

MLB Winter Meetings

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Orlando, Florida, USA

Pittsburgh Pirates

Manager Don Kelly

Press Conference



Q. Don, it's your first Winter Meetings as a manager. How has that changed? What's the excitement level for you going through this year?

DON KELLY: Really exciting. First year as a manager being here at the Winter Meetings. A lot of great conversations going on. I see how busy it is and everything, but just really excited about getting down here and getting our group fully together and looking forward to 2026.

Q. So far this off-season you guys have been connected to some higher profile free agents. As a manager, is that exciting? What are the discussions on your end when it comes to next year?

DON KELLY: Really exciting. We all know how much 2026 means and a lot of discussions going on about building towards that. Started right after the season was over this year. Obviously 2025 didn't go as we had hoped and really looking forward to '26. Just covering every avenue that we possibly can to try to improve the team for next year.

Q. What do you feel this team needs to do to be (no microphone)?

DON KELLY: Offensively we need to get better. We talked about that a lot, getting better on the offensive side. We need to continue to be really good on the pitching front. That's the foundation of our team, and continue to be good there and find a way to score some more runs to win more baseball games.

Q. Are you confident that there will be execution in terms of being able to bring in some external forces to improve the offense?

DON KELLY: Yeah, really love the conversations going on. Can't speak specifically to any individual thing per se, but a lot of great conversation, a lot of great things that are happening. Really with the ultimate goal of winning in Pittsburgh in '26.

Q. You talked about the external conditions with the offense, but internally talk about how you can get better as a group?

DON KELLY: Yeah, we're always beating that up, and that's a daily basis thing. That's throughout the season having different monthly goals as part of the process and then continuing after the season was over, reviewing '25. It's something that we do have to get better at offensively, continuing to have our guys get better as well as look to improve the club in any way possible.

Q. Do you want the offense to have a specific identity? If so, what might that be?

DON KELLY: I think that what we talked about last year was, when we were really good, I thought we handled at-bats really well. We continued to pass the baton. I know it was something that when we had those stretches of being good offensively, it was we passed the baton, we got guys on base.

Then that two-out, that big hit is the thing that eluded us a lot of times. And finding a way to get guys in their comfort zone in those big moments to come up with a big hit. Easier said than done, but continuing to push towards that for next year.

Q. Do you see that as a comfort thing that needs to be changed, or do you see that as just get someone who gets big hits or to get some sort of big hitter?

DON KELLY: I think that can come internally and externally. We've got guys who have stepped up in those moments, last year and in the past. Could it be somebody externally that comes in to do that? Of course it could.

I think the one thing as I've thought about last year and going forward, is continuing to be aggressive, finding ways to push the envelope in ways, playing baseball effectively, running the bases effectively to make sure we're doing everything we can to find ways to win.



Q. Going from bench coach to manager, how different has your fall been, this part of the season? Team building is happening at the front office level. Were you involved as a bench coach, and how much are you involved now? What ways would lend your eye to the process?

DON KELLY: More I think as a bench coach involved on the fringes. As a manager, definitely involved in the conversations. This is my first Winter Meetings I've been to. Excited to be down here. Excited to be part of the conversation.

As we look towards building in '26, the things we've talked about adding offensively is the biggest thing and directly involved in those conversations as well.

Q. When it comes to free agency, you're selling a player on dollars and cents, but also the opportunity. If you were just speaking with a free agent right now, what type of thing would you be telling him about the opportunity this presents?

DON KELLY: When you look at the team and the way that we're built with our pitching staff, there's some teams around the league that have good pitching staffs. Not discounting that at all. Totally believe that ours is at the top, towards the top of the league.

When you look at Paul, Bubba Chandler, Mitch Keller, Ashcraft, Jones, Burrows -- it's unbelievable the way that we have the starting pitching depth and the talent to be really good. I think that it's something that gives us a chance to win in '26 with the right additions.

Q. Along those lines, you guys (indiscernible) about trading Oviedo yesterday. What can you say about the version of the pitcher that came back to you this year and how he profiles at this stage of his career?

DON KELLY: Oviedo, what he went through last year, Tommy John and Spring Training and the way he was able to come back and the competitor he is, it stinks losing a guy like that, when you look at a guy that's going to be in the rotation. From our standpoint, in order to get Garcia, it was we had to give up something to get something.

Really excited about bringing Garcia back and the impact that he could potentially have in '26. The upside that he has is tremendous and really excited to add him back. Obviously it stinks to lose Oviedo, but it's great to have Garcia.

Q. With Oviedo, did the profile change? It looked like there was more carry on the fastball. How does that

happen?

DON KELLY: Yeah. I think that -- I don't know all the stuff, but the extension and the way that the fastball played was a little bit different. I know our guys worked hard on it with him to continue to adjust some things, and he did a great job of being able to make the adjustments.

Q. You mentioned Garcia. What do you kind of like about just the possibility of him adding some power to the lineup in '26 and just the impact that he could potentially make?

DON KELLY: Yeah. Some big-time power that he brings and just the ability to play all three outfield positions. Looks like he's an above average outfielder. Just the way -- I saw that double that he hit in his first at-bat down there in winter ball, and the way that he hustled and ran into second. All the reports we've gotten back and the video we've gotten to watch, we're really excited to add a young project of his caliber to this team.

Q. Do you think he could handle center if needed?

DON KELLY: I think so. He definitely could go to center field.

Q. A guy like Oneil Cruz, who probably didn't last year have the year he wants, the ceiling, you talk about how sky high it is. How do the Pirates get from where he was last year to that ceiling?

DON KELLY: Oneil has been working hard this off-season. Continuing to work with him on the approach, the way he's approaching every single at-bat. I think we saw the way that he got better in the outfield last year as the season went on in his first full season playing center field. Worked really hard at that, and he's doing the same thing offensively now.

Major Leagues is tough as you start to go through those changes and teams adjust to you, being able to make the adjustment back. And we're seeing Oneil go through that right now. He's having a great off-season. Looking forward to him having a really good year next year.

Q. Do the Pirates have somebody in the Dominican working with him? Did you guys send somebody down there?

DON KELLY: He was down there with Raul and at the academy doing some stuff. External strength and conditioning guy. He's been back in the States too. I know that Matt and our group is in touch with him often.



Q. We saw Horwitz bounce around a little bit at the end of the year. You guys have been connected to a couple of first basemen. Is second base or another position an option for him, or would you like to keep him at first?

DON KELLY: I think ideally we'd like to keep him at first base. He's such a good defensive first baseman. But totally open to other ways. We played him at second last year at the end of the season. He's played second for Toronto.

Just looking at any way to impact the team. Ideally he'll be at first.

Q. With Garcia, a guy who has a ton of power (indiscernible), you're trying to develop the power while also trying to minimize the (no microphone). How do you balance that in player development?

DON KELLY: Yeah, it's easier said than done. As we go through with the player in talking about the adjustments -- we were just talking about Oneil Cruz and the league adjusts back to you. Finding ways to talk to him about their approach, what the other team is trying to do to you, and continue to challenge yourself in practice on ways to, if it's fastball, slider, swing and miss.

The one thing that it seems with him is when it is in the zone and he attacks the right pitches, he squares them up and hits them really hard. That's what we're really excited about. As he continues to evolve and grow in his development, laying off those pitches that are outside the zone will be something, an area of emphasis for us to work with him on.

Q. You look at some of the top offenses last year, thinking specifically of like the Blue Jays and Brewers, teams that had a lot of success in the regular season, both had long runs in the postseason as well. And the style of offense they played that mixed power off the bat, a little speed, but particularly a lot of contact. What takeaways do you take from that in terms of the direction that offenses are taking right now across the majors?

DON KELLY: Yeah. It's interesting. I can speak more to playing the Brewers, and they did -- the at-bats they put up are really good. That's something we challenge our guys on too is continuing to put up good at-bats, fight with two strikes, continue to put the ball in play.

As you continue to see the development with your guys -- it's something which the Brewers have done a good job of -- it's hard to mix sometimes. They have a unique ability,

speaking of the Blue Jays, to have that kind of ability to make contact and drive the baseball, which is tough. Milwaukee didn't drive the baseball, I don't think, as much as some other teams, but they had the ability to work the count, do that. Cleveland is another team that comes to mind in that regard.

For us to continue to work with our guys and an offensive approach and an offensive identity of having tough at-bats.

Q. With your catchers right now, will you explore another option with Joey Bart? Is first base an option for him to get both bats in the lineup? How do you view the delineation of duties?

DON KELLY: Last year in practice Joey's taken some ground balls at first. Really see Joey as a catcher, but as it goes, we were able to get him in last year at DH a little at the end. I think that first base, if he continues to take some ground balls, something that we could explore down the line.

Q. Paul showed obviously a real desire to go deep in the games his last year, a lot of success going deep into games. How much of a decision to how long they should give him is in your hands? How do you think about that in year 3 now that he's certainly proven he can do it, can go to a very high level, but you also want to be mindful of wear and tear?

DON KELLY: No doubt. In regards to Paul specifically, I think it was 160 innings two years ago, 133 in the Big Leagues; then last year 187, 190. I don't know the exact number. Always continuing to try to push Paul and other guys forward while taking into account their health, where they're at.

Certainly a decision we collectively meet on and talk about before every single game and how we're going to try to -- it's a team of people that we pull together and really talk about that and dive into it and how to maximize not just Paul, but all of our guys.

We had a bunch of guys last year -- Ashcraft, Burrows -- that were on innings limits and just trying to make sure that we keep them as healthy as we can.

Q. What does the next step look like for Paul Skenes?

DON KELLY: First two steps have been really good (laughter).

All I know with Paul is he works his tail off every single day. We get to see him start -- we've talked about this a lot. We get to see him start every five days. The four days in



between is what separates him, the way he works, his commitment to his craft, the detail that he goes into every single day into making himself not just a good pitcher, but a great pitcher. He wants to be elite.

That next step, as far as -- he's going to let us know as he continues to push himself. His first two years have been unbelievable. Just really excited about seeing his development and him continuing to get better, because he does. That's what he does every single day, shows up. Shows up to win and shows up to get better himself.

Q. How confident are you that guys like Bubba Chandler, Ashcraft, Burrows can take the next step too and kind of go even a step forward in 2026 after getting some experience in 2025?

DON KELLY: Yeah. And I think that that experience is what separates. When you see Bubba come up and have quick success in his first two, then hit a rough patch there in his next two outings. That game against Milwaukee was a tough one. Then you saw the way he rebounded and responded.

All of our guys -- Burrows had a tough outing in Minnesota, I remember, right before the All-Star break. Found a way to bounce back. He showed different glimpses.

Ashcraft filled so many different roles last year in the bullpen, starting games. Pitching the ninth inning against the Phillies, it's pouring down rain, we walk Schwarber to get to Bohm and he gets a double-play to end it.

Carmen Mlodzinski started the year as a starter, goes down to Triple-A, comes back up in the bullpen, and found ways to start, relieve.

There were so many things, and the thing that stands out to me, when those guys got the ball, they took the ball and dominated as best they could in that moment they had, whether it was starting, relieving, closing, everything in between. It was really impressive to see the way they all did that, competing with each other against the other team, competing against each other for starts and innings. It was really cool to see.

Like we were talking about, that's the foundation of our team. That's the competitive drive. I think that, when you look at Paul and Mitch, they lead in that and the foundation of the pitching staff.

Q. Do you anticipate seeing Konnor in the mix for the shortstop position in Spring Training?

DON KELLY: Konnor's going to get -- yeah, we're still

talking about a lot of that. It's too early to say exactly what's going to happen there. But as far as a 19-year-old guy that just came out of high school, the year that he had to go through three levels and play the way that he played, the sky's the limit for him. The talent that you see, the wiring, the way he goes about it, he's really, really impressive.

Q. With Paul specifically, when he won the Cy Young, he kind of talked about how there's like two fields of people who would want to go to Pittsburgh. Some people want it as a resume stop. Some really see how special it would be to win in the city. He referenced you as someone who is the perfect person to manage in Pittsburgh. What did you make of those comments, how you find players that want to win here?

DON KELLY: I got chills, you saying that, because winning in Pittsburgh, for those that have seen it is special. When you think about the blackout game against the Reds. I was watching that game on TV, having grown up in Pittsburgh, seeing the early '90s and the success that the team had, that's what excites me. That's what drives me. That's what we're striving for every single day.

When we're here at the Winter Meetings and we're up in the suite talking about things, talking about the adjustments, talking about the offense, talking about how to continue to build the pitching foundation, that's what excites me. That's what we expect. That's what the fans expect, and that's what we want to bring to Pittsburgh in 2026.

Certainly it's not about me. It's about the players. It's about the city. It's about the fans. And it's about bringing winning baseball back to Pittsburgh.

Q. What would that mean for you to do that, to bring winning baseball back to Pittsburgh?

DON KELLY: I get chills when I talk about it. Honestly, like I said, Pittsburgh is a special place. It's a tough town. It's a gritty town. That's the attitude and the identity that we want to bring as a ball club to the city.

Q. To bring position players up earlier, a lot of reasons for it. From the increased athleticism and the range of all that stuff, but it's really, really hard to hit in the Major Leagues right now. How do you help a young guy who hasn't had a ton of experience in the minors figure it out on the fly in the Major Leagues?

DON KELLY: You're right. It's tough. It's tough to hit. Just continuing to work with them, continuing to expose, not just him, but others to opportunity and continue to see.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

Because referencing Oneil earlier, he saw some way that they were going to pitch him differently. And finding ways to combat that, continue to adjust.

And finding ways -- specifically maybe with Konnor, like finding ways to continue to hone in on his approach and what he does really well and learn what the other teams are going to try to do to combat that.

Q. I know Skenes is kind of an extreme example of this, but it's become not totally uncommon for a guy to be in college one year and be in the Big Leagues the next or over two years. Do you see that trend evolving in the sport where it's becoming a quicker runway for the players?

DON KELLY: Yeah. I think that the players, you know, they're going to let you know. When you see guys like Konnor and Paul that dominate through the Minor Leagues, they let you know when they're ready to move. Paul was, Konnor was this year. He got pushed really aggressively.

I think you take it case by case, but you are seeing younger guys get to the Big Leagues quicker across the league, not just with us.

Q. There's been so much turnover in managerial ranks in the last year, you included obviously, and you're seeing very different ways to fill that, different experience and different backgrounds. What do you think makes a good manager in today's game even versus your playing days? How do you think the rule has changed, and what do you think makes a good manager?

DON KELLY: Interesting. I guess, in order to answer that, looking back on my career guys that I respected, that I played for, Leyland is the first guy that comes to mind. Just the care that he had about people and his commitment to winning. And how he blended those two things together that, number one, you never questioned if he cared about you.

And that care might not come across as putting his arm around you. He might kick you in the butt sometimes to really show you that he cared and tried to get the most out of you. Then his commitment to winning and how he went about it every single day to blend those two things together is what really made him and I think other guys special.

Q. With Borgschulte getting his opportunity in Minnesota, what was he like to work with?

DON KELLY: Yeah. He was great to work with him.

Really happy for him that he was able to get that. Looking forward to catching up with him live some point. We had a really good relationship. Happy for him he got that opportunity.

Q. Any update with Jared Jones? Do you anticipate he's going to be on some sort of (indiscernible).

DON KELLY: He's doing well and getting better. The rehab has gone great. As far as timeline and all that, I think too early to say what that's going to look like given the length of time between now and Spring Training we have to go through. Everything is going well.

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