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How Traded Players Reconfigure Their Lives at a Moment's Notice

Baseball by Oliver Lee Bateman | Jul 28 2016, 3:07pm

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When Los Angeles Dodgers ace Clayton Kershaw herniated a disk in his lower back earlier this month, the organization rushed to fill the gap in its rotation. With their pitching staff already [wracked by injuries](#) to the likes of Brett Anderson, Alex Wood, Hyun-Jin Ryu, Brandon McCarthy, and Frankie Montas this season, the prospective playoff contenders were in glaring need of a healthy arm.

With that in mind, they hurriedly acquired durable right-hander Bud Norris from the slumping Atlanta Braves in exchange for a pair of minor leaguers—emphasis on hurriedly.

"Management moved quickly after Clayton got hurt, since we'd already had so many other injury problems with the rotation. The trade for Bud was consummated on June 30th, and he was going to start for us on July 1st," Scott Akasaki, [director of team travel](#) for the Dodgers, told VICE Sports. "As soon as that was finished and the Braves gave us his contact information, we put him on an overnight flight and he started for us the next night."

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Norris is an old hand when it comes to the sudden nature of baseball transactions. In 2013, he was traded at the deadline

from the Houston Astros to Baltimore. The two teams happened to be playing at Camden Yards; Norris immediately switched dugouts, and then pitched—[and won](#)—against the Astros the next day.

He did likewise for the Dodgers this season, [pitching six shutout innings](#) in a victory over the Colorado Rockies in his first start.

"We had to move Bud on Thursday," Akasaki explained. "Since he was starting Friday night, it was extremely important that we have him there and ready to go that day."

As the trade deadline approaches, nearly all of the conversations will turn to which marquee players are headed to which big-market destinations. Often overlooked, however, is the process of quickly putting these players in position to help their new teams—something that is every bit as important as acquiring them in the first place. That responsibility falls on the shoulders of travel directors, player agents, spouses, and short-term housing companies.



Same Jhoulys Chacin. Same delivery. Different uniform. Photo: Troy Taormina-USA TODAY Sports.

"We can't play short-handed, and there are sometimes challenging situations you've got to deal with," said veteran Phillies travel director [Frank Coppenbarger](#). "We've acquired

many star players over the years, from Pedro Martinez to Cliff Lee, and you have to ensure that those guys are ready to contribute as soon as possible. Per MLB rules, you're obligated to put them up in a hotel for their first seven days with the club, so it's always better if they're joining while we're on the road because then they can stay with the rest of the team, but we have hotels that we use in Philadelphia also."

Getting traded represents an abrupt break in a player's relationship with his previous organization. Teams like the Phillies and the Dodgers need to move fast to secure players who fill gaps in their major and minor league rosters, and there's an undeniably impersonal, even mercenary, quality to the nature of these transactions. Although the team might sign, recall, or release dozens of players each year in the normal course of business, an individual player has only his own professional and personal life to worry about.

"From a business standpoint, as soon as a player is traded, our obligations to him are over," Copenbarger said. "We get the contact information for the new player and are then responsible for getting him to where we're playing. Sometimes we might coordinate with the travel director for the other team in the transaction and handle arrangements for our former player if it's more convenient, but usually it's the responsibility of the team making the acquisition to relocate the new player."

For players and their families, this can prove a jarring process. Alba Chacin, wife of veteran Angels right-hander [Jhoulys Chacin](#), enjoyed six seasons of relative calm in Colorado before beginning a two-year stretch during which Jhoulys has pitched for three different teams.

After strong seasons in 2011 and 2013, Chacin seemed like an All-Star in the making—a pitcher with the stamina and outlook to

persevere in the thin Denver air, where he gave up only six home runs in 2013. But he slumped badly in 2014 and was released by the Rockies, after which he wound up signing a short-term deal with Cleveland. From there, he began a series of auditions with other organizations eager to see if he could regain the form he had demonstrated earlier in the decade.

"You hear all these crazy stories, so we were lucky to be in place for so long," Chacin told VICE Sports. "If we had been traded when we were in Colorado like we were this year, going from Atlanta to the Angels, we would have had so much to do. When you're moving, it's so easy to get lost doing all the things you're supposed to do: giving notice to end a lease, turning off utilities, getting your mail changed, getting your car moved across country. Mess any of those up, or a bunch of them, and you've got a ton of unexpected and inconvenient expenses."



Same Jhoulys Chacin. Same delivery. Different uniform. Photo: Jayne Kamin-Oncea-USA TODAY Sports.

Their experience this year has been different, because Chacin, like many other players, now uses a service provider to handle his short-term housing needs. After a strong finish to his 2015 campaign with the Arizona Diamondbacks, where he posted a 3.38 ERA across four starts, he had high hopes for his 2016 season with Atlanta.

"Our home base is in Arizona, but we've had to move quickly to get set up in Atlanta and then Atlanta went and worked a deal with the Angels, so off we went," Alba said.

The trade from Atlanta, where Jhoulys had struggled to find his footing, gave him a chance to earn an extended look from another organization that was well out of playoff contention. Of course, it also meant that he and his wife had to quickly uproot their lives.

"By now, we had begun working with a company called Stay Fit Housing, which handles all the little things about getting moved to a new town and set up again, and gives players flexible leasing options that are easy to terminate if you've got to move again fast, as we had to this year," he said. "We weren't set up this way at all in Denver—we were looking at the long-term there—but this time we were ready."

Erica Ruiz, Latin American client coordinator for the full-service player representation agency [Octagon Baseball](#), emphasized that the process can be particularly difficult for ballplayers who speak English as a second language or come from other countries.

"It's a very confusing time for these guys, and obviously players who are new to the country are at a higher risk for either being taken advantage of by landlords or simply not doing all the things they need to do when they have to move," she said. "As a result, what we do at Octagon is to hurry to resolve all these matters for the players that we represent, which can be especially challenging for players entering expensive rental markets like New York and Chicago."

Anyone who has lived in either of those cities knows that rents are already at staggering levels. Even long-term leases aren't always easy to come by, and the market for short-term,

furnished rentals, which is what many players are seeking, is far more costly.

Dan Hauptman founded [Stay Fit Housing](#)—the company used by Jhoulys and Alba Chacin during their recent moves—in order to address this market inefficiency.

"My partners and I formed Stay Fit because, when you think about it, it's crazy to imagine most guys who are very young who get traded or called up at a moment's notice being able to just take time out of a baseball schedule to drive around looking for a place to live in an unfamiliar city," Hauptman said. "When you're focused on baseball 24/7, like some of the most training-obsessed guys are, you aren't going to have the mental energy to find or break a lease, get your place furnished—and you probably are attracted to the convenience of a company that does that for you."



Same Jhoulys Chacin in his first uniform: the traditional Rockies pinstripes. Photo: Mark J. Rebilas-USA TODAY Sports.

Scott Akasaki, the Dodgers travel director, added that, owing to the peripatetic nature of baseball, most players do know at least one or two players on their new teams and can use them as resources.

"Finding housing and getting acclimated to a new city is part of

life for these players," Akasaki said. "At some point in their careers, whether in the minors or on another team, they've built a network of contacts, and when they get to a new area, those contacts can also help them get their feet on the ground. Agents and agencies help a lot, but word of mouth is also very important. Bud Norris, for example, I'd assume he's played with lots of these guys, and if so I'm sure he's asking them for advice."

Alba Chacin has traveled with her husband throughout his major league career, but the couple has a five-year-old about to start school and is now permanently based out of Arizona. "We didn't know anyone in Atlanta, so our short-term housing company got us a house there, and we didn't know anyone in Los Angeles, so they set us up there, too," Alba said. "My husband's mind has to be on baseball, all the time, and we players' wives are almost like secretaries. We've lived in the Dominican Republic, in Venezuela, we've had to bring Jhoulys' family in from Venezuela, we've had to coordinate all of this around baseball and his travel.... It's a huge undertaking."

Like every other ballplayer changing hands before the trade deadline, Chacin's professional life will be characterized by continuous movement until the precise moment it isn't. He has started ten games for the Angels this season, but it remains to be seen where his next stop will be. He still has the talent, but recently his results haven't equaled the work he did during his Colorado heyday.

"Obviously, Jhoulys has been fortunate to have such a long career and to have done such a good job," Alba said. "But we have always been on the go, constantly moving and getting in place, whether it's to a game or to a new house or getting your car shipped across the country or whatever. But eventually you as a player get to the end of baseball, there's no contract left to

sign, and it's like, what's next?"

For Akasaki and the contending Dodgers, the future is much more clear. Bud Norris has provided quality starts while figuring out his living arrangements in Los Angeles, but he's surely just one piece of a much larger puzzle for a club with visions of World Series glory in 2016.

"We're doing well this year, so our management will probably be looking to buy, and my objective as team travel director will be to ensure the new pieces are in place," Akasaki said. "We've been extremely competitive since I started with the team in 2000. Our organization doesn't ever stop improving, and the work doesn't stop, either."

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