

Indians walk off on Gomes' homer

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- The cold wind swirling around Progressive Field had been toying with fly balls to left field all weekend. So when Yan Gomes lifted a pitch from Royals reliever Brandon Maurer in that direction in the ninth inning on Sunday, the Indians catcher was hoping and praying.

"I knew I got it," Gomes said. "But, then I kept looking up and seeing [Royals left fielder Jon] Jay running after it. I was like, 'Oh no, is the wind going to kill it?'"

It didn't. Gomes' shot just cleared the 19-foot wall in Cleveland for a two-run, walk-off home run that propelled the Indians to a dramatic 3-1 victory over the Royals. Cleveland only scored six runs in the frigid three-game series, but that was just enough to eke out two victories, buying a little more time for the team's struggling offense to get going.

Gomes tore around the bases with his right arm hoisted skyward, while his teammates stormed the field for a celebratory mob that surely brought a warm ending to the day's run-starved affair. The blast was a drastic contrast from Cleveland's first breakthrough -- a check-swing RBI groundout from Jose Ramirez in the eighth.

In the end, all that mattered was it added up to a one in the win column.

"We needed the win and we got a win," Indians manager Terry Francona said.

The late rally helped on a couple of fronts.

First, Ramirez's unusual chopper in the eighth -- which scored Bradley Zimmer from third base -- halted Cleveland's scoreless drought at 23 innings. That represented the longest such stretch in Francona's six-season run at the helm with the Indians. The Tribe had not experienced a scoreless streak that long since a 24-inning spell that ran from Aug. 26-29, 2012.

That game-tying groundout from Ramirez also helped Indians starter Mike Clevinger avoid what would have been a hard-luck loss. Over a career-high 7 1/3 innings, Clevinger limited Kansas City to one run (via a triple from Jay in the fifth) on nine hits, ending with four strikeouts and two walks. With the help of his defense, Clevinger wiggled free of a handful of jams (twice courtesy of inning-ending double plays).

"This is definitely a step in the right direction," said Clevinger, who has a 0.71 ERA through two starts. "Today was not the prettiest one, but it was a good grind, a good battle. Show myself that this can consistently work on bad days."

Similarly, the lineup found a way to deliver. There was no success for six innings against Royals right-hander Jason Hammel, whose outing followed the six shutout innings that starter Ian Kennedy logged Saturday against the Tribe in a 1-0 win. But, finally, Cleveland caught a couple breaks, and Gomes hammered a pitch.

"Things are going to start coming our way," Gomes said. "We're going to keep battling and keep battling. That's one way to get it done -- I'll tell you that."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Whatever works: Cleveland snapped its scoreless drought with an unusual sequence in the eighth inning. Zimmer led off with a walk, stole second and moved to third on a sacrifice bunt from Francisco Lindor. Jason Kipnis then reached on a chopper back to reliever Justin Grimm, who bobbled the ball and made a poor throw to first for an error. With runners on the corner, Ramirez checked his swing, but made contact with the ball. It rolled to Grimm, who had no shot at stopping a hustling Zimmer from scoring from third. Ramirez was thrown out at first, but the odd play pulled the game into a 1-1 tie.

"We had 75 feet of grounders. We tied it," Francona said. "We obviously have some work to do offensively and we will. But, it's nice to win a game like that."

Don't run on Zim: Throughout his rookie campaign last year, Zimmer flashed a strong arm from center for the Tribe. That has continued this season and it cost Kansas City a run on Sunday. With two outs in the third, Jay tried to score from second on a single up the middle by Mike Moustakas. Zimmer gloved the ball and fired it 233 feet on the fly (per Statcast™) to Gomes, who applied the tag for an impressive inning-ending out.

"Man. He gave me so much time," Gomes said. "I was like, 'Oh man, don't mess up. Just tag him.' Usually, he keeps the ball low and it's usually like a one-hopper to me. That ball had no intentions of going downwards, man. I'm pretty sure if I let it go, it might've gone and hit the backstop in the air. It was that good of a throw. The kid's got tools, man. He's pretty unbelievable out there."

Hammel works out of trouble: The Indians' biggest threat against Hammel came in the fifth when Yonder Alonso singled to lead off, and with one out, Tyler Naquin singled. But Hammel came back and struck out Zimmer on a 3-2 fastball that just nicked the outside corner. Then with the shift on, Lindor grounded out to the right side, and Hammel preserved a 1-0 lead.

QUOTABLE

"I could hear it coming in. You knew from the flight path, before it got to second base, he was going to be on the money. I was pumped." -- Clevinger, on Zimmer's throw in the third

"He's like a ninja back there. I always appreciate those outs from him." -- Clevinger, on Gomes picking off Moustakas at first base in the sixth

SOUND SMART WITH YOUR FRIENDS

The announced temperature at first pitch for Sunday's game was 32 degrees, marking the coldest regular-season game on record at Progressive Field (1994-present). The previous record of 33 degrees occurred twice (April 5 and 7 in 1996).

MITEL REPLAY OF THE DAY

The Royals challenged a safe call in the eighth inning when Ramirez tapped a check-swing grounder down the third-base line and the throw to first seemingly pulled first baseman Whit Merrifield off the bag. The call was overturned and Ramirez was ruled out.

WHAT'S NEXT

Tribe ace Corey Kluber will take the mound in search of his first win of the season on Monday, when the Tribe hosts to the rival Tigers in a 6:10 p.m. ET clash at Progressive Field. The reigning AL Cy Young Award winner went 3-1 with a 3.73 and 35 strikeouts in 31 1/3 innings vs. Detroit in '17.

Chisenhall off to DL; Indians recall Naquin

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- Tyler Naquin packed his bags at Progressive Field on Saturday morning and then made the drive across Ohio to join Triple-A Columbus. When outfielder Lonnie Chisenhall injured his right calf in the Indians' game that night, necessitating a trip to the disabled list, Naquin got the call to head back north.

"The hope is that when he went back to Triple-A, he made some adjustments," Indians manager Terry Francona joked about Naquin's time spent on I-71.

Prior to Sunday's game against the Royals, the Indians officially placed Chisenhall on the 10-day disabled list with a strained right calf, which could keep him sidelined for four-to-six weeks, per Francona. The Indians' right fielder underwent an MRI, which was evaluated by the team's medical staff as well as by doctors in California, and the results indicated that Chisenhall injured the same area that proved problematic last year.

Naquin, who was optioned to Triple-A on Friday to clear room on the roster for left fielder Michael Brantley's return, was recalled to replace Chisenhall's vacated spot.

During Cleveland's 1-0 loss to the Royals, Chisenhall injured his right calf while running down a fly ball off the bat of Cheslor Cuthbert for the second out in the second inning. Chisenhall remained in the game for the remainder of the top of the inning, but alerted the Indians' medical staff of the issue and was removed and taken for tests.

In seven games played this season, Chisenhall has hit .235 with a .675 OPS in 17 at-bats as Cleveland's primary right fielder. Last season, he was limited to 82 games due to health issues but had a strong showing, batting .288 with 12 homers and 53 RBIs with an .881 OPS for the Tribe.

Chisenhall, who was responsible for three of the first six outs behind Tribe starter Trevor Bauer, missed a few games in Spring Training with an injury to the same calf. Last season, the outfielder also spent roughly seven weeks on the disabled list between July and August with a strain of the same muscle.

"The way it was described, it was a mild strain," Francona said. "The way they termed it is four-to-six weeks until they think [he can] return to play here. We've seen before, that doesn't necessarily mean that's what it's going to be. It could be shorter. It could be longer. We're not going to slow him down, but we need to let it heal and there's steps along the way that he'll have to do."

With Chisenhall out, Naquin could split time with Brandon Guyer in right field, with Brantley in left, Bradley Zimmer in center and Rajai Davis as a backup for all three spots. For Sunday's game, Naquin got the start in right field and was slotted into the eighth spot of the batting order.

"He's going to get a chance to play," Francona said of Naquin. "And he's played here before and he's actually helped us win before. So, it's a nice opportunity for him. Hopefully, he can help us win a few games."

Covering the Bases: Game 9 by Jordan Bastian

FIRST: Down the stretch last season and into the playoffs, Roberto Perez supplanted Yan Gomes as the Indians' starting catcher. It was fair to assume that would remain the case early on this season.

For Sunday's tilt against the Royals, though, Gomes was back in the front seat, marking his sixth start behind the plate in the first nine games for Cleveland. By the game's ending, Gomes had logged 56.1 innings this year, compared to 25 for Perez.

Before the game, Terry Francona was asked why Gomes was garnering the bulk of the innings, and the manager maneuvered around the topic with more of a general response related to getting players regular action in early April.

"You want to play guys enough where hopefully they start to get some rhythm," Francona said. "Not just hitting, but catching, everything. If you play one guy three or four in a row the other guy is going to sit too much. Especially early.

"So, we're trying to play both of them enough where we can keep them both feeling good about themselves. It's not the easiest thing to do. I'm just being as honest as I can about it."

OK, so maybe this is just how the chips have fallen as Francona has mapped out his lineups in the early going. Maybe, as the season progresses, there will be nine-game windows in which Perez gets six of the starts. This was believed to be a timeshare situation, but it hasn't looked like one out of the gates.

All of that said, there's arguments to be made in favor of both catchers, and they each bring plus defense when they're behind the dish. It's not like Perez is that far ahead of Gomes statistically or vice versa. Last year, Gomes rated better in WAR via Fangraphs and Baseball Reference, while Perez had the edge via Baseball Prospectus.

During Sunday's win, Gomes showed off three elements of his game that make him a consistent part of Francona's lineup.

GAME-CALLING

Indians starter Mike Clevinger has jokingly called Gomes his dad in terms of catching. Clev just does what Gomes tells him to do. Through two starts this season, the tandem has combined for only one run allowed in 12.2 innings. That included 7.1 strong frames on Sunday.

"A lot of the stuff he does doesn't show up on the statistics and doesn't show up on a stat sheet," Clevinger said. "A lot of fans can't see it. I mean, he's doing the stuff behind the scenes that's unbelievable. The stuff he's helped me with behind the plate."

CONTROLLING THE RUNNING GAME

This came up twice in Sunday's win. In the fourth inning, Clevinger struck out Ryan Goins and Jorge Soler tried to steal second on the pitch. Gomes fired a strike to shortstop Francisco Lindor, who applied the tag for an inning-ending double play. Then, in the sixth, Mike Moustakas wandered just a bit too far off first. Gomes fired behind the runner, and first baseman Yonder Alonso slapped a quick tag. Those were key outs on a cold day, when both teams were struggling to score runs.

"It's more than just a game like this," Francona said. "It's so comforting. I know when we prepare for a series, you look at guys that are runners and things like that, just to know both he and Roberto, if you give them a legitimate chance, they're going to throw you out."

POWER POTENTIAL

Over the 2015–18 seasons, Gomes has posted a .376 SLG overall. He's had his share of troubles, yes. His wheelhouse, however, is low in the zone, especially against fastballs. Over that same span, Gomes had a .528 SLG on four-seamers in the lower third of the strike zone, per Statcast. That will now go up in light of the two-run walk-off shot that the catcher belted to left off Brandon Maurer in the ninth inning.

"Right there, you're really just trying to keep the line moving, man," Gomes said. "As the at-bat went on, I felt like I was getting more and more on him. Once you're 3–2, you're just trying to shorten up, trying to get a good pitch. The more I kept fouling off, I was like, 'Man, I'm gaining on him. I'm gaining on him.' I got something maybe a little lower and put a good swing on it."

SECOND: There are reasons behind the Indians letting Bradley Zimmer get regular innings even when he's slumping offensively. Hitting is just one of the tools in his shed.

Last year, Zimmer posted 1.6 fWAR, even with an 81 wRC+. He had four Defensive Runs Saved and turned in a 6.7 BsR. His defense and speed alone are worth the price of admission. If and when he becomes a more consistent offensive threat, the center fielder has the potential to be a dangerous all-around talent.

The defense and speed elements factored into Sunday's win, too.

In the third inning, Zimmer ended a Royals rally with a pinpoint throw to home plate. Moustakas singled up the middle and Jon Jay thought he'd try to score from second. Zimmer gloved the ball and fired a strike to Gomes on the fly—a 233-foot frozen rope.

Take a look:

Statcast did not get the official arm strength on the play, but Clevinger saw a number that he brushed aside.

"It said 88.8 [mph]," Clevinger said. "That was at least 108.8. I could hear it coming in. You knew from the flight path, before it got to second base, he was going to be on money. I was pumped."

Gomes marveled at Zimmer's throw, too.

"Man. He gave me so much time," Gomes said. "I was like, 'Oh man, don't mess up. Just tag him.' Usually, he keeps the ball low and it's usually like a one-hopper to me. That ball had no intentions of going downwards, man. I'm pretty sure if I let it go, it might've gone and hit the backstop in the air."

"It was that good of a throw. The kid's got tools, man. He's pretty unbelievable out there."

It marked the 10th outfield assist of Zimmer's young career. Heading into Sunday, Billy Hamilton led MLB center fielders with 14 assists (1,221.1 innings) over the 2017–18 seasons. Jarrod Dyson ranked second with 10 in 771.2 innings. Zimmer has now reached double digits in 766 innings.

THIRD: Zimmer used his legs to help get something going for Cleveland in the eighth inning.

First, Zimmer drew a walk against Royals left-hander Tim Hill. Francona could have pinch-hit for the center fielder to avoid the left-on-left situation, but the manager was swayed by Zimmer's ability to manufacture and take away runs. The move paid off.

Zimmer then stole second base with Lindor up at the plate.

"That's why we let him hit," Francona said. "They're going to bring in a righty if we pinch-hit, so leave him in, because he's our best outfielder and he's one of our best basestealers. Fortunately, he got on base and he's not afraid to go in that situation."

Lindor moved Zimmer to third with a sacrifice bunt and then Jason Kipnis reached first on a chopper to reliever Justin Grimm. The play was botched from the start—Grimm bobbled it and then made a poor throw—but Zimmer didn't have a window to sprint home.

That came next.

HOME: Grimm fired a fastball high and tight to Jose Ramirez, who did what he could to back away from the pitch.

"I was just taking care of myself and making sure the ball didn't hit me," Ramirez said via translator Anna Bolton.

And then?

"It hit the bat."

The defensive half swing led to a dribbler in front of the plate. Zimmer bolted him—hitting a Sprint Speed of 29.3 ft/sec (his top speed of the season) on the play—and Ramirez hustled up the first-base line upon realizing that he tapped the ball in play.

Grimm had no play at the plate, but got Ramirez at first. The damage, however, had been done. A run was in, ending Cleveland's long national nightmare. The team's longest scoreless streak during The Francona Era ended at 23 innings. It was the longest drought since Aug. 26–29, 2012 (let's not talk about that month).

Francona put it best: "We needed the win and we got a win. We obviously have some work to do offensively and we will. But, it's nice to win a game like that."

April 8: Tito's pregame minutiae

by Jordan Bastian

On the extent of Lonnie Chisenhall's right calf injury:

TF: "The way it was described, it was a mild strain. Now, it's the same area as last year. The way they termed it is four-to-six weeks until they think [he can] return to play here. We've seen before, that doesn't necessarily mean that's what it's going to be. It could be shorter. It could be longer. We're not going to slow him down, but we need to let it heal and there's steps along the way that he'll have to do. I think there was a small hope at the beginning that maybe, because it was the same area, maybe it was scar tissue. It hurts like crazy and a couple days later you're OK. But, we had it read here and then we had it read in California by the same people so it's consistent, and I just think they felt like there was, like I said, a mild strain."

On whether it was a scar tissue problem when the calf flared up on Chisenhall during Spring Training:

TF: "I'm not sure you ever fully know. I mean, there's certainly some pretty well-educated people that do it all the time that are really good at it. But, I think it's also difficult at times."

On Tyler Naquin (optioned Friday and recalled Sunday) having a chance to get regular at-bats:

TF: "The hope is that when he went back to Triple-A, he made some adjustments. (laughter) You know what? He's going to get a chance to play and he's played here before and he's actually helped us win before. So, it's a nice opportunity for him. Hopefully, he can help us win a few games."

Asked if Naquin actually made it to Columbus:

TF: "Yeah, he packed yesterday morning and left. And I think he was going to play in the game last night. He turned right around and came back."

On the way the innings have been distributed between Yan Gomes (47.1) and Roberto Perez (25) through the first eight games:

TF: "You want to play guys enough where hopefully they start to get some rhythm, not just hitting, but catching, everything. If you play one guy three or four in a row the other guy is going to sit too much. Especially early. So, we're trying to play both of them enough where we can keep

them both feeling good about themselves. It's not the easiest thing to do. I'm just being as honest as I can about it. We just usually kind of look 3-4 days ahead of time and kind of look at things and see maybe why we play a guy here or try to have good reasons for doing it, and knowing you may have to adjust if a guy gets a foul tip or something like that.

"We don't know what's going to happen tomorrow or a week from now. But I think, if you let one guy sit too much, you open yourself up to maybe having a problem down the road—whether it's a guy not being ready to play or even physically. I think you've got to kind of keep both of them going, just because we don't know what's going to happen or what's going to play out."

On the silver lining of the cold weather being that the Indians are at least getting games in right now:

TF: "That's why we played yesterday. I know there's teams that are [dealing with it, too]. I mean, Minnesota played. I know it was worse than here. Stacking up games isn't good. Sometimes it just happens. The whole East coast seems like it's freezing. But, you make a good point. You need to play. As long as you're not putting guys at risk, you've got to try and play the games."

On Rajai Davis showing his speed out of the gates and even in the cold:

TF: "We were talking about that this spring. It's really something that he [is always ready to run]. And, in fact, yesterday is a good example. He's not starting. He comes in for Lonnie and the first ball he hits—he's always ready to run. And it's not just by luck. He prepares so well and, man, it's really something we respect and admire about him."

On Trevor Bauer taking issue with the time limit to warm up between innings:

TF: "We've talked to our pitchers a lot. Like, we had a meeting about it in Spring Training. With the rule changes the way they are in-between, if a pitcher wants to throw more, they've got to get out there. Because, the umpire's responsibility is to start this game at a certain point, and they get graded on that, and we kind of explained that to our guys. So, it's on our pitchers to get out there, if they want to throw more. So we need to, as the rules change, we need to adapt with it, because that's just the way it is. It was explained to us and the players understand. We need to do better."

On whether there should be more flexibility in poor weather conditions:

TF: "Again, I don't know that. I wasn't out there. I saw Trevor kind of talking to him. I try to put myself in everybody's shoes. The umpire has a responsibility that when it hits that [25 second mark], you know, get them going. I don't think that they were combative to each other, you know what I mean? I just think the pitchers know, if they want to throw more, they've got to get out there. So, that's why we try to make sure we have a catcher always around, so somebody is not waiting."

On Jose Ramirez's early-season slump:

TF: "I think the first road trip, and even some of Spring Training, he hasn't gotten his legs under him enough yet where, like you say, he has been hitting some fly balls to left field with not a ton of authority. I actually thought yesterday he took more aggressive swings than he has. I use the term 'hitter-ish,' I thought he looked that way. The other thing that, I think we talked about it the other day, when guys get out to a bit of a slow start and then they come back east for like a 10-game homestand [in the cold], you're going to have to be strong enough mentally to know that maybe you're not going to get back. Because guys always get back to their level—I always believe that and always will. But, you got to work to get [back]. It's hard to string good at-bats together. In the summer when it warms up and guys feel where they're really in a good comfort zone, you can start to get some momentum with your at-bats. When it's cold, every single at-bat is like an event. They've got their bat handle in front of the fire, they're trying to warm up their hands and it's just really hard to get any carry-over momentum going."

Asked if Ramirez is strong enough mentally to grind through the slump:

TF: "I know he is. I think he's a little bit irritated that he's [off to a slow start], because he's so good. But, I also think he'll be just fine. He's a really good hitter. Team-wide, we're not where we want to be. That will change. Like I said, we've got to be strong enough mentally to look up there for a while, see what you're hitting, and realize that you're a really good hitter."

On hitters needing to focus on good swings and not necessarily the results during a slump:

TF: "What can hurt, and Yonder is a good example, because he has squared up four balls, I mean really squared them up, and you get nothing to show for it. So, sometimes what happens is guys, it's human nature, you try to do something different. You try to do more. That's when you get in trouble. That's also easier said than done, but he's a good example of that."

On if the poor weather is worse for the pitchers or hitters:

TF: "I would say the hitters. Actually, the fielders, because they're standing. I think the pitcher is the one guy that is continuing to move, and as long as they can grip the ball. I think that's the one thing. If you can't grip the ball, all bets are off. As long as they don't lose the grip, I think they have the advantage."

On Ian Kennedy saying getting a new baseball was like trying to grip an ice cube:

TF: "No, I mean I get it. I think Trevor used the word 'cue ball,' but it can kind of feel slippery. It's nice when you feel like you can... you've got a little sweat going and you can grip the ball. It helps."

On the fielders dealing with the cold:

TF: "That's what I'm saying. They're standing there. I think that's the hardest thing. I think Brant was even saying his eyes were watering. Just got to fight through."

On Francisco Lindor's aggressiveness on his stolen-base attempt with one out in the eighth inning on Saturday:

TF: "I don't think I can sit here and say that you love a guy's aggressiveness, and then when he's out say, 'Oh, no.' I mean, we're trying to do whatever we can to tie that game, so you know, I thought [Drew] Butera made a great throw. That's part of the trust I think with guys, and I know he's thinking in the right [direction]. And he was talking to Sandy. I think the pitcher was 1.41 on that, so in most instances, he would be safe. It was just a great throw."

MLB | Indians 3, Royals 1: Gomes powers Cleveland to win over Kansas City

By STEVE HERRICK, Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Cleveland catcher Yan Gomes beat everyone with one big swing. The wind, the record-cold temperatures and Kansas City.

Gomes hit a tiebreaking two-run homer off Brandon Maurer in the ninth inning, lifting the Indians to a 3-1 win over the Royals in the coldest game in Progressive Field history.

Gomes drove a 3-2 pitch barely over the 19-foot wall in left field, ending another tough day for Cleveland's offense on a high note. Gomes was mobbed by his teammates at home plate after just the fourth hit of the afternoon for the Indians.

The game-time temperature was 32 degrees, the lowest in the 25-year history of the ballpark, and Gomes wasn't sure if his drive was going to clear the wall as left fielder Jon Jay drifted back.

"I knew I got it, but I kept looking up and I was like, 'Oh no, is the wind going to kill it?'" Gomes said. "It just got over."

Gomes also starred on defense in the cold conditions. He threw out Jorge Soler trying to steal second in the fourth and picked Mike Moustakas off first in the sixth.

"You have to figure out a way to stay warm," he said. "At the end of the day, the weather's not going to change."

Maurer (0-2) walked Yonder Alonso with one out before Gomes connected for his second homer. Cody Allen (1-0) worked the ninth for the win.

Jay's run-scoring triple put Kansas City in front in the fifth, but the Indians pushed across an unearned run in the eighth without registering a hit.

Bradley Zimmer led off with a walk and swiped second. He advanced to third on Francisco Lindor's sacrifice.

Zimmer stayed at third when Jason Kipnis reached on a throwing error by reliever Justin Grimm. But Jose Ramirez followed with a check-swing dribbler, bringing home Zimmer with the tying run. Ramirez was originally ruled safe on Grimm's wide throw to first, but the call was overturned after a review.

"That fastball probably would've hit him in the left shoulder if he didn't swing on it," Grimm said. "I made my pitch, and he couldn't have bunted it better. It stinks."

Indians manager Terry Francona felt his team was fortunate to be in position to win the game.

"I was glad we were still playing," he said. "In the eighth we had 75 feet of grounders and we tied it."

Cleveland hadn't scored since the first inning of Friday's 3-2 win. Lucas Duda's seventh-inning homer gave Kansas City a 1-0 victory on Saturday.

Cleveland's Mike Clevinger allowed one run in 7 1/3 innings while Kansas City starter Jason Hammel pitched six innings of three-hit ball.

Zimmer denied the Royals a run in the third when he threw Jay out at home on Moustakas' single. Jay drew a two-out walk and took second on Whit Merrifield's single.

Soler snapped a 0-for-34 skid dating to last season with three hits.

STILL PLAYING

Zimmer slammed into the wall in center trying to catch Jay's triple, but stayed in the game.

ONE THAT GOT AWAY

Hammel thought the Royals, who have played a major league-low seven games thanks to two postponements, squandered a chance for a victory.

"This is a game we need to have right now," he said. "This is a game we need to win, especially with the way they're not swinging the bats."

KEEP IT MOVING

Indians right-hander Trevor Bauer, who surrendered Duda's homer Saturday, said he didn't have enough time to warm up before the inning. In an attempt to speed up play this season, Major League Baseball has cut the time between innings from 2 minutes, 25 seconds to 2:05. Bauer criticized Commissioner Rob Manfred's decision, but Francona said the pitchers need to adjust.

"If a pitcher wants to throw more, they've got to get out there," Francona said. "The umpire's responsibility is to start this game at a certain point and we kind of explained that to our guys."

TRAINER'S ROOM

Royals: Duda (right hamstring tightness) served as the designated hitter for the third straight game.

Indians: RF Lonnie Chisenhall (strained right calf) is expected to be sidelined for four to six weeks. The injury is similar to the one that caused him to miss nearly two months last season. OF Tyler Naquin was recalled from Triple-A Columbus.

Indians 5, Clippers 3: Columbus' starting pitcher has seen world through baseball

By Mark Znidar The Columbus Dispatch

INDIANAPOLIS — Stephen Fife should never walk away from a ballpark feeling unwanted. He has played for 17 professional baseball teams, including three in the major leagues and in Venezuela, the Dominican Republic and Japan.

But his cellphone might as well have been on airplane mode during the winter, in that he was a 31-year-old right-handed pitcher without a team.

"I was unemployed and unsigned until the first week of February," Fife said. "I contacted everyone — coaches, staff and front offices. Then I called the scout who drafted me with the Red Sox. He had some people he knew with the Indians, and he got on it for me. He told me there was a roster spot with Cleveland. Then I called my agent."

If Fife continues to pitch the way he did in the Clippers' 5-3 loss to Indianapolis in Victory Field on Sunday, it could become a pretty fair deal for him and the organization. He gave up one run on eight hits, didn't walk a batter and struck out five in five innings in getting no decision. He threw 83 pitches, 61 of them for strikes.

Indianapolis won the rubber match of the season-opening three-game series by scoring three runs off relievers Ben Taylor and Evan Marshall in the seventh.

Columbus got 14 hits but left 12 men on base, including the bases loaded in the second and two in the fourth and seventh. Greg Allen, Francisco Mejia, Richie Shaffer, Brandon Barnes and Nellie Rodriguez each had two hits.

Manager Chris Tremie liked what he saw of Fife.

"He did a nice job for his first outing," Tremie said. "One inning cost him some extra pitches, and that probably kept him from going another inning. I was happy the way all our starters attacked the zone and three strikes in this series."

Boston picked Fife in the third round of the 2008 draft out of the University of Utah. He played in the New York-Penn League, South Atlantic League and Carolina League in his first three seasons, but he was just getting warmed up.

"This is my first bit in the International League," he said. "I definitely could put together some thoughts about my time in baseball. I've seen a lot of the world playing baseball, and it has been cool. My contract was purchased by the Seibu Lions last year when I was with the Marlins, and Japan was a great experience. I enjoyed my time there, but it wasn't the opportunity I was hoping for. I'd go back in a heartbeat."

Fife's pitching line suggested that Indianapolis knocked him around. But one hit ricocheted off his right leg, one bounced off one of his feet, one went off his glove, one was fisted into center field, and another was just off the glove of Shaffer at third.

Indians' Chisenhall to miss 4-6 weeks with calf strain

The Associated Press **The Associated Press** Apr 8, 2018, 12:17 PM

CLEVELAND (AP) -- Indians right fielder Lonnie Chisenhall is expected to be sidelined for four-to six weeks after straining his right calf, an injury similar to the one that caused him to miss nearly two months last season.

Outfielder Tyler Naquin was recalled from Triple-A Columbus to replace Chisenhall, who was placed on the 10-day disabled list before Sunday's game against Kansas City. Chisenhall was injured while making a running catch in the first inning Saturday and was removed for a pinch hitter in the second.

Indians manager Terry Francona said Chisenhall was diagnosed with a mild strain. Chisenhall was 4 for 17 in seven games after batting .288 with 12 homers and 53 RBIs last season.

Naquin was optioned to Columbus on down Friday when Michael Brantley was activated after recovering from ankle surgery. Naquin has one home run and two RBIs in five games with the Indians.

Indians notebook: Indians play the coldest game in Progressive Field history; Lonnie Chisenhall placed on 10-day DL

By Ryan Lewis

CLEVELAND: This stretch of frigid temperatures has now reached a historic level.

Sunday's first-pitch temperature was 32 degrees, officially the coldest in the history of Progressive Field. The previous record was a 33-degree first-pitch temperature on April 5 and 7 in 1996.

There was also a steady wind blowing in, which didn't help. Saturday's first-pitch temperature was 34 degrees. And there is little relief on the way for the next several days. Cleveland, as well as much of the Northeastern section of the country, continues to be mired in near-freezing temperatures.

Playing in temperatures that low is hard on just about everyone. It isn't easy for pitchers, who get to move around the most but also have to try to grip the ball. Trevor Bauer and Ian Kennedy, the starters for Saturday's game, said it felt like they were throwing a cue ball and an ice cube, respectively. Mike Clevinger started Sunday's game and tried to keep the blood pumping between innings.

"It's kind of just finding that middle ground where you want to keep your heart rate up, keep it going," Clevinger said. "Obviously, heart rate equals heat in your body. You don't want to, once you get short of breaths, you kind of teeter the line too much, you need to take a breath and slow down a little bit. But I was doing agility drills down low, weighted balls, squats, lunges, side lunges, so when I got back out there, really the only thing I had trouble with is release point. Even if you feel warm, you're not feeling your finger tips or extremities at all."

But really, it's tougher on the hitters, who have to wait around and then try to swing a few times with the needed power and precision. This weather came at especially the wrong time for an Indians lineup that struggled on their season-opening road trip. Getting off to a bad start is one thing. Having to come home and try to break out of it while battling the cold is another.

But the toughest spot? That is reserved for the position players stuck on the field for 10-15 minutes with a limited number of chances to move around.

"They're standing there. I think that's the hardest thing," Indians manager Terry Francona said. "I think [Michael Brantley] was even saying his eyes were watering. Just got to fight through."

The Indians' offense has struggled to get going, still failing to get more than seven hits in a game in the first nine games. The Indians got just 14 hits in the three-game series against the Kansas City Royals and twice won with just four. Their hope, at least, is that their batting averages rise before the temperatures do.

Back and forth

Last season, the Indians' outfield was a revolving door between the disabled list and the active roster. This season isn't off to any better of a start.

Michael Brantley started the season on the disabled list as he recovered from offseason ankle surgery. Lonnie Chisenhall, now, is heading to the 10-day DL with a right calf strain.

Chisenhall injured his right calf in Saturday's game against the Royals and was taken out in the second inning. Chisenhall was in the midst of his best offensive season in 2017 when he injured the same calf and was forced to the DL. He had some trouble with it this spring, and it's still plaguing him.

Francona called it a mild strain, and the early expectation is that Chisenhall can return to the lineup in 4-to-6 weeks.

"We've seen before that doesn't necessarily mean that's what it's going to be," Francona said of the timeline. "It could be shorter. It could be longer. We're not going to slow him down. But we need to let it heal."

Tyler Naquin was sent to Triple-A Columbus prior to Friday's game when Brantley was activated. By Saturday night, it was known that he'd have to come right back to Cleveland. He quickly logged a number of miles on I-71.

"The hope is that when he went back to Triple-A is that he made some adjustments — that was a joke," Francona said, making light of the few hours that Naquin technically spent at Triple-A. "You know, he's going to get a chance to play and he's played here before and he's actually helped us win before. So it's a nice opportunity for him. And hopefully he can help us win a few games."

Akron Beacon Journal LOADED: 04.09.2018

Indians 3, Royals 1: Indians end scoring drought, beat Royals on Yan Gomes' walk-off home run

By Ryan Lewis

CLEVELAND: An extended scoring drought was dragging on and the Indians were having to scratch and claw for any sign of offensive productivity. Then, one great swing and they were celebrating in the cold.

On a day that came with the coldest first pitch in Progressive Field history (32 degrees) the Indians came back to tie the Kansas City Royals in the eighth and win it 3-1 in the ninth on Yan Gomes' walk-off, two-run home run.

With a runner on first and Royals reliever Brandon Maurer on the mound, Gomes drilled a towering home run to left field that just cleared the 19-foot wall, sending a nearly frost-bitten crowd home happy.

"I didn't think anybody would be able to get a ball out to left field [due to the wind]," Indians manager Terry Francona said. "[Jason Kipnis] just hit his as good as he can hit it. [I was] looking at his back, the left fielder's back, and just thinking, 'Please don't catch it.'"

Prior to the home run, Gomes battled Mauer in a nine-pitch at-bat, fouling off pitch after pitch. Each time, his timing was improving.

Mauer finally delivered a pitch lower in the zone, and Gomes pounded it enough to leave the ballpark despite the cold and the wind fighting it.

"The more I kept fouling off, I was like, 'Man, I'm gaining on him. I'm gaining on him,'" Gomes said. "I got something maybe a little lower and put a good swing on it."

The win brought the Indians' record to 4-5 this season, a respectable mark considering the offense has been mired in a slump. But trailing 1-0 for most of the day and heading toward their second consecutive shutout loss, the Indians had to work for their first run in a couple of days.

They somehow manufactured their first run in 24 innings in the eighth, and they did it despite not hitting a ball past the pitcher's mound.

Bradley Zimmer walked to open the inning with Royals reliever Justin Grimm on the mound. Zimmer then stole second base to put the tying run in scoring position with nobody out.

Despite being up 2-0 in the count, Francisco Lindor laid down a sacrifice bunt to put Zimmer at third with one out. Kipnis followed by sending a dribbler back to Grimm. It didn't score the run, but the throw was errant enough to pull Whit Merrifield off the base and put runners on the corners.

That brought up Jose Ramirez, who accidentally got the run home. On a defensive check swing on an inside pitch, Ramirez tapped a ball down the third-base line that ended up in the right spot to score Zimmer and tie it 1-1. Really, it was more of a move in self defense.

"I was just taking care of myself and making sure the ball didn't hit me and it hit the bat, like it did," Ramirez said.

It snapped the Indians' 23-inning scoring drought, the longest such streak since they went 24 innings without a run from Aug. 26-29, 2012. And all it took was a walk, a steal, a bunt, a dribbler and a check swing.

Mike Clevinger turned in one of the better starts of his career. He lasted 7½ innings, allowed one run on nine hits and struck out four. The lone Royals run came with a scare.

With a runner on first in the fifth inning, Jon Jay drilled a ball to deep center field. Zimmer tracked it but couldn't haul it in. He also slammed his right knee and head into the wall and was a bit slow to get up. Francona and a trainer checked on him, and he remained in the game.

Two innings earlier, Zimmer flashed his arm strength, among the best in the league for an outfielder, to keep it a scoreless tie. With two outs, Mike Moustakas singled up the middle. Jay, who was on second base, tried to score but Zimmer delivered a strike to Gomes, who applied the tag.

"I saw the Statcast. For some reason it said 88.8 [mph], but that was at least 108.8," Clevinger said of the throw. "I could hear it coming in. You knew from the flight path, before it got to second base, he was going to be on money. I was pumped."

Akron Beacon Journal LOADED: 04.09.2018

Bradley Zimmer's arm is gaining a reputation to rival that of Cleveland Indians teammate Yan Gomes

By Joe Noga,

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- For the last several seasons, Cleveland's opposing baserunners have heard the adage "don't run on Yan," but they're also going to figure out sooner or later that "if you run on Bradley, it will end badly."

Bradley Zimmer and Yan Gomes both helped further their sterling defensive reputations Sunday when they cut down a trio of Kansas City baserunners in a 3-1 Indians victory.

Zimmer threw out Jon Jay at home plate in the third inning with a rocket that beat the Royals left fielder by three feet.

Indians starting pitcher Mike Clevinger realized Zimmer's throw had a chance as he watched it approach the plate.

"I could hear it coming in," Clevinger said. "You knew from the flight path, before it got to second base, he was going to be on money. I was pumped."

#Royals @ #Indians

Zimmer cuts down Jay (00:27)

MLB Gameday: <https://t.co/hhsoljuUva> pic.twitter.com/jqZ1ualvxx

-- Ballpark Videos (@BallparkVids) April 8, 2018

Gomes cut down K.C. base stealer Jorge Soler in the fourth inning on a strike-out, throw-out double play with Ryan Goins batting.

Later, in the sixth, Gomes threw behind Royals baserunner Mike Moustakas for a pickoff as first baseman Yonder Alonso applied the tag.

"Almost every game, he's like a ninja back there," Clevinger said of Gomes' pickoff. "Yeah, I always appreciate those outs from him."

#Royals @ #Indians

Gomes back pick's Moustakas (00:38)

MLB Gameday: <https://t.co/hhsoljuUva> pic.twitter.com/XXY85eAWSK

-- Ballpark Videos (@BallparkVids) April 8, 2018

Controlling the opposition's running game is nothing new for Gomes. He is among baseball's best in caught stealing percentage in the last two seasons (42 percent in 2017). In five previous starts this year, no other opposing baserunner had even attempted to steal against Gomes.

Manager Terry Francona took it a step further in praising Gomes' work behind the plate, saying it is comforting to know an arm of that caliber is back there when you need it.

"When we prepare for a series, you look at guys that are runners and you just know both he and Roberto (Perez), if you give them a legitimate chance, they're going to throw you out," Francona said.

#Royals @ #Indians

Indians strike-'em-out, throw-'em-out (00:23)

MLB Gameday: <https://t.co/hhsoljuUva> pic.twitter.com/LLE3LVp50T

-- Ballpark Videos (@BallparkVids) April 8, 2018

Meanwhile, Zimmer's arm is beginning to gain a big reputation on its own merits. In Anaheim last week the 25-year-old unleashed a laser-accurate throw to second base that cut down Angels catcher Martin Maldonado. Maldonado figured he'd cruise in with a double after hitting a ball off the wall in center.

We don't have any Angels in the Outfield, but we do have Zimmer, and he's pretty close, imo. [?] #FrankieTweets pic.twitter.com/HgmKq4jH29
-- Cleveland Indians (@Indians) April 4, 2018

The result was Zimmer's first outfield assist of the season. Combined with Sunday's throw and his team-high eight assists last year, he is one of three American League outfielders with at least 10 over the last two seasons.

Sunday's highlight throw from Zimmer impressed the man who was on the receiving end -- a guy who knows a little about making good throws himself.

"He gave me so much time," Gomes said of Zimmer's throw. "Usually, he keeps the ball low and it's like a one-hopper to me. That ball had no intentions of going downwards."

Gomes said he's sure if he had let Zimmer's throw go by him in the air that it would have hit the backstop.

"The kid's got tools, man," Gomes said. "He's pretty unbelievable out there."
Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 04.09.2018

Yan Gomes delivers walk-off home run as Cleveland Indians defeat Kansas City Royals, 3-1

By Joe Noga,

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The Indians' offense was mired in a deep freeze this weekend, but a quirky RBI grounder by Jose Ramirez broke the ice late Sunday and Yan Gomes sent fans home from a frigid Progressive Field with the warm feeling of a walk-off win.

Gomes capped a nine-pitch at-bat against Royals reliever Brandon Maurer in the bottom of the ninth inning with a towering two-run blast that just reached the bleachers in left field as the Cleveland Indians rallied to defeat Kansas City, 3-1.

"I kept looking up and seeing (Royals left fielder Jon) Jay running after it," Gomes said. "I was like, 'Oh no, is the wind going to kill it?' But, it didn't. It just got over."

Yan Gomes says GAME OVER! #Indians pic.twitter.com/1TsxSepxJ4

-- Today in MLB (@TodayintheMLB) April 8, 2018

Cleveland's offense snapped out of a 23-inning scoreless streak that reached back to the first frame of Friday's home opener when Ramirez's check-swing infield grounder scored Bradley Zimmer with the game-tying run in the bottom of the eighth inning.

Zimmer walked, stole second base and moved to third on a sacrifice bunt by Francisco Lindor. He scored when Royals reliever Justin Grimm threw a pitch up and in that hit Ramirez's bat and rolled fair. Ramirez was ruled out at first following a Kansas City video challenge.

"I was just taking care of myself and make sure the ball didn't hit me and it hit the bat," Ramirez said.

Jay's two-out RBI triple in the fifth inning was all the offense Kansas City could muster in a brilliant outing by Tribe starter Mike Clevinger.

Jay crushed a Clevinger curveball to center field in the fifth inning that Zimmer chased before crashing face-first into the wall as Royals catcher Cam Gallagher came around to score K.C.'s only run. In a career-high 7 1/3 innings, Clevinger struck out four and scattered nine Royals hits.

"It seemed like he was pitching out of the stretch early every inning, but I actually thought he pitched pretty well," manager Terry Francona said of Clevinger. "We turned a couple double plays and he made some real good pitches along the way."

Clevinger worked out of trouble in the third inning thanks to Zimmer's second outfield assist of the season. Jay tried to score from second base on a two-out single up the middle by Mike Moustakas, but Zimmer gathered the Moustakas line drive on one hop and fired a rocket to Gomes, who tagged Jay out before he reached the plate.

"That was a really good throw," Francona said. "It's on the line, and he got it there on the fly, but he didn't just airmail the cutoff man."

#Royals @ #Indians

Zimmer cuts down Jay (00:27)

MLB Gameday: <https://t.co/hhsoljuUva> pic.twitter.com/jqZ1ualvxx

-- Ballpark Videos (@BallparkVids) April 8, 2018

Cleveland stranded five baserunners and wasted scoring chances in the first and fifth innings as Royals starter Jason Hammel struck out Edwin Encarnacion and Zimmer with runners on base.

The Indians entered Sunday's game ranked last in MLB with a .161 team batting average and 29th with 43 total hits. They are one of three teams (Tampa Bay, Kansas City) that have yet to record 10 hits in a game this season.

Last season, the Indians did not reach 10 hits until their ninth outing on April 13. They went 51-8 when they reached the 10-hit plateau.

Gomes gets first CS and pickoff of season

In the fourth inning, Gomes collected his first caught stealing of the season as he cut down Royals baserunner Jorge Soler attempting to swipe second base. It was Gomes' first caught stealing of the season and the first stolen base attempted against the Tribe backstop in 2018. Gomes finished last season with a stolen base percentage of 40.

In the sixth inning, Gomes picked Moustakas off at first base with a snap throw behind the runner to Yonder Alonso.

The pitches

Hammel threw 88 pitches, 53 (60 percent) for strikes. Clevinger threw 110 pitches, 73 (66 percent) for strikes.

Thanks for coming

The Royals and Indians drew 14,240 fans to Progressive Field on a frigid Sunday. First pitch was at 1:10 p.m. with a temperature of 32 degrees, marking the lowest ever recorded for a regular-season contest at the ballpark.

The three-game series drew 66,322 fans, including a sellout for Friday's home opener.

Next

The homestand continues as Detroit opens a four-game series at Progressive Field on Monday at 6:10 p.m. Cleveland's Corey Kluber (0-1, 2.40) faces Detroit lefty Francisco Liriano (1-0, 1.35) in the opener.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 04.09.2018

Sunshine on a cloudy day: Cleveland Indians vs. Kansas City Royals lineups for April 8

By Joe Noga,

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Mike Clevinger takes the mound for the Cleveland Indians on Sunday as the Tribe looks to bounce back from Saturday's frustrating loss to Kansas City.

Clevinger will be making his second start of the season and first at Progressive Field in 2018. He opened his season April 2 in Anaheim, holding the Angels scoreless on four hits with five strikeouts in 5 1/3 innings.

It's Clevinger's fifth career start against Kansas City. He has a 3-0 record with a 2.42 earned run average in 22 1/3 previous innings. Clevinger faced K.C. three times in 2017, going 2-0 with a 2.16 ERA in 16 2/3 innings.

The Royals will counter with Jason Hammel on the mound. Hammel will also be making his second start of 2018 after taking the loss Monday in Detroit. He allowed five runs on seven hits in five innings against the Tigers.

Hammel went 3-2 in five starts against Cleveland in 2017, including wins in his first three starts. In his last start at Progressive Field on Sept. 16, Hammel retired the first 16 batters before allowing six of the next 10 to reach, including three home runs en route to an 8-4 Tribe victory.

Cleveland Indians recall Tyler Naquin from Class AAA Columbus, Lonnie Chisenhall put on disabled list

By Joe Noga,

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Tyler Naquin's most recent stint with Class AAA Columbus was brief.

The Cleveland Indians today recalled Naquin from Columbus just two days after optioning him to the Clippers when Michael Brantley returned from the disabled list on Friday.

Naquin replaces Lonnie Chisenhall, who was moved to the 10-day DL after re-injuring his right calf while making a catch in the second inning of Saturday's 1-0 loss to Kansas City.

Naquin did not appear in either of the Clippers' first two games in Indianapolis after being sent down, however, he does not have to wait the usual 10 days before returning to the big league roster because of an exception for replacements due to injury.

Naquin appeared in five of the Tribe's first six games, including the season-opening 2-1 loss to Seattle on March 29. He hit .167 (2-for-12) with one homer and two RBI while striking out five times.

Chisenhall was hitting .235 with a double and four strikeouts in 17 at-bats this season. He made three trips the DL last year, including missing 45 games in July and August while recovering from the same right calf injury.

Manager Terry Francona described Chisenhall's latest injury as a mild strain that occurred in the same area as the previous injury. He said Chisenhall could miss 4-6 weeks before being ready to return to play with the Tribe.

"We've seen before that doesn't necessarily mean that's what it's going to be," Francona said. "It could be shorter. It could be longer. We're not going to slow him down. But we need to let it heal."

The move gives Naquin another opportunity to prove he belongs on the Tribe's big league roster.

"He's going to get a chance to play and he's played here before and he's actually helped us win before," Francona said. "So it's a nice opportunity for him. And hopefully he can help us win a few games."

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 04.09.2018

Francisco Lindor, Bradley Zimmer or Yan Gomes: Who is the Cleveland Indians' best defender right now?

By Joe Noga, [cleveland.com jnoga@cleveland.com](mailto:jnoga@cleveland.com)

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- A Platinum Glove Award winner, one of baseball's best run-stoppers and the speedy kid with a cannon for an arm in center.

Cleveland Indians manager Terry Francona has a lot to be happy about these days when it comes to his defense up the middle.

"I think our defense as a team has been very good," Francona said Saturday. "Frankie's been outstanding. He's made the really good play. He's made all the routine plays. He makes some plays look routine that aren't. He's been very good."

On Sunday, both Yan Gomes and Bradley Zimmer made plays with their arms that helped keep Kansas City off the scoreboard. Francona mentioned in his postgame remarks that it's reassuring to know teams are less likely to try stealing bases with Gomes behind the plate, and he was impressed with Zimmer's accuracy on a third-inning throw to cut down a runner at home plate.

The Indians committed their first error as a team on Saturday when a throw by Roberto Perez skipped into center field.

Cleveland's seven-game errorless streak to begin the season was the club's longest in the Play Index era, since 1908.

Last year, the Indians led the American League and ranked third in Major League Baseball with a .986 fielding percentage, posting just 76 errors in 5,484 total chances. The 76 errors were the second-fewest in MLB.

But the question remains: Who is the Tribe's best defensive player right now?

The credentials

Cleveland Indians Francisco Lindor throws to first for a double play in the second inning Sunday.

Lindor: A two-time Rawlings Gold Glove Award finalist, and the 2016 Platinum Glove Award winner as the best defensive player in the American League, Lindor posted a .984 fielding percentage with 10 errors in 2017. He talked in the offseason about focusing on his footwork and his concentration. "It's paying attention to little details the whole entire time," he said. "Not taking any pitch for granted. It's about wanting the ball being hit to me and focusing on getting that out."

Cleveland Indians Yan Gomes has the Kansas City Royals Jon Jay dead to rights, tagging out Jay in the 3rd inning Sunday on a throw from Bradley Zimmer in center field.

Gomes: Led the AL in with a 42 percent caught-stealing rate while also posting the best catcher ERA (3.36) among 18 players with 2,400 plate appearances caught. His value to the pitching staff manifested itself in a variety of ways, as the Indians called just one pitchout during the entire 2017 season, an indication that Terry Francona and his staff trusted Gomes to control the opposition's running attack on his own.

Bradley Zimmer makes a sliding catch against Colorado in August.

Zimmer: Blessed with a long, lanky frame and elite speed that makes him one of the Statcast sprint speed darlings, Zimmer has developed a lethal throwing arm that also makes him one of the league's most potent defensive weapons. Since the start of 2017, he is one of three AL outfielders with at least 10 outfield assists. Last season, his eight assists tied him for the Indians' team lead with Michael Brantley.

Who's your pick?

From winter coat to T-shirts at the Cleveland Indians, Detroit Tigers games: Progressive Field forecast

By Kelly Reardon, cleveland.comkreardon@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio - A shift toward warm, spring weather is ahead for Cleveland this week, so Tribe fans heading to one of the Detroit Tigers games through Thursday will either need that winter coat, or a T-shirt and sandals. It depends on what game you've got tickets for.

The later in the week, the warmer it'll be.

Monday, 6:10 p.m.

Clevelanders with tickets to tonight's game will want to bundle up. Temperatures will stay in the mid 30s, but wind chills will feel closer to 30 degrees. Partly cloudy skies are expected, and a flurry or two can't be ruled out.

Tuesday, 6:10 p.m.

Tuesday's game is a little warmer, but Tribe fans will still want to wear their winter gear. Temperatures will hit the low 40s to upper 30s, but at least a mix of sun and clouds may help that feel a bit warmer.

Wednesday, 6:10 p.m.

The Wednesday Tribe game will be noticeably warmer as temperatures hit the low 50s and upper 40s. Sounds balmy, but with breezy winds, wind chills will drop toward the low 40s. Right now, there's a 20 percent chance of rain, but I'm thinking the showers won't start until after midnight. So for the most part, expect a mostly cloudy game.

Thursday, 6:10 p.m.

The game Thursday will finally feel like spring. Tribe fans can ditch the winter jacket as temperatures warm to the mid 60s and upper 50s. Winds will be a bit breezy, especially toward the beginning of the game, but with temperatures that warm there won't be much of a wind chill. Again, skies are expected to be mostly cloudy, and a stray rain showers is possible.

Because of the chances of rain for some of the games this week, this post will be updated daily through Thursday for any forecast changes.

Cleveland Indians vs. Detroit Tigers series preview, pitching matchups

By Joe Noga, cleveland.comjnoga@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio - Here are the preview and pitching matchups for the series between the Indians and Tigers that begins Monday.

Where: Progressive Field, Monday through Thursday.

TV/radio: SportsTime Ohio will carry the entire series. WTAM/1100 will broadcast Monday, Thursday and Tuesday's games. WMMS/FM 100.7 will broadcast Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.

Pitching matchups: LHP Francisco Liriano (1-0, 1.35) vs. RHP Corey Kluber (0-1, 2.40) on Monday at 6:10 p.m.; LHP Matt Boyd (0-1, 1.50) vs. RHP Josh Tomlin (0-1, 24.00) Tuesday at 6:10 p.m.; RHP Jordan Zimmerman (0-0, 8.71) vs. RHP Carlos Carrasco (2-0, 5.40) Wednesday at 6:10 p.m.; RHP Michael Fulmer (1-1, 0.68) vs. RHP Trevor Bauer (0-1, 2.08).

Series: The Indians went 13-6 against the Tigers last year.

Monday: Kluber is coming off back-to-back strong outings without a win to show for it. He pitched a complete game allowing two runs on opening day March 29 and took a no decision against Seattle and was a tough-luck loser after allowing two earned runs against Anaheim on April 4. He is 8-7 in his career with a 3.97 earned run average in 22 appearances against the Tigers.

Liriano is 5-6 in his career against Cleveland with a 4.19 ERA and 97 strikeouts. In 10 career appearances at Progressive Field, he is 2-3 with a 4.81 ERA and 54 strikeouts.

Tuesday: Tomlin is 7-6 lifetime against the Tigers with a 5.19 ERA and 50 strikeouts in 16 appearances. In 2017 he was 1-0 in two starts with five strikeouts and two home runs allowed.

Boyd is 1-2 with a 1.91 ERA in five lifetime starts against Cleveland. He averages 6.5 strikeouts per nine innings when facing the Tribe. His only career win at Progressive Field came on April 16 last year when he bested Carrasco behind a pair of home runs by Alex Avila.

Wednesday: Carrasco owns a 10-7 career record and 3.88 ERA against the Tigers in 25 appearances including 20 starts. He averages 8.8 strikeouts per nine innings when facing Detroit.

Zimmerman is searching for his first career win against Cleveland. He is 0-4 with a 10.88 ERA in three starts when facing the Tribe. Indians have four home runs in 22 1/3 innings off the righty.

Thursday: Bauer is 4-5 in his career with a 7.82 ERA and 52 strikeouts in 12 appearances (11 starts). Bauer was 0-2 with a 13.00 ERA in two starts against the Tigers in 2017. He averages 8.0 strikeouts per nine innings vs. the Tigers.

Fulmer turned in his second consecutive impressive outing to start the 2018 season Sunday, tossing 5.1 scoreless innings with four strikeouts. In two starts this season, Fulmer has a 1-1 record with a 0.68 ERA (13.1IP/1ER) and seven strikeouts. He is 2-2 with a 6.04 ERA against Cleveland in his career including two wins at Progressive Field.

Disabled list: Tigers - None. Indians - OF Lonnie Chisenhall (right calf), INF Giovanni Urshela (right hamstring), LHP Ryan Merritt (left shoulder), RHP Danny Salazar (right hamstring) and RHP Cody Anderson (right elbow) are on the disabled list.

Next: Toronto visits Progressive Field for a three-game series starting Friday.

Meisel: A productive Michael Brantley is what the Indians need most (and, well, they're paying \$12 million for it)

Zack Meisel 5h ago

Jason Kipnis figured the transaction might spell doom for his tenure in Cleveland. He placed that thought on the back burner, though.

When the Indians exercised Michael Brantley's \$12 million option for the 2018 season, Kipnis also felt a sense of relief. If the Indians could stomach both players' salaries, the two could take perhaps one final swing at a World Series ring together.

Kipnis and Brantley anchored Manny Acta's lineup during some of the franchise's lean seasons, with more question marks and unfamiliar faces on the roster than a Guess Who? board game. The Indians announced both players' contract extensions on the same morning before the 2014 home opener. They have adjacent lockers in the corner of the home clubhouse at Progressive Field.

Both have also paid rent at the trainer's table. When they take the field, no shoulder or neck or oblique or hamstring or ankle is safe.

The moment a player steps into a major-league clubhouse for the first time, the sand starts to trickle toward the bottom of the hourglass. Even Ichiro's career has an expiration date. An injury or a decline in skill ultimately saps just about every player of his big-league credentials. Only a select few advance to the next stage of life by their own volition.

Eight months ago, Brantley sat motionless in the outfield in Cleveland, his legs sprawled out in the grass as the team trainer jogged his way. Brantley was four weeks removed from an All-Star Game appearance, the crowning validation that permitted him to place his nagging shoulder issues in the rearview. He feared he had torn his Achilles tendon, the injury bug gnawing away at another ambitious chunk of his career.

"If you don't have it anymore or you get too old or your time is done, that's one thing," Kipnis told The Athletic. "But if you have an injury, it's tough, because it leaves you with a 'What if?' In an athlete's mind, you never want that."

Careers don't persist forever. Injuries leave a player to wonder, and that's dangerous, especially during the ruthless recovery process.

"You think, 'If I was healthy, could I have these numbers?'" Kipnis said. "'Could I have these extra years? Could I have figured something out this year to set myself up for a new contract?'" Being on the field opens up so many opportunities and scenarios."

Kipnis said it's "not too beneficial" to think along those lines. But it's also human nature.

Consider the case of Brantley, an MVP finalist in 2014, a stellar performer in 2015 and a guy who has since appeared in only 31.3 percent of 332 games. Could his presence in the lineup have vaulted the Indians past the Cubs in the 2016 Fall Classic? That question haunted him as he watched from the sideline as the Indians marched to the World Series, grabbed a 3-1 advantage over the Cubs and then stumbled at the finish line. Could a fully healthy Brantley have flipped the script in last October's ALDS letdown against the Yankees? If not for his medical maladies the past two seasons, would Brantley have remained among the league's top-tier hitters, meriting him additional pieces of hardware and the potential for a hefty future payday?

The Indians committed \$12 million to Brantley when they picked up his option in early November. It accounts for nearly one-tenth of the club's payroll and it undoubtedly factored into the team's unassuming offseason. The front office pulled the trigger knowing Brantley was bound for ankle surgery, an operation that would jeopardize his Opening Day status.

That's quite a risk, a bold undertaking.

The decision understandably received some criticism, given Brantley's injury history. Chris Antonetti and Mike Chernoff were banking on that 2014-15 version of Brantley — or a slightly altered duplicate of him — to surface once he navigated his way through another arduous recovery. And, hey, if anyone knew how to work in harmony with his body, it was the guy who rehabbed from a shoulder procedure the previous two winters.

Every March, we grow tired of three things: updates on Brantley's injury rehab, face-numbing wind chills and those Capital One commercials featuring Charles Barkley, Samuel L. Jackson and Spike Lee. Fans are reasonably skeptical of a guy soaking up a significant portion of the team's cash flow when he hasn't consistently remained in Terry Francona's batting order since Brohio existed at Progressive Field.

"It's not fun," Kipnis said. "As someone who's been on the DL himself, it's just not where you want to be, mentally or physically. We only get a small window to play this game and he's in the middle of a good career. He has a lot of good baseball left in him and you just want to see him go out and be able to play and not have other things hinder that."

The constant struggle to just return to the field, rather than to thrive on it, bogged down Brantley as he recovered from his second shoulder operation. After attending Vinnie Pestano's wedding in Ohio in December 2016, Kipnis spent a week in Cleveland to offer Brantley a daily diversion during his monotonous training regimen. Instead of relaxing and pondering ways to boost his performance for the next season, Brantley has been forced into an annual tradition of hoping there is a next season. That tests a player's mettle.

Brantley recovered in Florida after his ankle surgery, and he was still able to swing a bat as his lower body rounded into form. That allowed him to return to the fold in time for the Indians' home opener, in which he contributed a decisive two-run single.

The Indians' lineup needs Brantley.

"He's such a consistent at-bat," Kipnis said, "one of those mainstays who, even when he's cold, he's putting up good at-bats and hitting the ball hard somewhere."

The Indians' front office needs him, too.

Nothing needs saving after a nine-game sample other than the sanity of those lacking patience and demanding a fire sale or roster purge. But much could hinge on Brantley's production.

Everything in life revolves around opportunity cost, and the Indians deemed it worthwhile to sacrifice other potential upgrades in order to retain the oft-injured outfielder. If he can stay on the field, his salary could be a bargain. If he doesn't, then the Indians have another outfield spot to fill, maybe a bullpen spot down the line, a lack of starting pitching insurance and only a couple of coins to address it all.

Really, it all boils down to one shared vision for the fan base and the organization: that Brantley can deliver.

"Mentally, it's tough to do it the way that he's done it," Kipnis said, "which is grinding every day and making sure that he's done everything that he possibly can to give back. He's one of the easiest guys to root for."

MLB scheduling 10-game Indians homestand in early April is stupid | Jeff Schudel

By Jeff Schudel, The News-Herald & The Morning Journal

If you wanted to pass the time by making a list of silly things Major League Baseball does, you'd have to think long and hard to come up with something sillier than scheduling a 10-game homestand for the Indians in early April.

Who would guess the weather might here might be intolerable here at this time of year? Anybody with common sense, that's who. Yet baseball decided it would be a good idea to have the Indians play at Progressive Field every day from April 6-15. It matches a 10-game homestand lasting from July 6-15 as the longest of the season.

The temperature when Indians' starter Mike Clevinger threw the first pitch April 8 was 32 degrees — the coldest ever to start a game at Progressive Field (or Jacobs Field).

Playing in such cold weather is miserable for players and it is miserable for fans. The Indians' attendance suffers. Paid attendance April 8 was 14,240.

Of course baseball can't send the Indians and teams from other cold-weather cities on the road for a month to start the season, but why not start with a six-game homestand and pile up more home games when the weather heats up?

"It's cold for us, but I feel most sorry for the fans," Indians shortstop Francisco Lindor said. "They have to wear eight coats to try to stay warm."

The home team has the right to postpone a game because of bad weather until the game begins. After the first pitch, the decision is up to the umpires.

Often a team has an off-day on its first home series of the season in case the weather is bad. But the schedule maker didn't even provide that cushion for the Indians this year. The consequence of postponing a game could be playing a doubleheader later in the season and causing turmoil in the pitching rotation.

"That's why we played yesterday," Indians manager Terry Francona said. "I know there's teams that are.. I mean Minnesota played. I know it was worse than here. Stacking up games isn't good. Sometimes it just happens. The whole east coast seems like it's freezing. But you make a good point. You need to play. As long as you're not putting guys at risk, you've got to try and play the games."

The forecast calls for a high of 53 degrees on April 11 and a high of 64 the next day. But those games against the Tigers start at 6:10, so the best of the weather will be past.

The Indians' .159 batting average through nine games is the lowest in Major League Baseball. They are tied for 24th in runs scored with 27. Twelve of those were scored in two games — a 6-5 victory in Seattle with Carlos Carrasco on the mound and a 6-0 win in Anaheim with Mike Clevinger pitching.

Michael Brantley stroked a two-run single in the bottom of the first inning of the home opener on April 6. A 27-inning scoring drought followed.

"When it's cold, every single at-bat is like an event," Francona said. "They've got their bat handle in front of the fire, they're trying to warm up their hands and it's just really hard to get any carry-over momentum going."

Jose Ramirez, one of the Indians best hitters the last two seasons, is off to a horrible start with two hits in 33 at-bats. His check-swing ground out down the third-base line, however, drove in Bradley Zimmer in the bottom of the eighth inning on April 8 to tie the Royals, 1-1.

"I think he's a little bit irritated because he's so good. But I also think he'll be just fine," Francona said. "He's a really good hitter. Team-wide, we're not where we want to be. That will change. Like I said, we've got to be strong enough mentally to look up there for a while, see what you're hitting, and realize that you're a really good hitter."

Despite the slow start, at 4-5 the Indians are a game behind first place Minnesota in the A.L. Central Division.

Outfielder Lonnie Chisenhall was placed on the 10-day disabled list April 8 because of a calf injury. But he could be out from four to six weeks, Francona said. Chisenhall leads the Indians with a .235 batting average.

Tyler Naquin was elevated from Columbus about 24 hours after he was sent down to make a roster spot for Michael Brantley. Naquin was with the Clippers in Indianapolis on April 7 when he got the call-up. He arrived in Cleveland around 1 a.m. April 8 and was in the starting lineup 12 hours later. He was 1-for-2 before being lifted for pinch-hitter Rajai Davis when Francona wanted to get a right-handed batter to the plate.

"He's going to get a chance to play," Francona said. He's played here before and he's actually helped us win before. So it's a nice opportunity for him. And hopefully he can help us win a few games."

Chisenhall was limited to 81 games last season because of a calf injury.

On Yan Gomes, the 'ninja,' and why the Indians' opinions of their catchers will always extend beyond their offense

By T.J. Zuppe Apr 9, 2018 4

Mike Clevinger quietly sat at his locker Sunday morning. His feet were propped up on the chair next to his space. A blue robe with his name on the back covered his legs.

He couldn't have appeared any more relaxed.

That's saying something for the typically bouncy, restless starter.

After one of his final starts of the spring, Clevinger was asked by The Athletic to diagnose his growing ability to handle the inevitable chaos that accompanies each big-league start.

During that exchange with reporters, Clevinger heaped a seemingly endless amount of credit at the feet of Yan Gomes for helping him stay calm and within himself during the game's most hectic moments.

"He can see exactly when I'm getting too out of line, getting too amped up," Clevinger said. "He'll calm me down real fast. He has a real good dad approach."

A dad approach.

Given the comparison, it was almost fitting that Gomes, having just clubbed a walkoff two-run homer over the 19-foot wall in left field, held his 3-year-old daughter on his knee as he spoke with reporters following the 3-1 win over the Royals on Sunday afternoon.

Yan answered the questions. Brooklyn focused on her sucker.

And after the session, he praised his daughter for her solid showing in front of the media.

Once a dad, always a dad.

"(I was) super, super happy for him," Clevinger said. "A lot of the stuff he does ... doesn't show up on a stat sheet. A lot of fans can't see, I mean, he's doing the stuff behind the scenes that's unbelievable. The stuff he's helped me with behind the plate, the strikes he's stealing for me ... to see him actually get the credit he deserves is awesome."

Gomes' skyscraping homer served as one of the few balls the frigid elements allowed to pierce the stiff wind. Several other well-struck balls weren't so lucky.

That thought was running through Gomes' mind as he connected on the 96 mph fastball and jogged down the line, watching his towering fly the entire way. And when the ball finally cleared, he raised his right arm and yelled as he neared second — partially in celebration, partially in agonizing relief.

"I definitely thought (about the other balls that died)," Gomes said. "When I hit it — I've played here for a while now — I knew I got it. But, then I kept looking up and seeing (Jon) Jay running after it. I was like, 'Oh no, is the wind going to kill it?' But, it didn't. It just got over."

Gomes battled Royals reliever Brandon Mauer in a lengthy ninth-inning at-bat following Yonder Alonso's one-out walk. The count eventually ran full before Gomes fouled off three consecutive pitches to set up his game-winner.

As the sequence unfolded, he couldn't help but think of Andrew McCutchen's heroics for the Giants the night before.

"To be honest, I watched a little bit of MLB last night," Gomes said. "I was watching that McCutchen at-bat. He had like 13 or 14 (pitches). And I was like, 'Man, is this going to end up my way or what?' Well, it did."

McCutchen's at-bat lasted 12 pitches. He punctuated it with a walkoff homer against the Dodgers. Gomes' battle with Maurer didn't reach that level of epic, but it did help sweep some of the offensive frustration under the rug — at least for a bit.

"I didn't think anybody would be able to get a ball out to left field," Terry Francona said. "Looking at his back, the left fielder's back, (I was) just thinking, 'Please don't catch it.'"

While Gomes' third career walkoff blast may have saved the weekend from a run-scarce disaster, it also served as a bit of misdirection for the entire offense. Yes, as we've covered a few times over the past few days, their bats have run into their fair share of bad luck. Two of the club's best-hit balls Sunday — one by Kipnis, another by Francisco Lindor — went for harmless fly outs. That said, the longer it lingers, the more difficult it gets to dismiss the struggles.

While no one wants to stand behind the weather and bad luck as an excuse, Clevinger was willing to cut his hitters some slack.

"It's also like 20 degrees," he said. "You try to swing anything, I don't care how you feel, it's going to be hard to hit a ball. This is right now a pitcher's advantage on both sides. We're taking advantage of it."

In addition to the timely homer, Clevinger was also the beneficiary of two throws by Gomes.

He caught Jorge Soler trying to steal second. He got Mike Moustakas on a pickoff at first base. Gomes finished 10th in Statcast poptime last season, so his ability to make a strong, accurate throw is far from unexpected.

"He's like a ninja back there," Clevinger said. "I always appreciate those outs from him."

It's easy to understand why fans get frustrated with the lack of offense at the catcher position. It's difficult to always justify the lack of production when the rest of the lineup struggles. But every time a reporter asks why they stick with their backstops, the Indians point to games like Sunday — ones in which Gomes' above-average arm helped keep them in the game until his bat emerged from the freezer — as a big reason why their opinions extend beyond any offensive shortcomings.

"It's more than just a game like this," Francona said. "It's so comforting. I know when we prepare for a series, you look at guys that are runners and things like that, just to know both he and Roberto (Pérez), if you give them a legitimate chance, they're going to throw you out."

Clevinger established a single-game career high by pitching into the eighth Sunday afternoon. He was forced to pitch around some traffic, but you'd have to really nitpick to find many negatives about his first two starts: 12 2/3, 13 hits, 1 run, 4 walks, 9 strikeouts and a 2.60 FIP.

Still, he felt like his outing was far from perfect, even if he continues to move in the right direction. And any of the admiration he feels for his catcher's assistance along the journey is returned in Gomes' opinion of the 27-year-old hurler.

"That kid's competitive, man," Gomes said. "Seeing day in, day out, and even when he gets like a clean inning, he still finds some way to critique himself. And I think that's legit. It's not just him trying to talk smoke or anything. I think he's really sitting there and he's trying to get better every time he's out there. And he's got tremendous pitches, so for him to give me credit, I'm just trying to put the right fingers down for him."

Starting 9: Can Bradley Zimmer find a fix? Is Trevor Bauer on the cusp?

By Travis Sawchik 1h ago 1

1. Bradley Zimmer is one of the better athletes in the major leagues. Only Byron Buxton and Billy Hamilton were faster than he last season, according to Statcast's sprint speed data via Baseball Savant. Zimmer already rates as an above-average baserunner and center-field defender, with an elite arm and range, according to advanced metrics and the eye test.

Zimmer has similar skills and a similar problem to that of Buxton and Hamilton: Will he hit?

2. In 356 major-league plate appearances, Zimmer has a .235 batting average, .298 on-base percentage and a 31.2 percent strikeout rate. He's struck out in 25 percent or more of his at-bats since reaching Double A. He has a 75 weighted-runs-created-plus mark to date in the majors — 100 is league average — meaning he's been 25 percent below the league-average hitter.

Now, like Buxton and Hamilton, Zimmer can still be a quality regular based on his speed and glove alone. In fact, Zimmer has been worth 1.5 WAR, according to FanGraphs, based upon his first 108 major-league games.

What will determine whether Zimmer is a five-tool star — the next Grady Sizemore — or just a useful regular or platoon player is his contact ability. Thus far in his career, his rate of making contact ranks 263rd among 289 hitters with at least 300 plate appearances. Zimmer is whiffing at a near league-worst rate.

3. Zimmer has a couple of holes in his swing. There's a weak spot up, and many hitters are susceptible to chasing breaking pitches below the zone.

Zimmer is expanding up in the zone and missing there, and he is chasing below it. Zimmer rebuilt his swing last season to add more loft, but it's possible the bat path combined with the long levers of his 6-foot-5 frame are not allowing him to get on top of the high pitch, namely, the high fastball.

Consider his swing percentage and contact rate at the top and below the zone last year:

If he can begin to lay off the high pitch, and recognize spin pitches that dive below it, he'll become a more effective offensive player. If he can more often zero in on pitches he can drive — pitches middle and in as Francisco Lindor did a year ago — the loft he added to his swing plane will more often allow his raw plus power to manifest in game action. We're still early in the Zimmer story, and the upside is considerable.

4. One of the reasons this author liked Trevor Bauer as a breakout candidate this season was the expectation that he would continue to build upon the increased breaking-ball usage that fueled his second-half breakthrough last year. Bauer did that Saturday in an excellent start in which he allowed just one run in eight innings. Bauer threw more breaking pitches (53) than fastballs (40). Bauer threw 11 sliders, and that pitch, which he worked on adding and perfecting this offseason, generated three swings and misses. He did it all on a cold day with low humidity when he said he struggled to grip the ball.

Bauer is still trying to perfect the shape of the pitch to have it have more horizontal movement to differentiate it more from his elite, 12-6 breaking curveball. Both pitches have about 6 inches of horizontal break through two starts. He's made significant progress with the slider. It's a weapon that could take him to another level.

His floor is as a mid-rotation starter. His ceiling is as the best starting pitcher not named Corey Kluber on the staff.

5. One of the remarkable aspects of the 2017 Indians was the club's pitching health. Teams know on average they need about 11 starting pitchers to get through a season. Last season, the average major-league team had 11.3 pitchers make starts. The Indians? Just seven, and that includes four starts from Ryan Merritt. Four starters — Kluber, Carlos Carrasco, Mike Clevinger and Bauer — made at least 26 starts. Not only were the Indians' starting pitchers historically productive, becoming the first staff to strike out 10 batters per nine for a season, but they also were so good, in part, because they enjoyed better than average health.

The Indians' sixth starter last season, Mike Clevinger, was one of the most valuable depth starters in the game (2.2 WAR), trailing only the Dodgers' Alex Wood in fWAR (3.4) among pitchers who began the year as reserve options.

6. What this means is depth is more likely to be tested this season. Danny Salazar (shoulder) is already out for the first month, and Josh Tomlin was not only roughed up in Los Angeles but also his velocity was at a troubling level. While Tomlin struggled early last season, his velocity was down in the second half and it began at that depressed level in 2018. While Tomlin survives on control and guile over stuff, it's unclear how much stuff, how much velocity, he can afford to lose.

7. Terry Francona has shown a commitment to batting Jason Kipnis in the No. 2 spot (career wRC+ 87) against lefties early this season and has kept Yonder Alonso in the lineup against lefties (career wRC+ 83). The Indians led the majors in platoon advantage last season, with 69 percent of their at-bats coming against opposite-handed pitchers. The MLB average was 52 percent, according to Baseball Reference. With the loss of Carlos Santana, some of that platoon advantage figures to diminish.

8. While there is plenty of reason to be skeptical regarding Michael Brantley's health, and while it's certainly fair to question whether the Indians could have better used the dollars allotted to him to fill voids elsewhere, there is the argument to be made that Brantley — at 90 percent or better — is the best value the Indians could have found this offseason. We'll have to wait and see. The Indians plan to be careful with him early this season.

9. FanGraphs projects Brantley for 2 wins above replacement and a 114 wRC+ — meaning he'd be 14 percent better than a league-average hitter — in 536 plate appearances. Baseball Prospectus projects Brantley for 1.9 WAR and a .291 average. Two WAR for a single season is worth about \$18 million on the open market so there's a chance for Brantley to produce value for the club. And unlike some of the other corner options available this offseason, Brantley is a superior defender.

HE SAID IT

"You know what, it's not a bad thing ever. Whether you like the music or whether you don't, I mean these guys are here so much and it's such a big part of the day that my goodness sakes, you want them to enjoy being here. Shoot, it works so much better that way. They're good at getting their work done, but it would be tough if you just had to sit in front of your locker and stare at your locker and you weren't doing something. Everyone would be miserable."

— Francona when asked about general clubhouse chemistry after teammates had a mariachi band come in the clubhouse and play for Alonso on his birthday Saturday.

STAT OF THE WEEK: .159/49

Indians' batting average and wRC+ entering Monday, each ranking 30th. The Indians' bats have been as cold as the early-season weather.

Detr'Vintage' Fiers dazzles in debut as Tigers sweep White Sox

Chris McCosky,

Chicago — Yes, he said, he needed this one.

"This was a big start," said Mike Fiers, the veteran right-hander who pitched six, three-hit shutout innings Sunday, helping the Tigers beat the White Sox 1-0 and sweep three-game series. "The way I ended last year, my last four or five starts, I wasn't the pitcher I am."

Not even close.

He was pulled from the Astros' rotation and left off their postseason roster last September and he was tagged for 22 runs and 25 hits in 12 innings in his last three starts.

"I got to a place I couldn't get out of," he said. "It's not good. A lot of pitchers have been there. But you just stay with it, trust your coaching — Chris Bosio helped me a lot this spring — and for it to pay off now is awesome.

"It's an awesome confidence booster for me, but also for the team."

It sure makes the Tigers' one-year, \$6 million investment in him look better, especially after his spring was derailed by lower back stiffness that forced him to start the year on the disabled list.

"He's a veteran and he was always telling us, 'I'm fine, I'll be fine,'" manager Ron Gardenhire said. "You trust the veteran guys. Some of the young guys you worry about more, but with the veterans, you say, 'Here you go, let's see what you got.'"

His performance Sunday was clinical. His fastball maxed out at 89 mph, but by the fifth and sixth inning, he was getting swings and misses with it. He was spotting it expertly, mixing it with a cutter, change-up and curveball.

"The times I caught him this spring, he was most effective when he's adding and subtracting and going back and forth," catcher John Hicks said. "He was throwing all his pitches for strikes. We were able to add with the fastball (88-89), subtract with the change-up (80-83), subtract some more with the curve (69-72) and add with the cutter (87-88).

"He was in and out with all of it and he kept those guys off-balance. Later in the game, we had thrown so many change-ups and curveballs, his fastball was playing up and he as blowing it by people."

He allowed only three singles, none after the third inning, and struck out six. He got 15 swings and misses (seven off his four-seam fastball) and 15 called strikes (10 off his four-seamer).

"That's what I have to do," Fiers said. "I'm not going to overpower a lot of guys. When it looks like I do it's because they're off-balance. I need to keep them off-balance."

The average exit velocity on balls the White Sox put in play was 79.3 mph. Only two balls were struck at 100 mph or harder. It was suggested that the ball might not have been carrying in the chilly (36-degree) weather.

"It's not carrying because they didn't hit many barrels," Fiers said with a chuckle. "That's a very good hitting team, but we pitched very well this whole series."

The only time he was in trouble was the first inning. He hit Jose Abreu and walked Matt Davidson after allowing a one-out single to Avisail Garcia.

"I was trying to make my pitches too nasty," he said. "I have to stay within myself, trust my pitches and make everything look the same. Early on I was trying to make my change-up move a lot more and my fastball harder.

"I've definitely learned from my experience today, to stay within myself and pitch."

He got Nicky Delmonico to hit a soft liner that shortstop Jose Iglesias ran down and ended the first-inning threat by getting a soft ground ball from Wellington Castillo.

"He's got some deception," Gardenhire said. "You saw that today. That's why he's been in the big leagues a long time. We know he doesn't overpower hitters, but he's got deception. He pitches all around the zone. He changes speeds well.

"Today you saw vintage Mike Fiers."

The White Sox never threatened after the first inning. Fiers retired the last 11 batters he faced, and 16 of the last 18.

The Tigers, who had two hits all day, scored the winning run in the first inning and it was unearned off White Sox right-hander Reynaldo Lopez.

Leonys Martin, who got the Tigers' only two hits on the day, singled and stole second. He went to third on a passed ball. Miguel Cabrera brought him home with a sacrifice fly to center.

"We talked about being an aggressive team," said Gardenhire, after the Tigers stole seven bases in the series. "Guys going first to third, trying to force the issue. We don't like to stand around much. If you have some speed, we're going to try and use it."

The Tigers drew five walks off Lopez, but only one of those runners got as far as second base.

"In a game like this, you've got to take advantage of everything you can get," Martin said. "It's tough to play baseball in this weather, so you have to do all the little things."

The Tigers bullpen locked it down with three scoreless innings. The relievers have allowed just three runs in the last 21½ innings.

Alex Wilson and Daniel Stumpf worked a scoreless seventh and Joe Jimenez pitched an impressive eighth — striking out Yolmer Sanchez on a wicked slider and Yoan Moncada looking at a 95-mph fastball.

That left the ninth to closer Shane Greene.

Garcia reached on an error by third baseman Jeimer Candelario. Candelario made a slick back-hand play on the ball, but lost the handle when he tried to transfer the ball to his throwing hand.

But Greene induced a 6-4-3 double-play from slugger Jose Abreu and struck out Matt Davidson looking at a 95-mph fastball, earning his second save.

"We've been playing good baseball as a team and we're going to keep moving forward," Martin said.

The sweep in Chicago was the first by the Tigers since September 2011.

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Machado's hot start a union of talent, opportunity

Chris McCosky,

Chicago – It took him about a week to get over it. A bleak week spent moping around his house, stomach in knots, asking himself some very serious questions about his future.

This was in early December, 2013. The Tigers made a big splash signing free agent closer Joe Nathan. To make room for him on the 40-man roster, Dixon Machado was designated for assignment.

Age 21, after five years in the organization, after a rough season hitting just .215 at High-A Lakeland, Machado was cut loose. He was blindsided and distraught.

"When they told me they took me off the 40-man, my wife was pregnant at that moment," Machado said before the game against the White Sox Sunday. "I was sitting for a week inside my house thinking what do I need to do?"

"It was hard. I was crying and everything because your dream is to get to the big leagues and when you get there, they just took you off like that. It was hard at that moment."

It was also supremely motivating.

"That was motivating for sure," he said. "You know you've got to do it, not just for yourself, but you've got a family to take care of. You are playing for them, too."

Machado cleared waivers and rejoined the Tigers minor league system with a vengeance. He started the season in Lakeland, but was quickly promoted to Double-A Erie, where he hit .305 and showed some power for the first time in his career – six home runs and 31 doubles.

"And they put me back on the 40-man," Machado said. "It's a process. I'm glad those things already happened. I'm glad the things that happened last year already happened. Just keep looking forward."

Machado made his big-league debut in 2015, rode the Detroit-to-Toledo shuttle for two years, spent last year in a utility role and now, finally, at age 26, is the Tigers' every day second baseman.

And he's thriving. Entering play Sunday, he was hitting .300 with a .500 slugging percentage. He reached base each of the seven games the Tigers have played and has popped six doubles. He had 31 plate appearances by April 7; he got his 31st plate appearance on May 14 last season.

"One hundred percent," he said when asked if getting consistent at-bats has helped fuel his fast start. "You are learning every day. You are competing every day. Every day you face a different pitcher and you learn something. Whether you have success or not, you are still learning every day."

"I am just happy to be in this situation, happy for the opportunity and thank God everything is clicking. But I know it's early in the season. I just have to keep working hard."

Machado will tell you, and the Tigers scouts and player development people will agree, he's always had the talent to produce like he is now. His defensive skills have never been questioned; in fact, if the Tigers were to trade Jose Iglesias, Machado would likely become the regular shortstop.

The offensive production came slower. But it came steadily. As his body matured, as he built strength, he started driving balls into gaps. He had 164 hits in two seasons at Triple-A Toledo (2015, 2016) with 50 doubles and eight home runs.

The last piece of the puzzle, for Machado, was self-belief. And that didn't come until last season.

"You can say you believe in yourself, but you really have to believe it," he said. "Sometimes you say, 'I know I can play.' But you don't really believe in yourself."

It's hope. You hope you can succeed at the big-league level. And, as Machado found out the early part of last season, hope is a bad strategy. He was hitting .118 on May 3. He'd played in just 10 games, four starts. He had 20 plate appearances and was 2 for 17.

Right around that time, Ramon Santiago, now the club's first base coach, gave Machado a copy of the book, "Mind Gym: An Athlete's Guide to Inner Excellence," By Gary Mack and David Casstevens.

That book had a huge influence on Machado, and he still uses it as a touchstone reference. His season began to brighten considerably in May. For a three-month stretch (May 7 through July 7), Machado hit .389, with a .400 on-base percentage, .500 slugging and .900 OPS in 55 plate appearances.

"The only different thing I was doing in that stretch was preparing myself more mentally," he said. "Obviously, I was doing my work in the cage and all that. But I was more believing in myself, that I can hit, I can do this. I was just competing."

"Everybody who is in the big leagues is good. You don't get here because of luck or anything. I just started believing in myself and going out and trusting that I could do stuff."

That belief was fortified by the Tigers entrusting the everyday second base job to him after Ian Kinsler was traded. And it's been even more fortified by his hot start at the plate this season.

"He's a really confident young man," manager Ron Gardenhire said. "He just handles himself well. He doesn't get panicky about anything. I like his calmness on the field. He's a very talented young man and he works extremely hard and that's a good place to start in terms of developing a young player."

Gardenhire has kept Machado hitting ninth in the order all season and won't alter that any time soon. But long-term, he sees him as a lead-off hitter.

"I think eventually we will work our way toward that if everything keeps going like this," he said. "But right now he's swinging good and the lineup is doing fine. I am not going to screw with his head. I don't want him to change anything right now."

Gardenhire has seen it before. A player moves up to the top of the lineup and suddenly he changes his approach at the plate. He takes more pitches, gets behind in the count and starts to scuffle.

"I don't want to deal with any of that right now," he said, in reference to Machado. "The young man is doing fine. I don't want to turn the lineup around. Ultimately, you want to work your way up to where he's a top-of-the-order type guy."

"That's probably in his future. But we'll just leave him alone right now."

That's fine with Machado. Perhaps the quietest player in the Tigers' clubhouse, he is more than content lying in the weeds at the bottom of the batting order, knowing that every time he gets a hit or reaches base, he's turning the lineup over.

"We move our lineups around anyway and there's going to be times when (lead-off hitter Leonys) Martin is not in there," Gardenhire said. "That's when Machy would be right up there. We did that a lot in spring training.

"But our lineup is rolling over pretty good right now. Martin and (Jeimer) Candelario and the big guy (Miguel Cabrera) are getting chances to knock in runs. When those things happen, it's OK."

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