

MLB Winter Meetings

Tuesday, December 10, 2024

Dallas, Texas, USA

Minnesota Twins

Manager Rocco Baldelli

Press Conference

Q. Three of your kind of key right-handed guys are departing. With the way you guys like to operate, platooning, how key is a bench in bolstering your right-handed hitting this winter?

ROCCO BALDELLI: We know every year we're going to have to reassess what our roster looks like. There are going to be some years where we're probably heavier platooning and other years where we're just not going to be.

I can't tell you what this upcoming season is going to look like and the way we're going to operate like that. We may fill some of those spots. We may do it internally. We have Austin Martin. We have some other guys that can play in these roles.

But we may look to free agency to find someone. We may look to the trade market to find someone. But we also may not fill every one of those holes with that type of individual.

Q. Derek had mentioned Royce at second base as like an off-season conversation. Is that something you think he could handle if he's open to it and you guys want him there?

ROCCO BALDELLI: I said before I think he can handle it. If he has time to prepare and get ready for this and he has the second half of an off-season and Spring Training to get ready, he has the skill set. He has the ability to handle that. I have very little doubt that he can do that.

I actually saw Royce and Larnach yesterday. They're here and they work out locally. They're both doing very well. We had a good time. We went and got lunch. Jayce came too. It was nice.

Royce actually said he's been taking balls on both sides of second base. So that's -- it tells you a little bit about where his head is. He's like, yeah, I've been getting some work done at second just in case, just in case. We'll make that decision when we see what our roster overall is going to look like.



2024 BASEBALL WINTER MEETINGS DALLAS

It's hard to say anything about where Royce will ultimately fall. I'd like to figure that out sooner than later, and I'm sure he would too. But at this point in the off-season, we probably can't answer that question quite yet. He can do it. He can do it.

Q. But that would be something like you go into camp, you're the second baseman now?

ROCCO BALDELLI: Whatever we go with at the beginning to start Spring Training, I'd really like to be able to just go with that and allow him to prepare for his season in that spot, not move guys around.

There are times -- we have Willi Castro. It shows what we're always open to doing with players. But with Royce, I think finding a spot, a good spot for him and letting him settle in, prepare, get ready confidently and play, I think that's what we're looking for.

Q. You guys knew Carlos Correa is a good leader, but did it hammer home in the 153-game absence last year how valuable he is in the clubhouse dynamic just on that leadership front when you don't have him?

ROCCO BALDELLI: He was exceptional last year. He did it on both sides of the ball. He does it after the game, before the game. He sets a tone and an example of how to prepare and get ready to do this.

All that said, we were a different team. When he and Buck were not on the field late in the year, we were a different team. There's no doubt about that. Absolutely could have handled it better as a team. But no, it's true. When you take a guy away who's one of the top players in the game and someone that's playing shortstop for you every day and take him off the field -- tell me if I'm wrong -- but he was probably our best hitter last year too when he was out there.

You take all of that off the field, you're really going to be left searching and looking to figure things out. So what do you do about that? There's probably not an answer to that question, not one answer at least.



You try to prepare the rest of the team. Organizationally, we do it with trying to acquire a lot of quality depth and a lot of good players, just having a lot of good players sometimes makes up for losing a great player.

Q. Even with the plantar in both feet two years ago, do you still see him long-term shortstop?

ROCCO BALDELLI: I'm not sure what the long-term part of that question actually entails, but I foresee him as a shortstop. I still think he plays a very good shortstop. I'm sure that he will transfer over to third base at some point in his career. I can't tell you when that is. I don't know the answer to that.

I think he still has all of the qualities that you would look for in a very good shortstop.

Q. How do you feel at first base with Santana leaving. You saw what the defense can do. How do you feel internally? Julien is a name that's been brought up. How do you feel about that?

ROCCO BALDELLI: Carlos was -- Santana did an exceptional job for us. He solidified our defense. Our defense wasn't exactly a strength of ours last year. I wouldn't say that that was the meat and potatoes of how we were winning games, but he was one of the guys that were carrying us on that part of the field.

Losing that part of it is probably the hardest part to lose, if we're not able to bring him back. I don't know if we're going to bring him back. I think that's still a possibility.

We have guys that we can move over there. They're good young players. But I think something you're going to hear me say a fair amount going into Spring Training, and then into the season, is we have some young players that are going to have to step into roles, get themselves ready, and be ready to produce and help us win games.

It's not just about them establishing themselves and trying to do a good job. No, no, we need them. We need them to get ready to play.

So if it comes to Jose Miranda and Eddie Julien preparing themselves to play first base for us, then we have to just dive in head first and do it and get the job done. Both of those guys have work to do on the defensive side of the ball over at first base, but that's what the off-season and that's what Spring Training is for.

We've seen guys make great jumps defensively for us at different points over the last few years, and we'll need those two guys, if it does come to that scenario, to do the

same.

Q. As much as it might have made life difficult to have three rookies in the rotation to end the season, how good do you feel about the group with those guys having been tested the way they have the entirety of the rotation going into the season?

ROCCO BALDELLI: We have some starting pitching depth that normally disappears at some point in the season, and then you're left looking to a different direction to figure some things out. We have guys that made big leaps. We have guys that -- all those guys are different, though. I don't normally like to talk about them all in the same conversation.

I'm happy to break them down. You can ask about any one of them. But having guys that have gotten some Major League experience where they're not just going to be thrown into the fire for the first time, I think that will help them.

Maybe some of them will take bigger steps forward because of that. You hope that they all do. But even if some of them do, it's going to be a really good thing, a very valuable thing for us going forward. We're going to need likely all of them again, and we're going to need them to do an even better job than they did last year.

Some of them were pretty impressive. Sim came in and obviously stabilized us, did a great job. Festa came in and showed real flashes, not just an average starting pitcher that you put out there, but someone that can shut down good offenses. The other guys did nice work too.

We're going to have to sort all this out and again see what we end up doing over the course of the off-season to see what our starting pitching looks like.

Q. What are you expecting from Brooks Lee entering camp? He got a taste of the Big Leagues last year. He struggled in the end.

ROCCO BALDELLI: He's in that category of young guy needing to take a step forward. He's a pretty mature young player. You look at him, and you go, well, you feel comfortable putting him anywhere on the field. Does that mean he's as good as he needs to be everywhere on the field? No.

He has a lot of -- he has the hands. He has the feel for the game, the internal clock. He has these things already. So you feel good about it.

I think defensively he's going to do what he's going to do.

He's a fairly ready-made young player defensively. On the offensive end, I think understanding the zone going forward will be good for him. Making gains there, I think, which pitches he's offering at, which pitches he's trying to do what with, I think that is going to be good.

He's been able to swing at the lower levels and just hit and expand at times, but it didn't matter. He was just that talented. I think really tightening it up offensively will help him, but he has a lot of ability. I think he's going to be a good Major League player. Again, steps forward are what's needed.

Q. I was asking A.J. over here about Tyler Holton, about his value, and A.J. was saying that his ability, he thinks he pitched possibly in every inning this past year, that he opened and closed, he did everything, and how invaluable it is. Do you think many pitchers are capable of that, and moreover, is there anyone on your staff that can play that type of role?

ROCCO BALDELLI: A big part of that question is not just the physical element. The biggest part of it is probably the mental hurdles that go along with that. I think a lot of Major League players, and especially pitchers, they like to have a role and know what it is. In their opinion, it allows them to do their job in the best possible way.

I don't think there are many guys that volunteer for a role like that. I really don't. I haven't thought about guys on our team that would be able to do things like that. But if I was quickly like -- like Lou Varland would do anything we asked him to do. If we asked him to open or close or pitch a bulk role or start, he would do any of it and probably do it to the best of his abilities and be fine.

What I would say is I think more guys are capable of it than they believe. I think there are a lot of guys that could do it, but I think it is a hurdle, and I don't think you're going to find too many guys that are really jumping up and down to do it. So when you find a guy -- if you're looking for a guy that can do it and you find him, I think that can be very valuable.

Q. What was your reaction when you saw the video of Tropicana Field (indiscernible)?

ROCCO BALDELLI: It was an incredibly sad picture. I didn't really have any words for it. That was my home in baseball for a long time. Part of me still feels that way.

Really what you're hoping for are the people of the area, the Rays organization, all the people there that things work out in a really positive way for all those people. The Trop is a building, and there are a lot of memories attached to

the building itself, but really it's about the fans and it's about the people in the organization and the area.

Seeing the tarp flapping in the wind and the rain coming down and watching all of it, it's sad. It really turns your stomach, but you kind of feel helpless in some ways while you're watching it too.

I couldn't do anything about it. I talked to a few people. I can't even come up with anything that's going to make them feel any better about it either. But it hurt me to see.

I just hope that things can be done, and there's a solid, good, nice plan in place to fix both the building and the situation itself.

Q. You guys flipped your series with them, but what do you think playing Major League Baseball now is going to be like?

ROCCO BALDELLI: It will be different. It will be challenging. There's going to be a lot of days where what we know as Major League Baseball and the way that we function, our schedules and all of that, are just going to have to change. People in this game adapt. We've seen it before. The players and the staff and everyone will figure it out. The opposing teams will figure it out.

But it's going to be a total change. People are going to have to forget what was before and will have to move on to something new and make the best of it.

I'm sure that group of guys is going to make the best of the situation and go out there to just win games. I don't have any hesitation to think that things -- they're going to take advantage of the situation to their benefit on the baseball side of things, I bet, and I'm sure they're going to make it work just fine.

Q. How much do you think the physical wearing down went into Royce's last two months offensively? When you look at his season that second half, what did you see going wrong there offensively, and what's it going to take to get him back on track?

ROCCO BALDELLI: Well, there's not one answer to getting back on track. I think a lot of that comes down to him experiencing some challenges, some failure, the things that every player deals with, that he has not dealt with yet.

I think going through those things at the Major League level for the first time, it kind of -- it tempers you. It changes you. Then the next time you're dealing with those things, you treat them differently. You figure out ways to handle things, people to talk to, directions to go in that he didn't

probably do this time around but that he will do the next time around.

He has a great support system, so I feel pretty good -- not just in the organization, but he also has a really nice support system outside the organization. I think, when you've only really had success at the Major League level, anything but that can feel real off.

I think we're going to see a different guy when it comes to -- whether that's April, May, June, or at the end of the year, when he runs into a little rut, I think he'll treat it in a totally different manner.

Q. Expectations change for Buxton who's going -- this time last year, you were just hoping he could play center again?

ROCCO BALDELLI: Yeah, it was a really nice step for him. Even though he's a veteran player and a guy that's been around, seeing him go out there and play -- play a lot of baseball, have a smile on his face most days, figure out a kind of a pregame plan and a routine that is working well for him was really great to see.

I don't really set goals as far as that in my head, but if he's playing most days for us, we end up winning a lot, like it's not magic. He does that. We know he does it offensively and defensively, and he's a very -- another very difficult player to replace based on his ability and his talent.

Also like Correa, they're different people, but losing Buck's energy that he brings -- because he's really an inspiring player. He's a guy that all of the players on the team look to because all of his emotion is really directed towards the team and his teammates. He can really get guys in a good mental head space, and he makes people smile. Like it's exciting watching him play, even for his teammates.

So when he was not out there, I think losing that was something that we had a tough time replacing. So let's get him out there as much as we can, and we'll be okay.

Q. Now that you guys have separated from the way the season ended, how do you sense guys using that as motivation or pushing them in the off-season?

ROCCO BALDELLI: I think that's what we're going to see. It's something that I talked to our team about at the end of the year. Probably had a different season-ending conversation with our guys than I've ever had before.

But it hurt. It was a very, very -- it was a tough, hurtful way to end the year. It didn't feel good on any level the way the season ended, but that's life. What are you going to do

about it? You're going to use it to your benefit somehow going forward. You are going to use it to motivate you. You're not going to want to feel that ever again.

I think we have a lot of players -- something that I was just chatting with Larnach and Royce about yesterday. They were talking about it as well. You want that to not just come from the manager or the coaching staff, you want that to come from within, from the players in the clubhouse, and I think we're going to see that from our guys. I think we're going to see a very motivated group.

Q. What separates Tito as a manager that makes him different than maybe some of the others?

ROCCO BALDELLI: He's got kind of a magical personality. He does. He just does. We could line up all the managers or all the people in this building right now, and he has a little -- he has a spark. He has something that most people don't have. Maybe no one else has. It's a very, very unique thing to him that it puts people in a great head space when they show up to the ballpark and the clubhouse every day.

He forms really, really, really nice relationships with all the people around him. He makes you feel special. He makes you feel like you can do things. He makes you feel like you're a better player than you actually maybe even are sometimes. Who can do that? There's not many people who can do that.

And beyond that, obviously he's tremendous when the game starts. He's very good in all regards, but I think really it comes down to the way that he makes the team feel and the players feel about themselves.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports