

Saunders, Pompey hope to make up for lost time and step up for Blue Jays

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By Israel Fehr

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DUNEDIN, Fla. – From Josh Donaldson's MVP performance and Kevin Pillar's defensive wizardry to Marco Estrada's breakout and Roberto Osuna's sterling rookie campaign, the 2015 season represented the peak of the vast majority of Toronto Blue Jays players' baseball careers. Heck, even Marcus Stroman made a triumphant comeback from a torn ACL. With such strong examples already set by their teammates, the two players vying for the starting left field job this season are extra motivated to make up for lost time.

Michael Saunders and Dalton Pompey enjoyed Toronto's run to the ALCS, especially so as native Canadians, but they were both mostly relegated to taking in the experience as highly-invested observers.

"That was the toughest part for me last season, watching the games from afar," said Saunders. "I had to climb a lot of hurdles, mentally and emotionally, more so than physically, sitting back and watching these guys prepare knowing you're not going to be there that night."

For Saunders, it was due to injury. Saunders was infamously felled by a sprinkler last year on a now renovated field at the Blue Jays' spring training complex. He tore the meniscus in his left knee and despite encouraging early progress played in just nine games, as a persisting and painful bone bruise made it impossible for Saunders to get completely right. There was nothing the 29-year-old could do other than be patient.

"It was a waiting game. Nobody could give me a six-week or a 10-week prognosis. It was more say 'hey we got to wait until it heals,'" said Saunders. "Once it finally healed I was worried about getting healthy and getting strong again and getting to the point where it's not in the back of my mind and I'm not thinking about it and everything happens naturally."



For Pompey, it was living the reality of being a young and inexperienced at the top level of professional baseball. After impressing as a September call-up in 2014, he entered spring training last year as the favourite to start in centre field. Pompey's Grapefruit League play earned him the job, but he was on a short leash.

His struggles in April resulted in his demotion to the minors, where he remained for the rest of 2015, only returning to Toronto in September and staying through the playoffs where he was primarily used as a pinch runner. It sure wasn't how the 23-year-old had envisioned the year that started off so brightly playing out.

"I definitely learned that this game keeps you humble," said Pompey. "One minute you have success and the next minute you don't. It's a maturation process. I learned a lot from last year, learning how to deal with those ups and downs."

The most likely scenario for 2016 is that Saunders ends up getting the bulk of the starts in left field for the Blue Jays. He's also firmly in the mix to fill the vacant leadoff spot in the lineup. However, Saunders isn't getting ahead of himself. As the [subject of trade speculation](#) during the first week of camp, he knows it's best to stay in the moment.

"I'm just making sure I'm ready for opening day. Concentrating on not giving away at-bats, making sure I'm seeing the ball and comfortable in that aspect, and swinging at good pitches," said Saunders. "I'm mentally stronger and appreciating the fact that I'm healthy."

The question with Pompey is whether there's enough playing time for him in Toronto to warrant a spot on the opening day roster, or if the smart decision for his long-term development is for him to start the season in Triple-A. His ability to play centre field helps his case to stay, as does his speed.

"Right now I'm trying to focus on what I can do to prepare myself for the season and get better, mentally and physically. I feel like if I can take care of those two things, the rest will take care of itself," said Pompey. "Any way that I can help this big league team, because we've already got a lot of guys who are more than capable, if I can complement them then I'll definitely do it."

With Saunders feeling fantastic and Pompey a full year wiser, there's optimism that they can step up in their respective roles and help the Blue Jays get over the top.



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