



## Minnesota Twins Daily Clips

Tuesday, January 19, 2016

- Big question for Twins: Is Byron Buxton ready for the big stage? Star Tribune (Miller) p. 1
- Buxton, Molitor bat leadoff for Twins' Caravan. MLB.com (Bollinger) p. 2
- Crowds noticeably bigger as Twins start tour around Minnesota. Star Tribune (Miller) p. 3
- Twins caravan rolls into Bismarck. Bismarck Tribune (Reidell) p. 3
- Minnesota Twins Visit University of Mary. KX News p. 4
- Oliva, May, Duffey visit Grand Forks on Twins Winter Caravan. WDAZ News (Neumann) p. 5
- MN Twins Caravan to stop at GIANT Wednesday. Wahpeton Daily News (Leinen) p. 5
- Twins manager Paul Molitor learned plenty in 2015. Star Tribune (Neal III) p. 5
- MLB Pipeline's All-Defense Team. MLB.com (Mayo) p. 7
- Twins: Eduardo Escobar agrees to deal; Trevor Plouffe headed to arbitration. Pioneer Press (Berardino) p. 8
- Two arbitration-eligible Twins remain unsigned. Star Tribune (Miller) p. 9
- All-time great bullpens: 2000s. ESPN (Schoenfield) p. 10

---

### **Big question for Twins: Is Byron Buxton ready for the big stage?**

**Phil Miller | Star Tribune | January 19, 2016**

Byron Buxton is remarkably candid about it: He's not ready. He is barely 22, has appeared in only 46 big-league games and fears he would feel overwhelmed by expectations if the Twins handed him too much too soon this spring.

Nope, there's no way he is prepared to move into Torii Hunter's spacious corner locker in Fort Myers next month.

"I hope it's not me," Buxton said Monday, his first day traveling northern Minnesota as part of the Twins Winter Caravan. "That spot's a pressure point."

Clubhouse real estate aside, though, the Twins' top prospect is optimistic about his chances of making the team in spring training and seizing the starting job in center field, a role forecast for him since the day he was drafted second overall in 2012.

"I worked hard this offseason, probably harder than I worked the past three," Buxton said after signing dozens of autographs for an overflow crowd of Twins fans in a Holiday Inn banquet room. "I feel I've just got to go out there, prove myself and go take it."

Plenty of Minnesotans hope he is up to it, perhaps his manager most of all. The Twins traded Aaron Hicks to the Yankees in November, clearing the way, ready or not, for the Buxton Era. Paul Molitor knows his job gets a lot easier, and the Twins' fortunes probably a lot brighter, if the speedy Buxton begins to fulfill the superstar-in-waiting future so many have projected for him.

With Hicks gone, after all, there is no surefire Plan B.

"It will make things a lot smoother if he's the guy. Because if he's not, it's going to be interchanging parts and it might not look too pretty, at least at the start," Molitor said. "So I'm hoping that works out. It would be the best-case scenario if Byron Buxton is ready to be our center fielder."

In retrospect, he wasn't last June, when the Twins, facing a manpower shortage in the outfield, summoned Buxton from Class AA Chattanooga. Buxton

went 2-for-24 to open his career, injured his thumb less than two weeks after arriving and finished the season batting only .209 with a .250 on-base percentage in 46 major league games.

But Molitor was impressed by Buxton's intelligence and his ability to diagnose and address his shortcomings, and the manager is optimistic that the proper adjustments will be made.

"He knows what areas are holding him back — anxiousness, strike-zone recognition, maybe trying to do too much on a given day to live up to the hype," Molitor said. "He sees the game, what works and what doesn't, and he's always been able to make those changes."

Buxton has been trying to make those changes this winter, working out nearly every day near his Georgia home, both in the batting cage and in the outfield.

"It's kind of tough because you don't have major league guys throwing to you," he said, but he found an amateur pitcher with a low-90s fastball to give him the next-best thing.

He has a part-time tutor, too — Buxton is in contact with the now-retired Hunter several times a week, he said, and once even set up a remote camera so his now-retired former teammate could offer tips.

His emphasis, Buxton said, is on becoming more aggressive at the plate — and more patient, too.

"Patient as in, picking out good pitches to hit. And also be more aggressive on first-pitch fastballs, get-me-over breaking balls," Buxton said. "It's tough. At the end [of the season], it kind of clicked for me a little bit, so I'm just trying to bring that back."

Plenty of time for that in camp, though. This week, he is traveling through northern Minnesota with Molitor, reliever Casey Fien and broadcaster Dick Bremer, making 13 stops in four frigid days to meet fans and promote the team.

The presence of such a notable phenom, not to mention the team's turnaround season last year after four lousy ones, likely explains the much larger crowds that greeted the caravan Monday. More than twice as many fans showed up for the lunchtime program in Alexandria as a year ago, for instance.

### **Buxton, Molitor bat leadoff for Twins'**

**Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | January 18, 2016**

Despite subzero temperatures throughout Minnesota on Monday, the first day of the annual Twins Winter Caravan witnessed huge crowds to see Hall of Famer Paul Molitor, top prospect Byron Buxton and reliever Casey Fien.

The trio helped begin one of four legs of the caravan, which features stops in 48 communities in Minnesota, South Dakota, North Dakota, Iowa and Wisconsin over the next two weeks. And fresh off the club's first winning season since 2010, there were noticeably bigger crowds, which excited Molitor as he heads into his second season as manager.

But the caravan isn't anything new for Molitor, as the St. Paul native also went as a player while with the Twins in the late 1990s and feels it's a big part of his job to go on the trip and meet with fans.

"I remember talking last year, after I got the job, with [Twins president] Dave St. Peter, and he told me this is important for us if you can include these types of things as part of your offseason routine," Molitor said. "And we all know how important TwinsFest is to the organization. So I said I'd do my best while I'm in this role to be a part of that."

So while Molitor has plenty of experience with it, the caravan is new for Buxton, who said he volunteered to go on the trip. But Buxton, the outfielder who lives in his hometown of Baxley, Ga., in the offseason, admitted he was a bit taken aback by the weather.

"When I got in yesterday, it took my breath away," said Buxton. "Just getting off the plane and walking through the tunnel to the airport, it was freezing. But two years ago, it was -18 on the day I left TwinsFest, and that was my first one, too. So it broke me in."

Buxton, ranked as the No. 1 overall prospect by MLB Pipeline.com, helped attract large crowds at the first three stops of the caravan in Little Falls, Alexandria and Wadena. The stop at a luncheon in Alexandria drew roughly twice as many fans as last year.

"I think Byron is a big part of that," Molitor said. "He's still making covers of magazines. He's got a presence and people like to come out to see him. But

we had big crowds at the hardware store and at the luncheon on maybe the coldest day of the year."

Fien, a key member of the bullpen who posted a 3.55 ERA in 63 1/3 innings last year, joked that he's just along for the ride with a Hall of Famer and the game's top prospect. But it's the second caravan for Fien, who has become a dependable veteran for the Twins and drew laughs when he told the crowds that his favorite player growing up was Molitor.

"I mean, it's awesome, but I know they're here to see Mollie and Byron," Fien said with a laugh. "It's fun. You get to meet the kids, and that's the most fun part. Fans get a chance to hear what's going on from Mollie and from Byron. I just think it's really cool we get to come and meet the fans face to face."

### **Crowds noticeably bigger as Twins start tour around Minnesota**

**Phil Miller | Star Tribune | January 18, 2016**

The point of Twins caravan is to generate good public relations, and not necessarily just with the team's fans. So when a grade-school student wearing a Twins jersey on Monday asked Casey Fien who he looked up to as a child, the righthander didn't hesitate.

"My favorite player growing up," Fien said, "was Paul Molitor."

The overflow crowd of more than 225 roared as Fien's Hall of Fame manager beamed, getting Minnesota's annual meet-the-team event off to a lighthearted start in this northwest Minnesota town. And if the enthusiasm inside the Alexandria Holiday Inn banquet hall is any indication, the team's first winning record (83-79 in 2015) after four terrible seasons has rekindled interest in the state's baseball franchise.

More than twice as many fans showed up in Alexandria on Monday as turned out a year ago, a fact partly attributable to the school holiday, partly to the presence of rookie phenom Byron Buxton, but also, Molitor said, to a fondness for baseball in this state that he has been attuned to since his childhood. "We're lucky to have such great fans, wherever you go in Minnesota," the second-year manager told the lunchtime crowd, which braved below-zero temperatures. "There is no denying your support is important to our success."

The Alexandria program was delayed as additional tables were set up to handle the big crowd, and a morning stop at a Little Falls hardware store was equally standing-room-only.

Alexandria was stop No. 2 for Molitor, Fien, Buxton and television announcer Dick Bremer, just the beginning of a 13-towns-in-four-days trek through northern Minnesota. Further north and west, Trevor May, Tyler Duffey, Tony Oliva and radio broadcaster Cory Provus are trekking through North and South Dakota and the northwest corner of the state. All-Stars Glen Perkins, Brian Dozier and Joe Mauer are among those setting out for Iowa and the southern part of Minnesota next week.

### **Twins caravan rolls into Bismarck**

**Robert Reidell | Bismarck Tribune | January 18, 2016**

The annual Minnesota Twins caravan kicked off its four-day journey at the McDowell Activity Center on Monday morning.

Fans from all around the area gathered on the University of Mary campus for the hour-long promotion of Twins baseball and an opportunity to enjoy a meet-and-greet with legendary Minnesota outfielder Tony Oliva, current pitchers Trevor May and Tyler Duffey, "Voice of the Minnesota Twins" Cory Provus and team mascot T.C. Bear.

"The biggest thing is to talk Twins baseball and bring Twins baseball to the people that we know are our supporters but can't always make it to the ballpark," Twins manager of community relations Stephanie Johnson said.

"Our fan base is much larger than those who are in the stands every day, and the players know that, and we know that, so this is our chance to say thank you to people who are maybe a little bit further away that we don't get to say thank you to in person at the ballpark every year."

Provus opened up the event with a video, which displayed a multitude of highlights from the 2015 season as well as a number of quotes from players and coaches. Following the short clip, the Minnesota radio personality introduced Oliva, May, Duffey and T.C. to a resounding applause from the filled bleachers.

The trio of Twins players proceeded to tell stories and answer questions from the fans. Oliva told the crowd about his and long-time teammate Rod Carew's experiences facing Hall of Famer Nolan Ryan, a pitcher that May idolized as a kid.

"Growing up, my dad always said, 'Throw as hard as you can, and we'll figure out where you throw it later,'" May said while explaining why Ryan was his favorite. "He's just a bulldog. It didn't get any better than Nolan Ryan."

Duffey, on the other hand, preferred the expert control of Greg Maddux while also noting that he enjoyed the mastery of his late-90s Atlanta Braves rotation mates Tom Glavine and John Smoltz as well.

"He was the ultimate pitcher – Gold Glover, strike you out or get the ground ball," Duffey said of the 2014 Hall of Fame inductee. "Maddux was hands down my favorite guy to watch pitch."

After the question-and-answer session, the Twins caravan gave all the children in the stands an opportunity to meet everyone and receive autographs.

"We're here to come out and show our faces," Duffey said. "People support us all season, so I think it's important to get out here and show them we appreciate the fans and everything they do for us. This is going to be a great time, talking to kids, fans; you name it."

"We get to meet a lot of great people – real fans that come out here at 9 a.m. to see us – so it's kind of a tribute to them."

This specific group, which is just one of four groups traveling around Twins Territory this week, was scheduled to make two more stops on Monday following its appearance in Bismarck.

"From here, we go to Valley City and we'll end the day in Grand Forks," Johnson said. "Tomorrow night we'll be in Fargo, Wednesday night we'll be in Montevideo (Minn.) and we'll end the caravan on Thursday in St. Cloud (Minn.)."

Minnesota has not reached the postseason since 2010, but an 83-79 record last season has both players and fans alike geared up for the start of the 2016 campaign.

"Right now, we have a lot of young players that have a lot of potential, and we have a lot of people who play good outfield," Oliva said. "We have to wait. This coming year will be a very crucial year for us."

May shared Oliva's optimism while likening the organizational makeup to that of both the Chicago Cubs and Kansas City Royals.

"First off, we're young and we're exciting," the 26-year-old pitcher said. "I think we saw what the Cubs did last year, and there has been a lot of excitement in that organization."

"The Royals were like that when [Eric] Hosmer and [Mike] Moustakas were drafted," he continued. "They were all really excited about it and just had to give them time to work in, and it has worked out."

"We're in the exact same boat. We have a lot of young guys that are going to have to start taking over some leadership roles, and it's going to be a lot of fun to watch."

Pitchers and catchers report to spring training on Feb. 19.

## **Minnesota Twins Visit University of Mary**

**| KX News | January 18, 2016**

The University of Mary "scored" a special visit from some professional athletes this afternoon.

Minnesota Twins players, Trevor May and Tyler Duffy went out to U Mary for a meet and greet...

Along with Twins great, Tony Oliva, "The Voice of the Minnesota Twins," Cory Provus and the T.C. bear.

Students, adults and children from the community were invited to the event.

The Twins answered questions from the audience and even did a meet and greet with some kids at the end of the presentation.

They all waited in line to get something signed...

"To get a baseball signed," says Broden Seifert, 7 years-old. "Are you a big baseball fan," asks Averi Haugesag, News Reporter. "Mhmm," says Seifert.

"I'm excited," says Beckett Seifert, 5 years-old. "Are you a big Twins fan," asks Averi Haugesag, News Reporter. "Yes," says Seifert. "Have you been to a game," asks Averi Haugesag, News Reporter. "Yes," says Seifert.

"I want them to sign, I think my shirt and I'm excited about that," says Cordelia High, Minnesota Twins Fan.

After visiting U Mary-- the Minnesota Twins went on to visit Valley City and the University of North Dakota today. Tomorrow they will go to Fargo.

### **Oliva, May, Duffey visit Grand Forks on Twins Winter Caravan**

**Phil Neumann | WDAZ News | January 18, 2016**

The Twins were on the cusp of a playoff berth a few months ago for the first time in five years, and with Paul Molitor entering his second year as Minnesota's manager, there's a certain level of optimism surrounding the Twins just about a month from spring training.

That optimism has followed the Twins on their 56th annual winter caravan, which made a stop at the Wild Hog in Grand Forks Monday night. Twins legend Tony Oliva was joined by current pitchers Trevor May and Tyler Duffey, as well as Twins radio play-by-play man Cory Provus and mascot "T.C."

Grand Forks is one of 48 stops on the winter caravan, which includes stops in Crookston, Thief River Falls and Fargo on Tuesday.

### **MN Twins Caravan to stop at GIANT Wednesday**

**Kathleen Leinen | Wahpeton Daily News | January 18, 2016**

The Minnesota Twins Caravan will arrive Wednesday morning at GIANT Snacks.

The event, in its fifth year at the Wahpeton location, will feature Trevor May, Tyler Duffey, Tony Oliva, Cory Provus and T.C. Bear.

The event starts at 9:30 a.m. Wednesday, Jan. 20 at the GIANT Snacks facility, located at 17950 Hwy. 13 W., Wahpeton. Admission is free and everyone is invited to attend, said Robert Schuler, vice president of marketing.

Students from area schools have once again been invited and there will be a Twins poster contest.

"The kids are really getting into sports, especially baseball. The players are great, but the kids go crazy for the mascot, T.C. Bear," Schuler said. "They create such a fun atmosphere."

The event is a stop-off point for the Twins and is a way area residents can get up close and personal with some of their favorite players. Schuler said the Twins players enjoy the quick visit in Wahpeton. It is fun to interact with their fans and realize the support they receive outside of the Minneapolis area.

"We have some passionate Twins fans here," he said.

GIANT Snacks is the official sunflower of the Minnesota Twins and some additional professional baseball teams, including the Colorado Rockies, San Francisco Giants and the Texas Rangers.

"We'll have coffee out here and water from Bremer Bank," Schuler said. "We invite residents to watch the presentation. It's always fun to see them."

### **Twins manager Paul Molitor learned plenty in 2015**

**La Velle E. Neal III | Star Tribune | January 18, 2016**

Paul Molitor sat in his office at Target Field last week, preparing for his second spring training as Twins manager after an eventful, and surprisingly successful, rookie season.

Molitor faced his fair share of adversity while leading the Twins to their first winning season since 2010: a key starting pitcher was suspended for half the season; four members of the Opening Day lineup lost their jobs; the bullpen was at times a playpen; and the manager had to patch things up with his closer — who wasn't his closer in September.

Despite this, along with the standard injuries and sleepless nights that come with the occupation, Molitor appears genuinely enthused about his job as his

second season approaches.

"I told a lot of managers of teams we played against, particularly at the beginning of the year, that my sense of appreciation for what they do — especially those who have done it for a while — has grown exponentially just through having the opportunity to do it," Molitor said.

While last season was generally positive, it didn't come without learning moments. One thing Molitor wishes he had done better was communicate some things late in the season, especially when closer Glen Perkins recovered from neck and back issues.

Players like to know where they stand, and Molitor realized just how important it was late last season while he tried to find the right relievers to lock down games as the Twins eyed a return to the postseason.

The Twins dealt for Kevin Jepsen at the July 31 trade deadline to help set up for Perkins, but Perkins, who was 28-for-28 in save situations before the All-Star break, missed 16 games in September because of back spasms. When he returned, Jepsen remained the closer.

"Everyone was confident about Jepsen coming in at the end of the game," Molitor said. "We just kind of stuck with that. It seemed like the right thing."

But Perkins, a three-time All-Star, wasn't sure what his role was, and because of injuries, matchups and fatigue, it was hard for Molitor to establish a standard pecking order. Relievers had to be ready for anything with the playoffs at stake.

"There was never a conversation about, 'This is what we're going to do,'" Perkins said. "It was, 'Everyone is going to be prepared to throw at whatever point.'"

"For me, coming back from being hurt and not pitching to not having a routine, not having a role that was solidified, it was tough on me."

During one late September game, Molitor had to remove a struggling Perkins mid-inning, and the reliever jammed the ball into Molitor's hand as he left the mound. They spoke the next day, during which Perkins apologized but said the moment was born of frustration over the game, his struggles during the second half — and the communication issue.

Molitor and Perkins met again at the end of the season, during which Molitor told Perkins then that he's coming to camp in 2016 as the closer. Perkins, who has spent six weeks in Fort Myers, Fla., this offseason to work out daily, said Molitor expressed regret for how he handled things.

"I think there might have been a little disappointment in how we verbalized what our plans were for that last stretch of the season," Molitor said. "If he was more than a little disappointed, then he hid it well because I didn't feel it."

Overall, Perkins was encouraged about the impact Molitor made as the Twins finished above .500 after four consecutive seasons of 90 or more losses.

"I think it was awesome," Perkins said. "I think his attention to detail and his preparation were second to none."

The Molitor Administration was presented its first crisis before the first pitch of the season was thrown. Ervin Santana, the Twins' key free-agent signee last offseason, was suspended during the final week of camp for testing positive for a performance-enhancing drug. He was slapped with an 80-game suspension.

Molitor said the toughest thing for him at the time was gauging how the clubhouse would react. Who would support Santana? Who would show any resentment? Molitor, while speaking to the club, voiced his support for Santana and tried to get the team focused on starting the season and moving forward.

But the Twins lost six of their first seven games, including a season-opening sweep at Detroit during which the Tigers outscored them 22-1.

"I don't know how much [Santana's suspension] influenced that first week, but it wasn't very good baseball," Molitor said. "It wasn't just that we lost. We didn't hit. We didn't field. We didn't pitch."

Many with the club believed the sting of Santana's suspension had a definite impact on how the team began the regular season. After a 12-3 loss to the Royals on April 13 dropped the Twins to 1-6, Molitor spoke to the team about the ebb and flow of a season, and how most teams lose six of seven games at some point. And he was believable, as believable as a Hall of Famer with a 21-year playing career can be.

"We could have lost that clubhouse right then and there," General Manager Terry Ryan said. "He did not. Paul did a wonderful job of keeping things focused at the job at hand."

It seemed to work. The Twins won three of their next four series, then went 20-7 in May as they played their best baseball of the season.

“You know how calm, cool and collected Mollie is,” second baseman Brian Dozier said. “He kept reiterating how many times he got off to slow starts in his career.”

Danny Santana, Kennys Vargas, Oswaldo Arcia and Jordan Schafer were all in the Opening Day lineup, but each was replaced as the season moved along. Eddie Rosario, Miguel Sano, Eduardo Escobar and Aaron Hicks (since traded to the Yankees) stepped in. While fans clamored for Jose Berrios to be called up, Tyler Duffey got the promotion and went 5-1 with a 3.10 ERA. Molitor won while developing inexperienced players, which is not easy.

Molitor leaned on many people during his first season to guide this mix of veterans and newbies. Torii Hunter, the dance party captain, was great for chemistry in the clubhouse. Molitor had no experience with bullpen management, and valued the input of pitching coach Neil Allen and bullpen coach Eddie Guardado.

And he always had Tom Kelly as a resource. Molitor spoke with his former Twins manager about a dozen times during the regular season.

“I need to write things down,” Molitor said. “It helps me, and I definitely have my Tom Kelly notebook.”

Tuesday, Molitor was in his office, learning more about the nonroster invitees headed to camp. Monday, he will join Byron Buxton and Casey Fien on the first leg of the annual winter caravan. That means the Diamond Awards and TwinsFest aren’t far away. Then it will be time to head to Fort Myers for spring training.

It’s all gearing up again, and Molitor soon will encounter a new season and another set of challenges if the Twins are to push for a playoff berth.

Youngsters such as Sano, Rosario and Buxton must continue to make progress. Joe Mauer needs to regain his stroke. Starting pitchers Phil Hughes and Ricky Nolasco are looking for bounce-back years. And Korean designated hitter Byung Ho Park must prove he can make the adjustment to big-league pitching.

“I don’t think we’re a typical team in a year-to-year thing and that you expect things to pick up where they left off,” Molitor said. “Each season stands on its own. You hope the things that were positives in the previous year creep into the next year.

“I’m excited to see how it is going to play out.”

## **MLB Pipeline's All-Defense Team**

**Jonathan Mayo | MLB.com | January 18, 2016**

Baseball is often a game of numbers. Especially with the explosion of advanced metrics, a player's performance can be quantified in many ways.

While strides have certainly been made in measuring defensive ability in the same manner, there is still more subjectivity when evaluating glove work. That doesn't mean defense and run prevention aren't important. If the offseason deals for pitching and the large contract Jason Heyward signed with the Cubs are any indication, keeping runs from crossing the plate has increased in value.

It's not just crucial in terms of free-agent signings. Teams want to develop homegrown players who not only impact the game offensively, but with their gloves as well. Trying to figure out who the best defensive prospect in the game was the focus of the most recent Pipeline Poll of general managers, scouting directors and executives. It was abundantly clear just how subjective defense still is when the array of answers came in.

There were a total of 21 responses that brought in 14 names. There was no clear-cut winner, but Twins outfielder Byron Buxton did lead the way. The top three:

### **Name, Pos., Team, Votes**

Byron Buxton, OF, Twins, 5

Orlando Arcia, SS, Brewers, 4

J.P. Crawford, SS, Phillies, 3

See a pattern there? It actually was the one common theme in nearly all the responses. All but one of the baker's dozen of prospects mentioned a position up the middle. There were seven shortstops, three catchers and two center fielders. Opinions may greatly vary on the particular player, but it's

obvious that finding good defenders up the middle is the key.

"Defense up the middle is so valued because of the impact it carries," one general manager said. "The shortstop is the general of the infield, and the catcher may be the most impactful defender on the field. Defense matters, and up-the-middle impact can make or break a club."

That got the MLB Pipeline.com crew thinking. Taking these votes into consideration and doing our own internal work, we've come up with the 2016 All-Defense Prospect Team.

**Catcher:** Reese McGuire, Pirates

The 2013 first-round pick's bat hasn't come around just yet, but there's no question about his glove. McGuire is an outstanding receiver, with a strong and accurate arm to go along with rapidly developing game-calling skills.

**First base:** Dom Smith, Mets

While Smith, also from that 2013 first round, is a first baseman only, he has great hands and footwork around the bag to go along with an accurate arm. Infielders are going to love throwing to him at the big league level.

**Second base:** Jose Peraza, Reds

Sure, he's been traded twice in the span of five months, but that doesn't take away from his skills in the field. Peraza was a shortstop initially with the Braves, but he moved mostly because of the presence of Andrelton Simmons. He brings shortstop ability over to second, where he has the chance to be a plus defender.

**Third base:** Matt Chapman, A's

Finding guys who profile at the hot corner offensively while showing they can stick there defensively is tough. Chapman has the glove part down. He has one of the strongest infield arms in the Minors, and his hands and feet will work very well at third long-term.

**Shortstop:** Orlando Arcia, Brewers

Arcia was known as a glove-first guy when he began his pro career, but he has since raised his overall prospect profile by improving his offensive game considerably. The defense hasn't taken a back seat. Anyone who saw him play in the Futures Game knows that.

**Outfield:** Byron Buxton, Twins

Sure, he struggled offensively during his big league debut. But Buxton's defense didn't suffer and he can flat-out do it all in center field, with plus range and excellent instincts to go along with fearlessness and a cannon for an arm.

**Outfield:** Albert Almora, Cubs

The Cubs have made so much noise with prospects lately, Almora has gone a bit under the radar. He has future Gold Glove potential as well, maximizing just average speed with terrific jumps and routes. Almora's arm is strong and accurate, too.

**Outfield:** Andrew Stevenson, Nationals

A second-rounder in the 2015 Draft, scouts raved about his defense in center field while he was at LSU and during his pro debut. Some scouts put a 70 on the 20-80 scale for Stevenson's fielding. Buxton is the only one on this list with a 70 fielding grade.

## **Twins: Eduardo Escobar agrees to deal; Trevor Plouffe headed to arbitration**

**Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | January 16, 2016**

After taking over as the Twins' starting shortstop the past two seasons, Eduardo Escobar will enter 2016 with the most security he's ever enjoyed.

According to a person with direct knowledge, Escobar, 27, agreed to a \$2.15 million salary in his first year of arbitration eligibility after making \$532,000 last season.

Escobar was one of four Twins to avoid arbitration in advance of Friday's deadline for exchanging salary figures. He joined reliever Casey Fien (\$2.275 million), utility infielder Eduardo Nunez (\$1.475 million) and left-hander Tommy Milone (\$4.5 million).

Failing to reach agreement were third baseman Trevor Plouffe and co-closer Kevin Jepsen.

Plouffe requested \$7.95 million while the Twins countered at \$7 million. He earned \$4.8 million last season.

Jepsen, acquired from the Tampa Bay Rays in July, submitted a figure of \$5.4 million after making just over \$3 million last season. The Twins countered at \$5.05 million.

The Twins haven't gone to an arbitration hearing since Kyle Lohse (2005-06), and they still have time to keep that streak alive. Hearings run from Feb. 1 through Feb. 22.

The switch-hitting Escobar, who received permission from the Twins to stay with Aragua through the Venezuelan Winter League round-robin, might have been helped by arbitration agreements with two other shortstops with similar service time. Countryman Freddy Galvis settled at \$2 million with the Philadelphia Phillies, and the Pittsburgh Pirates agreed at \$2.075 million with Jordy Mercer.

Over the past two seasons, Escobar has accrued 3.1 Wins Above Replacement in 911 plate appearances, according to Baseball-Reference.com. Galvis logged negative 0.2 WAR, and Mercer matched Escobar despite sagging to 0.3 in 2015, his so-called platform year.

When Escobar signed as a 17-year-old amateur with the Chicago White Sox a decade ago, his signing bonus was just \$25,000.

Fien agreed to a \$2.275 million deal after posting a 3.09 earned-run average in the second half. He received a 65 percent raise (\$900,000) after making \$1.375 million last season.

Nunez agreed to a 44 percent raise to \$1.475 million, according to a source. He made \$1.025 million last season, when he made 33 starts and slugged .431 in 204 plate appearances.

On Thursday evening, the Twins agreed with Milone at \$4.5 million. That pushed their total allotment for six projected starting pitchers to \$40.25 million for the 2016 season.

## **Two arbitration-eligible Twins remain unsigned**

**Phil Miller | Star Tribune | January 15, 2016**

Even if an arbitration hearing is necessary to establish his 2016 salary, Trevor Plouffe will be the Twins' second-highest-paid position player next season, behind only Joe Mauer.

Plouffe, coming off a 2015 season in which he hit 22 home runs with a career-high 86 RBI, proposed a \$7.95 million salary Friday, the deadline for exchanging numbers for arbitration, while the Twins offered \$7 million.

Even the midpoint, \$7.475 million, represents a 55 percent increase over the \$4.8 million the third baseman earned in 2015, and would allow him to surpass Kurt Suzuki as the team's highest-paid non-pitcher other than Mauer.

The Twins have yet to reach an agreement with Plouffe or reliever Kevin Jepsen, but they struck deals with their other four arbitration-eligible players, "so it was a pretty good day," said Rob Antony, the assistant general manager who handles contract negotiations. "Hopefully over the next few days we have some good discussions and get the other two taken care of."

It was certainly a pretty good day for Eduardo Escobar, who quadrupled his salary in his first year of arbitration eligibility. The shortstop will earn \$2.15 million in 2016, he and the Twins agreed Friday, or more than four times his \$532,500 salary in 2015.

In addition to Escobar, the Twins settled on salaries with:

- Reliever Casey Fien, who agreed to a \$2.275 million contract after posting a 3.55 ERA in 63⅓ innings. The 32-year-old righthander received a 65 percent raise over his \$1.375 million contract of a year ago.
- Utility infielder Eduardo Nunez, who accepted a \$1.475 million salary, a 44 percent raise. Nunez, 28, earned \$1,025,000 last year, and batted .282 with a .327 on-base percentage and .431 slugging percentage.
- Lefthanded starter Tommy Milone, who approved a \$4.5 million salary Thursday.

Jepsen seems likely to join that group soon, given how close his salary request — \$5.4 million — is to the Twins' offer of \$5.05 million, a difference of only \$350,000. The midpoint is \$5.225 million, which would represent a 73 percent increase over the 31-year-old righthander's earnings of \$3.025 million last year. Jepsen, who saved 10 games in his two months with the Twins, can become a free agent after the season.

If no agreement can be reached with Plouffe or Jepsen, arbitration hearings will be held in February, in which a three-member panel chooses one figure or the other. The Twins have not taken part in a hearing since 2006, when they lost to righthander Kyle Lohse for the second year in a row.

"We filed numbers that we feel we can go into a hearing room and defend, but there's always strategy to it on both sides," Antony said. "And both sides feel a responsibility to keep salaries from getting out of whack, in either direction, because it does affect others around the industry. So we'll start preparing in case there's a hearing, and hope it won't be necessary."

Pending Plouffe and Jepsen, the Twins now have \$86.15 million committed to 12 players under contract for 2016, led by Mauer's \$23 million.

## **All-time great bullpens: 2000s**

**David Schoenfield | ESPN | January 15, 2016**

The evolution of the closer continued in the 2000s. More and more, their stints were limited to just one inning as two-inning saves became almost extinct. Closers rarely entered in the eighth inning or with runners on base anymore. This meant closers were nearly always available -- and thus could pitch in even more save situations. As a result, the number of 40-save seasons increased from 41 in the 1990s to 70 in the 2000s.

The best closers also became statistically more dominant as strikeout rates in the game continued to rise. Eric Gagne was 55-for-55 in save chances for the Dodgers in 2003, posted a 1.20 ERA and fanned 137 batters in 82 1/3 innings to become the last reliever to win the Cy Young Award. Bobby Thigpen's record of 57 saves set in 1990 lasted until 2008, when the Angels' Francisco Rodriguez recorded 62 saves while pitching just 68 1/3 innings. And, of course, Mariano Rivera had sustained dominance throughout the decade, six times posting an ERA under 2.00.

Even though offense started declining at the end of the decade, the percentage of complete games continued to decrease, from 5 percent to 3 percent. Bullpens started getting bigger, which allowed for more specialists and shorter appearances, so the number of pitchers used per game increased from 3.54 in 2000 to 3.93 by 2009.

My three best bullpens of the decade:

1. 2003 Los Angeles Dodgers (85-77): 19-20, 2.46 ERA, 58 saves, 69-3 when leading after seven

Thanks to Gagne, the Dodgers were 76-0 when leading after eight innings. It wasn't a one-man show, however, as the Dodgers recorded the lowest bullpen ERA of the decade, the second-best strikeout-to-walk ratio, the second-lowest batting average (.207), and the fifth-best K's per nine. Guillermo Mota posted a 1.97 ERA in 105 innings, Paul Quantrill pitched in 89 games and had a 1.75 ERA over 77 1/3 innings. Paul Shuey (3.00 ERA in 69 innings) and lefty specialist Tom Martin (80 games, 51 innings, 3.53 ERA) filled out the top five. Yes, the pen had a losing record, but that was a reflection of one of the worst offenses in MLB history. The Dodgers scored just 574 runs when offense was still high -- 68 fewer than any other NL team -- even though the lineup included Adrian Beltre, Shawn Green, Fred McGriff and Paul LoDuca.

2. 2002 Atlanta Braves (101-59): 30-14, 2.60 ERA, 57 saves, 82-1 when leading after seven

This was one of the more interesting bullpens in MLB history: Closer John Smoltz was 35 years old -- which made him the youngster among the team's top four relievers:

Smoltz (35): 3-2, 3.25 ERA, 55 saves, 80 1/3 IP

Chris Hammond (36): 7-2, 0.95 ERA, 76 IP

Mike Remlinger (36): 7-3, 1.99 ERA, 68 IP

Darren Holmes (36): 2-2, 1.81 ERA, 54 2/3 IP

The rest were solid as well:

Kerry Ligtenberg: 3-4, 2.97 ERA, 66 2/3 IP

Tim Spooneybarger: 1-0, 2.63 ERA, 51 1/3 IP

Kevin Gryboski: 2-1, 3.48 ERA, 51 2/3 IP

The Braves had the second-best bullpen ERA of the decade and the third-lowest OPS allowed, although their strikeout and walk peripherals didn't come close to the Dodgers'. They lost in the Division Series in five games to the Giants -- but unlike many Braves teams in the '90s, it wasn't the bullpen's fault.

3. 2006 Minnesota Twins (96-66): 26-10, 2.91 ERA, 40 saves, 72-1 when leading after seven

I was leaning to the 2001 Mariners here. That was the team that won a record-tying 116 games with a bullpen that went 33-15 with a 3.04 ERA (ninth-best in the decade, in a year when offense was still peaking) and the lowest batting average allowed (.202). But the Mariners lost SEVEN games that they led entering the ninth -- of course, they won 105 such games -- which means if Kazuhiro Sasaki had been a little more lights-out, they could have won 120 games.

Anyway, thanks to closer Joe Nathan, the 2006 Twins locked down leads in the late innings, going 83-0 when leading after eight. Nathan went 7-0 with a 1.58 ERA and allowed just 38 hits in 68 1/3 innings with 95 strikeouts. He had two blown saves, but the Twins won both of those games. Behind him, Dennys Reyes had a 0.89 ERA in 50 2/3 innings, Juan Rincon had a 2.91 ERA in 74 1/3 innings, Jesse Crain had a 3.52 ERA in 76 2/3 innings and Pat Neshek had a 2.19 ERA over 37 innings. Some of the other guys weren't as effective (Willie Eyre had a 5.31 ERA in 59 1/3 innings as the mop-up guy) but the 2.91 ERA was still fifth-best in the decade.