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BASEBALL; With Trachsel Injured, Mets Go to Plan B and C

By **CHARLIE NOBLES**

With the status of the veteran right-hander Steve Trachsel unclear, the Mets began discussing contingency plans should Trachsel miss any significant time.

In a statement Tuesday night, the Mets said Trachsel, who is suffering from a lower back injury, was "undergoing more tests" under the supervision of Dr. Robert Watkins in Los Angeles. More information should be available on Wednesday. It appears doubtful that the 34-year-old Trachsel, the Mets' projected fifth starter, will be ready for the start of the regular season in fewer than three weeks, representing the first setback for the Mets in Manager Willie Randolph's new regime.

Trachsel came to spring training talking of back discomfort and said he exacerbated the problem after pitching three and a third innings against the Baltimore Orioles last Thursday. He was examined in New York on Sunday, then went to Los Angeles the next day to see Watkins, who is renowned for his work on back injuries.

The Mets will have to find a new No. 5 starter over the next three weeks. Sometimes a fifth starter is not a necessity in April because of the cold weather and potential rainouts. But Rick Peterson, the Mets' pitching coach, said he wanted to make sure that the veteran right-hander Pedro Martínez was rested between starts, meaning no outings on less than four days' rest.

The Mets' plan would be to "look internally first," General Manager Omar Minaya said on Tuesday. In Trachsel, the Mets would be trying to replace a pitcher who threw at least 173 2/3 innings a year for the last four seasons and who had a 12-13 record last year with a 4.00 earned run average.

Randolph said there would be three or four candidates for the fifth starter's job. None appear to be all that inspiring. Randolph mentioned only Matt Ginter, 27, and the former first-round draft pick Aaron Heilman, 26. The others may be Jae Seo and, as a long shot, the 20-year-old Venezuelan Yusmeiro Petit, who made his first spring start Tuesday in the Mets' 7-5 victory over the Cleveland Indians at Tradition Field.

Petit, a right-hander with precision control who has yet to pitch above Class AA, gave up a run and two hits over two innings, counting the ex-Yankee Aaron Boone among his two strikeouts. Asked about his chances of making the major league roster, Petit politely demurred through an interpreter. He said he felt good, but that decision was the front office's to make.

"At the major league level I know I need to make more adjustments," Petit said afterward.

Though the Mets seem convinced that Petit should start the season in the minors, Randolph grew animated when asked about Petit's chance of being the club's fifth starter. "That's a young kid, I

don't know," he said. "I'll tell you what: he has a lot of poise. I like the way he went out and threw the ball today. He's been on fire in winter ball and done real well, I understand."

Ginter appears to be the most logical choice. He has pitched in the majors through parts of the last five seasons, including last year with the Mets when he went 1-3 with a 4.54 E.R.A. in 691/3. innings. After pitching three shutout innings Tuesday, yielding three hits and striking out three, Ginter said he has added a much-needed changeup to his pitching repertory.

"I used to throw it just for show," Ginter said. "On fastball counts now, I can mix in the change-up. I think it'll help a lot. I'm trying to get to the point where I can throw that or my slider at any given time."

Ginter said it was invaluable last season watching how veterans like Trachsel, Tom Glavine and Al Leiter went about their business.

"I saw how they watched hitters, how they watched film, how they prepared for a start, how they approached their workouts," he said. "So I figured I'd kind of do what they do. There's a reason they've been around that long."

And Randolph has some comfort level with Ginter, having seen him pitch for the Chicago White Sox against the Yankees two seasons ago. Randolph recalls Ginter not faring well but exhibiting a moving fastball and good slider.