



Jon Heyman

FRONT OFFICE BUMBLINGS AND LOCKER ROOM WHISPERS BY JON HEYMAN

Beltre case could strip L.A. of offseason momentum

When the Dodgers acquired multitalented Shawn Green early last month, they looked like a team on its way to regaining its previous luster and perhaps even recapturing past glory. Then, in a matter of days, everything changed.

The bombshell news that promising third baseman **Adrian Beltre** might be lost because the team allegedly signed him when he was too young—agent Scott Boras says he has proof the Dodgers knowingly signed him at age 15, one year before rules allow—abruptly halted any optimistic talk about the Dodgers.

Boras has been doing the talking lately, and he's making a compelling case that **Beltre** should be a free agent. According to Boras, not only did the Dodgers sign **Beltre** under age, they altered documents that reflected his true age by using correction fluid. In addition, Boras says the Dodgers delayed responding to his late March inquiry for six months, until October, after Boras had acquired a certified, unaltered birth certificate. If everything Boras says is true, and the Dodgers have presented no public refutation of his facts, **Beltre** deserves free agency. He received only \$23,000 upon signing in 1994, and Boras thinks he would have gotten several times that had he not been signed before other teams could court him.

In several past cases of players signed under age, the player was granted free agency. Those cases generally involved minor league players in which much less was at stake. **Beltre** might command \$7 million annually on the open market. He has power and speed, and as it turns out, he's only 20.

Dodgers G.M. Kevin Malone declined comment on the pending case. The Dodgers' public multi-pronged defense has lacked bite. They pointed out the signing occurred in 1994, well before the current regime came into power. Though that might absolve front-office members, it doesn't do much for **Beltre**.

Dodgers officials told the *Los Angeles Times* that the **Beltre** files were in Campo Las Palmas, their Dominican headquarters, which, if true, doesn't absolve them, either. It also doesn't say much for their filing system.

Tommy Lasorda suggested the Dodgers should be rewarded for their good work in developing **Beltre**. "How about giving us the money back for the hours I spent with him?" Lasorda says. That's akin to the jewel thief wanting credit for polishing

the heisted diamond.

Lasorda has suggested that **Beltre** was in on the lie from the beginning, a charge Boras flatly denies. "There's nothing that suggests (**Beltre** has) been anything but honest and forthright," Boras says. The agent says **Beltre** spoke no English at 15 and was unaware of the rule requiring him to be 16 to sign. Boras says he became aware of a possible problem during a dinner last spring at Vero Beach, Fla. He says he told **Beltre**, "You're a

pretty good player for 21," and **Beltre** responded, "Actually, I'm only 20."

Some suggest Boras capitalized by waiting until **Beltre** had his breakout year—he hit .275 with 15 home runs, 18 stolen bases and 67 RBIs last season—but Boras says he went to the Dodgers "the minute I knew about it," last spring. "They knew he was born in '79," Boras says. "They knew it all year long."

The commissioner's office sent a three-person team to interview **Beltre** and his parents as part of an investigation expected to conclude this month. Boras wonders whether **Beltre**'s value as a free agent might suffer slightly with no decision expected until after the winter

meetings. Baseball people deny that the high stakes will hinder **Beltre**'s potential in free agency.

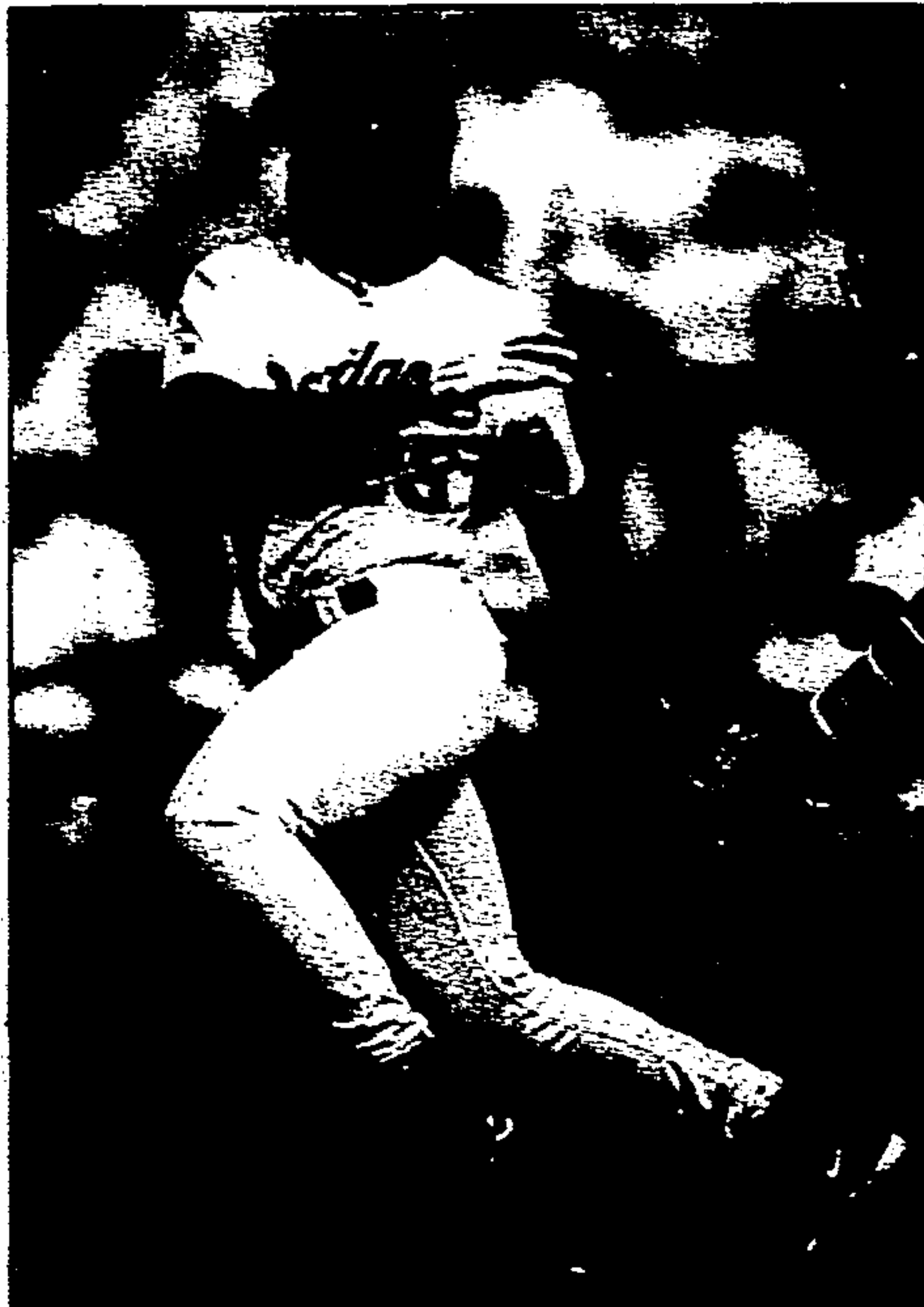
The Dodgers already are prevented from signing international players until after January 1 because scout Pablo Peguero violated rules while signing Cuban players Juan Carlos Diaz and Josue Perez (those players were granted free agency, and the Dodgers were fined \$200,000). Peguero signed **Beltre**, too.

The Dodgers may be somewhat heartened by the length of this investigation. But they also are hamstrung until it concludes. Fearing the worst (the offending team usually is disallowed from participating in the free-agent process), they have looked into trading for Vinny Castilla and Jeff Cirillo or signing Todd Zeile.

"Hopefully, this will be resolved sooner rather than later," Malone says. "We're in a holding pattern on some things."

Clearly, the celebratory mood is over. **TSN**

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ALBERT DICKSON / TSN

FREE TO GO? Beltre may be making a lot more money for another team in 2000.

inside dish

The Indians are getting discouraged about their chances of signing P **Chuck Finley** and will probably look for a deal among the second-tier free-agent pitchers. That means **Darren Oliver**, **Kenny Rogers** or **Omar Olivares**. ... The Mariners are believed to have offered Finley \$22 million over three years. Finley is seeking about \$30 million for three years. ... Agent **Scott Boras** says he has a five-year offer for Oliver and some four-year offers for Rogers. Boras says he expects to get five years for Rogers, who proved this year he could pitch in New York but still has to show he can win in the postseason. ... The loser of the **John Olerud** sweepstakes will make a play for 1B **David Segui**, who has drawn interest from the Blue Jays and Red Sox as well as the Mets and Mariners. ... Reds 2B **Pokey Reese** appears to be one sticking point in trade talks between the Mariners and Reds involving OF **Ken Griffey Jr.** ... The market has been surprisingly shallow for Griffey. Many more teams seem interested in SS **Alex Rodriguez**, mostly because he's five years younger. ... The Indians have received a few inquiries about OF **Manny Ramirez**, who is seeking about \$17 million to \$19 million annually. ... The Rockies made a run at 3B **Jeff Cirillo**, but the Brewers are insisting on a No. 1 or 2 pitcher for Cirillo. ... **Pete Rose**'s big hope, quite obviously, is that folks have forgotten what he did. Rose should stop lying about whether he bet on baseball (he did, it's all there in the Dowd Report), and he should stop trying to create the impression that he didn't have a chance to respond. Baseball interviewed 100 people, **John Dowd** reminded us last week, and Rose's people chose not to interview them. Rose also was given an opportunity for a hearing, and he never took it. Now that public sentiment is starting to go his way, he wants a publicity battle. But he still hasn't confronted any of the major evidence against him—and there was a lot of that. ... Good riddance to former umpires union chief **Richie Phillips**, who cost 22 men their jobs. Many of them didn't deserve it.

Arizona



EYE ON HISTORY: The players have a sense they are on the verge of something special. No second-year club has earned a playoff spot—in fact, only one second-year club (the 1962 Angels) has had a winning season. **Jerry Colangelo** has backed up his talk by signing veteran players with track records. Most of the players are 32 or older, meaning the time to win is sooner rather than later. ... **Hanley Frias** beat out **Dale Sveum** for the final infield spot. Frias' slick fielding gave him the final edge. With **Tony Batista** and **Jay Bell** up the middle, there was a need for a defensive replacement for late in games.

BULLPEN ADDITIONS: With **Gregg Olson** ailing a bit with a sore forearm and wrist, the club was concerned about a bullpen already short in depth. So it acquired **Darren Holmes** (from the Yankees for reliever **Ben Ford** and **C Izzy Molina**) and **John Frascatore** (from the Cardinals for reliever **Clint Sodowsky**). Holmes was a former closer with Colorado and is the only pitcher on the roster besides Olson with much closing experience. ... His job isn't on the line, but **Buck Showalter** will be under the microscope. He has real big-league players in '99 and his moves must pay off with consistency. Fans and Colangelo are expecting a lot. —*Pedro Gomez*

Chicago



SHORT ON ARMS: The team opened spring training with a solid pitching staff that appeared to be set. But as it left Arizona, the front office scrambled to find 11 serviceable arms. The team signed onetime sensation **Hideo Nomo** to a minor league deal. If the club sees that Nomo, 30, shows some good velocity and gets his split-finger pitch working again, it's likely to call him up in late April. The Cubs also picked up LHP **Brad Woodall** off waivers from the Brewers and LHP **Dan Serafini** in a cash deal with the Twins. Woodall could be a starter, and Serafini will provide some lefthanded insurance in the bullpen. ... G.M. **Ed Lynch** is still looking to acquire Twins closer **Rick Aguilera**—his former Mets teammate—but Aguilera is reluctant to be a setup man if traded.

PERSONNEL MATTERS: Manager **Jim Riggleman** doesn't get enough credit for using his entire 25-man roster and keeping the bench players sharp. He's able to plug versatile utilitymen (such as **Manny Alexander** and **Jose Hernandez**) into the infield and outfield, giving the team depth at several positions. Now that SS **Jeff Blauser** has shown he can play second base, Riggleman can easily give 2B **Mickey Morandini** days off when fatigue or injury affects his game. —*Bruce Miles*

Florida



CURBING PITCHES: Manager **John Boles** says his starting pitchers won't run up high pitch counts like **Livan Hernandez** and **Jesus Sanchez** did in '98. One reason **Jim Leyland** allowed it was because of a lack of faith in his bullpen. Boles thinks the bullpen is better now, which will help him impose stricter restrictions on the starters. ... The up-the-middle defense, with SS **Alex Gonzalez** and 2B **Luis Castillo**, should be strong, and 1B **Derrek Lee** is strong defensively, but can that trio—plus 3B **Kevin Orle**—hit? Lee will bat cleanup, and the Marlins will count on him for home run production, and Castillo and Gonzalez will bat first and second and try to get on base for Lee. If Orle doesn't produce early, he could be gone because **Mike Lowell** is recovering faster than expected from testicular cancer.

HIDE AND SEEK: Hernandez has changed his delivery to conceal the ball better. From the windup, he brings his left leg back farther and his knee higher, and keeps his glove lower. He pauses briefly before starting the front leg toward the plate, which he says will help slow his delivery. The change, back to the style he used in Cuba, was brought on by watching his half-brother, the Yankees' **Orlando Hernandez**, pitch. —*Dan Graziano*



HAVE ARM, CAN'T CLOSE: Dipoto was roughed up this spring, leaving Colorado uncertain of its closer.

Cincinnati



READY IF NEEDED: CF **Mike Cameron** must remain productive to fend off **Jeffrey Hammonds**. Cameron was one of the most impressive players in camp, winning the starting job and the leadoff spot. Hammonds closed with a rush, hitting the ball well, but Cameron's defensive skills and speed give him the edge. Hammonds should get some playing time in the corners when LF **Greg Vaughn** or RF **Dmitri Young** needs a rest or late-inning break. ... LHP **Denny Neagle** has continued to strengthen the muscles in his injured shoulder, pitching every fifth day. He is eligible to come off the D.L. Saturday but likely will need at least another week. ... **Stan Belinda** suffers pain in his shoulder almost every spring, and the team doesn't want to rush him. He's also eligible to join the team Saturday but likely will take more time.

TOP TUTOR: The team's best spring performance was rewarded with a promotion. **Dave Collins** tutored players in baserunning and conducted seminars in outfield play, stressing fundamentals. The team made Collins its first base coach, moving him up from a minor league instructor. Positioned at first, Collins will be able to work with **Pokey Reese** and Cameron, the team's primary basestealing threats. —*Chris Haft*

Houston



CONVINCING ARGUMENT: So much for **Ken Caminiti** starting the season on the disabled list. One week after being released from the hospital because of an acute sinus infection, Caminiti was expected to be in the opening day lineup. He convinced the team not to put him on the D.L. by building up his stamina while playing in minor league games. Manager **Larry Dierker** plans to ease Caminiti back into action, using **Bill Spiers** to fill in at third base on occasion. ... The decision on Caminiti means prospect **Russ Johnson** is headed back to Class AAA New Orleans for a third season. Johnson is becoming very bitter about being in the minors, and he has made it clear he would welcome a trade. But don't expect G.M. **Gerry Hunsicker** to give in to Johnson's frustrations. Hunsicker views Johnson as depth and would trade him only if he could get fair value.

BELL CHIMES IN: The batting order will be slightly different when Caminiti is not in the lineup. Spiers will hit second, and **Derek Bell** will move from second to Caminiti's cleanup spot. Bell has resisted hitting in the middle of the lineup in the past, but Dierker says Bell volunteered to hit fourth when it appeared Caminiti would start the season on the D.L. —*Carlton Thompson*

Atlanta



WELCOME, MR. JORDAN: From Bobby Cox's seat in the dugout, **Brian Jordan** always looked like a player who would fit perfectly in Atlanta. A hard-nosed, no-nonsense type who plays the game the way it's supposed to be played. "Solid," Cox says. "He's not going to hit 50 homers, but he'll hit 25 to 30 and he'll drive in right around 100 runs." In other words, Jordan is no **Andres Galarraga**, but until mid-February, no one expected him to be a cleanup hitter, either. Galarraga's cancer has forced a series of changes in the lineup, from **Ryan Klesko's** move to first base to Jordan batting fourth. While Galarraga's bat (44 homers and 121 RBIs) will be sorely missed, in Jordan the Braves have one of the N.L.'s best clutch hitters. With the Cardinals last season he had 44 two-out RBIs and 15 game-winning RBIs.

ANDRUW'S POTENTIAL: Judging by Giants LF **Barry Bonds'** comments, **Andruw Jones** might be baseball's next superstar. "Andruw Jones plays center field like no one I've ever seen," Bonds says. "He runs down balls like it's a joke." Better than **Ken Griffey Jr.**? "He's faster than Junior." Bonds was asked if Jones has established himself. "No, but if you look at his potential, he has a chance to be the best center fielder ever." —*Bill Zack*

Colorado



NO CLOSING STATEMENT: **Jerry Dipoto** came to camp as a candidate to be the closer, along with **Curtis Leskanic**, **Dave Veres** and **Mike DeJean**. But he pitched his way out of the job. He led the team with 16 saves in 1997 and a career-high 19 last season. However, this spring he was scored upon in his final four outings and allowed at least one earned run in six of 11 spring games. In addition to two blown saves, Dipoto's spring ERA was 7.30, and he allowed 27 baserunners in 12 1/3 innings. He was having trouble throwing first-pitch strikes. Dipoto's only spring salvation was that his arm was fine. Early-season performance will indicate who will emerge as closer.

READY OR NOT: **Larry Walker** had a bad week, starting when he strained a muscle in his right rib cage while hitting a home run in batting practice. The following night, he developed food poisoning after he ate dinner in a Tucson restaurant. Walker had been having a superb spring. He came to camp 12 pounds lighter, weighing 227 after putting in time with a personal trainer in the offseason for the first time. In 19 spring games, he hit .340 with two doubles, four triples, one home run and 15 RBIs before being hurt. —*Jack Etkin*

Los Angeles



WHOA, ADRIAN: The Dodgers are pleased by how much starting 3B **Adrian Beltre** has improved. Through winter ball and spring training, **Beltre** has put up impressive offensive numbers and played solid defense. He's hitting for a high average and some power and striking out less. After being pressed into the majors before he was ready last year, **Beltre**, 21, struggled with the bat and with maintaining a work ethic. Club vice president **Ralph Avila** pushed **Beltre** into making an attitude adjustment—and **Beltre** has responded. ... RHP **Antonio Osuna** is making good progress recovering from offseason elbow surgery, but he has been put on the disabled list as a precautionary measure.

MAKING AMENDS: With OF **Todd Hollandsworth** on the 15-day disabled list with a right hamstring pull, the team was forced to shuffle the 25-man roster. The team now will carry only four outfielders and keep a third catcher. OF **Jacob Brumfield**, who worked himself into contention for the fifth outfield spot, likely will move up to become the top reserve. C **Rick Wilkins** will give the Dodgers insurance behind **Todd Hundley**, (who's coming off an arm injury) and hard-working rookie **Paul LoDuca**. —*Jason Reid*

Insider



Jon Heyman

Clubs ready to address 'areas of concern' (holes)

With the possible exception of the Yankees, every team will head to spring training with what is called an "area of concern"—a euphemism for a glaring weakness.

There are holes, and then there are holes. Here are six big ones as players prepare to journey to Florida and Arizona.

■ **Lineup, Rangers.** General manager Doug Melvin was widely hailed for acquiring a nice package of talent for Juan Gonzalez, including pitchers Justin Thompson and Francisco Cordero and young outfielder Gabe Kapler (although some wonder why he didn't take Juan Encarnacion rather than Kapler). The impressive acquisitions are something for Melvin's resume, but what's left for the lineup?

For the first time maybe in their history, the Rangers will enter camp with better pitching than hitting. With Gonzalez gone, they will be vastly inferior offensively. Not only will the Rangers be without Gonzalez's firepower (39 home runs, 128 RBIs and

a .326 batting average last season, a subpar year for him) and Todd Zeile's bat (24 homers, 98 RBIs), they will miss leadoff hitter Tom Goodwin.

Kapler has the potential to beef up the offense, but he's hardly a sure thing. Rusty Greer will attempt to supplant Goodwin at the top of the order, but Greer doesn't seem like a good fit in that spot.

■ **Outfield, Mets.** The Mets hoped to trade Rickey Henderson to Detroit, St. Louis or Boston, but now they're stuck with him in left field. That works for the batting order, but what about the outfield? Henderson remains a force offensively, but he has lost a step (or three) defensively. The Mets got Derek Bell in the Mike Hampton trade when the Astros insisted they take Bell, who batted .236 last season (that's comparable to about .205 in the old days). New York will play Bell in right field, hoping he'll be revitalized in the last year of his contract.

The loss of Roger Cedeno cost the Mets speed, and it's uncertain how the righthanded-hitting Benny Agbayani will fit in because Bell and Henderson also bat from the right side. The lefthanded-hitting Darryl Hamilton is adequate in center field, but there's a question about him, too—he has the right to declare himself a free agent March 15. Melvin Mora, the No. 5 man in the outfield, is the Mets' best defensive outfielder, and longtime prospect Jay Payton may finally be free of the arm trouble that has dogged him for years. One plus: No Bobby Bonilla.

■ **Shortstop, Dodgers.** With the Dodgers, you could pick three or four trouble spots. If **Adrian**



POWER OUTAGE: The Rangers will have a tough time replacing Gonzalez's offense.

Beltre is declared a free agent by an arbitrator in his upcoming grievance, then third base is a major problem. Down on Devon White after nagging injuries slowed him in 1999, the Dodgers are determined to give Todd Hollandsworth a chance in center field. Catcher Todd Hundley threw better at season's end, but he has to hit higher than .207. With the offensively strong Mark Grudzielanek moving from shortstop to second base, that leaves two light-hitting options—Alex Cora and Juan Castro—to replace Grudzielanek. Cora is the favorite, only two years after the Dodgers considered giving up on him as a starter. Los Angeles also signed Kevin Elster, who sat out last year. Elster already has annoyed his bosses by declining their invitation to work out this winter.

■ **Center field, Indians.**

Cleveland has replaced the injured Kenny Lofton with Lance Johnson, who missed two months last season because of an abdominal strain. How's that for insurance? Johnson has employed noted trainer Bob Kersee to help him with his physical problems. The Indians hope Lofton will recover from rotator-cuff surgery by mid-July.

■ **Rotation, Angels.** G.M. Bill Stoneman was a major league pitcher, so perhaps he knows something the rest of us don't. Why he didn't sign serviceable Steve Trachsel, who wound up signing with Tampa Bay for \$1 million guaranteed, is a mystery for now. Stoneman explained he didn't want to take innings away from Anaheim's young pitchers, then signed Tom Candiotti and Kent Mercker. Ace Ken Hill has an arthritic arm and a penchant for complaining. Prospect Ramon Ortiz, described by some as a "Pedro Martinez clone," is the one shining spot in a rotation of journeymen and so-so prospects.

■ **Rotation, Orioles.** On a team filled with players who are out of position or out of place, pitching was supposed to be a strength. But the Orioles failed to obtain Chuck Finley, then reneged on an offer to Aaron Sele. They settled for Pat Rapp, who along with Jason Johnson, Matt Riley, Jose Mercedes and Calvin Maduro will be in the mix for the final two spots in the rotation. **TSN**

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FRONT OFFICE HUMBLINGS AND LOCKER ROOM WHISPERS BY JON HEYMAN

inside dish



BOB LEVERONE/TSN

NO FUTURE: Rocker's words will haunt him.

Things aren't getting any better for LHP John Rocker, who is almost certain to be suspended by Bud Selig. The commissioner is very image conscious—and also very offended by Rocker's offseason remarks. With his Atlanta teammates slow to support him, it's possible Rocker never will recover from his racist words. One National League coach predicted Rocker, who had 38 saves in 1999, "will be out of baseball in two years." ... It won't be pretty if Los Angeles loses the **Adrian Beltre** grievance case. Dodgers people are saying they will name stars on other teams who were signed before age 16, which might create a mess. There's little question the Dodgers erred by signing **Beltre** at 15, but it will take a courageous arbitrator to set the third baseman free. Perhaps a compromise can be reached. The Dodgers have extra incentive to do right by **Beltre**. His agent, **Scott Boras**, represents four members of the Dodgers' rotation (**Kevin Brown**, **Chan Ho Park**, **Darren Dreifort** and **Eric Gagne**) and, more important, free agent-to-be **Alex Rodriguez**, perhaps the player they most covet. ... Things aren't comfy between Orioles owner **Peter Angelos** and his G.M., **Syd Thrift**. Angelos has apparently noticed Thrift has failed to improve the team after elbowing **Frank Wren** out of the job. ... The Orioles would love to play **Jerry Hairston** at second base, but they can't find a taker for **Delino DeShields**. ... The Blue Jays need to cut a few million dollars from their payroll. They may wind up trading SS **Alex Gonzalez**, perhaps to the Braves. Such a trade would enable Toronto to move **Tony Batista** back to shortstop. Prospect **Casey Blake** would then become the Jays' third baseman.