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Lopez dazzles, Palka comes through to top KC

By Max Gelman / MLB.com / Aug. 2, 2018

CHICAGO -- Reynaldo Lopez had a rough July. The young right-hander seemed to have lost the feel and rhythm he had early this season, pitching to a 7.39 ERA in five starts last month. That ugliness culminated in an eight-run, five-homer performance last Friday, after which Lopez admitted he'd been having trouble focusing on the mound.

It was an entirely different story on Thursday afternoon, however, with the calendar having turned to August. Lopez rebounded from that career-worst outing to toss seven-plus stellar innings as the White Sox beat the Royals, 6-4, at Guaranteed Rate Field in the series finale.

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"I was focused today," Lopez said through team interpreter Billy Russo. "I felt very good. At the end, it was a crazy end. [Daniel] Palka had the big hit for us today. It was a very emotional game, a very intense game."

Lopez's struggle to focus got to the point where manager Rick Renteria, pitching coach Don Cooper and bullpen coach Curt Hasler sat down with him to make sure nothing was physically wrong, Renteria said

earlier this week. Though Lopez could not pinpoint exactly what distracted him, he "truly felt like he wasn't focused on doing his job," Renteria had said.

But Lopez quashed any doubts about his ability to focus with his performance Thursday. Lopez pitched into the eighth inning for the fourth time this season. The five hits allowed tied his fewest since his June 5 start against the Twins, when he held Minnesota to one hit in seven scoreless innings.

"Focus is the key for you to have success. For me today, the focus was throwing the first pitch for a strike, being able to command the zone," Lopez said. "Before the game, I said to myself, 'Forget about the outside noise, forget about everything. Just think about the game, the pitches you need to execute,' and I think that was a key for me today."

"You could see he was on a little bit of a mission to execute," Renteria said. "It really has to do with knowing that you're gonna have so many starts during the course of a big-league season, and every single one of them matters. ... Focus is really important; it's not being uptight or stressed, it's just focus and trying to get the best out of yourself."

After allowing the first two Royals to reach base in the eighth, Lopez was removed from the game, and both runners came home on Whit Merrifield's three-run pinch-hit homer. Lopez was charged with two runs, but the White Sox responded in the bottom of the inning, when Jose Abreu hit a one-out solo home run, and Daniel Palka followed with a three-run pinch-hit homer of his own.

Palka's home run was his third pinch-hit long ball of the season, tying him with Oscar Gamble in 1977 for most pinch-hit homers in a season in franchise history. But what was different this time, Palka said, is that he came up to bat thinking about hitting one out.

"Yeah, 100 percent, homer," Palka said. "Seriously. I wanted a ball up I can hit. He gave me one."

In a franchise that has made several acquisitions for top prospects, Palka flew under the radar when the White Sox claimed him off waivers from the Twins last November. But he's become a central part of Chicago's offense this year, ranking second on the team with 16 home runs.

Despite that, Renteria said that acquiring Palka was no accident.

"There was an expectation that there was the ability for him to do basically what he's doing," Renteria said. "We knew he had pop; it was in practical terms [of] how applicable would it be, like he's doing right now."

"He's just driven. He's a person who's trying to be himself and trying to show what he can do."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Abreu moves into 10th: Abreu's eighth-inning home run was the 141st of his career, moving him into sole possession of 10th all-time in White Sox history. Abreu had been tied with Ron Kittle.

"Once Pito hit that homer, the energy in the dugout changed big time," Palka said. "To get it started like that was big."

SOUND SMART

During the White Sox eighth-inning rally, the Royals issued an intentional walk to Omar Narvaez. It was just the third time in Narvaez's career he's been walked intentionally. Narvaez is hitting .407 (35-for-86) with four home runs over his past 27 games.

HE SAID IT

"He's probably really upset right now, even though he's expressing the joy of victory, that, 'Gosh, I'm going to have to start making adjustments or the guys behind me are gonna start making adjustments,' and I'd say probably I'm gonna have to make adjustments as a hitter. Take it out of the umpire's hands." -- Renteria, on Yoan Moncada striking out four times looking

UP NEXT

The White Sox head to St. Petersburg for a three-game series with the Rays starting Friday at 6:10 p.m. CT. Lucas Giolito (7-8, 6.26 ERA) goes for Chicago, seeking to rebound from a five-run outing. Giolito had a relatively solid July and brought his ERA down from the mid 7s to the low 6s.

Refocused Jimenez nets honor with strong July

Top prospect hit .455 with a 1.311 OPS in month; Cease named Minor League Pitcher of the Month

By Scott Merkin / MLB.com / Aug. 2, 2018

CHICAGO -- White Sox general manager Rick Hahn made a Wednesday visit to Triple-A Charlotte, home of the Knights and Eloy Jimenez, the organization's top prospect and the No. 3 prospect overall, per MLB Pipeline.

With the outfielder not in the lineup, the two had a chance to talk. But there was no conversation about an impending promotion to the White Sox for the 21-year-old, who is hitting .376 since moving from Double-A Birmingham to Charlotte.

"I'm just working on the things that I know I need to work [on]," said Jimenez through interpreter Billy Russo during a Thursday conference call in honor of Jimenez being selected White Sox Minor League Player of the Month. "I can't get frustrated over things that I can't control.

"I can get frustrated when things don't go well on the field, because those are the things I can control. What happens off the field, I can't control."

Hahn spoke to the media about both Jimenez and Michael Kopech, the right-hander pitcher who is the White Sox No. 2 prospect, and the boxes they need to check off before getting the call to Chicago. Jimenez would appear to have answered quite a few of those questions with his play in July.

Jimenez hit .455 with five home runs, seven doubles, 12 RBIs and a 1.311 OPS in 14 games. He has returned strong from an adductor strain, and he stressed that he continues working on the intangibles he can control.

"The key for me in Charlotte has been being patient, calm, swinging at pitches in the strike zone and keeping my confidence," Jimenez said. "I have been working hard on my defense, same as with my offense. I'm trying to be more patient at home plate, trying to get some more walks.

"But I haven't changed anything. I've had the same goals since I started playing: just try to get better every day. In all the aspects of the game, try to improve. It has been the same approach for me since I started playing. I did the same thing in Double-A in the beginning of the season, and I'm just keeping the work going in Charlotte."

Jimenez's time this past offseason with Gigantes in the Dominican Winter League -- with whom he hit .368 with four home runs and 21 RBIs -- helped the acquisition from the Jose Quintana trade prepare for the advanced pitching seen in International League action. Hahn and Jimenez didn't really talk about that aspect of his game on Wednesday. There was just an exchange of pleasantries, with Hahn encouraging Jimenez to keep working hard as he pushes toward his big-league debut.

"When God thinks that the time is right, I'm going to be ready," Jimenez said. "I'm working to be there this year, but if the front office or somebody else doesn't think that I should be there, that is their decision. I'm going to be ready for when the opportunity arrives."

Cease takes home pitching honor

Dylan Cease, the No. 5 White Sox prospect and No. 45 overall per MLB Pipeline, was named the organization's Minor League Pitcher of the Month for July. The right-hander posted a 2-0 record with a 1.50 ERA over four starts for Birmingham, striking out 35 and walking nine over 24 innings.

Cease struck out 12 and allowed one hit on July 25 against the Tennessee Smokies, following up a 12-strikeout, two-hit effort for Class A Advanced Winston-Salem on May 1.

"With the one in Winston, that was more I had a good changeup that day," said Cease during a Thursday conference call. "My most recent one, it was my slider and curveball and fastball were really good and my changeup was pretty good. I had a little bit better feel my last one."

Since the promotion to Birmingham, Cease has gone to more of a spike curveball. That effective pitch has allowed Cease to get ahead early and also put hitters away late in the count.

Third to first

- No. 10 White Sox prospect Alec Hansen was moved Thursday from Birmingham back to Winston-Salem, per the Dash. Hansen topped the Minors with 191 strikeouts in 2017, but he has walked 42 against 35 strikeouts in 35 2/3 innings for the Barons since returning from right forearm soreness.

- Infielder Nick Madrigal and outfielder Steele Walker, the White Sox top two picks in the 2018 MLB Draft, were promoted one Minor League level as announced by the team on Thursday.

Madrigal, selected fourth overall by the White Sox, moved to Winston-Salem after hitting .341 with no strikeouts over 44 at-bats in 12 games for Class A Kannapolis. Factoring in Madrigal's brief time with the organization's Rookie-level Arizona League team, he has gone 57 at-bats without striking out.

Walker jumped up to Kannapolis after hitting .267 over 13 games between the AZL White Sox and Advanced Rookie-level Great Falls.

- Nate Jones, sidelined since June 12 with a right pronator strain, played catch prior to Thursday afternoon's contest. The right-handed reliever suffered a setback in his injury rehab during the All-Star break and hadn't thrown in two weeks.

AL Central: Moving forward post-Trade Deadline

By Rhett Bollinger / MLB.com / Aug. 2, 2018

With the Indians out to a healthy lead in the American League Central, they were the only buyers in the division, as the other four clubs decided to sell, including the second-place Twins, who were the second-most active sellers in the Majors, trading away five players before Tuesday's non-waiver Trade Deadline.

The Indians helped shore up two of their issues with moves to address the bullpen and center field, while the Royals, Tigers, Twins and White Sox added pieces for the future. Here's a look at what all five clubs accomplished at the Deadline and what it means going forward:

INDIANS

What they did at the Deadline

Prior to Tuesday's Deadline, the Tribe landed center fielder Leonys Martin and Minor League pitcher Kyle Dowdy from the Tigers in exchange for shortstop prospect Willi Castro. Back on July 19, Cleveland shipped its former No. 1 prospect, catcher Francisco Mejia, to the Padres for All-Star closer Brad Hand and sidearm Adam Cimber. Also on Tuesday, the Indians acquired outfield prospect Oscar Mercado from the Cardinals for Minor Leaguers Conner Capel and Jhon Torres.

What it tells us

The Indians' main priorities during the trade season were to strengthen the bullpen and help the injury-riddled outfield. With Hand and Cimber in the fold, and relief ace Andrew Miller due back from the DL soon, the bullpen is in a much better spot. In Martin, the Indians upgraded the outfield defense and added a bat to lengthen out the bottom third of the top-heavy lineup.

What's the goal

For many players in Cleveland's clubhouse, free agency is looming and there is a heightened sense of urgency to win the World Series now. Given that all the players acquired have at least one additional year of control, the front office showed that it is focused on keeping the window open well beyond this year.

Big questions

Can the Indians really proceed with two outfield platoons? Right now, Martin and Rajai Davis are splitting time in center, while Melky Cabrera and Brandon Guyer divvy up the innings in right. That is not an ideal setup, but the Tribe is trying to maximize the offensive and defensive production in the absence of a surefire everyday player at either spot.

ROYALS

What they did at the Deadline

Traded outfielder Jon Jay, closer Kelvin Herrera and third baseman Mike Moustakas, all with expiring contracts. Acquired Brian Goodwin as a potential starting center fielder.

What it tells us

The Royals' No. 1 priority since last fall was finding ways to restock the farm system and accelerate the rebuild. They made a nice haul with their trades, picking up outfielder Brett Phillips, who could be a long-term starter, and another Major League-ready outfielder in Goodwin. They also added prospects to their Top 30 list per MLB Pipeline: right-hander Elvis Luciano (No. 23); third baseman Kelvin Gutierrez (No. 17) and outfielder Blake Perkins (No. 15). Right-hander Jorge Lopez, also acquired for Moustakas, could be a bullpen piece by next season.

What's the goal

Get a long look at Phillips and Goodwin (presently on the disabled list), and other internal prospects such as first baseman Ryan O'Hearn, among others in the system (Richard Lovelady, Josh Staumont, etc.).

Big question

Wins and losses are mostly irrelevant as the Royals barrel toward a 100-plus-loss season. So, the battle for roster spots in 2019 essentially can begin now. Kansas City will need to clear space off the 40-man roster so they can activate Eric Skoglund and Jesse Hahn off the 60-day disabled list, and call up other prospects from the Minors. But will it start the service-time clock on Lovelady, Staumont and/or Nicky Lopez?

TIGERS

What they did at the Deadline

Traded Martin and Dowdy to Cleveland for Castro.

What it tells us

While the Tigers continue to stockpile prospects for their rebuilding project, the more telling statement was the lack of deals with other veterans Detroit had on the block. While general manager Al Avila admittedly tempered his expectations on returns, he opted to hold onto Mike Fiers and Francisco Liriano rather than give them away for throwaway prospects.

What's the goal

The Tigers head into the stretch run looking to keep developing their young players, a group that now includes outfielder Mike Gerber in Martin's old roster spot. They'll likely add more youngsters once rosters expand in September.

Big question

If the Tigers do not trade Nicholas Castellanos by the end of August, will they revisit the idea of a contract extension, something they threw out last offseason but quickly dismissed for lack of common ground?

TWINS

What they did at the Deadline

Traded infielder Eduardo Escobar to the D-backs for two prospects; traded right-hander Ryan Pressly to Astros for two prospects; traded lefty Zach Duke to the Mariners for two prospects; traded right-hander Lance Lynn to the Yankees for two prospects and traded second baseman Brian Dozier to the Dodgers for infielder Logan Forsythe and two prospects.

What it tells us

After making it to the AL Wild Card Game last year, the Twins planned to compete this season and signed several players to one-year deals in the offseason, but after struggling to find any consistency, the front office decided to sell. Escobar, Duke, Lynn and Dozier were impending free agents, while Pressly is under control through next season, so the Twins were trying to get value from players who were otherwise going to leave in free agency. It was a tough week for Twins fans, as Dozier and Escobar were the heart and soul of the club, but the organization feels it's now better set up to compete in the near and long-term future.

What's the goal

Despite receiving some lower-level prospects among the 11 Minor Leaguers they acquired, the Twins are still preparing to be competitive next season. They opted to hold onto right-hander Kyle Gibson, who is under team control next year, and closer Fernando Rodney, who has a \$4.5 million club option for 2019. They still see the last two months of the season as important to the development of young core players such as Jose Berrios, Eddie Rosario, Miguel Sano, Jorge Polanco and Max Kepler. Right-hander Ervin Santana, who has made just two starts this year after undergoing finger surgery in February, could also be traded in August, as he's an impending free agent.

Big question

Byron Buxton and Sano were expected to break out this season and help Minnesota build on its unexpected success last year, but it hasn't been the case. Buxton has struggled offensively and has had trouble staying healthy, as he's currently nursing a left wrist sprain at Triple-A Rochester. Sano is back with the Twins, but spent roughly six weeks in the Minor Leagues, including a stint at Class A Advanced Fort Myers to work on his conditioning and get back on track offensively. They're both still a huge part of the future, and finishing strong would be big going into next season.

WHITE SOX

What they did at the Deadline

Traded closer Joakim Soria to the Brewers for left-hander Kodi Medeiros and right-hander Wilber Perez; traded international signing bonus pool money to the Yankees for left-hander Caleb Frare and to the Rays for left-hander Hunter Schryver.

What it tells us

General manager Rick Hahn has talked about this season being more about development than talent acquisition, unlike this time last year, and the lack of frequent action at the Trade Deadline backed up that idea. The White Sox brought in needed left-handed pitching depth to their rebuild.

What's the goal

The main target for the White Sox remains setting themselves up for multiple championships. That involves developing players at the Minor League level, not rushing them to the big leagues even if there's a need, and putting together a critical mass of talent.

Big question

When will outfielder Eloy Jimenez and right-handed pitcher Michael Kopech, the organization's top two prospects, arrive with the White Sox? Will they arrive with the White Sox in 2018?

Hahn recently mentioned a checklist the pair needs to fulfill, even with both of them performing at a high level for Triple-A Charlotte. Again, the organization's focus is future excellence and not speeding things up now for present gratification.

Eloy Jimenez not worrying about when he'll be called up to White Sox: 'I'm going to be ready for when the opportunity arrives'

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago / Aug. 2, 2018

The question hasn't changed since the beginning of the season. White Sox fans have been begging for an answer for months.

When is Eloy Jimenez going to get called up to the major league squad?

The White Sox certainly have their reasons for wanting to give Jimenez more time and more experience facing pitching at the Triple-A level. After all, he's played fewer than 30 games there. But the numbers Jimenez has put up in Charlotte, and in Birmingham before that, have been downright sensational. Heading into Thursday, Jimenez boasted a .376/.423/.693 slash line with eight homers and 17 RBIs in his 27 games with the Knights.

It's that kind of production that has folks clamoring for a promotion.

As for Jimenez, who at this time a year ago was still playing at Class A Winston-Salem, he's not quite as worked up about the situation. He's going about his business in Charlotte and knows that the decision to bring him up to the majors is out of his hands.

"I'm working to be there this year, but if the front office or somebody else doesn't think that I should be there, that is their decision," Jimenez said through a translator on a conference call with reporters one day after being named the organization's minor league player of the month. "I'm going to be ready for when the opportunity arrives.

"I can't get frustrated over things that I can't control. I can get frustrated when things don't go well on the field because those are the things I can control. What happens off the field, I can't control that."

As general manager Rick Hahn has mentioned multiple times over the course of this season, the numbers that show up in a box score don't tell the whole story of a young player's development and that there are other, non-statistical things that the organization is looking for before making the decision to promote someone to the next level, the big leagues in the case of Jimenez and fellow top prospect Michael Kopech.

To that end, Jimenez has plenty of things he's working on on a daily basis to make sure he's as ready for the majors as possible.

"I have been working hard on my defense, same as with my offense. I'm trying to be more patient at home plate, trying to get some more walks," Jimenez said. "But I haven't changed anything. I've had the same goals since I started playing, just try to get better every day in all the aspects of the game, try to improve. It has been the same approach for me since I started playing. I did the same thing in Double-A in the beginning of the season and I'm just keeping the work going in Charlotte.

"I've been working hard. I've been getting to the ballpark early everyday, trying to do my work in the gym. Trying to lose some weight too, to be in the best shape as possible, to perform to the best of my abilities and just to be ready for whenever the team decides to call me up."

With how he's fared at both levels he's played at this season, it would figure that Jimenez would join the big league team at some point before the 2018 season runs out. Though the White Sox, with the major league squad 33 games under .500, are in no rush to bring any of their prospects up, and Hahn has said that eagerness to see Jimenez and Kopech on the South Side — be it from the fan base or from his own front office — will not at all be the determining factor in a promotion.

All Jimenez can do is keep hitting, keep improving, keep developing. And at some point, the call will come.

Daniel Palka hit a dramatic pinch-hit homer to beat the Royals: Could it be a glimpse of his role on future White Sox teams?

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago / Aug. 2, 2018

So many projections of the White Sox future focus on where all these talented prospects are going to wind up starting.

But rarely does one of these 2020 or 2021 projections include bench players.

This isn't to say that Daniel Palka, who hit his third pinch-hit home run of the season to lift the White Sox to a win over the visiting Kansas City Royals on Thursday, is destined to be nothing more than a pinch-hitter. There are plenty of surprises left in this rebuild, and few things have been as surprising in 2018 as Palka being one off the team lead in home runs as the calendar flips to the season's final two months.

But it's a valuable thing to have a pinch-hitter extraordinaire. Being able to send someone to the plate in the middle of a game that can take the ball out of the ballpark and flip the situation on its head is a nice tool to have in the toolbox. And if the wave of White Sox prospects washes ashore on the South Side and plugs every position on the diamond, being able to keep Palka around as a power bat off the bench wouldn't at all be a bad thing.

"He's shown the ability to do that," manager Rick Renteria said after Thursday's win. "He gets in there, he's certainly not scared of the moment. I think he's just looking for a pitch out over the plate that he can handle and drive. He's confident in his swing, and he's got natural strength.

"I know we start him, we DH him, but he seems to have a little bit of a knack, as we're seeing, in the pinch-hit at-bats. Not so much (just) the homers, he has good at-bats. He'll take a walk, might get a base hit. He has good at-bats. He's showing that he's got that possibility in him."

With the state of rebuilding that the White Sox are in, any import from the minor leagues is greeted with questions about taking advantage of an opportunity. And often, those are asked with Wally Pipp in mind. Pipp, of course, was the player who lost his job to replacement Lou Gehrig, who became one of the game's all-time greats.

But not everyone's going to be the Iron Horse.

And so maybe for Palka, taking advantage of the opportunity that's in front of him means showing the White Sox he can be used in a pinch. Certainly his effort Thursday, one of the more dramatic moments of the White Sox season, would fit that bill. After the Royals took their own lead on an eighth-inning pinch-hit homer, Palka's three-run blast broke a 3-all tie.

Again, that's a valuable thing to have.

"It's the same as like pregame preparation," Palka said. "We got the cage down there so you know we got access to do the same stuff we do if we are starting a game.

"I wanted to hit a homer. That was it. I wanted to get a ball I could hit out of the park. He gave me one."

Can Palka stick on this developing squad? That's been a question worth discussing since he came up from Triple-A, and it's an unanswered question until the White Sox see what all these prospects end up doing. Certainly he's capable of getting hot, hitting .378 with five homers in his last 13 games.

"Just need to be a little more consistent," Palka said. "Made some adjustments the series before the All-Star break, and they are working pretty well. Just going to try to stay steady doing what I'm doing these past however many games, 15 or so.

"Whatever role is open, I'm down to compete for it."

Just remember that taking advantage of an opportunity doesn't always mean becoming a starter for the next decade. Sometimes it means providing one of the tools that championship teams need to succeed.

Struggling pitching prospect Alec Hansen goes from Double-A to Class A in White Sox system

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago / Aug. 2, 2018

Alec Hansen has had a rough go of things in 2018, and he's heading the opposite way of many of his fellow prospects in the White Sox farm system.

After missing months due to a springtime forearm injury, Hansen posted a 6.56 ERA in nine starts with Double-A Birmingham, and he was moved back to Class A Winston-Salem on Thursday.

Hansen, a second-round pick in the 2016 draft, has had a lot of trouble with walks, which have piled up in a hurry despite just a handful of outings. He's walked 42 batters in 35.2 innings. That's compared to 35 strikeouts, a surprising ratio considering he led all of minor league baseball with 191 strikeouts a season ago, when he walked only 51 batters in 141.1 innings.

After walking a season-high nine batters two starts ago, he followed that up with his shortest outing of the year, a 1.1-inning start that featured three runs and seven more walks. Hansen has issued 22 walks in his last three starts, which have lasted just 10.1 innings.

Not long ago, Hansen was the White Sox second-ranked pitching prospect, behind only Michael Kopech. But his struggles, as well as the strong performances by Dylan Cease and Dane Dunning, have dropped him in MLB Pipeline's rankings. Once a top-100 prospect, he currently ranks outside the top 100 and as the No. 10 prospect in the White Sox (loaded) system.

Eloy Jimenez still waiting for White Sox call-up: 'I'm going to be ready' for opportunity

By Phil Rogers / Chicago Tribune / Aug. 2, 2018

Eloy Jimenez insists he is as much in the dark about his possible promotion to the White Sox as anyone but feels confident he can do the job when he's called on. The visible proof is Gleyber Torres, who was signed by the Cubs at the same time as him in 2013.

Torres was traded to the Yankees in the Aroldis Chapman deal two years ago. Jimenez and Dylan Cease went to the White Sox for Jose Quintana last season.

Torres was promoted to New York in late April and has emerged as an everyday second baseman, sometimes even hitting in the middle of the Yankees' loaded lineup. He was batting .289 with 17 home runs, 49 RBIs and .902 OPS through Wednesday.

"Gleyber is a great guy," Jimenez said through a translator on a conference call with reporters. "He was like my brother. We worked together and I'm really happy for him for all the success he's having right now in the majors. I'm pretty sure I can have the same success because I'm a hard worker too."

When Torres and the Yankees visit Guaranteed Rate Field next week, Jimenez is expected to still be in Triple A, continuing his development and remaining off the service-time clock. He spent time with White Sox general manager Rick Hahn in Charlotte on Wednesday night but says he was left not knowing if he is going to be brought to the South Side when rosters expand in September.

"We just said hello to each other," Jimenez said. "He told me just to keep working hard, keep doing the things I've been doing here. That's it. We didn't talk about anything else."

Jimenez said he doesn't have any expectations about being promoted even though he has hit .337 with 18 home runs and 59 RBIs with Double-A Birmingham and Triple-A Charlotte this season.

"I'm working to be there this year but if the front office or somebody else doesn't think that I should be there, that is their decision," Jimenez said. "I'm going to be ready for when the opportunity arrives. When God thinks that the time is right, I'm going to be ready."

The White Sox honored Jimenez as their minor-league player of the month for July. He hit .435 with seven doubles, six homers, 13 RBIs and a .455 on-base percentage over 16 games after recovering from a strained muscle in his left hip.

Cease was named as pitcher of the month. He is 11-2 with a 2.71 ERA between high-A and Double-A this season, and went 2-0 with a 1.20 ERA and 42 strikeouts in 30 innings for Birmingham in July. He also appeared in the Futures Game in Washington, D.C.

Daniel Palka finding a niche as 3-run pinch homer lifts White Sox over Royals

By Phil Rogers / Chicago Tribune / Aug. 2, 2018

Daniel Palka had one thing on his mind when he was summoned to pinch hit.

A single probably would have put the White Sox ahead, but the big rookie was swinging for the fences.

“One hundred percent, homer,” Palka said. “Seriously. I wanted a ball up I can hit out of the park.”

Palka jumped on a nothing slider at the belt from Royals reliever Jason Hammel, driving it into the seats in right-center field for a three-run homer. It gave the Sox a 6-4 victory Thursday and a 2-4 record for the homestand at Guaranteed Rate Field.

It was a moment worthy of the legendary South Side Hit Men and thus appropriate that it gave Palka a share of a franchise record. Oscar Gamble hit three pinch homers in 1977, setting the mark, and this was the third for Palka, who has 16 home runs in 244 at-bats.

While blue-chip guys such as Yoan Moncada, Eloy Jimenez, Michael Kopech and Luis Robert command attention from the media and fans, it takes contributions from some unexpected sources to complete a successful rebuild. Palka, claimed off waivers from the Twins in November, is showing he can pound right-handers well enough to play a long-term role.

“(In) the last year and a half or so, the guys in the front office filtered through many, many players,” manager Rick Renteria said. “He was one of the guys they targeted, that they liked, and our scouts liked, and put in good reports. It wasn’t by accident.”

General manager Rick Hahn credits scouts John Tumminia, Chris Lien and Keith Staab for leading him to give Palka, 26, a giving him second chance after he had fallen out of favor with the Twins.

Palka would love everyday at-bats as a corner outfielder or designated hitter, but he looks more like a potential role player. That’s fine with him if that’s how it works.

“Yeah, man, whatever role is open,” he said. “I’m down to compete for it.”

Reynaldo Lopez has a shot to be a fixture in the White Sox rotation, but inconsistency has bothered him. He held the Royals scoreless through seven innings and left with the Sox leading 2-0 after a leadoff double and bunt single in the eighth.

An entirely different game broke out with both bullpens involved. The Royals took a 3-2 lead when their pinch hitter, Whit Merrifield, hit a three-run homer off Xavier Cedeno in the eighth.

“I felt good,” said Lopez, who cut his ERA to 4.47. “I felt in command of all my pitches. I was focused today. I felt very good. At the end, it was crazy. ... It was a very emotional game, a very intense game.”

Jose Abreu started the eighth-inning rally with a tying homer off Jason Adam.

“Once Pito hit that homer, the energy in the dugout changed big time,” Palka said. “To get it started like that was big.”

Nothing was bigger than Palka’s swing. There’s no way to know where his career goes from here, but being mentioned next to Gamble is a cool way to start.

Extra innings: The White Sox may add a catcher for the weekend series against the Rays in Florida. Kevan Smith’s wife was in labor when the team left for Florida. ... Moncada struck out looking in all four at-bats, giving him a majors-high 149 strikeouts. He’s on pace for 224, which would break Mark Reynolds’ season record of 223 in 2009.

Series preview: White Sox at Rays

By Phil Rogers / Chicago Tribune / Aug. 2, 2018

All games on WGN-AM 720

Friday: 6:10 p.m., NBCSCH.

RH Lucas Giolito (7-8, 6.26) vs. RH Ryne Stanek (1-3, 2.36).

Saturday: 5:10 p.m., WGN-9.

LH Carlos Rodon (3-3, 3.24) vs. LH Blake Snell (12-5, 2.27).

Sunday: 12:10 p.m., NBCSCH

RH James Shields (4-13, 4.56) vs. TBA

Jose Abreu, Daniel Palka power White Sox to 6-4 victory

By Daryl Van Schouwen / Sun-Times / Aug. 2, 2018

Admitting his concentration was an issue in his previous four starts in which he had struggled with an 8.72 ERA and 0-4 record, Reynaldo Lopez looked locked in Thursday.

He pitched seven-plus innings of two-run ball in the White Sox’ 6-4 victory against the Royals at Guaranteed Rate Field.

Lopez exited in the eighth inning leading 2-0 with two runners on, a lead that disappeared on Whit Merrifield’s three-run pinch home run with two outs against left-hander Xavier Cedeno, the third Sox reliever of the inning.

Jose Abreu’s homer in the bottom of the inning against Jason Adam tied it, and Daniel Palka’s three-run pinch homer against Jason Hammel put the Sox in front 6-3.

Lopez, who received a no-decision, allowed five hits and two walks and struck out four, helping the Sox (38-70) avoid a series sweep against the Royals (34-74).

“I’ve said it before — focus is the thing that will keep you in the game,” Lopez said. “Focus is the key to success. Today, the focus was throwing the first pitch for a strike and commanding the zone.”

“Right from the beginning, straight out of the bullpen, you could see right out of the shoot he was hitting 96 [mph], 97, working 93, 94 with a good changeup,” manager Rick Renteria said. “Attacking the strike zone.”

Lopez said he told himself to block out the outside noise and “just think about the game, the pitches you need to execute, and I think that was a key for me today.”

Omar Narvaez singled Abreu home in the fourth and Tim Anderson doubled in a run in the seventh to notch two runs against right-hander Brad Keller.

Rosell Herrera's sacrifice fly in the ninth against Luis Avilan, who went home with the dugout scorecard for notching his first career save, accounted for the Royals' fourth run. Leury Garcia's running catch against the wall in left helped prevent further damage.

Palka in a pinch

Palka, 4-for-11 with three homers as a pinch hitter, batted for Matt Davidson and tied Oscar Gamble's franchise record (1977) for pinch homers. Palka said he was looking to go deep.

"I wanted to hit a homer," he said. "That was it. I wanted to get a ball I could hit out of the park. He gave me one."

Palka has 16 homers this season.

Madrigal, Walker promoted

Fourth overall selection Nick Madrigal and second-round outfielder Steele Walker were promoted to Class A Winston-Salem and low Class A Kannapolis, respectively.

Madrigal, a middle infielder, was batting .341/.347/.409 with one walk and no strikeouts in 12 games at Kannapolis.

† Right-hander Alec Hansen, rated as the Sox' No. 2 pitching prospect after leading the minors in strikeouts last season, was transferred from Class AA Birmingham to Winston-Salem. Hansen, 0-4 with a 6.56 ERA in nine starts, has dealt with soreness in his right forearm.

This and that

With 141 homers, Abreu passed Ron Kittle for 10th place on the all-time franchise list.

† Narvaez is batting .407 with six doubles, four homers and 17 RBI in his last 27 games.

† Anderson has hit safely in 20 of his last 21 home games.

† Catcher Kevan Smith missed the game while with his wife, awaiting the birth of the couple's first child. The couple plans to name the baby after close friend and former teammate Daniel Webb, who died in an ATV accident last October.

Eloy Jimenez waits patiently for call from White Sox

By Daryl Van Schouwen / Sun-Times / Aug. 2, 2018

Give credit to Eloy Jimenez. At 21, he already knows how to say most of the right things about his current place, which is waiting patiently for a call-up to the White Sox while hitting the cover off the ball at Class AAA Charlotte.

Jimenez seems more than ready to be a major-leaguer, having ripped Southern League pitching at Class AA Birmingham and now elevating his performance in the International League at Charlotte, where he batted .435/.455/.839 with six home runs and 13 RBI in 16 games last month.

General manager Rick Hahn was there to see him Wednesday, even though Jimenez had the day off, sparking speculation that a call-up might be imminent, perhaps made-for-national-TV worthy with a Sox home game Monday against the Yankees added by ESPN this week.

"We just said hello to each other," Jimenez said during a conference call with media Thursday, the day after being named the Sox' Minor League Player of the Month for July. "He told me just to keep working hard, keep doing the things I've been doing here. That's it. We didn't talk about anything else."

Jimenez is the No. 3-ranked prospect in baseball, according to MLB Pipeline. Fans are clamoring on social media for his promotion to a team that hasn't given them much to cheer about with a 38-70 record. Many of them are wondering what could possibly be left for Jimenez, and perhaps top pitching prospect Michael Kopech, as well, to check off from a list of things to be accomplished before they see the majors.

There's a financial advantage in keeping Jimenez's major-league service-time clock on hold till next April, but indications are the Sox aren't worried about contractual money matters in 2025. Hahn might actually mean it when he suggests they will err on the side of patience with Jimenez.

"Our checklist that we want these guys to answer is a little more lengthy than [what is seen in box scores]," Hahn said last week, "and not until they've answered all those questions we have for them at the minor-league level will we promote them."

That touched off a flurry of blowback from fans, as well as media, wondering what else he would need to do. So Jimenez has been asked about "checked boxes."

He said he's "just working on the things I need to work [on]. Nobody has told me anything about any list."

Defense, particularly taking good routes on fly balls, is certainly on the list for Jimenez, whose bat is not an issue as he leads the IL in on-base percentage (.423) since his promotion from Birmingham on June 21. He's hitting .337/.386/.601 with 18 homers, 23 doubles and 59 RBI in 80 games between Birmingham and Charlotte.

He could step in right now and be the Sox' best-hitting outfielder, maybe more than that.

"I can't get frustrated over things that I can't control," Jimenez said. "I can get frustrated when things don't go well on the field because those are the things I can control. What happens off the field, I can't control that."

Jimenez said the key for him since getting promoted to Charlotte has been showing patience at the plate, staying calm and swinging at pitches in the strike zone against pitchers that have better command than he saw at Birmingham.

"I'm trying to get more walks [he has eight in 27 games, with 12 strikeouts], but I haven't changed anything," he said. "I've had the same goals since I got in the game — get better every day in all aspects of it."

"I'm working to be there this year, but if the front office or somebody else doesn't think that I should be there, that is their decision. I'm going to be ready for when the opportunity arrives. When God thinks that the time is right, I'm going to be ready."

Palka powers White Sox to 6-4 win over Royals

By Scot Gregor / Daily Herald / Aug. 2, 2018

Palka power.

Daniel Palka has it, and he flashed it at the right time for the Chicago White Sox Thursday.

With the game tied at 3 and two on and one out in the eighth inning, Palka came to the plate as a pinch-hitter. The muscular 6-foot-2, 220-pounder had one thing on his mind.

"I wanted to hit a homer," Palka said. "That was it. I wanted to get a ball I could hit out of the park. He gave me one."

Relief pitcher Jason Hammel left a pitch up and Palka crushed it, launching a 3-run homer into the right-field seats. The 420-foot drive lifted the Sox to a 6-4 win over the Kansas City Royals.

Palka is now tied for the franchise lead with 3 pinch-hit home runs. Oscar Gamble also had the had trick, in 1977.

"He's shown the ability to do that," White Sox manager Rick Renteria said. "He gets in there, he's certainly not scared of the moment. I think he's just looking for a pitch out over the plate that he can handle and drive. He's confident in his swing and he's got natural strength."

It was a bright afternoon for Palka, and the same goes for Sox starting pitcher Reynaldo Lopez.

Blaming a lack of focus for an 0-4 record and 8.72 ERA over his last 4 starts, the 24-year-old righty was locked in against the Royals.

"Right from the beginning, straight out of the bullpen," Renteria said. "You could see right out of the shoot he was hitting 96, 97 (mph), working 93, 94 change-ups, attacking the strike zone. Everything you wanted to see out of him today, he gave us."

Lopez pitched 7 innings and allowed 2 runs on 5 hits and 2 walks to go with 4 strikeouts.

"I felt good," Lopez said through a translator. "I felt in command of all my pitches. I was focused today. At the end, it was a crazy end. Palka had the big hit for us today. It was a very emotional game, a very intense game."

Cease honored:

Eloy Jimenez and Dylan Cease were two of the Cubs' top prospects last season before being traded to the White Sox for Jose Quintana.

In July, Jimenez was voted the Sox's minor league player of the month and Cease was named the top pitcher.

The 22-year-old righty was 2-0 with a 1.20 ERA in 5 July starts with Class AA Birmingham.

"I think I'm just executing pitches better, to be honest," said Cease, a 6-foot-2, 190-pounder. "I've changed my curveball to more of a spiked curve and it seems to have improved my curveball."

For the season, Cease is a combined 11-2 with a 2.71 ERA and 131 strikeouts in 106⅔ innings with Birmingham and high A Winston-Salem.

There is little doubt he is tracking toward the White Sox's rotation.

"I feel if I was up there right now, I could compete," Cease said. "I could definitely compete but I'm not that worried about it right now. I'm trying to see what I can do right now to be the best player I can be."

Moving day:

The Sox's top two draft picks were promoted Thursday.

First-rounder Nick Madrigal heads to Winston-Salem after batting .341/.347/.409 in 12 games at low A Kannapolis.

The No. 4 overall pick in the June draft out of Oregon State, Madrigal did not strike out in 49 plate appearances.

Outfielder Steele Walker, the White Sox's second-round pick out of Oklahoma, was bumped to Kannapolis after slashing .206/.263/.412 with 2 home runs and 4 RBI in 9 games with Advanced Rookie Great Falls.

Starting pitcher Alec Hansen, who led all minor league pitchers with 191 strikeouts last season while going a combined 11-8, 2.80 ERA with Kannapolis, Winston-Salem and Birmingham, was demoted from Birmingham to Winston-Salem Thursday.

Hansen was 0-4 with a 6.56 ERA in 9 starts at Double-A after missing over two months with right forearm pain.

Red-hot Jimenez keeps cool while waiting for call from White Sox

By Scot Gregor / Daily Herald / Aug. 2, 2018

On the field, Eloy Jimenez is doing all the right things with Class AAA Charlotte.

The Chicago White Sox's top prospect is equally impressive off the field.

Speaking on a conference call Thursday after batting .435 with 7 doubles, 6 home runs, 13 RBI, 13 runs scored and a 1.293 OPS over in July and being voted Sox's minor-league player of the month, Jimenez could have used the platform to push for a deserved promotion to the major leagues.

The 21-year-old outfielder will continue letting his advanced play do the talking.

"I can't get frustrated over things that I can't control," Jimenez said through White Sox translator Billy Russo. "I can get frustrated when things don't go well on the field because those are the things I can control. What happens off the field, I can't control that."

He's not the best defensive outfielder in left or right, and he's not a base stealing threat.

But Jimenez is in complete control where it matters most -- the plate.

Heading into Thursday night's game against Norfolk, the 6-foot-4, 220-pounder was hitting a combined .337/.386/.601 with 18 homers and 59 RBI in 80 games with Charlotte and AA Birmingham this season while striking out only 51 times in 339 plate appearances.

Since being promoted to Charlotte on June 21, Jimenez has pulverized International League pitching. Playing winter ball in his native Dominican Republic after the 2017 season helped prepare the right-hander for the step up in class.

"There are some similarities here in Charlotte," Jimenez said. "The pitchers here throw hard and they have better command of their pitches and they throw strikes. Having the experience that I had in the DR put me in a better position to succeed in Charlotte."

Sox general manager Rick Hahn is weighing two options with Jimenez. He could call him up in the next few days or weeks or wait until the middle of next April to delay his service time clock.

Though he is clearly ready, Jimenez is comfortable playing the waiting game.

"I'm working to be there this year but if the front office or somebody else doesn't think that I should be there, that is their decision," Jimenez said. "I'm going to be ready for when the opportunity arrives. When God thinks that the time is right, I'm going to be ready."

Hahn was in Charlotte on Wednesday and he talked with his prize prospect.

"We just said hello to each other," Jimenez said. "He told me just to keep working hard, keep doing the things I've been doing here. That's it. We didn't talk about anything else."

Maybe Hahn visited Charlotte for one last look at Jimenez as a minor leaguer.

"Honestly, I don't know," Jimenez said. "I don't know why he was here. If he was here, it was for a reason. Maybe he knows something that I don't know."

Jimenez, Kopech will be playing for Chicago White Sox, but when?

By Scot Gregor / Daily Herald / Aug. 2, 2018

Eloy Jimenez is going to be wearing a Chicago White Sox uniform soon. Ditto for Michael Kopech.

An argument can be made that Jimenez would be the Sox's best hitter right now, and Kopech would be their best pitcher.

So it's not a question of if the duo are going to be with the White Sox. It's when.

There are two answers, and both are undoubtedly being weighed by general manager Rick Hahn and the Sox's front office.

1. Bring 'em up

Jimenez had a monster July and was voted White Sox player of the month after batting .435 with 7 doubles, 6 home runs, 13 RBI, 13 runs scored and a staggering 1.293 OPS over 16 games with Class AAA Charlotte.

The 21-year-old prospect has combined to hit .337/.386/.601 with 18 homers and 59 RBI in 80 combined games with Charlotte and AA Birmingham this season, and he has struck out only 51 times in 339 plate appearances.

Kopech was very good in April, not so good in May and June and back to very good in July (1-1, 3.33 ERA, 38 strikeouts in 27 innings).

Hahn was in Charlotte on Wednesday, and the guess here is he spoke to both of his best minor-league players.

Late last week, Hahn was asked when Jimenez and/or Kopech will be joining the White Sox.

"As we've talked about all along, the good ones do have a way of forcing the issue on you," Hahn said. "At the same time, the important thing for us in any promotion, whether it's Eloy and Kopech, or (Yoan) Moncada, (Lucas) Giolito and (Reynaldo) Lopez last year, or the hopefully legion of guys you'll be asking about over the next 18 to 24 months, the most important thing is that they're in a position to have long-term success for us, that they're in a position to succeed and not just survive.

"So, yes, while you can look at a stat line or you can look at a boxscore and say, 'This guy looks like he's doing well, looks like he's ready,' our checklist that we want these guys to answer is a little more lengthy than that. And not until they've answered all those questions we have for them at the minor-league level will we promote them."

Moncada was promoted to the White Sox on July 19 last season. Lopez followed on Aug. 11, and Giolito came up from Charlotte on Aug. 23.

2. Leave 'em down

Thanks to baseball's collective-bargaining agreement, the Sox can opt to keep Jimenez and Kopech at Triple-A in August, the final month of the minor-league season, and into the early part of next season.

Why?

If they wait until mid-April 2019, they would get an extra year of service time on both players. In other words, Jimenez and Kopech would not be eligible for free agency until after the 2025 season.

It might sound like a stupid choice and a waste of major-league development time, but why not wait another month this year and a couple of weeks next year to keep both players under contract for another full season?

The Cubs made a similar decision on Kris Bryant in 2015, bringing up the star third baseman from AAA Iowa on April 17.

Sooner or later, we'll find out what the White Sox are going to do. Jimenez and Kopech might both be in the major leagues as early as Monday, when the Sox open a three-game home series against the New York Yankees.

If one or both are not in the majors in September, you'll know why.

The Dylan Cease Trade: How the White Sox are getting the prototype pitcher the Cubs envisioned By Patrick Mooney / The Athletic / Aug. 2, 2018

Keith Lockhart knows what great pitching looks like after playing on those Atlanta Braves teams in the late 1990s/early 2000s. Lockhart knows because he was the other player the Kansas City Royals threw into the deal to get a young hitter named Jermaine Dye.

Those are the big ideas surrounding Dylan Cease and the experiment the Cubs ran through the draft and their player-development system, trying to leverage their scouting acumen, financial resources and world-class facilities. Cease is now becoming the blue-chip prospect the Cubs envisioned – except it's happening in the White Sox organization the year after the José Quintana trade that shocked the baseball world.

The run-up to the July 31 trade deadline demands instant analysis of buyers and sellers – and winners and losers – when it's so much more complicated than that. Cities don't throw parades for teams that finish atop the Baseball America prospect rankings. People won't tell their grandkids where they were when they first saw a minor-league highlight clip of Eloy Jiménez on Twitter.

The Cubs needed Quintana to shake their listless team out of a World Series hangover, match up against Max Scherzer and Clayton Kershaw in the playoffs and stabilize the rotation through 2020. Theo Epstein's baseball operations group understands the job is to find a next generation of players like Cease and Jiménez and restock the farm system.

But to understand why the Cubs didn't have the prospect capital to make a huge deal for a top-of-the-rotation starter, instead settling for the 2018 version of Cole Hamels, listen to Lockhart, the Georgia-based area scout who signed Cease out of the 2014 draft. It's also a ray of hope for White Sox fans in the middle of another lost season on the South Side.

"He was like the prototype guy that Theo on down talked about," Lockhart said. "Every time we talked about him in our meetings, he was like our guy: 'This is going to be the pitcher we're going to develop from scratch. He's going to get to the big leagues and be a starter.'

"When he got traded, you're crushed, because you want to see him in a Cubs uniform. You know he's going to pitch in the big leagues and you just wanted it to be with your team. But you kind of get over that and you understand the move and the window we have to win."

Lockhart was on the ground floor of this project, watching from the stands at Georgia Gwinnett College on a freezing cold day near the beginning of Cease's senior season at Milton High School. Cease felt something and walked off the mound in the middle of the game, a moment that would set in motion one of the biggest trades in Chicago baseball history.

"When you watched his delivery, it looked like he was playing catch," Lockhart said. "When you're watching from the side, sometimes it doesn't look like he's throwing that hard. And then you look at the gun, it's 94, 95, 96.

"That gave you the confidence that this guy could probably start just because he was athletic and the delivery was under control. It was just a matter of fine-tuning some things. He was definitely on everybody's radar coming off the summer and into the spring and then it just ended pretty abruptly.

"We didn't really know the magnitude of it. [But] Dylan probably would have went in that mid-first round if he would have continued that climb throughout the spring."

Cease would ultimately need to have Tommy John surgery and decide whether or not to follow through with his commitment to Vanderbilt, a high-profile program known for its ability to recruit and develop pitchers.

Near the top of the 2014 draft, the Cubs ignored the industry consensus and trusted their gut instincts about Kyle Schwarber, making a below-slot deal with the No. 4 overall pick worth \$3.125 million. With their second-round pick, the Cubs chose pitcher Jake Stinnett, a college senior without much leverage. Those decisions freed up extra money to take chances deeper in the draft and the Cubs brass wanted the names of high-ceiling, hard-to-sign high school players. Cease immediately came to mind.

The Cease family never really wavered about what it would cost (\$1.5 million) to buy out his offer from Vanderbilt and requested that Dr. James Andrews be involved in the medical process. The Cubs needed confirmation that Cease would relocate to their Arizona facility and allow the organization to supervise his recovery from the Tommy John procedure.

"We just wanted to make sure they were on the same page," Lockhart said. "We have such a phenomenal rehab and nutrition program. The thing about Dylan was he was kind of a skinny high school kid. The fact that he was able to stay in Mesa at our complex that whole time, I think he put on 25 or 30 pounds.

"To be able to have our guys be with him from the first time he picked up a ball until he got on the mound for his first game was huge. It was kind of a perfect scenario. You hate for guys to get hurt. [But] for us to really be able to walk him through from Day 1 – and if there's any hiccups in the delivery or whatever – it's easier to kind of break down or start fresh. Plus, just feed him like crazy and put good weight on him.

"Everything was progressing in the right direction and the arm was almost better than it was before. I don't know if it was better. But I just think the combination of the TJ, the rehab, the strength training, the result was multiple 100-mph fastballs."

In the right-handed Cease, Lockhart saw a best-case power pitcher that reminded him more of John Smoltz than Tom Glavine or Greg Maddux, the Hall of Fame teammates who became part of his mental database. Cease is now listed at 6-foot-2 and 190 pounds and coming off an appearance in the All-Star Futures Game, showing he might become just as important to the White Sox rebuild as Jiménez.

"Nowadays as a scout, you see so many throwers because of the showcase world," Lockhart said. "It's max-effort, throw as hard as you can for an inning or two. You have to kind of weed through which ones have the makeup and the delivery to be able to have three polished pitches.

"The one thing that stood out so well with Dylan was his delivery. You watch his head and the way his arm came through and it didn't look like he maxed out his body to get to mid-90s. That's a sign where our player development/pitching coaches – if they have to tweak something – [know] it's a lot easier to tweak someone who's under control and athletic. He kind of just exuded all of that."

The Cubs admitted that it was easier to give up Cease in the Quintana trade because he had only advanced to Class-A South Bend and still needed to master three more minor-league levels before truly getting on the major-league radar (assuming he stayed healthy).

This season might have made Cease untouchable. Cease excelled at advanced Class-A Winston-Salem (9-2, 2.89 ERA) and earned a promotion to Double-A Birmingham, where he's dominated Southern League hitters (2-0, 2.34 ERA, 49 strikeouts and 13 walks through 34 2/3 innings). That includes last week's win over the Cubs' Double-A affiliate – when Cease retired the first 20 batters he faced. In his next outing, Cease extended his scoreless-inning streak to 17. Cease has notched at least seven strikeouts in all six of his Double-A starts.

The White Sox just named Cease and Jiménez as their minor league pitcher and player of the month for July. The Cubs are counting on Quintana (9-7, 4.26 ERA) to pitch better and deliver another strong second-half performance that leads to a third straight division title and a fourth consecutive playoff appearance.

When the Cubs point to their big-game confidence and clubhouse chemistry, part of it can be traced back to the aggressive investments made in the big-league team. The Cubs can live with Gleyber Torres becoming a star for the New York Yankees because Aroldis Chapman helped them get 2016 World Series rings. Lockhart knows every angle of the Quintana deal and how it will be dissected over and over again.

“When it first came down, it was easy to say, ‘Listen, we got an established big-league starter for some guys that were in A-ball,’” Lockhart said. “As the years go on, if Dylan turns out to be a No. 1 starter for the White Sox and leading a rotation, then the story just stays alive.

“I was traded to Atlanta from Kansas City and it was mainly a Michael Tucker-for-Jermaine Dye trade. I was in there and there was a left-handed pitcher in there for the Braves. We were two of the other guys and Jermaine Dye was hurt the first couple years and Michael Tucker got off to a decent start. That's kind of all you heard about.

“And then Jermaine Dye kind of became Jermaine Dye. Then it was like, ‘Oh, the Braves got Keith Lockhart and Jermaine Dye is an All-Star.’

“As guys evolve, the trade becomes a fun thing for the media to always keep talking about. Hopefully, we'll get another World Series. It's like the Chapman trade. It's worth it when you win.”

Someday, maybe this will be known as “The Dylan Cease Trade.”

Rick Hahn did not personally deliver Eloy Jiménez's ticket to Chicago — yet

By James Fegan / The Athletic / Aug. 2, 2018

Eloy Jiménez got the day off Wednesday from a Charlotte Knights game that wound up getting suspended by rain, so he had even more time to entertain an important guest to BB&T Ballpark — which, due to his .376/.423/.693 batting line across 27 Triple-A games, is sort of like his kingdom these days.

That guest was Rick Hahn, who coincidentally is the general manager of the team that employs Jiménez.

“I don't know why he was here,” Jiménez said through team interpreter Billy Russo over a conference call. “If he was here, it was for a reason. Maybe he knows something that I don't know.

“We just said hello to each other. He told me just to keep working hard, keep doing the things I've been doing here. That's it. We didn't talk about anything else.”

Jiménez is always gregarious and upbeat, but his answer didn't exactly suggest the most rollicking conversation between the two. And it seems pretty obvious that Hahn didn't surprise him with a plane ticket to Chicago — yet.

Because the conversation did not end that way, Jiménez's conference call — occasioned by his White Sox minor league player of the month honor — shifted to his awareness of the areas in which he needs to improve in order to earn a promotion. Rick Hahn declined to specify what Jiménez or Michael Kopech

needed to work on last week. Defense and establishing a run of success and health in Charlotte longer than one awesome month can be assumed, but Hahn left it by saying that both players were well aware of what tasks lay ahead of them.

Jiménez's professed ignorance about "boxes to check" or "checklists" or anything that has thrown the White Sox fan base into meme-based exasperation would seem to run counter to this. But Jiménez acknowledged awareness of areas for improvement, even if he didn't use the same terminology.

"Nobody has told me anything about any list," Jiménez said through Russo. "I'm just working on the things that I know I need to work [on]. The front office work is just to try to do the work that they can do off the field, in the meantime. As a player we have to do the job that we can do on the field."

Jiménez also mentioned that he's trying to drop some weight amid references to working on his defense. That said, he pretty clearly would be happy to be in the majors by Friday, as he would have been happy to be there in June, before Triple-A pitching provided a rehash of the sophisticated approach he demonstrated in the Dominican Winter League.

"I'm working to be there this year but if the front office or somebody else doesn't think that I should be there, that is their decision," Jiménez said through Russo. "I'm going to be ready for when the opportunity arrives. When God thinks that the time is right, I'm going to be ready."

Dylan Cease isn't dealing with quite the same demand for his promotion, but also quietly got minor league pitcher of the month honors — he struck out 42 in 30 innings in Double-A Birmingham and recorded a 1.20 ERA in July. His run included seven innings of scoreless, one-hit ball with 12 strikeouts on July 25, an outing he said was better than his near-identical 12-strikeout outing in Winston-Salem on May 1.

Cease usually keeps his answers pretty simple, but when asked why he was nukuing a level he had just been promoted to that went beyond "executing pitches," he noted an adjustment to his curveball suggested by sidelined rotation mate Dane Dunning.

"I've changed my curveball grip to more of a spike curve," Cease said. "I made that adjustment actually when I got up here. I talked to Dane about it and I thought I could make my curveball better."

A spike curve sounds like more of a wipeout offering that something Cease can dump in for strikes, which Winston-Salem pitching coach Matt Zaleski identified as the next step for him a few months back, but Cease said it's working for both and showing more depth as well. At 106 1/3 innings, Cease is already 13 frames above his career-high as a professional. The White Sox have made a point of avoiding large jumps in that regard, but Cease has been pleased with how his velocity has stayed strong overall.

"I think it's just the weight room, continue to do my throwing program and make sure I get enough recovery and sleep and eating good," Cease said. "I'm already more than I've thrown previously so we'll have to see how everything holds up this last month."

Speaking of Zaleski, he'll be reunited with Alec Hansen, who flourished under his tutelage in Great Falls in 2016 after being drafted, and in the first half of last season in Kannapolis. The White Sox demoted Hansen to High-A Winston Salem after suffering through control problems in Double-A Birmingham similar to the ones Zaleski helped remedy when he came out of the University of Oklahoma.

Zaleski of course would push away all the credit for Hansen leading the minors in strikeouts last season, and attribute it to the pitcher's perfectionist nature. But as Hansen has walked 42 in 35 2/3 innings this season after missing nearly half the year with a forearm muscular issue, including 16 in 5 1/3 innings over his last two starts, a restoration of his confidence like the one pulled off in 2016 is in order.

Lefty Ian Clarkin, who missed a month with a groin strain after starting the season in Birmingham's rotation, and has been working in relief in Winston-Salem since returning, will go to Birmingham in Hansen's stead.

Infielder Mitch Roman is traveling down south as well, to make room for No. 4 overall pick Nick Madrigal in the Dash infield. Second round pick Steele Walker was promoted to Low-A Kannapolis as well.

After citing focus as the source of all his troubles, Reynaldo López—who is less than a year older than Hansen after all—enjoyed a nice recovery outing against the Royals on Thursday in a 6-4 win. He struck out just four over seven innings, but returned to getting swinging strikes off his changeups, walked only two, and took a scoreless game into the eighth until a pinch-hit three-run home run from Whit Merrifield off Xavier Cedeño plated the runners he left behind. Afterward, he was still talking about focus.

“I’ve said it before — focus is the thing that will keep you in the game,” López said through team interpreter Billy Russo. “Focus is the key for you to have success. For me today, the focus was throwing the first pitch for a strike, being able to command the zone. Before the game, I said to myself, forget about the outside noise, forget about everything. Just think about the game, the pitches you need to execute and I think that was a key for me today.”

Renteria more immediately noted that López came out of the gate 96-98 mph, but focus can present itself in a lot of ways. If it can present itself as one less question mark in the 2019 starting rotation, the White Sox will take that.

The seemingly simple fix to Reynaldo López’s recent struggles

By James Fegan / The Athletic / Aug. 2, 2018

There’s a list of analytical points that seemed like possible avenues to exposing the root of Reynaldo López’s recent struggles, which have caused his ERA to rise from 3.35 to 4.57 over the course of his past seven starts heading into his outing in Thursday’s series finale against Kansas City. He’s improved the carry on his four-seam fastball a bit since last year, but the swing-and-miss rate on it remains below average despite truly top-shelf velocity. His strikeout and walk rates remain too similar, and while the development of his slider has been tremendous, one can’t help but wonder whether his once prominent changeup would help get some ground balls amid a stretch that has seen him allow 11 home runs in 38 2/3 innings.

López pushed aside all that.

“I feel good, my body is strong, my arm is loose,” López said through team interpreter Billy Russo. “I think that the reason of my struggles, like I said before, is because of my focus. I think as a pitcher and as a ballplayer, if you want to have success, you have to focus. I don’t know why, but for whatever reason, during my last two or three outings, I’ve been losing my focus in part of games. When I lose my focus, I’m not able to execute, I’m not able to be as effective as I want to be. That has been the root of the problems. It’s just a matter of focus. I’ve been working on it to fix it and we’ll see how it goes next time.”

He’s certainly right that he’s said it before, blaming the general issue of focus after his last start, in which he allowed five home runs to the Toronto Blue Jays. He also cited it when manager Rick Renteria, pitching coach Don Cooper and bullpen coach Curt Hasler sat him down for a meeting after that outing to try to suss out the cause of his struggles. Renteria said after the loss to the Jays that fatigue was something to consider with López, but that during their meeting, the pitcher shot that notion down, as he did again to me on Wednesday.

“He truly felt like he wasn’t focused on doing his job,” Renteria said. “We wanted to make sure that we made an adjustment if we needed to, if there was a fatigue factor involved. It has nothing to do with the physical depletion on his ability to do things. He just felt that he wasn’t giving us a commitment, focally, when he was pitching and he was going to try to make the adjustment.”

What’s prompting the lapses in focus? How can they be stopped? Such a difficult-to-pin-down explanation rightfully inspires a lot of questions. López became a father for the first time in the last month, and is working through his first full season in the majors, but just said this is “something every ballplayer passes through.”

But whereas the Sox coaching staff has repeatedly cited focus and attentiveness on every play as something their young infielders are learning the necessity of through experience, or something that can be enforced through benchings for not running, it seems harder to reinforce in starting pitchers, who are by nature engaged in every pitch they throw. Renteria described it in terms of “commitment to the task,” on the mound and an unwillingness to accept bad results that is necessary to become elite. Whatever it is, it’s well beyond what a simple mound meeting can offer, at least for now.

“It’s all dependent on him, because sometimes we try to help, but if he doesn’t listen to us ...” said Omar Narváez, who caught López’s previous start. “You know, when he gets locked in, he’s usually not listening to anybody, so it’s kind of hard to help him when [he doesn’t] have an open mind. We try to have a conversation right after the game. Sometimes during the game it’s not a good time to do it because everything is happening too fast. Sometimes I would rather go after the game than during the game.”

If Narváez’s assessment sounds harsh, recall that López essentially blamed his own stubbornness and refusal to take Kevan Smith’s suggestion to throw off-speed to Salvador Perez before a backbreaking three-run home run in the eighth inning of a game earlier this month. If anything it sounds like a real-world description of how a phenomenon that is hard to understand manifests itself in games, and Narváez, who praised how much progress Carlos Rodón has made in keeping his cool on the mound, says what López is going through can happen to anyone.

For a team that began the season with a troika of starting pitchers in their first full year in the majors, and now has Carson Fulmer working as a reliever in Triple-A and Lucas Giolito improving but still saddled with the highest ERA of any qualified starter, this left turn in López’s promising season is a dispiriting development for the first wave of the Sox’s pitching youth movement.

These struggles in focus have rendered López to as downbeat as he has been all year, but for a lauded piece of the future of the franchise, it’s a problem that sounds more coachable than insufficient stuff, mechanical flaws or a major injury. And in terms of how much this stretch has thrown off López mentally, there are limits to its effect.

“I never lost confidence in myself,” López said. “I never lost the desire to want the ball, to want to go out there and pitch and compete. That’s something that is in me. I’m never going to lose that. It doesn’t matter what’s the circumstance. I always want to pitch. I always want to compete and show what I’m able to do. I know that right now the situation hasn’t been as good as we want it. But the desire to go out there and to pitch and perform is intact.”
