

## SPORTS

## TWINS PREVIEW WEEK

## Improved pitching staff is no pie in sky

LA VELLE E. NEAL III



FORT MYERS, FLA. — One equipment truck has departed for the Twin Cities. Another is being loaded

as the Twins prepare to break camp and head for a regular season that will be better than the clunker of 2022.

How do I know? Well, I know a lot of things. And, after watching the Twins in exhibition games and examining how the roster was constructed, I know that the 2023 Twins will finish 91-71.

Laying out the reasons for such improvement usually requires listing a team's strengths. Evaluating this year's Twins begins with who is not here.

Chris Archer is a free agent. Dylan Bundy recently signed a minor league free-agent deal with the Cubs. Joe Smith is a free agent. Jharel Cotton is in Japan. Jhon Romero last week signed a minor league deal with Cleveland. Tyler Duffey, on a minor league deal with the Cubs, might make their club.

Gary Sanchez and Miguel Sano might play in other countries this year.

That means more than 30% of the Opening Day roster from last year is not in the majors — and five are not even playing.

The rotation will be better just because Bundy and Archer, who combined to make 30 starts of less than five innings last season, are gone. The nights in which Twins manager Rocco Baldelli asks the bullpen to cover 13 or more outs should be greatly reduced because they traded for a quality starter in Pablo Lopez and will have either a healthy Kenta Maeda or, if he falters, the promising Bailey Ober in the No. 5 spot.

Baldelli should lean more on his rotation this season — thank heavens — and Sonny Gray pretty much demanded it on Sunday when he said, "I don't think we're interested in going four innings and being happy."

Archer's ears shouldn't just be burning; they should be incinerated.

There are no reclamation projects in the rotation this year, and it should be one of the better ones in baseball.

Jhoan Duran is coming off a boffo year as a reliever. Four others averaged more than a strikeout an inning last season. Jorge Alcala is healthy. The bullpen has bite.

"It's probably the deepest pitching staff that we have had going into the season,"

See **NEAL** on C5 ▶

## A shift in priorities to boost offenses

By PHIL MILLER • phil.miller@startribune.com

FORT MYERS, FLA. — Max Kepler considered the question, started to answer and thought better of it.

"I'll keep my mouth shut," the Twins right fielder said with a slight smile, "about what I think of the shift."

Joey Gallo cursed when the topic was broached, shook his head and likewise decided to keep his opinion to himself.

"I don't want to say what I think is fair and what isn't, and wind up in a headline like always," the new Twins outfielder explained. "Every time I answer questions about the shift, people want to make me the face of it."

Justin Morneau wasn't a part of those clubhouse discussions, but he understands the sentiment, the emotion that defensive shifts trigger, particularly in lefthanded sluggers such as himself and the two Twins outfielders.

"[Players] are trained from Little League on that if you hit the ball hard, most of the time you will be rewarded for it," the 2006 AL MVP and current Twins broadcaster said. "When that's no longer true, yeah, it's frustrating. You hit a hard line drive to the outfield, and it lands in the second baseman's glove and it's an out every time, that's tough."

See **TWINS** on C5 ▶

Twins season opener: 3:10 p.m. Thursday at Kansas City (BSN)

Star Tribune illustration • Photos by Star Tribune, Associated Press

WILD 5, SEATTLE 1 Wednesday: at Colorado, 9 p.m. (TNT)

## There's no stopping Boldy — again — as Wild demolish Kraken

Winger picks up second hat trick in five games.

By SARAH McLELLAN sarah.mclellan@startribune.com

When he was a kid on his driveway, Matt Boldy might have been on a blitz like this.

"Maybe playing by myself," he said.

That is definitely not the case now.

No one has potted more goals in the NHL in March than Boldy, the winger turning in his

second hat trick in five games on Monday to spark the Wild to a 5-1 rout of the Seattle Kraken in front of 19,291 at Xcel Energy Center while joining exclusive company for his scoring surge.

"It just seems to be going in," Boldy said.

In his second NHL season, Boldy is already up to three hat tricks to tie for the second most in Wild history. Not only is he the fourth U.S.-born player to tally three before the age of 22, but since 2000-01 only five NHLers have posted more hat tricks before turning 22 — a



CARLOS GONZALEZ • cgonzalez@startribune.com  
Wild winger Matt Boldy, right, celebrated with Marcus Johansson after scoring one of his three goals in a 5-1 romp over the Kraken.

list that includes former Wild great Marian Gaborik and current stars Connor McDavid and Patrik Laine.

"That's pretty special," defenseman Jake Middleton said. "It's cool to have a player of his caliber doing it at such a young age, especially with another top player out. The way he's kind of put us on his back is pretty impressive."

The Wild are 6-1-2 without injured superstar Kirill Kaprizov, and Boldy's 11 goals over that stretch are tops in the league.

Going back to Feb. 17, the Wild have been on a 15-1-4 run to pocket an NHL-best 34 points and this victory kept them in first place in the Central Division with eight games remaining. They won despite finishing the game shorthanded, as Ryan Reaves left with an upper-body injury.

Goaltender Marc-Andre Fleury was locked in early, his 13 first-period stops keeping the Wild afloat before they picked up the pace. Overall, Fleury racked up 35 saves.

See **WILD** on C6 ▶