016. Josmil Pinto, Hicks and Chris Herrmann were all out of options, but the Twins traded Hicks and Herrmann and lost Pinto via waivers this offseason.

Arcia is the most interesting of the group, as he's only 24 and has plenty of raw power, given that he hit 20 homers in 103 games in 2014. But he's coming off a down year and will have a lot to prove in Spring Training. Tonkin is a strong candidate to make the Opening Day bullpen, while Santana is expected to be used in a utility role next season. All three, however, would likely be lost via waivers if the Twins decided to go that route.

Do the Twins even think about bringing back Justin Morneau for a backup role?

Morneau was present at Torii Hunter's retirement news conference at Target Field and said at the time he was open to anything at that point as a free agent. But after the Twins signed Park to be their regular designated hitter, it essentially closed the door on a Morneau reunion. There simply aren't enough at-bats for Morneau, who is looking for more playing time than he would get with Minnesota.

One female physician's experience in a man's world of pro sports medicine

One of the most interesting stories in pro sports over the last couple of years has been the hiring of Becky Hammon as an assistant coach by the San Antonio Spurs. Men coaching high-level women are nothing new but with a few exceptions, in such sports as swimming, it is unusual for elite men to be coached by women.

When it comes to sports medicine providers, and especially to the orthopedic surgeons who take care of elite athletes, it has mostly been a men’s game as well. This is changing, however, and my Mayo Clinic colleague Dr. Diane Dahm is caring for the Minnesota Twins and the Minnesota Timberwolves. Dr. Dahm is a professor of orthopedic surgery and has published numerous research papers in medical journals that have advanced the field of sports medicine. Last month we exchanged questions and answers via e-mail and then followed up with a visit as I learned more what it was like to be a medical Becky Hammon.

Michael Joyner | Sports Illustrated | January 11, 2016

One female physician's experience in a man's world of pro sports medicine

One of the most interesting stories in pro sports over the last couple of years has been the hiring of Becky Hammon as an assistant coach by the San Antonio Spurs. Men coaching high-level women are nothing new but with a few exceptions, in such sports as swimming, it is unusual for elite men to be coached by women.

When it comes to sports medicine providers, and especially to the orthopedic surgeons who take care of elite athletes, it has mostly been a men’s game as well. This is changing, however, and my Mayo Clinic colleague Dr. Diane Dahm is caring for the Minnesota Twins and the Minnesota Timberwolves. Dr. Dahm is a professor of orthopedic surgery and has published numerous research papers in medical journals that have advanced the field of sports medicine. Last month we exchanged questions and answers via e-mail and then followed up with a visit as I learned more what it was like to be a medical Becky Hammon.

Michael Joyner: How many women are team doctors for major league men’s teams?

Dr. Diane Dahm: Pro teams generally have both an orthopedic surgeon and a primary care physician taking care of them. Although I am the only female head orthopedic surgeon in the NBA, there are two outstanding female primary care physicians: Lisa Callahan [NY Knicks] and Kathy Weber [Chicago Bulls]. Kathy and I are somewhat unique in that we are women who work with both NBA and MLB teams. I am also aware of two female physicians caring for teams in the NFL, so I really don’t consider myself a trailblazer. I just feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to be part of this relatively small group.

MJ: When did you get interested in orthopedics and how did you then gravitate to sports medicine?

DD: I became interested in sports medicine at a very early age. I used to attend pro sporting events as a kid with my dad. I knew I wanted to be a doctor, but instead of delivering babies like he did, I wanted to take care of athletes.
MJ: When I started med school in the early ’80s, orthopedics was almost all “guys”, and the folks who gravitated towards sports medicine had typically been athletes. It seems to me that the rise of women in sports medicine generally, and orthopedic surgery in specific, tracks Title IX and women participating in sports.

DD: Although it may not have impacted me directly, there is no question that Title IX has led to more girls participating in sports, and many orthopedic and sports medicine physicians are former athletes. My personal sports experience growing up consisted of playing baseball and football in the neighborhood with my older brother and his friends. What I lacked in size and talent I made up for in effort and determination, which is probably why they let me play. I was captain of the softball and basketball teams in high school, but realized fairly quickly that I wasn’t good enough to play at the next level. So in college [Wake Forest] I worked as a student athletic trainer and played intramurals. Now I work out when I can, play a little golf, and watch my kids play sports.

MJ: How has it been interacting with elite pros who are men? Was there an adjustment period for the players or for you? Or was it pretty straight forward?

DD: Over the years I have covered essentially every level of men’s sports—from high school to the pros. As I mentioned, in college I worked football, traveled with men’s soccer, and also taped a few ankles for the basketball team. Incidentally, I was at Wake Forest before Tim Duncan but did occasionally tape the ankles of Muggsy Bogues, who played in the NBA at 5’ 3”!

I’ve learned that it’s important to create an atmosphere of mutual respect. Pro athletes have exceptional talent and work extremely hard, much harder than most people realize. I have tremendous respect for them, as well as for the coaches and trainers who work with them. I have also been very lucky to work with two great professional organizations that have cultivated an inclusive environment.

MJ: When I was running for the University of Arizona in the late ’70s, sports orthopedic surgery was in its infancy. It was before widespread use of arthroscopic procedures, there were long periods of immobilization after surgery and very limited use of advanced biomaterials. All of that has changed for the better and elite athletes now make full recoveries from what used to be career-ending injuries. What do you see on the horizon?

DD: Individualized treatment based on patient-specific factors, use of virtual reality in rehabilitation of injuries to mimic game and practice situations, and use of athlete-specific data to monitor workload and fatigue, and hopefully prevent injury.

MJ: What have you learned from the elites that you apply to your regular citizen-athlete patients?

DD: Hard work and dedication to rehabilitation will get you back to sport after injury. A positive attitude also helps.

MJ: Biggest surprise?

DD: Probably how uneventful being a woman in my field actually is. The real surprise will be when a woman is named head coach of a high profile men’s team.

New Twin Park Byung-ho hoping to continue hard-hitting ways in majors

Yoo Jee-ho | Yonhap News Agency | January 11, 2016

South Korean slugger Park Byung-ho, who signed with the Minnesota Twins this offseason, said Tuesday he hopes to continue his hard-hitting ways as a big league rookie in 2016.

Park left for the United States Tuesday to continue preparations for his first Major League Baseball (MLB) season having signed a four-year deal worth US$12 million. The two-time MVP with the Nexen Heroes in the Korea Baseball Organization (KBO) will first work out with the Heroes in Arizona before reporting to the Twins’ spring training in Fort Myers, Florida, on Feb. 26.

Park belted a career-high 53 home runs in the KBO last year, his second straight 50-homer season. It capped off a dominant four-year stretch in which he belted 173 home runs with 492 RBIs while twice winning MVP and twice finishing second in the voting.

The 29-year-old said he understands what the Twins count on him to do and he’s ready to live up to expectations.

"I know the Twins signed me because of all the home runs I’ve hit in Korea," Park told reporters at Incheon International Airport. "I’d like to hit a lot of home runs in the majors, too, and to develop into a consistent slugger."

Park, who has been notoriously shy about discussing his numbers in the KBO, said he hasn’t set any statistical goal for himself, adding, "My biggest objective is to make quick adjustments to the new league."
"Since this will be my first season, I think I will need time to adjust and will go through some rough patches," Park added. "I think baseball itself will be the same. I will have to adjust to new teammates and a new culture. I will also be facing entirely new pitchers, and I will have to study them thoroughly and correct my weaknesses."

After the Twins signed Park, Paul Molitor, the team's manager, said the club will "need to be patient with him" and make sure he won't worry about frustration with the adjustment period early in the season. Park said Molitor had told him the same thing when they'd met earlier, and that he appreciates the manager's generosity.

"The club is showing me a lot of faith, and I have to work that much harder to prepare for the season the best I can," Park said. "I don't want to be in a hurry. It's important to make a good impression at the camp, but if I peak too early, it will actually be detrimental later in the season. I will have to talk things over with the coaches."

Park has been a first baseman for the majority of his KBO career but is expected to serve as the primary designated hitter for the Twins. Joe Mauer, once an MVP-winning catcher and the face of the franchise, is now the team's everyday first baseman. To make room for Park, the Twins are trying to convert last year's DH, Miguel Sano, into a corner outfielder in 2016.

Park, who has previously said he'd prefer to play in the field, said the Twins told him that he'd be the DH for most of the season but that they expect him to also be ready to take the field "once or twice a week."

Park is one of three South Koreans to sign a major league deal this winter, along with outfielder Kim Hyun-soo of the Baltimore Orioles and right-hander Oh Seung-hwan of the St. Louis Cardinals. They're joined by three incumbents: Choo Shin-soo of the Texas Rangers, Ryu Hyun-jin of the Los Angeles Dodgers and Kang Jung-ho of the Pittsburgh Pirates.

The Twins are looking for more punch in their lineup after ranking in the lower half of the American League last year in hits (14th), home runs (10th), slugging percentage (12th) and extra-base hits (10th).

**Prospect Discovery For Twins In Moldova**

**Phil Miller | Baseball America | January 12, 2016**

Minnesota Twins scout Cary Broder wasn't paying much attention when Vadim Balan stepped on the mound at a baseball academy in the Czech Republic last May. Broder had watched Balan a year earlier in Italy, and barely made note of the righthander's 89-mph pitches. This time was different.

“He looked much more athletic as he starts throwing. 91 (mph). OK. Then 93. That’s pretty good. Don’t see that much in Europe,” Broder said. “Then 95. Whoa—95? And 96, 96, 95, 96. You get the idea.”

Broder had an idea, too. After watching Balan throw a few sliders, pitches “with a wicked tilt to them, impressive,” he contacted Minnesota. A day later, Balan had a $15,000 contract and the Twins had their first player ever from Moldova, a small former Soviet republic of fewer than 3 million people that sits between Ukraine and Romania.

“He’s really raw and his command was non-existent the first time I saw him,” Broder said. “Pitchability will be his obvious issue. But it’s a tiny investment, and he’s an awesome kid who deserves a chance.”

He’ll get it in the Rookie-level Gulf Coast League in 2016, a 22-year-old rookie from an Eastern European town called Tiraspol.

“He’s got a big league arm,” Twins vice president of player personnel Mike Radcliff said. “His baseball skills are crude, but he’s got a hard, very heavy fastball. You like taking chances with those guys.”
Being Moldovan presents extra challenges. Balan was supposed to pitch in the GCL last year, but the U.S. visa process for Moldovans is complex. By the time his paperwork was approved, it was late August. So on Aug. 26, Balan made his only pro appearance, facing six batters against the GCL Rays. He struck out four of them, but hit one, too.

“I’m excited for him,” Broder said. “And he’s got a twin brother I’d like to sign, too. A lefthander.”

TWIN KILLINGS

• The Twins signed a handful of free agents to minor league contracts, including infielders Buck Britton and James Beresford.
• Miguel Sano cut short his Dominican League season after just 15 games when the Twins asked him to rest for the upcoming season. Sano has yet to play in the outfield, where the Twins project him next year.