

Russell Martin excited to work with Blue Jays' young pitchers

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By Israel Fehr

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VANCOUVER – While Russell Martin has said he's [prepared to catch](#) R.A. Dickey's knuckleball, the work he puts in with the Blue Jays' promising young arms will be the 31-year-old's most rewarding challenge in his first year in Toronto.

Drew Hutchison, 24, made 32 starts in 2014 after missing all of the 2013 season recovering from Tommy John surgery. His ERA was an underwhelming 4.48, but his 3.85 [FIP](#) indicates that he's edging closer to a breakthrough. Marcus Stroman, 23, had a 3.29 ERA and an even more impressive 2.79 FIP in 20 starts with the Jays. He's small in stature, 5-foot-9, but makes up for it with [wicked stuff](#) and a bulldog mentality. Aaron Sanchez, 22, made his major-league debut as a reliever in late July, posted a 1.09 ERA in 33 innings out of the bullpen and now he's poised [to join the rotation](#). [According to past prospect rankings](#), Sanchez might have the highest upside of the three.

Add left-hander Daniel Norris, 21, into the mix and Toronto's future on the mound appears exceedingly bright. A big part of Martin's [\\$82 million job over the next five years](#) is to do what he can to translate that raw talent into wins for the ballclub.

"I don't know a ton about them," admitted Martin. "I want to talk to them and get to know them a little bit. Talk about the basics of the game, what they like to do on the mound. My job is to really know all the characters of the guys that are on the team. All I know is that they seem like good people. On the field, [they're] incredible talents. Power arms [with] electric stuff."

The process of getting familiar with one another got underway at dinner Thursday night in Vancouver – and yes,

Martin [picked up the tab](#) – as the Blue Jays passed through beautiful British Columbia as part of their winter tour. It's just the first step for Martin as he begins to build relationships with every member of the pitching staff. More conversations are to come, and will be followed by the important video sessions and bullpens that will take place at spring training once the team descends on Dunedin, Fla., in less than a month.

In Pittsburgh Martin handled a relatively experienced staff, but the Blue Jays have to be encouraged by Gerrit Cole's appraisal of his former catcher. Cole made his debut with the Pirates as a 22-year-old in 2013 and speaks of Martin with reverence.

"Russ is the heartbeat of the team," Cole [said](#) back in October. "He controls the pitching staff. He really is the leader on all sides of the baseball, defensively, offensively. He's on the same page with everybody obviously on the staff."

With that kind of praise for Martin's work behind the plate, it's no wonder Hutchison, Stroman, and Sanchez are counting the days until they have to report to camp.

"When you have someone back there who's been around the league so long, who knows hitters, who knows your pitches – I'm looking to put my trust in him," said Stroman. "If he calls [a certain] pitch and he's got confidence in it, I'm going to throw it. I'm looking forward to learning everything I can from him and him teaching me all the knowledge he has."

"I think that's important for everyone. If you have a guy like that behind the plate, regardless of who's on the mound, I think it will help," added Hutchison. "Hopefully we can learn from him and help take this team to where we want to be."

They have good reason to believe they're heading in the right direction. Of all his on-field accomplishments, Martin's new teammates are most impressed by his track record of being an integral part of winning teams.

"He's been in the big leagues nine years and seven of those nine years he's made it to the playoffs," said Sanchez. "His leadership and what he's about, bringing his game to Toronto is going to be phenomenal."

It shouldn't take too long before Martin makes an impact, either. He takes immense pride in his defense because "it only takes one situation where you take a pitcher out of a count, he has to throw a ball over the plate, it gets hit and they score a couple runs or start a rally."

That sharp focus is why he's regarded as one of baseball's [best pitch-framing](#) catchers. His expertise in that aspect of the game is something the Jays' pitchers stand to benefit from when Martin is on the field.

"My goal is to get as many quality pitches into strikes as possible and that way the pitcher is in a better spot. The key is to give a good clean target," said Martin. "Early in my career I [caught] Greg Maddux. He told me 'I want you to look like a painting' behind the plate and that really stuck with me. When I give a target I make sure I'm consistent with my target, just like Maddux told me back in the day."

At the time he just wanted to earn the approval of a Hall of Famer. Now close to a decade later, with multiple All-Star game appearances under his belt and a monster contract in hand, Martin is the one in the position to dole out wisdom.

The veteran backstop is ready to take on the role, and his influence on Hutchison, Stroman, Sanchez, and soon Norris is going to be crucial to the Blue Jays' postseason hopes in 2015 and beyond.

"The younger guys are still at the stage where they're figuring out their craft and I can help them, give them ideas, help them shape the mental preparation," said Martin. "I definitely look forward to working with them."

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