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The Mariners are thinking of Mitch Haniger first and baseball second: 'We all feel bad for him'

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Seattle's Mitch Haniger hits during a game against the New York Yankees, Wednesday, May 8, 2019, in New York. (Kathy Willens / AP)

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PEORIA, Ariz. – There was no frustration in Friday’s early-morning hours at the Mariners’ spring-training complex, only acceptance and sympathy for outfielder Mitch Haniger and his latest hindrance from full health.

The Mariners’ best player underwent his second surgery in three weeks, further delaying his return to the field and his 2020 season.

Late Thursday evening, Haniger posted a humorous picture of himself on Instagram in a hospital bed in Los Angeles to announce his latest surgery.

General manager Jerry Dipoto met with a small group of media members Friday morning in Peoria to discuss the details of a procedure they knew was coming for the past few days.

“Mitch had a procedure called a microdiscectomy,” Dipoto said. “I’m not a doctor, but it’s a small repair of a vertebrae. We don’t have a timeline on his return. He’s in the hospital recovering right now. He seems to be in pretty good spirits. We’re expecting him to be here in camp, but we don’t have a timeline for that either.”

The surgery was performed by Dr. Robert Watkins, a renowned spine specialist in Los Angeles.

Haniger was in the process of recovering from a surgery to repair a sports hernia. After feeling some discomfort in his lower abdomen during a hitting session in late January, Haniger was checked by doctors and deemed to need a surgery to repair the tear in his abdominal wall. Dr. William C. Meyers of the Vincera Institute, a specialist in sports hernias, performed the procedure in Philadelphia.

But this lower-back pain isn’t new. Haniger dealt with it late last season as he was recovering from surgery to repair a ruptured testicle he suffered June 6, when he was struck in the groin by a foul ball off his own bat. That back discomfort kept him from

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“He was having some low-back pain and contacted his doctor and was put in touch with Dr. Bob Watkins in L.A.,” Dipoto said. “In less than a week’s time, he went from informing Dr. Meyers in Philadelphia of his low-back pain and within six days was in L.A. to have the procedure.”

Haniger remains hospitalized as part of the recovery. Seattle has sent Ryan Bitzel, the team’s physical therapist, to Los Angeles to visit Haniger.

“We’re hoping we get a little more clarity in the days ahead,” Dipoto said.

One thing is clear: The Mariners won’t rush Haniger back from the latest surgery.

The Mariners were already expecting Haniger to miss all of spring training and the beginning of the regular season. This surgery will likely extend that absence. But at this point, the team is more concerned about getting Haniger healthy first, and baseball second.

“It’s incredibly frustrating (for Haniger),” Dipoto said. “We all feel bad for him. It’s why we don’t really want to put a timeline on it because this has been a frustrating run for Mitch. There’s obviously been a lot of physical issues that have stemmed from one unfortunate incident. Hopefully, he’s able to get beyond it.”

Last season, Haniger slashed .220/.314/.463 (batting average, on-base percentage and slugging percentage) with 15 home runs and 32 runs batted in in 63 games. In 2018, he made the All-Star Game and ended the year slashing .285/.366/.493 with 26 home runs and 93 RBIs in 157 games.

As Seattle’s best overall hitter, there really is no replacing his production or presence in the lineup. With their focus on the future, the Mariners will take a long look at outfielder Jake Fraley as a starting option. They could use some combination of Fraley, Mallex

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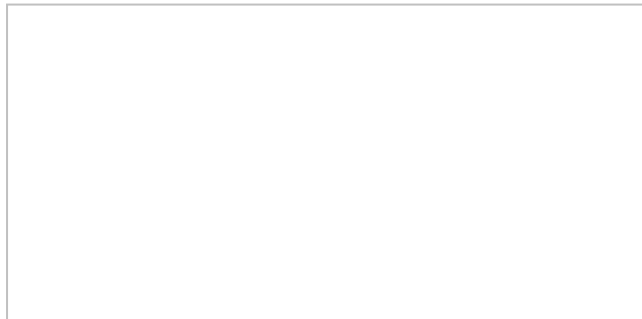
think this opens up the door for increased opportunity for the Jake Fraleys and Braden Bishops of the world.

“There’s a reason we brought in a guy like CarGo, to provide some leadership and mentorship, and we’ll see how he looks physically when he gets into camp. We’re open to any possibilities, but we really don’t believe this is something that affects all of 2020. We have no timeline on it yet, but if this is an opportunity to provide the at-bats for the young guys, then that’s what we’ll do.”

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