

Royals Wrap Up Spring Training

By Alex Burbidge
and Mark Elliott

With Cactus League play over, the Kansas City Royals have more than a few takeaways after five weeks of Spring Training. Roster cuts and surprise additions to the team have taken their tolls, but headlines have been dominated by three main subjects: the injury to Salvador Perez, catcher, the resurgence of Bubba Starling, outfielder, and the remarkable comeback of Kyle Zimmer, pitcher.

Playing their 17th season in Surprise, Arizona, the Royals finished Spring Training with a record of 18-21. The main news out of camp concerns Perez, who officially underwent Tommy John surgery for an injured ulnar collateral ligament on March 6. He will miss the entire 2019 season, which led to the signing of Martin Maldonado, catcher.

Maldonado hit only .225/.276/.351, which is only a slight downgrade offensively from Perez, but what he lacks offensively, he makes up for defensively. Winning the Gold Glove Award in 2017, Maldonado led the Major Leagues in putouts in 2017 and 2018, as well as being the leader of defensive games, assists, fielding percentage and caught stealing percentage in 2017. However, he was also second in baseball in passed balls, with 13 last season. In his Royals debut, Maldonado went 1-2 with a walk and a double; however, he let several balls by him as the night went on. This issue should be corrected as the season begins, with him getting more adjusted to the pitching staff.

Starling, most well-known for being one of the biggest draft busts in Royals history, had a monster spring, going 6-7 in his first seven at bats, good for an .857 batting average. He also hit two home runs in a game in a 12-5 loss against the Colorado Rockies. Though he was reassigned to Minor League camp on March 19, this is a major leap for Starling, who hit only .257 in an injury-plagued 2018 season in Triple-A. Having signed for \$7.5 million after being drafted seventh overall in 2011, he has accumulated an extremely underwhelming .236 batting average in his career. At this point, even

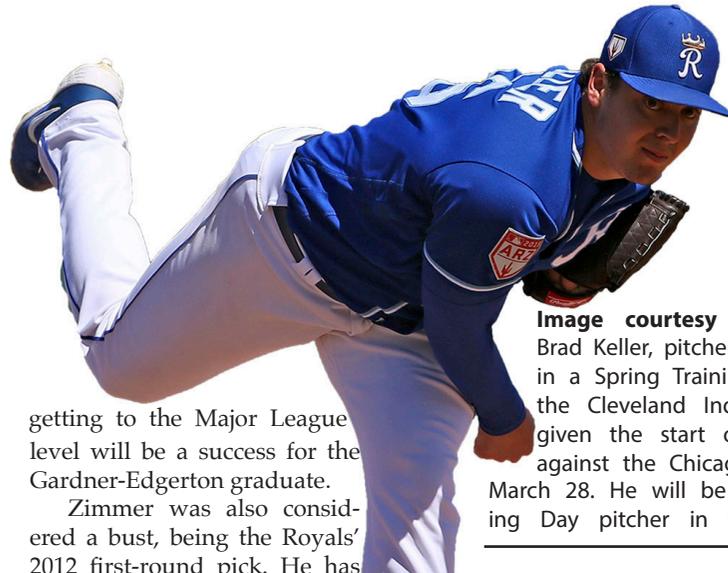


Image courtesy of AP Images

Brad Keller, pitcher, delivers a pitch in a Spring Training game against the Cleveland Indians. Keller was given the start on Opening Day against the Chicago White Sox on March 28. He will be the 26th Opening Day pitcher in franchise history.

getting to the Major League level will be a success for the Gardner-Edgerton graduate.

Zimmer was also considered a bust, being the Royals' 2012 first-round pick. He has also yet to make his Major League debut but could be primed for the closers' spot after posting a mere 0.93 ERA in spring, as of March 20. Zimmer spent the winter working out at Driveline Baseball in Kent, Washington. He entered their program after reportedly topping out at only 58 miles per hour with severe arm pain. After months of work, he is back to routinely throwing 94 off the mound and is forcing his way on to the Major League roster.

The Royals have signed two new arms to fill out the bullpen: Brad Boxberger and Jake Diekman. Boxberger most recently was the closer for the Arizona Diamondbacks but struggled in that role, putting up an ERA of 4.39 and a WAR of -0.7. Diekman on the other hand is also looking to have a bounce-back campaign. After spending four years in a Texas Ranger uniform, Diekman became a free agent and signed with the Royals for \$2.75 million with a mutual option for the 2020 season. With Ned Yost saying that there will be no definitive closer, both will get some save opportunities, along with Wily Peralta, Kevin McCarthy and Zimmer.

Other notable news includes Danny Duffy's injury struggles and Brad Keller getting the nod to be the starting pitcher on Opening Day. Duffy is out for Opening Day because of shoulder troubles, and after a drop in velocity in 2018, this could turn out to be disastrous for the Royals. Entering the third year of a

five-year extension worth \$65 million, Duffy's contract is quickly turning into one of the worst in baseball after a 2018 in which he had a 4.88 ERA. Duffy has also had some issues off the field, having been arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol in August 2017. He is expected to be ready by the time his turn in the rotation comes around in the second week of the season, leaving the Royals with a four-man rotation until his return.

Keller was the Royals' ace last year; after being drafted in the Rule V Draft, he gave up only 0.4 home runs per nine innings, an unprecedented number for a rookie pitcher. Relying on his sinker, Keller will likely do much of the same on Opening Day and throughout the 2019 season. Being one of the most successful Rule V picks in recent memory, this hopefully will become the beginning of the organizations taking risks on more of these picks. The Royals drafted two in the offseason, Sam McWilliams and Chris Ellis, pitchers, though McWilliams was returned to the Tampa Bay Rays after having a 15.43 ERA in spring.

Though 2019 will be another poor year record-wise for the Royals, great individual seasons and player development will provide excitement and bright spots throughout the campaign. If everything goes according to plan, they could be back in the playoff hunt by 2022.