

MLB Winter Meetings

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Detroit Tigers

Manager A.J. Hinch

Press Conference

Q. I wanted to hit you with, at the end of the year, after the tough loss we asked you about Riley, and the good -- the homers, the RBIs the production and strikeouts. What is this offseason, what's the next challenge for him to maybe bridge that gap between the good and the bad?

A.J. HINCH: So how do you have a three-peat of All-Star seasons? Like, he had one of the most remarkable seasons in Tiger history. Yet, there's always room for improvement.

He's very aware of the things that he is going to try to do and do better. That's easier said than done, than hey we need more contact, we want the at-bat quality. Of course everybody does. So I think with Riley, getting his body in a good place to be able to endure what we ask of him is always the number one priority.

The swing adjustments, the approach adjustments, the subtle little tweaks coming off a successful season soon follow.

We haven't had a full conversation about strikeouts or miss. It's very obvious he wants to take the next step to be an even more elite player. But he's spending the winter getting himself ready to play 150-plus games again as he did successfully last year.

Q. Concerned at all about the decline in his speed and defensive metrics?

A.J. HINCH: Yeah, I think again that's all part of getting himself in a position to play the outfield more. I think as rosters get configured and your team gets formed as it gets closer to spring, the DH at-bats, how much can I get him off his feet more, can I avoid some of the wear and tear that comes with the style of outfield that he plays?

We've caught a few little subtle things on his pre-pitch that has sort of negatively impacted defensive metrics that we're not concerned with, but at the same time can we get him in a better position to go both ways a little bit better.



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The speed work that he's doing this offseason will be key.

He doesn't have to be a burner, but we're trying to get him to be an efficient runner to be able to cover the ground that we know that he can.

Q. With Gleyber coming back with the qualifying offer can always go one way or another, were you surprised that he came back? And what does it mean to get him back for '26?

A.J. HINCH: I'm not surprised, he came back because he liked it here. Obviously, I get to stay away from contracts and things like that. He confided in me that he loved it in Detroit, he wanted to come back. And then the business side of the game takes care of itself.

So he texted me right away and told me what his intent was the morning of the Q.O. stuff. And I was thrilled. I mean, who doesn't want to add the quality at-bat, the presence, the on-base skills, the contact skills? He's thirsty to win. He played through incredible pain and did that for the group at a volatile time of our season and then into the offseason.

So Gleyber's impact for us exceeded his performance because he brought it every single day. This guy loves to post and play. And he loved his time in Detroit. His family loved it. It didn't surprise me.

Q. Speaking about the injury to Torres, do you expect a more competitive season since he won't be playing through pain anymore? How excited are you to see him fully healthy when the season starts?

A.J. HINCH: I think he's capable of a lot of things. I think the key is going to be health for him. He had a good season in its own right. I think the tale of the two seasons, pretty easy to identify -- when he got hurt and how much it was bothering him through the end of the year.

Obviously we believe in him and he's going to -- he's already asked me where he's going to hit in the lineup. He wants to hit second or third, obviously.

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But, to me, I think he's a healthy Gleyber Torres season is an exceptional one, given that he was partially healthy and had a great impact for us.

Q. For Jack coming back, too, same note, do you try to get more out of him this offseason or do anything different to try to get him back to maybe the 2024 version of him, or is it let Jack be Jack?

A.J. HINCH: I think both. We're not looking into the rearview mirror to try to capture some moment in time as much as we're trying to identify what he does well and enhance it.

And Jack's another example of players who want to be here. He had choices. He could have done whatever he wanted at the end of this contract, and he chose to come back. And that's meaningful for our group and our team.

On the baseball front, we're going to continue to chip away at the things that he does really well. Obviously getting his body moving, that helps his fastball. And incorporating his spin. He's going to work on the changeup still. And I saw him take the ball late in the season with the season on the line, with incredible guts.

So this offseason is going to be very productive. We're in touch with him. We're sending people to him. Getting him ready faster will be key for him to get off to a good start, but it's all hands on deck for he and all of our players to try to find a subtle way to put him in a better position in the spring.

Q. Kerry Carpenter, where is he at in his progression? Last year, 130 games career high. Played a lot more outfield than he has in the past. Got even some left-handed at-bats in the postseason and handled himself. Where is he in that progression toward less of a mix-and-match -- that's a bad thing to say with Kerry -- but less of a right-handed/left-handed?

A.J. HINCH: Not going to hit for him?

Q. Was not going there.

A.J. HINCH: Kerry is doing great. I do think he's also learning how to run the long race. He played through a few things that could have derailed part of his season, which has troubled him over the last few seasons, being able to stay active for the full season.

No fault of his, but just some unlucky turns around bases and colliding with walls and doing some baseball things. But he's taking incremental steps to be better. He loves

playing the outfield.

And most of the time, my decision between outfield and DH is centered around our options. Who is available? Whether Parker is healthy or not, when Wenceel was up. Is Vierling available or not? It's not a knock on Kerry's development as an outfielder at all. Then you keep saying to him, the better at-bats you have, the more at-bats you have, when it comes to these match-up things.

He did a really good job finding some cues, making some adjustments and getting a few more of those at-bats. I keep challenging him. He keeps responding, and I know that teams manage against him, which I say all the time. And that's going to continue. And we need him to continue to be hungry for those at-bats.

Q. You could end up having a fair amount of changeover in the bullpen depending how this offseason goes. How much can you use Spring Training to figure out how that different mix (indiscernible)?

A.J. HINCH: You know, every team is different. I know ours feels the same over the last couple of seasons because there's a lot of carry-over from year to year, which has been a strength. These guys had playoff runs. They won two playoff series and continue to advance.

I think in the spring, we are going to use the time to sort out what we have and what's the best way to use them.

It's a hard place in time to evaluate. So we will build the team over the course of the next couple months with some soft focus on what's best way to use the group. Then we'll sort it out during the spring a little bit. Like, are there competition for important innings? Of course. Are there competitions for at-bats? Of course.

But performance in the spring is a tough gauge in trying to make, you know, decisions like you're saying, but I don't even know the group we're going to have.

I know it's not the group we have right now. I think there's going to be additions. And it's going to come with some ebb and flow. Our guys are used to that too.

Q. For Anderson signing with you guys, coming over from Korea, four seasons in Asia. How much are you able to project what his stuff is going to look like, how it's going to play against big league hitters? How much is a wait-and-see?

A.J. HINCH: I don't think everybody knows the exact transition from any league. I don't think we've still figured

out Triple-A to the Big Leagues. We haven't figured out the overseas to the Big Leagues.

It's hard to even predict performance team to team within the league. But we're trying. Obviously what we're proud of and what we were attracted to with Drew was the adjustments. The kick (phonetic) change was real. The velocity was real. We got to know the human. He's a versatile arm that can do a lot of things. He built a foundation of innings, all positive for us as Tigers. We're going to capitalize on that.

And I think for a guy who we brought in as a minor league free agent, we disappointed him by sending him to Triple-A. He leaves and goes to overseas to pitch. He wanted to come back. And I think that's a great hat tip to Fet and Robin and the pitching group, as well as Drew knowing we're a place he can come and get better.

Q. I'm sure people stop and ask you about Skubal in that situation.

A.J. HINCH: Every day.

Q. What's your answer? How are you handling the noise around that?

A.J. HINCH: I think I have the easiest job in baseball when it comes to putting Tarik in the lead spot in the rotation.

I operate with that on my mind all the time. And I think for players -- I'm used to players having to navigate like different points in their career. Some of it is breaking in as rookies. Some of it is reaching the mid-level where they're starting to mix baseball and business with the arbitration process and then all the way to free agent years.

I've had players who have experienced that. So I guess it makes it easier for me to help Tarik. Just control the controllables, try to stay sort of out of the rumor mill and prepare to have the best season that you can. Rarely, do you get a chance to prepare a three-peat in the Cy Young. He's locked in on what he's doing at his home.

I'm locked in on looking forward to him pitching for us. If that changes, I'm going to get a call and we'll react accordingly. But I'm not focused on that. I know all that Scott has talked about and trying to stay out of the lobby here to have to go over the minute-by-minute curiosity on the best pitcher in baseball. And the reason that all of this is such a big topic is because we have the best pitcher in baseball. And I love that he's a Tiger.

Q. You mentioned being there for him in that regard. I think it was 2022 maybe around the trade deadline his

name first ever surfaced, maybe that shook him a little bit. How do you see him handling all of this going back then to now?

A.J. HINCH: I think he's been able to handle, not just the talk around him, but the growing expectation that's bestowed on him now. When he gives up a run, you know, we get questions about it. When he gives up multiple hits in a row, you know -- there's so much that comes with a pitcher of his magnitude. So much pressure of him, so much expectation, so much high standards.

And he thrives in that. And I've watched him be able to handle that by channelling all of that energy and that adrenaline into the performance, like into preparation. That's the thing that Tarik is best at, other than getting hitters out, is preparing to get hitters out.

And that hasn't changed since the day that I met him. What he does is change a little bit with how he's altered his program. But he's a beast because he's the best.

Q. Other managers have said they're not going to let their pitchers challenge the ball-strike thing. How do you tell the best pitcher in the planet he can't challenge? I don't know what your strategy is, but I'm curious.

A.J. HINCH: We haven't gone that far yet to say that they're not. I have some conversations to have on pitchers who definitely want to.

Tarik already had a little bit of a trial at this at the All-Star Game. I don't know if it's fortunately or unfortunately, but I think he got it right. That probably helps his case, but we've got to go over that by the time we get to spring. And ideally, we'd like to leave that up to the catcher. Not because I'm an ex-catcher, but because of the vantage point and the understanding of where that strike zone is, but I will have my work ahead of me with a few of our guys.

Q. Do you have any other early team-wide strategies you're thinking about when it comes to using it?

A.J. HINCH: I've spent some time talking to our P.D. group and even some of the players who have gone up and down. Right now we're locked in on measurements and making sure that we have everybody in camp at the time in which they're going to make those measurements get done. And we'll adapt accordingly.

I think, similar to the replay, the subtle little adjustments that everybody's had to make around some new rules. It will fall into a good rhythm and a good understanding of the -- I think the first month will probably be the hardest month.

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Maybe spring will help a little bit. But in the spring, you can try and fail and it's not that penal.

You do that in San Diego or Arizona or a home opener against St. Louis, and it's a little more costly. We'll have a running tab on who's good at it and who is not. Because there might be some position players who get their optionality taken away from the challenged call.

Q. As a former catcher, when all of this (indiscernible) was being discussed and you didn't know what the structure of it would be, for a while if they went to the full-blown system, there was a lot of concern that that would take away a chief tool of catchers. But this structure that they have, does it enhance?

A.J. HINCH: I'm glad they didn't go to the full automated strike zone for the art of catching, but also still having some human interaction behind the plate. I think that's some of my best memories as a player was that interaction with the umpire.

Now, the thing that we have to challenge ourselves with is, I think, as catchers is wanting that pitch so badly because you do a good job sticking it or you do a good job -- you can't steal it from the ABS, whereas it felt like for a while that was part of the art of catching was the ability to make it look like a strike. And sometimes you can make it look like a strike to yourself. And that will be an interesting conversation we have with Dillon and Jake and our catching group, to actually challenge not just the balls that you catch perfectly, but they have to actually be in the box.

Q. If I asked you to look around the game, people who might make a good manager one day, players or coaches, don't have to give me names, but what kind of qualities would you be looking for?

A.J. HINCH: It's interesting, this is an incredible offseason of guys getting hired into this position. It's a small fraternity. Some of my best memories and experience is here at the Winter Meetings is when you can find a little bonding time with some of the other managers, so I'll continue to do that.

The characteristics that always come through is relatability to the players, the ability to process information quickly, having sound decision processes is important. Surrounding yourself with an incredible staff who do the lion's share of the physical work with the players. And then ultimate communication skills.

And those communication skills are important to the player to get buy-in. It's also important in partnership with the office to be a leader in the organization.

So, some relationships I need to build across the new managers that were hired this year are some of them. But it's awesome to see our position grow and realize, especially, I came a different route many years ago. I like that there are more and more challenges ahead for the group.

Q. Speaking of that different route, Josh Byrnes hired you at Arizona, is now at Colorado. What should Colorado expect from him as an innovator and a thinker?

A.J. HINCH: He's incredible. He's one of the most impactful baseball people in the game. And for players, for executives, for coaches, for managers, he's as genuine as they come.

He's intellectually curious. He's a tireless worker. He's impacted my career in so many ways. But not just me, but across multiple organizations.

So, I think the creativity in Colorado will be immediately felt because of his impact and DePo's impact to sort of broaden the scope of baseball operations, all the way down to the academy in the minor leagues. There's nobody in that organization that doesn't get better when they spend time with Josh.

Q. How much do you know the Japanese free agency Murakami? Do you know anything about them?

A.J. HINCH: I know them mostly by name and a little bit of video and just the media and stuff that I follow to try to learn more about the players.

I have some former players who played in Japan that I've quizzed every now and then when a player comes over. But not entirely familiar. WBC helps, too.

Q. What are your thoughts on Kevin McGonigle winning the AFL MVP and how well he played in Double-A last year? Do you feel he could skip Triple-A and make the Opening Day roster?

A.J. HINCH: I think both he and Max Anderson had incredible fall leagues. We did pay attention. Joey Cora went down to see that group and FaceTimed me at a dinner that I didn't know that I was going to pay for at the end of the fall league. (Laughter). So I got a chance to treat him to dinner in Phoenix without even being there.

Kevin was there, max was there. I think Kevin, you know -- first off, he's a great prospect and a really emerging player. I look forward to seeing him.



Obviously, we've got a lot of decisions to make and everybody's curious to make decisions on what's possible for him. I think his development is super important. He's got to go step by step to make the impact that so many people are predicting that he can do.

We'll make those decisions in time. I don't think anything's been ruled out. I also don't think anything is necessarily in the works as we get closer to spring. But hoping to get him to camp and get him in games and get him playing with more expectations as he inches closer to his dream.

Q. With Max in mind, with his contact skills?

A.J. HINCH: Max Anderson?

Q. Yeah, something your club maybe lacked at times, does that sort of give him a leg up, like is he a good fit for the yard?

A.J. HINCH: I think Max Anderson's sort of immediate fit comes as that right-handed player who complements the left-handed side of our third base. And if Z-Mack ever plays second or Colt plays second -- Colt and Zack are obviously entrenched in our team -- but we've always had a right-handed complement if we chose to go that route.

We moved on from Andy Ibáñez. Max becomes a candidate at some point to fill that role as it stands today. Who knows if that's how it's going to be when we get to camp? But his contact skills, power and ability to play multiple positions, which will not surprise our beat, but those are all great attributes that Max is learning and growing with.

But, yeah, of course, his offensive profile has opened some eyes.

Q. This is not really specific to Max or Kevin, but the data shows the league's getting a little bit younger. Sometimes it feels like it's a lot younger, I think. We all know young players can struggle. Is there a reason beyond certain rule incentives that teams seem to be getting aggressive promoting guys to the Major Leagues?

A.J. HINCH: Yeah, we've seen that the development time gets shorter and the age, obviously, shrinks with that. I don't know if that is part of the -- the skill acquisition in the regular season and the offseason, the predictability of all the metrics make teams a little more comfortable to move guys pretty fast.

The thing that I pay attention to is not necessarily whether

they can hit 94 with 18 vert and 4 horizontal. It is rounding out the rest of the game. When the game speeds up when they get to the big leagues, the small intricacy parts of the game are what they struggle with. It's the pace. It's the consistency. It's the tempo.

It's never really getting a break at seeing vert and velocity day in and day out. Those things are huge when players are making their adjustment to the Major Leagues, and you can't get it anywhere else.

But as fast as we're promoting players across the industry, the baseballly things we need them to do well -- the base running, the positioning, the execution of fundamentals -- still matter in understanding all things that impact wins and not just hitting data, pitching data, pitch data. All super important. But to play in the big leagues, you've got to be a complete player.

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