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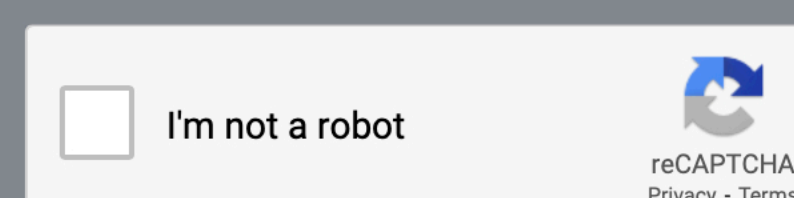


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ChiSox closed the deal for Hendriks

Bob Nightengale

USA TODAY

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Closer Liam Hendriks and his wife, Kristi, are back in their familiar rental home for spring training. But when he sets foot in the Chicago White Sox's camp Wednesday for the first day of workouts, he will be surrounded by the kind of hype that he has never felt in his career.

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.

"That's the plan," Hendriks told USA TODAY Sports. "That's why I signed with the White Sox. I want that World Series ring. I know we can make it happen."

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.

They watched Hendriks pitch in every game for the Oakland Athletics, throwing 105 pitches in 72 hours and striking out 12 batters in 5 1/2 innings, and sent the White Sox home for the winter.

"Unfortunately, we got an up-and-close look at how dominant he could be," White Sox general manager Rick Hahn said. "It's easy to say we wanted him after watching what he did against us, but the truth is that he's been on our radar for over a year, leading up to the 2020 season. I'm sure I bothered (Oakland GM) David Forst a little too much trying to trade for him going back prior to the season."

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."

Hendriks, his agents Hannaford and partner Tim Clarke, and the White Sox provided USA TODAY Sports a behind-the-scenes look into their negotiations.

It was only hours after the official start of free agency Oct. 28 that the telephone calls started pouring in. By the end of the first week, 11 teams contacted Hannaford expressing interest. Two other teams later followed.

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



Liam Hendriks, who posted a 1.79 ERA over the past two seasons with Oakland, signed an unusual contract with the White Sox. ROBERT HANASHIRO/USA TODAY SPORTS

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.

'Full-court press'

The calls began the week of Nov. 30 with the Toronto Blue Jays, Los Angeles Dodgers and Houston Astros.

The second week was the White Sox. The calls lasted 60 to 75 minutes with the team's GM, manager, pitching coach and at least one analytic staff member on every call. Some even had employees from their community relations department. Hendriks and his wife took meticulous notes.

"We set up the Zoom calls because we wanted to get a feel of the organization, grasp their organizational direction, see how the pitching coach and my thoughts intertwined with one another," Hendriks said. "I didn't want to go to a place that had a cookie-cutter mode on how to use guys. I wanted to see the back-and-forth, and see what works for both sides, and make sure I fit in the organization."

"I needed my wife to be on board, too. We do everything as a partnership. I'm going to have to transport her entire life to a new city. I wanted her to go somewhere she would be the happiest."

The White Sox, realizing the first impression would be the most lasting, had White Sox executive vice president Ken Williams, Hahn, manager Tony La Russa, assistant general manager Jeremy Haber, assistant GM/player development Chris Getz (his teammate in 2014 with Toronto) and pitching coach Ethan

Katz on their call.

"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."

Hendriks was captivated and charmed, particularly by La Russa. They knew each other from ARF, the Animal Rescue Foundation founded by La Russa and his wife, Elaine, in which Liam and Kristi donated their time and money.

"Tony would come down to our clubhouse in Oakland and we would talk," Hendriks said. "I loved his mindset on the way he manages. He knows how to run a bullpen. I mean, he was the one who established that closer's role with Dennis Eckersley. I appreciated his old-school vibe. If a guy is pitching well, let him pitch. I told him I always want that ball."

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.

Hendriks had offers from five teams by Dec. 10. The White Sox started with an initial proposal of two years and an option guaranteeing just less than \$20 million.

"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."

"But when a team like the White Sox continued to be engaged, Tony reaching out, players reaching out, he was feeling the love. We said if this is real, let's take it to a level where we can get it done."

'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.

"I had a lot of fun in the free agent process," Hendriks said. "Now, here I am wearing that black slimming uniform. Hopefully, I'll soon be wearing a World Series ring too."

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