

Spring training initial focus on robot umpires and World Baseball Classic

BY RONALD BLUM
AP BASEBALL WRITER

Just 102 days after a thrilling World Series ended with the Los Angeles Dodgers becoming the first repeat champion in a quarter century, pitchers and catchers are back on the field Tuesday as spring training begins with an initial focus on ABS and WBC.

In what could be the last full season before a labor confrontation over a possible salary cap proposal, players are preparing for the Automated Ball-Strike system, giving teams a chance to appeal pitch calls by the plate umpire to so-called robot umps.

"I'm really excited about it. I've obviously seen it in Triple-A for a while," said Washington's Blake Butera, among eight new managers and at 33 the youngest in 54 years. "You always hear the chatter from the dugout getting on the umpires. It's like: Hey, challenge it. Let's see what you got."

ABS was tested in 13 spring training ballparks last year, and teams won 52.2% of 1,182 challenges, which averaged 13.8 seconds. Major League Baseball's 11-man competition committee voted in September to approve regular-season use for 2026.

Each player will be measured for his strike zone starting at 10 a.m. to noon on a rolling basis during spring training — the time of day to maintain uniformity — and the data will be verified by the Southwest Research Institute.

Most teams appear reticent about allowing pitchers to challenge, preferring catchers and



The Automated Ball-Strike System plays on the scoreboard after a pitch call was challenged during the first inning of a spring training baseball game between the Chicago White Sox and the San Diego Padres, Feb. 26, 2025, in Phoenix.

managers make the decisions.

"The first month will probably be the hardest month," said Detroit manager A.J. Hinch, a former catcher. "Maybe spring will help a little bit. But in the spring, you can try and fail and it's not that penal. You do that in San Diego or Arizona or a home opener against St. Louis, and it's a little more costly. We'll have a running tab on who's good at it and who is not. Because there might be some position players who get their optionality taken away from the challenged call."

Tampa Bay will be preparing for a return to Tropicana Field in St. Petersburg, Florida, repaired after hurricane damage caused the Rays to play home games last year at the New York Yankees' Steinbrenner Field in Tampa.

PLAYER TURNOVER

Most top free agents had signed ahead of spring training, and the biggest deals included Kyle Tucker and Edwin Diaz joining the Dodgers, Alex Bregman to the Chicago Cubs, Pete Alonso to the Baltimore Orioles, Dylan Cease the AL champion Toronto Blue Jays and Bo Bichette the New York Mets.

Free agents who stayed put included Philadelphia's Kyle Schwarber and the New York Yankees' Cody Bellinger.

Right-hander Freddy Peralta was acquired by the Mets from Milwaukee in the most notable trade.

Among Japanese players joining MLB, infielder Munetaka Murakami signed with the Chicago White Sox, infielder Kazuma Okamoto the Blue Jays, and right-hander Tatsuya Imai the

Houston Astros.

WORLD BASEBALL CLASSIC RETURNS FOR FIRST TIME SINCE 2023

Japan will try for its fourth title and second straight when players leave their clubs for the sixth edition of the tournament, to be played from March 5-17 in Houston; Miami; San Juan; Puerto Rico; and Tokyo.

Rosters on the 20 national teams include 306 players under major league and minor league contracts, including 78 All-Stars.

"It was something I really wanted to be a part of," U.S. captain Aaron Judge said. "I think this team is going to be on a mission."

Shohei Ohtani, who struck out Mike Trout to end Japan's 3-2 win in the 2023 final, will be limited to hitting.

LARGE DUGOUT CHANGEOVER

There will be eight new managers on opening day, one shy of tying 2003 and 2020 for the most who weren't the team's skipper at the end of the prior season, according to the Elias Sports Bureau.

Butera is joined by Craig Albernaz (Baltimore), Skip Schumaker (Texas), Derek Shelton (Minnesota), Craig Stammen (San Diego), Kurt Suzuki (Los Angeles Angels), Tony Vitello (San Francisco) and Walt Weiss (Atlanta). In addition, Warren Schaeffer was made Colorado's permanent manager after getting the job on an interim basis last May 11.

All but Schumaker and Shelton are rookie big league managers.

Butera is the youngest since Frank Quilici with the 1972 Twins. A generational change has seen Ron Washington (73) and Bruce Bochy and Brian Snitker (both 70) leave managing jobs.

Vitello, who had been the University of Tennessee's coach, made the rare move directly from college coach to major league manager, following the path of Hall of Famers Hughie Jennings and Casey Stengel.

"I think for that direct jump, I think college baseball had to become closer to what pro baseball is," Vitello said.

"If you want to call it guinea pig or sacrificial lamb or it goes well or doesn't go well, who cares? I guess I should," Vitello said. "I wish there was somebody like with a shorter haircut and more reputable up here to say it's time for college baseball and Major League Baseball to be married a little closer for a lot of different reasons."

LOOMING LOCKOUT

Players and teams are preparing for a confrontation when the five-year collective bargaining agreement expires at 11:59 p.m. EST on Dec. 1.

A management lockout is likely, just as when the previous deal expired in 2021. A deal to preserve the 162-game schedule was reached after a 99-day lockout on March 10, 2022 — 10 days after MLB's initial deadline to keep a full season.

Talk of a possible salary cap proposal has both sides preparing for the possibility of the first in-season stoppage since 1995.

'Greenland Derby' against the US is a chance at the Olympics for Denmark to show its hockey growth

BY STEPHEN WHYNO
AP HOCKEY WRITER

MILAN — Denmark's athletes walking into the opening ceremony at the Olympics led Eurosport broadcaster Davide Livermore to highlight an upcoming men's hockey game.

"The big crunch derby on Valentine's Day in the ice hockey rink, given all that's happening in Greenland at the moment, is the USA against Denmark," Livermore said. "The Greenland Derby, as no one's calling it just yet."

U.S. President Donald Trump's rhetoric in recent weeks about taking control of Greenland has stirred up national pride in Denmark, which oversees the semi-autonomous island. That the teams just happen to face off at the Milan Cortina Olympics is no extra motivation to the players, but it is a chance for them to ride a wave of patriotism as significant underdogs.

"I think we're just going out there to try to win a hockey game," former NHL forward Alexander True said. "We're not thinking too much about anything other than the hockey game."

To many back home, it may mean more than a hockey game.

Onlookers and fans seem more tuned in to the geopolitical story line than members of the national team. Last month, thousands marched in support of Greenland, and hundreds of military veterans waved Danish flags at a silent protest in the capital city of Copenhagen.

"Politics and all the stuff going on in the world is not something we're focused on right now," forward Nicklas Jensen said. "But of



Denmark's Nick Olesen (95) celebrates with teammates after scoring the winning goal in a quarterfinal game between Canada and Denmark at the hockey world championships on May 22, 2025, in Herning, Denmark.

course playing against the U.S. is special. It's arguably the best team on the planet they put together, so it's going to be a tough challenge."

But it's a challenge Jensen and his teammates hope is also an opportunity to show how far the small country of 6 million people has come in hockey. Denmark was in the second-tier B division until 2003 and had not qualified for the Olympics until four years ago in Beijing.

Now Denmark is at the Games for a second time in a row, a result of a pipeline of players making it to the NHL and inspiring others. Frans Nielsen led the way to the NHL and was followed by the likes of Jannik Hansen, Lars Eller, Frederik Andersen and Nikolaj Ehlers.

"It's been a long process, but we have been and we keep producing some top-level talent out of the small pool of players that we have," defenseman Oli-

ver Lauridsen said. "I think the fact that we have been able to perform on the biggest stage with the national team is also helping to foster the next generation of hockey players."

Morten Poulsen, 37, is Denmark's oldest player at the Olympics, and he has seen the growth firsthand. Poulsen has been around so long he has played with some of his younger teammates' fathers and older brothers.

"I've known these guys from a very, very young age and seen all the sacrifices, all the hard work they've been doing to be such a great success, both for themselves but especially from the nation, too," Poulsen said. "The hockey country of Denmark has really gathered a lot from a lot of people that's shown the way for a lot of years now."

The most tangible evidence of the growth came last spring when Denmark stunned Canada — with

three-time Stanley Cup champion and two-time Olympic gold medalist Sidney Crosby and Macklin Celebrini — on home ice in the quarterfinals at the world championships. Even losing in the bronze-medal game, fourth place was highest finish at any tournament in the national team's history.

"Now we're actually a team that's competing for some fun games in those tournaments," Jensen said. "It's great steps for the whole country, and it gives good belief and it's really cool to be a part of."

With the NHL's best back at the Olympics for the first time since 2014, it's hard to imagine Denmark matching or topping what it did at worlds. The Danes have the longest odds of winning their group that includes the U.S., Germany and Latvia at 33-1. They are tied for the third-longest shot of winning it all in Milan at 300-1 on BetMGM Sportsbook.

eighth grader Lexie Willis, along with subs Kennedy Whitesell, Alyssa Hays and Abi Payne.

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BROWN

FROM PAGE B1

Louisville started off hot and didn't cool off much, shooting 58% in the first half and finishing 39 of 65 overall. The Cardinals' total included 18 3-pointers on 30 attempts, tying their second-highest output this season.

Ven-Allen Lubin had 20 points and Tre Holloman

19 for N.C. State (18-7, 9-3), which had won six in a row and entered 6-0 in ACC road games. The Wolfpack shot 41% and made just 18% from deep.

Conwell hit 10 of 14 shots and 5 of 6 from

behind the arc.

UP NEXT

N.C. State: Hosts

Miami on Saturday.

Louisville: Takes on

Baylor on Saturday in

Fort Worth, Texas.

BOWLING

FROM PAGE B1

Sophie O'Bryan will compete for Apollo in the State Singles competition Tuesday afternoon. O'Bryan was runner-up in Region 1 singles.

O'Bryan will also be in

the team competition for

Apollo with senior Addison

Wells, junior Gracie Brown,

senior Raleigh Shelton and

eighth grader Lexie Willis, along with subs Kennedy Whitesell, Alyssa Hays and Abi Payne.

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"Coach P. was mad," said Jared Prickett on Saturday.

Coach P. was building a college basketball team that pretty much couldn't be beaten, and he worked the mind games to near perfection.

"He put your ego on the bench," Anderson said. "The starting lineup was switching a lot early. Ron Mercer accepted coming off the bench. Jeff Sheppard accepted coming off the bench. Guys accepted their roles, they played well as a second unit."

"Coach was so masterful at putting us in a bit of a bubble where all the noise around us — you certainly heard it — but coach's voice was so strong," Pope has said. "He was so intimidating at times — so demanding, pushed us so hard — that everybody kind of leaned on each other to survive. Just the brute force of his will forced us all to kind of band together."

"I felt like it was harder for us to deal with coach (Pitino) than it was to deal with the opponents just about every single night, right? And that was a gift that he gave us. It was very intentional, and it was a masterful way of taking a bunch of prima donnas that we all were and getting us to all be in this together."

At the end of that 1996 college basketball season, all those Kentucky Wildcats cut the national championship nets down together.

LEGAL NOTICE

LEGAL NOTICE FOR
RFP # 2026-01 RAILCAR
MOVERS
REQUEST FOR BIDS

OWENSBORO RIVERPORT
AUTHORITY

Notice is hereby given that the Owensboro Riverport Authority is requesting proposals to purchase 2 new Railcar Movers. Copies of the Request For Proposals are available from the Owensboro Riverport Authority, by contacting Michelle Payne, mpayne@owensbororiverport.com. All proposals shall be submitted in accordance with requirements set forth in the RFP and shall be received at 1771 River Road, Owensboro, KY before 2:00 p.m., (CST), February 24, 2026. All late proposals will be returned unopened. Emailed proposals are not accepted. Owensboro Riverport Authority reserves the right to postpone, accept or reject any and all proposals and to waive any informality in the bid process as Owensboro Riverport Authority deems in its own best interest.