

Teams needing a 'closer' look

BY KYLE STACK
Special to amNewYork

Fantasy baseball owners are accustomed to adjusting their strategies as MLB players' roles change from season to season. Nowhere is that more apparent than with closers.

Here is a look at five closer situations impacted by injury and performance.

CLEAR DIRECTION

Cleveland Indians

A strained right lat muscle will keep **Kerry Wood** on the shelf until at least early May. Youngster **Chris Perez** is the full-time closer in Wood's absence, and he would retain that role in the event Wood is traded. The 24-year-old Perez has converted only nine of 16 career save opportunities but his 10.03 K/9 rate and 1.26 WHIP through his first two seasons indicate future success.

Colorado Rockies

Normally reliable closer **Huston Street** is likely to start the season on the 15-day DL with right shoulder inflammation. That opens the door for **Franklin Morales** and, to a lesser degree, **Manuel Corpas**. Before **Street** likely returns by late April, go with **Morales**, who closed seven of eight save opportunities while striking out 41 batters in 40 innings last season.



Street

NEARLY STABLE

Philadelphia Phillies

Any fantasy owner who picks enigmatic **Brad Lidge** should have a backup plan, and that includes the season's first week. That's all the time Lidge is supposed to miss due to recovery from offseason elbow and knee surgery. **Ryan Madson** is the front-runner to fill his spot; he inspires confidence

based on his 6-for-7 save performance last September. Lidge's inconsistency should keep Madson on owners' minds even when he returns.

INDECISION CITY

Toronto Blue Jays

The closer role is a three-horse race with a decision looming before Opening Day. Look for **Kevin Gregg** to have the inside track in light of his 84 saves the last three seasons for the Marlins and Cubs. However, his 20 blown saves during that span could mean **Jason Frasor** or **Scott Downs** will receive occasional looks. Frasor is the likelier recipient since he closed 11 of 14 opportunities last season.

Minnesota Twins

Joe Nathan's Tommy John surgery has created a free-for-all. **Jon Rauch** will

probably get a shot to close since he has 26 career saves; he also has 18 career blown saves.

Matt Guerrier and **Jose Mijares** have been rumored as options, but the wild card is **Francisco Liriano**, who's pegged as the fifth starter. His devastating slider could make him a gem of a fireman.



Ryan Madson (GETTY)

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NFL OKs change giving each kicker a shot in playoffs OT

The NFL changed its overtime rules for playoff games yesterday.

Starting next season, if a team wins the coin toss and then kicks a field goal, the other team gets the ball. If the game becomes tied again after that next series, play will continue under sudden-death rules. If the coin toss winner immediately scores a touchdown, the game is over.

Owners voted 28-4 in favor of the proposal. (AP)



Saints kicker **Garrett Hartley** would not have clinched the NFC title game under new rules. (AP)

St. John's obtains permission to talk to Ga. Tech's Hewitt

St. John's has targeted Georgia Tech's Paul Hewitt to be its next basketball coach and has received permission to interview the former Long Islander, a Georgia Tech athletic official said yesterday.



Hewitt

Hewitt, who turns 47 in May, graduated from Westbury High School. (NEWSDAY)

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