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The Athletic

Giants Mailbag: What's up with that offense, what are the next pitching moves and much, much more

Andrew Baggarly

Joe Panik and the Giants offense (which consists of Joe Panik) will report to AT&T Park for the home opener on Tuesday, but we don't have to wait that long to delve into your burning questions following the four-game split at Dodger Stadium.

Let's overreact to small sample sizes together!

(Eds. note: This is a curated and slightly edited version of the discussion featured here.)

Ben M. asks: When do you think we see (Steven) Duggar? I feel like part of the reason he was sent down was to get the extra year of service time, and he will be up in a few weeks (provided he doesn't go 0-30 before then). This factor doesn't seem to be mentioned because he isn't some top 100 prospect. Thoughts?

Maybe service time was on the list somewhere, and by somewhere, I mean it falls between "think of the cab fare" and "but I haven't eaten lunch yet so can we do this later." The Giants really like Duggar, but there is a difference between a prospect you feel has a decent chance to be an everyday player and a can't-miss future franchise anchor like Ronald Acuña Jr. with the Braves or Kris Bryant with the Cubs. So this isn't about delaying Duggar's free agency six years from now.

Can we all keep the number 13 in mind? That's the number of games that Duggar has played at Triple-A in his life. The Giants would have had to sacrifice center field depth in the form of Gregor Blanco or Gorkys Hernandez to put Duggar on the 40-man roster, and then what if the

kid hits .115 in the first three weeks?

No sense making that move until the Giants feel it best serves both the player's development as well as the team's success. We'll probably see him at some point before the All-Star break, and if we do, ideally it will be because he has forced the issue. Not because Austin Jackson wrenched his knee in a tragic revolving door incident.

Steven N. asks: What is wrong with the Giants offense? Is it worrisome at all or too early?

As Ralph Barbieri would say, two things can be true. Probably more the early part. But the sooner they have a nice eight-run game or a four-run inning, the less likely this will become a "thing" in their heads.

Albert B. asks: How is Will Smith's recovery coming? When should we see him back in the bullpen?

He was scheduled to throw to hitters in live BP yesterday. He had two more of those sessions lined up. The plan was to leave Arizona on April 11 and join an affiliate for a minor league rehab stint. That can last a maximum of 30 days. As long as he has no setbacks, he and the Giants were circling May 1 on the calendar.

Mike S. asks: How many hits does it take the average MLB team per run scored? And then how many does it take the Giants (guessing it takes them more, indicating poor efficiency)? Not taking extra bases, not getting guys over, not getting them in with risp less than two outs, no speed on the basepaths, low BAwRISP, etc.

So far this year (as of Sunday's games) there have been 822 hits and 438 runs scored. Last year it was about 42,000 and 22,000. So the ratio is just a smidge less than 2 to 1. Of course, as Jayson Stark noted in his tremendous debut column today, which I highly recommend you check out, the league set an all-time high in an interesting respect: better than 60 percent of players who amassed enough plate appearances to qualify for the batting crown hit at least 20 home runs.

The Giants, of course, had none of those players. Brandon Belt led them with 18. Yes, the Giants absolutely need to run the bases as efficiently as possible and hit in the clutch. But they need to make the home run part of their game this season, too. The revolution passed them by so badly that they got lapped a couple times. I also tend to believe the lack of power was the biggest factor that explained why they won all of three (*THREE three THREE three*) road series last season.

Louis W. asks: Wow Baggs, what an offensive disaster. Too early to panic, or signs of things to come?

Too early to panic. But, you know, be concerned. Little Jared is old enough to walk on the

escalator without picking him up. You still keep an eye on him to make sure a shoelace doesn't get snagged in the machinery, though.

Eric S. asks: Baggs, are (you) expecting (Tim) Lincecum to make it to the All-Star break?

First he's got to make it to the Rangers active roster. A blister prevented Lincecum from making progress quickly enough. Until we see him against big league hitters again, it's hard to be confident that anything he's doing now can lead to sustainable success again. Sure are a lot of people rooting for him, though.

Jose A. asks: Baggs, 2 runs in 4 games, both Panik heroic HR's. The new guys (Jax, Longo, Cutch) are 1 for 31 combined after the series. What's going on and what do they need to get going?!?!

Two for 43, actually. No need to sugar coat it. They're pressing a bit. At least Andrew McCutchen is taking good swings. Evan Longoria looks lost in a fog.

Jeremy D. asks: How much do you think Bobby Evans has played in the downfall of the Giants? I know good teams can't be at the top forever, and eventually decline. But ever since (Brian Sabean) was promoted and Evans has taken over it has been very many bad moves. So far Melancon, Samardzija, Longoria have been horrible. I think it's time to fully rebuild.

Not after four games. It'll be interesting to see what course they chart if they lose 90-plus again this year. But let's see how this plays out. The front office is collaborative so I think their recent downfall is something that reflects on the entire organization. I mean, the farm system should have been equipped to step in and help a bit more to keep last season from spiraling into a total embarrassment. So it was an organization-wide failure.

Traven T. asks: Do the Giants have any plans on signing a back-end veteran starter like R.A. Dickey?

Sounds like they will continue to go internal for now. They'll either wholestaff it on April 10 or call up Tyler Beede or Andrew Suarez (although Suarez would involve a 40-man move). That might be the only time they need one of those guys to plug a rotation spot if Jeff Samardzija continues to make progress. If he has a setback though, and whoever starts on the 10th gets torched, then they might have more of a sense of urgency. But they aren't going to go over the CBT at this point.

Justin M. asks: I don't want to worry about the offense because it's only the first series of the season. Then again, we said that last year. Are Cutch, Longo, and Jackson enough if they can't string together good at-bats?

Any team that can't string together good at-bats, and doesn't have a bunch of home run hitters, is going to be in trouble.

Diego B. asks: The Giants have been baseball's worst team for a year and a half. Is Bruce Bochy on the hot seat if they don't start winning? Do you see Dusty Baker stepping in?

Do you know the last time the Giants fired a manager with any length of time remaining on his contract? Don't spend a lot of time on this. You won't get it. It was Jim Davenport in 1985. Roger Craig took over and then it was Dusty and Felipe Alou (who served out their contracts and then departed) and then Bochy.

The Giants and Bochy are under contract through 2019. Would they break such a lengthy M.O. if they have another rotten season? Maybe they'd find a way to gently push him out, especially if he has any additional health concerns this season. If that were to happen, then I think they would go young with their next manager. Bam Bam Muelens would be a candidate before Dusty. Don't be surprised if you hear the words "Giants manager David Bell" in your lifetime, either.

Robert W: What is the track record of players changing leagues? Longoria looks lost but maybe it's just excellent LA pitching...

Maybe not as significant as it used to be when the leagues didn't cross over and the umpires were totally different, etc. There wasn't the same level of video and scouting information available then, either. I don't think it's a huge factor.

This was a tough place for Longo to open up. He's from Bellflower/Downey and probably had a ton of friends and family at the ballpark, too. Players often seem to struggle when they make a rare appearance in their hometown. Compound that with wanting to make a good first impression with the Giants while changing teams for the first time. It's true, he didn't look great in spring and his at-bats have been painful to watch these four games. But let's see how he looks when he gets a couple of knocks and a chance to settle in.

Albert B. asks: How're you liking the new gig, Baggs? What are the best and most challenging parts of covering the team (for The Athletic or just in general for covering a Major League team)

I like it a lot! Because I don't write a running game story, which often involves massive stress and rewriting because of late lead changes, I can really watch the game and notice the small stuff. That's the biggest benefit. Then I can sit down to write and not feel exhausted because I didn't just get done wrestling a bear of a running story for 90 minutes.

Cathy C. asks: Do you think the Giants need to be concerned with Hunter Pence's throwing arm? I'm a fan and rooting for him to do well this year. Fingers crossed.

The Dodgers obviously knew Pence's throwing problem and exploited it. There aren't many teams that have a plus arm in left field. The way it gets compounded is because Pence has to play deeper than most left fielders, which means more singles will fall in front of him, which means runners off second base will test him. That said, he made a nice play coming in on a ball

yesterday and he does seem to be getting good reads out there. He said he feels more comfortable with the way he has to turn as a left fielder than he did as a right fielder. So that's good.

Kelly H. asks: Can you choose one starter, position player, and reliever who you think will have surprisingly good seasons?

We did this in our preview story that posted last Wednesday. I went with Hunter Strickland. The next day, the Giants named him the closer. I am also available for seances and palm readings.

Kyle L. asks: Any clue on who the first man up might be to take the fifth starter spot until Samardzija and Bumgarner are back?

I heard Suarez is seen as being more ready than Beede. But there is the 40-man roster issue. If you're making me bet \$20 on it, I'd go with Suarez. Then a staff game. Then Beede.

Calvin W. asks: In what ways is the Dodgers organization more progressive than the Giants?

The biggest difference is probably that analytics dictate the Dodgers' roster and in-game decisions. Whereas the Giants have gotten better about using analytics to inform their roster and in-game decisions.

Luke D. asks: How frequently do the Giants utilize analytics in day-to-day coaching and adjustments? How frequently do players use them on their own initiative and how does it differ between guys?

Saw a good example last night. The Giants shifted on Yasmani Grandal. When it got to two strikes, Crawford and Longoria switched positions. I have never seen the Giants do that before. Tells me they are taking the shifting to a more involved level, as other teams do. That's just one example.

Mike M. asks: Hey, Baggs. How many games do you see Posey catching this year and when do you think it'll be time for him to make the move to 1st for good? And where does that leave Belt?

There's no reason to move Posey off catcher. He brings defensive value and leadership there beyond the sprinkling of hits he might otherwise get with a tad fresher legs as a first baseman.

Greg M. asks: Do the Giants blow up this team if they are not improved by the All-Star break?

Depends on how bad it gets. But sure, they'd have to consider trying to move pieces at that point.

Rammi H. asks: Do you see Bochy making any lineup changes? Or at least shuffling the order

around?

He might. Betting he doesn't. Maybe Posey at first base and Hundley behind the plate against the left-hander Tuesday.

Sean P. asks: I want the Giants to do well. With that said Baggs if the team continues to struggle what is the date where the front office and Bochy decide it's time to change directions and commit to a full rebuild? Do they even have the stones to do it? It seems like they are highly invested in filling the seats and making sure the board/owners get paid.

I say that because the right baseball decision is to not sign aging vets to large contracts which they constantly do. They have some pieces they could move: Cueto, Shark, Bum, Cutch, Longoria, Posey, Crawford, Jackson, Melancon (haha), Belt, etc. A full rebuild would require trading everyone including Bum and Posey, although I think Posey and Crawford have full no-trade clauses. What is that date? Two months, All-Star game? They have already been the worst team in baseball for a year and a half. If they are in last place 2 months from now wouldn't it make sense to blow it up? If we fans have to endure losing baseball we might as well have some hope for the future. When/if this gets turned around 3, 4, 5 years down the road Bum, Crawford, Posey (the core) will be on the downside of their careers. Why not move them this year at the deadline to contending teams, and get some prospects to restock their pathetic farm system.

Let's put it this way. Last year's Cueto was an immovable piece. If they get the 2016 Cueto this season, and everything still goes off the rails, then absolutely, they should try to move him. Same with Shark if he is performing at a high, high level. McCutchen would be an easy player to move if they're out of it before July 31. I think they're stuck with Longoria in any event. And they won't trade Posey or Crawford. I just do not see that happening at all.

The real question would be Bumgarner. If you feel it's not a wise baseball move to give him that \$200 million extension, you might as well trade him in a Chris Sale-type deal and restock the system. But ... let's just stop ourselves here. This is all a hypothetical within a hypothetical. Maybe we could watch and enjoy some baseball games?

Tommy G. asks: If Strickland keeps up a good job as closer, will Giants stick with him in that role over Melancon, or is it definitely Melancon's job when he's back?

If he does nothing to warrant losing it, then I think he should keep it. And Melancon comes back in whatever role he can tolerate. Will the Giants have the stones to do that? I really couldn't tell you. Just seems hard for me to believe that it's reasonable to expect Melancon to be a) healthy b) effective and c) resilient, which means able to throw three in a row or take the ball when save situations snowball a bit, etc. A closer has to be d) all of the above to really count on him.

Strickland is probably best equipped to be that guy from now till September this year. Just let him be the closer and then it's one less uncertainty for the team, etc. to worry about.

John B. asks: Is Trayce Thompson a possible Giants outfield pickup? He'd be preferable to Gorkys, no? Younger with some power.

I've wondered about that. They are pretty full of outfielders at Triple-A — I'm not sure how they'll divvy up time between Mac Williamson, Austin Slater, Chris Shaw and Duggar — so probably not. Though I would agree he has a bit more offensive breadth than Gorkys. The most important part would be how proficient he is in center field. I haven't seen enough of him to know. Will ask, though.

ogc O. asks: Obviously small sample sizes right now, but who of the more unknown players up now have impressed you, including their work in spring training? Who among the guys sent down do you think will make a big impact in 2018? What are the surprises in prospect placement in the minors, both those aggressive and those expected to be higher? In particular, I love that Heliot Ramos is with Augusta, what do you think of that placement? And what are your thoughts on Beede, and his struggles during his pro career?

Moronta threw 98 mph and seemed to have an idea where it was going. Pierce Johnson certainly didn't derail his spring momentum in his first appearance. And Stratton wasn't even at his best but was plenty competitive yesterday.

The pitching overall was a real bright spot. The rotation was supposed to be wrecked, remember? And all we're talking about is the offense today. Augusta is a good place for Ramos to begin. Beede we covered quite a bit in the spring.

Jesse B. asks: Have you noticed any changes in approach by certain players in response to suggestions by the new coaches? Have certain ideas been emphasized more by the new coaches than in the past? Or is it too early to know?

Biggest changes probably have to do with pitch sequencing and not being afraid to pitch backwards instead of obsessing about establishing the fastball. That's an adjustment for Posey as well as the pitchers.

Jared M. asks: Are you as excited as me for the days ahead, when McCutchen and Longoria are in a groove while Buster is hot and Panik is Panicking, all the while Belt is Belting and Crawford is winning another Gold Glove?

This is the internet. I'm sorry. Your optimism was outlawed in 1997. But yes, in all seriousness, this offense has plenty of potential when it's rolling.

George A. asks: Glad to see the Giants split the series with the Dodgers. Even though we won the first 2 games with pitching and Panik hitting the 2 bombs we kinda lucked out in those games. The last 2 games we did not look good in all phases. With all that being said I still believe that if we play at .500 until Bum, Shark and Melancon come back we'll be OK. What do you

think?

You never want to split a series when you can win it, regardless of who's on the disabled list. But sure, as long as they don't play their way out of contention, they should be playing meaningful games if they arrive at .500 in June. That said, you never know how the division will play out. If the Dodgers, Diamondbacks and Rockies all zoom away like they did last year, then .500 won't look so hot in June. I think the division will feature quite a bit less separation this season, though.

Thomas H. asks: Pence had a tough time seeing the ball in the outfield last year. Any info on that?

I've asked him. He has been evasive on this matter.

Chris W. asks: I'm most concerned about the outfield defensively. Still getting to know each other? Pence in left is just weird to see, Jackson/Blanco isn't a straight platoon, will that create drama in the clubhouse? Cutch is in right out of his comfort position, it's been looking sloppy out there.

No clubhouse drama, but they definitely are less familiar with one another than they should be after six weeks in Arizona. I wrote on this Saturday. I'll just leave this paragraph here:

The Giants wanted to take as long a look as possible at prospect Steven Duggar, who logged 120 innings in center field during the exhibition schedule. Austin Jackson played 67 innings there. Even Eury Pérez, a non-roster player who lockered in minor league camp, played more spring innings in center (32) than Blanco (29) did.

lap T. asks: Giants with 2nd highest payroll, and so many holes to fill. Are they overpaying for homegrown players or just really bad at evaluating talent?

They sought cost certainty with guys who helped them win multiple World Series titles, and now have less financial flexibility because of it. Cain came off the books last year. Pence is done after this year. But they still have \$120 million committed to, like, six guys in 2020.

David B. asks: This may be too big, but can you talk about the Giants' struggles in putting together a good pipeline. It feels like the Giants' farm system hasn't been rated in the top half forever. Do we not spend enough on development? On scouting? Just not a company priority?

You're right, that is too broad of a question for this format. They spend what they are allowed to spend. There have been some major miscalculations. They are revamping player instruction and investing in additional staff there. They opened a new academy in the Dominican last year. But it doesn't take more than a high-level misstep or two to really set an organization back.

Take the signing of Lucius Fox two years ago. He got \$6 million. That is a huge amount and a

massive commitment, especially when you consider the Giants had to pay a 100 percent tax for blowing away the maximum bonus amount. That also put them in the penalty for two years in which they could not offer any international free agent a top bonus of more than \$300,000.

Those two years in the penalty box will end July 2. And now they have nothing to show for Fox. He went in the Matt Moore trade. They didn't receive the kind of contribution they expected from Moore, whose salary got dumped in a trade to the Rangers. All that adds up to money blown and two years of signing opportunities wasted. That's just one example. If you missed this story from a couple weeks ago, there's a TON more here.

Alex A. asks: Hi Baggs! How do you deal with all the fan(at)ics who overreact after 4 games? Have you seen an uptick in hysteria in recent years?

Eh, it's a good thing overall. The fact that people care means they're invested, they're engaged, they're reading. Sure, it can get tiresome, especially when some of the most uninformed opinions are also held the most stridently. But I'd be pretty stupid as a beat writer to wish that fans didn't care as much as they do.

Rick P. asks: Do expect Austin Jackson and Blanco to be a strict platoon in CF this year?

Let's end with a question that is succinct, insightful and interesting! I have wondered this myself. Probably not. There's an avenue for either player to steal some starts from the other depending on who's hot. I do think it's unlikely that Blanco would start against lefties because the Giants already have Belt, Crawford and likely Panik in the batting order as everyday players. But if Jackson is contributing with the bat, and most importantly, if his legs look good and he's proving to be close to on par defensively with Blanco, then I could see him playing more against right-handers.

That stated, I do believe that Blanco will prove to be the superior defender. And that matters a ton, especially at home and at places like Coors, etc. Also, Jackson probably has more of an opportunity to branch out. (Jackson didn't play a single inning in a corner outfield spot this spring, which tells me that if the Giants plan to have him start around 80 games, it would have to mean some starts against right-handers in center.)

Thanks for the questions, everyone!

CBS Sports

It's early, but Giants newcomers struggle vs. Dodgers and they have some cause for concern

R.J. Anderson

Over the weekend, the San Francisco Giants split their season-opening four-game series against the Los Angeles Dodgers. For most any team, leaving L.A. with a 2-2 record qualifies as a win. For the Giants, it qualified as a near miracle.

Let us count the ways in which the Giants were fortunate to escape with an even record.

A makeshift rotation

The Giants entered the spring expecting to open their season by starting Madison Bumgarner, Johnny Cueto, and Jeff Samardzija.

Injuries prevented Bumgarner and Samardzija from taking their turns, leaving the Giants with no alternative other than to dig into their depth. Hence Ty Blach, Opening Day starter; hence non-roster invitee Derek Holland beginning game three; hence Chris Stratton taking the mound in the series capper.

What happened next was a mixed bag. Blach gutted his way through five shutout inning in an Opening Day victory, and Cueto threw seven one-hit frames to follow it up. After that, things got dicey. Holland and Stratton combined to allow eight runs (six earned) in 10 1/3 innings.

The bad news for the rotation is that Bumgarner and Samardzija will remain out. The good news is that most people aren't paying attention to it at this point. That's because of

An inept lineup

Here's a fun fact everyone has heard by now: the Giants scored two runs all series. Both were courtesy of Joe Panik solo shots -- one off Clayton Kershaw, one off Kenley Jansen. Otherwise, the Giants' bats were kept off the board for the rest of the series, including the final two games.

While there's no sense digging too deep into the numbers after four games, the Giants' woes are predictably widespread. In fact, the Giants have five non-pitchers with negative OPS+ marks, regardless of sample size. That group includes

Disappointing newcomers

Over the winter, the Giants traded for Andrew McCutchen and Evan Longoria and signed Austin Jackson to spur more offense. Through one series, they've done anything but.

The trio combined to go 2-for-43 with 14 strikeouts, no walks, and one extra-base hit. Longoria has been particularly poor, delivering an 0-for-15 with five strikeouts. Yikes.

Obviously none of the above is predictive or means a whole lot outside of the context of four games. The Giants lineup, the new guys included, will perform better because they're too talented not to do better over the coming weeks and months.

Still, if there's a such thing as the luckiest 2-2 team in baseball, then it's these Giants.