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Broussard thrives at new position

Former first baseman likely to earn roster spot as outfielder

By Jim Street / MLB.com



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PEORIA, Ariz. -- Ben Broussard reported to Spring Training a month ago as a first baseman and left camp on Thursday as a multi-purpose player who influenced the makeup of the Mariners' 25-man Opening Day roster.

Broussard performed so well in the outfield this spring that the Mariners decided to send Jeremy Reed to the Minor Leagues and create an opening for an extra infielder. It probably will be Rey Ordóñez, although Mike Morse remains in the running for a backup role.

"With the ability Ben showed us to play both corner outfield positions, plus the versatility of Willie [Bloomquist] being able to play both the infield and outfield, it gave us the ability to carry an extra infielder, which we think will help this club," manager Mike Hargrove said.

When the Mariners broke camp on Thursday -- half the team went to San Francisco for a night game against the Giants, and the other half played the Padres at Peoria Stadium and then departed for Las Vegas for the final two Spring Training games -- there were nine infielders and five outfielders (counting Morse) still competing for jobs. But you can subtract outfielder Adam Jones and infielder Gookie Dawkins from the lists, barring an injury or trade.

Mentioned in trade rumors during camp -- the most prevalent one had him being sent to the Giants for reliever Armando Benítez -- Broussard appears destined for Safeco Field and Monday's regular-season opener against the Athletics.

He returns to Seattle more versatile than when he departed last October, a little more than two months after being acquired from the Indians for Shin-Soo Choo and Shawn Nottingham.

Broussard's duffle bag now includes an outfielder's glove to keep his first baseman's mitt company.

"It has opened up a whole new area for me to get into the lineup somewhere," he said. "Being able to play the outfield, as well as first base, gives me a better opportunity to get on the field."

The Mariners seem determined to develop as many multi-positioned players as possible. Bloomquist is the ultimate utility player, capable of providing Major League-caliber play at seven positions. Morse was signed and developed as a shortstop by the White Sox, but trails only Bloomquist in number of positions played.

Third base could be Morse's final destination, but he can play both corners of the outfield and first base.

So it wasn't a big surprise when Mariners outfield coach Mike Goff approached Broussard a day or two before the Cactus League season started and asked Richie Sexson's backup if he would be comfortable playing in the outfield.

"[Jose] Guillen wasn't ready to be in the field and I



Ben Broussard has gotten acclimated to playing in the outfield this Spring Training. (Elaine Thompson/AP)

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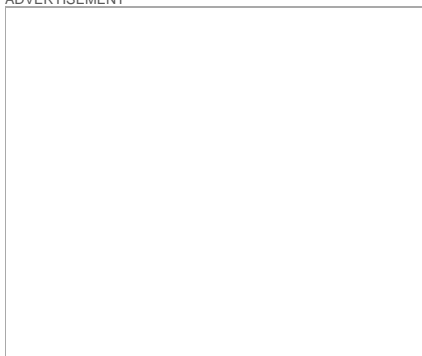
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saw it as a good opportunity so I said, 'Sure, let's go,'" Broussard recalled. "I was willing to give it a shot and see how it goes."

The knees were a little wobbly at first, and the butterflies came out in force, but the more fly balls Broussard chased and snagged, the more confident he became.

"It came back and I actually felt pretty comfortable," he said. "When I first came up to the big leagues with Cleveland [in 2002], I played a little left field for them and was nervous as heck. I made a lot of mistakes."

Lucky for him, first baseman Jim Thome departed via free agency prior to the '03 season and Broussard became a first baseman.

"We had a ton of outfielders so they moved me to first base," he said. "There was no need for me to go back out there."

The 6-foot-2, 220-pound Broussard hadn't been in the outfield in a game situation until March 2 in a Cactus League game against the Padres. He played right field.

He has since also played left field and first base, where he plays Gold Glove-caliber defense.

"Goffie and I have been working every day," Broussard said. "Catching. Throwing. Everything. In a way, it's like starting my career over again."

His career so far has produced a .266 batting average, 77 home runs and 277 RBIs in 580 big-league games.

This spring, Broussard has produced a .308 batting average, three home runs (two of them in one game) and eight RBIs.

Oh yes, he also has made two highlight-reel catches while playing in left field.

"The first one was against the Royals at their place [Surprise]. I was running in and the sun was right in my face. I couldn't see the ball clearly, but found it and made a diving catch," Broussard said. "The other night, against the Rangers, a guy [Nelson Cruz] hit a ball down the left-field line. I was running full-speed and just layed out and made the catch. Never done that before in my life, and don't know where that came from.

"That was awesome."

Catches like that are good for your reputation, and Broussard says he wants opposing teams to respect his defensive ability.

"I don't want to be a weakness on the team and have other teams run on me because I'm not good out there," he said.

Jim Street is a reporter for MLB.com. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.

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