

MLB Winter Meetings

Monday, December 9, 2024

Dallas, Texas, USA

Arizona Diamondbacks

Torey Lovullo

Press Conference

Q. No injury updates?

TOREY LOVULLO: No, no.

Q. No surprise surgeries or anything to speak of?

TOREY LOVULLO: Surgeries? No imaging. Everybody is good. Everybody is healthy. Look, I just got in here today, so I'm just getting grounded with what's happening upstairs. I'm not -- I know you want to know about what kind of our push is, our target is. I haven't really got a feel for that.

I will say that our front office is always constantly trying to upgrade. You know the special spots they live in. It's the controllables, starting pitching. Always looking for bullpen pieces.

I know you want to ask me if we're looking for a closer. I feel strongly enough with between A.J. Puk and the development of Justin Martinez, that's a really good place for us to start and could live with that. I'll leave it up to the group to how they develop the plan, how they push the ball forward to make our team as strong as possible.

We won 89 games last year. I've been having a tough time kind of digesting that, figuring out how we can win one more game because that's where we live. We live in that space. We live in that space of winning that little inch that's going to help us win a game, but will get us into the playoffs. So it does matter. We're going to try to figure out the best way to put the most dynamic team on the field that's going to help us win as many games as possible, and I trust the front office that they're doing that right now.

Q. (Question about coach staff changes).

TOREY LOVULLO: Yeah, of all the coaches that I feel for on the staff it's probably the infield coach because I see the game through an infielder's eyes. That's my baby. If I have one thing that I'm paying a lot of attention to, it's the infield defense and in particular the play and pace of which they play the game.



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Then to find the right guy, the guy that was going to be able to use his own resourcefulness, his own expertise and then tap into those around him to push to the next level, that was the type of personality I was looking for.

I have a long history with Shaun Larkin, a very long history. I managed in the Minor Leagues. I was his infield teacher for four or five of his Minor League seasons. So I feel very comfortable knowing the personality and what drives him every single day.

I also have had a chance to know him as a staff member on the other side of it as our farm director. So I know there's incredible initiative and creativity. So that's what I was looking for. It was a really easy fit for me to say, Step into this role, develop, and push and make us better.

Q. How did he respond to the opportunity to get back on the field just emotionally? I talked to him briefly. He seems super excited.

TOREY LOVULLO: I think that's in his blood. That's where he wants to be. He wants to be on the diamond, in the dirt, getting dirty with the boys. That's part of what made him the player that he was.

So I know that he did some really -- he did some different things to get him to that point. Being the farm director for the years at the Diamondbacks is not an easy job. It's a very demanding job. He accepted that role, but I think when the opportunity came for him to get back into a uniform, he was really excited about it.

I spoke to him a couple of times, and I had to interview him. I wanted to make sure that he was on the right page. We spoke probably for about a half an hour, and he just drove home so many well thought out answers that told me this is where he wanted to be, this is a space he wanted to live in.

Q. To your point, how long did it take you to digest how the season ended?

TOREY LOVULLO: Yeah, I was bitter for a while. I'm not going to lie. I wasn't going to run from it and pretend that I



wasn't. It was probably the meeting with ownership. Sat down with Ken and Derrick, and I was able to offload exactly how I was feeling, and that always makes somebody feel better.

They gave us some positive reinforcements. We understood what happened during the year. We talked it out. We talked about it for a good 10 or 15 minutes. That was probably ten days, two weeks after the season. I don't know exactly what the day was, but probably two weeks before I finally said, Okay, it's time to move on. I have to get away from what happened.

You always target what happened most recently, right? You are always looking at the Game 155 through 162. There were so many things that happened during the course of the year that we need to get better at. Pitching is one of them. That's why we had to make some of the improvements that we made with the teachers. I felt like parts of our infield defense could have gotten better.

So we'll see. We'll see how it looks in 2025. It was turning gears and start looking at '25 because I don't want to waste time thinking about what we did last year.

Q. You mentioned the pitching. (Indiscernible). How much do you value pitching? Was it more frustrating than maybe you would think?

TOREY LOVULLO: 89 wins is a very successful season. It's a solid season. In a lot of cases I know what got us in the playoffs in '23. I don't know what happened in years past, but I think in a lot of cases it gets you into the big dance.

Yeah, I pride myself on talking about and believing in pitching going hand-in-hand with defense because it's what gets you to win a World Championship. It's my gut feel. I don't think it's a crazy recipe. It's worked before in the past.

So, yeah, it was a different year, but when you are winning games and you have 80-plus wins, and you're charging at a spot, you don't know how you got there. You don't think about it. I thought about it a little bit afterwards. Yeah, I think we need to pitch the baseball better for sure. There are some plays on defense I feel like we have to make a little more efficiently, and we will. We're going to work on that.

Q. Just curious if you got a chance to see any of Sasaki and just your impressions of him on film there in Japan?

TOREY LOVULLO: Yes, I have. I've gotten a chance to

watch him a little bit, bits and pieces. I was telling somebody, yeah, it's a lot of fastball. It's a swing-and-miss split. He's going to be a really good starter here immediately. I've been very impressed by what I've seen so far.

Q. Have you guys decided on (indiscernible) -- Jameson coming back from surgery?

TOREY LOVULLO: Yeah, we're going to let him get some innings and stretch him out and see where that goes. Now, is he going to be a full-time starter next year? I don't know that answer, but I want to make sure that if we have a need for him being one of the 13 best pitchers and we put him in the bullpen, that he's able to do that too.

He'll be stretched out initially, but how far he goes and how many innings he throws next year is yet to be determined.

Q. With Slade I guess the guys in the middle of the season you decided to go the bullpen route with him. Do you see that changing?

TOREY LOVULLO: We're doing something similar with Slade. I feel like as you stretch guys out and give them the ability to repeat that delivery, you are going to find out where you are standing and what kind of stuff you have and make improvements a little bit more rapidly. We'll do the same thing with Slade as well.

Q. You have three key guys that are free agents. (Indiscernible).

TOREY LOVULLO: A little bit, yeah. A little bit overwhelming at times to think about if everybody is moving on. Like I said, I don't know what the plan is, but I'm proud of those guys for putting themselves in that position to create some free agency interest.

Specifically Christian Walker. Think about, he was a waiver claim, right? He reinvented himself and turned his whole life around by hard work and dedication. It's just a great story. I'm really proud of him. Wherever he lands, I'm going to be super happy for him.

Does he land on our team? I don't know what that answer is, but yeah, I think it can be a little bit overwhelming if we have some space to fill the way we potentially could with Joc and Walk moving on. That's a lot of offense. Yeah, it could be overwhelming to think about, but we'll figure it out.

Q. Do you think Hayden Smith could be one of the guys?

TOREY LOVULLO: Yeah, his name is in the mix there. I



don't see why not. You know what I'm going to say. He can hit. He can hit. He is still developing.

I know that he wants an opportunity. He's been very patient. He's been back in the Minor Leagues for the past few years where maybe he shouldn't have been, and he wants his next opportunity.

Q. The trend of shorter starts by starting pitchers has continued unabated for 100 years, but it's accelerated lately. You came in, 21 outs was the mantra, right, and now it's down to five innings a game. Literally 5.1. Is there a floor there for you, or are you thinking about maybe internally trying to stop that trend from going any further or reversing it?

TOREY LOVULLO: I mean, I don't want to single-handedly say what direction the game is going in, but it seems like it's more on the bullpen. I feel like you're going to fatigue the bullpen, right? There are creative ways to work through that I think too, shuffle through bullpen pieces to preserve them.

I believe in starting pitching. It's my core. I know that we have had this conversation many times. I was watching the 1981 World Series, Dodgers-Yankees, and Mike Torrez threw nine innings. Was it Mike Torrez?

Q. (Indiscernible).

TOREY LOVULLO: Okay, it was 140-plus pitches, right? That just doesn't happen in today's game. There are reasons why. I think starting pitching organizes your day. It makes things look really good or really sloppy. When they pitch deep into the game, can you set your bullpen pell pieces up and preserve them.

So I would like to see our starters. If 5.1 was our average, I think we need to be better for sure.

Q. How big of a challenge is it being in a division when the payroll is dwarfed by the Dodgers and now, of course, it will be the Mets with Soto's contract?

TOREY LOVULLO: We know what the ground rules are. We know what the landscape is, and we embrace that challenge. We know we have to be a little bit better technically, a little bit sharper mentally, and just prepare ourselves every single day. It's super star type of teams like the Dodgers and the Padres had last year.

Personally I love watching the players play. I love watching good baseball players. When you have them in one dugout at one time, I hate that we play against them. I enjoy the game, but it forces us to do better. I don't mind

that at all.

Is it daunting? Of course, as we sit here right now and there's curiosity about where the next free agents are going, you know, we have to embrace it. We know what our landscape is. Our owner told us where we have to be. We're going to adhere to that and accept that.

Q. The cable deals are really hurting some clubs, but not others. The Mets seem to be doing okay. You guys are affected. Is that at all part of the conversation? Not "woe is us," but at least what do we have to do to be better and how do you compete against teams that --

TOREY LOVULLO: I have a personal thought about that. You guys don't care about that I'm sure.

Q. Sure, we do.

TOREY LOVULLO: I think that it's a level of ownership. If they need to figure out how to level the playing field, I think they should. That's what I personally think about it.

At the end of the day we know we're challenged financially. Things have been different for us than the Mets and Yankees and Dodgers and some other clubs. We're okay with that. We love that challenge. I think that's way above my pay grade from a technical standpoint.

Q. Can I ask you about Soto?

TOREY LOVULLO: Of course.

Q. He is in your division. You have battled against him that year and as long as he's been in the league. What makes that guy different?

TOREY LOVULLO: I think it's his bat-to-ball skills, the balance that he shows, and the ability to control the zone and not swing at bad pitches. He's a tough out. He's willing to sacrifice a strike to get into the at-bat. He understands what the at-bat is asking for.

The first time I saw him, he was 20 years old. I could not believe he was 20 years old. He carried himself like he was 30, like he had been around the league for a long time.

I just think overall if you are going to ask me one thing, it's the hand-eye, bat-to-ball skill. It's elite. He knows where the ball is going, and he knows where the barrel is going to find the baseball.

Q. In your experience does that skill age well? He is

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signed now until 40.

TOREY LOVULLO: Yeah, until 40. He's going to have 20 years of Major League Baseball experience under his belt. There's only a few players that have done that at elite level. I have every belief that he will be the guy that can do it for sure.

Q. There's always been in Ted Williams comp with him. You know what that means. It's a compliment, but is it fair? Is it real?

TOREY LOVULLO: I mean, Ted Williams, right? My dad taught me everything about Ted Williams. That's a tough one for him. He's probably the greatest hitter of all time.

I think Soto is on a different level than the rest of the league at times. I mean, 41 home runs, the OPS. The numbers that he has are not lucky. It is because he has an incredible ability to impact the baseball, and he understands what each at-bat is asking for.

So comparing him to Ted Williams, I think we need to see a few more years of it for sure.

Q. (Indiscernible).

TOREY LOVULLO: Yeah, Bonds did it.

Q. (Indiscernible).

TOREY LOVULLO: Yeah, a little like Barry Bonds. Barry Bonds I think early in his career he was trying to figure some things out, and then he got really good in his last 12 or 13 years of his career. I feel like that's what Soto could potentially do.

Barry bonds was elite. One of the best ever for sure.

Q. What do you think of the at-bats?

TOREY LOVULLO: I'll always say it. I'll support what the Commissioner says and what the Commissioner is talking about and what Major League Baseball is willing to do. I don't think it would work very well for me.

Q. How so? You're more of a traditionalist it seems like generally.

TOREY LOVULLO: I think changing the DNA of a lineup and the construction of a lineup, and it just would change the way you could attack a lineup. It just doesn't seem like it's fair.

Q. So even if you can have Ketel bat twice in a row in

an inning, that down side always --

TOREY LOVULLO: Yeah, for sure, but I guess maybe messing with the DNA is something like you walk Ohtani to get to Ohtani, right? It just doesn't sound right to me. That's more along what I'm thinking of.

Of course, I want Ketel to hit twice back-to-back, right? Of course, I do, but that's an interesting concept, and I'll support it if it gets to that point.

Q. Corbin Carroll, I wasn't aware of this during the season, but he had more called strikes above the zone than any other hitter in Major Leagues, 106.

TOREY LOVULLO: I didn't know it was that number, but I knew it was extremely high.

Q. How much did that contribute to some of his early struggles when everything else was going wrong? It seemed like an unfair disadvantage for him to have to deal with.

TOREY LOVULLO: Yeah, I think because of his size, umpires would get thrown off and call a high strike. I would look at the iPad during the game, and there were times it happened twice an at-bat to him.

You would never know it because of his demeanor. I credit him for his work ethic to try and figure out how to get through it and his focus to not let it force him to get out of at-bat. Yeah, I think he was chasing a pitch that took him a little while to learn how to hit, and the umpires, because they called 106 of them, that's a lot, out of the zone, it might have been a little bit more of a challenge for him because of that number.

Q. Are you looking forward to 2026 being able to challenge that?

TOREY LOVULLO: Is that going to happen in 2026?

Q. That's the rumor.

TOREY LOVULLO: I'm worrying about tomorrow, yeah.

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