

MLB

Mariners head to spring stuck in awkward middle ground

By **TIM BOOTH**
AP Sports Writer

SEATTLE — As general manager Jerry Dipoto accurately explained, the Seattle Mariners are a team stuck in the middle.

They're not in the position of rebuilding. They have enough talent and enough veterans — with big contracts — to be competitive. But they're not among the elite of the American League, including the Houston Astros in their own division.

So as the Mariners head to spring training next week, they'll do so in a very awkward position. Their everyday lineup is already established. Their pitching — led by lefty James Paxton — could be strong if key players perform up to expectations. Seattle very well could be in contention for a playoff spot in the American League and possibly end the longest playoff drought in baseball.

But no one believes Seattle is in position to compete with the superpowers of the league.

“What gets me in an urgent position every day is understanding where our roster is, how to build this group into a playoff scenario, and let them do what they do,” Dipoto said.

Here's what else to watch as the Mariners begin spring training in Peoria, Arizona:

NEW LOOK: The two biggest offseason additions for Seattle were trades to acquire Dee Gordon from Miami and Ryon Healy from Oakland. Each move comes with uncertainty because both players are being asked to make positional changes. Gordon is moving from second base to center field, while Healy will be the full-time first baseman after spending the majority of his career at third base. Gordon will be slotted into the leadoff role, dropping Jean Segura to second in the batting order, but should help lengthen Seattle's lineup. The one big move made in free agency was getting right-handed reliever Juan Nicasio to help in the bullpen. Nicasio could



AP Photo/Orlin Wagner, File

The backend of Seattle's starting rotation is the biggest question entering spring training. The Mariners are set at the top with James Paxton and Mike Leake.

end up being the crucial eighth inning bridge for Seattle.

ROOKIES TO WATCH: Because of how established Seattle is at most positions there won't be a whole lot of new faces likely making the squad out of spring training. The bullpen is the one area where some young arms could flash, perhaps

none more than Max Povse. The tall right-hander was forced into making his debut last year as part of Seattle's rotating door of pitchers. But it was a difficult position for Povse and he struggled in his limited time. His ability to earn a spot in the bullpen out of spring training could be big for Seattle's plans.

THEY'RE SET: From a position player standpoint, the Mariners are set. Healy will get every chance to be the starting first baseman. Gordon will anchor the outfield with Ben Gamel and Mitch Haniger flanking him on the corners. Even the backups are set with Andrew Romine and Guillermo Heredia as reserves that will likely see plenty of playing time. Injuries would seem to be the only way Seattle's everyday lineup gets disturbed entering spring.

THEY'RE NOT: The backend of Seattle's starting rotation is the biggest question entering spring training. The Mariners are set at the top with James Paxton and Mike Leake. They are hopeful Felix Hernandez can stay healthy and be far more effective than he was last season. It's the final two or three spots that need to be solved and while the Mariners have arms to choose from, each is filled with questions. Lefty Marco Gonzales is out of options and will be given every opportunity to make the club out

of spring. Erasmo Ramirez pitched well after being acquired from Tampa Bay last summer. Ariel Miranda was Seattle's best pitcher at times last season, but faded late. Andrew Moore was another that showed flashes but was not good when he struggled.

Finding consistency for those final couple of spots will be critical to help a bullpen that's been overused the past two seasons.

ON DECK: Keep an eye on third baseman Kyle Seager during spring training. He's a notorious slow starter, but last year he never completely overcame his sluggish beginning and his .249 batting average was the lowest of his career. Seattle can't afford a staple in the middle of its batting order to have another awful start. Hernandez will also see his work ramped up during the spring. Rather than a slow approach as the past, Hernandez will see regular work from the beginning of spring training in the hopes he can carry a full load in his first start.

In this 2014 file photo, Tropicana Field is viewed before a baseball game between the Chicago White Sox and the Tampa Bay Rays in St. Petersburg, Fla.

AP Photo/Reinhold Matay, File



Rays owner wants new ballpark

Scouting locations across bay in Tampa

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Tampa Bay Rays owner Stuart Sternberg wants to make a historic neighborhood in Tampa the next home of the perennially low-drawing team, which wants to shift across the bay from St.

Petersburg.

Sternberg said at a news conference Friday the Rays will focus their new ballpark search on the east side of the bay at a 14-acre site in Ybor City, just north of Ybor Channel.

It's the first time the team has publicly stated its preference for Tampa over St. Petersburg, its home since the franchise started play in 1998.

Sternberg and baseball

Commissioner Rob Manfred say Tropicana Field, the last fixed dome stadium in the major leagues, is inadequate. Tampa Bay drew a major league-low 1.25 million fans last year, including the team's smallest crowd ever at the ballpark on the west side of the bay, 6,509 against Minnesota on Sept. 5.

The timeline of such a project is unclear. A new ballpark likely will cost more than \$700 million.

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