

Extra Bases

By Tyler Kepner

Last week the Blue Jays called up Vladimir Guerrero Jr. By delaying his debut in the major leagues, Toronto guaranteed that Guerrero will not become a free agent until after the 2025 season. MIKE HELLIG/USA TODAY SPORTS, VIA GETTY IMAGES

The Next Big Thing Is Finally Here

You think a team should call up a rookie when he's ready? Sometimes, the decision is not that easy.

The Toronto Blue Jays announced on Wednesday that they were finally promoting Vladimir Guerrero Jr. to the majors. It was the same day, the San Diego Padres' Chris Paddock threw seven shutout innings in a victory, and the Mets held first place in the NL East. It's a pretty good time to call to your slugging first baseman, Pete Alonso.

"He's a born leader," Mets Manager Mickey Callaway said. "He was made for this." Alonso is a rookie who had never appeared in the majors before this season. So is Paddock, a 25-year-old right-hander, and Paddock is a former prospect who was with the Blue Jays in 2015. He is 20. Alonso, 24, had eight home runs entering Saturday's game, with a 1,046 on-base plus slugging percentage. Paddock had a 1.07 earned-run average. Paddock's last start was hitting 286 with six home runs.

Guerrero, 20, might be better than all of them. He has more walks than strikeouts with 20 minor-league career homers, 381 hits and 101 RBIs. He's in the Hall of Fame. But the Blue Jays did not promote Guerrero last season, and had no plans to put him in the majors this season. He had never, even before he was strained his oblique muscle in spring training.

By delaying his promotion to the majors, the Blue Jays ensured that Guerrero would not become a free agent until after the 2025 season, at the earliest. This tactic has been widely used by teams in the past. The Blue Jays, with Kris Bryant in 2015, and a few others, to understand the strategy of sacrificing a few weeks of one season for an extra year of control over a potential superstar.

Guerrero is a young player who is expected to be happy with their chance. Both teams hope to contend and have starred well, and they will be grateful in September for the games they'll play in April. "I just don't know what it's going to come down to," Alonso said. "This division's cutthroat. Anything can happen, and you can't ever tell. It's a tough division." The Philadelphia Phillies infielder Scott Kingery, one of baseball's top prospects before last season, made the team out of spring training last March, after signing a contract with the Phillies. "I've seen a lot of recent trend of players signing long-term deals before reaching free agency long-term motivate teams to promote their best players without considering service time. I think that's a good thing. If you're going to sign them to a contract anyways, we might as well get 'em up here to help the team," Kingery, 24, said, adding that he's never seen a player sign a long-term contract. "I think it should be that every team is trying to win as many games as possible, and to do that, you want to have your best players."

That was Brodie Van Wagner's theory when he left a lucrative job as a player

agent to become the Mets' general manager last fall. We've seen a similar career of advocating for players, and sought assurances from the Wilpons, the team's owners, that they would not hold out for the best offer.

"I took the job with a pretty significant risk of my own professional stature, and the communication I had with the ownership group on the front end was, 'I'm interested in this job, but I'm not interested in an extended 18-month contract. I want to win, we've got to put the best 25 guys on the field when they prove to us they're the 25 best guys,'" Van Wagner said. "I don't want to be a player who's privately disappointed throughout the off-season, and I met Pete, spent time with Pete, outlined the opportunity for Pete and gave him a platform to seize that."

Guerrero, who was called up last September despite having 38 home runs in the minors, took advantage of his chance by hitting .352 in spring training. He has been indispensable ever since, but he's still a young player. "I think the Blue Jays were right to call up Guerrero," Van Wagner pointed out that many top young players, including the Mets' Michael Conforto and Brandon Nimmo, needed a return to the minors after their initial professional seasons.

"Sometimes, we as an industry overvalue the potential for extra years of service over the performance of the player," Van Wagner said. "It's really important to get the most out of a player. I think the Blue Jays had a bad front end, that ultimately will determine when a guy gets to free agency."

Guerrero and Alonso—or another star rookie—does stay in the majors every day for six consecutive years? Van Wagner said he would welcome that problem.

"That's a good thing for us," he said. "Had we not done that, we would have a lot of players going back to write, then that's on me."

The Royals Are Still Running

The Kansas City Royals had their two fastest runners on the corners in the second inning against Tampa Bay on Wednesday. The lead runners were Jacob deGrom and Terrance Gore at third, the Royals' Blake Snell made a pickoff throw to first as Hamilton took off for second. Gore then streaked for home, and the Rays threw Snell out at first. Hamilton had rounded second by then. Hamilton had rounded second by then and the Rays caught him, too, for an unusual double play.

The rebuilding Royals are in last place in the American League Central. They won that game and increased their road to 28 stolen bases, the most in the majors entering Saturday's games. Their speedsters have the freedom to run, which is a risk-averse.

"I'm just glad to be on a team that allows us to run and gives us opportunities to show our ability," said Gore, who had hit .279 with 32 stolen bases through Friday. "That was pretty much what they told us: 'We want to play defense, we want to play the game right, we want to put our bases hurt—but we want to run and the legs, literally, in stolen bases.'"

The Royals, who play home games at spacious Kauffman Stadium, led the majors in stolen bases with 128. They were A.L. persistent and finished fifth in steals the next season, when they won the World Series.

The Royals also relied on power hitters, especially in the postseason. The team's approach on the bases has not caught on. The 2018 and 2019 seasons have featured 118 bases on balls in a game (0.31) in the majors since 1973.

"I know we like it, that's all that really matters," Manager Ned Yost said. "It's a lot funner than sitting back waiting for a leadoff hitter to get on base. We like that action, we like to get on base, we like to create havoc on the baselines. We like to play with the boundaries when we're playing." The Royals' Whit Merrifield led the majors in steals last season with 45, the lowest major-league-leading total since 1968. He also led the majors in stolen bases last season, with 19. "They can outrun the Hamilton or Gore." — They can outrun the Hamilton or Gore. — He reaches base more often, studies pitchers' moves and takes advantage.

"Sometimes, we're going to get thrown out, we know that," Merrifield said. "It's not going to keep us from running. We're going to keep running." Merrifield also led the majors last season in another of baseball's bedrock counting statistics: hits, with 192. His franchise-best 31-game hitting streak in 2018 was the longest in the majors since he broke a record that George Brett held.

"That was the part of my game in high school and early on in college," said Merrifield. "I was a power hitter, I was a speedster in the clubhouse run in the 2010 College World Series. That's how I played, that's how I got in the lineup: I at least tried once a game to beat for a hit. I was a power hitter, I was a speedster on the field, and also would get around that I could hunt, third baseman became better, and there was less opportunity to do it. It's the fact that my hitting hit came on a day when I was kind of full circle, so it was cool."

Wisdom in a Rut

Cody Allen has earned more than 150 saves and \$30 million playing baseball. He has pitched in the postseason four times in his career, and he has never started a game in the 2016 World Series.

But Allen is struggling now for the Los Angeles Angels, allowing runs in four consecutive games in a recent stretch and struggling to get the job done lately. When asked about it on Wednesday by reporters covering the team, Allen gave a timeless comment that should resonate with almost anyone who has played baseball.

"If you've ever felt your knees buckle on a curveball, or had your pride wounded by a barrage of line drives off your pitcher, you know how it feels." — "This game is humbling," he said. "It's either hard or really hard."

Pete Alonso (20) returning to the Mets' dugout after hitting a home run in St. Louis on April 21. "He was made for this," said the team's manager, Mickey Callaway.



ALONSO: GREGG DEGUIRE/USA TODAY SPORTS, VIA GETTY IMAGES