

Carrasco K's 14 to pass 200, but Tribe falls in 11

By Aaron Rose MLB.com

TORONTO -- Indians right-hander Carlos Carrasco was brilliant for eight innings, matching his season high with 14 strikeouts, but he didn't get much help from his teammates in a 3-2 extra-inning loss to the Blue Jays at Rogers Centre on Friday night.

Adam Cimber had been working on six scoreless appearances for the Indians, but Kevin Pillar took a low breaking ball over the left-field wall to walk off the Indians in the 11th.

"Thought the slider was the right pitch there; [I] just didn't execute it and he smacked it," Cimber said.

The Indians have now lost 10 walk-offs this season, tying them with the Chicago Cubs for the second most in the Majors, trailing only Minnesota with 12.

"When you're pitching in a situation like that and you make a mistake, sometimes you go home," Indians manager Terry Francona said. Carrasco came into Friday night trailing only Chris Sale for the highest swinging strike rate among American League starters, and since the All-Star break, he's posted the fourth-highest strikeouts per nine for qualified Major League starters with 11.57.

Carrasco's 12th strikeout gave him 1,095 career strikeouts, tying him for 10th in Indians franchise history with Mike Garcia. An inning later, he got Kendrys Morales to record his 13th strikeout of the game, giving him 200 punchouts on the season for the third time in his career.

The Blue Jays got to Carrasco in the fifth, scoring an unearned run when Jose Ramirez let a ground ball get by him at third for an error. The fielding gaffe allowed Rowdy Tellez to advance to third base and come around on a sacrifice fly in the next at-bat.

"I thought he was really good. He got us deep in the game," Francona said. "[He] used the fastball and breaking ball, some of his split changes. Even when we didn't convert a couple plays, he made pitches with men on base and really pitched well."

Two innings later, Carrasco allowed a leadoff double to Randal Grichuk before Tellez took a first-pitch slider to center field for another double to score Grichuk. After a wild pitch allowed Tellez to advance to third, Carrasco got Aledmys Diaz to strike out swinging, then he forced a flyout to end the threat.

He finished the night throwing 113 pitches, allowing just two runs (one earned) on six hits with one walk.

"I still felt strong in the bottom of the eighth," Carrasco said. "I feel fine right now."

Yan Gomes gave the Indians the lead briefly in the sixth inning, when he scooped a low fastball over the left-field wall for a solo shot. The pitch was just 1.01 feet off the ground, the third-lowest pitch hit for a home run this season. Gomes also holds the record for the lowest pitch hit for a home run this season, on Aug. 21, when he took Red Sox reliever Tyler Thornburg deep to left field.

"He went down and got one the time before and hit the ball to center," Francona said. "Then he went down and got another one for the home run. That's good to see -- he's been swinging pretty good."

Blue Jays starter Marco Estrada kept the Indians off balance with his changeup, which he threw 42 percent of the time. He went six innings, allowing just two runs with five strikeouts and five hits.

"He kind of pitches backwards, kind of pitches off of his changeup," Francona. "It's such a good pitch that he can even elevate it, and he throws that fastball off the same look and gets a lot of fly balls off of it."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Indians can't convert in 11th: After Gomes and Greg Allen led off the inning with a single and a walk, Rajai Davis failed to lay down a sacrifice bunt, but it went right to pitcher Jake Petricka, who got the lead runner at third for a fielder's choice. Lindor couldn't cash in the runners, but Kipnis walked to load the bases and bring Ramirez to the plate. The 25-year-old third baseman hit a grounder into the shift to end the inning, leaving the bases juiced.

N. Ramirez gets in and out of jam: In the ninth inning, an errant throw from Gomes allowed Pillar to go from first to third on a steal attempt. With the winning run just 90 feet away, reliever Neil Ramirez got Richard Urena to fly out to center to end the threat.

SOUND SMART

Edwin Encarnacion singled in his first at-bat and is now hitting .395 in 10 games against the Blue Jays.

YOU GOTTA SEE THIS

In the third inning, Davis was so confident that a 3-2 pitch was out of the zone, he dropped his bat just as the ball crossed home plate. It was a good guess, as the pitch bounced in the dirt allowing Davis to reach base leading off the inning. He would later steal second, but that was as far as he would go.

UP NEXT

Adam Plutko (4-5, 5.04 ERA) takes the mound against the Blue Jays on Saturday at 4:07 p.m. ET at Rogers Centre. It's Plutko's second start of the season against Toronto, whom he held to just three runs over 7 1/3 innings in the second of two games on May 3. The 26-year-old right-hander has recorded just one quality start in four outings since being recalled on Aug. 19. The Indians will face Blue Jays rookie Sean Reid-Foley (1-2, 5.51) for the first time this year. The 23-year-old right-hander is coming off a dominant 10-strikeout performance in which he allowed one run over seven innings against the Marlins.

Tribe to be cautious with Brantley in Sept.

TORONTO -- With their magic number to clinch the American League Central down to seven, the Indians are going to be extra cautious with Michael Brantley, who was out of the lineup Friday night against the Blue Jays.

"I'm probably being a little overprotective," Indians manager Terry Francona said. "I think it's probably the prudent thing to do." The 31-year-old Brantley has been dealing with a left foot injury he sustained when he fouled a ball off the top of his foot in the third inning of Wednesday's 3-1 win over the Royals.

Brantley is hitting .303 with an .819 OPS and 14 home runs in 125 games this season.

Injury notes

Andrew Miller will throw a side session on Saturday before he's re-evaluated by the team.

The team had no update on Trevor Bauer, who is continuing to recover from the stress fracture in his right fibula that landed him on the 10-day disabled list on Aug. 14.

Mejia homers twice for Padres

Francona isn't upset about Francisco Mejia's offensive outburst with the Padres on Thursday night.

"When a kid leaves, you don't stop thinking they're a great kid or good player," Francona said. "We knew to get [Brad] Hand and [Adam] Cimber we had to give up something good, so unless we're playing him, I hope he rakes."

Mejia is MLB Pipeline's No. 21 prospect had been the the Indians' No. 1 prospect prior to being dealt on July 19.

Akron RubberDucks one win shy of advancing in AA playoffs: Indians minor leagues

By Elton Alexander, The Plain Dealer

CLEVELAND, Ohio - Nellie Rodriguez has made his presence felt in a big way with the Akron RubberDucks since his late-season return from Columbus. The big first-baseman, 24, put an exclamation point on that Thursday night with a 10th-inning home run that gave the Ducks a 2-0 lead in the Eastern League Playoffs over Altoona.

The best of five series heads to Altoona for a potential three games, but the Ducks only need one more victory to close the series out and advance.

The 6-2, 225-pound Rodriguez, drafted in the 15th round in 2012, has played the last 31 games of the season with Akron, hitting .283 with five home runs and 23 RBI.

Where is he?: No sign of pitcher Triston McKenzie (7-4, 2.68 ERA) in this series as the Indians have decided to slow his roll, at least through the opening round of the playoffs.

The top pitching prospect for the Indians was clearly on a pitch count throughout the season after arriving in June from extended spring training to allow a tender forearm to heal.

He never pitched more than seven innings in a game all season with the Ducks, and only once more than six in five starts in August.

Lynchburg Hillcats

The Lynchburg Hillcats and Potomac are tied at one game each in a best-of-five series. In Game 1, the Hillcats had a five-run second inning and held on for a 5-2 victory. Dillon Persinger opened the scoring with a two-run double with the bases loaded, and Mitch Longo and Nolan Jones each singled home runs in the same inning.

Justin Garza earned the win with 5.2 innings. He allowed only one run.

In Game 2, the Hillcats took a 1-0 lead but Potomac rallied and won 4-1.

THE DAILY DOUBLE: Persinger finished the regular season with seven doubles over his final 11 games. He began the postseason with two more doubles in the Game 1 win over Potomac. Persinger has become the Hillcats everyday leadoff hitter since Jodd Carter's promotion to Double-A Akron on Aug. 9.

Cleveland Indians: Inside story of Josh Donaldson deal -- Terry Pluto

By Terry Pluto, The Plain Dealer terrypluto2003@yahoo.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- How the Indians pulled off the Josh Donaldson deal:

1. DIDN'T SEE IT COMING.

When Terry Francona said he planned to keep Jason Kipnis at second base and Jose Ramirez at third base, the Tribe manager had no idea what was happening with Josh Donaldson.

Nor did he know the injured Toronto Blue Jay star third baseman would end up in Cleveland.

Francona proclaimed Kipnis and Ramirez staying at their natural positions on Aug. 26.

At that point, Donaldson was on the disabled list for Toronto. He had not played a game since May 29. He was dealing with a major calf muscle injury.

No one knew if Donaldson would be able to play in a minor league rehabilitation game before the Sept. 1 deadline.

The Indians had been talking to Toronto on and off for months about acquiring Donaldson.

In late July, it appeared Donaldson was going to try and come back from his injury. The Indians and Blue Jays had some semi-serious trade talks.

But Donaldson's calf muscles would not cooperate, and he needed more time off.

Even in the middle of August, no one knew when (or if) he'd play again in 2018.

2. WAS HE HEALTHY?

Donaldson and the Toronto front office were having major issues. It's messy, and most of it deals with how his injury was handled and his contract negotiations. The Blue Jays wanted to trade him. Donaldson wanted out.

But Donaldson had to prove he was healthy. For a trade to happen, Donaldson knew he had to be on the field somewhere in the last week of August.

For Donaldson to be eligible for the playoffs, he had to be on a team's roster before Sept. 1. That meant midnight, Aug. 31, was the trade deadline.

Donaldson played for the first time on Aug. 28. He played third base for the Dunedin Blue Jays in the Class A Florida State League.

He also played on Aug. 30. The team was rained out on August 29.

The Indians and a few other teams sent scouts to Florida to check out Donaldson. The Indians not only were watching Donaldson swing the bat and move in the field, they were paying special attention to his throwing.

The third baseman had a sore right shoulder in spring training. Between infield practice and game action, they saw his arm was strong.

Just as important, he made good throws from different angles. That's important for a third baseman, who has to throw off-balanced and sidearm on bunts or slow rollers.

At the plate and in batting practice, Donaldson looked healthy. Between the two games, he was 2-for-5 and hit a homer.

3. DID THEY HAVE ENOUGH TIME?

For Donaldson to be traded after Aug. 1, he had to clear waivers.

The Blue Jays didn't put him on waivers until 1 p.m. Wednesday. Then they had 48 hours to see if any team would claim Donaldson.

Donaldson had \$3.7 million left on his contract. It was doubtful any team would claim him and pick up that cash -- given the questions about his health.

He also would be a free agent at the end of the year.

Tribe General Manager Mike Chernoff and President Chris Antonetti did have some preliminary talks with Toronto about a deal during the waiver period, but they had to wait until after 1 p.m. Friday to become very serious. That's when he cleared waivers.

St. Louis was interested in trading for Donaldson.

So the Indians were not assured they'd get Donaldson.

4. WHAT ABOUT THE DOCTORS?

The Indians had their medical people examining Donaldson's records sent to them by Toronto.

Furthermore, the Indians and Toronto were looking at a player to be named later heading back to the Blue Jays. The player under discussion was pitcher Julian Merryweather, who entered the 2018 season as the No. 17 prospect in the Tribe farm system, according to Baseball America.

But Merryweather had Tommy John elbow reconstruction surgery on March 8.

While Tribe doctors were checking out Donaldson, Blue Jay doctors were looking at Merryweather's records.

Merryweather will be 27 on Oct. 14. He had a 23-20 record and 3.92 ERA as a minor league starter. He was a fifth-round pick by the Tribe in 2014.

The Blue Jays front office knew Merryweather well. President Mark Shapiro and General Manager Ross Atkins were both working for the Tribe until 2016.

5. WHAT ABOUT THE MONEY?

Toronto wanted the Indians to pay as much as the \$3.7 million left on Donaldson's deal. The Indians wanted to save as much as possible.

Talks went back and forth. The Indians and Blue Jays agreed on Toronto sending \$2.7 million to the Tribe along with Donaldson.

The Indians would pay \$1 million of Donaldson's contract.

Once that was settled, it still had to be sent to the commissioner's office to be approved.

All of this was happening Friday afternoon.

6. COULD IT WORK?

Adding the 2015 American League MVP meant 2018 MVP candidate Ramirez would have to shift from third to second.

"Jose was willing to do it," said Francona. "He just didn't want to go back-and-forth."

Second baseman Kipnis would be gone from his usual second base spot and thrown into the pool of outfielders -- no guarantees that he'd start.

"He was not jumping for joy," said Francona. "But that's understandable."

Why were the Indians willing to upend the infield only five days after the manager said everyone would stay in their same spots? Because this wasn't making changes to accommodate Yandy Diaz, a talented young third baseman, but not post-season proven.

It was Donaldson coming to Cleveland. The players know what he could mean for the lineup.

"He's an MVP-type player," said Francona. "He's a middle-of-the-order bat...He kind of puts fear into you when he steps in the batter's box. He plays with an edge. He plays hard."

But could he stay well enough to play in October?

"There is some risk," admitted Antonetti. "But he's one of the most dynamic players in the game on both sides of the ball when healthy."

The Indians consider a healthy Donaldson close to a Gold Glove-caliber third baseman. From 2014-17, he batted .282 while averaging 27 HR and 98 RBI per season.

7. TRUSTING THE CULTURE

Lots of teams talk about creating a "winning culture" and players "focused on winning" rather than individual goals.

Few teams have it, at least to the extent of the Indians.

In the middle of the 2016 season, closer Cody Allen told Antonetti and Francona that he was willing to give up his closer role if the Tribe made a deal to add a premier reliever.

That was part of the reason they were willing to make the monster deal for Andrew Miller. They knew the lefty reliever also was extremely unselfish. He had the ability to close, but the heart to fit into the team.

The Allen/Miller combination helped the Tribe reach Game 7 of the 2016 World Series.

In the middle of the 2018 season, the Indians traded for San Diego All-Star closer Brad Hand. Once again, Allen was willing to give up his prestigious closer's role, if necessary.

Hand was like Miller, willing to fill whatever bullpen role asked of him.

In the final weeks of the 2017 season, Ramirez moved from third to second base. Kipnis went from second base to center field.

Now they were being asked to do that again.

"We have a very selfless team," Antonetti has often said.

That's why the Tribe has had six consecutive winning seasons since Francona arrived in 2013.

It's why they are headed to their fourth post-season. It's why most players enjoy being with the organization. The Indians have stability and credibility.

It's also why they knew they could add Donaldson.

8. CLOSING THE DEAL

By 9 p.m. on Aug. 31, the Indians were sure the deal was going through. They reached Donaldson and had a good talk with him.

The Tribe was playing a home game against Tampa Bay. By 10:30 p.m., it was official.

The next day, Donaldson arrived in Cleveland. The Indians, Donaldson and the medical people designed a program for him to play in the minors for 10 days. They are creating a type of spring training for him.

Donaldson was 2-for-5 in his first two minor league games with the Tribe, both hits home runs.

So far, he has stayed healthy. He is expected to start playing for the Tribe on Sept. 11.

Heading into free agency, Donaldson has strong motivation to prove he can still produce. The 32-year-old also is a driven, competitive athlete who loves the big stage of playoff baseball.

In 31 post-season games, Donaldson is a .292 hitter (.836 OPS) with four HR and 13 RBI.

The Indians feel the urgency to return to the World Series.

They know Donaldson could re-injure his calf muscle. But they also know if they had failed to trade for Donaldson, they'd always wonder what would have happened if they had, in time for October baseball.

Cleveland Indians under Terry Francona are Winning, Inc.: DMan

Dennis Manoloff

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Don't take this for granted, Indians fans.

Don't take for granted what your team is doing in -- or, more to the point, to -- its division. After a victory Thursday night in Toronto, the Indians are 80-60 and own a 16 1/2-game lead in the AL Central. Magic number to clinch: seven. Achieving a single-digit magic number by the first week of September is impressive.

I know, I know: The AL Central beyond the Indians is trash. Second-place Minnesota is 63-76; last-place Kansas City, 46-93.

Oh, well.

The Indians and their fans need not apologize. Nobody in the AL East apologized to the 1970's Indians or 1980's Indians during their seemingly annual futility. In 2012, the AL Central champion Detroit Tigers didn't send the Indians a box of Kleenex for the Tribe's 68-94, fourth-place, 20-games-back dud.

In the NFL, New England Patriots coach Bill Belichick and quarterback Tom Brady never will attach an asterisk to AFC East dominance of the past 1,000 years that has been facilitated by varying sizes of tomato can in New York (Jets), Buffalo (Bills) and Miami (Dolphins).

Teams play in the division assigned by the league, and they play the opponents on the schedule.

Don't take for granted, Indians fans, what your team has done under manager Terry Francona. The Indians are rolling toward their third consecutive division title and sixth above-.500 record in six seasons with future National Baseball Hall of Famer Francona at the helm. Francona's Indians are 534-414 with what will be four playoff appearances and at least one World Series appearance.

These types of runs are atypical for the franchise, even as two have occurred within the past 25 years. Manager Mike Hargrove's Indians won five straight AL Central Division titles, and made two World Series appearances, from 1995 through 1999.

When I see a 16 1/2-game lead in the AL Central, I not only appreciate what the Indians have done in 2018 but also what they might be able to do for year(s) to come. Even while granting a recency bias and understanding that the Indians' roster will change pieces year over year, I wonder: Which division opponent will challenge them anytime soon?

I thought the Twins would push the Tribe into the summer. Not even close. They have taken five steps back since their wild-card entry last season.

I thought the White Sox, loaded with intriguing young talent, would be the division's next power. They still might be. But they are 56-84.

The Tigers are 57-83, with less promise going forward than the White Sox. The Royals are a disaster just three years removed from a World Series title.

Given the players the Indians have under contractual control -- read: starting pitchers -- they have a realistic opportunity to stretch their division dominance to five, six seasons. That means avoiding the one-and-done, wild-card round and going directly to the best-of-five division series. Win a best-of-five and best-of-seven series, reach the World Series.

Because the MLB playoff road is not as arduous as, say, the NHL's or NBA's, there is more volatility to the proceedings. The Indians know this well. Examples:

*1996 team won 99 games in the regular season and lost in the division series.

*1997 team won 86 games and went to the World Series, losing in seven games.

*2016 team won 94 games but was not expected to dazzle in the postseason, yet it reached the World Series, losing in seven games.

*2017 team won 102 games and was favored by many to win the World Series, only to lose in the division series.

Where the MLB postseason is concerned, just get in -- preferably as a division winner. The Indians under Francona likely will continue to do so. However routine it might seem, it should not be taken for granted.

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Carlos Carrasco's 14 strikeouts go in vain as Cleveland Indians fall to Toronto, 3-2, in 11 innings

Paul Hoynes

TORONTO - Extra innings once again proved unkind to the Indians.

Following one of Carlos Carrasco's best starts of the season, the Indians lost to Toronto, 3-2, in 11 innings Friday night at Rogers Centre. The Indians are 2-7 in extras this season.

Carrasco allowed two runs and struck out 14 Blue Jays in eight innings, but the game continued well past that until Kevin Pillar hit a game-winning homer off Adam Cimber with one out in the 11th.

The Indians missed a chance to take the lead in the 11th when Yan Gomes singled and Greg Allen walked to start the inning. A botched bunt by Rajai Davis resulted in a force at third. After Jake Petricka struck out Francisco Lindor, Jason Kipnis walked to load the bases, but Jose Ramirez grounded out.

Gomes gave the Indians a 2-1 lead with a two-out homer in the sixth, but Carrasco couldn't hold it.

Randal Grichuk and rookie Rowdy Tellez opened the seventh with doubles. Tellez's fifth double in his sixth big-league game tied the score at 2-2. Carrasco wild-pitched Tellez to third, but he kept the score tied by striking out Aledmys Diaz and retiring Richard Urena on a fly ball to the track in left.

The Indians took a 1-0 lead on a two-out single by Ramirez in the fifth. Toronto starter Marco Estrada hit Allen to start the inning. Allen stole second and came around to score on Ramirez's single.

Ramirez entered the game in an 12-for-70 funk and it may be hurting his defense. After he drove in the Tribe's first run, he allowed the Blue Jays to tie the score in the bottom of the fifth when he couldn't handle Pillar's easy grounder to third. As the ball rolled past Ramirez and into left field, Tellez scored from second to make it 1-1.

In the sixth, Luke Maile sent a hard bouncer to third that Ramirez knocked down, but couldn't make a play on. It could have been his second error of the game, but Maile was credited with a hit. On the next play, Billy McKinney sent another shot down the line that Ramirez stopped with a dive, righted himself and threw to second for the force.

It was his best defensive moment of the night.

Estrada, who had lost his last two starts, held the Indians to two runs on five hits in six innings. He worked up in the strike zone and had the Indians hitting the ball harmlessly into the air for most of his six innings of work. Gomes drove a 1-1 pitch off his ankles over the fence in left for his 13th homer.

Carrasco, in the eighth, recorded his 200th and 201st strikeouts of the season. But he was still in trouble. McKinney reached on a single and Justin Smoak walked with two out. Grichuk sent a hard shot to third. Ramirez made the stop and hustled to third for the force to end the inning.

Rajai Davis tried to get Carrasco the win. He beat out an infield single in the ninth, stole second for the second time in the game, but the Indians couldn't get him home. Lindor lined out to right and Kipnis grounded out to first.

Carrasco, for the first time in his career, has struck out 200 or more batters in two straight seasons.

What it means

The Indians entered Friday night's game trailing AL West-leading Houston by seven games for the right to host the ALDS on Oct. 5. The Astros visited Fenway Park to play Boston on Friday night on a five-game winning streak with a 3 1/2-game lead over the A's.

The pitches

Estrada threw 103 pitches, 64 (62 percent) for strikes. Carrasco threw 113 pitches, 82 (73 percent) for strikes. Carrasco's season high for pitches thrown is 117 on May 9 against Milwaukee.

Thanks for coming

The Indians and Blue Jays drew 26,830 to Rogers Centre on Friday night. First pitch was at 7:07 p.m. with a temperature of 72 degrees. The roof was open.

Next

Rookie Adam Plutko (4-5, 5.04) will face the Blue Jays and right-hander Sean Reid-Foley (1-2, 5.51) on Saturday afternoon at 4:07 p.m. SportsTime Ohio, WTAM and WMMS will carry the game.

Plutko is coming off a loss to the Royals in which he struck out a career-high eight batters, but allowed three homers. He earned his first big-league win against the Blue Jays on May 3 at Progressive Field.

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Short spring-training conversation produces big results for Francisco Lindor, Cleveland Indians

Paul Hoynes

TORONTO - The spring-training conversation between Francisco Lindor and manager Terry Francona was brief and went something like this:

Lindor: "Hey, Tito, I want to hit leadoff."

Francona: "It's still too early. Let's see how things shake out."

But when the Indians opened their spring-training schedule, more often than not, Lindor was leading off. Once the regular season started, well, the Indians played their 141st game of the season Friday night and Lindor was batting leadoff for the 138th time.

If you've followed the Indians with only a passing interest this season, you can probably recite the reasons why Francona likes Lindor at the top of the order. Here's a refresher course just in case you forgot: He's a switch hitter, who can run, steal a base, hit for average and provide instant offense because he can hit the ball out of the park.

One more thing: when the bottom of the order gets on base, it's nice to have Lindor at the top of the lineup waiting to drive them in.

Thursday night almost all those points were on display. Lindor homered in his first two at-bats. In the fifth, after Toronto rallied to take a 4-3 lead, Greg Allen and Brandon Guyer, the last two hitters in the lineup, reached on a single and double. Lindor followed with a broken-bat single to left for a 5-4 lead that turned into a 9-4 win.

On the night, he went 4-for-5 with three runs and four RBI.

Lindor has hit seven leadoff homers this year, tying Grady Sizemore's club record. Overall, he's hit 33 homers, tying his career high set last year. He leads all leadoff hitters with 33 homers and 82 RBI and is tied with Mookie Betts for the lead with 110 runs out of the top spot in the lineup. Overall, Lindor leads the big leagues with 117 runs.

"The most important stat is runs scored and he leads the league by a pretty good margin," said Francona.

Lindor does not strike one as the patient type. Too many fast-twitch muscles firing at once, which means the leadoff spot is ideal for him.

"I love the feeling of getting the game going," said Lindor. "Whether I get on base or I score. Whatever happens, if I get on base in the first inning and help us score, teams know, 'Here are the Indians. They're here to compete pitch after pitch after pitch.'"

This year the first inning has belonged to the Indians. They've outscored the opposition, 102-65, and Lindor is a big reason why. He's hitting .299 (35-for-117) with seven homers, eight RBI and 33 runs in the first inning.

But he is not alone.

No. 2 hitter Michael Brantley is hitting .347 (34-for-98) with 22 runs in the first. Jose Ramirez, the No. 3 hitter, has 13 homers, 34 RBI and 20 runs in the first.

Where is he? Brantley missed his second straight start Friday with a bruised left ankle. He fouled a pitch off his foot Wednesday against the Royals.

"I'm probably being overly protective," said Francona. "I feel it's the prudent thing to do. He'll be fine."

Brantley took batting practice on the field Friday.

Remember him? Francisco Mejia made his first start for the Padres on Thursday against Cincinnati. The switch-hitting catcher went 2-for-4 with two homers and four RBI.

The Indians traded Mejia to San Diego for closer Brad Hand and right-hander Adam Cimber on July 19. Hand has gone 8-for-8 in save situations for the Tribe.

"Good for him," said Francona. "That's great. When a kid leaves, you don't stop thinking they're a great kid or a good player. We knew to get Hand and Cimber we were going to have to give up something good. So unless we're playing them, I hope he rakes."

Finally: Andrew Miller (left shoulder), after throwing an encouraging bullpen session on Thursday, will throw again on Friday. If that goes well, he should be ready to face hitters in a simulated game situation before being activated.

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Cleveland Indians 'respectfully' shelve Chief Wahoo for 4-game series in Toronto

Paul Hoynes

TORONTO - Manager Terry Francona said the decision not to wear Chief Wahoo on their uniforms or caps during this four-game series at Rogers Centre in Toronto was made by the organization to show respect for anyone offended by the soon-to-be discontinued logo.

"We're just trying to be respectful," said Francona. "We're never trying to be disrespectful by wearing it. We just want to do the respectable thing."

The Indians, at the end of this year, will stop wearing Chief Wahoo on their uniforms and using it as a logo. Chief Wahoo, in one form or another, has been a part of the team's uniform since 1947, but when the Indians played the Blue Jays in the American League Championship Series in 2016, Douglas Cardinal, a Native American activist, brought a lawsuit against MLB and the Indians. The suit sought to ban Cleveland from using its team name and logo in the series.

The suit was dismissed, but in its wake MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred brought pressure on the Indians to dump The Chief because of its racist overtones and looming legal problems. In January the Indians and MLB announced that this would be the last year that Chief Wahoo would be used on their uniforms.

"It was an organization decision (not to wear it in Toronto)," said Francona. "I'm sure they talked to MLB. I just know what they told us. We fully support being respectful."

When the Indians leave Toronto after Sunday afternoon's game, Chief Wahoo once again be added to their uniforms and hats for the rest of the season.

When Andrew Miller was asked about not having Chief Wahoo on the team's uniforms in Toronto, he smiled and said, "We've been coached up pretty good. We're just here to play baseball games."

Added rookie center fielder Greg Allen, "I just put on the uniform they tell me to put whether it has Chief Wahoo on it or a C on it."

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All the numbers align for the Indians

By David Glasier, The News-Herald

Here are four numbers that matter as the Indians continue their drive to a third straight American League Central Division title and what the team's fans hope is a long, exciting run in the playoffs.

With a 9-4 victory over Toronto on Sept. 6, The Indians reduced to seven their "magic number" for clinching the AL Central title and securing the coveted berth in a best-of-five AL Division series that begins on Oct. 5.

The word "coveted" fits here because the three AL division winners - Indians, Boston Red Sox and, probably, Houston Astros - steer clear of the winner-take-all Wild Card game scheduled for Oct. 2. If the season ended today, the New York Yankees would host the surprising Oakland A's in the AL's version of that high-stakes contest.

Two important landmarks in the 2018 season could be reached by the Indians on Oct. 11.

Given the way the Indians and Twins are playing now, that well could be the day the Indians clinch the AL Central title. They will be in St. Petersburg, Fla., playing the Tampa Bay Rays, in the middle game of a three-game series.

The Indians are riding a three-game winning streak on Sept. 7. They'll face the Blue Jays in the second game of a four-game series at Rogers Centre. Minnesota has dropped five games in a row and 10 of 12.

Also on Oct. 11, barring an unexpected setback in his rehab program, Josh Donaldson will join the Indians and move into the line-up as the starting third baseman. In a trade with the Blue Jays completed on Aug. 3, the Indians obtained the three time AL All-Star and 2015 AL Most Valuable Player.

Donaldson has been sidelined since May 28 with shoulder and calf injuries. He's on the 10-day disabled list, retroactive to Sept. 1. In minor-league rehab appearances with the Triple-A Columbus Clippers and Double-A Akron RubberDucks, he's connected for a grand slam (Columbus, Sept. 3) and two-run home runs (Akron, Sept. 5).

Donaldson told reporters on Sept. 5 he felt great and would be ready to come off the DL on Sept. 11.

The lead, in games, the Indians (80-60) have over the second-place Twins (63-76) as of Sept. 7 It's the biggest cushion the Indians have had in the AL Central since moving into the top spot for good on April 21.

The number of games remaining in the regular season for the Indians, who will be in Kansas City to face the Royals in the finale on Sept. 30.

Pillar lifts Jays after Indians' Ramirez leaves bases loaded

The Associated Press

TORONTO (AP) -- Carlos Carrasco pitched a gem, and AL MVP contender Jose Ramirez came to the plate at the perfect moment.

And still the Cleveland Indians couldn't turn it into a victory.

Kevin Pillar hit a solo homer in the bottom of the 11th after Ramirez grounded out with the bases loaded in the top of the inning, allowing the Toronto Blue Jays to beat the Indians 3-2 on Friday night.

Pillar's second career walkoff home run came off right-hander Adam Cimber (3-6). It was Pillar's 12th homer of the season.

The loss was Cimber's first with Cleveland following a midseason trade from San Diego.

"I thought the slider was the right pitch there," Cimber said. "Just didn't execute it and he smacked it."

The Blue Jays recorded their eighth walkoff win of the season, one more than they had last year. Toronto is 20-12 in one-run games.

Cleveland dropped to 2-7 in extra innings. The Indians' magic number to clinch a third straight AL Central title remains at seven.

Carrasco matched a season best by striking out 14 over eight innings. The right-hander allowed two runs, one earned, and six hits.

After establishing his fastball, Carrasco relied on his slider and changeup to keep the Blue Jays swinging and missing. He struck out four straight over the first and second innings and fanned a pair in six of his eight innings.

"Even on 3-2, I was using my slider," he said. "It was good."

Just not good enough for the Indians to triumph.

"Anytime a guy pitches that well, you want to give him a win," infielder Jason Kipnis said.

Toronto won for the first time in franchise history when striking out at least 20 times.

"There's probably not a better slider in the game," Blue Jays manager John Gibbons said of Carrasco. "He attacks. If he's on, there's going to be some walking back to the dugout."

Yan Gomes hit a solo home run for the Indians.

Pillar had reached third base with two outs in the ninth, but Neil Ramirez sent the game to extra innings by getting Richard Urena to fly out.

Cleveland loaded the bases with two outs in the 11th, but Danny Barnes (3-2) relieved Jake Petricka and got Ramirez to ground out to second base.

Ramirez opened the scoring with a two-out RBI single off Marco Estrada in the fifth, but the Blue Jays scored in the bottom half when Rowdy Tellez doubled and scored on Aledmys Diaz's sacrifice fly.

The Indians reclaimed the lead on a two-out homer by Gomes in the sixth, his 13th, but Toronto tied it again when Randal Grichuk and Tellez hit back-to-back doubles off Carrasco in the seventh.

Tellez has six doubles in his first three games, making him the first rookie since Joe DiMaggio in 1936 to have six doubles over any three-game stretch in his debut season.

Toronto put runners at first and second with two outs in the eighth, but Carrasco ended his outing by getting Grichuk to ground into a fielder's choice.

Estrada allowed two runs and five hits in six innings.

EXCLUSIVE COMPANY

Astros teammates Gerrit Cole and Justin Verlander are the only other pitchers to strike out 14 or more twice this season.

SHAPIRO SPEAKS

Blue Jays president and CEO Mark Shapiro touched on a number of subjects in a rare media availability several hours before the game. Shapiro denied a rift with team owner Rogers Communications and shot down a report linking him with the New York Mets.

"This is where I want to be," he said.

Shapiro also responded to Thursday's criticism from the MLB Player's Association over the Blue Jays decision not to promote top prospect Vladimir Guerrero Jr., viewed as a manipulation of the 19-year-old star's service time.

"I feel strongly that the best thing for Vladdy's development is the path that we've laid out," Shapiro said, adding that he welcomes "scrutiny" from the union. Guerrero was named Baseball America's minor league player of the year Friday.

YOUTH MOVEMENT

Regarding the roster rebuild currently underway in Toronto, Shapiro said "there's no longer any gray area about where we are," adding that a return to competitiveness could be "a matter of two, three, four years, because that's the amount of time it takes for players to transition to the major league level."

TRAINER'S ROOM

Indians: 3B Josh Donaldson (left calf) went 0 for 4 with two strikeouts in a playoff game for Double-A Akron. ... OF Michael Brantley (left foot) sat for a second straight day. ... LHP Andrew Miller (left shoulder) will throw a side session Saturday.

UP NEXT

Indians RHP Adam Plutko (4-5, 5.04) faces Blue Jays RHP Sean Reid-Foley (1-2, 5.51) on Saturday afternoon. Plutko is winless in seven outings since a June 24 victory over Detroit. Reid-Foley allowed one run in seven innings to beat Miami for his first career win last Sunday, his third big league start.

Pillar hits solo shot in 11th inning to give Jays a 3-2 walkoff win over Indians

about 9 hours ago by: Canadian Press

TORONTO — With a lineup loaded with prospects and callups, it was the Toronto Blue Jays' longest-tenured player who provided the dramatics on Friday night.

Kevin Pillar hit a solo shot in the 11th inning to give Toronto a 3-2 walkoff victory over the Cleveland Indians. He turned on a 2-1 pitch from sidearm reliever Adam Cimber (3-6) for his 12th home run of the season.

"When you're pitching in a situation like that and you make a mistake, sometimes you go home," said Indians manager Terry Francona.

The no-doubt blast was Pillar's second career walkoff home run. Reliever Danny Barnes (3-2) recorded one out for the victory.

Rowdy Tellez had the statisticians working overtime by hitting two more doubles on the night.

He became the first player since 1913 to record six doubles in his first three career games. Tellez also became the first American League rookie to hit six or more doubles in a three-game stretch since Joe DiMaggio in 1936.

"It's been incredible, it's been historic," said Pillar. "He just seems to be very comfortable in the box. It's one thing to go out there and drive the ball all over the field, but it's the way he's going about his at-bats.

"He's on pitches, he's taking good pitches, he's got a pretty good idea of what he wants to do at the plate. He's been using the whole field and it's been fun to watch."

Cleveland, which entered play with a magic number of seven to clinch the American League Central title, fell to 80-61. Toronto improved to 64-77.

Indians starter Carlos Carrasco didn't factor in the decision despite a strong eight-inning effort. He matched a season-high with 14 strikeouts and allowed six hits, one earned run and a walk.

"There's probably not a better slider in the game and he's got a good arm," said Blue Jays manager John Gibbons. "He attacks. You knew going into that game, if he's on, there's going to be some walking back to the dugout."

Toronto struck out a season-high 20 times on the night.

Carrasco retired the first seven Blue Jays in order before Richard Urena slotted a single through the right side of the infield. Urena was caught stealing on the next pitch.

Blue Jays starter Marco Estrada held the Indians off the scoreboard until the fifth inning, when Jose Ramirez stroked a single to centre that plated Francisco Lindor.

With two runners on, the Toronto right-hander struck out former teammate Edwin Encarnacion to keep it a one-run game.

Tellez hit a one-out double in the bottom half of the frame and moved to third when Ramirez misplayed Pillar's slow grounder. Aledmys Diaz followed with a sacrifice fly that brought Tellez home with the tying run.

Yan Gomes restored Cleveland's one-run cushion with a solo shot in the sixth. It was his 13th home run of the season.

Estrada worked six innings, allowing five hits, two earned runs, two walks. He had five strikeouts.

"Everything just kind of fell into place and he looked like the old (Estrada), he really did," Gibbons said. "Our bullpen was good tonight. It was just one of those games, a low-scoring game, everybody did a nice job."

The Indians threatened in the seventh by putting two runners on but this time it was reliever Tyler Clippard who fanned Encarnacion to end the frame.

In the bottom half, Randal Grichuk led off with a double and Tellez drove him in with a double. He has six doubles in eight at-bats since his callup from triple-A Buffalo.

Pillar reached third base in the ninth inning after stealing second and advancing another 90 feet on a throwing error by Gomes. Urena flew out to force extra innings.

The Indians loaded the bases in the top of the 11th before Barnes came on with two outs and got Ramirez to ground out.

The Blue Jays outhit the Indians 9-8. Announced attendance was 26,830 and the game took three hours 51 minutes to play.

Notes: Before the game, the Blue Jays assigned right-hander Mike Hauschild to the Bisons. ... Sean Reid-Foley (1-2, 5.51 earned-run average) is scheduled to start for Toronto on Saturday afternoon against fellow right-hander Adam Plutko (4-5, 5.04). ... The Indians dropped the Chief Wahoo image from their hats and jerseys for the four-game series, which continues through Sunday. The logo will be retired from on-field use in 2019.

Pillar, Tellez, bullpen give Blue Jays extra-inning win over Cleveland

Ryan Wolstat

Rampaging Rowdy stole the headlines, but Kevin Pillar gave the Blue Jays a win Friday night with an 11th-inning, walkoff home run off of Cleveland's Adam Cimber at Rogers Centre.

Big Blue Jays rookie first baseman Rowdy Tellez continued his stunning MLB start with two more doubles – his fifth and sixth in eight plate appearances to begin his big league career – and Pillar ended the second of a four-game set against Cleveland, following five innings of scoreless relief by the Toronto bullpen behind starter Marco Estrada.

Pillar said he initially considered bunting with one out to try to "get something going" against the side-armed, but swung away and blasted what manager John Gibbons called a no-doubter to left field.

Pillar said the presence of youngsters like Tellez and the other September callups have both energized the veterans and reminded them what they are playing for, even with the playoffs out of reach.

"At the end of the day, we're all replaceable in this room," Pillar said.

Tellez is the first player to notch five doubles in his first three games and he joined Joe DiMaggio as only the second American League rookie since 1936 to hit six or more doubles over any three-game span.

"It's been incredible, it's been historic, it's been fun to watch," Pillar said of what Tellez has done so far.

Cleveland starter Carlos Carrasco was outstanding, going eight strong innings, striking out 14 – one off of his career high – with only one walk and six hits allowed, with only one of the two runs he surrendered being earned.

But thanks to Tellez, a decent night by Estrada and fine work by the bullpen, Carrasco was denied his 17th win of the season.

"What a ballgame," Gibbons said afterward.

Carrasco cruised early, striking out four of the first six batters he faced.

A key part of Cleveland's formidable starting rotation, Carrasco is having another big year after finishing fourth in Cy Young voting last season and he didn't allow a hit until Richard Urena's single in the third. Carrasco had seven strikeouts through four, but Tellez was a thorn in his side.

After Cleveland opened the scoring off Estrada in the fifth when Greg Allen, who had been hit by a pitch to start the inning and then stole second, was brought around by a single by Jose Ramirez, Tellez opened the bottom of the inning with his first two-bagger. A ground ball by Kevin Pillar got through the legs of Jose Ramirez for an error, and Luke Maile tied the game with a sacrifice fly.

Estrada surrendered a home run to ex-Jay Yan Gomes in the sixth before his night ended, but Tellez followed a Randal Grichuk double in the seventh with his second to tie the game again.

The fans would have to wait a while for the decisive run to come across.

Estrada had struggled immensely (3-4, 7.27 ERA) since coming off of the disabled list on July 30, but turned in a solid effort against Cleveland. He wasn't dominant like Carrasco was for most of the evening, but it was progress for the soon-to-be free agent.

Estrada's line was six innings, five hits, two runs, both earned, five strikeouts and two walks. It was one of his better efforts of this tough season.

"It's getting there, slowly but surely," Estrada said of where his game was currently at.

"I feel like I was locating (the ball) better."

NOT BAD, VLAD

Vladimir Guerrero is in very good company.

The young Blue Jays slugger was named Baseball America's Minor League Player of the Year on Friday after hitting .402 with 14 home runs in 234 at-bats for double-A New Hampshire and then .336 with another six home runs in 110 at-bats for triple-A Buffalo. Guerrero Jr.'s slash line for 2018 was a gaudy .381/.414/.529.

Atlanta's Ronald Acuna won the award last year and is on the way to being named the National League's top rookie, and while 2016 winner Yoan Moncada has struggled, baseball's best player Mike Trout won in 2011, 2015 winner Blake Snell is one of the top pitchers in the game and 2014 winner Kris Bryant won NL MVP two years later.

Derek Bell (1991) is the only other Toronto prospect to win the award, though Jose Canseco and Frank Thomas would later play for the club.

Guerrero's bat is Major League-ready, but the Jays have controversially chosen to not call him up yet, insisting that the decision is about his development and not about service time and future contract options.

DUNEDIN COMING ALONG

Blue Jays president Mark Shapiro declined to address renovation plans for Rogers Centre on Friday, but in a sit down with reporters said lots of progress is being made in Dunedin.

The team and the city of Dunedin, Florida, will spend millions to renovate the team's spring training and minor league stadium and Shapiro said they are "far along on the design process" and hope to break ground by early next season with a goal of being there in 2020.

"It's an opportunity to gain a competitive advantage," Shapiro said of what the finished product will allow.

Jays WATCH: Stro Show likely cancelled for year

Ryan Wolstat

The Stro Show might be cancelled for the rest of this season.

Blue Jays manager John Gibbons said again on Friday that starting pitcher Marcus Stroman will miss his scheduled start on Sunday due to blister issues and that he will try to play catch soon to build up a callous, but, "I don't know if you'll see him again (this season)." Speaking before Toronto played Cleveland, Gibbons said the call would be made later.

Stroman posted a disappointing 4-9 record with a 5.54 ERA this season, a far cry from the 13-9, 3.09 2017 campaign that saw him finish eighth in American League Cy Young voting.

Gibbons provided some other injury updates, saying third baseman Brandon Drury, out since August 4th, is progressing from his fractured left hand.

"He got a scan a couple of days ago, it's definitely healing, but we're running out of time," Gibbons said.

Utility infielder Yangervis Solarte should be "ready soon," Gibbons added.

GREAT STARTS

The manager has seen a lot in his decades in baseball, but the starts turned in as Jays by Rowdy Tellez and Billy McKinney have been up there with any he has seen before.

"I've been very impressed," Gibbons said. "The odds of the game, you've got to cool off, but you're watching the way he plays, his approach, it should work for a good, solid player," Gibbons said of McKinney, who began his Jays career hitting .351 (before Friday), while reaching base at least once in each of his 16 games with a plate appearance.

"He puts the ball in play," Gibbons said, adding he was shocked to hear how much McKinney had struggled in the minors this season (.203 in 20 games with Buffalo, .226 in 56 with Scranton Wilkes-Barre before that) before his monster big league run.

Meanwhile, all Tellez had done was become the first player in the live-ball era to have an extra-base hit in his first three plate appearances. Tellez is also the first with four extra base hits in his first five plate appearances and only the second ever to notch four doubles in his first two games.

NO SPENDING SPREE, NO DUH

This shouldn't shock anyone but Blue Jays president Mark Shapiro said that the Jays won't be in the bidding in the off-season for a couple of superstars.

"We're not going to be playing on Bryce Harper and Manny Machado," Shapiro said after insinuating that team payroll will come way down as the rebuild kicks into gear over the next couple of seasons.

Toronto's Opening Day payroll the past two seasons has been \$163 and \$162 million, U.S., respectively.

Right now the club only has six players signed for 2019 and will pay them \$54.9 million, though a large number of others will get new deals in arbitration.

The departed (or departing) Josh Donaldson, Curtis Granderson and Marco Estrada made \$41 million on their own this season.

AROUND THE BASES

Gibbons said rookie Jonathan Davis will be utilized as a pinch runner and might fill in a bit in the outfield, but it's tough to find time for all of the outfielders. With McKinney able to play some first base it might open up more options though for Davis to pinch run and then stay in games ... "He's a good first baseman," Gibbons said he was told by Buffalo Bisons manager Bobby Meacham of McKinney. "I knew they played him down there a bit, but I thought it was out of desperation." Meacham told Gibbons McKinney showed well at the position. "It's an added bonus," Gibbons said of the outfielder McKinney being able to play first too. "That versatility always helps, especially when you're trying to make it."

Toronto Sun LOADED

Blue Jays' Shapiro holds court on his status, Vlad Guerrero Jr., Josh Donaldson, the future and more

Ryan Wolstat

Team president Mark Shapiro did his best Mike Babcock impression on Friday afternoon, indicating that there would be pain coming down the pike for Blue Jays fans, but that good things were also on the way down the line.

Toronto supporters can only hope that Shapiro's prognosticating skills are as good as those of the Toronto Maple Leafs head coach, because while the Leafs now have some of the best players in the NHL and are regarded as legitimate Stanley Cup contenders after some dismal rebuilding seasons, the Jays are only getting started on the long road back to relevance.

Shapiro assembled the media to pour cold water on reports that he was eyeing a job with the New York Mets: ("I'm as excited to be here as ever. This is where I want to be, yeah," Shapiro said); to speak to other reports of friction between himself and ownership ("I don't know where those reports come from. I feel a strong sense of support and alignment with the people I report to"); to discuss the fallout of the recent trade of Josh Donaldson, one of only two Jays to ever win an MVP award ("the end of relationships are complex, can get strained – it was tough for everybody, but we're moving forward") and of course to address the status of super prospect Vladimir Guerrero Jr., who was named baseball's Minor League Player of the Year by Baseball America on Friday.

On Thursday, a spokesman for the Major League Baseball Players Association told Sportsnet that Toronto's decision not to call up Guerrero this season was bad for everybody involved.

"The decision to not to bring him up is a business decision, not a baseball decision. It's bad for the Blue Jays, it's bad for fans, it's bad for players and it's bad for the industry," said the spokesman.

Shapiro, who just celebrated the three-year anniversary of his hiring by the club, took issue with those comments, questioning the spokesman's knowledge of player development and insisting that the decision to keep Guerrero down is the best long-term, on-field call the club can make.

"We want him to have as strong a foundation as possible, this is the best pathway to do it," Shapiro said, pointing to the need for Guerrero to continue to improve his defence, evolve as a leader since that will be part of his role with the big club, hopefully for years to come, and to keep working on his body and nutrition and his routines.

Shapiro said the Jays are open to the super prospect making next year's Opening Day roster (they can buy more time in terms of holding off on a mega-contract by not calling him up until later next summer, which has led to speculation they would find a way to do just that), but for now they are maximizing the limited window they have to help Guerrero get better.

"It's very difficult to focus on player development at the Major League level," Shapiro said. "This could be it for his development time."

Shapiro added that he welcomes "that scrutiny" from the MLBPA and believes he and his staff, with decades of experience in player development, know what is best for Guerrero and that not calling him up now won't impact the relationship between the Jays and the third baseman in the future.

"I trust the culture that we have in place, believe in the culture and the people," he said.

Shapiro also touched on how to compete in the American League East, roundly regarded as the toughest division in baseball owing to the presence of the New York Yankees and Boston Red Sox. His take was that building up the farm system with as many good prospects as possible and then developing them is the only path to competing with those franchises long-term.

He made it clear that while the 2015 and 2016 playoff seasons were great, he doesn't want to go another 20 years without talking playoffs and when they make it back, he wants it to be sustainable, a regular occurrence.

To that end, it sounds like the payroll will be slashed in 2019 and 2020 before Rogers is asked to open up the wallet again, though the club will still be looking for additions in free agency that will compliment all of the youngsters learning their trade.

"They have to play," he said. "The only way to know (what you have) is to play them, pointing out that some will break hearts by failing, while others will emerge out of nowhere and exceed expectations.

"There's no longer any grey where we are," Shapiro said of the team's status contention-wise.

"You don't do it happily, know there will be disappointment with fans we are doing it with resolve (to emerge down the line as a sustainable contender).

"There are good things coming," Shapiro concluded.

Just not anytime soon.

Toronto Sun LOADED: 09.08.2018

Blue Jays boss plays coy on Mets buzz

RICHARD GRIFFIN

It was an unusual press briefing Friday afternoon in a board room in the Blue Jays offices at the Rogers Centre. Club president Mark Shapiro met with the media for just under an hour to discuss the evolving state of the Jays and stomp out some minor brush fires before they sparked out of control.

He also took the opportunity to put a spin on the future of a team that has transitioned from self-proclaimed wild-card hopeful to a full-fledged rebuild.

Jays president Mark Shapiro said Friday that he feels "a strong sense of support and alignment with the people I report to."

The first issue he wanted to address was a rumour that had the former Indians general manager and president on a shortlist to assume the same duties with the New York Mets as reported in the New York Post. Shapiro has been with the Jays three years, taking over as president in October of 2015. His departure would leave the franchise somewhat in turmoil with unfinished business surrounding improvements to the stadium and a major rebuild of the spring training facility, plus the team.

"I'm not going to comment on that specifically except to say I can comment on how I feel about being here," Shapiro skated around his reported inclusion as a Mets candidate. "I can comment on where my thoughts and focus are. I feel as, if not more, excited to be here (as) the day that I chose to come here over three years ago.

"At the top of the list, the city and the country and what that's meant to me personally and to my family being here. It's been an exceptional place to be. Then for the potential of the franchise, if anything, living here the past 2 1/2 years I feel even more bullish on what an incredible opportunity there is here to build something over multiple years. That captures an entire nation and achieves levels that you dream about when you think about these jobs."

There had been speculation that, with the team trading away Josh Donaldson and headed south through the standings, there was trouble brewing and a butting of heads between Rogers ownership and their hand-picked president.

"I don't know where those reports come from," Shapiro said. "I've received nothing but strong support. I probably have a level of operational day-to-day trust and empowerment that, if not unparalleled, is among the best in all of baseball. I feel a strong sense of support and alignment with the people I report to."

The fact of the matter is, Rogers understands what's happening right now. Shapiro was brought in specifically to take this team in the direction in which it is now headed. The 51-year-old executive had been with the Indians since 1992, and when he was hired by the Jays the idea was to oversee stadium upgrades, cut payroll and rebuild through the farm system.

But fate and GM Alex Anthopoulos interfered, and behind some farm-system stripping deals, at least in terms of the number of prospects, the Jays made a 2015 second-half run to win the division with a repeat appearance in 2016. With those two years of pesky interference out of the way, the Shapiro plan can resume — three years late.

"I would never, ever say playoffs get in the way of anything," Shapiro said. "I think what has transpired was well within what I'd expected. Understanding that we had a really talented but aging major-league core. Understanding that we probably didn't have the internal alternatives at the upper levels of young talent to say: OK, let's try to turn this around on the fly. So we've got to play that veteran core out.

"There really wasn't a choice. It was grudgingly. You don't do it happily. With understanding the pain and understanding the disappointment that it causes fans. But it's with resolve that you're going to get back (to being good) as quick as humanly possible. You don't ever enter into pulling back from contending, from competing, lightly. You do that when it's clear that it's the path you have to take. Then once you do it, you do it with resolve and you do it with clarity, and we are moving in that direction. Now there is no longer any grey about where we are."

After defining the fact of a rebuild, Shapiro attempted to explain the length of the rebuild, which he pinpointed as 2021 with encouraging signs in 2020. But for the final month of the 2018 season, the basic theme for manager John Gibbons 37-man roster is that The Future is Now — except for Vlad Guerrero Jr.

Jays fans can learn to appreciate the rebuild, but will they pay to see it happening? Not if this week's attendance is any gauge of what is to come.

"When you enter into these junctures, usually your payroll comes down because you have younger players anyway," Shapiro explained. "What's more important — and this is the commitment from ownership — is that when you start to get good, when it starts to be clear that contention is on the horizon, when you start to look up two years from now and (people) are saying, 'They might only be .500 but, damn, there's some good players there. These guys are getting good.'"

It's clear that the Jays' payroll will drop significantly in 2019. However, Shapiro spoke from past experience about the need in two years when homegrown talent is in place, but attendance is lagging to spend some money to fill in the gaps with free agents and more expensive trade pieces. He has run this by ownership already.

"At that point (in two years) it's important that you outpace revenues," he said. "At some point there needs to be an investment that says we're willing to fund a payroll ahead of those revenues coming in. It's not a concern for next year. It might not be a concern for '20, but in '21 you could ask me that question between the off-season of '20 and '21. Hey, are we going to start to fund a payroll that puts these guys back in contention, and that's the most important thing."

In the meantime, there are plenty of good seats available. Toronto Star LOADED: 09.08.2018