

2023



SEASON PREVIEW

NEW FACES,  
NEW PLACES

## JACOB deGROM, RHP

The most dominant pitcher in baseball, Jacob deGrom left the New York Mets to become the jewel of the newly revamped Texas Rangers rotation. The 34-year-old has battled injuries in recent years, but when he's on there's no one better. Since 2021 deGrom has posted preposterous numbers, including a 1.08 ERA with 146 strikeouts against just 11 walks over 92 innings.

## JUSTIN VERLANDER, RHP

Normally losing a pitcher of deGrom's caliber would be

  
devastating for a team's pitching staff, but the New York Mets immediately turned around and replaced one Cy Young Award winner

with another. Verlander is enjoying a spectacular late-career run, and last season he won his third Cy Young Award at age 39 only a year removed from Tommy John surgery while helping lead the Houston Astros to a World Series championship.

## XANDER BOGAERTS, SS

The Red Sox all-time leader in games played at shortstop,

  
Xander Bogaerts received a "God-father" offer from the San Diego Padres that no sane person could have refused. Now in possession of an 11-year, \$280 million contract, the four-time All-Star becomes the latest superstar to join a Padres team that's all-in on chasing the first World Series championship in franchise history.

## TREA TURNER, SS

One of the most athletic and exciting young players in baseball, Trea Turner helped lead the Los Angeles Dodgers to a 111-win season last season but

  
is now locked up as the Philadelphia Phillies shortstop of the future. Turner signed for 11 years, \$300 million during the Winter Meetings, and the Phillies hope he can be one of the last pieces needed to get over the hump after falling two wins short of a championship last fall.

## DANSBY SWANSON, SS

The rebuilding Chicago Cubs made a major statement by

  
signing Dansby Swanson, a former No. 1 overall pick who already has an All-Star nod, a Gold Glove and a World Series championship to his name during

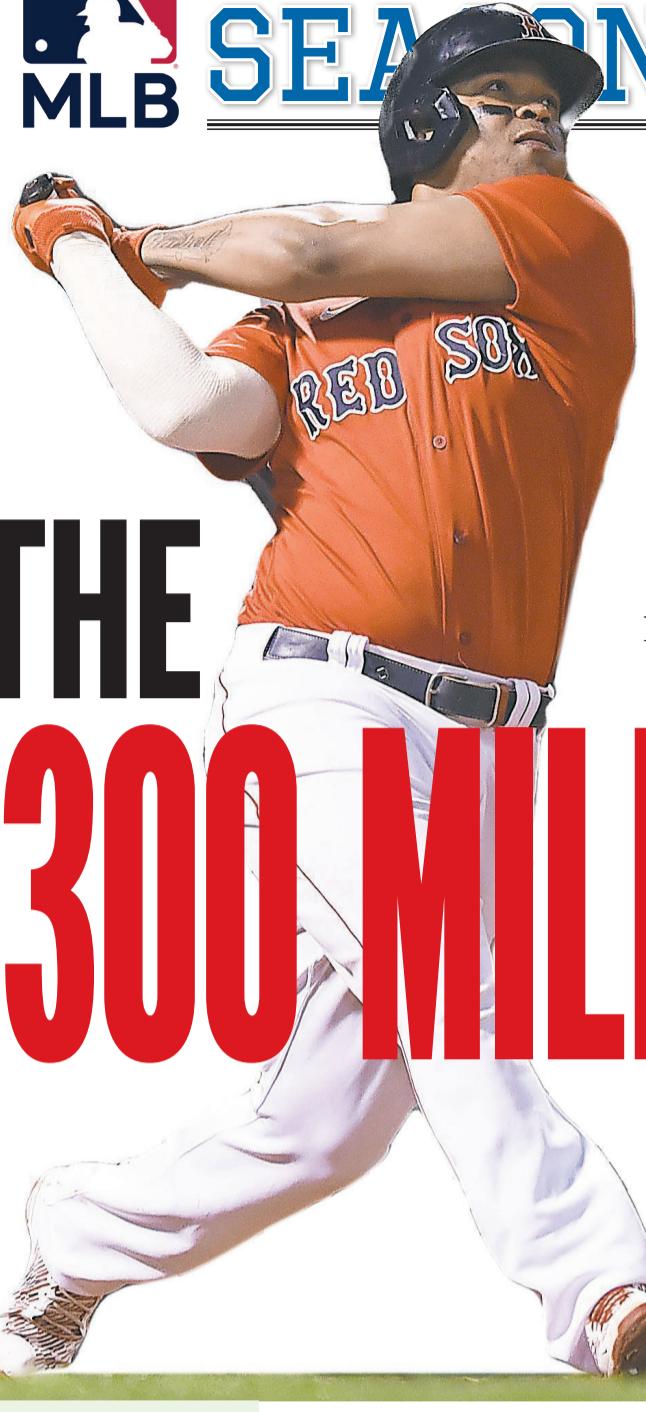
his time in Atlanta. Though Chicago is probably still at least a year away from contention, Swanson figures to be a foundational piece who the Cubs can build around for the next seven years.

## CARLOS RODON, RHP

Yankees fans might need to wait a little while to see their

  
big offseason addition take the hill, as Rodon is expected to start the year on the injured list with a left forearm muscle strain, but once he's back he'll be a huge addition to a New York rotation that already featured ace Gerrit Cole. Rodon signed a six-year, \$162 million deal after posting a 2.88 ERA in 31 starts with the San Francisco Giants last season.

— Mac Cerullo, CNHI Sports Boston

THE  
\$300 MILLION  
MEN

Amid a league-wide spending spree, MLB stars are more valuable than ever

## Major rule changes

This season MLB is introducing radical new rule changes designed to improve the game's pace of play. Here is what fans can expect when they head to the park in 2023.



All eyes will be on the new pitch clock in 2023.

**Pitch clock:** Pitchers have up to 15 seconds to begin their motion when the bases are empty and up to 20 seconds when there is at least one runner on base. If they take too long they'll be charged with an automatic ball. Pitchers may also disengage the rubber twice per plate appearance, and a third will result in a balk unless an out is recorded on a runner. The disengagement count will reset if a runner advances. Batters must also be in the batter's box and alert to the pitcher with at least eight seconds left on the clock, and batters will also get one timeout per plate appearances. Those who take too long to get back into the box will be charged with an automatic strike.

**Ban on defensive shifts:** Two infielders must be positioned on each side of second base when a pitch is released. All four must have both feet in the infield dirt when the pitcher is on the rubber, and infielders won't be allowed to switch sides unless there is a substitution.



The new, bigger base, left, is replacing the traditional smaller base, right.

**Larger bases:** MLB has increased the size of first, second and third base from a 15-inch square to an 18-inch square. The new bases are roughly the size of a pizza box and the larger bases are intended to reduce the likelihood of collisions between runners and fielders on the base paths.

BY MAC CERULLO  
CNHI SPORTS BOSTON

Rafael Devers recently signed a 10-year, \$313.5 million extension with the Red Sox. He is one of five players to ink a deal worth more than \$275 million in the offseason.

**A** generation ago Alex Rodriguez stunned the sports world when he landed an unprecedented 10-year, \$252 million deal with the Texas Rangers, nearly double the previous record-holder for largest deal in MLB history.

Now, an offer like that to one of MLB's top stars might get you laughed out of the conference room.

The trend began in 2019 when Manny Machado became the first free agent in MLB history to reach the \$300 million threshold. His 10-year, \$300 million deal was almost immediately eclipsed when Bryce Harper inked a 13-year, \$330 million contract with the Philadelphia Phillies later that offseason, and things have just kept accelerating from there.

As it stands today 13 of the 15 largest contracts in MLB history were signed over the past four years. Before 2019 only two players had ever reached the \$275 million threshold, Alex Rodriguez in 2007 (10 years, \$275 million) and Giancarlo Stanton in 2015 (13 years, \$325 million). This past offseason alone five players hit that mark, including Manny Machado for the second time when he inked an 11-year, \$350 million extension ahead of next year's potential opt out.

Now with two-way sensation Shohei Ohtani approaching free agency and superstar Juan Soto looming not long afterward, it's not crazy to imagine \$500 million could soon be in play.

How did this happen?

Last year's new 5-year labor deal included an expanded postseason and allows clubs to sell advertisements on uniforms, both of which will significantly boost revenue. MLB also recently finalized numerous lucrative national broadcast deals, including streaming agreements with AppleTV+ and NBC's Peacock service, and entering last season Forbes estimated that the average club was worth over \$2 billion.

The expanded postseason also means more clubs have a shot at winning the World Series. The Phillies, for example, have significantly raised payroll over the past few years and nearly saw their investment pay off last fall when they snuck into the playoffs as the third Wild Card and subsequently came within two wins of a championship.

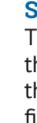
The N.Y. Mets have also pushed

their spending to new heights, with owner Steve Cohen running up an extraordinary \$350 million payroll trying to bring the club's first title since 1986.

Despite having one of MLB's smallest markets, the San Diego Padres have done the same thing, and they've become so popular that they've gone from a receiving club in MLB's revenue sharing program to a paying club. In the process they've made a mockery of other small market clubs who pocket every dollar that comes in and invest the bare minimum in their rosters.

THE TOP  
CONTENDERS

MLB'S BEST TEAMS  
AND HOW THEY  
CAN WIN IT ALL



The Padres finally got over the hump last fall, beating the Dodgers in the NLDS after finishing 22 games behind their rivals in the NL West, and now look primed to push for the first World Series title in franchise history. San Diego has assembled one of the most talented (and expensive) rosters in baseball, adding Xander Bogaerts to a club that already featured Manny Machado, Juan Soto and which is about to get Fernando Tatis Jr. back after a year lost to injury and suspension. The Padres pitching staff is loaded too, so it will be fascinating to see if the club's big bet pays off.

## NEW YORK METS

  
The Mets suffered a brutal blow recently when All-Star closer Edwin Diaz went down with a season-ending knee injury during a post-game celebration in the World Baseball Classic, but Steve Cohen's club should be talented enough to contend anyway. New York boasts the highest payroll in MLB history at approximately \$350 million and added three-time Cy Young winner Justin Verlander and Japanese superstar Kodai Senga to a rotation that returns future Hall of Famer Max Scherzer. The Mets also bring back outfields Brandon Nimmo, slugger Pete Alonso and shortstop Francisco Lindor, and if Diaz's injury becomes an issue by midseason there's no doubt the Mets will trade for another closer to help bring back the club's first title since 1986.

LOS ANGELES  
DODGERS

  
The Dodgers are coming off a quiet offseason by their standards and are expected to take a step back, but considering how dominant they've been in recent years even a "lesser" Dodgers team could easily be a top championship contender. This year's club swapped J.D. Martinez in for Justin Turner and made some notable bullpen acquisitions, but the Dodgers also lost shortstop Trea Turner in free agency and then saw his replacement Gavin Lux go down for the season with a torn ACL. Even still, Los Angeles still has Freddie Freeman, Mookie Betts and a rotation led by Clayton Kershaw and Julio Urias, so the Dodgers aren't going anywhere.

## NEW YORK YANKEES

  
After questions loomed around his future in the Bronx all last year, Aaron Judge is back and should spend the rest of his career as a New York Yankee. The reigning AL MVP is coming off a historic season and returns to anchor one of baseball's strongest lineups, and the Yankees also made a splash by signing lefty Carlos Rodon, one of the top starting pitchers on the market. Rodon will start the season on the injured list with a strained forearm but should soon join ace Gerrit Cole to form one of the top 1-2 punches in the game.

## HOUSTON ASTROS

  
The defending World Series champions are coming off a dominant season and have reloaded by adding slugger Jose Abreu to a lineup that still features Jose Altuve, Alex Bregman, Yordan Alvarez, Kyle Tucker and second-year sensation Jeremy Peña. The Astros did lose ace Justin Verlander in free agency but return starters Framber Valdez, Cristian Javier and Lance McCullers Jr. along with the bulk of a bullpen that put together the strongest October in MLB history last fall. The Astros aren't going anywhere.

ATLANTA  
BRAVES

  
Two years removed from a World Series championship, the Braves have locked up their entire young core through the rest of the decade and should be perennial championship favorites for years to come. Top prospect Dansby Swanson at shortstop and the club also brought in catcher Sean Murphy to complement a group that still includes, among others, outfielder Ronald Acuña Jr., infielders Matt Olson, Austin Riley and Ozzie Albies, starters Max Fried and Kyle Wright, and top NL Rookie of the Year placers Michael Harris II and Spencer Strider.

— Mac Cerullo, CNHI Sports Boston