

MLB Winter Meetings

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Washington Nationals

Manager Blake Butera

Press Conference



2025 BASEBALL WINTER MEETINGS ORLANDO

Coverage Presented By

CohnReznick 

Q. You've probably been doing these before, but your first time as manager. What has this experience been like for you?

BLAKE BUTERA: I think the biggest difference this year -- I've been to the last three or four, but the biggest difference is it's kind of a new group. So getting to know everybody in the organization and spending a lot of time in the team suite forming those relationships with the group and getting to know one another and kind of setting our tone for the season.

Q. Does it feel different to be a Big League manager than a Minor League manager?

BLAKE BUTERA: It does, 100 percent.

Q. What kind of interactions have you had that you didn't have in the past?

BLAKE BUTERA: I think first and foremost sitting up here in front of all of you is one different thing, not quite the same in the Minor Leagues.

More often than that, it's just talking about where this group's headed, what our team is going to look like, just different situations, different scenarios that are going to come up throughout the season, how we see X, Y, and Z. It's more of like game planning in December versus when you're a Minor League manager, it's like here's your club. Now just go play.

Q. What can you tell us about your coaching staff, what you like about the group, what stood out to you about those guys?

BLAKE BUTERA: I think, first and foremost, the most important thing for us as a group when you're building out a staff -- we understand that players come from all different walks of life and different backgrounds. We want to make sure we build a staff where each one of our players feel connected. With that, I know most of the staff has trended younger. That wasn't on purpose. We weren't trying to get

young staff.

Someone made a joke like did you tell Paul when you got hired that the staff has to be under 40 years old? I'm like, you might not believe me, but no.

(Laughter.)

No. We wanted to make sure the biggest thing is we bring in good people. And then on top of that, this is a young roster, and the common theme from a lot of the players is just, like, we have a long ways to go. We have a next year to get to. Yeah. We're in the Big Leagues, but we're also super young. We want to continue to develop and get better. We want a staff that's going to push us to grow. That's kind of the staff we tried to build out.

Q. Even if being young was not intentional, you are now at a point where it's like you have an abnormally young group of coaches. What about that dynamic excites you?

BLAKE BUTERA: I think just how up to speed they are with this day and age of baseball. You have to adapt. The game's moving faster than ever. The information that we have access to now is more than it's ever been. It's just going to continue to become more. It's not just having information. You want to bring in coaches that want to understand how to interpret the information and, two, understand when to deliver to players and what to deliver to players.

You can't just say here's everything. Here you go, MacKenzie. No, no. What do we want to talk about this and when's the right time for him to hear it? I think a lot of our staff have practice with that and experience with it and they're really good at.

Q. Who among these guys did you already have relationships with, and who is brand-new to you?

BLAKE BUTERA: From the staff?

Q. Yes.

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BLAKE BUTERA: I would only say probably three or four I knew beforehand personally. Obviously Michael Johns, coming over from the Rays. Victor Estévez worked together with myself five years ago with Escogido. I've played against a couple of them and watched a couple of them from afar. And reached out to Terry Francona for a long time on Simon and reached out to people across the game to get background information.

There's so many interviews when you're going through staff, and it's so hard to get to know people in an interview setting. I like to go off of people I know that have worked with them, players or coaches, and understand who they really are as people.

Q. I imagine you're trying to map out what your team might look like down the line but also some uncertainty MacKenzie, CJ, guys of that nature. How do you go about building out your vision is for the team and how the pieces all fit in?

BLAKE BUTERA: I didn't prepare for this to happen, but coming over from the Rays, it's what the Rays do every year. It feels like it's such a weird thing, I think to everyone when you talk about it, but it's like, man, this is every off-season with Tampa Bay. It's like is it Tyler Glasnow? Is it -- you name it. There's somebody that, hey, there's trade rumors.

It's not like we're looking to move people or get rid of people. MacKenzie, CJ, these guys are great players. We are always going to be open ears to what other teams want or what they're asking for. I think we'd be crazy or not doing our job if we're going to shut down out any time a team reaches out.

Credit Paul Toboni a ton. He reached out to MacKenzie, hey, this is happening. We can't stop teams from calling us. They are calling us. The information gets out there. People are aware of it. So we can just be very transparent and up front, hey, this is what's going on. If anything gets close, we'll let you know.

Q. With the trade for Harry Ford, how are you going to approach the competition for catcher role?

BLAKE BUTERA: You can never have enough catching. It's really hard to get talented young catching. We're excited with Harry. We're excited with the catching group we have coming in. That's who we planned to go into Spring Training with. We add Harry when Seattle reaches out. We have this unbelievable offer on the table. I think it was great for both sides. Jose is an incredible pitcher.

Seattle is getting somebody that they're going to use in high leverage situations this year and the next couple years. I think both teams are going to look back at this trade and say it really helped both sides.

On the catching situation in particular, we want all these guys to come into Spring Training and compete. I think you get the most out of players when there's a competitive environment, and that's what we're looking to create.

Q. I don't know if you've had the chance to reach out to Keibert Ruiz since the trade, but what would the message be to him?

BLAKE BUTERA: Just come in ready for Spring Training. We think the world of Keibert. He means the world to us. You're still a big part of these plans. Come into Spring Training, and let's see how it shakes out.

Q. How do you view the defensive alignment in the outfield? Particularly for Dylan Crews, is center field going to be a priority moving forward? How do you see that shaking out?

BLAKE BUTERA: When you look at the group, between Dylan, between Jacob, those are two pretty athletic guys that can play center field. Taking another thing from the Rays, you look at the center fielders they've had defensively and how much of a premium they put on that position, it's nice that we can have two guys that can play out there. Not just play out there, but play out there really well.

You bring in Daylen. You bring in James. Our bench coach MJ was with James at IMG the last couple days leading up to Winter Meetings, and they were working on outfield defense. MJ was like, man, James really wants to be a good outfielder. Somebody that young that has had the success he's had offensively with the amount of home runs, the fact they actually want to go work on their pre-pitch and their first step in the outfield in December is pretty cool to see.

So I think we have some options out there, not to mention Robert Hassell, who we have big expectations for as well.

Q. How did that meet-up with James at IMG transpire? Whose idea was that?

BLAKE BUTERA: As a staff, one thing we've talked about as a group is just reach out to all the players. Form relationships, start the ball rolling now. It's a lot, right? Our players getting calls from -- we have a 12-person staff right now. It's a lot of people. It also shows them how much we care about them, want to get to know them, want to get this



thing rolling rather than waiting until day one of Spring Training, here we go. Let's start that now.

It just so happened that MJ and James connected, and James is like -- MJ lives in Bradenton, and James was like, hey, I'm going to be at IMG this week. They're like, hey, let's meet up.

Q. What kind of conversations have you had in that vein with CJ Abrams being hard to get a hold of in the off-season. He's a guy in this space, having a lot of success but kind of hard to tap into. What's been the vision for you guys?

BLAKE BUTERA: CJ is great. We've connected over the phone. He's in Atlanta right now. He's working out at one facility and then hitting at Maven in Atlanta. He was like, hey, come down. Let's meet up. I want you to see where I'm hitting at.

I know their elite hitting guy at Maven. We have that connection. Andrew Aydt is going to see him at Maven from here. We already had a lot of conversation with CJ and he wants our help and direction. It's pretty fun.

Q. CJ has a lot of success in terms of his range defensively and a lot of plays but also some of the routine ones maybe gotten away. How do you improve what he can do defensively and turn some of those routine plays into doing it more often?

BLAKE BUTERA: It's a good question. I think we're going to see that happen with a lot of these guys. When you put a premium and make sure players understand how important defense is -- once again, going back to the Rays, where I think they care about defense more than any other team in baseball -- I think when players understand how important that is and they buy into it, that's when you get the better work ethic, you get the early work done, all these different things.

I know I've said this before, but Daylen -- Daylen wants to work on his defense in the off-season. No one wants to work on their defense in the off-season. They want to go to the indoor cage or go to the gym. No one is like I'm going to the outfield at my high school field in December and working on defense.

With CJ, it's a lot of the same things. Hey, defense is really important. You're young. If you want to play this game for a long time and play the game at shortstop -- with how good you are and how talented you are, you can make a lot of money and play this game for a really long time if you just stick at shortstop. Understanding the importance of that, that's the biggest thing.

Q. Are you viewing CJ as shortstop and Luis as the second baseman, or is there thought of shifting them to the right side of the infield, both of them?

BLAKE BUTERA: No, I think we're happy with CJ at short. To that point, we talk about everything. Everything's on the table in terms of our defensive positioning with all of our outfield, infield, the catchers, obviously the first base position, which we're all aware of is one spot we're focused on as well. Whatever we can do to get our best lineup together, our best nine hitters, we're going to make sure that happens.

As we build out our staff, you're going to see a lot of people that are defensive specialists we put together between MJ, between Smarslok, between Vic, between Corey Ray, all these guys, I think we're going to make big improvements on defense to where we can play guys in multiple positions.

Q. How are you planning to manage a pitching staff? It's obviously a very different job in the Majors compared to managing a Minor League pitching staff? What has been your process in kind of getting ready for that?

BLAKE BUTERA: Talking to Simon and Sean Doolittle and now Dustin Glant, we're going to have with us, we kind of running through each of pitchers to see, this is what they've done historically. This is what we see them doing. Having conversations with those guys about where they feel best, where they feel comfortable. Also prioritizing health. With how hard they're throwing, you're seeing more and more guys go down.

Trying to be more proactive in planning what their innings are going to look like and mapping out starter roles versus relievers versus back end, whatever it might be.

Q. I don't know how much you've seen up close with the challenge system in the Minor Leagues, whether it's from personal experience, but what are your anticipations for how that's going to work at the Major League level and how much are you looking forward to or dreading? What do you think about that?

BLAKE BUTERA: The ABS?

Q. Yes.

BLAKE BUTERA: I'm really excited about it. I've obviously seen it in Triple-A for a while. One thing it does is you always hear the chatter from the dugout getting on the umpires. It's like, hey, challenge it. Let's see what you got.



I think one thing that's really good about it is like the umpires in the Big Leagues are really good. They're really, really good.

It's a hard job, man. You have to lock in for that many pitches. And then you miss one, one's borderline, you're hearing it from the dugout. It's not an easy job. I think now the challenge system, what it's done is like, all right, you don't like it, challenge it.

Q. Do you sense having a philosophy about letting anybody challenge any time, not letting pitchers challenge, catchers? Is that conversations you're already having?

BLAKE BUTERA: Yeah. We'll talk about it as a group. I have some ideas about kind of what's worked in the Minor Leagues the last few years and what has definitely not worked. We'll make sure the players are aware of that.

Q. Is it an advantage at that level?

BLAKE BUTERA: I think so, but I think a lot of teams have somebody on their staff that's probably come up from the Minor Leagues that has some experience with it. I agree. I think having seen it and used it the last few years really helps.

Q. What definitely hasn't worked?

BLAKE BUTERA: There's a few things, but we'll keep those between us for now. I'm sure you'll see them.

Q. What does the successful 2026 season look like in your eyes?

BLAKE BUTERA: Yeah. That's a really good question. I've been asked this a lot. The more I think about it, hearing a group that is hungry to be developed a little bit more, creating a culture where these guys are out on the field early. You come out to Nationals Park and we have a 7:00 game, and you see guys out there at 2:30, 3:00 working on their game. The more the season goes on, the more you see of that, the more I feel like our culture is moving in the right direction.

If these guys continue to improve with how young they are right now, the snowball effect is just going to continue. We're building up the Minor League system as well with the people we've brought in to where, once we create the culture of the work ethic and everybody buying in and honestly everybody loving one another, it sounds like this group is tight already.

Just seeing these guys pull for each other, having each

other's backs, I think, when we get to the end of 2026, regardless of how many wins we have, if the early work is really good, these guys are developing their individual skills, I think that sets us up for 2027 being awesome.

Q. Do you sense in your conversations with these guys that they are motivated to do what you're talking about, the extra work, they feel like that's something that keeps happening?

BLAKE BUTERA: Sure. That's what excited me the most. Obviously I didn't get to talk to these guys until after I signed on for the job. But I told Paul right away, man, I was really excited about this. Every player I've called individually, they're like -- like, James Woods, I'm talking to him, and he's like, yeah, last year was horrible.

I'm like, James, there's a lot of guys that are 22 years old that would take that season in a heartbeat.

He's like, yeah, but the end of the year wasn't good.

I talked to Daylen Lile, I'm like, what are you working on? He's like, my defense is horrible. There's no reason that someone with my athleticism is not a good defender.

And Dylan Crews, the same thing. I talked to him, and he's like mad on the phone. Dylan, you've got time.

They're hungry. They're super motivated.

Q. As a new manager, what's going to be your balance between being I don't want you guys to be complacent, there's room for improvement, but it's okay to be proud of yourself?

BLAKE BUTERA: There's definitely a balance. It's tricky. You want to be somewhere in the middle. What I've noticed from this group is just like they'll need a little bit of a pat on the back, but they're not going to really want it that much. They're going to want to be pushed more than they want, hey, you're really, really good.

There will be a time for that, I promise you. Coaches have to do that, but it seems like a really hungry group.

Q. We were talking about the importance of technology in the Minor Leagues. For you all in the Major Leagues, how important is that for you? How do you imagine incorporating that and using that to help teach and help guide your player development?

BLAKE BUTERA: It's really important, especially coming -- our coaching staff is coming from different organizations where a lot of these players, especially with how young this

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group is, they've had access to that information coming up, whether it was in college, whether it was in the Minor Leagues, whether it was with their private instructors in the off-season.

So they're used to having the information. So it's like we need to have that. It's hard to pull that away from them after having used it. I see it being a pretty big part of our operation.

Q. In addition to James and CJ, who else is doing in-person visits with the new coaching staff?

BLAKE BUTERA: I've met with MacKenzie. I grabbed lunch with MacKenzie last week. Andrew's meeting up with Jacob Young. There's probably like 15 to 20 guys. There's a lot of them.

Q. This is like a consistent thing that you're doing across the team?

BLAKE BUTERA: Yeah. Especially with our coaches that live in different parts of the U.S., Victor Estévez met up with Luis Garcia in the Dominican. Victor is a manager in winter ball right now and Luis was playing against him. They met up on an off-day. He saw Luis play the other night and texted me the report from the game. I'm like, you can focus on managing your team. I'm ready to work. Let's go.

Q. I'm curious how it's been -- Craig Albernaz and you are close and you're both now first time managers. What is it like navigating it together to whatever extent you're able to?

BLAKE BUTERA: Yeah, it's been fun. I think Alby is one -- the best part about Alby, you know where you stand. Anything I ask him, he'll tell me. He'll shoot me straight.

We've talked about this for a long time. I think we talked about being on a staff together. But to be honest -- don't tell him this -- but going against him is going to be a lot more fun. We've already joked about the Orioles and Nationals playing against each other. He's like should we get a house somewhere in between? What do you think? I'm like, no, man, you do your thing.

Joking aside, he's been awesome. We've bounced off different ideas against each other. There's a handful of managers out there that have been super helpful. Even Rob Thomson just now, anything I can do, let me know. Well, quit signing all these players or just get out of our division. How about that?

Q. Question about in-game decisions. To what extent

do you see yourself maybe deviating from what data, probability, and analytics will do with a pitching change or whatever?

BLAKE BUTERA: Yeah. The information is so good right now, but a big part of making sure as we build out our R&D and analytics department is that we feel really good how the information is coming together and then trusting those decisions and that information.

Coming from the Rays again, Cashy does a tremendous job of that. That's something that he and I have talked about for a long time. A lot of it is making sure that your staff understands how this information is coming together and why we're going to behave a certain way. Then also there's a gut instinct to it as well for sure.

Q. Coming back to Dylan Crews really quick, it's kind of been an uneven start to his Big League career. What type of player do you think he can be, and what do you think he needs to do to get to that point?

BLAKE BUTERA: I think the world of Dylan. I'm so excited to get him in here. What we saw last year was not the Dylan Crews we know. He's such an explosive player, and he's had success his entire life. I think a big part of why we see a lot of players scuffle when they go from Triple-A to the Big Leagues, one, it's the biggest gap in all of sports in my opinion going from Triple-A to the Big Leagues. The skill level, the difference there is huge.

When Dylan understands like he can still be Dylan Crews in the Big Leagues and be himself and have confidence, hey, I belong here -- I don't just belong here. I'm an All-Star caliber player and believes in himself to do so -- we're going to support him with that, surround him with that and make sure he feels that way. A lot of it is to be confident and believe in who he is. He doesn't need to change anything just because it's the Major Leagues now.

I think for some players, it's easier for me to say than to do right now because there's a lot of pressure out there. We think the world of Dylan, and I think he's just going to take off.

Q. That same thing applies to you, right?

BLAKE BUTERA: What is that?

Q. Having been in the Minor Leagues your whole life and now be yourself in the Big Leagues and not try to be something different.

BLAKE BUTERA: That's kind of the advice I've gotten from Tito or Cashy or Alby, whoever it might be, don't



change who you are. Be who you are. There's a reason why you're in this role. There's a reason why you have the relationships you have with staff members and others throughout the industry. Just continue to be who you are. I'm telling Dylan this, and sometimes I need to tell myself the same thing.

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