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Bob Nightengale

USA TODAY

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The pitcher the White Sox hated and cursed for 72 hours last October is the same man who could lead them to a place they haven't gone since 2005.

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It was Hendriks who extinguished the White Sox's hopes last season. If not for Hendriks, Chicago likely wins the American League wild-card round of the playoffs and, who knows, maybe makes a run deep into October.

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The A's never traded him. But one week into free agency, the White Sox and Matt Hannaford, Hendriks' agent, began a two-month courtship, tying the knot in one of the most unique contracts you might ever see.

The length of Hendriks' deal is open to interpretation — three or four years — but either way it guarantees \$54 million. There's even a prenup, if you will, that would include deferred payments through 2033 if things go sour. It's almost like a mini-version of the infamous Bobby Bonilla contract, who last played 20 years ago but still is paid \$1.193 million every July 1 by the New York Mets through the age of 72.

"This is like my career path," Hendriks said, "a winding road, a unique and interesting way of doing things. It was interesting. But when it's all said and done, they wanted me from the beginning, and this is where I wanted to be all along."

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Clarke researched and narrated a 15-minute video that was sent to those teams, illustrating that Hendriks was the most dominant reliever in baseball the past two years. It revealed the stark differences with the White Sox bullpen with and without him. This is a pitcher who had struck out 14.7 batters per nine innings with a 1.98 ERA since becoming



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the A's full-time closer during the 2019 season, with a 0.897 WHIP the past two years.

The outpouring of interest was humbling, but Hendriks and his agency knew they had to weed out teams to gauge their real interest. So they decided to set up Zoom calls with COVID-19 preventing personal visits. If teams really weren't serious, they realized they'd have no interest in setting up hour-long calls with their front office and coaching staff.

Hendriks and his wife decided they wanted to be on calls together. They would listen to teams talk about their dedication toward building a World Series contender, their philosophy on bullpen usage, and how the couple could make an impact in the community with charitable endeavors.

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"We put on the full-court press," Hahn said. "We were all impressed by Liam and Kristi. Their answers were extremely thoughtful. They were very up to speed with our on-field and off-the-field endeavors and the city of Chicago. They absolutely became prepared and left a really positive impression on the call. When we all got off that call we were very fired up trying to make it work."

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The White Sox didn't bother camouflaging their interest, and all of their moves were designed with Hendriks in mind. They traded for Lance Lynn of the Texas Rangers on Dec. 8 instead of venturing into the pitching free agent marketplace. They wanted to save money on an outfielder and two days later officially signed Adam Eaton for \$8 million. Meanwhile, the White Sox kept recruiting Hendriks, with La Russa personally calling several times. So did pitcher Lucas Giolito and other White Sox players.

"The thing that was most impressive is that he and his wife had done a lot of research about the team," La Russa said. "The only question is he wondered how the bullpen would be handled. I told him we make decisions based on both observation and analytics. You got to watch and see what you see, right. If you have a good legitimate closer, you set the plan for the bullpen that day to get him the ball in the ninth."

And there was the money.

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"I was not going to eliminate any teams on the surface," Hannaford said. "My job as an agent is that Liam was approaching this with an open mind. I told them that he will give everybody interested an opportunity to sell themselves on him and his wife. Where this ends up, I don't know."

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'How can we bridge the gap here?'

There was a lull in conversations with everyone during the holidays, but teams circled back in January and increased their offers. The White Sox proposed a three-year deal for just more than \$40 million. Hendriks and Hannaford, believing they could get a four-year deal, or at least \$48 million over three years, held their ground.

Still, while Hannaford was engaged with teams on potential four-year deals, the White Sox were adamant they would not go past three years. They reached a stalemate, and the White Sox feared the Astros and Blue Jays would provide four-year deals.

"There was no way I was going to commit to a regular four-year contract," White Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf said, "so I was thinking, 'How can we bridge the gap here?'"

Reinsdorf, who owns the Chicago Bulls, decided to try an NBA tactic, one he talked about for years with Williams and Hahn. He would offer a three-year deal for \$39 million, with a club option for \$15 million. The twist? The buyout, after several tweaks, would be the exact same as the salary. So Hendriks would be paid \$54 million whether he pitches three years or four years.

"Hannaford not only grasped what we wanted to do," Hahn said, "but came up with the structure to make sure it complied with the CBA."

If the White Sox do not pick up the option, the \$15 million buyout would be spread out over 10 years, paying him \$1.5 million a year without interest, valuing the contract at \$51.66 million.

"While I knew we weren't really going to save any money," Reinsdorf said, "the reason I proposed 10 years is that it would give us some cash flow relief. The player would get the same money he was going to get, but if we had to let him go, I didn't want to have a \$15 million payment for the year if we had to replace him. It just made it easier to absorb the pain if we had to let him go. If we didn't do that, I don't think we would have gotten him."

A day later, on Jan. 11, the deal was finalized. Hendriks would receive a \$1 million signing bonus, \$11 million this year, \$13 million in 2022, \$14 million in 2023 and a \$15 million club option with a \$15 million buyout.

The fascinating aspect of the deal's structure is that Hendriks could potentially earn more money if he struggles in 2023 and the White Sox decide not to pick up his option. The White Sox would still owe him the \$15 million and he could re-enter the free agent market.

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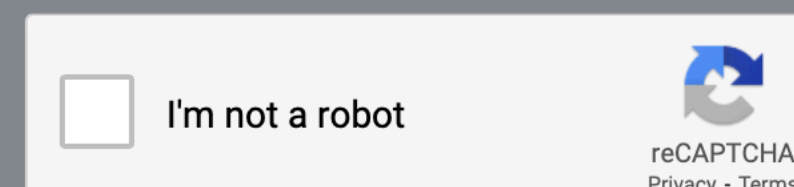


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