

MLB Winter Meetings

Monday, December 8, 2025

Orlando, Florida, USA

Miami Marlins

Manager Clayton

McCullough

Press Conference

Q. A year later after being here the first time, how are things different for you and the team?

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: Personally, things have slowed down some. This time last year was very much a whirlwind and proverbial drinking from a firehose, was certainly happening -- with a little over year ago this time we were trying to fill out a whole new staff and getting to know new people.

And while I thought I had a pretty good understanding of what things were going to be like you don't know until you go through it. Getting through a full year, getting to the offseason and coming back and us preparing for '26, certainly feeling it in a different place.

And very excited for how things finished with our group last year. That's probably -- we didn't accomplish last year what we were hoping to. You get into a season you want a chance to get into the postseason. We came up short, but I think we all -- we took some solace in that. We finished our season very strong. We were playing meaningful baseball deep into September.

And our ultimate goal, as we talked about last year, was the development of the players we had. There was a lot of opportunity provided for young players on our roster. And a high number of those took, we felt like, real steps forward to cement themselves as Major League contributors for us, and are going to help to continue to build a foundation here that leads to consistent success.

Q. What message did you leave when the season was over to go into the offseason getting ready for the new season and knowing what it takes to be in the hunt and play meaningful games in September?

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: We were in Philadelphia, it was, like, game 159 when we were officially done. We got home the next day. I told them, one, I was disappointed because there's nothing better in this sport than having the



2025 BASEBALL WINTER MEETINGS ORLANDO

Coverage Presented By

CohnReznick 

opportunity to pop champagne and to celebrate a postseason appearance and having the chance to go for a World Series title.

So that part I was letting them know my disappointment for them that we weren't going to have a chance to do that in 2025. But that didn't at all dim the optimism I had for what our future looks like as well as us taking a step back, which is hard during a season, and you get so caught up in the day to day with, we did a lot of -- I felt we did a lot of things great organizationally moving ourselves forward, so that this year coming up is no guarantee that we were going to be better than we were in '25.

There's no guarantee that we're going to win X amount of more games that gets us into the postseason. There has to be the same or more sense of urgency with how -- this isn't starting Spring Training. This was starting with guys and our players and our staff in the offseason and the preparations from a physicality standpoint and a skill development standpoint that it needs to happen.

So our group has embraced that. And one thing I know from watching them for a whole year, we saw how tough and relentless they were. And it hurt to finish and not get in.

So they love each other and I think are, number one, very excited about it. But I think they'll be ready to meet the challenge of what's ahead of us when we start in '26.

Q. Is it fair to say that next year will be less about opportunity and more about results?

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: I think results were still a part of -- that's Major League Baseball. At the end of the day it's about winning that night's game. It's about being able to perform at a level that continues to give you opportunity. So I think we're going to continue to give runway opportunity to our group, and the ones that last year had it.

So their development is nonstop, and you can achieve both at the Major League level. But when we go out there and the game starts at 6:40 or 7:10, all 26 players, our staff, it's

ASAP  . . . when all is said, we're done.®

about winning that night's game and doing what I think is best for our team. And then we recycle it the next day and go right back to trying to improve upon ourselves for the next opportunity.

Q. The record starts fresh, there will be different variables for other teams, what not. How close do you think you guys are as a team to actually making the playoffs in 2026?

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: We feel like we're going to go into 2026 with a real shot to play postseason baseball. That's going to be our goal. You get in there there's a long-term goal at the end of the year we'd love to be here.

It's for me more about we can't get too ahead of ourselves. We'll have a long time between now and then. We have a six-week Spring Training. And we have seven months of the season. It's about us handling the low points of a season which are going to come, like you're going to go through some ruts. Us again being able to handle adversity very well, get off the mat.

Those are things, while, yeah, we're going to be thinking about that. But I'm not going to focus and can't let our group focus too much on looking down too far down the road. We need to be better about what's right in front of and that day.

Q. Can you talk about how much different Spring Training will be now in your second year and it's more knowing the people rather than having to know everyone and all that stuff?

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: It certainly will be nice having more familiarity with -- we got a new complex that's being built. We're all excited about it. It's going to be a really big improvement for us and we're excited about.

But then you walk on the fields and it's one thing to know someone, their name, we watch them on the other side of the field or know a stat sheet. But to spend a year or spend months with a person, that's when real bonds start to form.

So we hope that we can just somewhat pick up where we left off last year. And the players will come in with an expectation and an understanding of what's important to us. How are we going to run our drills? How are we going to run camp? There's going to be less of those unknowns. And we can firmly make the focus on areas of which our team and individuals need to get better for us to accomplish what we'd like to.

Q. A lot of new coaches. It was reported that Blake

Butler will be joining your staff. What went into that hire?

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: Obviously with Tyler Smarslok going over to the Nationals, we hired Craig Driver to be our catching coach. And Craig has some experience as well coaching first base with the Cubs. We made Drives catching first base. And were on the lookout for someone to come in dominate the infield play.

As we went through that process, Blake stood out. Coming over from the Pirates, he managed in their system. He was going to be their infield coordinator. We love his technical acumen. He's also someone who culturally will be a real additive for our group. I feel like Blake will come in and build strong relationships with our guys and team up with Hector Crespo, and those guys will continue to push our infield program forward.

Q. Front office, they're obviously tasked with adding, subtracting what not. How much do you think externally do you guys need to add to the roster to help you or supplement the guys already there in 2026?

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: I know Peter will continue to look for every avenue, whether that's any type of external avenue to potentially like help our team. And I think what we'll do. If we have players that come in from our system that are new that augment, great. And we'll certainly a big focus is going to be continuing with the number of -- the clarity with which we'll have from last year to this year we think is much different with some of the players that established themselves.

And a big task is going to be trying to -- not just repeat that, but help them take steps further. Whether that's minor league free agency, Major League free agency, trades, waivers, there's so many avenues in which to bring in talent to the organization. And our job in turn is to maximize and get the very best out of them.

Q. Can you talk about the two new assistant hitting coaches day and he is?

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: We' got Chris Hess from the Red Sox and Corbin Day from Minnesota. We're going through that process with them. They stood out for their own qualities.

Corbin is full of energy. He's a tireless worker. He spent time on the Major League staff with the Twins last year. Has a real solid background in game planning.

And then Chris coming over from the Red Sox, had spent a



... when all is said, we're done.®

couple of years ago in Double-A with a lot of their high-end prospects and had successful time with them, was going to be in Triple-A this year.

So with the amount of work that goes into a day now at the Major League level, giving Petey an extra hand there, having three hitting coaches we felt was going to be very important to do. So there's just so much work in a given day.

I think they're both incredibly open minded. They're going to help push the things that we feel are important and also be able to bring some outside perspective in ways in which to enhance our hitting group and help us score more runs.

Q. Are there some areas that you guys, coaches can help a team improve, maybe clean up, whether it's strikeout or walk or defense?

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: On the pitching side, big turnaround for me last year was as we got probably into probably the middle of May our walk rate dramatically dropped. Early on in the season it's not sustainable to have a 12 percent walk rate in the Major Leagues as a pitching staff.

We have arm talent. We had guys that really had great stuff but we needed to get it in the box more.

When we cut the walk rate down to 6, 7 percent and our defense cleaned up, in turn, we played probably as good a brand of baseball for a few months as we could have. And that's going to continue to be the recipe -- filling up the strike zone with high-quality stuff, and when you have a chance to put people away to be able to go get a punch-out.

Offensively we'll continue to hammer home the plate discipline, decision making, because that's a big part of where things start. We're facing high-quality stuff every single night. You have to be able to control the strike zone, and you guys have seen, we have a lot of players that have real ability to make contact. Now, it's just trying to optimize that contact a little more, get more out of that contact, while hopefully a year after getting a lot of Major League at-bats taking some of those throw-away at-bats and just tighten things up a little bit. We can create more run-scoring opportunities and use our athleticism on the bases is, for me, where we can continue to make strides on the offensive end.

Q. Regarding Derek Shomon were you expecting to see him get the opportunity he's gotten with the White Sox? And what kind active impact did he have with the Marlins?

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: Not surprise that Sho was someone would come after. He's a very talented hitting coach. He has a great way of building relationships with players. He understands data. He understands the new school/old school.

Very happy for Sho to get back home to Chicago. We knew that was going to be a big loss, but that's what happens when you have quality coaches and employees that people are going to come, and we feel like we were able to go out and find two that are going to come in pick up right where our group needs to be.

Q. How much work do we in Chicago have censoring quotes to be able to fit the print?

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: He'll be all right. He'll get it. He's colorful. He's got a great personality. You'll really enjoy Sho.

Q. Augustin and (indiscernible) working the academy, what do you see from him and expectation?

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: Our expectation for Gus is he comes in and Gus is going to be a catcher. Still believe in that. Saw Gus for a couple of days down in the Dominican. He was working hard.

And it wasn't just the work that he was doing. I think speaking with Gus and talking to him, how he was able to reflect on that season. It's hard to get a breath during the season. So I think Gus had a chance to self-reflect some on the year, take a breath.

One thing that he mentioned physically he felt okay, but mentally, it's quite the grind. And I asked him to hit in the top of the lineup almost every day. Having to go back there and catch, probably played more than he ever has.

Gus was saying all the right things. He was embracing and taking on this offseason different than he did the last season, which is fair. He has a different perspective on what's ahead and what's expected.

Gus knows the narrative. Gus is smart. He knows what's said and he's not backing away from it and we're right behind him because we believe in the person, number one, and believe in the ability that Gus has a real shot to catch the big leagues.

Q. What's the prospect you're most looking forward to seeing in the Spring Training and why?

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: The most exciting part is we



have a lot of very talented players in our system coming up. Much has been written about Joe Mack and should be. He's a young catcher at a premium position that I feel like eventually can impact on both sides of the ball.

I think the year that Josh White had last year in Triple-A from a performance standpoint was spectacular. So excited to get to see Josh more this year. And certainly Robby Snelling, Thomas White, with the type of seasons they have, their youth, the ceiling they have.

Pitching is always going to be what drives this thing. Excited to see them as well, as Kemp Alderman, Minor League Player of the Year. Kemp had a really big year. Our group in Petey loves him. The tenacity, the toughness, the edge he brings, which is something I value as well. Excited to see Kemp get a chance to come to camp and get comfortable around our group.

Q. A year ago you accurately predicted Cabrera as your breakout candidate. For '26, you touched about it on the radio --

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: I'm going to go today, right now, I mentioned Otto, but more breakout needs to be Ryan Weathers. For me, Ryan, it's the talent. Ryan, unfortunately, last year wasn't able to -- he just had an interrupted season with some injuries the last couple of years. But this guy is top-shelf stuff from the left side. He's incredibly motivated. Highly competitive. Excited for Ryan this year. And I'm predicting Ryan to have a big year.

Q. I guess a position player, would it be Otto and why?

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: This guy is maybe not a household name around the league, but he made the switch last year to shortstop. He's a terrific defender. He brings some value on the bases, and I just feel Otto, offensively, is just scratching the surface. He impacted the ball last year better than he had. He's never struck out a whole lot, and his walk rate improves some. I think there's still some plate discipline, things, when Otto continues to tighten those up, the overall offensive game will be risen, an above-average ball player at shortstop is hard to find.

Q. What about bounceback candidates, both pitching and position player?

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: Bounceback pitcher? I guess I'll say Sandy, only because the totality of the year. He can get into -- we've talked a lot about Sandy last year, how he finished was much more indicative, I think, of what '26 is going to look like for Sandy.

As he got further away from the procedure and he got himself into competition and we saw the version that everyone expected the whole season. So his perseverance shown, his toughness. I expect Sandy to pick up right where he left off last year.

Q. Position player?

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: Position player bounceback? We had just so many trying to bounce for the first time. I don't know if we'll see -- we might have to have a bounceback person in June if they have a first few couple of months.

Q. Norby maybe?

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: Norby, just the choppiness of his season and being hurt in Spring Training. And then coming back and getting hurt again. We haven't seen the Norby that we all know that he's capable of. Hopefully that's another one.

Hopefully he's healthy and able to go out there and hit like he always has and continue to get better defensively.

Q. What do you think now is playing time offseason but the strength of the ballclub?

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: Our strength our arm talent. If you look potentially at what we have on the mound from a rotation standpoint, the depth that's behind there as well as the number of players that last year in the bullpen that came and stepped up. And so I think we have a lot of arm talent that will go into our camp with, we'll leave Spring Training with.

And there will be some very solid options behind them through the course of the season. You need a lot of pitchers to get through the season. Our arm talent is something we can lean on and will continue to be the backbone of our season.

Q. The coaching staff, a lot of guys are in their second full season. (Indiscernible) sophomore slump. How can you guys help them avoid that as a coaching staff?

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: The league is going to continue to adjust. That's not going to stop. Stowers, the great season he had, there was a period he struggled, and now it's, okay, be able to step back and recognize what's happening and what do you need to go do?

I think we'll continue to be very open and transparent with our players where they are now this is -- think potential



roadblocks that are coming ahead, and the big thing for me will be us not getting too far ahead of what again -- last year, we didn't worry about the noise last year in Spring Training, and this year, while expectations may be different, that they're not going to matter.

We have a job to do each day. And so us as a group understanding what it takes for us to win and then knowing that the rough patches are going to come and it's our ability to bounce back, adapt, adjust that's going to be a separator in the type of season we have.

Q. How do you feel about the ABS, the ball/strike challenge?

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: In Spring Training, they rolled it out a little bit. From a pace of game play, it was great. I think it brought a different level of engagement at different points of the game. Giving the players an opportunity to have some say, impactful moments in the game, I'm excited to see how it plays out. And also say that the umpires who are back there, it's a very difficult thing, 300 pitches a night with the type of stuff they're seeing. They do an exceptional job.

Now Major League Baseball has done a good job recently enacting some things that have enhanced our fan experience. And this is another one that has a chance to go over well.

Q. Have you talked about strategy, how you use it, how do you challenge if it's a strike or ball, who in the order, what time of the game, what situation?

CLAYTON MCCULLOUGH: As a staff, we kick those things around. We had a sense, potential that it was coming. We haven't dug in with that with our players at this point. It's more something in Spring Training that we get into more from a tactical standpoint that we want to most leverage it.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports