

Dome finale full of frustration for Tribe Rookie mistakes, Laffey's subpar start equal rough loss

By Anthony Castrovine / MLB.com

MINNEAPOLIS -- The Indians were enablers, not spoilers, in their final visit to the Metrodome.

Everything that transpired here over the past three days served to boost the Twins' hopes of catching the first-place Tigers in the American League Central and support the notion that the Indians are an inexperienced team finishing out a tough season on an uninspired note.

The series concluded with Wednesday's 7-3 loss to Minnesota. It was a loss in which Aaron Laffey couldn't pitch around some defensive miscues that frustrated manager Eric Wedge.

"We played very young," Wedge said. "It wasn't anything fundamental, it was just some decisions we made. There were five, six or seven situations where we have to be better."

Wedge didn't want to call anybody out or get specific, but some of those situations were obvious.

Laffey, who made his Major League debut in this building back in 2007, made the only defensive mistake that was tallied on the scoreboard. It was his fielding error in the third that opened the door for Michael Cuddyer's RBI single, which gave the Twins a 1-0 lead. Just before allowing that single, Laffey dropped a toss from Matt LaPorta on a would-be inning-ending groundout off the bat of Jason Kubel.

In the fourth, a ball misplayed by Shin-Soo Choo allowed Jose Morales to turn what would have been a single into a double. And Laffey found trouble with two outs, walking Nick Punto to put two on, then serving up a Denard Span single to center.

Morales scored on Span's single, and Span advanced to second when center fielder Michael Brantley tried, unsuccessfully, to nail Punto at third. Shortstop Asdrubal Cabrera, who would later leave the game with a right knee bruise, probably should have cut off the throw to prevent Span from advancing.

With the two runners in scoring position, Laffey walked Orlando Cabrera, then gave up a two-run ground-ball single to Joe Mauer to make it 4-0. And in the fifth, Laffey served up a leadoff shot to Cuddyer to make it 5-0.

It was clear, by that point, that Laffey was well on his way to a second successive subpar start. He allowed seven runs, six of which were earned, in 3 1/3 innings against the Rangers on Sept. 8.

"I think this was more of a bad start than that one," Laffey said. "I threw more pitches that last start, but I threw the ball better. I lost my feel for it [this time]. Late in the game, I wasn't throwing quality pitches in quality locations."

Laffey also didn't get much run support, though the Indians finally awoke against Nick Blackburn in the seventh, when the hot-hitting LaPorta smacked a two-run blast to center field to make it 5-2.

In the bottom of the inning, however, Laffey quickly gave up a single to Kubel and an RBI double to Cuddyer before getting yanked. Morales later added a sacrifice fly off reliever Jess Todd to make it 7-2.

Add it all up, and Laffey was again charged with seven runs, six of which were earned, with the lone unearned run also attributable to him in some fashion. He gave up 12 hits and walked three batters while striking out none.

But Wedge didn't harp on Laffey's effort.

"I don't feel we played that well behind him," Wedge said.

Nor did Cleveland take full advantage of its two late opportunities to get back in the ballgame. With Blackburn gone, LaPorta singled home a run off Jesse Crain in the eighth, capping a series in which he went 6-for-12 with two homers and five RBIs. It was a confidence booster for LaPorta, who had been struggling a bit beforehand.

"It's important not to give in right now," LaPorta said. "It doesn't matter what's going on around you. Part of being a man is finishing strong."

But the Indians couldn't finish what LaPorta started. Luis Valbuena drew a walk off Crain to load the bases with two outs, but Matt Guerrier got Kelly Shoppach to pop out to end the inning.

And in the ninth, the Tribe put two on with two outs against Guerrier. Cabrera fouled a ball off his right knee and left the game, and Jamey Carroll replaced him and grounded out. The Twins then turned to closer Joe Nathan, who retired Choo and Jhonny Peralta in order.

Thus ended the Indians' days of playing under Minneapolis' Teflon dome. The Tribe went 89-110 all-time in the building.

But what's more important is the way the Indians are closing out the 2009 season. What was once a second-half rally toward respectability has become a floundering finish akin to the start that got the Tribe in its out-of-contention predicament to begin with. Limping toward the finish line, which looms 17 games away, Cleveland has dropped 13 of 16.

It appears the Indians' youth and inexperience is catching up with them. Wedge didn't deny that notion.

"That's a fair assessment," he said. "It's part of it. You look at what's happening on a daily basis, and, quite frankly, you have to go through them. You're going to make mistakes, whether it be mental or fundamental, and you learn from it."

**Sizemore's second surgery goes well
Center fielder scheduled to rehab in Cleveland, then Arizona**

By Anthony Castrovince / MLB.com

MINNEAPOLIS -- Grady Sizemore went 2-for-2 in the surgery stat line.

Sizemore underwent successful surgery on Wednesday morning to reinforce an unstable abdominal wall on his lower left side. The condition, known as an athletic pubalgia, was corrected by Dr. Bill Meyers in Philadelphia. Head athletic trainer Lonnie Soloff accompanied Sizemore on the trip to Philly and reported that all went well during the 20-minute procedure, which required a small incision in the region.

So that's two successful surgeries in the span of a week for Sizemore, who had arthroscopic surgery on his left elbow on Sept. 9.

Thus ends a season of pain for Sizemore, who is scheduled to begin rehabbing from both surgeries immediately and be able to initiate his normal offseason conditioning program on time in early November. Through the remainder of the '09 season, he'll rehab in Cleveland, then he'll transition to the Tribe's Goodyear, Ariz., complex, which is not far from his Scottsdale home.

Sizemore suffered both the elbow and groin injuries during Spring Training. The groin problem prevented him from participating with Team USA in the World Baseball Classic, and it limited him on the basepaths this season. His stolen base total dropped from 38 in his 30-30 season of '08 to 13 this season. He was caught stealing eight times after getting caught five times last year.

The Indians officially placed Sizemore, who batted .248 with 18 homers and 64 RBIs, on the disabled list on Monday.

The Indians also announced Wednesday that right-handed prospect Jason Knapp had successful arthroscopic surgery on his right shoulder Tuesday in New York.

**Cabrera day-to-day with knee contusion
Tribe shortstop fouls a pitch off his leg in ninth inning**

By Anthony Castrovince / MLB.com

MINNEAPOLIS -- Tribe shortstop Asdrubal Cabrera's last memory of the Metrodome will be laying on the trainer's table in the visitors' clubhouse with an ailing right knee.

Cabrera left Wednesday's game against the Twins after fouling a Matt Guerrier pitch off his knee in the ninth inning of the Indians' 7-3 loss. He suffered a right knee contusion and is listed as day-to-day.

Tribe media relations director Bart Swain said Cabrera was still in "a lot of pain" after the game. It's doubtful Cabrera will be in the lineup when the Indians open a four-game set against the A's.

Cabrera, who is batting .306 with six homers and 63 RBIs this season, lay on the ground for several minutes after the foul ball struck him. He was finally helped off the field by a team trainer. Jamey Carroll finished his at-bat and grounded out.

**Masterson feels better with each start
Cleveland (61-84) at Oakland (66-78), 10:05 p.m. ET**

By Anthony Castrovince / MLB.com

MINNEAPOLIS -- The Indians want and expect Justin Masterson to be in their 2010 rotation, but his transition from relieving with the Red Sox to starting with the Tribe hasn't been seamless.

That's to be expected, to some degree, as Masterson is a 24-year-old kid still finding his footing in the big leagues, let alone with a new club and a new role.

Masterson, though, has shown flashes of the stuff that the Indians feel will translate to a long and successful starting career. That stuff was especially evident in his last start against the Royals on Friday, when Masterson successfully mixed in his changeup over the course of six innings in which he gave up one run on four hits with four walks and four strikeouts.

"As the season goes, I continue to get better," Masterson said. "I feel strong, and I feel healthy."

When Masterson takes the mound on Thursday night in Oakland, it could be a good test to see how well his stuff translates to the rotation. Masterson, after all, dominated the A's in relief, giving up no earned runs and striking out 11 in eight innings out of the Red Sox's bullpen the past two seasons. When he faces the A's as a starter, he'll have to mix up his pitches more. The Tribe considers the changeup a key pitch for him in that regard, though Masterson downplays its impact slightly.

"Before, there weren't opportunities to use it," Masterson said. "Now, sometimes I'm forcing it, and sometimes I'm having success with it. It's a nice pitch. I've had success without it and success with it. But as we face guys three or four days in a single day, it's nice to have it in your back pocket."

Masterson, acquired in the July 31 trade that sent Victor Martinez to Boston, is closing out a season in which he began in the Red Sox's rotation, moved back to the bullpen, where he thrived in the '08 postseason, and joined a new team and transitioned to a new job. That's not exactly an ordinary season, but he's taken it in stride.

"It's been OK," Masterson said. "It just gives you [knowledge about] a few more aspects of baseball."

Pitching matchup

CLE: RHP Justin Masterson (4-7, 4.25 ERA)

In his Major League career, Masterson is 7-9 with a 4.05 ERA in 126 2/3 innings over 22 starts, with a 1.41 strikeout-to-walk ratio. As a reliever, he is 3-3 with a 3.28 ERA in 74 innings over 53 appearances, with a 2.88 strikeout-to-walk ratio.

OAK: RHP Clay Mortensen (1-2, 6.75 ERA)

Mortensen earned his first career win in just his third career start his last time out against the Twins on Friday. The young right-hander's only mistake came against the first batter, as leadoff man Denard Span tagged Mortensen for a solo homer. But Mortensen settled down after that, pitching six strong innings while allowing just one run on five hits. He said after Friday's win that it was the first time he was able to effectively throw all three of his pitches. He'll be facing Indians for the first time in his young career.

Tidbits

The Indians will continue to give Fausto Carmona his regular turn in the rotation, as he tries to apply the lessons hammered home during a two-month stint in the Minors. "We have to run it through," manager Eric Wedge said. "You just hope he finds it -- that zone to where he can be consistent and find something he can latch on to and reach for when he needs it. It's been a very odd year for him with his path." ... Short-season Class A Mahoning Valley beat Staten Island, 3-2, in 11 innings to force a decisive Game 3 in the New York-Penn League finals. That game was slated to take place on Wednesday night.

Cuddyer keep Twins in playoff chase with 7-3 win

Michael Cuddyer is a bit surprised the Minnesota Twins have overcome so much and are still in the pennant race.

He's a big reason why.

Cuddyer homered, doubled and drove in three runs Wednesday and the Twins beat the Cleveland Indians 7-3 for a three-game sweep.

Joe Mauer singled twice, raising his major league-leading average to .374, and drove in two runs as the Twins won their fourth in a row.

Just two games over .500, Minnesota began the day 4 1/2 games behind Detroit in the AL Central. The Tigers were home Wednesday night and Thursday afternoon against Kansas City, then visit the Metrodome for a three-game set beginning Friday.

"The way we've played this year, it's amazing we still have a chance and it's sitting in front of us," said Cuddyer, who has replaced the injured Justin Morneau at first base, and is 8 for 16 in those four games. "At this point we need everybody to contribute. Even the guys that are hurt we need them to cheer us on."

It's been like that much of the year.

Mauer missed the first month of the season, and Minnesota's starting rotation has been in flux nearly all season, including the absence of Kevin Slowey since July 4.

"It's fun to watch. Matt Tolbert's getting out there and battling and covering ground at third base, (Orlando) Cabrera seems to always put some good swings on the ball, Nick Punto's been playing a lot better," manager Ron Gardenhire said. "(Denard) Span's been there and Cuddyer and Mauer. ... The rest of them have to step up and do things, and that's what's been happening."

Now comes the first of seven remaining games with the Tigers.

"We get the first three here and we need to take advantage of that," outfielder Jason Kubel said.

Matt LaPorta homered and had three RBIs for Cleveland, which has lost four straight and 13 of 16.

Nick Blackburn (10-11) allowed two earned runs and eight hits in 6 1-3 innings for his second win in 12 starts since the All-Star break. He lowered his second-half ERA from 7.36 to 6.90.

Joe Nathan struck out the final two batters for his 41st save in 46 chances.

Cuddyer homered leading off the fifth and added an RBI double in the seventh. The home run was the second in three games for Cuddyer, who hit a three-run shot to lead Monday's 6-3 comeback win.

Blackburn came up with his third solid start in four outings. The lone blip was last Friday, when he allowed six earned runs in three innings against Oakland.

Blackburn retired the Indians in order three times in the first four innings, and got out of a two-on, no-out jam in the fifth when Kelly Shoppach grounded into a double play and Trevor Crowe grounded out.

"He threw more curveballs in the first two or three innings than he did in his entire last start, although he was still up in the zone too much," Gardenhire said.

For the second straight start, Aaron Laffey (7-6) gave up six earned runs and a career-high 12 hits. His own mistake put him behind.

With two outs in the third, Laffey dropped a soft toss covering first base for an error. Cuddyer followed with an RBI single for a 1-0 lead.

Laffey walked No. 9 hitter Punto with two outs in the fourth. Span followed with an RBI single, and Mauer had a two-run single two batters later for a 4-0 lead.

"I didn't feel like we played well at all behind him," Cleveland manager Eric Wedge said. "We made some poor decisions on cutoffs, decisions where we could have taken the out that would have saved us two or three runs easy."

LaPorta hit a two-run shot in the seventh and added an RBI single in the eighth before Shoppach popped out with the bases loaded.

"It's important not to give in right now," LaPorta said. "It doesn't matter what the situation is around you. That's part of being a man is finishing strong. Just come out here every day and try and get better for the ballclub."

NOTES: Mauer has established a career-high with 87 RBIs. ... This was Minnesota's seventh series sweep of the year. ... Cleveland is a season-worst 23 games under .500. ... Indians SS Asdrubal Cabrera left the game after fouling a pitch off his right knee in the ninth inning. He is listed as day-to-day with a contusion

Twins sweep young Indians

By Sheldon Ocker

MINNEAPOLIS: What will it take to break the Indians' run of losing baseball? Improved pitching and hitting? Fewer novices on the roster? A new start next year?

None of these potential corrective measures will be forthcoming, except for a fresh beginning in 2010, and nobody knows whether that will work. So the losing continues, including the 7-3 loss Wednesday afternoon to the Minnesota Twins, who swept the three-game series at the Metrodome.

Asked if playing several rookies was starting to catch up with the Tribe, manager Eric Wedge said: "We played young today. There were decisions made — maybe five, six or seven, but I'm not going to point anyone out — we just have to be better with that.

"You look at all the kids out there. So many things happen [mistakes] on a daily basis. But you have to go through that when you have young players."

In contrast to the Tribe, which has lost 13 out of 16, Minnesota has a reason to win aside from pride and job security: The Twins still are in the race for the American League Central Division title, albeit tenuously. Moreover, the first-place Detroit Tigers are coming to the dome on Friday for three games and what might sensibly be regarded as the Twins' last chance.

The Twins did the proper prep work by vanquishing the Tribe, which these days can properly be labeled as hapless. What other description fits a team whose pitching has gone south, whose offense is spotty and whose defense has recently contributed to the overall malaise?

Even Aaron Laffey has been tainted by the persistent losing. Until recently, Laffey was a somewhat surprising bright spot in a lackluster season, but he has been ineffective in his past two starts, including the outing Wednesday.

"I felt like I threw the ball better in my last start," Laffey said. "I threw a lot of quality strikes early today but not as many as the game went on. I lost it a little; I was getting behind in the count too much. I definitely have to put a stop to that."

Because Wedge is using a six-man rotation, his starters are getting irregular work.

"I just kind of felt out of whack," Laffey said. "I had seven days before my last start and eight days until this one. Usually in that time, I'd be pitching three times. I don't know if that had anything to do with it, but I think your body knows the difference."

Laffey (7-6, 4.09 ERA) gave up seven runs (six earned) on 12 hits and three walks. The error that produced the unearned run was Laffey's own, occurring when he failed to catch a short throw as he covered first base. It happens.

More to the point, Laffey had problems with the front, middle and end of the Twins' batting order. He gave up three hits to Michael Cuddyer, who bats fifth, allowing an RBI single, a leadoff home run and an RBI double.

Part-time catcher Jose Morales, the seventh batter, doubled twice off Laffey, and leadoff hitter Denard Span had two singles, an RBI, and he scored a run.

Of course, Joe Mauer was not left out of the equation. Minnesota's No. 3 hitter singled twice, the second of which drove in two runs.

Mauer leads the American League in batting with a .374 average, but that pales in comparison to what he has done against the Indians. For the year, Mauer is batting .536 and for this series .778 with an on-base percentage of .833 with three RBI and two runs scored.

It would be a stretch to argue that the Indians had their own version of Mauer, but Matt LaPorta spent three productive days in the Metrodome, with six hits in 12 at-bats, two home runs and five RBI.

"His approach is solid," Wedge said. "He's putting up better at-bats, and he's very strong."

The home run was LaPorta's sixth of the season, five coming since he was called up from Triple-A Columbus on Aug. 19 for the second time this season.

Maybe it shouldn't be a surprise that a rookie who was acquired for a Cy Young Award winner, CC Sabathia, would begin making an impact in his first few dozen major-league games. But it usually doesn't happen that way.

"I learned a lot my first time here, and I learned more when I went back to Triple-A," LaPorta said. "I pick the brains of [manager] Torey Lovullo and [hitting coach] Jon Nunnally.

"Tony Graffanino also is a big part of me growing as a player. He expects a lot out of me. He's almost like a mentor to me."

Graffanino is a veteran utility player who spent part of the season with the Tribe and part with Columbus.

"It's important not to give in right now," LaPorta said, referring to the Indians' cold streak. "Part of being a man is finishing strong. You want to go out every day and try to get better for your ballclub."

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LaPorta enjoys time at first base

By Sheldon Ocker

MINNEAPOLIS: Matt LaPorta doesn't have an official description yet, as in Indians starting right or left fielder or regular first baseman.

Nothing wrong with that. LaPorta is a rookie with fewer than 40 big-league games on his resume. In most of those, he has played the outfield. But in two of three games against the Minnesota Twins this week, he has moved to first base.

"He made a good pick [Monday night] at a big time in the game," Indians manager Eric Wedge said. "I'd like to get him out there more. He's done a lot of work at first with [coach] Luis Rivera."

Until two weeks ago, Wedge was saying that LaPorta would tackle first base at a later date, maybe next spring. That playing two outfield positions was enough for now.

But for some reason, the timetable changed. Maybe because there is no obvious successor to Ryan Garko, who was traded to the San Francisco Giants in July.

"Potentially that could be Matt's position," Wedge said. "It depends on the supporting cast. We have a lot of outfielders. First base is a place we still have to decide who's going to be there."

Fans probably think of LaPorta as someone who has been an outfielder first. Not so.

"At college [University of Florida] in '07, I was the everyday first baseman," LaPorta said. "I never played the outfield before I was drafted."

Yet in the minor leagues, he has mostly played left and right, though he was aware that might change.

"When I was in Milwaukee, they said I might play first, so I got a first baseman's glove," LaPorta said. "But I never played there. They said the same thing when I came here. But I didn't play first until a couple of months ago."

LaPorta will gladly play either the outfield or first, whatever allows him to stay in the big leagues. But first base has its advantages.

"I'm enjoying it now," he said. "It's about being comfortable there. First is more of a skill position, being in the infield. So it's a little hard to get back to where I was a couple of years ago [in college]. Plus up here, the game is a lot faster."

LaPorta enjoys first base for another reason: He has someone to talk to, even if they're opposing runners.

"I like that part of the game," he said. "I just chat with guys, ask, 'How you doing?' You don't have to know someone to ask how things are going."

LaPorta said he has no ulterior motive in talking to base runners, like distracting them.

"I don't play the game like that," he said.

The Fausto dilemma

Fausto Carmona will finish out the season in the Indians' rotation, but then what? Should he go to winter ball and pitch more innings or take a break from baseball entirely.

"It's [winter ball] something we're talking about," Wedge said. "I don't think we're going to do anything in-between. It's going to be one way or the other. It's just been an odd year for Fausto."

And a miserable one in which he is burdened with a 3-11 record and 6.58 ERA.

"We're going to keep running him out there," Wedge said. "We just hope he finds it, finds that zone where he can be consistent. He knows what he needs to do. It's just about command — pounding the bottom of the zone."

It's also about Carmona's fragile psyche and staying focused when things go wrong on the field.

"I think he's better than before," Wedge said. "But that's an issue for him."

Asdrubal aching

Asdrubal Cabrera fouled a ball off his knee in the ninth inning, tried to fight off the pain then went down on the turf and left the game.

He has a contusion but probably will have an X-ray before today's game in Oakland. He is listed as day-to-day, but it would be an upset if he played tonight.

Surgeries 'R' Us

Grady Sizemore underwent successful surgery Wednesday in Philadelphia to reinforce the lower left side of his abdominal wall in a 20-minute procedure that included making a small incision.

Sizemore will begin the rehabilitation process in Cleveland and resume his normal offseason workout regimen at his Arizona home in November.

Right-hander Jason Knapp also underwent a successful procedure to remove loose bodies from his right shoulder in New York on Wednesday. He is expected to be fully recovered by spring training.

Playoff update

Mahoning Valley kept its hopes for a New York-Penn League title alive with a 3-2 win over Staten Island to even the best-of-three final series at one game apiece. Marty Popham gave up two runs and four hits in five innings, and Chun-Hsiu Chen homered and singled, driving in a run. Argenis Martinez had two hits and one RBI.

Title just one win away for Aeros By Stephanie Storm

POSTED: 11:08 p.m. EDT, Sep 16, 2009

One more win.

That's all the Aeros need to claim their third Eastern League Championship after taking a commanding two-games-to-none lead in the finals with a 7-6 victory over host Connecticut on Wednesday at Dodd Stadium in Norwich.

The best-of-five series now shifts to Akron's Canal Park on Friday at 7:05 p.m. after a day off to travel today.

Unlike the previous four playoff games in which the Aeros cruised to wins, the team's franchise-best 13th consecutive victory did not come easy.

After Josh Rodriguez's three-run home run gave the Aeros a 7-4 lead in the ninth inning, closer Josh Judy tiptoed through a land mine of a bottom of the inning as the Defenders pulled within a run before Tyler LaTorre was called out on strikes to end the game.

"That ninth inning was certainly interesting," Aeros manager Mike Sarbaugh said. "Not exactly how you draw it up, but we had confidence in [Judy]. Of course this time of year, it doesn't matter how you get a win — there's no style points."

Akron jumped out to a 3-0 lead in the third inning, sparked by the first of two doubles on the night by hot-hitting Jerad Head.

"It was Head's triple that also set up [Rodriguez's] big hit," Sarbaugh said. "To have a guy like him with some pop in his bat down there in the nine hole is a real luxury."

Connecticut cut into the deficit in the bottom of the inning with a run on back-to-back doubles by Brock Bond and Mike McBryde. Then in the fourth, the Defenders loaded the bases with one out against Aeros starting pitcher Jeanmar Gomez.

Though Gomez rebounded to strike out the side to quell the threat, he couldn't continue the Houdini act in the fifth, when Brett Pill's solo home run pulled the Defenders within a run at 3-2.

Despite struggling with his command, Gomez limited Connecticut to two runs over five innings before turning the game over to the bullpen. Reliever Carlton Smith breezed through the sixth inning, and the Aeros' offense added an insurance run in the seventh.

But Smith and home-plate umpire Shaun Francis did not see eye-to-eye on anything in the bottom of the inning. After a single by McBryde and two walks, the bases were loaded with no outs. When a few more questionable calls led to Smith walking in a run, he was lifted for Zach Putnam.

Putnam did a good job of limiting the damage, getting Eddy Martinez-Esteve to ground into a run-scoring double play and then striking out LaTorre looking. But the damage was done. The Defenders had pulled even at 4-4.

In the ninth, Rodriguez's home run — his first of the season that also marked his 13th consecutive game with a hit — gave the Aeros a 7-4 lead.

"After all the time he missed [with hamstring issues], he had to start all over to get his timing down," Sarbaugh said. "It was a little like spring training for him at first."

But the Defenders mounted one final rally against Aeros closer Judy, scoring two runs on a McBryde triple and Rodriguez error before LaTorre was again called out looking to end the game.

Heyman > DAILY SCOOP

Holliday, Bay, Lackey look like best of intriguing group of free agents Story Highlights The 2010 free-agent class isn't exactly brimming with stars in their prime

Beyond hard-hitting outfielders Matt Holliday and Jason Bay and superb starter John Lackey, the 2010 free-agent class isn't exactly filled with stars in their prime. Except for the bullpen and designated hitter spot, the class lacks depth. But that doesn't mean it will lack intrigue.

After last year's unusual winter, in which certain star players got paid big bucks, some were paid handsomely and other good ones were left standing at the altar, it'll be interesting to how this coming winter's class will be treated. I asked one general manager and one agent to gauge where the market might go, and in some cases their predictions differed wildly, especially with the biggest position-player stars, Holliday and Bay (in a few cases, though, their predictions were exactly the same).

It's never easy to predict how high free-agent salaries might go. But after a winter in which stars Mark Teixeira, CC Sabathia and A.J. Burnett were rewarded with contracts for \$180 million, \$161 million and \$82.5 million, respectively, but very good players such as Bobby Abreu, Orlando Hudson, Randy Wolf, Orlando Cabrera and Jon Garland were left with one-year deals, it's especially difficult to predict where things are headed. The economy still isn't good, but baseball revenues appear to be holding up. So who knows?

With almost all the playoff entrants all but decided now, it's time to take a look at the best of the upcoming free agents. I have listed the predictions of the agent and GM, and also put in my two cents (my predictions were made before seeking theirs). A couple of their predictions were ranges, and talented yet fragile Rich Harden was deemed too unpredictable by the GM to venture a guess. Here are the best of the best of the free agents-to-be:

1. Matt Holliday, Cardinals OF. St. Louis is going to try to keep Holliday, one of four big summer pickups who helped the Cardinals run away with the NL Central. The Cardinals are going to hope that he loves being in their baseball-crazed city to the point where he would forego bigger dollars elsewhere (Boston and both New York teams are likely interested). With franchise man Albert Pujols's contract up in two years and Cy Young candidate Chris Carpenter in a year, the Cardinals don't figure to be the high bidder. The agent said he believes that Holliday and Bay should each get \$2 to \$3 million a year less than Teixeira. But the GM said, "Teixeira's a plus defender, a switch-hitter and slightly younger" than Holliday.

Agent: \$147 million, 7 years.

GM: \$80 million, 5 years.

Me: \$120 million, 7 years.

2. Jason Bay, Red Sox OF. The Red Sox tried earlier, and Bay has said he loves playing in Boston, a stark change from Pittsburgh.

Agent: \$147 million, 7 years.

GM: \$60 million, 4 years.

Me: \$80 million, 5 years.

3. John Lackey, Angels pitcher. The Angels tried last winter at close to \$60 million over four years, but Lackey said he signed a team-friendly deal last time and won't do it again.

Agent: \$75 million, 5 years.

GM: \$60 million, 4 years.

Me: \$85 million, 5 years.

4. Chone Figgins, Angels infielder. Versatile player is expected to draw interest from many teams. The White Sox and Yankees might top the list.

Agent: \$40 million, 4 years (or \$30 million, 3 years).

GM: \$35-40 million, 4 years.

Me: \$50 million, 4 years.

5. Jose Valverde, Astros closer. Terrific season except for aging a year (he'll be 32 next spring).

Agent: \$36 million, 3 years.

GM: \$27 million, 3 years.

Me: \$16 million, 2 years.

6. Bobby Abreu, Angels outfielder. One of baseball's most consistent players made \$16 million in 2008 before inexplicably having to take a pay cut of nearly 70 percent. The GM sees Abreu as comparable to Raul Ibanez, who received \$31.5 million for three years last winter.

Agent: \$6 million, 1 year.

GM: \$30 million, 3 years.

Me: \$30 million, 3 years.

7. Jarrod Washburn, Tigers pitcher. Huge performance in Seattle, not so much in Detroit. Could go back and rejoin the Mariners.

Agent: \$18 million, 2 years.

GM: \$18 million, 2 years.

Me: \$36 million, 3 years.

8. Miguel Tejada, Astros shortstop. The easiest prediction is that he'll be playing third base somewhere.

Agent: \$30 million, 3 years (or \$20 million, 2 years).

GM: \$18 million, 2 years.

Me: \$10 million, 1 year.

9. Orlando Hudson, Dodgers second baseman. The Mets would make a real run if they can find a taker for Luis Castillo.

Agent: \$21 million, 3 years.

GM: \$25 million, 2 years.

Me: \$16 million, 2 years.

10. Jon Garland, Dodgers pitcher. Another who was left to settle last year.

Agent: \$30 million, 3 years.
GM: \$15 million, 2 years.
Me: \$16 million, 2 years.

11. Vladimir Guerrero, Angels outfielder/DH. An interesting case that gave both our experts great pause. A terrific talent who aged an extra year and was hurt for most of the first half.

Agent: \$30 million, 2 years.
GM: \$15-18 million, 2 years.
Me: \$20 million, 2 years.

12. Rich Harden, Cubs pitcher. Injury-prone ace is a \$100 million player on talent. However, he's hurt almost as often as he's healthy, and some will avoid him altogether.

Agent: \$27 million, 3 years.
GM: No prediction.
Me: \$20 million, 2 years.

13. Marco Scutaro, Jays shortstop. Career year was well-timed.

Agent: \$18 million, 3 years (or \$14 million, 2 years).
GM: \$20 million, 3 years.
Me: \$20 million, 2 years.

14. Randy Wolf, Dodgers pitcher. He will get more if he's willing to leave L.A., the agent predicts.

Agent: \$16 million, 2 years (in L.A.).
GM: \$18 million, 2 years.
Me: \$15 million, 2 years.

15. Doug Davis, Diamondbacks pitcher. Good chance he stays in Arizona.

Agent: \$24 million, 3 years (or \$16 million, 2 years).
GM: \$15 million, 2 years.
Me: \$12 million, 2 years.

16. Rafael Soriano, Braves reliever. Talented pitcher but hasn't lived up to hype in Atlanta.

Agent: \$21 million, 3 years.
GM: \$14 million, 2 years.
Me: \$12 million, 2 years.

17. Johnny Damon, Yankees outfielder. Big year. But "better in Yankee Stadium," the GM said.

Agent: \$18 million, 2 years.
GM: Whatever the Yankees want to pay.
Me: \$16 million, 2 years.

18. Benjie Molina, Giants catcher. Nice season. Mets may make a run.

Agent: \$11 million, 2 years.
GM: \$10-12 million, 2 years.
Me: \$15 million, 2 years.

19. Andy Pettitte, Yankees starter. He says he's undecided about a return. But everyone thinks he's going back to the Yankees.

Agent: \$10 million, 1 year.
GM: \$11-12 million, 1 year.
Me: \$12 million, 1 year.

20. Hideki Matsui, Yankees DH. Big field of DHs may hurt him. Could replace Ken Griffey Jr. in Seattle, the GM predicted.

Agent: \$20 million, 2 years.
GM: \$5-6 million, 1 year.
Me: \$8 million, 1 year.

21. Trevor Hoffman, Brewers closer. He's said he wants to return, and he should be due a raise.

Agent: \$8 million, 1 year.
GM: \$7-8 million, 1 year.
Me: \$8 million, 1 year.

22. Jim Thome, Dodgers pinch hitter. Caught in the middle of a DH-heavy market.

Agent: \$8 million, 1 year.
GM: \$5 million, 1 year.
Me: \$5 million, 1 year.

23. Billy Wagner, Red Sox reliever. He wants to close somewhere, so it's likely he rejects Boston's arbitration offer.

Agent: \$1-2 million, 1 year.
GM: \$7 million, 1 year.
Me: \$10 million, 1 year.

24. Carlos Delgado, Mets first baseman. Hoping to return for a two-week tryout but looking at incentive-laden deal whatever happens.

Agent: \$2 million, 1 year (plus incentives).
GM: \$5 million, 1 year.
Me: \$5 million, 1 year.

The market also includes some talented players who have questions of injury or recent underperformance, such as pitchers Erik Bedard and Brett Myers and position players Adrian Beltre and Rick Ankiel. The agent and GM foresaw one-year deals in these cases.

There are also a number of players with options who could become free agents. Jermaine Dye and Tim Hudson each have mutual options for \$12 million. In Dye's case, the agent and GM said they believed that the White Sox would turn down the option. The agent predicted that Dye would get \$16 million for two years, while the GM predicted \$18 million for two years. (We didn't address Hudson, since he just came back from Tommy John surgery and his situation is so unpredictable.) Manny Ramirez has a player option for \$20 million. Both the agent and GM predicted that Ramirez would accept that option. I foresee Dye turning down the option and getting \$25 million for two years and also see Ramirez picking up that \$20 million option.

Around the majors

- There are several theories for the Rays' stunning 11-game slide, which ended on Sunday: 1) the Scott Kazmir trade sending a negative message; 2) a realization that they were out of it; 3) Carlos Pena's season-ending broken hand; 4) B.J. Upton's abject struggles; 5) overuse of key pitchers in the pen; and 6) a new player or two not fitting in.
- The Tigers showed great integrity and interest in winning by continuing to play Magglio Ordonez through his uncharacteristic underperformance earlier in the year, and Ordonez triggered his \$18 million vesting option with a fifth-inning groundout in the Tigers' 11-1 loss on Tuesday night. Ordonez can still hit, and his first-half struggles may be attributed at least in part to his wife's cancer surgery in May. But it's highly questionable whether he's an \$18 million player anymore. Still, the call was the right one, as he has helped the Tigers stay in first place by hitting .357 with a .510 slugging percentage and .940 OPS since the break. Ordonez was hitting only .271 with limited power when manager Jim Leyland lessened his role in June. (The Rangers' Kevin Millwood is 4 1/3 innings away from vesting his 2010 option for \$12 million).
- A geographic shocker from a friend that few (if any) have noticed: Los Angeles leads both leagues in hitting while New York is second in both. The Angels lead the AL with a .286 batting average; the Yankees are second at .283. The Dodgers lead the NL at .273 with the Mets second at .270. Yes, that's right, the Mets are second in batting average.
- The Mets' real offensive problem is power, and they will look for home run hitters as they eye free-agent options for left field, first base and catcher.
- The Rangers are in the usual spot of rooting for the Red Sox, who are playing the AL West-leading Angels this week. With seven games of their own left against the Angels (and a 9-3 record vs. L.A.), the division title is now Texas' best playoff hope, even though they trail both the Angels and Red Sox by six games in the loss column.
- Daisuke Matsuzaka's performance vs. the Angels (six scoreless innings) in a 4-1 win on Tuesday is Boston's biggest boost to date.
- Albert Pujols has locked up the NL MVP. But while looking to fill out their ballots, voters shouldn't ignore Andre Ethier's six walkoff hits. He did it again on Tuesday night with a two-run home run to beat the Pirates' Phil Dumatrait 5-4 in 13 innings.

Harwell to Tiger fans: Loyalty, love appreciated

By MICHAEL ROSENBERG AND SHAWN WINDSOR

The old photos and television clips on Comerica Park's video scoreboard appeared just as the top of the third inning ended: Ernie Harwell sitting in a booth, in front of a microphone, filling the airwaves with the mellifluous voice that raised a couple of generations of Tiger fans.

The crowd began to rise, and clap, waiting for Michigan's most iconic sports broadcaster to walk out to home plate to say good-bye. Slowly, the applause floated out onto the field, peaking as Harwell strode out from the tunnel behind home plate, walked past the gates and out onto the grass.

He thrust his arms into the sky as the noise washed over him. Standing before a solitary microphone with no one on the diamond but the umpires, the old voice of the Tigers raised his arms once more and quieted the crowd.

"Thank you," he said, "I feel lucky to be here."

He spoke for a few minutes, thanking the Tigers and the fans and all those who had given him such a magical ride. He said little of his inoperable cancer, except for this: "It's going to end here in the great state of Michigan."

Both the Tigers and the Kansas City Royals stood on the steps of their respective dugouts, applauding, even though many of them knew little of the legendary broadcaster.

Harwell was touched by it all. And he said so.

"You Tiger fans are the greatest fans of them all," he finished. "Thank you for your support, your loyalty and your love."

Then he strolled back off the field. His ears filled with chanting:

"Ernie! Ernie! Ernie!"

And like that, the 91-year-old disappeared back into the tunnel.

Earlier in the night, about 20 minutes before the Tigers-Royals game, Harwell walked into the press box to address his colleagues.

"Well, the boy announcer returns," Harwell said. "And I just want to say a few words to the old media."

Harwell talked briefly about being a "failed newspaperman myself" before going into radio, then said this:

"I don't feel too good, I'm a little shaky. I talked to the players, I had some time with them. I had a little session with the umpires. After this, we'll go out in the middle of the ballgame and do a little speech after the video. But I want to thank you for all the wonderful ways you've treated me and my family, the way that you've written nice things about me, and the way you've always been first-class with me. And I couldn't ask for a better group of people to work with. And I want to say God bless you, and my best to everybody. Thank you very much."

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Tigers and Fans Salute Harwell

By NICK BUNKLEY

DETROIT — Ernie Harwell, the beloved Detroit Tigers broadcaster, described his rare visit to Comerica Park for Wednesday night's game as a chance to say hello to the team and its fans.

But they knew, just as he did, that it could very well have been Harwell's goodbye to the city where his booming Southern drawl was the voice of summer for 42 years.

Earlier this month, the 91-year-old Harwell revealed that he has an inoperable and incurable form of bile duct cancer. He has said the disease could defeat him within a year — maybe longer, maybe shorter — yet in the next breath insists that he is "ready for a new adventure."

Tigers fans, though, are not ready to give up Harwell, who retired in 2002.

"He was the background noise of our lives growing up," said Ron Del Villano, who attended the game specifically to see Harwell's appearance.

Harwell used to throw a ceremonial first pitch of the season when Del Villano played baseball as a boy on the east side of Detroit. "We were always wishing Ernie would call one of our home runs," he said.

Harwell spoke to the crowd during the third inning Wednesday, after fans watched a video tribute to him on the scoreboard. The Tigers asked their opponent, the Kansas City Royals, for extra time in the game to accommodate Harwell, although he began by saying he would be brief because "we don't want to be penalized now for delay of the game."

He stood at a microphone behind home plate and waved to the fans before thanking them for their "devotion, support, loyalty and love."

"In my almost 92 years on this earth, the good Lord has blessed me with a great journey — and the blessed part of that journey is that it will end in the great state of Michigan," Harwell said.

"I deeply appreciate the people of Michigan. I love their grit, I love the way they face life, I love the family values. And you Tiger fans are the greatest fans of all. No question about that."

The Tigers, who lead the American League Central, went on to defeat the Royals, 4-3.

Before the game, Harwell met with the Tigers players and greeted members of the news media in the press box that bears his name.

"I don't feel too good," he told a group of reporters. "I'm a little shaky."

But he was generally in good spirits, and he laughed while describing himself as a "failed newspaperman" who stumbled into a fallback career in radio.

"I don't think Ernie wants anyone sitting around feeling sorry for him," Tigers Manager Jim Leyland said. "I think it's really a happy moment."

On Sunday, Harwell will be an honorary captain for the Detroit Lions, who play at Ford Field.

A native of Atlanta, Harwell began his broadcasting career in 1948 with the Brooklyn Dodgers. He spent several years each with the New York Giants and the Baltimore Orioles before arriving in Detroit in 1960.

He was known for colloquial catchphrases like describing home run balls as "long gone" and batters who took a called third strike as "out for excessive window shopping."

Darryl Austin, 29, who moved to Detroit just after the team's 1984 World Series championship, remembers secretly staying up past his bedtime as a boy to hear Harwell and root for a Tigers victory.

"I used to put my radio in the pillow and dial into 760 AM to listen to the rest of the game," said Austin, who watched Wednesday's game from the walkway above Harwell's name on the team's center-field wall of Hall of Famers.

Harwell worked at Comerica Park, which opened in 2000, for only three seasons. Most of his career was spent in the press box at Tiger Stadium, which was torn down earlier this year.

Harwell was among those who tried to save the old stadium from demolition, offering to donate his large collection of baseball memorabilia to be displayed at a museum on the site. But efforts to raise enough money for the project fell short, and the city proceeded with razing the stadium.

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