

MLB Winter Meetings

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Detroit Tigers

A.J. Hinch

Press Conference

Q. You mentioned yesterday a little bit about just the challenge of coming back with a young team that had success at the end and got into the playoffs, and you mentioned that it was like Game 7 from August on and to get those guys to buy into the substitutions and the roles and the various ways to win every game. What's the challenge of repeating that mindset and regaining that vibe that you had?

A.J. HINCH: We got to taste it down the stretch playing playoff games for the better part of two months, and then we go into the actual playoffs and win a playoff series for the first time in a long time. Then a really tough series against Cleveland.

So anything that we talk about or about our preparation or what we need to do to be better, they know why, right? We've gotten to experience it a little bit. I don't feel like this team is going to really waver off of that.

I think the biggest challenge for a young team, and I've seen this before, is not looking backwards as you're trying to progress. I mean, we can't repeat last season. We're not trying to repeat last season. We're trying to be better. We want to win the AL Central. We want to put ourselves in a better and better position moving forward.

You can't do that by looking backwards. I want our guys to take ownership of the fact that we are going to be looked at a little bit differently. We have a lot of things we need to do to get better. The test is going to come as the attention grows towards the season that that was a fun run and a fun time and a memorable playoff chase for us, and now we start over again.

Q. Whether it's internal or external, what are the steps you take to get to winning the AL Central?

A.J. HINCH: We obviously need to play better for a longer period of the season. It's hard to imagine putting together that type of ending that we did. We're capable of it. We showed that we can win as many games as anybody in baseball over a period of time, but you know, we had some



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tough months too. We had some tough learning curves for our players and everybody around the organization.

So we just have to get incrementally better in every spot, and we have examples of that throughout the year where players, you know, struggled or didn't do their best, and then all of a sudden turned into mainstays in the lineup down the stretch.

We had lessons learned on how we were going to deploy our talent and how we were going to use our players. Every team is different. You know, I say that every year.

They may not be as different personnel-wise, but guys will play better, guys will do -- hopefully we'll be healthy. We weren't healthy for last season for a lot of the middle part of the season, and obviously we know what is at stake.

Q. It feels like there could be a lot of competition for the last rotation spot or two. How are you communicating to some of those guys, Mize, Manning, Montero?

A.J. HINCH: The common thing for us has been when we talk about this depth of pitching and the way we used our pitching last season is you can pitch well while you're in there. So the competition is going to be we have to get better in a lot of different areas.

We had a rotation to speak of. I know we used it a little differently, but we're just telling these guys to come in ready to compete and try to make our team. As you get better, the teams get harder and harder to make, and that's a good thing. It's a good thing for us as a team. It's a good thing for us as an organization.

We've told a lot of our players that it's important to have a good offseason. Whether that's a pitch grip change, whether that's an understanding of your usage, whether it's how your body is moving, whether it's some of your training, the innings are going to be very competitive.

Q. You stressed the outfield being taken care of. You have a full season with Riley in the corner and whether it's whoever else in the opposite corner. How much of an asset in outfield is that for you guys over the

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course of a whole season?

A.J. HINCH: That's been a major step in the right direction for us. I think George Lombard is one of the best outfield coaches in baseball. He's been -- you know, he's been in the news before. He's going to be a manager someday, but his impact on our outfield defense has been really well documented, but also really well-earned.

We can put three center fielders on the field in a big -- not the biggest outfield, but a big outfield and a pretty good pitching staff, and that's a step in the right direction. We can turn a lot of hits into outs. We can turn a lot of doubles into singles.

I feel really good that I can mix and match in any order. Parker is going to be in center, but arguably three center fielders in the outfield any given night is a huge advantage for our pitching.

Q. How much has (indiscernible) been working on his own with his own guys hitting-wise this offseason, and how much of (indiscernible)?

A.J. HINCH: It's a good balance for everybody. We get to the offseason, and these guys all have either former coaches or people they work with and our guys are in sync with them. He's been with both.

You know, he's got a great setup in Arizona along with a number of other players. We sort of have a whole operation in Arizona now with a couple of players and a few of our staff members that live there. They just got together I think last week with a few of our hitting guys to check in with them. We'll put them together with some defensive guys like we do with a lot of our -- our coaching staff, our Major League coaching staff, is incredible about being open to having some offseason visits. Our players are always reaching out.

Tork, along with a lot of guys, are getting -- we had the exit interview. We're having the offseason analysis. We're getting into now the holidays -- we're in the middle of the holidays, and that's when the work really begins with the bat. We're in constant contact with these guys.

Q. Just for -- just a side thing here, it's not going to happen, that Golden At-Bat idea that was thrown up. As someone who picks apart games and thinks five moves ahead, that explode your mind just the thought of that ever happening?

A.J. HINCH: It blew up my phone because coaches and players and people were wondering about it. Obviously I know it's controversial, like every change that comes. I

think we're all interested in trying to make the game better, and everybody will have an opinion on whether or not something like that is doable. That's a tough one.

The way our game has been played for however many years, I've been very progressive with some of the changes that we've made. That one caught me off guard a little bit. We open up with the Dodgers next year. I don't know that I want to see any of their hitters, you know, get to hit twice in the same inning. I know we're not going to do that, but that's a tough one to wrap your arms around on the onset.

We'll see if it gets any more traction over the years.

Q. Beau Brieske's transition to the bullpen, could that be a template for any of the other starters? Is there any starter on the roster that seems particularly well-suited?

A.J. HINCH: I think all these guys would choose potentially being a stretched-out starter in the bullpen over maybe being in Triple-A. We haven't talked to anybody about coming in with that mindset when you look at how deep our rotation options are. That conversation is probably coming for somebody, but we've asked our guys to get ready to compete for a rotation job.

Then as the spring goes, if we have a transition like Beau has made or last year we had a couple of our young starters get broken into the Big Leagues by being in the pen, we put Kenta in the pen, that seems to be more of a Spring Training timing than a mindset right now.

We want our guys to come in ready to try to win a rotation spot on opening day.

Q. I actually have sort of the opposite question. On Tyler Holton, he has a lot of attributes to be a starter, and he's had two fantastic years. How much conversation has actually gone into could he start for us?

A.J. HINCH: Yeah, I think the natural thought is he could do whatever is asked of him. There hasn't been a ton of conversation about that given the depth that we have and, quite honestly, how good he's been in the role that we've had him.

We use him as much as anybody in baseball, and we try to give him the allotted rest. Not as much as a starter rests, but when he gets stretched out to two and three and four innings, we're very disciplined with giving him the amount of rest before we pitch him again.

He's not going to be in the starter competition. He's in that

Swiss Army knife where he's going to pitch probably every inning next year that we play. Maybe not extra innings if I have already used him, but I don't know if he did every inning this year. If he didn't, he got as close as anybody in baseball.

Q. So a philosophical question. We're not talking about the No. 1 and 2 starters on the team. Isn't Tyler Holton more valuable pitching in the same number of innings in the current role as he would be as an actual starter?

A.J. HINCH: If you look how I use Tyler, he pitches in winning games. Either he bridges to other guys in the bullpen or he's closed out games for us. So to a manager, the guys that pitch in wins, the guys that can close out wins, the guys that can get you out of tough jams to lead you to a win, my definition of value is going to be how do we create more wins for ourselves?

By how comfortable I've become using Tyler in any role, he's pretty valuable to me where he's at.

Q. One last quick follow-up. How many pitchers can do what he did from your experience? How much of a unicorn is he? Or is he not?

A.J. HINCH: I think until guys -- listen, I don't doubt players ever. I think guys can do a lot of different things if you just give them the opportunity.

I don't know how guys would respond to his versatility, the lack of knowing when he comes to the ballpark what part of the game he's going to pitch in, the variety of lineups that are thrown at him. Some people pinch-hit righties. Some people don't.

He's a special pitcher for us because I literally -- he's one of the guys I know coming to the ballpark that I have a valuable player to put in the game when we need it the most. That's a unique skill set.

Q. You talked a minute ago about the role we hope doesn't come into play, but all the changes that have been made from pitch clocks to the three-batter minimum pull and the bigger bases. Have any of them as you have seen them progress -- have you liked them, hated them more or less?

A.J. HINCH: I think the rule change -- I think we've nailed it. I mean, I think if we look up, and despite all of us, naturally we're going to resist any sort of change or any sort of newness to the history of the game and things like that, but I haven't heard or seen hardly any complaints.

There was a little bit of talk around the pitch clock, and I think we've all adapted to that, and nobody is upset with the sub-three-hour baseball game, right?

You see the bigger bases. They're going to look weird, and now if we put a smaller base on the field, that would look weird, you know, because we've become accustomed to the bigger base.

When you look at the pickoff rule, which from a strategy standpoint or the three-batter rule from a strategy standpoint and you ask us to now manage or play the opposite, we would probably have a hard time going back to it because we're so accustomed now to the new.

I think we've nailed the rules as an industry. We need to continue to try to tweak them to get better. If one doesn't work, you know, I don't miss as an ex-catcher the catcher getting blown up. I realize we probably have given up runs due to the lack of being able to run somebody over. I don't need our second baseman being flipped.

I know I'm caught in between old school and new school on it, you about the physical part of that, I don't think we're really missing that on our game. So we nailed that.

You go rule by rule, and the game has survived. It's been pretty good, and the game I think is more entertaining today than maybe it once was in certain times.

Q. Would it help too that the guys that are doing it in the modern and now we've progressed to the point or these guys are used to it when they get here?

A.J. HINCH: A modern day second baseman would not be able to understand how to protect yourself on a double play. To ask him to run over a catcher now, it's unfair. If anything, the unique adjustment is going to be the players that have never been in the Minor Leagues since the challenge system has been in place in the Minors.

They're not going to remember whatever it's going to be, tap your hat or whatever to challenge a call in Spring Training. That's going to be a unique experience for them.

I think the game is very adaptable. Probably more adaptable than most of us give it credit.

Q. How is Javi Baez doing this morning?

A.J. HINCH: Javi is doing well. He's in between Puerto Rico and Tampa with his rehab. We go back and forth. Our people have been down to Puerto Rico and seen him. He's going step-by-step. It's a long rehab process, and that's why we're all anxious to see how he comes out of it

physically with the hip and hopefully alleviates the back issues that he's talked a lot about.

He's been very diligent in his work and very diligent in his rehab process. He hasn't had a misstep or he hasn't had anything that gives us doubt or pause that he's not going to be fully healthy when the time comes.

I don't know when that is, and I don't know what he's going to be able to give us as we get into the spring. We'll know a little bit more, but I've been very proud of his communication, his diligence and the program he's on is giving him the best chance to get back being healthy.

Q. I'll follow up. Obviously a lot has been -- how long and maybe how much do you feel like this injury in particular has hampered him? Do you feel like it's a realistic expectation (indiscernible)?

A.J. HINCH: Yeah. I don't know how long it bothered him. I know it hurt him to tell me and our training staff how much he felt like he couldn't go, but I also remember the Arizona series where he had an incredible break-out series and carried us through a good series.

I remember the home run against Munoz against Seattle at our place that helped the trajectory of our season turn in the right direction. So we've seen flashes of Javi, but it gets absorbed a little bit too much into some of the struggles.

Obviously we hope this is a remedy to get him back to playing with freedom and playing more consistently and being the version of the player that he thinks he can become, and we think he can become. He's got work to do, and he sat on the sidelines and watched a really young, interesting team play really well down the stretch, and I bet that's giving him a lot of energy.

Q. How -- Matt Vierling is not an excuse guy, and he played every position almost every day. How beat up was he at the end? Can you talk about it? How does that impact what he needs to do in this offseason because that's going to be his role?

A.J. HINCH: He has one of the hardest jobs on our team because he has to be prepared to play a lot of different positions, and then even we re-introduced first base to him down the stretch last year just because we were moving guys around so much. So it does wear him down.

I've got to get better at trying to figure out his physical sort of gas tank and where it's at. I don't know if he needs more off days as much as we just need to -- we need to be cognizant of where he's at.

He was worn down at the end. He's going to work hard this offseason and knows that the same role, right field, third base, a little bit center field, probably left field -- we're still going to keep a first base mitt by him. He's embracing that.

Now as he's seen himself have a really good season in that valuable role of being necessarily unknown of what position he's going to play any given week, and he's been awesome. He's really a part of the glue of our clubhouse and our team and gives me a ton of flexibility to make decisions throughout the game because I have Matt Vierling.

Q. The guys that ran bases (indiscernible) how easy is that to translate into a full season, and is that something you feel like would be a point of emphasis in Spring Training?

A.J. HINCH: Like stolen bases, first to third or all-over pressure?

Q. First to third.

A.J. HINCH: One thing that -- we look at our season. If you look at our whole season as a whole, it will not tell the whole story of who we are. If you look at the beginning part of the season, we didn't put a ton of pressure on teams. We didn't run the bases quite as aggressively. We did mix and match quite a bit. We had your standard five-man rotation with two of the best pitchers in baseball anchoring that.

The second half hour of the season we got younger. We got more athletic. We could run the bases a little more aggressively. We could start runners a ton more. We became a little bit more left-handed. The platoon stuff started working, and we mixed and matched our pitching.

I think the pressure part of that is something that we've been working towards over the last four years, and our personnel is starting to match that pressure mindset. We started putting a ton of immense pressure on the opponent with ball in play and us being able to take advantage of bases.

We have now something that was in realtime high-end baseball, playoff chasing to playoff caliber baseball to now use that. You think I'm going to use that in a video? You're damn right I am. Do you think I'm going to use that as motivation? Absolutely I'm going to.

I hope that becomes our identity because our personnel matches that, and we can utilize our guys the best we can.

Q. What were your takeaways from Brant Hurter's season? How do you evaluate the Triple-A performance and then the Big League performance when he started in Triple-A and started in the Big Leagues?

A.J. HINCH: I think he had to do a lot. We broke him in with a very unique role of being a mostly bulk reliever/starter and getting his innings in a different way. We could insert him whenever we wanted to and against whatever hitter we wanted.

He adapted to that well. He's easy-going. He's low-key. His routine is excellent. His strike-throwing is very, very good. He's a tough angle. Especially the first time you see him from the big body with a unique angle.

He's very much more adaptable than I think most pitchers are given credit. He could do anything. So we are going to build him up as a traditional starter and give him a chance to win a rotation spot.

Given the confidence that he had to have had throughout this first taste of the Major Leagues and the type of games he was pitching in, I see him pretty eager coming to spring to try to win a job and be a valuable part of our rotation.

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