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FREE-AGENT OUTFIELDER B.J. UPTON'S NAME IS A POPULAR ONE FOR THE ATLANTA BRAVES' POTENTIAL VACANCY IN CENTER FIELD, BUT IS HE THE TEAM'S BEST OPTION? (KIM KLEMENT-US PRESSWIRE)

BRAVES SEE B.J. UPTON AS VALUABLE COMMODITY

ANDY JOHNSTON | Published: Tuesday, November 20, 2012, 1:53pm

The Atlanta Braves love B.J. Upton.

And physically, what's not to love? He runs like the wind, swiping bases with ease. His power can be intimidating. His glove swallows fly balls destined for the gaps. And even though he just turned 28, Upton is an experienced postseason performer, having already played for the Tampa Bay Rays in the 2008 World Series and American League Division Series in two other years.

The Braves have some cash and need a center fielder and right-handed power.

Upton needs a new home.



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The perfect fit, right? That's what the Braves would like to know.

Frank Wren, like other general managers with money to spend, is just beginning his offseason shopping spree. With Chipper Jones (\$13 million) and Derek Lowe (\$10 million) off the books, the Braves can pursue some of the best available players, and Upton certainly checks some of the Braves' boxes.

But this is just the beginning of baseball's spending season.

Like Christmas shoppers, Wren and his cohorts are starting to look around. They're examining their teams, checking their lists, comparing prices and hoping to spot a Black Friday deal.

It's thought that Upton would want \$15 million a year for five years, so at \$75 million, he wouldn't be a bargain buy. He rejected Tampa Bay's one-year, \$13.3 million qualifying offer, saying it's "time to focus on the next phase of my career." Even at that price, Upton would be cheaper than Josh Hamilton, who is reported to want between \$20 million and \$25 million a year.

Wren isn't ruling anyone out at this point, but the Braves need to save some money for a left fielder or third baseman, depending on where Martin Prado ends up.

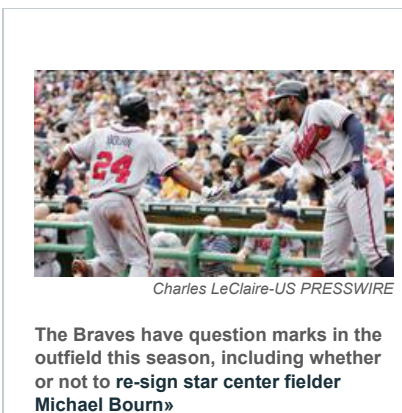
They also have to give raises to some of their arbitration-eligible players.

The Braves displayed their interest in Upton by inviting him to Atlanta last week. They gave him a Turner Field tour and wined and dined him at a downtown restaurant.

"I'm really blown away by the love other cities are showing me right now. Can't wait to see how this pans out," Upton tweeted on the night he met with Wren, manager Fredi Gonzalez and former manager Bobby Cox, among others.

It seemed like a strong start, even though Upton might not be the answer to the Braves' needs.

Upton hit 28 home runs and stole 31 bases, power/speed numbers that only Jason Heyward can match among current Braves. Upton's stolen bases have declined from a high of 44 in 2008 as his power numbers have increased to this season's career high.



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Braves falter in four key areas, drop Game 1 to Dodgers

The Braves' Game 1 defeat to the Dodgers was the result of breakdowns in four crucial areas.



Three Cuts: Kershaw, Dodgers overpower Braves in Game 1

Clayton Kershaw settled in and stifled the Braves as the Dodgers took Game 1 of the NLDS.

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But look closely and you'll notice flaws.

You don't need a CARFAX report to see that Upton strikes out way too much, 169 times in 2012. No surprise, his on-base percentage was .298, the worst of his eight years in the majors. By comparison, Brian McCann had the lowest on-base percentage among Braves regulars at .300. Dan Uggla, who struck out 168 times, and Michael Bourn, who whiffed 155 times, but both reached base at a .348 clip.

Upton hasn't been able to duplicate his high OBP from his first two full years in the majors (.386 in 2007 and .383 in '08). He also hit a combined .284 those years and walked 97 times in '08, but he has never had more than 145 hits in a season and walked only 45 times in 2012.

His batting averages the past four years are:

- 2009: .241
- 2010: .237
- 2011: .243
- 2012: .246

Upton was incredibly streaky last year, hitting 17 of his 28 home runs in August and September.

The Braves almost surely will need someone to replace Bourn, who will probably sign with another team, and might be better served pursuing Angel Pagan or Shane Victorino or working out a deal for Minnesota's Denard Span or Colorado's Dexter Fowler, who is from an Atlanta suburb.

And if the Braves sign Upton, they would need to find a left fielder — most likely, given this year's free agents — to hit leadoff and get on base.

But this is just the start.

There are plenty of shopping days left before the beginning of spring training.

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