

4 deals for a final boost

Moves to ponder for teams that need a push

BY KYLE STACK
Special to amNewYork

Several MLB clubs finished the 2009 campaign on the brink of playoff or World Series contention.

With free agency and trading season in full gear, those teams are assessing payroll budgets and roster depth to determine the ideal players to target. Here are four "on the brink" franchises who could find their perfect match:

To reach playoffs Mets

Sign SP Ben Sheets, 29

Starting pitching is the Mets' primary need.

While other prominent free-agent starters might be too expensive, Sheets could bring similar value at a lesser cost. The four-time All-Star sat out the 2009 season while recovering from right elbow surgery but is expected to be ready by spring training.

2000

The year of Ben Sheets' gold-medal-clinching, complete-game victory for the U.S. Olympic team

His lengthy injury history means the Mets could sign him to an incentive-laden deal. The reward is worth the risk, given that he has a career 3.72 ERA and a 1.20 WHIP and could be an excellent No. 2 or 3 starter.

Texas Rangers Sign SP Randy Wolf, 33, and SP Erik Bedard, 30

Neither lefty would change the Rangers' fortunes by himself.

Yet the addition of both would help them improve on their 68 quality starts in '09 (third worst in the AL) and fortify a rotation dotted with promising youngsters. Best of all, Wolf and Bedard weren't offered arbitration, so signing them wouldn't cost the Rangers draft picks.

Wolf's 3.23 ERA and 1.10 WHIP last year and Bedard's lifetime 8.8 K/9 rate are appealing enough. Throwing the southpaws at pitcher-friendly parks in Oakland and Seattle against division foes could land the Rangers in the postseason for the first time since 1999.

To reach World Series L.A. Dodgers

Sign SP John Lackey, 31

This is a perfect match that might not materialize because of the uncertain ownership situation in Los Angeles.

The Dodgers' payroll is near the brink, and Lackey will command a long-term contract anywhere from \$70 million to \$110 million. But the career L.A. Angel's status as a No. 1



Lackey

pitcher would fit seamlessly with the Dodgers' need for a frontline starter. Lackey, who has a string of four consecutive years with an ERA 3.83 or lower and a WHIP 1.27 or lower, must catch the Dodgers' attention, but his Type A free-agent status would cost the Dodgers a first-round pick if they sign him.

Boston Red Sox Trade with Cincinnati Reds for 2B Brandon Phillips, 28

Boston's solution for their perennial shortstop troubles may include shifting Dustin Pedroia from second base. If that happens, the Red Sox could retool by parting with a couple of prospects from their loaded farm system for Phillips, who's available due to Cincy's tight payroll.

Phillips, a 2008 Gold Glove, has attained at least 20 homers and 20 steals three years running, and he's under contract for at least two more seasons.

His 2012 club option for \$12 million becomes a mutual option if he's traded, but the Sox could conceivably have him for three years at roughly \$30 million if they acquire him.



Could Ben Sheets help solidify the Mets' starting rotation?
(GETTY)



Brandon Jacobs may be left alone on Sunday to add to his 683 yards and three TDs this season.
(GETTY)

At RB, Giants may be down to Jacobs

Who would have thought that at this point in the season Brandon Jacobs would be the healthiest running back the Giants have?

Jacobs, who has run into late-season injuries each of the past two years, may be the only regular running back available to the Giants when they play the Cowboys on Sunday.

Ahmad Bradshaw missed the Thanksgiving game against the Broncos with a sprained left ankle and foot troubles; D.J. Ware (formerly Danny) suffered a concussion during that 26-6 loss. Neither of those players practiced for the Giants yesterday.

As for Sunday, coach Tom Coughlin said the team is "keeping our

GOFF ALOFT

With middle linebacker Antonio Pierce on injured reserve with a disk problem in his neck, the Giants shuffled linebackers yesterday. Second-year man Jonathan Goff, almost exclusively a special-teamer so far, took snaps with the starters. (AP)

fingers crossed" for Bradshaw, who was not wearing a protective boot yesterday (he was in a boot and on crutches last week).

Regarding Ware's concussion, "I know they're going to go very cautiously," Coughlin said. "It's strictly medical. When they clear him, then he's ready to go." (NEWSDAY)

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