

Blue Jays' Stroman, Sanchez, Osuna work together to achieve lofty goals

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By Israel Fehr

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DUNEDIN, Fla. – There was some shock about the sheer number of pitching prospects the Blue Jays shipped out before last year’s trade deadline – 11 in total – to acquire the haul of players, highlighted by David Price and Troy Tulowitzki, that helped the team get into the postseason and advance to the American League Championship Series.

It was evidence of the pitching depth in Toronto’s system. It also reflected the faith the organization has in 24-year-old Marcus Stroman, 23-year-old Aaron Sanchez, and 21-year-old Roberto Osuna to be the franchise’s impact arms of the future.

And with good reason. Stroman has the talent and poise that’s required to be a star. When he tore his ACL last February, he was supposed to miss the year. But Stroman bucked the conventional medical timeframe and made his comeback in September. He didn’t miss a beat, either, pitching brilliantly from the get-go down the stretch and in the playoffs.

Sanchez opened last season in the rotation before going down with an injury in June and missing close to two months. When he returned in late July, he was turned a reliever and thrived in a late inning role, just like he had in

2014. He joined Osuna in the bullpen, who by that point had already been elevated to the closer's role, even though he was still a rookie.

It's a hefty burden to carry, but fortunately Stroman, Sanchez, and Osuna don't have to go far to get the feedback they crave to improve and fulfill those lofty expectations. All they have to do is get together.

"We pick each others brains. We're very honest with each other. We're at that level now where we don't get frustrated with each other, we understand we're trying to get through to each other and give a different point of view," says Stroman.

"Even though we have different stuff, to see the mentality of how someone that's very close to you approaches another hitter gives you a different mindset from someone you respect who is going through the same thing."

From Jose Bautista's Super Bowl party in Florida to the NBA All-Star festivities in Toronto and everywhere in between, Stroman and Sanchez were inseparable this offseason. They had their share of fun, but when it was time to work they were there to keep each other accountable.

Stroman is striving to step up and be the staff ace following Price's departure as a free agent. The emphasis of Stroman's training was on sharpening his repertoire so he can be efficient and get deep into games. He says his knee feels great and he no longer needs to wear a knee brace when he pitches.



Sanchez is in the process of working his way back into the rotation and this time he wants to stick there for the entire season. It's what pushed him to add 25 pounds of muscle over the winter, as he feels the additional bulk will help him hold up physically. He has some competition for the fifth spot on the starting staff in Jesse Chavez, Drew Hutchison, and Gavin Floyd, but Sanchez will be given every opportunity in spring training to earn the job.

"When we lost in Game 6 [of the ALCS], my mind was already on being a starter," says Sanchez. "That was the plan. Nobody knows, but that's my goal, is to go out there and make 30 starts [and] get to 200 innings."

Osuna wasn't in the gym with them, spending his first offseason as a big leaguer back at home in [Mexico](#), but he was in constant text and phone communication with his teammates until they were reunited in Dunedin.

"We kept in touch," says Osuna. "Talking about what we think we need to do, talking about the season and how we're going to get ready to perform. We've always got a lot to talk about."

One of those discussions points was how the team planned to use Osuna after Drew Storen was acquired from Washington in January. Storen has ample closing experience, but Osuna showed he wasn't fazed by the demands of the gig. Osuna insists he's not preoccupied with how it shakes out and hasn't changed how he's getting prepared.

"It doesn't matter. I just have to go out there and do my job. No matter what my role is I'm going to do my best. It's their decision and I have nothing to do with it," says Osuna. "I want to be able to throw any pitch in any count, that's my goal this year."

The conversations between Toronto's three young pitchers aren't about to stop any time soon. Stroman and Sanchez's lockers at Florida Auto Exchange Stadium are right next to each other, and Osuna is never too far away.

They realize how they perform is directly tied to how much success the Blue Jays can achieve this season, perhaps more than any other players on the roster.

"We've got big roles here on this team," says Osuna. "Last year doesn't count anymore. I'm very happy with what I did and what we did in general, but that's in the past. It's a new year, so we've got to focus on this year."

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