

U.S. baseball's prospects struggle to reach Olympics

By RONALD BLUM
AP Baseball Writer

Brandon Dickson, the U.S. closer who blew a ninth-inning lead, threw his last major league pitch in 2012. Caleb Thielbar, who gave up the game-winning hit in the 10th, threw his last big league pitch in 2015.

The entire 28-man American roster at the Olympic qualifying tournament that ended Sunday combined for a career 2.1 Wins Above Replacement, according to Baseball Reference — less than a quarter of Cody Bellinger's 9.0 WAR for the Los Angeles Dodgers this year alone.

Little wonder the U.S. failed to earn an Olympic berth at the Premier12 competition, where champion Japan and runner-up South Korea brought many top players.

Mexico qualified for the first time, rallying twice for a 3-2 victory over the U.S. in the bronze-medal game that determined an Americas berth. The U.S. will have two more chances to join host Japan, Mexico, South Korea and Italy in the six-nation Olympic field: an Americas tournament in Arizona starting March 22 and, if it flops again, a final tournament that includes multiple regions in Taiwan from April 1-5.

"We cannot make major league players available for the actual tournament in August," Major League Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred wrote in an email to The Associated Press. "In fairness to the other



AP Photo/Jeffrey Phelps, File

This Sept. 1, 2011, file photo shows St. Louis Cardinals pitcher Brandon Dickson throwing during the first inning of a baseball game against the Milwaukee Brewers in Milwaukee.

qualifiers and to protect the integrity of the competition, it seemed best to try and qualify with the level of players that will be available in August."

Just six U.S. players at the Pre-

mier12 had major league experience, none of them All-Stars: 39-year-old catcher Erik Kratz along with five pitchers: Dickson, Thielbar, Clayton Richard, Brian Flynn and Brooks Pounders.

While many players on the roster were high draft picks, just three first-rounders were among the 13 position players: Los Angeles Angels outfielder Jo Adell, Philadelphia third baseman Alec Bohm

and Chicago White Sox first baseman Andrew Vaughn. And the only first-rounder on the pitching staff was Boston right-hander Tanner Houck. Just two players on the roster are among MLB.com's top 100 prospects, Adell at No. 5 and Atlanta outfielder Drew Waters at No. 23.

American pitchers at the tournament had pitch limits — no starter threw more than five innings.

"I think that's just expected for good prospects pitching in November," said U.S. team general manager Eric Campbell, a veteran of three seasons with the New York Mets. "I think that's the expectation then it will be in March, as well."

MLB was a proponent of restoring baseball to the Olympics, believing it will spread the sport around the world

"Baseball is an international sport," Philadelphia Phillies general manager Matt Klentak said. "As it becomes even more international, the presence of the United States in international tournaments is really important."

Baseball was a medal event from 1992-2008. When the IOC voted in 2007 to drop the sport after the Beijing Games, British IOC member Craig Reedie cited "the lack of the MLB players." The sport was restored three years ago for 2020 at the request of the Tokyo Organizing Committee, but in February the organizers of the 2024 Paris Games said they were recommending to the IOC that baseball again be dropped.

Seahawks think they've found a role for Shaquem Griffin

By TIM BOOTH
Associated Press

RENTON, Wash. — Shaquem Griffin had not played a defensive snap since Week 16 of last season.

He seemed locked into just being a special teams player for the Seattle Seahawks, despite assurances from Pete Carroll and others that they were trying to find the best way for Griffin to contribute on defense.

Suddenly, Griffin was out there on defense when Seattle beat San Francisco two weeks ago. It was for more than one play — 13 live snaps not counting one play that was a penalty — and Griffin was lining up as a rush defensive end, despite

being vastly undersized. It was a nod to Griffin's college days at UCF when he was one of the most disruptive players in the country when he was rushing the quarterback.

After nearly 1 1/2 seasons of trying to figure out how Griffin could best fit into the Seahawks' defensive scheme, they may have stumbled into a possible way to use him.

"It always feels good to be out there and get after the ball a little bit and just be able to use my speed," Griffin said. "It's less thinking. It's just more playing ball."

Griffin's story is well known by now. He became a college star and an NFL draft pick despite not having a left hand. He started the first NFL game of his career at line-

backer at the beginning of last season, bringing a level of notoriety and attention that seemed overwhelming at times.

But his playing time on defense quickly disappeared during his rookie season as Seattle struggled to find Griffin's best role. He wasn't a true linebacker. He wasn't skilled enough yet to be an effective pass rusher. After playing 41 snaps in the first game of his career, Griffin totaled nine the rest of last season.

But Griffin and Seattle remained patient and committed to finding a role. The Seahawks decided in the offseason to use Griffin as a specialty pass rusher, but the plans were delayed by Griffin's lingering injuries during training camp. It

took until Week 10 for Seattle and Griffin to finally bring those plans to fruition.

"They could have just threw me in there like, 'OK, let's see what you've got,' and then not having a clue of what to do," Griffin said. "So, I'm glad coach (Clint) Hurtt and coach Jethro (Franklin) just taking me in like, 'Let's work on this, work on get off.' And even keeping me after practice to work on that to make sure that I wasn't going out there just to go crazy and not know what I'm doing. That's not fair to anybody else."

What was notable about Griffin's snaps against San Francisco was they seemed to come at the expense of veteran Ziggy Ansah,

whose Seattle tenure has so far been a disappointment. Ansah and Griffin ended up playing the same amount of snaps against the 49ers and were on the field together only once. Neither recorded an official statistic, but Griffin seemed to have more of an impact in the pass rush than Ansah.

"The thing that he really brings is a whole level of speed and activity that we like," Seattle coach Pete Carroll said of Griffin. "We've been working him in practice. We just want to continue to expand that and see how that goes. We have to use him better. As we see him, we're learning more about what we can do with him. He was a good addition I thought."

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