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Thursday, April 5, 2018

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Gibson pumped for frigid Opening Day start

Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | April 4, 2018

PITTSBURGH -- Right-hander Kyle Gibson left the Twins on Wednesday to fly to Minnesota in advance of his scheduled start in the home opener at Target Field on Thursday at 3:10 p.m. CT against the Mariners.

Gibson is coming off a strong outing, as he held the Orioles hitless through six innings before being lifted after 102 pitches on Saturday. The start in the home opener is a nice reward for Gibson, who had a strong second half last year and was arguably the club's best pitcher down the stretch when it made its surprise run to the American League Wild Card Game.

[View Full Game Coverage](#)

"Any chance you get to start a home opener, Minnesota fans won't care if it's 32 degrees or 22 degrees, they want to see a baseball game," Gibson said. "I'm excited to be headed home and start a good homestand."

As Gibson noted, cold temperatures are in the forecast for the opener, with a high of 39 degrees and a low of 16 on Thursday, according to Weather.com. It's also been snowing in the Twin Cities this week and a crew had to use high-pressure hoses and shovels to clear snow from the stands on Wednesday. But Gibson said he actually enjoys pitching in the cold and started in the club's coldest game in history on April 17, 2014, with a first-pitch temperature of 31 degrees. The MLB record for the most frigid contest is 23 degrees on April 23, 2013, set at Colorado's Coors Field.

"Snowing and cold is better than not snowing and cold," Gibson said. "It's either going to be brutally cold or there is going to be some cool snow on the ground. I grew up in Indiana and we had snow there. We played in it every now and then. And my first college start [at Missouri] was snowed out."

Gibson pitched in mostly favorable conditions on Saturday night with a game-time temperature of 55 degrees at Camden Yards. His offspeed pitches helped him get out of jams after issuing five walks, as he struck out six and induced weak contact.

"I tried to be as similar to the end of last year as possible," Gibson said. "Even when it was 2-0, or 2-1, I had confidence with my fastball in the strike zone instead of getting them to chase it. Hopefully, that's going to be the thing this year, that I can look back on it and say through all the struggles of 2017 that's what I learned and that's when I turned it around."

Twins tidbits

- Twins first baseman Joe Mauer was held out of the lineup on Wednesday, as planned by manager Paul Molitor. Molitor explained it was a way to make sure Mauer will be in the lineup for Thursday's home opener and also a way to get some at-bats for Logan Morrison, who is off to a slow start offensively.
- The home opener kicks off on Thursday with Breakfast on the Plaza, starting at 6 a.m. before DJ Advance plays starting at noon. Molitor and Mauer will meet with the media in a press conference before the game. The National Anthem will be performed by Dossa with a flyover featuring T-38s from the United States Air Force. The ceremonial first pitch will be thrown by the 2018 Olympic Gold Medal-winning U.S. Men's Curling Team.

Fernando Rodney caught snowflakes on his tongue while closing out the Pirates in a snow storm

Michael Clair and Rhett Bollinger | Star Tribune | April 4, 2018

The rhyme tells us we should expect plenty of April showers in anticipation of those May flowers. Given the number of rain delays and postponements in the baseball season so far -- Pittsburgh already had two games rained out during the opening series against the Tigers -- that part has come true.

But in Pittsburgh on Wednesday night, the Twins defeated the Pirates, 7-3, while playing through a wintry mix of snow. Though the flurries came and went, here's what it looked like when Ivan Nova took the hill at the start of the game:

Yeah, that's more of a January thing than an April one.

It was a pretty frigid night, too, with the temperature sitting at 37 degrees at the start of the game, though it felt much colder given 20 mph winds.

Though the Pirates should be getting used to that weather by now -- having not played a game that was warmer than 40 degrees yet -- Francisco Cervelli didn't look like he enjoyed it:

Byron Buxton appeared the same way in the outfield -- and he plays in Minnesota. If you've ever seen "Fargo," you know the Pittsburgh weather is par for the course.

Two homers were smashed into the wind, with Dozier's going high enough into the air to win the "Beat the Wind Chill" game:

Chris Mack

@THEChrisMack

Dozier's HR (30 degrees) wins the "Beat the Wind Chill" sweepstakes. <https://twitter.com/THEChrisMack/status/981659217030537216> ...

"It's one thing to have a temperature like that," Twins starter Jake Odorizzi said after the game. "But when you add in wind and snow, it's an interesting viewpoint out there. It's probably the coldest game I've ever thrown in, in my life. I tried to get a feel for the ball. But I didn't feel comfortable with my release point or a feel for the ball, but it's a good precursor for Minnesota."

The snow made for some messy baseball, too. Eddie Rosario popped the ball up and, with swirling winds and plenty of white things in the sky, Cervelli completely lost the ball.

Dozier understood the struggle. "It wasn't really bad to see until that last inning," Dozier said after the game. "Usually, I'm hoping they hit it to me but in the ninth, I was OK they didn't. Let's just put it that way."

It all culminated in the greatest moment possible: With Twins closer Fernando Rodney on the field to secure the win, he took a pause from his

mound duties to try and catch snowflakes on his tongue. Because even adults love snow days.

This is just par for the course for Rodney. "It doesn't surprise me," Twins manager Paul Molitor said about the closer's mid-game snow snack.

Where Twins' Top 30 prospects are starting season **Jonathan Mayo | MLB.com | April 4, 2018**

With the 2018 season getting started, here's a look at where the Twins' Top 30 prospects are projected to start the season:

1. Royce Lewis (MLB No. 20), SS -- Cedar Rapids Kernels (A)
2. Fernando Romero (MLB No. 68), RHP -- Rochester Red Wings (AAA)
3. Stephen Gonsalves (MLB No. 79), LHP -- Chattanooga Lookouts (AA)
4. Nick Gordon (MLB No. 81), SS/2B -- Chattanooga Lookouts (AA)
5. Wander Javier, SS -- Extended spring training
6. Alex Kirilloff, OF -- Cedar Rapids Kernels (A)
7. Brusdar Graterol, RHP -- Extended spring training
8. Brent Rooker, OF/1B -- Chattanooga Lookouts (AA)
9. Blayne Enlow, RHP -- Cedar Rapids Kernels (A)
10. Lewin Diaz, 1B -- Fort Myers Miracle (A Adv)
11. Akil Baddoo, OF -- Cedar Rapids Kernels (A)
12. Lewis Thorpe, LHP -- Chattanooga Lookouts (AA)
13. LaMonte Wade, OF -- Chattanooga Lookouts (AA)
14. Travis Blankenhorn, 3B -- Fort Myers Miracle (A Adv)
15. Zack Littell, RHP -- Chattanooga Lookouts (AA)
16. Tyler Jay, LHP -- Chattanooga Lookouts (AA)
17. Felix Jorge, RHP -- Chattanooga Lookouts (AA) - DL
18. Kohl Stewart, RHP -- Chattanooga Lookouts (AA)
19. Mitch Garver, C -- Minnesota Twins (MLB)
20. Andrew Bechtold, 3B -- Cedar Rapids Kernels (A)
21. John Curtiss, RHP -- Rochester Red Wings (AAA)
22. Tyler Watson, LHP -- Cedar Rapids Kernels (A)
23. Luis Arraez, INF -- Fort Myers Miracle (A Adv) - DL
24. Ben Rortvedt, C -- Cedar Rapids Kernels (A)
25. Jacob Pearson, OF -- Extended spring training
26. Jake Cave, OF -- Rochester Red Wings (AAA)
27. Zack Granite, OF -- Rochester Red Wings (AAA)
28. Jose Miranda, INF -- Cedar Rapids Kernels (A)
29. Landon Leach, RHP -- Extended spring training
30. Yunior Severino, 2B -- Extended spring training

• Twins prospect coverage | Twins Top 30 prospects stats

Team to watch

When everyone is healthy, Double-A Chattanooga leads the way with nine Top 30 prospects, but the ceiling in Class A Cedar Rapids is just too much to pass up. It starts with top prospect, and 2017 No. 1 overall pick Royce Lewis, but it also includes 2016 first-rounder Alex Kirilloff, the outfielder who missed 2017 because of Tommy John surgery, and 2017 third-rounder Blayne Enlow, the exciting right-hander, who got \$2 million to sign last summer. All three are in the organization's top 10.

Top prospects' starting spots

Division Teams

NL East ATL, MIA, NYM, PHI, WAS

AL East BAL, BOS, NYY, TB, TOR

NL Central CHC, CIN, MIL, PIT, STL

AL Central CLE, CWS, DET, KC, MIN

NL West ARI, COL, LAD, SD, SF

AL West HOU, LAA, OAK, SEA, TEX

• Top 100 prospects' starting spots

- 41 top prospects make MLB rosters

Teams on MiLB.TV
Rochester Red Wings
Cedar Rapidsernels

New faces

A third-round pick of the Angels last June, toolsy outfielder Jacob Pearson struggled a bit during his pro debut in the rookie-level Arizona League. But the Twins liked his power-speed potential heading into the Draft and were happy to get him in return for international bonus pool money. He'll hang back in Extended spring training awaiting assignment.

Outfielder Jake Cave had a chance to stick with the Reds as a Rule 5 pick, but was sent back to the Yankees. He made it up to Triple-A in New York's system last year, one of his best. But when the Yankees designated him for assignment, the Twins swooped in and acquired him for right-hander Luis Gil. He'll start the year in Rochester.

Infielder Yunion Severino was one of the players declared a free agent by Major League Baseball in the wake of the Braves international signing scandal. The Twins were thrilled to bring him into the fold for \$2.5 million and will likely send him to a rookie level later this summer.

On the shelf

Right-hander Felix Jorge was slated to begin the year with Chattanooga, but triceps soreness will delay his 2018 debut. Second baseman Luis Arraez tore his ACL three games into his 2017 season and is still working his way back. The hope is he'll join Fort Myers in mid-May.

Twins end Bucs' reign as final undefeated team

Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | April 4, 2018

PITTSBURGH -- Logan Morrison snapped an 0-for-13 funk to open the season with a go-ahead RBI double as part of a four-run sixth, while Eduardo Escobar doubled twice and Miguel Sano went 3-for-5 with two RBIs to help the Twins to a 7-3 win over the Pirates to clinch a winning road trip on a cold and snowy Wednesday night at PNC Park. Minnesota went 3-2 against the Orioles and Pirates before heading home for the Target Field opener on Thursday.

Morrison, starting at first base over Joe Mauer with National League rules in effect, made his first hit with his new club count, as he smacked an RBI double into the right-field corner to score Sano from first after he tied the game with an RBI single to plate Brian Dozier. Escobar followed with his second double of the game to score Morrison before Byron Buxton added an RBI double of his own to cap the scoring in the sixth.

"I think he feels pretty good about it," Twins manager Paul Molitor said with a smile. "But I don't think he was putting any pressure on himself. I'm sure getting that first one was a relief for him."

Morrison's go-ahead hit came on a 2-2 fastball, and Sano was able to score from first despite peeking at the right-field corner as he rounded third, as he lost sight of third-base coach Gene Glynn.

"I was just battling, trying to get the barrel on something. I've been feeling comfortable in the box, but whenever I make contact, something [bad] happens," Morrison said. "But it's just one of those things. It's been like 15 at-bats. Keep working and it'll fall."

Dozier got the Twins on the board with a solo shot in the third -- his fourth this season, which is tied for the Major League lead. Sano sparked a rally in the fourth with a leadoff double before scoring on a sacrifice fly from Escobar and padded Minnesota's lead with an RBI single in the seventh to score Eddie Rosario from first, as he was running on the pitch.

"We used a couple ways to manufacture runs," Dozier said. "We had some big hits and some big doubles, but we also had great baserunning. Rosario on that long single, we practice that in Spring Training. That's what I'm talking about with creating runs."

Right-hander Jake Odorizzi was hurt by a two-run homer from Josh Bell in the first and went 4 1/3 innings, surrendering three runs on five hits and three walks. But the bullpen was sharp, with Taylor Rogers getting out of a jam in the fifth with the help of Rosario throwing out Gregory Polanco at the plate. Trevor Hildenberger tossed two scoreless frames, Addison Reed threw a scoreless eighth and closer Fernando Rodney preserved the win in a non-save situation.

"What a job by the bullpen tonight, picking me up right there," Odorizzi said. "[Rogers] got two big outs and [Rosario] came up huge with that throw. It was kind of a momentum-shifter. We ended up taking the lead shortly after that. The offense and bullpen picked me up so I'll return the favor."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Sheriff Rosario: The Pirates looked as though they were going to add to their lead in the fifth, when Corey Dickerson singled to left with two and two out. But Rosario threw out Polanco at home as he tried to score from second to keep it a one-run game. The Twins took the lead for good the next inning.

"I felt good on the throw," said Rosario, who dealt with triceps tendinitis in Spring Training. "It was a tough play. There was snow and cold, but I wanted to do a good job and save the run and help the pitcher."

Popup drop: Dozier drew a leadoff walk in the sixth and quickly advanced to second on a wild pitch. Rosario then hit a high popup about 6 feet in front of home plate. Catcher Francisco Cervelli and starter Ivan Nova clearly lost the ball in the air, and Bell did not get under it. The ball dropped, and Bell made the safe play by throwing out Rosario at first. Dozier took advantage, safely dashing to third on the play. That left him in ideal position to score the tying run when Sano, the next batter, singled to right. Sano finished 3-for-4 with two runs and two RBIs.

MITEL REPLAY OF THE DAY

Right-hander Tyler Glasnow appeared to pick off Rosario at first base after a walk in the seventh inning. Rosario was initially ruled safe, however, and the call was upheld after a two-minute, 59-second replay review. The Pirates lost their challenge, and the baserunner proved to be costly. One pitch later, with Rosario running from first, Sano slapped an RBI single to left field.

WHAT'S NEXT

Right-hander Kyle Gibson is set to start the Target Field home opener for the Twins on Thursday against the Mariners at 3:10 p.m. CT. Gibson has yet to allow a hit this year, as he threw six hitless innings against the Orioles on Saturday before being taken out after 102 pitches. Mauer is also expected to return to first base after Morrison started in his place on Wednesday.

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Twins smack five doubles en route to victory in snowy Pittsburgh

Phil Miller | Star Tribune | April 5, 2018

PITTSBURGH – The Twins on Wednesday stumbled across the best way to stay warm during April baseball: Run, preferably around the bases.

The snow swirled, the wind howled and the temperature kept ratcheting down toward freezing and below. But the Twins kept the blood flowing by smacking nine hits, stretching five of them into doubles, and taking extra bases whenever possible, even in some of the most surprising circumstances. The wintry weather became such an afterthought, closer Fernando Rodney was catching snowflakes on his tongue as he recorded the final outs of the Twins' 7-3 victory at empty PNC Park.

"It's a good game to win. We end up having a winning road trip to start the season," Twins manager Paul Molitor said of his 3-2 team. "Everyone will be anxious to get back home. At least we'll be used to the conditions."

Used to them, but not necessarily happy about it. "Cold. I'm still cold," Miguel Sano said a half-hour after a game in which, heavily garbed with winter wear, he provided the go-ahead run by slowing down, speeding up and rumbling home from first base on Logan Morrison's first hit as a Twin, a double into the right field corner.

"He can move, man," Morrison said. "Great baserunning."

Temperatures were in the mid-30s during the game with a wind that made it feel like 22 degrees, with the teams sometimes fighting blowing snow.

The Twins had some more of that, plus some fine defense, and a brain freeze, too — all of it provided by Eddie Rosario. The left fielder, fighting through a season-opening slump, scored from first base on a single by Sano, and in the fifth inning, with the Twins trailing 3-2, charged in to scoop up a Corey Dickerson single and throw out Pirates baserunner Gregory Polanco at the plate, a play that "changed the momentum of the game," according to starting pitcher Jake Odorizzi.

"It was a big play," agreed Molitor. "The ball wasn't hit particularly crisply, but the direction was good and [Rosario] had a straight charge toward the plate and he kept it on line. [That's] something we didn't see as much of last year as we had in the past, with that throw tailing up, but he kept that one right on the mark."

But Rosario also went 0-for-4 and had an embarrassing moment amid the Twins' game-winning four-run rally in the sixth. With Brian Dozier on second, Rosario hit a popup into the snowy gale above home plate. Pirates catcher Francisco Cervelli couldn't find it amid the flurries, and neither could first baseman Josh Bell. But when it fell to the turf in fair territory, Rosario hadn't moved, and was thrown out at first, with Dozier moving up.

Call it a teaching moment.

"I felt like I needed to say something, even though I know he knows. You just can't make assumptions like that," Molitor said. "He's frustrated, I'm sure. He's trying to get the runner over there with a man on second and nobody out, and he pops it up. The frustration got the better of his judgment there."

Actually, Rosario said, he believed the ball was foul, and when he heard Cervelli yell that he couldn't see it in the snow, "I say, 'Hey, hey, [it's] over there, over there!'" Rosario said, in hopes of fooling Cervelli. "I'll just run next time."

It turned out not to matter, because it was at that moment that the Twins really began producing heat with their bats. Sano singled home Dozier — who earlier in the game had already provided his fourth home run in just five games — Morrison doubled, and after a pitching change, Eduardo Escobar and Byron Buxton doubled, too. It added up to four runs, more than enough to hand the 4-1 Pirates their first loss, largely because the Twins' bullpen chipped in with 4 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings of scoreless relief.

Odorizzi surrendered two first-inning runs, on Josh Harrison's leadoff double and Josh Bell's 432-foot home run to center field. A pair of singles produced another Pirates run in the fourth inning, and after issuing back-to-back walks in the fifth, his night was done.

Baseball coaches are in never-ending war with spring cold

Patrick Reusse | Star Tribune | April 5, 2018

Two Super Bowls and now a third NCAA Final Four on the way to a dome in downtown Minneapolis. The revelation that Hazeltine National will become the first U.S. golf course to host a second Ryder Cup a decade down the road.

These have been fine promotional efforts by influential people in behalf of Minnesota, but as long shots, none can equal the coup pulled off by Ely's Matty Stukel, when he convinced the American Legion to bring its 1980 World Series to the small, woodsy mecca on the edge of the Boundary Waters.

There hasn't been a town so small (roughly 5,000 then) or so remote (four hours to the Twin Cities) before or since to host this national event that has taken place since the late 1920s.

"I was in the ninth grade," Frank Ivancich said. "It was amazing to see Will Clark and Sid Fernandez and John Cangelosi playing on our Ely baseball field."

Ivancich is entering his 15th season as Ely High School's baseball coach and hoping to again see players on the grass of Veterans Memorial Field ... oh, maybe early next month.

"We're still all white up here," he said. "And, the nights are still so cool, any little bit of melting during the day turns to ice."

Cool ... as in below zero? "Yes, it's below zero this morning," said Ivancich, from a school office on Wednesday. "Take the weather you're having in Minneapolis and subtract 10 or 15 degrees. That's Ely."

The Ely Timberwolves have gone to four state tournaments in six years, including the past two. They have 16 key players returning. Ivancich can't wait to see this club, other than with whiffle balls, tennis balls and rubber baseballs in the Ely gymnasium that has stood since the early 1900s.

"We're in a tournament in Hinckley on the weekend of April 20," Ivancich said. "We hope to play those games. If we don't, it's probably going to be May before we can start playing the teams around here."

The Twins and Opening Day fans are lamenting Thursday's forecast high of 38 with snow and rain at Target Field.

"Thirty-eight, a little snow, rain mix," Ivancich said. "We'll take it any day. Let's play two."

Jerry Haugen is in his 42nd season as the baseball coach at St. John's University. The Johnnies' last game played was on March 20 — in Tucson.

“We’ve played 16 games, all in Florida or Arizona,” Haugen said. “Late springs aren’t new. One of my early years, we were playing Carleton on our old field, it was supposed to get to 40 degrees, so we started the game. Never got above 31, we had rain, hail and snow all within 10 minutes.

“My favorite cold-weather game was a couple of years ago, on our new turf field. We plowed off 5 inches of snow and piled it up behind the dugouts.

“Tom Druk was one of our players, and the family had a golden poodle retriever named Chance at the game. The foul balls would disappear in the snow, and Chance would dash over, dig out the baseballs, and return ’em to the dugout. They were a little slobbery, but we had baseballs.”

John Anderson is in his 38th year as Gophers baseball coach. The snow and cold has taken care of the first Big Ten series at Siebert Field. Anderson arranged to have this weekend series vs. Penn State moved to Purdue.

“Worst ever? I would have to go back to 1990 at Iowa City,” Anderson said. “They had to bring in a pickup truck to load the ice that was being broken up and shoveled off the tarp. They finally got the tarp off and we played two seven-inning games.

“Dan Wilson was catching, with his throwing hand in his back pocket. I asked, ‘What’s that?’ And he said, ‘If I don’t do that, I can’t feel my hand.’”

Ryan Lefebvre, a voice of the Kansas City Royals and a former Gopher, also cited the doubleheader at Iowa City as his coldest game as a player.

“I was a kid from California and that was the first day I said, ‘Toto, we’re not in Los Angeles anymore,’ ” he said.

Josh Wetzel is in his 16th season as the voice of the Rochester [N.Y.] Red Wings, the Twins’ Class AAA farm club. That team also will be opening at home against weather odds on Thursday.

“My first game in 2003 ... and Rochester’s first as a Twins affiliate,” Wetzel said. “It started sleeting, then snowing. Players had ice on their caps. Lew Ford and Michael Restovich were a couple of guys freezing in the outfield.”

Restovich? No problem.

As a kid from our Rochester, Resto was fully aware of Minnesota’s April tradition: sleet, snow and baseball.

Snow? Home opener starter Kyle Gibson says bring it on

Phil Miller | Star Tribune | April 4, 2018

PITTSBURGH – It snowed during the Twins’ game at PNC Park on Wednesday, but Kyle Gibson wasn’t there to see it. Maybe he’ll see some Thursday, when he pitches the home opener.

He actually wouldn’t mind.

“Snowing and cold is better than not snowing and cold,” Gibson said, taking a position that few fans would probably agree with. “It’s going to be brutally cold, [but maybe] there is going to be some cool snow, too.”

The occasion provides its own warmth, the righthander said. “Minnesota fans aren’t going to care if it’s 32 degrees or 22 degrees, they’re excited to see a baseball game,” he asserted. “And we’re excited to be going home.”

Especially after having to play a night game that included several innings played with snow swirling around the field. Wednesday’s finale of the two-game series began at 6 p.m. EDT, and even that was a sticking point between these two teams. The Pirates originally scheduled the game for 7 p.m., to the dismay of the visitors from Minnesota, whose own home opener is scheduled for 3:15 p.m. Thursday. The Twins asked Pittsburgh to switch the game time to a 1 p.m. start, but the Pirates hoped for a big enough first-week crowd to justify the night game.

A compromise of sorts was reached when the Twins pointed out that, under MLB’s collective bargaining agreement, if the game was scheduled for 7 p.m., and included a flight home longer than 90 minutes, the Twins would not be allowed to schedule a day game on Thursday. The Pirates gave in, but the Twins will still experience a rarity this week: a day game after a night game, with a change of cities in between.

Given the odd scheduling, the Twins sent Gibson to Minneapolis before the game began — he hoped to catch the last few innings on TV after landing — so he can be rested for his start in the home opener.

King remembered

As the nation's media marked the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination on Wednesday, Gibson reflected on a personal connection that he and his Twins teammates made during spring training. Before a morning workout in early March, Minnesota players were addressed in the clubhouse by Martin Luther King III, son of the civil rights leader.

"I got to talk to him a little while, and that's a pretty cool experience, getting to hear from the son of somebody who probably changed our country as much as anybody," Gibson said. "He was a very gifted speaker. I've listened to a few Martin Luther King speeches online, and you could almost close your eyes and recognize that this was his son."

King was in camp on behalf of RISE, an effort to encourage professional athletes to register to vote, and to use their public platform to encourage others to do so. "He shared a little bit of his dad's experience, and he used it to invoke the importance of the vote in this country, and the importance of exercising that right," Gibson said. "I wanted to thank him for what his family went through."

Kinley ready, waiting

Tyler Kinley has waited five years to make his major league debut, so an extra week isn't any problem, the righthander said Wednesday. It might be harder on his family, all of whom were in attendance in Baltimore over the weekend without getting to see him pitch. His girlfriend has been in Pittsburgh, again with no luck, and Kinley said his mother and brother are planning to be in Minneapolis this weekend.

Eventually, they'll see him pitch for the Twins, and it'll be great, right? "It's going to be everything — to pitch at home, in the opening series, getting to be a major leaguer," the 27-year-old Rule 5 pick said. "I'm really looking forward to it."

Twins face challenges early in the season

Sid Hartman | Star Tribune | April 5, 2018

The Twins come home to open Target Field on Thursday after a successful five-game road trip to start the season that culminated with their 7-3 win over Pittsburgh on Wednesday.

After starting the season 3-for-17, Miguel Sano went 3-for-5 with a double, two RBI and two runs scored and moved his average up to .273. Brian Dozier continued his incredible home run streak with his fourth in five games. And Eduardo Escobar stayed hot, going 2-for-3 with two RBI to move his average up to .438, a great start in place of the suspended Jorge Polanco.

On top of that the bullpen backed up a shaky Jake Odorizzi, who allowed three runs on five hits and three walks in snowy conditions over 4½ innings, as Taylor Rogers, Trevor Hildenberger, Addison Reed and Fernando Rodney combined to allow three hits and no runs.

Hopefully the Twins can build on that momentum as they settle in for 12 straight home games. They weren't so successful at home last year, going just 41-40 compared to 44-37 on the road.

A better start?

A year ago the Twins didn't set the world on fire to start the season. They won their first four games, but finished 12-11 in April, 14-12 in May, 14-15 in June and 10-15 in July.

They finally hit their stride and had a great August, when they went 20-10. It was that stretch, which included a six-game winning streak, that got them an American League wild-card playoff berth, because they went 14-14 in September before winning their lone game in October.

The Twins will have to overcome a few things at the start of this season with starting pitcher Ervin Santana out until May and Polanco out for 81 games.

Polanco was a big catalyst during that successful August. He had hit just .224 in the first half of the season with three home runs and 31 RBI, but he really turned it around in the second half and hit .373 in August alone with six home runs and 23 RBI.

Santana, meanwhile, was the workhorse for the team in the first half of the season in 2017, when he went 10-6 with a 2.99 ERA and was named an All-Star.

The Twins are going to have to hope that Odorizzi and Lance Lynn can help bolster the staff without Santana and that Escobar can stay solid at

the plate.

Yes this is a new ballclub for the Twins. While nine of the 13 position players on the 25-man roster are the same from 2017, the only two pitchers who broke camp with the 25-man roster this year that did so last year are Kyle Gibson and Ryan Pressly.

That means that 10 of the 12 pitchers on the staff were not here for Opening Day in 2017.

New coaches arrive

While the Twins have made big changes on the field, in bringing in such free agents as Lynn, Odorizzi and first baseman Logan Morrison, perhaps their biggest changes have been in the coaching staff.

Over the past two years they have completely revamped their key positions in replacing hitting coach Tom Brunansky, pitching coach Neil Allen and bench coach Joe Vavra.

This year Garvin Alston is in his first year as a major league pitching coach replacing Allen, who had been in that role with the Twins for three seasons.

Derek Shelton is the bench coach, replacing Vavra, who had been with the Twins in different roles for 12 years.

Twins President Dave St. Peter talked about how the transition has been going among the coaching staff.

“Derek Shelton comes to us as our bench coach and spent a lot of time with Tampa last year, with Toronto, he’s a really, really gifted leader and I think is really going to be helpful to Paul Molitor,” St. Peter said. “Garvin Alston, first-time major league pitching coach, and he’s had a tremendous amount of support from [senior pitching adviser] Bob McLure and the likes of Bert Blyleven.

“Garvin is going to be great. He’s going to bring a lot of energy and a lot of personalized pitch plans. We’re optimistic that he’s going to do for our pitching staff what James Rowson has done for our hitters. Both of those guys I think are a big part of our future.”

Yes, Molitor was very close with former coaches Vavra, Allen and Brunansky, but there’s no doubt the shake-up to bring in Rowson worked great last season and the Twins need the same to happen this year with Shelton and Alston.

ESPN ranks Vikings

ESPN graded out all 32 NFL teams this week for how they did in free agency, and the Vikings were the only team to receive an “A” grade. And that was before the team filled a huge need with wide receiver Kendall Wright.

ESPN wrote: “It took two years of strategic planning for Minnesota to enter free agency with \$53 million in salary-cap space. The Vikings set themselves up to be able to get any quarterback they wanted this offseason, and that’s exactly what they did in offering Kirk Cousins — 2018’s top free agent — an unprecedented fully-guaranteed contract.”

They added that signing defensive lineman Sheldon Richardson put the Vikings among the biggest winners in the offseason.

This is another season where General Manager Rick Spielman and his staff have put the team in a great position heading into the NFL draft later this month.

Jottings

- The Timberwolves game against the Nuggets on Thursday is one of the biggest regular-season games in team history. The Wolves are 2-0 against Denver this season, and the Nuggets (43-35) are one game behind the Timberwolves (44-34) in the loss column. While the Timberwolves could still finish anywhere from fourth in the Western Conference to out of the playoffs, there is one certainty: If they win three of their final four games there is no way they can miss the postseason.

- If the Wolves reach the playoffs and open on the road, their first home playoff game would be either Thursday, April 19, or Friday, April 20. If they happen to get into the No. 4 seed and open at home, their first home game would be either Saturday, April 14, or Sunday, April 15. ... The third annual Flip Saunders Legacy Award will be presented on Monday at that evening’s game vs. Memphis. The award honors the current Timberwolves player who has best demonstrated community service throughout the course of the season.

- Speaking of Kendall Wright, his athleticism appears to be unparalleled as he earned all-state honors in Texas in football, basketball and track and played both ways in football. ... The Vikings may be looking for a diamond in the rough in linebacker Reshard Cliett, who has been with six

teams in three NFL seasons. Cleitt ran a 4.4-second 40-yard dash at the NFL combine and is considered extremely fast for a linebacker.

Postgame: 'Coldest game' for Odorizzi, used to pitching indoors

Phil Miller | Star Tribune | April 4, 2018

PITTSBURGH — A trio of extras from PNC Park, where the snow has stopped. No, it's started again. Oh, it stopped. Wait, there it goes again ...

Jake Odorizzi has spent all but four games of his career in a Tampa Bay Rays uniform, "so I've kind of been spoiled." Pitch in the Tropicana Field dome to start the season, and usually it's warmed up by the time the Rays hit the road.

He hasn't even been to Minnesota as a Twin yet, but he's got a taste of what he's in for.

"There was a great deal of wind, some snow. It was an interesting viewpoint out there," Odorizzi said after pitching 4 1/3 innings in 35-degree weather at PNC Park. "Definitely the coldest game I've thrown in, probably in my life."

The cold made his hand dry which made it difficult to get a good grip on the baseball. "I didn't feel comfortable with my release point, getting a feel for the ball," he said. "It's a good precursor for Minnesota."

Odorizzi's next start comes Monday against the Astros — and it's not expected to be any warmer in Target Field.

Wednesday was April 4, and Brian Dozier hit his fourth home run. That's already more homers than Dozier has hit in any April of his career except 2014, when he had seven.

"I feel great. I feel great, that's all I can say," Dozier said of his unusually hot start.

His third-inning shot off a sinking changeup from Pirates starter Ivan Nova felt better than it wound up being, Dozier said. The ball carried into the left-field corner, and just dropped over the wall, barely out of reach of Pirates left fielder Corey Dickerson. "I thought I hit it further back. I don't know if I need to get into the weight room a little more," Dozier said. "I thought it was way back, and then I saw [Dickerson] tracking it, and I picked up my trot a little bit."

Dozier also stole his first base of the season, taking off after walking in the ninth inning with the Twins ahead by four. Given the tempest he ignited recently by suggesting Baltimore's Chance Sisco was wrong to bunt with a seven-run deficit last weekend, Dozier said he was careful to make sure the steal was appropriate. "I made sure that I looked at [Twins manager Paul Molitor]," Dozier said. "Had the green light, so we're all good."

The only thing not so good about the day: The weather. The snow flurries grew heavy in the ninth inning. "Usually I'm always hoping they hit it to me," he said, "but in the ninth, I was OK that they didn't, let's just say that."

After relying on 21 shutout innings from the starting pitchers during their first series in Baltimore, the Twins' bullpen began dominating in Pittsburgh. In two games against the Pirates, Twins relievers threw a total of 8 2/3 innings without allowing a run. That came after Twins starters Lance Lynn and Odorizzi allowed first-inning home runs to create an early deficit in both games.

"The bullpen did a really nice job," Molitor said, "especially with Hildy [Trevor Hildenberger] coming in for two innings and picking us up."

Recollections of coldest baseball days

Patrick Reusse | Star Tribune | April 5, 2018

What's the coldest day ever at the ballpark?

Terry Ryan, former Twins GM and current Phillies scout: "Sixteen, 17 years ago, I was in Edmonton when it was the Twins affiliate. It was early May and it was snowing so hard that I could hardly see the pitcher. I was pretty sure it was Juan Rincon, but I couldn't tell even though I was right behind the plate. And they finished that game."

Jim Kaat, pitching and broadcasting great: "Missoula, Montana, 1958. Jack McKeon was the manager. I pitched in snow flurries. We had some

Cuban players — Bert Cueto was one — and they wouldn't leave the hotel. They had never seen snow and we're afraid to go out in it. Also, Fenway Park, April 18, 1961, my first Twins win. Flurries. We won 3-2. My roomie Billy Pleis saved it."

Paul Molitor, Twins manager and Hall of Famer: "I'd say it was as a visiting player with the Brewers in the old Exhibition Stadium in Toronto. It was minus-3 Celsius and the winds were howling off the lake."

Jack Hannahan, former Gopher and big-leaguer: "A series at Wichita State in 2000. We got snowed out in the ninth with Luke Appert at second and me at the plate. It was 29 degrees and snowing during the game. We beat them the next day."

Glen Perkins, also a former Gopher and three-time AL All-Star: "I pitched at Michigan — 29 degrees and 12 degree windchill. I gave up two runs in the ninth and got a no-decision. That was the only game in my Big Ten career that I didn't get a win."

Billy Milos, Twins scout: "Late March 1996, watching eventual Red Sox first-rounder Josh Garrett in Vincennes, Indiana. Rare high school night game. It was too cold to play in the day, much less at night, but it also was our first chance to see Garrett that spring. Imagine a pile of scouts huddled in the stands trying to keep each other warm. I was wearing my big fluffy Russian hat. That thing saved me."

Despite the cold and snow, Twins dig deep make opener best it can be
Tim Harlow | Star Tribune | April 5, 2018

As heaters thawed the field and scoreboard messages flashed "Fire Up," crews bundled in winter wear shoveled an icy mix off the infield tarp at Target Field and tossed it in motorized carts to be hauled away.

More than 75 Twins employees — from part-timers in the call center to team president — shoveled, shoveled and shoveled some more to clear the field and seats of a record-setting snowfall in time for Thursday's home opener against Seattle.

This may be the most unseasonable start to the baseball season since the outdoor downtown stadium opened in 2010. There's been snow, there's been cold, but there hasn't been an April like this.

"Winter continues," reads a long-term forecast statement issued Wednesday by the Weather Service's metro area headquarters in Chanhassen.

The forecast offers little payoff for a delay in the scheduled start. The temperature has never fallen below zero in the Twin Cities during the month of April, but thermometers will be within a whisker of that this week. A low of 5 degrees Friday morning will shatter the previous mark of 1979's 10 degrees for the coldest April 6 in the Twin Cities.

Another storm system will bring the potential for several inches of snow Sunday into Monday, the National Weather Service said.

Snow is a distinct possibility for the game, too, as game time temperatures should be just above the freezing mark. That puts it close to the coldest Opening Day at Target Field, April 1, 2013, when first-pitch temperature was 35 degrees. The coldest home opener in Twins history occurred at Met Stadium — 33 degrees in 1962.

Some shoveling included

On Wednesday morning Bryan Johnson was handed a shovel and directed to the right-field bleachers at Target Field. Call it one of those "duties as assigned" for the manager of premium services, who was on just his third day on the job.

"They did not cover this in contract negotiations," joked the North Carolina transplant, whose job is to ensure fans have the best experience possible when they take in a Twins game. "My boss said fans will love and appreciate what we are doing."

Johnson removed snow from the bleachers. Others from a paid custodial service walked through the stadium seating bowl using hoses to spray 130-degree water heated by steam from the neighboring Hennepin County garbage burner to melt accumulated snow.

"In the seating bowl, we really don't have a good place to put the snow and we had to wash down the stadium anyway," said Gary Glawe, senior director of facilities. "This will just take us a while longer and it's more challenging when overnight temperatures are 10 degrees."

Snow removal started Tuesday afternoon and will continue through Wednesday night so umpires can yell "play ball" at 3:10 p.m.

"I'm not saying it's going to be perfect, but we are hoping for an awesome Opening Day," Glawe said. "I stress to people to dress appropriately and wear appropriate footwear as there could be icy spots."

The round-the-clock shoveling operation is not unprecedented. A similar effort was needed in May 2012 when a freak 5-inch snowstorm led to the postponement of one game. The next day, the upper tiers of seats were closed and fans were moved to lower levels.

But for this home opener, calling off the game and waiting a day isn't a viable option, even though another round of snow or rain is forecast to move in just before the game.

"Friday does not look any better," Glawe said.

The weather service made it officially unusual.

"It's not too surprising to see snow in early April, but the degree of the cold we will be experiencing into early next week is highly anomalous," its statement said.

For Johnson, it's just way too cold.

"I've never seen anything remotely like this," he said. "It's crazy, but lots of good team building."

Strike from Eddie Rosario jolts Twins toward a 7-3 win over Pirates

Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | April 4, 2018

PITTSBURGH — Eddie Rosario's throwing arm seems to be just fine, thank you.

After missing 11 days this spring with tendinitis in his right triceps, the Twins' left fielder energized the visitors with a fifth-inning laser that cut down Gregory Polanco at home plate. A four-run outburst followed the next half inning, sending the Twins to a 7-3 win over the Pittsburgh Pirates and a split of this two-game interleague series.

"A play like that changes the momentum of the game," Twins center fielder Byron Buxton said. "That was a big turning point for us — throwing that guy out, keeping that run off the board. We took that momentum and just kind of ran with it."

Ignoring the snow flurries that swirled throughout the windy, 37-degree night, Rosario deftly charged Corey Dickerson's line single to short left and uncorked a one-hop strike to catcher Jason Castro for the inning-ender.

"It was a tough play," Rosario said. "It's snowing, it's cold, but I did a good job. I tried to save that run and help the pitcher."

A player who uses emotion as fuel, Rosario backpedaled his way toward the infield, barking jubilantly at Buxton as he did so. The center fielder couldn't help but laugh.

"It was definitely funny," Buxton said. "It was along the lines of, 'Don't run on me!' He was kind of amped, and he let 'em know."

Sunglasses perched atop his cap, gold chain flapping on his chest, Rosario put two fingers to his lips and blew out the smoke from an imaginary six-shooter. Fresh off his 32nd career assist in three-plus seasons, Rosario then mimicked a cowboy re-holstering his weapon as he dramatically pushed his right hand down close to his right hip.

His shivering teammates loved it.

"The energy was there the whole game," Buxton said. "We just needed that one little spark, and that's what sparked us."

Logan Morrison, snapping an 0-for-13 start with the Twins, ripped the go-ahead double into the right-field corner to chase starter Ivan Nova. Miguel Sano, despite slowing down around third, was able to beat Josh Harrison's relay throw and score all the way from first.

Eduardo Escobar and Buxton added RBI doubles to give the Twins' bullpen a cushion as they completed a 3-2 season-opening road trip and knocked off the majors' last unbeaten team. It was the second double of the night for Escobar, who added a sacrifice fly in the fourth to score Sano after a leadoff double off the wall in right.

Four Twins relievers got the final 14 outs as the Twins' bullpen recorded 8 2/3 shutout innings in the abbreviated series.

Brian Dozier, who walked to start the four-run sixth, got the Twins on the board with a two-out solo homer in the third. It was Dozier's fourth homer already this year, tying him with Bryce Harper and Charlie Blackmon for the major league lead.

Dozier's heads-up baserunning overshadowed a Rosario gaffe in the sixth when the wind blew an apparent foul pop back into play with Rosario still standing at the plate. An embarrassed Rosario was thrown out at first after the ball landed in fair territory, but Dozier took third on the plate ahead of the return throw.

Twins manager Paul Molitor talked to Rosario after the play, and Rosario assured him it would never happen again.

"You just can't make assumptions like that," Molitor said. "The frustration got the better of his judgment there."

Rosario also was fortunate not to be picked off after a leadoff walk in the seventh. It took a two-minute, 59-second review to uphold a safe call, and Rosario, running with a full-count pitch, then scored from first on Sano's long single into the left-center gap.

"I ran hard for that," Rosario said.

Starter Jake Odorizzi, knocked out in the fifth, wasn't nearly as sharp as he was in six shutout innings on Opening Day in Baltimore. Josh Bell put the Pirates ahead 2-0 in the first with a 432-foot blast off the batter's eye, and Colin Moran added a go-ahead single in the fourth.

Twins starters still have a 2.45 earned-run average heading into Thursday's home opener.

Twins' Logan Morrison sees no point in playing in sub-freezing temperatures **Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | April 4, 2018**

PITTSBURGH — New Twins designated hitter/first baseman Logan Morrison sparked a bit of a controversy back in the snowbound Twin Cities on Wednesday morning when he posted a video of a snowy intersection on his Instagram account.

"New rule," Morrison captioned his post. "You build a stadium, it has to come with a roof. This is fun for no one, including fans. It's 2018, people want to be comfortable while watching and playing games."

Thursday's forecast in downtown Minneapolis called for a high of 34 with a 50 percent chance of snow.

Asked about the social-media backlash a few hours later in the visiting clubhouse at PNC Park, Morrison smiled on the eve of his first Twins home game.

"They didn't like that," he said. "I was just more or less saying it would probably be more comfortable for everyone if we had roofs. I don't think anyone wants to freeze and watch a baseball game either."

Upon signing with the Twins in late February, Morrison was asked about playing in cold weather after spending the bulk of his nine-year career in home stadiums with roofs in Miami, Seattle and Tampa Bay. He joked that at least his feet would be warm at Target Field, where a system of heated pipes below the playing surface keeps the grass frost-free.

Off to a 0-for-11 start with two walks and a hit-by-pitch, Morrison couldn't readily recall the coldest conditions he's played in.

"I really haven't played in that much cold," he said. "Maybe Philly early in the season, back in the day. It might have been 35 (degrees) and raining."

Morrison, who started at first base in place of Joe Mauer for Wednesday's interleague matchup with the Pittsburgh Pirates, doesn't believe major league games should ever be played sub-freezing temperatures.

"I just think, if you ask anyone, you don't want to coach in it, you don't want to pitch in it, you don't want to hit in it, you don't want to field in it, you don't want to watch it," he said.

Retrofitting cold-weather baseball stadiums, including Target Field, with some form of retractable roof is something he supports.

“I’m not a numbers guy,” he said, “but I just feel like if you put up the initial cost up front, you’ll get more in return for that. Then you don’t have to worry about (weather), especially in Minnesota. When you have South Dakota, North Dakota, all those people, they don’t want to drive in, right? They don’t want to drive in and then get rained out or snowed out, whatever it might be.”

With wind gusts up to 40 mph forecast for Wednesday night, Morrison was accepting suggestions from teammates for protecting himself against the elements.

“They told me some Vaseline tricks and Warm Skin-type stuff,” he said. “You’re not going to stay warm, you’re just going to be not as cold. We’ll figure it out. It’s something you’ve got to deal with, so you deal with it.”

KINLEY STILL WAITING

Twins Rule 5 pick Tyler Kinley entered Wednesday still looking to make his big-league debut after making the jump from Double-A in the Miami Marlins organization.

Kinley, 27, has thrown off the bullpen mound, but no more than 10 pitches on a given day in case he is needed in that night’s game.

“I don’t know if it’s going to be necessity or logic or what components will dictate his first outing,” Twins manager Paul Molitor said. “At some point you’re going to have to figure out a way to do it, that’s for sure.”

BRIEFLY

Pirates rookie third baseman Colin Moran is the nephew of former big leaguer B.J. Surhoff, a Milwaukee Brewers teammate of Molitor’s from 1987-92. Moran’s first-inning grand slam proved the difference in a 5-4 Twins loss on Monday.

Former Twins relief prospect Nick Burdi, lost to the Pirates in the Rule 5 draft in December, threw his first bullpen this week following Tommy John surgery last May. Burdi must be carried on the active big-league roster for at least 90 days or offered back to the Twins for \$50,000.

Twins bracing for potentially record-setting cold in home opener

Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | April 5, 2018

PITTSBURGH — Even before closing out a season-opening road trip, the Twins were bracing for what could be the coldest home game in franchise history.

Thursday’s forecast called for a morning low of 7 degrees with a high of 34 and a 50 percent chance of snow in downtown Minneapolis, home of Target Field. The Twins’ home opener, scheduled for 3:10 p.m. against the Seattle Mariners, already has been announced as a sellout.

“It’s going to be rough,” Twins manager Paul Molitor said.

At least the Twins will have the right guy on the mound in starting pitcher Kyle Gibson. It was Gibson who started the coldest home game in Twins history, April 17, 2014 against the Toronto Blue Jays.

Game-time temperature for the noon start was 31 degrees. Gibson, in his second big-league season, worked eight shutout innings against the Toronto Blue Jays in the first game of a doubleheader, allowing four singles and a walk in a 7-0 victory.

Gibson, who grew up outside Indianapolis and played at the University of Missouri, threw 62 of his 105 pitches for strikes.

“I always tell people, I don’t mind it because I’m the warmest guy out there,” Gibson said. “I’m the one who’s moving every single pitch. The trick is just to try to stay in the (strike) zone and keep guys swinging. You want your defenders moving around. You want them staying warm.”

The coldest game in major league history was April 23, 2013, when it was 23 degrees at game time for the Atlanta Braves and Colorado Rockies at Coors Field. Twins special assistant Michael Cuddyer started and played right field for the Rockies that day in the 1:11 p.m. opener of a doubleheader. It was 30 degrees at first pitch for the 6:41 p.m. nightcap.

Gibson, who pitched in snow flurries a couple of times at Greenfield (Ind.) High School, flew back to the Twin Cities ahead of the team charter on Wednesday in order to get extra rest for what promises to be a challenging assignment.

“I’m actually kind of looking forward to it,” he said. “You just don’t get to do it very often, you know? It’s going to be cold, but we need to play because Friday’s even worse. I’m excited about it, really. Just a little bit of fun.”

Friday is a scheduled off day, which is good considering the forecast calls for a high of 25 and a low of 7.

Molitor, who spent the bulk of his playing career outdoors with the Milwaukee Brewers, knows the impact cold weather can have on a baseball team.

“It has an effect,” Molitor said. “People think about it, they talk about it. You try to spread the word that it’s one of those uncontrollable things both teams have to play with, and somehow amidst everything we do here there’s a mental toughness component, too.”

“And that means having to deal with all sorts of various adversities that came our way, including trying to perform a very difficult game where the conditions are going to be frigid.”

It was 40 degrees at first pitch Monday afternoon at PNC Park, where the Twins lost 5-4 to the Pirates while issuing 11 walks for the first time since August 2014. Six of those were by starter Lance Lynn, tying his career high.

“Tough conditions,” Molitor said. “I’m sure for the pitchers, that ball was slick and dry and cold. We had trouble throwing it over.”

Twins second baseman Brian Dozier, who also played in the 2014 game against the Blue Jays along with first baseman Joe Mauer, said Monday’s conditions were tolerable in the field.

“Weather-wise it wasn’t that bad,” he said. “It was cold. I know at second (base) I just underhand it over there anyway.”

Molitor will challenge his players to use the cold weather to their advantage during this opening homestand, when Saturday’s forecast carries a high of 28 degrees and a low of 10. Sunday’s forecast is for a high of 32 and a low of 26.

“I think the player that can think about maybe using that to his advantage instead of disadvantage is one that might come out for the better,” Molitor said. “If you can feel the ball, it probably does favor the pitcher. It can be tough to hit, especially when you’ve got four layers of clothes on and try to swing a bat.”

And there is no way to start your swing early enough to avoid the vibrations that come with making contact on the handle instead of the barrel.

“The more you try not to get jammed, you’ll get jammed,” Molitor said. “You have to be as natural as you can.”

Twins doing what they can to make sure Target Field’s home opener happens **Derek Wetmore | ESPN 1500 | April 4, 2018**

If the weather doesn’t cooperate and the Twins have to postpone Thursday’s home opener, it won’t be for lack of effort.

Thursday’s game is scheduled to start just after 3:00 pm local time. But it’s early April in Minnesota and so there are widespread concerns about the forecast. In this case, it’s the high-tech weather instruments telling us that the game might have to be played with a daytime high temperature of 34 degrees, a low temp of 15, and a 50% chance of snow.

What are you going to do? Grab a shovel.

And according to a few sources with direct knowledge of snow removal efforts, that’s exactly what the Twins did Thursday.

With the uniformed roster on the road to wrap up a road trip in Pittsburgh, more than 100 members of the ‘behind-the-scenes’ staff worked to clear snow Wednesday at Target Field, sources said. That list included GM Thad Levine, assistant GM Rob Antony, Baseball Ops Director Daniel Adler, Director of Minor League Ops Jeremy Zoll and many others.

Adler previously worked for the Jacksonville Jaguars in Florida; Zoll was in the Dodgers organization last year; Levine’s office 18 months ago was in Arlington, Texas. The guess here is that shoveling April snow in Minneapolis wasn’t on the list of job duties when those guys applied for jobs here.

But that group and others stepped up for some team building and snow clearing. Here’s some video captured by our friends at KSTP TV.

And here’s a photo of the green grass, tweeted by team president Dave St. Peter. The rest of the metro area was covered in a wet, white blanket Wednesday.

The Twins have a built-in off day Friday with the Mariners in town, just in case the opener needs to be scrapped for weather. The Tigers, to pick an example, have already had 3 games adjusted because of weather. Snow and other conditions have been a story across the baseball landscape in this first week. We'll see what happens in downtown Minneapolis on Thursday afternoon.

If you're planning to go to the game Thursday, you should bring your coat. You can leave your shovel at home; the Twins already took care of the snow.

Big spenders? Twins cracked top-5 this winter in rate of payroll increase

Derek Wetmore | ESPN 1500 | April 4, 2018

This is not a column about the Twins' pursuit of Yu Darvish and it's not a column about the final season of Joe Mauer's megacontract. This is a column about the Twins increasing their year-to-year team payroll more than all but 4 other Major League teams this offseason.

You could accuse the Twins of bargain hunting, as I have in the past. After all, even the long list of good veteran additions this winter came at what looks like a fairly big discount. But there's a difference between dumpster diving and thrift shopping, and I think it's looking like the Twins made out like bandits at a poorly attended estate sale.

Here's a look at the notable additions from the winter, and Minnesota's on-field payroll commitments for 2018:

Lance Lynn \$12 million (and performance bonuses of up to \$2 million for incentives he's expected to reach)

Addison Reed \$8.25 million

Logan Morrison \$6.5 million (and performance bonuses up to \$1.5 million for objectives he definitely can reach)

Jake Odorizzi \$6.3 million (and a minor league shortstop)

Fernando Rodney \$4.25 million

Zach Duke \$2.15 million

Michael Pineda \$2 million

Pineda won't start this year but he could pitch out of the bullpen. His contract clearly was more about 2019 than this summer. And Anibal Sanchez also got some tryout money but we won't dwell on that here.

Add it up and it's about \$42 million invested in making the roster better – even before factoring in the extra \$3.5 million for Lynn and Morrison, and without regard to in-house raises for guys like Brian Dozier, Kyle Gibson and Eduardo Escobar.

Anyways, this paints a picture that should have already been clear. Sure, they got some good deals with savvy and patience this offseason. But it's also fair to say that in a winter when a lot of teams sat on their hands, the Twins stood up to go get the checkbook.

According to a story from FanGraphs.com, the Twins' opening day payroll ranks 18th among all Major League teams. Baseball Prospectus tabs their opening day 25-man roster commitments at \$128,713,226, which is by far a club record. (It's \$15.5 million more than the 2013 opening day payroll, or a 13.6% increase.)

The big-market teams are at the top of the list, as you might expect. What caught my eye in the FanGraphs story, though, is the leaderboard for the teams the added the most on a percentage basis. Last year's opening day payroll in Minnesota was roughly \$108 million, for a club that only sort of took itself seriously as postseason contenders. This winter the front office took that challenge much more seriously, and opened the checkbook to make noteworthy additions all around.

That resulted in an increase of more than \$20 million year over year, or roughly a 19% increase.

Per FanGraphs, only four teams made bigger relative gains: the Brewers, Diamondbacks, Padres and World Series champion Astros. (If you look at change in terms of dollars instead of as a percentage, the Red Sox jump ahead of the Twins on this list and Minnesota steps back to No. 6.)

There's one other significant takeaway from the payroll numbers. You might have guessed this but the Tigers saw the biggest overall drop in payroll on a percentage basis. Right behind them: the Chicago White Sox. Considering that the Royals also shed more than \$21 million over the winter and are looking like clear rebuilders, these drops illustrate the opportunity that the Twins have within their own division. Win games in the A.L. Central at a good clip and hold your own against the rest of the league and you've got yourself a recipe for the postseason.

Twins top Pirates 7-3 in snowy series finale

Staff Writers | Associated Press | April 4, 2018

PITTSBURGH — Brian Dozier's bat tends to warm up in step with the weather. Not this year.

The Minnesota second baseman hit his fourth home run in four days and his hustle on the bases sparked a rally as the Twins handed the Pittsburgh Pirates their first loss of the season with a 7-3 victory at frigid PNC Park on Wednesday night.

Dozier, a career .225 hitter in April, smacked a drive that bounced off the top of the left-field wall and over in the third inning. Then he sprinted from first to third when an infield popup dropped between three Pirates in the sixth to ignite a four-run outburst that allowed Minnesota to take command.

“I don’t know if it’s a different Brian Dozier,” Twins manager Paul Molitor said. “For whatever reason some of his starts haven’t matched up with the second halves he’s put together, but his power has been there for us through the first five games.”

Dozier thought his home run would land well into the left-field bleachers and admitted he was surprised when instead it ended up scraping the top of the wall just out of the reach of Pittsburgh left fielder Corey Dickerson.

“I think it’s a sign of how strong the wind was tonight, or that maybe I need to get in the weight room more,” Dozier joked.

WATCH: Twins hit 3 doubles, score 4 in 6th inning

Miguel Sano added three hits and two RBIs for Minnesota. He chopped a single to right off Ivan Nova (0-1) to tie the game in the sixth and then chugged all the way around from first when Logan Morrison’s first hit of the season buried itself in the right-field corner.

Eduardo Escobar also drove in two runs for the Twins. Taylor Rogers (1-0) got two outs in the fifth to pick up the win as Minnesota wrapped up a season-opening road trip at 3-2.

Josh Bell hit a 432-foot home run through the snow flurries in the first inning for Pittsburgh. Dickerson added two hits for the Pirates, but Pittsburgh’s attempt to start 5-0 for the first time since 1983 ended during a 20-minute span that encompassed the bottom of the fifth and the top of the sixth.

Gregory Polanco took a wide turn around third trying to score on Starling Marte’s single to left and was thrown out at home by Eddie Rosario to end the fifth. Nova walked Dozier to start the top of the sixth and then the weather got involved when a high pop by Rosario between the pitcher’s mound and the first-base line briefly vanished in the snow.

The ball fell between Nova, Bell and catcher Francisco Cervelli. Though Bell recovered to get Rosario at first, Nova never recorded another out, giving up a run-scoring single to Sano and then Morrison’s double that snapped an 0-for-11 start to the season. Dovydas Neverauskas came on and allowed two run-scoring doubles as the Twins pushed their advantage to 6-3.

“Trying to help guys get some experience in some challenging situations,” Pirates manager Clint Hurdle said. “That’s the way we went with it, the way I went with it, and it didn’t work out well for us.”

TEACHABLE MOMENT

Molitor made it a point to pull Rosario aside after he failed to run out the popup. Though things worked out for Minnesota, Rosario understood he should have darted for first instead of watching the ball assuming it would be caught.

“You just can’t make assumptions like that,” Molitor said. “I’m sure he’s frustrated because he’s trying to get the runner over from second with nobody out, but his frustration got the better of his judgment.”

BUNDLE UP

The temperature at first pitch was 37 degrees, with wind chills in the 20s and snow flurries off and on throughout the night. Wintry weather has been commonplace for Pittsburgh during the opening week of the season. All five Pirates games have been 40 degrees or cooler at game time.

“It was OK until the ninth inning,” Dozier said. “I always want the ball to be hit to me but that was the one time where I was hoping it wouldn’t be hit my way.”

TRAINER’S ROOM

Pirates: SS Jordy Mercer took some grounders and swung the bat but was held out of the starting lineup to give the swelling on his right pinkie time to subside. Mercer injured the finger while diving back to first base on a pickoff attempt Monday.

UP NEXT

Twins: Open their ninth season at Target Field on Thursday when Seattle visits. Kyle Gibson will start for Minnesota. Gibson threw six shutout innings in his 2018 debut last week against Baltimore.

Pirates: Steven Brault gets the spot start in place of injured Joe Musgrove when Pittsburgh opens a four-game set against Cincinnati on Thursday. Brault went 1-0 with a 4.67 ERA in 11 appearances last season, including four starts.

Preview: Twins vs. Mariners

Staff Writers | Associated Press | April 4, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS — Right-hander Kyle Gibson takes the mound Thursday afternoon as the Minnesota Twins return to Target Field to face the Seattle Mariners in their 2018 home opener.

Gibson had a huge second half in 2017, going 7-3 with 3.76 ERA over his final 13 starts, striking out 70 with just 22 walks in 76 2/3 innings.

He carried that into his first start this season, holding Baltimore scoreless over five innings. Gibson (1-0, 0.00 ERA) didn't allow a hit but walked five batters while striking out six in the Twins' 6-2 victory.

"I tried to be as similar to the end of last year as possible," Gibson said. "Even when it was 2-0, or 2-1, I had confidence with my fastball in the strike zone instead of getting them to chase it. Hopefully, that's going to be the thing this year, that I can look back on it and say through all the struggles of 2017 that's what I learned and that's when I turned it around."

He'll need to be ready for more than just a good Mariners lineup; the temperature Thursday in Minneapolis is forecast to be 39 degrees with a possibility of snow.

"Snowing and cold is better than not snowing and cold," Gibson said, taking a position that few fans would probably agree with. "It's going to be brutally cold, (but maybe) there is going to be some cool snow, too."

Gibson was 2-0 with a 5.25 ERA in two starts against Seattle last season. He gave up 17 hits and three walks over 12 innings in those two starts, but Minnesota won both. He is 4-2 with a 3.49 ERA in eight career starts against the Mariners.

First baseman Joe Mauer will be back in the Twins' lineup Thursday. Manager Paul Molitor held the veteran out of the Twins' 7-3 victory at Pittsburgh Wednesday to have him fresh for the home opener.

The Mariners will be looking to bounce back after a 10-1 drubbing Thursday afternoon at San Francisco. Left-hander James Paxton (0-1, 11.57 ERA) gets his second turn of the season in the contest. He is also looking to bounce back after giving up six runs on six hits, including a pair of home runs, in his season debut last week against Cleveland.

Mike Zunino, who has caught 53 of Paxton's 75 big league starts and many more in the minors, is recovering from an oblique injury and won't be behind the plate Thursday. Paxton threw to Mike Marjama against the Indians and will likely work with David Freitas against the Twins.

"They caught me quite a bit in spring training so we've had conversations about what I want to do," Paxton said. "But they are obviously still learning me. It's also my responsibility to talk to them and tell them what I like to do. I do my report and stuff and I will go over that with whoever is catching me tomorrow. I just have to be very clear what my plan is and how I want to attack hitters."

Paxton was able to get a little more sleep than his teammates, who arrived in Minneapolis late Wednesday night after a 4:15 p.m. start on the West Coast. Paxton flew into Minnesota earlier in the day, but he'll have to battle the weather, too.

"I will just try to stay warm in between innings," Paxton said. "I think when I'm out there pitching, I'll be fine because I'll be moving around and staying warm. In between innings, I will have my jacket on and stay by the heat."

Paxton has three career starts against the Twins, going 2-1 with a 2.70 ERA. He faced them just once last season, earning a victory despite allowing three runs on five hits and a walk over five innings of work.

Jake Odorizzi Is the Twins' Latest Addition And He's Showing Off a Refashioned Curveball

Michael Beller | Sports Illustrated | April 4, 2018

Jake Odorizzi made 126 starts in his career before joining the Twins. In none of those 126 starts did he ever throw more than 17 curveballs. In fact, he tossed double-digit curves just nine times, or in 7.1% of his outings. Last season, he had more games where he threw zero curveballs—

four—than ones where he threw at least 10 (three). The deuce has always been part of Odorizzi's repertoire, but never an important one.

Odorizzi took the ball for his Minnesota Twins debut last weekend, and make an excellent first impression. He tossed six shutout innings against the Orioles, allowing two hits and two walks while striking out seven batters, in what was ultimately a 3–2 loss for the Twins. Still, Odorizzi more than did his part in typical fashion. He lived largely on his four-seamer and splitter, throwing 38 of the former and 23 of the latter, while mixing in a handful of cutters and sliders. There was one major difference, however. Odorizzi, in his first start with the Twins, matched his career-high in curveballs thrown in a game, breaking off 17. Based on the results he got with the curve, we'll likely be seeing plenty more of them from him this season.

Before getting to Odorizzi's mastery of the Orioles, I need to stress what a departure his pitch mix in his Twins debut was from what we had seen from him over the first 126 starts of his career. Odorizzi threw his curveball just 5.7% of the time last season. For his career, that number is 4.9%, and he has never thrown it more than 7.7% of the time in a single season. Odorizzi's 17 curveballs against the Orioles accounted for 18.3% of his total pitches in the outing. Not only did the 17 curves match a career high, the 18.3% share set a new high mark for the offering in a single start. That means that the curve wasn't simply the right pitch in the right matchup; it will likely be a key part of Odorizzi's arsenal all season.

Five of Odorizzi's curves produced whiffs, including a strike three against Adam Jones. Two of those came in 0–0 counts, one was on 0–1, and one was on 2–0. The Orioles put three of the curves in play. Two went for groundouts, both of which had exit velocities of less than 63 mph, while the other was a popout. Of the remaining nine curves Odorizzi threw, three were fouled off, one was a called strike, and five were balls. The final accounting: five whiffs, three weak outs, five balls, three foul balls and one called strike. The pitch is a true weapon, and we'll see him throw it more often.

Odorizzi's first curveball of the game was the one that produced a third strike. On a 2–2 count against Jones, Odorizzi spun a sharp-breaking curve spotted well just off the outside corner. Jones swung through it for the strikeout.

Any pitch that a pitcher goes to in a 2–2 count with a man on second is clearly designed to be an out-pitch, and Odorizzi's execution on the pitch against Jones shows why it's an offering he'll return to in two-strike counts. The next curve we'll look at, however, opened Tim Beckham's first plate appearance of the game.

It's an unspectacular curveball in this specific case, evaluated solely on break and location. What makes this special, however, is the fact that it's a 0–0 count. Beckham is almost sure to let this go as the first pitch in the plate appearance, unless he's sitting curveball. All Odorizzi needed to do was get it over the plate to jump ahead. That he was confident enough to go to the pitch to start a plate appearance, and that he still wanted to paint a corner, gives a good indication of how confident he is in the pitch.

Pedro Alvarez, who was batting behind Beckham in this game, provided a lesson in what happens when you're surprised by a 0–0 curveball. After the success Odorizzi had with the pitch against Beckham, he went right back to it to kick off the plate appearance against Alvarez. He did a better job of hitting his north-south spot this time around, and that sent the curve breaking beneath the strike zone.

Whiffs are ideal, but regularly inducing weak contact is just as important. Odorizzi did that all three times the Orioles put the curve in play, resulting in two groundouts and a popout. The grounders came off the bats of Trey Mancini and Tim Beckham. Both were spotted well on the outer-third, with Mancini and Beckham rolling over them feebly to the left side. They were effectively the same pitch with the same result, with one in an 0–1 count, and the other in a 1–1 count.

Consider what we've seen from Odorizzi in this column. Using the curve in all counts? Check. Going to it against hitters from both sides of the plate? Yep. Whiffs and weak contact? Absolutely. Called strikes, too? You know it. In other words, everything a pitcher hopes to get out of a pitch, Odorizzi got with the curve against the Orioles.

That's a filthy 0–1 curveball to Craig Gentry, an offering that only could have produced a whiff or a grounder. It resulted in the former, putting Gentry in an 0–2 hole. Odorizzi finished him off two pitches later with a four-seam fastball.

Odorizzi made 126 starts before joining the Twins. He never threw more than 17 curveballs in any of them, and he hit that number just once. Odorizzi has made one start with the Twins, and he doubled his number of career starts with 17 curves in the outing. That alone would be noteworthy, but the effectiveness of the pitch makes it newsworthy. Odorizzi's lack of a go-to breaking ball has held him back in his career. If the curve is now the third reliable pitch in his repertoire, joining the four-seamer and splitter, he could be in for new heights in 2018.

Journal Times editorial: Minnesota Twins declare an Unwritten Rule we can do without
Editorial Board | The Journal Times | April 5, 2018

The term "fair play" is used outside the context of sports, but of course that's where it originates: All competitors play by the rules of the game, whichever game it may be.

Rules of the game? They're written down, widely available for reference and enforced by officials.

Except in baseball, which at the Major League level apparently has a full set of unwritten rules that must be followed.

We learned of another Unwritten Rule of Baseball after a game Sunday between the Baltimore Orioles and the Minnesota Twins:

If you're down 7-0 in the ninth inning, the pitcher beating you has a one-hitter going and his teammates put on a defensive shift to deny you, the batter, the area where you usually send a batted ball, you are not allowed — repeat, not allowed — to bunt to the other side of the field.

If you find yourself having never heard of this particular Unwritten Rule, you're not alone.

In the top of the ninth Sunday, Twins pitcher José Berrios had a one-hitter going. Baltimore catcher Chance Sisco came to bat having gotten the only Orioles hit.

The Twins shifted to the right side of the field — clearly in an attempt to deny Sisco, 23, another hit. Sisco, observing that the left side of the infield was now wide open, laid down a perfect bunt and reached first base. The Twins added a walk and another hit, but couldn't get any runners home. Berrios lost his one-hitter but kept his shutout, Twins win 7-0.

Here comes the Unwritten Rule part. In the clubhouse after the game, Deadspin.com reported Monday, the Twins were displeased that Berrios — let us check our notes here — had tried to get on base.

Second baseman Brian Dozier: "Obviously, we're not a fan of it. He's a young kid. I could've said something at 2nd base but they have tremendous veteran leadership over there."

Berrios: "I don't care if he's bunting. I just know it's not good for baseball in that situation. That's it."

Outfielder Eddie Rosario: "Nobody liked that. No, no, no. That's not a good play."

It's "not good for baseball" for a player to ... try to win the game? Where were we when this change was announced?

This next comment from the Twins' camp hurts the most around here: "It kind of took some of the drama out of what might have unfolded, but that's fine."

That's from Twins Manager Paul Molitor. Known to fans of the 1980s Milwaukee Brewers as "The Ignitor" for his recurring role in getting Brew Crew rallies started. Sometimes with a bunt single.

Oh, Paulie. What's happened to you since you went back home to the Twin Cities?

"What is the unwritten rule he seems to be referring to?" said Orioles vice president of baseball operations Brady Anderson. "That if a team is winning by several runs they can continue to employ their shift taking certain hits away from the batter, but out of respect 'for the game,' the opponent must continue to hit the ball where they've positioned their defense until the score is a little closer? Is that how it works? Is he the arbiter of how the game should be played?"

Baseball seems to have an awful lot of Unwritten Rules. If they're so important, we're left to wonder: Why haven't these unwritten rules become written rules?

Some Unwritten Rules, the ones dealing with good sportsmanship, don't bother us as much. You're not supposed to be stealing bases when you're up 16-0 in the ninth inning, we're told. We get that. We'll file that under Running Up The Score, the rough equivalent of throwing deep downfield passes in football when you're up 49-0 in the fourth quarter.

But the onus there is on the baseball team holding the big lead.

The team trailing, by however many runs, is absolutely within its rights to try to put some runs on the scoreboard. Because the object of the game is to score more runs than the other team, and if you haven't made the third out in the ninth inning, you should still be trying to get on base and score a run.

The idea that the Orioles were supposed to lay down and let Berrios get his one-hitter? That's unsportsmanlike.

"Championships are there to be won, and the fact that you win one, or you win two or you win three doesn't mean to say that you should be filled up now. I think you should win as many as you can, and every time you go out there you should try to win."

That quotation is from another Wisconsin sports legend: Vince Lombardi.

Getting Frontier Field ready for Red Wings Opening Day is in the genes for the Buonomos
Leo Roth | Democrat & Chronicle | April 4, 2018

It was a day when the Wizard of Oz met the Rochester Red Wings.

With wind whipping powerfully at Frontier Field, light poles swayed, the infield tarp blew off in defiance of metal stakes, a party tent came down and debris swirled into dozens of mini-twisters.

Amid Wednesday's chaos, head groundskeeper Gene Buonomo, his assistant son, Geno, and their staff of 10 hardy workers kept at the business of getting the field ready for Opening Day on Friday.

Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night — nor, apparently, 60 mph gusts — right? The Postal Service has nothing on these guys.

A house could've fallen on the Wicked Witch of the East and the Buonomo men would not have flinched. Adjusting to surprises is what the Wizards of Wheelbarrows do.

Weather is their friend — and their enemy.

"It's getting the field ready, the grass ready, the infield ready, the mound ready, home plate, it's everything," Gene Buonomo said. "The frost comes from underneath, that's the problem you have, but we're pretty well set."

It's true.

Despite a truly miserable month of cold March weather, the Frontier Field outfield is as green as the inside of a Brink's truck.

The greatest lawn this side of an Oak Hill fairway is ready for the Red Wings and Buffalo Bisons, testament to the power of fertilizer placed in the right hands.

"We fertilized it 10 days ago, and with just a bit of warmth, that fertilizer kicks in and we get green fields," Buonomo said.

Rescuing a ball park from the grip of Old Man Winter and transforming it into a cathedral is part science and part sweat.

It means purchasing your grass seeds, weed killers and white line paint by the pallet. It means having a weather app on your cell phone and the timing of a successful pickup line.

The elder Gene, 68, has been with the Red Wings for 27 years, coming over from Silver Stadium. Young Geno, 34, began learning the family business as a teenager and has been his dad's lead assistant for six years.

While fathers and sons make memories at Red Wings games, this father and son team makes those memories possible. Working from a "clubhouse" stuffed with rakes and shovels and a fleet of John Deeres.

"We have a good time," said Geno after his dad attempted to put rabbit ears behind his head during a photo pose.

"I let my son do the hard work and I do the rest of the stadium," big Gene said. "The lawn, trees and the bushes, we do the whole grounds. We didn't always do that."

Groundskeepers are the first to study a team's schedule, hoping their team opens on the road. Last season, the Red Wings opened with an eight-game road trip, opening at home April 14.

No luck this time. No problem.

"It's more challenging than last year because we don't have that extra week," Geno said. "We open up earlier and the weather hasn't been on our side. But in the majors, they're dealing with it and it's the same thing here. We do what we have to do."

Because the show must go on.

The elder Buonomo's shining reputation as a Sultan of Seeds is well-known in baseball.

More than a few Wings players and managers have left him notes and framed photographs that hang on the walls of his shop, writing things like "Great Job on The Field!"

Recalling the biggest challenge in getting Frontier Field ready for an opener was easy for Gene: 2014, following the Frozen Frontier, when a hockey rink was built over the infield, followed by a spring snowstorm.

"A week before the opener, we had a foot and half of snow," Buonomo said. "The pitching coach (Marty Mason) said, 'We're going out of town to start; we come back in four days. If you have the field ready, you're a miracle man.' We were ready."

The Miracle Man had worked his magic rake.

This can be a stress-filled job, what with 71 home games, concerts and special events. But it's not as stressful as when the Frontier Field crew had to juggle preparations for professional soccer and lacrosse teams, too. Those days put an extra couple of o's in "long."

One of the biggest challenges now is fixing all those burn marks in the grass that postgame fireworks leave. The secret: special green paint.

For Gene Buonomo, it's all a labor of love. For the love of baseball.

He was never really that worried that the Red Wings and Monroe County would not come to terms on a new lease. That the team would actually play games elsewhere in 2018 as was threatened was the hot wind of politicians and league officials.

After 130-plus years, professional baseball is part of our community's fabric. Like Kodak film (back in the day), Genesee beer and a Garbage pPate.

"I played ball in the projects in the inner city growing up," Buonomo said. "As kids, we lived and breathed baseball. The Knothole Gang; I couldn't wait."

Times have changed. And then some things never change.

"We need baseball," Gene said. "What are you going to do, have kids hang out on the corners with nothing to do and get into trouble? They come to the ballpark and it's a family thing. It's good for families. You want something to look back on, making memories with your son and daughter on Opening Day."

Getting Frontier Field ready is a Buonomo family tradition. It's in their genes.

Chattanooga Lookouts pitcher Zack Littell looking to build off last season's 19-1 record **David Paschall | Times Free Press | April 5, 2018**

Zack Littell, tonight's starting pitcher for the Chattanooga Lookouts as they open their 2018 season at home against the Birmingham Barons, is well aware of the lofty bar he set last year.

Just how lofty?

Should Littell be the losing pitcher this evening at AT&T Field, where first pitch is set for 6:15, he would match his loss total from last season, when he made 25 starts.clips

"Every year, I try to be better than I was the year before, but topping that will be really tough," Littell said this week. "I just have to go into this with the same mindset I had last year, which is simply to give your team a chance. Everything else tends to take care of itself."

"Last year was crazy, because at a certain point, winning 19 games wasn't in my control. It just kept happening."

The 22-year-old from Mebane, N.C., is coming off a sensational season in which he posted a combined 19-1 record for two organizations spanning three leagues. He began last season in the New York Yankees organization and went 9-1 with a 1.77 ERA for the Tampa Tarpons of the high Single-A Florida State League.

That earned Littell a promotion to the Double-A Eastern League's Trenton (N.J.) Thunder, where he went 5-0 with a 2.05 ERA. On July 30, the 6-foot-4, 220-pound right-hander was traded from New York to the Minnesota Twins as part of the deal that sent veteran big-league starter Jaime

Garcia to the Yankees.

Littell took his talents to the Southern League, where he went 5-0 with a 2.81 ERA in seven starts for the Lookouts, and he was placed on Minnesota's 40-man roster in November along with Stephen Gonsalves and Lewis Thorpe. Gonsalves is scheduled to start Friday night's game for the Lookouts, with Thorpe scheduled for Sunday afternoon.

"Zack is just a call away from the big leagues," said Tommy Watkins, who's in his first year as manager of the Lookouts. "I think he's got the highest winning percentage in all of the minor leagues the past two or three years, so it's just good to have him on our side."

Littell did post a combined 13-6 record in 2016, when he was in the Seattle Mariners organization and competed at the Single-A and high Single-A levels, so his two-year mark is a staggering 32-7. Racking up more wins this spring certainly would be noticed by the Minnesota brass, but Littell isn't thinking that far ahead.

"I can't control any of that," he said. "If I get a call, then I get a call. The game is the same. You still have to go out there and compete and throw. If you change your mindset for something like that, you're really not doing your job."

"I've fine-tuned a lot of my pitches as far as my slider and changeup. My changeup was pretty good last year, and I've been just trying to build off of that. I'm just trying to worry about what I can control."

Littell is quick to praise the teams he played for last year when discussing his stellar record. Tampa went 46-19 during the first half of the Florida State League season while he was compiling his 9-1 mark, and his 5-0 records with both Trenton and Chattanooga accompanied teams that went 92-48 and 91-49, respectively.

With more than half of Chattanooga's roster from last season starting out with this year's Lookouts, another banner year for Littell could be in store.

"I think the team is going to be pretty good, because even the new guys had really, really good numbers last year and are really good players overall," Littell said. "There is a lot to be excited about. I don't like to put expectations on anybody, but we expect to be pretty good."

While it remains to be seen if a 19-1 record can lead to a big-league career, it has helped result in Littell's first opening-night start.

"I'm excited about this," he said. "Opening day is a special day for the fans and the players. It's what you build up for all offseason. I'm ready to go."

Familiar faces return to lead Miracle on and off the field in 2018

Bryan Cooney | News-Press | April 4, 2018

A new regime begins Thursday for the Fort Myers Miracle as two not-so-new faces take the helm in the front office and on the field.

General Manager Chris Peters and manager Ramon Borrego have seen the ins and outs of Hammond Stadium, with Peters having previously worked as an assistant food and beverage manager for the Miracle in 2007 and Borrego having played for the Miracle in parts of three seasons.

The Miracle open their season at Hammond Stadium tonight at 7 against Charlotte, and fans will get the opportunity to see Phil Hughes take the mound for Fort Myers as he begins his rehab assignment for the Twins.

The 31-year-old and 11-year major league veteran is returning from an oblique strain and likely will return to the Twins to step in for the injured Ervin Santana in Minnesota's rotation next week.

Peters took over as general manager in September after a seven-year stint by Andrew Seymour and is hopeful that he will see continued success on the field for the Miracle. Fort Myers went 42-25 to win the Florida State League's South Division second-half title, including a 24-7 mark at Centurylink Sports Complex before bowing out in the semifinals to the Palm Beach Cardinals.

"Hopefully, we can carry over that second half into a good start to open the season and bring a championship to Fort Myers in 2018," Peters said.

"I'm excited to see how far we can take this organization; it's great to be back for me with the Miracle. We have the best ballpark in the league, and we've invested a lot in our promotions this season. We want to get as many groups within the community to the park and be a shining star for Southwest Florida."

Borrego will have big shoes to fill after Doug Mientkiewicz led the Miracle to a league championship in 2014, along with the second-place finish

last year and another in 2013 in his three seasons as Fort Myers manager.

Borrego, a 39-year-old former utility player, managed the Gulf Coast Twins the past eight years, coaching, among others, Byron Buxton, Jose Berrios and the Twins' No. 1 pick in last year's draft in Royce Lewis.

"Ramon has been great to work with so far. He calls the area home and embraces being the manager of the Miracle," Peters said.

"Along with the coaching staff, they all want to do their part to ensure players are developed, but make no mistake, Ramon wants to win ballgames here, and we feel like we have a very strong team this season to do so."

Borrego, a resident of Lehigh Acres since 2013, had fond memories as a player dating back to 2000, recounting a walk-off double to help the Miracle win a game on Fireworks Night. His excitement of coming full circle to lead Fort Myers in the dugout was evident as he spoke to the team before Wednesday's practice.

"Talking to the guys down the left-field line, it brought back a lot of memories for me, playing with guys like Michael Cudduyer. Having the chance to play for the Twins organization to now managing the Miracle is very exciting," Borrego said.

"Running the Gulf Coast League team has helped me a lot, and I'm just excited for the opportunity to get this season started."

Borrego believes highly in his preparation for his club, analyzing the opposition's spray charts and developing a game plan tailored for his defense to go along with his starting pitcher to get the most out of his team on the field.

"That is something I love to do, align and position our infield and outfield, and I put a lot of research into it. The guys have asked a lot of questions about it, and I've had some of these guys already play for me so they know how I approach things. It really helps them adjust to the game, which is one of the biggest parts of their development."

Among the returners from the Miracle last season, Florida Gulf Coast University's Brady Anderson returns to the fold. He played for Borrego for the Gulf Coast Twins in 2016.

The 25-year-old right hander led Fort Myers with 113 innings over 27 appearances, including 18 starts, and feels the 2018 roster is capable of continuing the team's strong end to 2017.

"Hopefully, we can get off to a better start than last year and get a playoff spot secured in the first half, which is definitely possible with this group," Anderson said.

"Ramon is very laid back and allows you to be yourself out there and is always willing to help guys out in any way."

Fort Myers will play nine of their first 11 games at home to open the season before embarking on a stretch of nine consecutive road games.

2018 Fort Myers Miracle Opening Day Roster

Pitchers (13): RHP Brady Anderson, LHP Charlie Barnes, RHP Clark Beeker, RHP Max Cordy, RHP Colton Davis, RHP Logan Lombana, RHP Hector Lujan, LHP Anthony Marzi, RHP Sean Poppen, LHP Alex Robinson, RHP Cody Stashak, LHP Andrew Vasquez, RHP Tyler Wells

Catchers (3): Taylor Grzelakowski, Caleb Hamilton, Mitchell Kranson

Infielders (5): Travis Blankenhorn, Lewin Diaz, Brandon Lopez, Nelson Molina, Alex Perez

Outfielders (4): Jaylin Davis, Jared Foster, Jimmy Kerrigan, Aaron Whitefield