



SF Giants Press Clips Wednesday, June 13, 2018

San Francisco Chronicle

Giants lose again to lowly Marlins before a crowd of 5,928

John Shea

MIAMI - This is not how the Giants envisioned their stop in South Florida, home of one of baseball's worst teams.

The Giants came to town after winning eight of 10 games and were hoping to pad their numbers against the Marlins before concluding their three-city trip at Dodger Stadium.

Two games into a four-game series, the Giants aren't succeeding. In Tuesday night's 3-1 loss, they didn't put up much of a fight with their bats, scored their only run without the benefit of a hit and wasted a strong start by Chris Stratton.

Stratton pitched seven innings, a rarity for the Giants these days, just the second time in 34 games a starter completed seven innings. The other was rookie Andrew Suarez on June 2.

It hardly mattered. In a game witnessed by an announced get-together of 5,928 — a couple of whom tried to start a Derek Jeter chant, to no avail — the Giants were shut down by Trevor Richards, who entered 0-3 with a 5.02 ERA, and three relievers. They collected three hits, all singles. One was from Stratton. Another was an infield single by Hunter Pence.

It didn't help that Gorkys Hernandez, after drawing a one-out walk in the fifth and getting sacrificed to second, got picked off.

The Giants fell below .500 again and will rely on Suarez and fellow rookie Dereck Rodriguez, their next two starters, to help salvage the series. The Marlins will counter with Caleb Smith and Dan Straily, but it doesn't matter who's on the mound if the Giants swing the bats as they did Tuesday.

Their only run came in the first inning after Richards walked Joe Panik and Buster Posey and wild-pitched each another base. Brandon Crawford hit a sharp grounder to the left side that easily could have been a two-run single, but shortstop J.T. Riddle made a Crawford-like play - diving to backhand a short hop - to throw him out.

Panik scored, but Posey was stranded when Longoria grounded out. No Giant other than Hernandez, who got picked off, reached scoring position the rest of the night.

Riddle not only made the big play but got the big hit, a two-run double to highlight the Marlins' three-run rally in the third.

San Francisco Chronicle
Giants' Evan Longoria trying to regain defensive form
John Shea

MIAMI - Evan Longoria won his third Gold Glove in 2017 but hasn't been defending up to par in his first season as a Giant.

"I just haven't played all that great defensively," he said Tuesday. "I don't have an excuse for it. I've just got to continue to work."

Longoria committed his 11th error Monday, an alarming number considering he made 12 all of last season and has a career high of 14. Longoria is one error behind Boston third baseman Rafael Devers, who has the most errors in the majors at any position.

Spending his first 10 seasons with the Tampa Bay Rays, Longoria played his home games indoors on artificial turf, which can provide more true hops than on grass or dirt. Quite a difference from the AT&T Park elements.

“At our place, it is an adjustment with the wind and the cold and the damp,” infield coach Ron Wotus said. “I’m not making excuses for him, and he wouldn’t make excuses. But it’s not an easy place to play.”

While agreeing the Giants’ park is a tougher place than the Rays’ park, Longoria said it’s a non-factor. “As I’ve played more games there (in San Francisco), I definitely feel more comfortable,” he said.

Longoria added, “It’s like anything in this game. A lot of it is mental. You go in streaks up and down and start to get in a little bit of a funk -- it’s the same offensively -- and you start thinking about things you never thought about before and maybe press too much, try to make plays you shouldn’t try to make or try to make them in different ways.

“It just kind of compounds itself. My focus has been to continue to work and believe in myself and try to get myself back on a good run where I start to feel some confidence and build off that.”

Advanced defensive metrics tell a similar story. Longoria led American League third basemen with 11 defensive runs saved last year. This year, he’s at -2. He still makes fantastic plays on a regular basis, though. Tuesday, he charged a bunt by J.T. Riddle and threw across his body for the out, making a tough play look routine.

“You can go through this whether you’re a fielder or a hitter,” Wotus said. “A hitter’s not hitting .300 every year. It’s a new team. There’s adjusting. It’s definitely not who he is. He’s a Gold Glover. It’s not a big concern. He works to get better every day.”

Belt’s status: Brandon Belt, who had his appendix removed June 1, continues to progress at the team’s training facility in Arizona. He’ll take batting practice Wednesday and join the team in

Los Angeles this weekend, though it's not known if he'll need minor-league rehab games before rejoining the Giants' lineup.

San Jose Mercury News

Recurring issue plaguing Giants, threatens opportunity for winning road trip

Kerry Crowley

MIAMI—After taking two of three from the first-place Washington Nationals over the weekend, the Giants arrived in Miami with a roster that's clearly superior to the one fielded by Don Mattingly's Marlins.

In the first game of the series, the Giants sent their ace, Madison Bumgarner, to the mound to face a veteran, Wei-Yin Chen, with one of the worst ERAs in the National League.

The Giants had every reason to believe they would continue their recent roll and take the opener of a four-game set against the Marlins.

And then they lost.

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The Marlins overcame three separate deficits in a game they won for the first time since July 19, 2010 and though it was Bumgarner who surrendered two of the Giants' leads, an overworked bullpen allowed three late runs.

Loaded with experienced veterans who almost all have sub-3.00 ERAs, the Giants' bullpen has become one of the team's greatest assets in recent weeks, particularly after the return of Will Smith and Mark Melancon added critical depth.

However, the bullpen has been featured far too prominently of late as none of the four Giants to start games on the team's current road trip have lasted longer than 5 1/3 innings.

As Bumgarner continues to build up stamina following an abbreviated rehab stint, the Giants' starting rotation is still without Johnny Cueto and Jeff Samardzija, who both remain on the disabled list. As a result, the starting unit features a pair of rookies, Andrew Suárez and Dereck Rodríguez, as well as Chris Stratton, who is in his first full season as a major leaguer and has

posted just one quality start over the last month.

The Giants have attempted to compensate for the inexperience on their staff by carrying eight relief pitchers, but six of the eight have already been used twice on the road trip while Ty Blach's lone appearance out of the bullpen required 3 1/3 innings of work.

The constant stress on the Giants bullpen has limited opportunities for rest, and manager Bruce Bochy believes that may have contributed to the club's downfall on Tuesday.

"They've been used a lot," Bochy said. "I'm a little concerned there. We've used them a lot lately. (Reyes) Moronta, his command was off. (Sam Dyson's) been used quite a bit. He made a mistake on a cutter up there."

Both Moronta and Dyson made their third appearances in four days Monday, as Moronta had an earned run charged to his ledger while Dyson surrendered the decisive two-run home run hit by J.T. Realmuto in the Giants' 7-5 defeat.

Neither right-hander will be at the front of the line Tuesday, but several arms could pitch for the third time in five days if Stratton fails to deliver at least six innings of work.

"Hopefully we'll get some length there in a couple of these games so we can give some guys a break," Bochy said. "Because I've got some guys that need a break tomorrow."

Bochy hinted that he would prefer to stay away from Dyson, but that Blach is available to offer the Giants multiple innings if needed while Smith has pitched just once on the road trip.

With six games remaining on a 10-game road trip, the Giants are counting on Stratton, Suárez and Rodríguez to pitch deep into their upcoming starts in Miami before the club travels to Los Angeles for a pivotal three-game set against the Dodgers.

"We're going to need some length here pretty soon," Bochy said.

The Giants have yet to post a winning record on a road trip this season. If that stands to change, they'll need their starting pitchers to help set the tone over the next six days.

San Jose Mercury News

Giants hopeful Brandon Belt can return ahead of schedule

Kerry Crowley

MIAMI—When the Giants fly from Miami to Los Angeles this week, they'll be greeted by a familiar face.

First baseman Brandon Belt is expected to join the team in Southern California as he continues to recover from an emergency appendectomy he underwent June 2.

Belt was initially expected to miss three weeks, but he began rehabbing at the Giants facility in Arizona over the weekend and took swings during soft toss drills Tuesday. The club's current home run leader (11) will participate in a full batting practice Wednesday and continue to train in Scottsdale until the Giants travel to the west coast.

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"He soft-tossed, he threw, did quite a bit of baseball activities," manager Bruce Bochy said. "Tomorrow he'll take regular batting practice and that's a big step. If he feels fine doing that, we're getting close on him."

Bochy said the Giants medical staff will evaluate Belt in Los Angeles and hinted it's possible he'll be reinstated to the team's 25-man roster this weekend. A return in a two-week time frame from an appendectomy would be considered rapid, so the Giants are keeping all options open including devising a plan for Belt to play in a handful of rehab games before he rejoins the club.

Belt posted a .307 batting average and a .950 OPS through his first 53 games as he worked his way into a role as the Giants regular cleanup hitter. Despite missing time due to injury, he remains in consideration for National League All-Star honors and ranked third in the voting behind Atlanta's Freddie Freeman and Chicago's Anthony Rizzo after the first ballot update was released Monday.

Samardzija rehab start in the works

Right-hander Jeff Samardzija is poised to make his first rehab start since being placed on the disabled list with shoulder tightness.

The Giants starter will likely pitch this weekend and could join Triple-A Sacramento on the road in Round Rock, Texas for an outing on Friday. Bochy said Monday that Samardzija's first rehab

start would likely last around 60 pitches and that he'll probably need two outings before the club feels comfortable having him return to the starting rotation.

If the Giants want Samardzija to pitch in the Bay Area, Single-A San Jose begins a homestand Friday.

San Jose Mercury News

Giants record three hits, waste Stratton's quality start with loss to Marlins

Kerry Crowley

MIAMI—The Miami Marlins rank dead last in major league attendance this season, pulling in an average crowd of 10,551 fans per game.

Fewer than 7,000 patrons took in each of the first two games of Miami's series against San Francisco, but those that did pay to attend have witnessed a rather surprising development: The Giants are unraveling at the hands of the last-place Marlins.

After falling 3-1 on Tuesday, the 33-34 Giants have a losing record for the first time in more than a week.

For the second straight night, the Giants played like a sub .500 team trying to tread water. With two straight defeats to open a four game set, that's now what they are.

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Despite having a starter log seven innings for just the second time in the club's last 34 games, Chris Stratton's quality start wasn't enough to offset a troubling night for the Giants' offense.

For a Giants club that opened the month of June by winning seven of their first nine and taking series from three different contending teams—the Phillies, D'Backs and Nationals— a significant amount of good will the team drummed up with its fan base has vanished quickly.

After losing three separate leads to fall in Monday's series opener, the Giants opened Tuesday's contest by missing a golden opportunity to take control of the game in the first inning. San Francisco did secure a 1-0 lead on a Brandon Crawford RBI groundout, but the Giants failed to push across multiple runs despite having runners on second and third and no one out with the heart of the order due up.

Marlins starter Trevor Richards walked the first two hitters of the game and moved them along 90 feet with a wild pitch, but he fanned Andrew McCutchen on a 3-2 changeup below the strike zone to record his first out. After Miami shortstop JT Riddle robbed Crawford of a hit with a diving stab and throw to first, Evan Longoria bounced out to end an inning that began in promising fashion for the Giants.

The first inning turned out to be the only frame in which the Giants scored against Richards, who entered the night looking for his first career win despite having six career starts under his belt. Richards carried a 5.02 ERA into his outing, and even though he tallied five scoreless innings against San Francisco, he didn't exactly blow the Giants away with his arsenal.

Richards picked up just five swinging strikes –three alone in a fifth inning at-bat by Hunter Pence– and only struck out two Giants hitters, but induced plenty of weak contact to position the Marlins with a chance to lock up the game in the final innings.

His counterpart, Stratton, battled through one of his best outings over the past two months, but his quality start wasn't enough to carry a lineup that failed to follow through on its end of the bargain.

Stratton worked into the seventh inning Tuesday and ran into trouble just once, but a three-run third proved to be the right-hander's downfall in Miami.

The Marlins plated the game-tying run on a Starlin Castro RBI single before Riddle ripped a two-run double that ended up deciding the game. Miami hit the ball hard enough to extend its lead, but a diving catch from Pence in left field and a 1-5 double play turned after Stratton snagged a 90-mile per hour line drive took away a single that likely would have led to two more runs.

After catching a break with the line drive double play, the Giants had a chance to cut into the Marlins lead following a one-out walk by Gorkys Hernández in the top of the fifth. A Stratton sacrifice bunt advanced Hernández into scoring position, but catcher J.T. Realmuto picked off the Giants center fielder at second base to end the inning and punctuate another costly situational mistake.

MLB.com

SF can't capitalize on Stratton's quality start

Glenn Sattell

MIAMI -- Good things have happened this year for the Giants when **Chris Stratton** has taken the mound. They average 6.35 runs per game when the righty takes the hill, and they almost always win. But Marlins right-hander **Trevor Richards** flipped the script, earning his first Major League win in Miami's 3-1 victory over the Giants on Tuesday.

The Marlins have taken the first two games of this four-game series, beating the Giants for the 14th time in their past 21 meetings and ninth of 12 at Marlins Park.

View Full Game Coverage

Richards (1-3) pitched six innings of two-hit ball, limiting the Giants to just a lone first-inning run.

Stratton got the Giants' first hit off Richards, leading off the third with a line single up the middle. That was after they had staked him to a 1-0 lead in the opening frame. Walks to **Joe Panik** and **Buster Posey**, a wild pitch and a groundout from **Brandon Crawford** produced the run.

The Marlins answered with a three-run third inning. Stratton struggled in the frame, yielding three hits, a walk and a hit batter. He averted further damage by snagging a line drive off the bat of **Miguel Rojas** and flipping for the double play to third baseman **Evan Longoria**, who played in his 1,500th Major League game.

It was the second defensive gem of the inning. **Hunter Pence** made a diving catch in left field to rob **J.T. Realmuto** of a hit.

Manager Bruce Bochy was looking to get some length from his starter, hoping to give his overworked bullpen a break. Giants starting pitching had only thrown 22 quality starts this season, among the fewest in the Majors.

Bochy got that out of Stratton (7-4), who worked seven innings, allowing three runs on four hits. He struck out three and walked three (one intentional). But the offense wasn't there, mustering just three singles, and the Giants fell to 10-4 on the season with Stratton as their starting pitcher.

MLB.com

Miami series a homecoming for Giants rookies

Glenn Sattell

MIAMI -- Who says you can't go home again? Two Miami products return to their roots to pitch for the Giants in back-to-back games Wednesday night and Thursday afternoon against the Marlins.

Wednesday starter **Andrew Suarez** was born in Miami, grew up a Marlins fan and went to the University of Miami, where he pitched three innings against the Marlins in the team's stadium-opening exhibition in 2012.

View Full Game Coverage

Thursday starter **Dereck Rodriguez** is the son of former Marlins star Ivan "Pudge" Rodriguez. He was homeschooled during his father's World Series championship year (2003) with Miami, so he said he was at the ballpark all the time. That was back when the Marlins played at Pro Player Stadium.

"It was fun, a lot of good memories," said the younger Rodriguez. "But it's weird coming back here, because you're playing the same team, but it's a different stadium."

Rodriguez lives in Plantation, 30 miles north of Miami, during the offseason.

The 25-year-old Suarez will be making his 10th Major League start on Wednesday. He is 2-4 with a 5.06 ERA.

"Andrew's done a nice job," said Giants manager Bruce Bochy of the left-hander. "He's really made a lot of progress. You look at his stuff, it's going to work here. He's 93 [mph] in that area with a good breaking ball and a good changeup. He's got poise, that's what I like about him.

"Last start got away from him in the fifth inning, but the start before that was one of our better starts of the season that he had."

Suarez said he is pumped for the opportunity to pitch back in his hometown.

"This is going to be amazing," Suarez said. "It's going to be like college, back here throwing in front of my family and friends. I have a big family, but I think most of my friends are going to come.

"It hasn't really settled in, I'm sure it will once I step on the mound. Growing up, watching the Marlins since I was little and in college playing in the stadium against them as well, I'm going to be very excited, for sure."

Suarez said he has enjoyed his short time in the Major Leagues, and that he is already learning a lot.

"It's awesome. The veteran guys here have been helping me out and helping me adjust to the big leagues, minimizing damage and trying to not repeat the same sequences and all those things. Change my looks when someone's on, just small things," Suarez said.

Rodriguez, who graduated from high school in Miami, said he also expects a large contingency to be in the stands cheering him on.

"I've got a lot of family and a lot of tickets [to give out]," Rodriguez said. "I'll be playing for free for a couple of days."

Rodriguez said his dad would be at Marlins Park on Tuesday and for the remainder of the series. He said he spent a lot of time in the batting cage growing up, and he never dreamed he'd be playing in the big leagues as a pitcher.

"[Pitching] was different," Rodriguez said. "It was fun. It was a lot of work, but it paid off. Hopefully I can stay here for a lot of years."

Rodriguez will be making his third Major League start. He is 1-1 with a 5.25 ERA.

The Athletic

Four observations: Chris Stratton gives Giants a badly needed quality start in another loss to Miami

Shayna Rubin

Marlins Park has seen Brandon Crawford at his best.

In August 2016, Crawford lifted a Giants team dragging through the muddy end of a franchise-altering slump with just the fifth seven-hit game in modern baseball history.

"Crawford learned something tonight," NBC Sports Bay Area announcer Duane Kuiper said right before his fifth hit, *"that it doesn't always pay off to hit the ball hard."*

Almost two years later, Marlins Park proved Kuiper right. Crawford — the hottest hitter in baseball — hit a couple of stingers in his three at-bats Tuesday. This night in Miami, they all found gloves.

One of them, at least, was hit hard enough to score the Giants' only run in a 3-1 loss to the Marlins.

That's the quasi-highlight from an offense that went into the game with an NL-leading .263

average. Pitcher-they'd-never-faced Trevor Richards couldn't find the strike zone early, but Crawford's RBI proved to be the only run they could scratch out as the rookie allowed two hits in six innings for his first MLB win. The Giants hit safely *three* times in this one.

Kuiper's tune sang a little lower this day in Miami:

"These games really tick me off because, you know, they're boring."

I don't know, I saw a couple of interesting points to pluck.

1. Chris Stratton's in-game adjustment

The issue is recurrent: the Giants need a starter to make a quality start. The bullpen is gassed.

By the middle of the third inning, it looked like Chris Stratton wouldn't be the guy for the job.

A nine-pitch first inning provided promise, but Stratton dealt a leadoff walk to Justin Bour in the second and labored through a 21-pitch – though scoreless – inning. The third wasn't any kinder. After giving up a leadoff single to Derek Dietrich and hitting Brian Anderson, Stratton was touched for run-scoring hits by Starlin Castro and J.T. Riddle to give the Marlins their 3-1 lead.

The rest of the game was crickets.

But that's notable.

After snaring a 90 mph come-backer off Miguel Rojas' bat and doubling Castro off third to get out of the inning, Stratton retired the next 12 batters, stretching a start that looked destined for abbreviation before sunset, eastern time.

He relied primarily on his fastball, tossing a healthy dose of curveballs and changeups through those early innings, then seemed to switch it up following a meeting with pitching coach Curt Young after hitting Anderson. Stratton started to mix his slider in a bit more in his final three short innings, generating some key strikes and outs. Suddenly, Stratton dug through seven innings, allowing just four hits. It was the quality start at one point no one saw coming — it was the first time he'd gone at least seven since April 18 — but the one Bochy and the bullpen needed.

2. Will Smith is killing it

Smith hankered to get back on the mound once the season began, the last stop on a full recovery from Tommy John surgery that kept him behind dugout fences long enough.

Tuesday night he came on in relief of Cory Gearrin, who'd given up a single and infield hit to start the eighth inning.

Smith brought out pangs of frustration from a Miami lineup that looked ready to sail

complacent to a win, striking out the side — Bour, Castro and Riddle — with a filthy combo of fastballs and sliders. They all struck out swinging on his slider.

Since his return, Smith has pitched 16 innings in 17 games and allowed just seven hits, striking out 19 and walking five.

3. Joe Panik and Hunter Pence

Every moment that defines Hunter Pence as a San Francisco Giant is inherently unorthodox and often stunningly spectacular. It's the unorthodoxy that makes Pence so spectacular. Often the spectacularity is more stunning because of the unorthodoxy.

Pence on the fence. Pence upside down catch. Pence hitting the ball three times with one swing.

He dropped another low-key, spectacularly unorthodox play on us in the third inning, robbing J.T. Realmuto of an extra-base hit with this diving catch.

His elbow seemed to get caught up in turf, but he came up with the run-saving out.

Joe Panik was flipping around second base quite a bit, too. First he made a quick snag-and-turn on J.B. Shuck's grounder to lead off the fourth inning. In the sixth he managed to glove this tricky hop off Rojas' bat.

4. Road trip woes

Two straight losses to the last-place Marlins dampened the Giants' positive juju whirling from a series win in Washington. They're 2-3 on this 10-game road trip with two games left in Miami before heading to Los Angeles to face the Dodgers three times.

The Marlins dumped most of their talent last offseason, so the Giants' continued struggles against them seems odd. The Giants are now 14-23 on the road (19-11 at home) and have lost 14 of their last 21 games against the Marlins and nine of their last 12 games at Marlins Park.

The Athletic

Stark: How MLB expansion could lead to realignment, a new playoff format, a universal DH and more

Jayson Stark

"I want to be clear about expansion. ... We've made clear we have two big issues — Tampa Bay and Oakland — that need to be resolved before we think about it. But the fact of the matter is, we're blessed. We've got cities out there that want to have Major League Baseball. And I think Major League Baseball has to show some receptivity to that because down the road, we are interested in it."

-Commissioner Rob Manfred, to the Athletic's Ken Rosenthal last month

Close your eyes and imagine baseball in the year 2025. Close your eyes and imagine baseball after Rob Manfred's expansion dreams come true.

Imagine a sport that could look dramatically different with 32 teams instead of 30.

Imagine a realignment, based almost solely on geography, that could blow up the structure of the leagues and divisions as we've always known them.

Imagine a postseason that could also expand, to 12 or even 16 teams.

Imagine a totally overhauled schedule, with fewer games and saner travel.

Imagine a sport where every team would use the designated hitter, possibly because there could be no such thing anymore as a National and American league.

Yes, it's a funny thing. When the commissioner utters that magic word, *expansion*, the first question most people tend to ask is: "Where?" But in some ways, that's the *least* interesting question revolving around expansion these days.

When people inside the game discuss where expansion is heading, they're gazing far beyond the geography. What they see is expansion as a powerful vehicle that could open doors to untold possibilities, whenever the stars line up to make it all possible.

"The benefits of having 32 teams are so clear," says one baseball official, "that at some point, we've got to get to 32 – whether it's in two years or 20."

That question – when? – is probably the hardest to answer. But those other questions? Let's take a look at them, informed by extensive conversations with people around the sport.

WHICH CITIES HAVE THE BEST SHOT?

Let's just assume that one of these decades, the stadium situations in Oakland and Tampa Bay actually get resolved. Crazy idea, we know. But let's go with that – and assume that neither the

A's nor the Rays wind up relocating.

That opens the expansion field to every major city in North America that currently lacks a big-league baseball team. We've explored all the cities that have been connected with MLB at any point. Here is how we would rank those cities, based on our own reportorial instinct:

1) PORTLAND, ORE. – It's the 22nd largest media market in America, with a metropolitan area that is home to nearly 3.2 million people. One baseball official described Portland as the most organized of all the cities bidding for a team. So it has that going for it. Its biggest drawback is that it's less than 200 miles away from Seattle, so a team in Portland would face many of the same travel challenges that the Mariners face. But ... if baseball is headed toward realignment (and a schedule) based around geography, having two teams in the Pacific Northwest would actually ease the travel burden in both Seattle and Portland. And that could be a major selling point, assuming a new ballpark and TV rights deal fall into place.

2) CHARLOTTE, N.C. – One of the fastest-growing cities in America, Charlotte ranks No. 17 among all American cities in population (over 850,000) and ranks as the 23rd largest media market. Charlotte actually has a larger population, within its city limits, than Atlanta, Miami, Tampa or Nashville. It's a hotbed of pro and college sports passion. And another team in the Southeast would fit perfectly into baseball's geographic profile. Naturally, it always comes down to money – and building a ballpark. So there's still that. But by any other measure, Charlotte appears well-positioned to be one of the 32.

3) NASHVILLE – Very similar profile to Charlotte, though in a slightly smaller media market (No. 27). Nashville has showered love on the Titans and Predators, has a long and successful minor-league history, and fits the geographical allure of adding a team in the South. It would also need a ballpark and TV deal. But as one longtime official put it, "I've always been surprised that Nashville wasn't higher on this list."

4) MONTREAL – It's the largest city in North America without a baseball team, with an estimated 1.7 million people living in the city and approximately 4 million in its metropolitan area. Plus, it feels as though baseball owes Montreal a second chance, after everything the labor wars of the '90s did to doom the Expos to failure. But there are numerous issues behind the scenes. The prospects for a new stadium and big TV deal are shaky. There are the same tax and currency-conversion challenges the Blue Jays face. And the political enthusiasm for doing what it takes to attract a team doesn't seem to match the energy in Stade Olympique every March, when the Blue Jays stop by for their annual exhibition games. A lot more would have to happen to bring baseball back to Montreal than it might appear from afar.

5) SAN ANTONIO/AUSTIN – The Rangers and Astros wouldn't be big fans of any attempt to install a team in San Antonio or Austin, two of the fastest-growing cities in America. But we found it interesting that they were the first two areas mentioned by one official we surveyed –

if only because Austin is the largest city in the United States that has no team in any of the four major professional sports, and San Antonio is the largest with just one team (the Spurs). But MLB would have to make significant concessions to the other Texas franchises to make this happen.

6) LAS VEGAS – In hockey, the Golden Knights just wrote themselves the greatest expansion script ever. The Raiders will arrive in 2020 if all goes according to plan. And when the Supreme Court signed off on the legalization of sports gambling from coast to coast, it removed much of the weight that had always hung over the idea of baseball in Vegas. But Las Vegas would be the smallest media market in baseball (No. 40), even smaller than Milwaukee and Cincinnati. So there would be built-in revenue challenges from Day One. And let's face it: Vegas is one scorching place in the summer, with an average temperature over 100 in June, July and August. So "even with a dome or a retractable-roof stadium," says an official of one team, "I just don't think you have the same energy or commerce in Vegas in the summer as you do during the winter."

7) MEXICO CITY – The commissioner has mentioned Mexico City (population: nearly 9 million) as a potential expansion site numerous times. But there are so many obstacles to putting a team in Mexico, on almost every front, that one source we surveyed went so far as to say: "I think you'd see a team in London before you see a team in Mexico."

Are there possibilities other than these? Of course. Indianapolis? Oklahoma City? New Orleans? A third team in New York (or North Jersey)? A third team in the Los Angeles/Orange County metroplex? A team in Connecticut? None would be completely impossible. But none would be even remotely close to likely, either. Get back to us in five years.

HOW WOULD REALIGNMENT WORK?

Close your eyes and imagine baseball in the year 2025. Yeah, we know we've used that line before. But here is where that flight of imagination begins to carry you to places you never expected to travel.

Imagine the Yankees and Mets, Giants and A's, Dodgers and Angels, Cubs and White Sox – all in the same division.

Imagine the Astros playing the Red Sox in October – in the World Series.

Imagine if baseball divided its landscape along the geography-based lines of the NBA – as opposed to the artificial, league-based lines drawn up in 1901.

Is *that* really where baseball is headed?

To be honest, it's way too premature to tell. What we *can* tell you, though, is that baseball's Strategic Planning Committee has looked at that realignment-by-geography scenario long and

hard.

A bunch of different ideas remain in play. But a geographic realignment easily could look like this:

MLB EAST

BAMBINO DIVISION

NY Yankees
NY Mets
Baltimore Orioles
Washington Nationals

SPLINTER DIVISION

Red Sox
Blue Jays
Phillies
Pirates

AARON DIVISION

Braves
Marlins
Rays
Charlotte*

MUSIAL DIVISION

Cardinals
Tigers
Reds
Indians

MLB WEST

JACKIE DIVISION

Dodgers
Angels
Diamondbacks
Padres

MAYS DIVISION

Giants
A's
Mariners
Portland*

BRETT DIVISION

Royals

Astros

Rangers

Rockies

ERNIE DIVISION

Cubs

White Sox

Brewers

Twins

(*-expansion team)

Now, there are obviously many, many variations on that alignment. It wouldn't be hard to redraw the map to keep Yankees/Red Sox, Cubs/Cardinals, Dodgers/Giants, etc., in the same division, for instance. But you get the idea.

"When we talked about this, it just felt like a very futuristic conversation," says one source who was present for these discussions. "It might seem so radical. But it has so many advantages from a scheduling, fan and attendance standpoint."

And it isn't just him talking. When Rob Manfred sat down with Ken Rosenthal, the first advantage he cited when he began ruminating on expansion was getting to "a more geographically based alignment."

There are other ways to get there, though. Baseball could opt for two eight-team divisions in each league over four four-team divisions. But among the folks we surveyed, there was clearly more support for more, smaller divisions – because of the geography advantages and because it would allow eight teams to tell their fans, "Hey, we won our division."

The most dramatic question of all, however, would be this:

Does baseball really want to blow up the National and American leagues?

It's neat. It's clean. It's efficient – geographically speaking. But doing that means offending the traditionalists – and there are still plenty of them, sitting in owners' boxes and in the bleachers.

Doing that also means bringing the DH to all 32 teams, because there would be no such thing anymore as an "American League." On the other hand, a universal DH could happen with or without any sort of realignment. They're not necessarily linked.

So could baseball realign by geography *without* waving goodbye to the National and American leagues? Well, not as cleanly. But it could go to something like this:

NATIONAL LEAGUE

NL NORTHEAST

Nationals

Mets

Phillies

Pirates

NL MIDEAST

Cubs

Cardinals

Reds

Brewers

NL SOUTH

Braves

Marlins

Rays**

Charlotte*

NL WEST

Dodgers

Giants

Padres

Diamondbacks

AMERICAN LEAGUE

AL EAST

Yankees

Red Sox

Orioles

Blue Jays

AL MIDEAST

Indians

Twins

White Sox

Tigers

AL SOUTH

Astros

Rangers

Royals

Rockies**

AL WEST

Mariners

Portland*

A's

Angels

(*- expansion team)

** - changed league)

There are several variations on that idea, too, naturally. And something like that might eventually be how this turns out. But whether realignment turns out to be radical or not-so-radical, the ripple effects would be dramatic. Which leads us to ask ...

HOW WOULD THIS AFFECT THE SCHEDULE AND POSTSEASON?

We should make clear that baseball is still years away from having to answer those questions. But all of this will be on the table:

FEWER GAMES, MORE PLAYOFFS – We found nobody who didn't see expansion as a trigger for both of the above. The postseason field could expand to either six teams per league or as many as eight. The regular season then would shrink – likely to 154 games – so the postseason could begin sooner and the World Series could end before Thanksgiving.

WHY A 154-GAME SCHEDULE – Lopping eight games off the schedule also cuts about 10 days off the regular season. So an extra postseason round could fit comfortably into that time frame. And the schedule-makers would be eternally grateful for finally having the opportunity to make out a schedule with A) an even number of teams in each league, B) an even number of teams in each division and C) more wiggle room. As one official put it, "What everyone involved with the schedule tells me is that 32 teams and 154 games is the single easiest schedule to make."

BALANCED OR UNBALANCED – This debate has been going on for two decades. It won't be going away no matter how baseball realigns. There is so much emphasis now on the importance of winning your division that an unbalanced schedule makes sense – unless you're ensconced in the wild-card race. Then an unbalanced schedule punishes teams in the best divisions, and that has never seemed very fair. In his interview with *The Athletic*, Manfred suggested that a more balanced schedule "probably" makes sense. But if the biggest selling point of geographical realignment is to make travel less crazy, that swings the scale back toward unbalanced, right? This is a tough one!

HOW GEOGRAPHICAL REALIGNMENT COULD HELP OCTOBER – In his conversation with Ken Rosenthal, Manfred raised a typical postseason scheduling nightmare that he would love to

avoid – when a team like the Red Sox plays a team like the Angels in a best-of-five Division Series. Besides the grueling coast-to-coast travel, he said, there’s another problem: “You’re either playing too early for the people in Anaheim or too late for the people in Boston.” But if MLB divided its leagues by geography, NBA-style, it would never face one of those matchups before a best-of-seven round, because the early rounds would be either all-East or all-West matchups. Is it possible to make that happen without blowing up the leagues? Sure doesn’t seem like it. And that could factor heavily into the realignment strategy down the line.

A NEW ROUND OF PLAYOFFS – Does baseball really want to follow the NBA and NHL toward a 16-team postseason field? That would likely mean starting the postseason with *eight* best-of-three-game series. And in a sport that plays every day, that would mean overlapping games – and would probably work only if baseball goes to total geographical realignment. So adding a sixth playoff team seems more likely, leading to an NFL-type format in which the Nos. 3 and 4 seeds among the division winners would host the two wild cards in each league. Would that be a one-and-done game or a best-of-three? Too early to say. Just bear in mind that baseball’s national TV deals with Fox, Turner and ESPN run through 2021. And you know what drives those deals? October.

It’s fascinating to take a step back and see how all these pieces fit together once expansion opens the box to this puzzle. But with 30 teams, doing any of this turns into a sport-wide migraine.

So you can close your eyes and try to picture all of this. But this is no Rob Manfred pipe dream. This is *going* to happen. This isn’t a matter of *if*. It’s a matter of filling in the year – and then filling in all the brave-new-world details that are guaranteed to follow.