

WINTER MEETINGS PREVIEW

Cheaper, Younger, Still a Contender: What Detroit Is Chasing in Nashville

With the ace on the block and a bullpen reinforcement already in the mail, the defending champions head into next week's Winter Meetings looking less to reload than to recalibrate — and the early moves say the front office means it.

By **Marcus Delaney**, Tigers Beat Writer

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Nine days out from the Winter Meetings in Nashville, the defending World Series champions are already tipping their hand. Tarik Skubal — the same left-hander who beat Pittsburgh twice in October and finished his postseason at a perfect two starts, two wins — is officially on the market. So is Nobuyuki Nakagawa, the Japanese reliever the front office has quietly targeted for weeks, with an offer already in his camp's hands. Two moves, two very different directions, and one clear message: this winter isn't about standing pat on a champion. It's about getting the roster's edges cheaper and younger without touching the parts that just won it all.

The Skubal listing is the one that will make the rest of the league sit up. It's not a fire sale — general manager Jeff Greenberg has been direct that this is exploratory, a chance to see what the market bears on a 35-year-old ace who has slid from a 74-grade arm to a 68 over the last year and a half, still owed one more guaranteed season before he can walk. Move him at the right price, and Detroit banks real payroll flexibility on a roster that finished the season roughly \$60 million over its own front-office budget. Keep him, and the Tigers still run out a front two of Skubal and Guo-fang Hou that just won a championship. There's very little downside to taking calls. There's a real one to ignoring them.

What makes the listing feel low-risk rather than reckless is what's standing behind it. Jackson Jobe took a step forward in October that looked more like arrival than fluke. Pat Dellinger has emerged as a real rotation option. And in Toledo, Andrew Weems and a wave of exciting arm depth give the org a cushion that didn't exist the last time Detroit shopped a starter from a position of strength. If a Skubal deal doesn't come together at the right value, nobody in the front office is walking away disappointed — Hou alone anchors a rotation that can win a division. If it does, it buys the kind of financial room that turns "get cheaper" from a slogan into something the payroll sheet actually reflects.

"We're not trying to blow this thing up. We're trying to trim the parts of it that don't need to be this expensive to still be this good." — a front-office voice close to the Skubal conversations

The other half of the equation is about what Detroit is buying, not selling. The pursuit of Nakagawa — a hard-throwing 28-year-old with a genuine plus-plus fastball-curveball combination but a bullpen-only 35 stamina grade — is a bet on projection over track record. The plan, as it's been described inside the building, isn't to plug him in as a conventional reliever. It's to use him as an opener, letting Weems or Dellinger inherit the game in the third or fourth inning, while the Player Development Lab spends the next year or two trying to stretch his workload and add a weapon to his two-pitch mix. If it works, Detroit has a \$20-million answer to some of the rotation depth it may be trading away. If it doesn't, it still has a bullpen piece who profiles as a shutdown multi-inning weapon — not exactly a disaster landing spot for the investment.

It's the kind of swing the roster can afford to take precisely because the bullpen doesn't need saving. Closer Bradgley Rodriguez is signed for four more years and coming off an automatic season at the back end. Juan Torreyeva, Zuo-qian Ning, and Alfredo Zarraga give Detroit three more true weapons in front of him, and two-way man Sheng-En Lin remains the sport's most interesting Swiss Army knife. Nakagawa doesn't need to be great in relief on day one. He needs to be useful while the conversion project plays out — and on a team this deep in the pen, that's a bet Detroit can make without holding its breath.

THE TRADE CHIP BOARD

Beyond the two headline items, the Tigers go into the Winter Meetings with a short, deliberate list. Adam Kirby is the name most likely to move first — a useful piece, not a foundational one, and exactly the kind of chip that turns into a MiLB depth upgrade. Walker Jenkins would go too, if the return justifies it. What isn't moving, short of an offer nobody in baseball is actually going to make: Max Clark, Justin Crawford, and Juan Soto. All three were central to the run to the title, all three are keepers, and Greenberg has made no secret that "monstrous" is the only word that gets a conversation started on any of them.

By The Numbers

PAYROLL VS. BUDGET
\$393.5M
current player payroll · team budget \$332M

2032 PROJECTED PAYROLL
\$356.5M
still roughly \$24M over budget

WINTER MEETINGS
Dec. 10-13
Nashville · 6 days away

On The Block

Skubal, LHP (35)	68 OA
Sanchez, LHP (34)	52 OA
Bellinger, OF (36)	45 OA
Kirby, OF (24)	46 OA
Jenkins, OF (26)	55 OA

Untouchable

Soto, 1B (33)	71 OA
Crawford, OF (27)	61 OA
Clark, OF (26)	57 OA

Dev Lab Results

Ethan Petry
Improve Infield Defense — **Solid Progress**
arm +, range +5

Max Clark
Learn New Position (RF) — **Successful**
error +, arm +

Louis Wood
Improve Infield Defense — **No Improvement**

Michael Arroyo
Learn New Position (LF) — **Poor**
coaches advise against using this season

Cristopher Sanchez and Cody Bellinger round out the outgoing list, both on expiring value and both fine on their books either way — Detroit will happily carry either one to a free-agent walk year if a trade doesn't materialize. Bellinger's full no-trade clause narrows his market to essentially one realistic partner in the Yankees, so that one may simply resolve itself over the winter regardless of what happens in Nashville.

DEV LAB NOTEBOOK

Away from the trade rumors, the offseason's other quiet storyline is unfolding in the Player Development Lab, where four programs wrapped this week with mixed but notable results.

The headline is Max Clark's move to right field — officially graded "Successful," with the coaching staff signing off on it as a real, usable option, giving Detroit a young center fielder who can now also play a competent corner. Ethan Petry's infield defense work also came back positive, "solid progress" with modest gains to both his range and his arm, one more data point in a rookie season that keeps finding new ways to exceed expectations. Not every program broke Detroit's way: Louis Wood's own infield defense assignment came back with no improvement, and Michael Arroyo's attempt to add left field to his profile was graded poor enough that the coaching staff is recommending against using him there this season — a real setback for a player the front office has quietly viewed as a future "sell high" candidate given the salary spike coming on his deal in a few years. Positional versatility was the swing skill on the table for Arroyo, and for now, at least, it isn't there yet.

THE BOTTOM LINE

None of this reads like a team in crisis, because it isn't one. It reads like a champion doing what champions with an overextended payroll are supposed to do the winter after: sell the decline assets while they still have value, buy upside where the roster can absorb the risk, and leave the actual core alone. Whether Skubal is still a Tiger by Christmas is a genuine open question. Whether Detroit is still the best team in the AL Central either way is not. Six days from Nashville, that's exactly the position a front office wants to be negotiating from.