

MLB Winter Meetings

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Houston Astros

Manager Joe Espada

Press Conference



2024 BASEBALL WINTER MEETINGS DALLAS

Q. With Soto out, you think you might be able to make some moves soon?

JOE ESPADA: I think now that Soto is off the board, I think things might start moving here quickly. It's not going to change anything for us. We're having conversations as an organization to improve our team.

I really like where we're going right now and conversations that we're having on how to improve our team. I really think we're in a really good spot.

Q. What have your conversations been like about your pursuit of Bregman?

JOE ESPADA: We're doing everything in our power to get that done. I know what he represents -- what he means to this organization. I think Dana and the staff and all of us are on the same page in making this our No. 1 priority.

So we are trying really hard to bring Alex Bregman back.

Q. (No microphone.)

JOE ESPADA: Yeah, we have to, right? Alex Bregman is going to do what's best for him in his career, his family. So we've got to keep that in mind. So we are having conversations how -- if we don't have the opportunity of bringing him back, how are we going to fill that spot?

So we are working through that. We have a good process in place. We're having really good meetings. So I think -- if that's the course that we're forced to take, I think we'll be in a really good position to make the right move and bring -- or have guys in place already in the organization that can fill that position.

Q. Do you have in-house candidates?

JOE ESPADA: I think we're looking at both in-house and free agency, or even if it makes sense, via trade. We're looking at different ways to be creative and try to put a good team on the field.

Our objective, again, is to win the division and take this team back to the World Series. We're exploring every avenue out there to try to improve our team.

Q. Had your optimism on Bregman grown, less? How would you assess where you are optimism-wise to get this done?

JOE ESPADA: I try to stay neutral when it comes to that because I want Alex Bregman back as much as everyone in our city, but that's the part of the business that you never know.

We are definitely making a push, and hopefully we can get this deal done here at some point.

Q. What other areas of the club are kind of in conversations where you would like to add pieces?

JOE ESPADA: Our conversation is pretty much everywhere. I think you can never have enough pitching. So that's another area that we are looking at. Starting rotation, our bullpen, just try to add some depth. If something happens and we know it's going to happen, just to make sure that we have the pieces just to help us sustain any push if we have to, and not tap into our younger kids who probably are not ready for the Major Leagues.

So we try to add pieces that can help us through the long season.

Q. You went down to Puerto Rico to see Dezenzo and Matthews. Specifically with those two guys, where are they now, and do you think they're close to being able to help you at the Big League level?

JOE ESPADA: I think they are. I saw both Zach and Brice, and they both played really well. They both played well. They actually just stopped playing. We had them there since December 7. Zach swung the bat really well. He played some first base. He played left. He played both positions very well.

Brice played some third base and played some second

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base. I was actually really impressed the way he played second base.

I think they're both in a really good spot when it comes to their player development, and I could see both guys at some point helping us at a Major League level.

Q. When you see Dezenzo, where do you think he's most ready to help the team defensively --

JOE ESPADA: He needs more reps than anything. I think we could get a average defender at both left and first. He did play really good left field, which he hasn't gotten that many reps, but he played really well in Puerto Rico. When I was there, the conditions were really tough. There's a lot of rain. It wasn't the best surface. And he actually handled those situations very well.

Also watched him play some first base. For me, just more experience. He just needs some more repetition just to get comfortable at both positions.

Q. Do you see him as a third baseman at all?

JOE ESPADA: I think so too. We're not closing the door on that. When we went to Puerto Rico, they had a need for first base and left field on that team, so he played those really well. But I think he'll continue to get repetitions at third base.

Q. When the guys return from injury, what do you think of your starting rotation at that point? Would you like another pitcher? How do you feel about your starters right now?

JOE ESPADA: Right now obviously I feel really good about Valdez. We've got Hunter Brown and Arrighetti and Ronel Blanco. We've got a couple of young pitchers that will fit right in if we have to. Gordon is a really nice fit we just put on the 40-man roster who threw the ball really well. Gusto is another guy we've had conversation about. He'll be ready to contribute at the Major League level.

Again, we're having conversations. Because I think you need more than just five or six guys. So that's one area that we'll be spending quite a lot of time here in the next couple of weeks talking about how can we improve our pitching depth.

Q. Do you expect McCullers to be ready for Opening Day?

JOE ESPADA: I think it's premature for me to speculate anything on that. I do want to say that I spent some time with him last week, both him and Luis, and they both look

really good. They both are improving very well. I think at some point this season, they're going to help us. They're going to pitch for us.

I don't want to put a timeline on when they'll be ready, but I do know that right now as we speak, they're both doing really well.

Q. What did they do the last few weeks? Are they throwing or playing catch?

JOE ESPADA: Yeah, they both are. I know Lance is playing catch. Luis at some point in the next couple days, we're going to start loading a little bit more work on him. But they both are healthy. We're kind of moving in the right direction. They're not 100 percent yet, but they're in a good spot right now. I feel pretty good about where they're at right now and can at some point help us this season.

Q. It seems like we ask you this every year, but how much do you want to expose Alvarez to left field?

JOE ESPADA: Absolutely. My answer always is keeping Yordan in the lineup is really important. Any time I throw him in left field consecutive games, he's going to post. He wants to help us win. He never says no, but I need to be more mindful of the more he plays out there, the more I'm asking of him, and I need to try to keep him healthy.

So I would like to kind of cut back on the amount of reps that he gets in left field. So hopefully we could get that done and not ask Yordan to play that many innings in left.

Q. (Indiscernible) playing some second base. Was there a particular reason you wanted him to play there?

JOE ESPADA: We just wanted him to get reps at multiple positions -- third, short, second, he'll get some of those reps.

Obviously when you go to winter ball, they have someone playing shortstop, so we kind of work around what their team structure is according to how they put that team together.

We have a really good second baseman, and our second baseman is not going anywhere.

Q. Where do you have Whitcomb right now? Where do you have him in terms of just those guys?

JOE ESPADA: He's also in the list of our depth. He's a guy that will go to Spring Training, and he'll get some repetition at all infield positions. He's part of our future.

Q. Hader's season, is there any tweaks he needs to make or that he is doing for next year?

JOE ESPADA: I actually saw him last week, and we did not get into deep conversations about our plans for him for next year besides needing him to close.

When it comes to his arsenal, we do have a couple things for him that I know Josh and Murph at some point will sit down and discuss with him. We're not quite there yet, but at some point we'll talk to Josh and set up for him to start working on it once we start going to Minute Maid and we start our workouts that we usually have during the off-season.

Q. The Astros have had such a lock on the AL West the last few seasons, but also the playoff losses at home are starting to streak a little bit. Can you talk about the dynasty that people like to associate with the Astros and where that stands as of now?

JOE ESPADA: I also know we have won some big games at home in the postseason. It's just baseball for me more than making a reason why we have lost like big games in the postseason at home.

To speak about this particular year, we played a really good Detroit team, who was probably the hottest team in baseball that last month. They came in and played well those two Wild Card games.

But I do think our team played really well at home this season, which we didn't do last year in the regular season. So we turned that around. I expect our team to play well in front of our crowd again this season.

Q. Dubon obviously succeeded in the utility role, but is there a path for him, depending on how your roster shakes out, that you guys would consider him in a more regular role if there's a spot that you guys need to fill?

JOE ESPADA: It's good to have Dubon because he's that guy. If something happens and we need to fill a spot, Dubon is there. Dubon has played 135, 140 games the past few years. So he plays almost every single day.

What makes him valuable is he can start a game at third and finish in right field. Or he can come in at some point and pinch-hit and play defense and help us win the game. So having that piece on your team is super valuable. We are a really good team when Mauricio Dubon is that player and we can just deploy him in many different ways.

Q. (No microphone.)

JOE ESPADA: Defense has always been a priority for our organization. We pitch and we catch the ball. That's kind of like our way of winning games. That's part of our culture. I think making -- continuing to make defense a priority and bringing Tony Perezchica into the field, it was very important for me because we have guys who are coming up through the system. We mentioned Whitcomb and Brice Matthews, those guys who are coming up, having a really good instructor is important.

That's why I really wanted to bring Tony Perezchica into the organization because I think he's one of the best infield instructors in the game.

Q. With regards to infield defense, is it quite where you want it?

JOE ESPADA: No, I just want to continue to sustain our success, sometimes bringing a different voice, different ideas, those fresh set of eyes, kind of keep things fresh in perspective. Tony has done just that. We watch videos together. We talk about our guys. He sees things that we haven't seen before, or he sees things that we saw in Arizona that he had brought up to my attention that, you know what, that's actually pretty interesting that you see those things.

Another thing about Tony is how well Arizona ran the bases. Tony kind of brings that running attitude, like taking the extra base, pushing the envelope on the bases. So that's also something that attracted me about Tony.

Q. How important would it be for you to get a player that could play multiple positions, including first base, and do it at a high level?

JOE ESPADA: That's kind of -- Mauricio Dubon can do some of that. Right now when we're having conversations about other players that are out there, it's someone who can bring flexibility and we can use him in the outfield or he can play some first, can play some up the middle. There's a lot of guys out there that can do that.

Teams, they need that to give some of their everyday players some time off. If we could bring another one into the fold, that would be great. We're just trying to look at many different ways how we can improve our club.

Q. McCormick, how do you balance what you saw last year from him and what you kind of know is in there, what you've seen in the past?

JOE ESPADA: What I told McCormick is 2024, just turn



the page, put that in the past. He's a really good player, and it's in there. I think he tried to do a little bit too much going into Spring Training and trying to put the same numbers and try to -- well, just be the same Chas McCormick that you've been for previous seasons, and you're going to be fine.

I told him, hey, listen, that's in the past. Forget about it. Go home. Train, get ready, and get ready for Spring Training.

Q. Have you seen any video or film on (indiscernible)?

JOE ESPADA: I have. I've watched a lot of video, and he's really good. So we'll see.

Q. In the clubhouse (indiscernible) sign of a player's leadership, does that factor into it?

JOE ESPADA: It's part of the criteria we're looking for. Not only a good player, but a good human, someone who understands that you are representing the Houston Astros, our community. How you carry yourself, that's important.

So when we talk to any player, I bring those questions right away. You know, family, how important it is to have your family around? What kind of things do you like to do in the community? Is there anything I can do to help you as a manager?

That stuff matters. If you take care of those things, players tend to focus more on their work, and they're comfortable. It makes going to the office more enjoyable when we help them on those personal issues.

Q. How's your winter so far?

JOE ESPADA: It's been good. Spent some time with the family. My parents are here in Dallas, so get to spend a couple of days here with them. It's been good. Thanksgiving with them. It's been really good.

Q. The Rangers are more competitive now. Just how fun is it to do that series, come to Arlington and go back to Houston, that series as of late?

JOE ESPADA: We do. For us, being the best team in Texas, we care about that. We try to win every series we can, and they're in our division. So it matters when we play those guys, I'll tell you that. It means a lot to us to win that boot. We take pride in those series. I know they're always looking at ways to improve their club.

And teams in our division too. They're not the only team trying to improve their club and trying to compete.

Q. What would the team look like if Pressly wasn't here next year?

JOE ESPADA: I'm not going to comment on that. I don't want Pressly to go anywhere because he's one of the best relievers, one of the best closers in the game. I don't have much to comment on that, just the fact that he's a big piece of our bullpen. He's done some wonderful things for us here the last couple of years.

Q. Any updates on JV?

JOE ESPADA: I don't have any updates, sorry.

Q. How did Pressly -- he said all the right things probably, but how did he handle going to the eighth inning after being a closer for so long?

JOE ESPADA: It was tough for him to adjust, for all of us to adjust. I'm used to Pressly coming in in the ninth and shut the door, so it took some time for him to adjust. I think -- once he did, I think he got it going, and I think he threw some big innings for us. I think he did a really good job.

There were stretches where we all went through struggles as a team, but we all manage a way to get big outs and to figure some things out together as a unit.

But it did take some time for him to kind of get his routine going since he just got ready to pitch the ninth inning for so many years for us.

Q. You still have Rob Montero on the roster. What's the route for him to come back?

JOE ESPADA: He's still a guy that we believe in. He's going to come to Spring Training, and he's going to get opportunities to make our club. We all know when Montero is throwing the ball well, he's a force. We like his stuff. I think we made some adjustments in Triple-A that I think helped him. We expect him to come into Spring Training and compete for a spot.

Q. What are your expectations of Forrest Whitley?

JOE ESPADA: I'm excited about Forrest Whitley. I think he's a guy we've been waiting for for a long time. I think he's finally starting to turn the corner. I could see Forrest competing in our bullpen. But I'm excited for him. He's actually healthy, and I think he understands what it takes. He got a taste this year in the Big Leagues.

I expect him to come in ready to go in Spring Training.



