

# Replacing Russell Martin

Russell Martin, the New York Yankees' catcher during the last two years, left the Yankees [to sign](#) as a free agent with the Pittsburgh Pirates. To the ears of most Yankee fans, this sounds incongruous. The Pirates are a team from whom the Yankees sign free agents, not a team that signs away valuable Yankee players.

When people think of great Yankee traditions, they often think of centerfield, where three Hall of Famers, albeit one (Earle Combs) who is a borderline case, played that position for most of the years from the mid-1920s through the mid-1960s, and where another great player, Bernie Williams, played for much of the Yankees' latest run of greatness. However, the Yankee tradition at catcher has also been very strong. Hall of Famers Bill Dickey and Yogi Berra held that position down for most of the 30s-50s, while other great players like Elston Howard, Thurman Munson and Jorge Posada have been integral parts of many great Yankee teams. Martin obviously is not part of that tradition, but he is a useful player who will not be easy to replace.

Martin is not a great all around player. He is a lifetime .260 hitter who has not even managed to hit that well since 2008. Martin draws most of his value from being able to do two things well, play defense and hit for power. During his two years with the Yankees he has hit 39 home runs, and did solid work behind the plate. He has also drew 103 walks during his two years in pinstripes, which has also bolstered his offensive contributions. The OPS+ of 94 which Martin has posted over the last two years is not comparable to what Jorge Posada in his prime would do, but coupled with Martin's defense has made him a good player.

The Yankees are now faced with the question of how to replace Martin. This is, in one respect, a very direct question. The Yankees need a catcher because, without one, to paraphrase Casey Stengel, they would likely have an awful lot of passed balls. The Yankees have some strong catching prospects like Austin Romine and Gary Sanchez, but neither of them appear ready to start at the big league level. The career backups currently available on the Yankees, Eli Whiteside and Francisco Cervelli, are fine defensively, but are unlikely to hit much. The Yankees could also pursue a catcher, like Mike Napoli or AJ Pierzynski, through free agency. Trading for a catcher is also possible but unlikely given how few players the Yankees have who are both expendable and capable of bringing much back in a trade.

This is a decision about personnel, but it is also a decision about philosophy. If the Yankees believe that they must win the World Series every year, then the logical thing to do is to bring on Napoli or Pierzynski. However, these players are 31 and 35 years old now; and Napoli has never been a full time catcher. Signing an older player, particularly if that player will quickly migrate to first base or DH, as Napoli would, would raise many problems for the Yankees, especially as both these players will likely end up with contracts of three years or more, but turning the job over to some combination of Whiteside, Cervelli and Romine will damage the Yankees' chances in 2013.

The decision the Yankees have to face is whether to take on more payroll and older players or begin to think about 2014 and beyond, not just 2013. If the Yankees choose the latter, they will probably not go far in 2013, but they will be able to use the next twelve months to try to shed some payroll, answer questions like whether or not any of their prospects can contribute on the big league level and perhaps even accumulate some young talent. If the Yankees do not replace Martin with an expensive free agent they would be wise to also not seek to replace free agent Nick Swisher and to look into moving aging, but still valuable players like Mark Teixeira. They can also use 2013 to address the inevitable questions of what to do about shortstop and closer when future Hall of Famers Derek Jeter and Mariano Rivera either retire or decline to the point when they can no longer contribute.

Taking one year off from the treadmill of veterans and big contracts which rises inevitably from being a big market team trying to win it all every year would help the Yankees position themselves much better for 2014-17, but because of the expectations they have created for themselves, this will be a difficult decision for the team to make. How they handle replacing Russell Martin will be a good early view into their thinking on this question.

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