

Tribe's offense awakens behind Carrasco's gem

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- Carlos Carrasco took the mound on Wednesday unsure how much margin for error he would have against the Tigers. Over the past several days, as the Indians' offense went as cold as the temperature around Progressive Field, Cleveland's pitchers knew even one mistake could prove costly.

Carrasco made one mistake in a complete-game performance, but it mattered little on this night. The Tribe nine produced what must have felt like an avalanche of run support en route to a 5-1 victory over the Tigers. A four-run fourth gave Carrasco plenty of room to breathe and, in turn, allowed the team's hitters to let out a collective sigh of relief.

"We knew it was coming," Indians second baseman Jason Kipnis said. "Guys are too good of hitters to have it go on for too much longer. I think you're going to see guys start warming up as the weather does, too."

Cleveland's lineup managed just 10 runs total over its previous five games, but the club's pitching limited the damage that drought could have caused. Carrasco continued the rotation's recent run of dominance by going the distance and holding the Tigers to one run, a solo homer off the bat of Leonys Martin. In fact, with the exception of Martin (3-for-4 on the night), Carrasco held Detroit to an 0-for-25 showing. Carrasco's outing lowered the starting staff's ERA to 1.04 over the past six games. In that 5-1 stretch for Cleveland, the rotation has piled up 37 strikeouts against nine walks in 43 1/3 innings (or more than seven innings per game on average). Carrasco stuck with a heavy four-seamer and curveball mix, but worked in his split-change, slider and two-seamer enough to keep Detroit's hitters guessing.

"He pitched a heck of a game," Indians manager Terry Francona said. "He pounded the zone. His offspeed is so effective coming off of his fastball, and he stays down with it so consistently that he just gives himself a chance against every hitter."

Carrasco was overpowering to the point that, if Cleveland's lineup stayed cold, the team was still in a position to find the win column.

For the first three frames, it felt like more of the same from the Indians' order. In the fourth, though, the Tribe broke through against lefty Daniel Norris, who replaced Jordan Zimmermann after a first-inning liner back to the mound forced the starter out of the game. Cleveland churned out four runs on six hits in a span of nine batters. The Indians had six hits combined in the previous 14 innings.

Earlier this week, Indians hitting coach Ty Van Burkleo held a meeting for his hitters, displaying some numbers to show that things were not as bad as they seemed. For example, Cleveland carried a .284 team slugging percentage into Wednesday's game but had an expected slugging percentage of .475, per Statcast™.

"Hopefully," Van Burkleo said, "we're not going to get too many guys starting to press and trying to do too much and trying to swing harder and trying to get hits on pitches that aren't good pitches to hit. So, today was a nice day to kind of move in the right direction. And, as the weather warms up, I think it's going to get better."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Four score: Throughout the Tribe's recent offensive drought, the team has preached aggressiveness on the basepaths to help manufacture runs. In the fourth, following their consecutive singles, Jose Ramirez and Michael Brantley successfully pulled off a double steal. That helped set the stage for Yonder Alonso's two-run single to right, igniting the Indians' four-run outburst.

"That was really heads-up," Francona said of the double steal. "We've kind of come to expect that with Jose, [if they] either forget about him or one-look him and go. He's so good at [taking advantage of] that."

Cookie Monster: While Carrasco held eight of the nine batters in Detroit's lineup hitless, he had no answer for Martin, who fell a triple shy of the cycle. That included a tape-measure solo homer to right field off a Carrasco slider. Statcast™ estimated the sixth-inning drive at 421 feet.

SOUND SMART WITH YOUR FRIENDS

With the win, the Indians claimed a series win, marking the 14th consecutive series victory for Cleveland over American League Central foes. According to STATS LLC, that is the longest such streak for any MLB team in the divisional era (1969-present).

INJURY REPORT

Zimmermann left the game after just seven pitches with a right jaw contusion caused by a Kipnis line drive that hit him on the side of his face. Zimmermann cleared concussion protocol, but was sent out for X-rays to determine if there was any further damage. Kipnis' liner had a 105.6-mph exit velocity, according to Statcast™, giving Zimmermann too little time to get his glove up.

"You never want that," Kipnis said. "Everyone's out there competing. You want it to be decided by talent and skill and all the other stuff. You don't want it to be because someone got injured or anything like that, so you never root for anyone to get injured. It was a scary moment, [he's tough] just to walk off like that. He's got a strong jaw."

WHAT'S NEXT

Right-hander Trevor Bauer is slated to take the mound on Thursday, when the Indians look to sweep the rival Tigers in a 6:10 p.m. ET tilt at Progressive Field. Bauer went 10-4 with a 3.93 ERA in 17 starts at home last season.

Carrasco pitches complete game, beats Tigers, 5-1

By Steve Herrick, The Associated Press

Carlos Carrasco pitched a three-hitter, struck out six and walked one in his first complete game this season as the Indians beat the Tigers, 5-1, on April 11 at Progressive Field.

Cleveland scored four runs in the fourth off Daniel Norris (0-1), who replaced Jordan Zimmermann after Zimmerman was hit in the face by a line drive in the first inning.

Yonder Alonso had a two-run single, and Tyler Naquin and Francisco Lindor had RBI singles.

Norris blanked the Indians until the fourth. Jose Ramirez and Michael Brantley singled and pulled off a double steal. Alonso's single to right scored both runners. Naquin and Lindor also had run-scoring hits.

Brantley added an RBI single in the seventh. Kipnis broke an 0-for-23 slump with a seventh-inning double. The Indians, who entered batting a big league-low .158, had a season-high 10 hits.

The Indians have defeated the Tigers 10 straight times and are 30-10 against Detroit dating to the start of the 2016 season. Cleveland has also won a season-high four straight games.

Zimmermann was back in Detroit's clubhouse a few hours after being hit in the face by Jason Kipnis' line drive.

"Obviously it could've been worse," Zimmermann said. "It could've been a break, but it still didn't really feel that great. I'm sure it'll be worse tomorrow. I'll be good to go next time around."

Making his third start of the season, Zimmermann retired Francisco Lindor on a fly ball starting the game. The 31-year-old right-hander had little time to react to Kipnis' liner on a 2-2 pitch.

"I tried," he said. "I saw it fine. I just had no chance of getting (the glove) up fast enough."

Zimmermann was face down on the pitcher's mound for several moments after being struck and was attended to by head athletic trainer Doug Teter.

"It was terrifying and it made a terrible sound," Detroit manager Ron Gardenhire said. "Your heart drops. When you go out there you never know what you're going to see."

First baseman Miguel Cabrera fielded the ball after Zimmermann was struck and stepped on the base for the out.

A distraught Kipnis crossed the bag and knelt on the first base line as Zimmermann was examined. Several Tigers' position players also knelt and the crowd of 10,872 went silent.

"You never want that," Kipnis said. "Everyone's out there competing. It was a scary moment, tough guy just to walk off like that. He's got a strong jaw."

Zimmermann, who passed the concussion protocol tests, has evidence of that. He had his jaw broken on a line drive while pitching for the University of Vermont in 2007. Doctors inserted 11 screws and several plates.

"I felt it," Zimmermann said. "I went down and just felt all my teeth were there, and my jaw wasn't peeled in like the first time it happened. So I think I got lucky. The first time I broke it back in college, they put a couple plates in there and the doc told me you'll never break it again. Put it to the test tonight and everything came back just fine."

Carrasco (3-0) was hit on the face by a line drive off the bat of Melky Cabrera of the Chicago White Sox at Progressive Field in 2015.

"I think I'm lucky because it got a little bit of the glove," Carrasco said. "I don't know about him. He was hit really hard. I hope everything is fine with him."

RHP Michael Fulmer (1-1, 0.68 ERA) faces Indians RHP Trevor Bauer (0-1, 2.08 ERA) in the finale of the four-game series April 12. Bauer has not beaten Detroit since May 5, 2016.

Civale among top prospect performers

By William Boor MLB.com @wboor

• Indians No. 10 prospect Aaron Civale led Double-A Akron to a win with a dominant performance on the mound. The 22-year-old was in complete command, firing 55 of his 85 pitches for strikes, as he fanned seven and yielded just three hits over six scoreless innings.

“It’s going to get better.” A Q&A with Indians hitting coach Ty Van Burkleo by Jordan Bastian

When the doors to the clubhouse opened on Wednesday night, “I Got 5 On It” by Luniz blasted from the locker room’s sound system. It was a fitting start to a run of classic rap and R&B hits.

It was only a few minutes earlier that Cleveland put the final touches on a 5–1 win over the Tigers. Given the way the Tribe had to scratch and claw and fight for even one run in recent games, that five must’ve felt like an all-out uppercut for a knockout. Carlos Carrasco’s complete-game served as the 10 count.

The Indians scored four runs in the fourth inning after managing four runs in the previous 16 innings combined. That inning also included six hits. Cleveland collected six hits in the previous 14 frames combined.

Even after the victory, the Tribe’s collective slash line was .170/.262/.290 through a dozen games. And, yet, thanks to the team’s typically stellar pitching, the first-place Indians are 5–1 on the homestand and 7–5 overall.

The outburst of offense Wednesday allowed the team to breathe.

“I felt really good for our hitters,” Indians manager Terry Francona said. “I was thrilled for VanBo and Victor, because I know they’ve been going home at night and probably not sleeping real well, because they care so much.”

Francona was referring to hitting coach Ty Van Burkleo and assistant hitting coach Victor Rodriguez. Prior to Monday’s game, they held a meeting for the hitters to discuss the recent troubles in the batter’s box, and to reinforce the belief that things aren’t nearly as bad as they seem.

Van Burkleo presented his players with numbers that showed hard-hit statistics and expected production rates. Results are what matter in the end, but in a long season, trusting the process—especially when the underlying data says it is working—is critical.

Following Wednesday’s win, reporters caught up with Van Burkleo on his way out of the clubhouse.

Q: When you have preached to the hitters to stick with their approach and trust in it, what’s the feeling like when they finally enjoy a little bit of a breakout like in tonight’s game?

TVB: “It was nice when you can have a day where the bats start breaking out. The big thing is the approach is good. When guys aren’t getting hits, sometimes they start trying to get a hit and change the approach and just get a little anxious. So, we’re really trying to keep them focused on the fact that the at-bats are good. We’re swinging at pitches in the zone. We’re hitting balls hard for outs. It gets frustrating and the first two balls they hit today were both crushed and both outs. So, again, that’s why it was nice to break out and I think as guys start seeing their numbers going north, I think it’ll ease their minds a little bit. It’s been unbelievable, really.”

In the first inning, Francisco Lindor hit a pitch from Jordan Zimmermann 105.6 mph to right field. It was another Barrel that went for a flyout. Heading into Wednesday, Cleveland was 3-for-12 (.250 average) with a 1.000 SLG on Barrels in the previous five games of this homestand. For perspective, those 12 batted balls came with an expected average of .804 and an expected slugging percentage of 2.908. Kipnis followed with a 105.7 mph liner, which struck Zimmermann in the side of the face and resulted in a scary 1–3 putout.

Q: We know stretches like this are hard on the players, but has it also been hard on the hitting coaches?

TVB: “Well, I mean, you feel for the guys, you know? You look at some of the balls [Yonder] Alonso hit and then you look at his numbers. And you say, ‘Man, this guy could be hitting .350 with five homers right now.’ But, he’s done a real good job of saying, ‘I’m just going to keep finding the barrel and just keep barreling it up.’ He’s done a real good job of that. It’s going to change. There’s a lot of good hitters in this room. Usually, you’ll have a couple guys that get off to a rough start. This has been everybody. The beauty of it is our pitching’s been so good that we’ve been able to win ballgames. That’s a real good sign, but there’s going to be times during the season when we’re hitting and scoring a lot of runs and taking pressure off the pitching.”

Entering Wednesday, Alonso was tied for second in MLB for the most Barrels with seven. He also ranked 380th out of 383 hitters (min. 25 balls in play) in difference between expected slugging percentage (.803) and actual slugging percentage (.361) at -0.442.

Q: Does it help that this is more of a veteran team? Do you think they’re doing a good job of not getting overly caught up in the results?

TVB: “Yeah, I do. I’ve been real proud of how the guys have gone about it and how they’re not panicking. They know they’re good. It’s nice with the modern day metrics to be able to point things out to them. We all see it, but to be able to have that raw data to say, ‘Look, this is where we’re at. We’ve hit a lot of balls 95-plus [mph in terms of exit velocity] and we’ve got a lot of outs on those balls.’ So, yeah, it’s frustrating for them, but they’ve done a good job of staying the course.”

Q: You just mentioned exit velocity. What other types of numbers did you show the hitters in Monday’s meeting?

TVB: “This was before this series, but going into this series we had [a considerable amount of] balls hit at 95 or above and all for outs. The expected slugging and the ball-in-play average is 100 points lower than any team has had in five years, you know? So, it’s unsustainable to be able to maintain that. ... It was something ridiculous. When a guy hits a ball like Frankie today, he lines that ball to right field and it was 106

mph off the bat, it's like, 'God, here we go again.' But, it's starting to warm up and I think when it's really, really cold, it's hard enough to hit. You've just got to keep the frustration out of it when we do [struggle]. As it warms up, your muscles fire better. You just feel better as an athlete. You feel like you can move better. You don't have to wear as much heavy clothing that can make you feel stiff."

1. Through Tuesday, the Indians had a .174 batting average on balls in play. The lowest BABIP for any team across the 2013–17 seasons was a .275 mark by the 2013 Cubs.

2. Heading into Wednesday, Cleveland ranked 17th in MLB with 98 batted balls with an exit velocity of 95 mph or better. The Indians ranked last in MLB with a .684 SLG on those batted balls, compared to a .976 MLB average. The Indians' expected SLG (1.298) on batted balls at 95+ mph ranked second in MLB.

3. The first-pitch temperature on Wednesday was 54 degrees. The previous five games had announced first-pitch temps of 40 (Tuesday), 33 (Monday), 32 (Sunday, setting a Progressive Field record for coldest regular-season game), 34 (Saturday) and 41 (Friday).

Q: And the ball travels better as the temperature climbs. In the seventh, for example, Kipnis hit a double to left on the kind of ball that probably would've been a flyout a few days ago...

TVB: "It would've been. In fact, yesterday, the ball that Alonso hit, he crushed that ball and he caught it right up against the wall. Two days [ago], the day before and the day before that and the day before that, it wouldn't have even got to the warning track. It was like hitting in ice. I think the humidity was close to 80 percent and it's 30 degrees. The ball's not going anywhere. You get a little breeze that accentuates it a little more."

In the fifth inning on Tuesday, Alonso sent a pitch from Matthew Boyd to left with a 101.8 mph exit velocity and 27 degree launch angle. That Barrel had a hit probability of 84% and traveled 358 feet—into Victor Reyes' glove for a flyout.

Q: So, this is how to stop the Air Ball Revolution?

TVB (laughs): "Yeah, let's get the launch angle down. It's been tough, but coming in here after a 2–1 win is comforting. Our pitching staff has really picked us up big time. And, it's tough for every team here, too."

Through the six games on the homestand, Cleveland's rotation has a 1.04 ERA with 37 strikeouts and nine walks in 42.1 innings. Carrasco held Detroit to one run on three hits in nine innings Wednesday night. Overall, the Indians pitching staff currently ranks fourth in MLB with a 2.82 ERA.

Q: When you're giving the players all the numbers, do you feel like you have to sell them on it?

TVB: "I don't know if you have to sell it as much as just lay it out and let them know, 'Hey, we're right where we need to be. We're right where we were last year and we're right where we need to be.' I really appreciate the modern day metrics to be able to point that out. Ten or 15 years ago, we knew it, but..."

Q: But, they just had to trust you...

TVB: "Yeah, exactly. Now, it's, 'This is what we're doing and we're going to keep right where we're at.' And hopefully we're not going to get too many guys starting to press and trying to do too much and trying to swing harder and trying to get hits on pitches that aren't good pitches to hit. So, today was a nice day to kind of move in the right direction. And, as the weather warms up, I think it's going to get better."

Q: We've never seen anything like this team-wide...

TVB: "I know. The scoreboard is ugly right now. I kind of feel like I should take my phone out there and take a picture of it, so I can hold it up and show them in July and say, 'Remember this?'"

April 11: Tito's pregame minutiae by Jordan Bastian

On the team's aggressiveness on the bases of late, given the importance of manufacturing runs during the lineup's slump:

TF: "You have to be intelligent. We always appreciate and encourage aggressiveness, but you've got to be intelligent. I'm really proud of our guys. It's not a lot of fun going through periods where you swing the bat like this, but they're playing the game with enthusiasm. They're into it. They're picking each other up. I think they know they're going to hit. But, I've seen teams that maybe pout a little bit and because of that you lose a couple of games and that doesn't help anything. I'm proud of them. Their effort's been terrific."

On the temptation to point fingers during struggles like this:

TF: "That's what I mean. I mean. I feel for them, because I want them all to do well. But, they've been playing the game and hustling. Their hits will come. And then, winning should be a little easier. It doesn't mean you're going to win all the time. We say it all the time. Sometimes winning is harder. It doesn't mean you can't. It's just harder."

On it being strange to see an entire lineup filled with batting averages in the .100s:

TF: "I know. Believe me. That will change. It's easy when you can step outside and think, well, in August this might cost guys three or four points on their batting average. In April, when it's all you've got, it's hard to do. Guys just have to live through it."

Wednesday's lineup:

.159
.098
.132
.154
.158
.167
.167
.214
.179

On defense playing a big role in the Indians' success:

TF: "We found out the hard way. If you don't play defense, it's really hard to win. You put so much value in your pitching staff that, if you don't make the plays, it just doesn't work. But, if you have a good pitching staff and a good defense, when you score, it's meaningful. I can't give you a better example than this week. We've scored 10 runs and we're 4-1."

On hitting coach Ty Van Burkleo presenting data to the hitters to show that the expected production far exceeds the results so far:

TF: "That's the biggest thing, is that you don't want guys saying, 'Well, I've got to do more. This isn't enough, so I've got to do more.' Because inevitably, 'more' turns into trying to do too much, and then you get guys rolling over and that's not what you want. You want them to stay with what works, even if in the small sample it hasn't. Because, it will. It's amazing. Guys get to their level. It's the damndest thing, but they do."

On the bullpen arms bridging the gap to Andrew Miller and Cody Allen:

TF: "I actually thought everyone threw well on Tuesday night. OT [Dan Otero] came in a really tough spot, gets a strikeout, gets a broken-bat double. I thought he made some really good pitches. I know it's hard for guys when they feel they didn't get the job done. I thought he threw the ball extremely well. It's nice to find a way to win without going straight to Andrew, because we can't do that all the time. And when you can mix in [Tyler] Olson, Otero and Zach [McAllister], that's when you have a tendency to build in the right direction."

On McAllister's improvement with his breaking ball:

TF: "He's worked so hard on trying to be able to have a lead breaking ball to get you into a count or back into a count. It's not something that has come as easy as his fastball, but it's something he's spent a lot of time working on it. You can tell by watching him how much it's getting better."

On Miller have strong results, but not looking as sharp as he can be yet:

TF: "I said that to [pitching coach Carl Willis] on Tuesday night. My goodness, it doesn't feel like he's hit his real stride, but you look at his stats—four innings, eight strikeouts. He's pretty good. This just in."

On Willis' rapport with the pitchers:

TF: "Carl has been tremendous. He's fun to be around. We knew he would be. Following Mickey [Callaway] is not easy, because of what he meant and what he did here. Carl is the perfect guy to do it along with [Scott Atchison and Brian Sweeney]. I think that's a good combination and the pitchers enjoy them."

Indians 5, Tigers 1: 14 Walk-Off Thoughts on a slumping offense trusting the numbers, the value of context in diagnosing an issue and understanding that results can be deceiving

By Ryan Lewis

Here are 14 Walk-Off Thoughts after the Indians' 5-1 win against the Detroit Tigers Wednesday night.

1. Whenever there is a team-wide offensive slump, eventually, the blame often comes around to the hitting coaches. It's really just somewhat of an easy scapegoat that masks an underlying issue or needed context, but eventually, the hot seat has to grow warmer as the bats fall colder, warranted or not.
2. The Indians, though, knew to be patient. They knew the results weren't indicative of how well those in the lineup were actually swinging the bats. As the Twitter hot takes began to rain down (well as some push-back against analytics), those in the organization knew there wasn't a five-alarm emergency on the offensive side.
3. Heading into this series, for example, Francisco Lindor, Jason Kipnis, Yonder Alonso, Bradley Zimmer and Yan Gomes were all among those who had a better hard-hit percentage this season than in 2017. All entered Wednesday night's game with a batting average below .200.

4. One of the key truths that the analytical revolution has shown is that baseball, in many cases, is about regression to the mean. Over a large enough sample size, eventually, the extremes will often regress closer to their averages. The Indians are collection of examples right now of an offense expected to find more success. The results haven't reflected the quality of contact, thus far. Entering Wednesday, the Indians were dead last in baseball with a .174 BABIP but 10th in hard-hit percentage at 33.9 percent.

5. Indians manager Terry Francona joked—maybe half-joked—that hitting coaches Ty Van Burkleo and Victor Rodriguez probably haven't been sleeping while the offense has struggled to put up runs. But, there's a difference between an offense slumping to start the year because nobody is swinging the bat well and a team struggling to score runs but while many are still making hard contact. One means there's a major problem, one means not to panic. Hence, context is key.

6. Said Van Burkleo: "The big thing is the approach is good. When guys aren't getting hits, sometimes they start trying to get a hit and change the approach and just get a little anxious. So, we're really trying to keep them focused on the fact that the at-bats are good. We're swinging at pitches in the zone. We're hitting balls hard for outs. It gets frustrating and the first two balls they hit today were both crushed and both outs. So, again, that's why it was nice to break out and I think as guys start seeing their numbers going north, I think it'll ease their minds a little bit. It's been unbelievable, really."

7. Hitting three line drives but going 0-for-3 isn't a cause for panic compared to a day when you go 2-for-3 but with two bloopers and a strikeout, even if a couple of those days in a row can be frustrating. Extrapolate that out to a lineup of nine hitters, and of course frustration will build. But to add a layer to it, teams can now show players the statistical data behind everything. Frustration doesn't necessarily mean the need to change mechanics. Players might already know, but having the raw data can't hurt.

8. Said Van Burkleo: "You look at some of the balls Alonso hit and then you look at his numbers. And you say, 'Man, this guy could be hitting .350 with five homers right now.' But, he's done a real good job of saying, 'I'm just going to keep finding the barrel and just keep barreling it up.' He's done a real good job of that. It's going to change. There's a lot of good hitters in this room. Usually, you'll have a couple guys that get off to a rough start. This has been everybody. The beauty of it is our pitching's been so good that we've been able to win ballgames. That's a real good sign, but there's going to be times during the season when we're hitting and scoring a lot of runs and taking pressure off the pitching."

9. One stat that Van Burkleo pointed out to the Indians' hitters was slugging/expected slugging on balls hit with an exit velocity of at least 95 mph. Entering Wednesday, the Indians had a .684 slugging percentage on balls hit at least 95 mph, according to Statcast. The league average on such hits was .976. The Indians' expected slugging, meaning where they should be, is 1.298, which would be second in the league. The simple translation: over a large enough sample size, it's very likely that the Indians will find much more success than they have been given that they continue to hit the ball as hard as they have been so far.

10. Added Van Burkleo: "I've been real proud of how the guys have gone about it and how they're not panicking. They know they're good. It's nice with the modern day metrics to be able to point things out to them. We all see it, but to be able to have that raw data to say, 'Look, this is where we're at. We've hit a lot of balls 95-plus and we've got a lot of outs on those balls.' So, yeah, it's frustrating for them, but they've done a good job of staying the course."

11. Even as the Indians struggled to put runs up on the board—Wednesday night was the first time this season they totaled 10 hits in a game, for instance—they were still winning thanks to a pitching staff that's off to a strong start, allowing one or zero runs in five consecutive games. The cold weather hasn't helped the lineup either, but still, the Indians have won five of the six games on this homestand and are 7-5 this season.

12. Said Kipnis: "We knew it was coming. Like I said before we were a little less worried than everybody else. Obviously, you can smile that we were winning games with four hits or less. It used to be four runs or less that we needed or had had. But guys are too good of hitters to have it go on for too much longer. I think you're going to see guys start warming up as the weather does, too."

13. The real value for teams on the coaching level utilizing analytics as they have isn't just to be able to say, "Well, according to league averages, here's what should be happening." It is that all of this helps them diagnose a problem as real or something that is hiding behind context. If quality at-bats are being put up and hard contact is being made at a high level, changing things to chase results might be a mistake. It isn't saying that there haven't been some poorer at-bats or contact mixed in, which has surely been the case at times at varying degrees, but the result might be deceiving. In this sense, again, context plays a vital role.

14. Said Kipnis: "You know what, I mean, we're obviously not having the ideal start. I'm not going to say it's just been all bad luck. I've had bad at-bats, too, and bad swings, but when you mix in bad results with bad luck, you've just got nothing to hang your hat on and that's been happening. But there's a lot of positives I can take out. We're starting to see it better and get better. I'm just going to keep hitting the ball."

Indians 5, Tigers 1: Carlos Carrasco goes distance, Indians hitters wake up

By Ryan Lewis

CLEVELAND: The Indians' winning ways continued, though this time the offense found its rhythm in a 5-1 win against the Detroit Tigers at Progressive Field.

After not being able to collect more than four hits in three consecutive games — even though they still won all three — the Indians strung together six hits in a four-run fourth to pull away in support of starter Carlos Carrasco, who pitched a complete game.

Against Daniel Norris, who entered the game after starting pitcher Jordan Zimmermann was struck in the face by a line drive off the bat of Jason Kipnis in the first inning, Jose Ramirez and Michael Brantley opened the fourth inning with singles. Yonder Alonso followed by ripping a two-run single to right field, and Tyler Naquin and Francisco Lindor then each added an RBI single to put the Indians up 4-0.

"I felt really good for our hitters. I was thrilled for [hitting coaches Ty Van Burkleo and Victor Rodriguez] because I know they've been going home at night and probably not sleeping real well, because they care so much," Indians manager Terry Francona said. "We kept the line moving, and we hadn't been doing that much — we hadn't had a line to move."

On Zimmermann's seventh pitch of the game, Kipnis lined a ball that hit the Tigers right-hander in the right jaw/cheek area. He left the game, passed the concussion tests and was sent to undergo X-ray imaging. Kipnis reacted instantly, making an anguished face before he had even dropped his bat. As he reached first base, he put both hands on his helmet.

"You never want that," Kipnis said. "Everyone's out there competing. You want it to be decided by talent and skill and all the other stuff. You don't want it to be because someone got injured or anything like that, so you never root for anyone to get injured. It was a scary moment. [He's a] tough SOB just to walk off like that. He's got a strong jaw."

Brantley added another RBI single in the seventh to extend the lead to 5-1.

The Indians (7-5) have now won five of the six games on this homestand and their last 10 against the Tigers dating back to last season.

Carrasco (3-0) gave the bullpen the night off, allowing one run on only three hits and two walks to go with six strikeouts in his ninth career complete game. It was the fifth consecutive game in which the Indians have allowed one or zero runs.

"He pitched a heck of a game — he pounded the zone, his off-speed is so effective coming off of his fastball, and he stays down with it so consistently that he just gives himself a chance against every hitter," Francona said. "God, he pitched real well."

Betting against Josh Tomlin? It's a fool's gambit, Cleveland Indians say

By Joe Noga, cleveland.com jnoga@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Everybody was betting against Josh Tomlin after last week's atrocious outing in Anaheim. Everybody except for his teammates and manager.

Tomlin lasted just three innings during his season debut April 3 against Los Angeles, allowing eight Angels runs on eight hits, including a career-high four home runs.

But Indians second baseman Jason Kipnis said the team did not lose faith in the veteran right-hander, who is admired for how he competes each time he takes the mound.

"We're not going to lose confidence in him after one start," Kipnis said. "Other people might, but we're not going to. We've seen him have a bad start before."

Last year, Tomlin went 2-3 with an 8.87 ERA in five April starts, marking the highest April ERA in his big-league career. In May and June he went a combined 2-6. But from July 6 to the end of the season, he was 6-0 over 10 starts with a 3.11 ERA to secure his third consecutive winning season for the Tribe.

"The guy has proven to be a major league pitcher," Kipnis said. "And I don't think anybody in here wanted to count him out after one bad start."

Tomlin did not factor in the decision Tuesday when Cleveland defeated Detroit, 2-1; however, he held the Tigers scoreless through five innings, allowing four hits and a pair of walks. Tomlin retired 10 of the final 11 batters he faced and lowered his earned run average by 15 to an even 9.00.

In his last five starts against American League Central Division opponents, Tomlin is 2-0 with a 1.40 ERA in 25 2/3 innings.

Manager Terry Francona said Tomlin needed a lot of pitches to get through the first three innings, but made good pitches when it counted. Then the veteran righty settled in.

"I thought he found some rhythm as he went," Francona said.

Tomlin said he felt more like himself on Tuesday, though his command is still probably not where he wants it to be. But it was good enough to put his club in position for a win.

"That's the whole mindset, it's just go out there, attack the zone, put the ball in play and let our defense work," he said. "On cold nights like today, throwing strikes, letting them put the ball in play, it's probably going to bode well."

Francona revealed Monday that Tomlin fought through lower back soreness in Anaheim after landing awkwardly on a pitch to Justin Upton in the first inning. The Indians pushed Tomlin's next scheduled start back a day (essentially two days with the off day on Thursday) giving him six days of rest between outings.

Tomlin said he did not realize at the time that the back soreness was affecting his pitches in Anaheim. However in studying film, he could tell that the ball was not coming out of his hand the way he wanted it to.

"It was just the sitting down, the timing between (innings), it would stiffen up on me a little bit," he said. "I left balls over the middle of the plate, wasn't able to put anybody away and wasn't throwing very competitive pitches."

Meanwhile, Francona credited Tomlin and the starting rotation for stepping up while the club's offense has been in a deep freeze. Cleveland's starting pitchers have a combined 1.05 ERA with 31 strikeouts and eight walks in 34 1/3 innings.

"Our pitching staff has kind of saved the day," Francona said. "It's not just pitching good. Every game has been one run, so there's not a lot of margin for error."

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 04.12.2018

How to squeeze a lot from a little and 5 other things we learned about the Cleveland Indians

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com phoynes@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio - The Indians have the lowest batting average in the big leagues and have scored the second fewest runs in the American League.

When they do score, however, they're making the runs count. The Indians are 4-1 on this 10-game homestand, while scoring just 10 runs.

They have done that with pitching, defense, timely home runs and good base running. The Indians entered Wednesday night's game against the Tigers tied for the AL lead with 11 stolen bases.

"You have to be intelligent," said manager Terry Francona when asked about getting the most out of every run his team scores. "We always appreciate and encourage aggressiveness, but you've got to be intelligent."

"I'm really proud of our guys. It not a lot of fun going through periods where you swing the bat like this. But they're playing the game with enthusiasm. They're into it. They're picking each other up. I think they know they're going to hit."

The Indians are hitting .158 (55-for-349) as a team. In Tuesday's 2-1 win over Tigers, Rajai Davis was the only player hitting .200 or better in the starting lineup. In Wednesday night's lineup, Tyler Naquin was the only starter hitting .200 or above.

"I've seen teams that maybe pout a little bit and because of that you lose a couple of games," said Francona. "I'm proud of them. Their effort has been terrific."

The Indians have played in cold weather for eight of their 11 games. Temperatures near freezing are not a hitter's best friend.

Terry Francona on Indians pitching, defense carrying struggling offense

They also haven't hit in the best of luck. Their team BAPIP (batting average on balls put in play) is .174. The league average for BAPIP, which does not include home runs or strikeouts, is about .300. Last year the Indians hit .295 as a team.

Take Jose Ramirez and Francisco Lindor for example. Ramirez's BAPIP this year is .088 compared to .319 last year. This year Lindor's BAPIP is .219 compared to .275 last year. BAPIP's that soar above or below .300 not only reflect the talent of the hitters, pitchers and defenders involved, but also an element of luck.

A few days ago hitting coach Ty Van Burkleo talked to his hitters about statistics that showed the Indians were actually hitting better than the traditional numbers suggested. Francona felt that was an important message to deliver.

"The biggest thing is you don't want guys saying, 'Well, I've got to do more. This isn't enough, so I've got to do more.' Inevitably more turns into trying to do too much. Then you get guys rolling over (hitting weak ground balls) and that's not what you want. You want them to stay with what works."

No. 1: Run prevention

The Indians have the second best fielding percent and the third lowest ERA in the AL. The combination allowed them to enter Wednesday night's game in a virtual tie for first place in the AL Central despite a nearly non-existent offense.

"We found out the hard way if you don't play defense, it's really hard to win," said Francona, referring to the Tribe's defensive problems in last year's ALDS. "You put so much value in your pitching staff that if you don't make the plays it just doesn't work."

"But when you have a good pitching staff and a good defense, when you score it's meaningful. I can't give you a better example than this week. We scored 10 runs and we're 4-1."

No. 2: Where's your ski mask

The Indians have played in such miserable weather this April that the ski mask or hoodie seems to have become a regular part of their uniforms. The exception has been second baseman Jason Kipnis.

He does not wear a ski mask. When asked why after Tuesday's game, Kipnis said, "Because I'm an adult male."

Kipnis, who also doesn't wear long sleeves in cold weather, is from Chicago where the winters are as long and cold as they are in Cleveland.

"I grew up playing in weather like this, with snow on the ground," said Kipnis. "As soon as you get a couple of sprints in and that blood moving, it's not as cold compared to somebody who just sitting there and is just taking the wind. Plus we get to heat up in the dugout."

No. 3: The bridge builders

In Tuesday's win, Francona went to the bullpen five times. The first three relievers - Zach McAllister, Tyler Olson and Dan Otero - were entrusted with getting a 1-0 lead to the late innings where Andrew Miller and Cody Allen were waiting.

McAllister pitched a scoreless sixth inning, but Otero allowed a game-tying RBI double to Jeimer Candelario in the seventh. But it all worked out as Miller pitched a scoreless eighth, catcher Roberto Perez hit a tie-breaking homer and Allen pitched the ninth for the save.

"I actually thought everyone threw well on Tuesday night," said Francona. "OT (Otero) came into a really tough spot, gets a strikeout, gets a broken bat double. I thought he made some really good pitches. I know it's hard for guys when they feel they didn't get the job done. I thought he threw the ball extremely well."

Francona was glad that he didn't have to go Miller earlier than he did.

"It's nice to find a way to win without going straight to Andrew because we can't do that all the time," said Francona. "And when you can mix in Olson, Otero and Zach, that's when you have a tendency to build in the right direction."

No. 4: The learning curve

McAllister's best pitch is and always will be a fastball, but he's continued to work on his curveball and it's shown some improvement. Francona said the pitch allows McAllister to "get into a count or back into a count."

"It's not something that has come as easy as his fastball," said Francona. "But it's something he's spent a lot of time working on it. You can tell by watching him how much it's getting better."

No. 5: This just in

In his last two appearances, Miller has a save and a win. For the young season, he's struck out nine in 5 1/3 scoreless innings. The opposition is hitting .211 against him.

Now here's the scary part, Miller might not be in peak form yet.

"I said that to Carl (Willis, pitching coach) on Tuesday night," said Francona. "My goodness it doesn't feel like he's hit his real stride, but you look at his stats - 5 1/3 innings, nine strikeouts. He's pretty good - this just in."

Cleveland Indians pitchers on comeback line drives: 'You try to let your instincts take over'

By Joe Noga, cleveland.com jnoga@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Indians reliever Dan Otero tried not to look at replays of the Jason Kipnis line drive that knocked Detroit starter Jordan Zimmermann out of Wednesday's game with a left jaw contusion.

"Those always make me uneasy," Otero said. "As a pitcher you know it always could happen. You try to let your instincts take over. But when you see it happen to another guy, it just makes you cringe."

Pitchers in the Indians bullpen jockeyed to see a replay of the incident on the scoreboard. Otero's response: "Nah, I'm good."

Otero and fellow reliever Zach McAllister are no strangers to line drives back to the mound. In fact, both Otero and McAllister encountered similar plays in the same game on Aug. 30, 2016 against Minnesota.

With the bases loaded and the score tied at 4-4 in the third inning, Twins outfielder Logan Schafer sent a screaming line drive back toward Otero's head. Otero snagged the ball and threw to Francisco Lindor covering second base for a double play. Per Statcast, Schafer's ball left the bat with an exit velocity of 84.7 miles per hour.

In the sixth inning, McAllister took a Kurt Suzuki line drive off his calf, flipping the ball into the air for a catch and the second out of the inning. Suzuki's ball left the bat at 101.3 mph.

"It's just reaction," McAllister said. "You hope, as a pitcher, that you're able to get out of the way or at least get anything that's important out of the way, or get something on it to deflect it a little bit."

In the moments after being struck by a comeback liner, pitchers are often so rattled that they don't immediately locate the damage, McAllister said.

"When you do get hit, you don't necessarily know where it got you," McAllister said. "You just know that you got hit pretty hard."

Tigers manager Ron Gardenhire said he does not think Zimmermann will have to go on the disabled list, and that he will probably make his next start.

"He's actually feeling good," Gardenhire said. "It was terrifying and it made a terrible sound. Your heart drops. When you go out there you never know what you're going to see."

Indians manager Terry Francona can empathize with Gardenhire. Francona was in a similar position on April 15, 2015 when Carlos Carrasco was struck in the face by a line drive off the bat of White Sox outfielder Melky Cabrera.

Cabrera crushed a ball that deflected into Carrasco's right cheek at 90.4 mph.

"I think I'm lucky because it got a little bit of the glove," Carrasco recalled.

Kipnis said in the heat of competition players want games to be decided by talent and skill, not due to injuries to key opponents.

"It was a scary moment (and he's a) tough SOB just to walk off like that," Kipnis said. "He's got a strong jaw."

Otero said he sympathizes with hitters in that situation, noting Kipnis' emotional reaction on the field Wednesday. He recalled playing with former Indians minor leaguer Joe Martinez in San Francisco in 2011 and watching a ball ricochet off his head clear into the dugout.

"It's going to happen, it's part of the game," Otero said. "But it still makes me uneasy."

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 04.12.2018

Ty Van Burkleo on Cleveland Indians' poor April hitting: "It's going to change"

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com phoynes@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Ty Van Burkleo is so confident that the Indians will hit and hit well this season that he's tempted to take a memento to remind them of the current bad old days.

The memento would be a shot of the scoreboard at Progressive Field showing the Tribe's lineup from Wednesday's game and their batting averages. The lineup manager Terry Francona put on the field against the Tigers featured one batter hitting over .200 - Tyler Naquin at .214.

"The scoreboard is ugly right now," said Van Burkleo, in his sixth season as hitting coach for the Indians. "I kind of feel like I should take my phone out there and take a picture of it, so I can hold it up and show them in July and say, "Remember this?"

The Indians, with the temperature finally climbing out of the 30s, beat Detroit, 5-1, on Wednesday night. For the first time this season they collected 10 hits. Every other big-league team has already done that at least once.

"I feel good for Ty," said Francona. "He can go home and get some sleep."

The Indians are a long way from being a dangerous hitting team. They're still hitting only .170 as a team, the lowest in the big leagues, while averaging three runs per game.

Van Burkleo has been in the batting cages with his hitters and in their heads as well. The last thing he wants them to do is change their swings to try and generate offense just because there has been so little of it.

"It was nice to break out," said Van Burkleo, referring to Wednesday's win. "I think as the guys start seeing their numbers go north, I think it will ease their minds a little bit. It's been unbelievable, really."

In the hitters' meeting on Monday before the Indians opened this four-game series against Detroit, Van Burkleo told them they were swinging well, but just weren't lucky. He used advanced metrics to explain it.

"Going into the series, I think we had like 34 balls hit at 95 mph (exit velocity) or above and all for outs," Van Burkleyo said. "The expected slugging (percentage) and the ball in play average (BABIP) is 100 points lower than any team has had in five years. So, it's unsustainable to be able to maintain that. . .It was something ridiculous."

Entering Wednesday's game, according to Statcast.com, the Indians ranked 30th with a .684 slugging percentage on batted balls with an exit velocity of 95 mph or faster. The league average on similar balls put in play was .976.

Over the last five years, according to mlb.com, the the lowest BABIP for a team was .275 by the 2013 Cubs. The Indians were at .174 entering Wednesday's game.

The Indians, in other words, have hit so poorly in April that they can't help but get better.

"I really appreciate the modern day metrics to be able to point that out," said Van Burkleyo. "Ten or 15 years ago, we knew it, but (the players just had to trust you)."

Van Burkleyo says the hitters have handled it well.

"I mean you feel for the guys, you know," he said. "You look at some of the balls (Yonder) Alonso has hit and then you look at his numbers. You say, 'Man, this guy could be hitting .350 with five homers right now.' But he's done a real good job of saying, 'I'm just going to keep finding the barrel and just keep barreling it up.'

"It's going to change. There are a lot of good hitters in this room. Usually you have a couple of guys get off to a tough start. This has been everybody. The beauty of it is our pitching has been so good that we've been able to win ballgames."

Warmer weather will help. Jason Kipnis ended an 0-for-23 slump with a double in the seventh inning on Wednesday. On Saturday against the Royals, he hit a similar ball that was caught on the warning track by Jon Jay, preventing Francisco Lindor from possible scoring in a 1-0 loss.

What was the difference in the two drives? On Saturday the first pitch-temperature was 34 degrees. On Wednesday, it was 54.

"Two days ago Kipnis' ball would have been an out," said Van Burkleyo. "On Tuesday, Alonso hit a ball to the track in left field. He crushed that ball, but it was caught right up against the wall. Two days before that, it wouldn't have even got to the warning track.

"It was like hitting in ice. I think the humidity was 80 percent and 34 degrees. The ball's not going anywhere."

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 04.12.2018

Aaron Civale, Akron RubberDucks shut out Binghamton

By Cliff Pinckard, cleveland.com cpinckard@cleveland.com

BINGHAMTON, New York -- Aaron Civale threw six scoreless innings and Sicnarf Loopstok had two RBI, leading the Akron RubberDucks to a 4-0 win Wednesday night over the Rumble Ponies.

It was the third straight win for the RubberDucks (4-3) and puts them over .500 for the first time in the young Class AA Eastern League season.

Akron scored all four runs in the second inning, with Loopstok hitting a bases-loaded single to bring in two runs. Another run scored on a passed ball by Binghamton catcher Patrick Mazeika, and Ka'ai Tom made it 4-0 with an RBI triple.

Meanwhile, Civale (1-0, 0.93 ERA) gave up only three hits, struck out seven and walked no one, retiring the final 11 batters he faced. The win is Civale's first in Class AA.

Argenis Angulo, Luke Eubank and Dominic DeMasi all pitched a scoreless inning of relief.

The RubberDucks are third in the Eastern League in team ERA (2.70).

Former NFL quarterback Tim Tebow was 1-for-3 as the designated hitter for the Rumble Ponies.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 04.12.201

Offense awakens, Carlos Carrasco goes the distance as Cleveland Indians beat Tigers, 5-1

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com phoynes@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The game began with a scare and ended with an Indians offense that actually looked the part.

Not only did they reach 10 hits in a game for the first time this season, they put together a big inning as well. Carlos Carrasco needed no further help as he pitched his first complete game of the season in a 5-1 victory over Detroit at Progressive Field.

Detroit's Jordan Zimmermann was six pitches into his third start of the season when Jason Kipnis lined a pitch back to the mound that hit Zimmermann in the right side of his jaw. The ball deflected to first baseman Miguel Cabrera, who retired Kipnis.

Zimmermann went down, but eventually walked off the field after a concerned Kipnis wished him well. He passed MLB's concussion protocol and was taken to a hospital for X-rays. Lefty Daniel Norris replaced him.

The Indians, who came into the game with the lowest batting average in the big leagues at .158, took a 4-0 lead with four runs in the fourth against Norris (0-1).

Jose Ramirez and Michael Brantley started the rally with consecutive singles. Yonder Alonso, after Ramirez and Brantley worked a double steal, delivered them with a single to right for a 2-0 lead. Yan Gomes moved Alonso to second with a single to center and Tyler Naquin made it 3-0 with a single to left.

At what point does something like this become a routine play?

Francisco Lindor's single made it 4-0. The Indians (7-5), by the way, have won four straight.

Manager Terry Francona loved the double steal.

"That was really heads up," he said. "We've kind of come to expect that with Jose. Either forget about him or one look him and go - he's so good at that."

Carrasco (3-0, 3.48) threw a three-hitter against the Tigers for his second complete game in the last two years and ninth of his career. He's 5-1 with a 1.66 ERA over the last two years against Detroit.

"Carlos pitched a heckuva game," said Francona. "His off-speed stuff was so effective coming off of his fastball. He stayed down with it so consistently that he gives himself a chance against ever hitter."

Tiger center fielder Leonys Martin had the only three hits off Carrasco. He accounted for the Tigers' only run as well with two-out homer in the sixth. Carrasco, 11-7 in his career against Detroit, struck out six and walked two.

Carrasco welcomed the four-run fourth and said he never lost confidence in his offense.

"I trust in my teammates," said Carrasco. "It's not only the Cleveland Indians (who aren't hitting). There's 29 other teams who will struggle at times. We just have to figure out a way to get through it."

The Indians added a fifth and final run in the seventh. Kipnis doubled to end an 0-for-23 skid and scored on Brantley's single to right.

The @Indians strike first with a 2-run single from Yonder Alonso!

Lindor recorded the Tribe's 10th hit with a two-out double in the eighth. The Indians are the last MLB team to have a 10-hit game. They had 59 10-hit games last season.

"We knew the this was going to happen," said hitting coach Ty Van Burkleo. "We knew we'd have a day when we started breaking out of this.

"So, we're really trying to keep them focused on the fact that the at-bats are good. We're swinging at pitches in the zone. We're hitting balls hard for outs."

The Indians extended their winning streak against the Tigers to 10 games with Wednesday night's win. They have held Tigers to three or fewer runs in each of those 10 games.

Zimmerman threw seven pitches, five (71 percent) for strikes. Carrasco threw 110 pitches, 76 (69 percent) for strikes.

The Tigers and Indians drew 10,872 to Progressive Field on Wednesday night. First pitch was at 6:11 with a temperature of 54 degrees.

Bauer is coming off an eight-inning 1-0 loss to the Royals. He's 4-5 against the Tigers in his career, including an 0-2 record with a 13.00 ERA against them last year.

Fulmer, 2-2 with a 6.04 ERA in his career against the Tribe, won his first game of the season on Saturday against the White Sox. He threw 5 1/3 scoreless innings for the win.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 04.12.2018

The Morning After With heavy heart, Tanner Graham takes over as Clippers home clubhouse manager

By Roger Metzger, GateHouse Ohio Media

It's not the way Tanner Graham wanted to become the home clubhouse manager for the Columbus Clippers.

Graham, a 2011 graduate of New Philadelphia High School, was the visiting clubhouse manager for the Class AAA affiliate of the Cleveland Indians before tragedy struck the organization.

Last December, Clippers' home clubhouse manager Matt Pruzinsky went into cardiac arrest and died attending a National Football League game between the Cleveland Browns and Green Bay Packers at FirstEnergy Stadium in Cleveland.

He was just 32.

Graham was elevated to home clubhouse manager in early January after spending last season as the visiting clubhouse manager.

"I can't say enough good things about Matt," said Graham, who was under his wing for the past five seasons. "I am forever indebted to him. I wouldn't be working in baseball if it weren't for him."

It all began when Graham was playing college baseball at Otterbein University. One of his teammates put him in contact with Pruzinsky, who subsequently employed him as an intern. Pruzinsky got Graham a full-time position out of college with the Clippers, which led to him being his assistant for two years and then the visitors clubhouse manager gig.

"He gave me an opportunity when I was 20 years old," said Graham, now 25. "I wish I could thank him."

Graham found out Pruzinsky's passing on Monday morning, Dec. 11, one day after his fatal heart attack.

"That was some awful news to wake up to," recalled Graham. "It was just a shock."

"The first day I went back into the office we laughed, cried and shared stories," said Graham. "We were getting calls from former players all over the world. Matt had a huge impact on a lot of people. He impacted a lot of lives."

Despite the unfortunate circumstances, a new home clubhouse manager had to be selected and Clippers' General Manager Ken Schnacke felt that Graham was the right man for the job.

"It was a tough situation to walk into, but it's an honor," said Graham. "Everything I know about being a clubhouse manager I learned from Matt. I just want to carry on the legacy that he started."

Graham talked with his cousin and former Quaker baseball standout Justin Merryman, who offered some sage advice.

"You have to think that if Matt had to pick one person to take his job it would be you," Graham said Merryman told him.

"I just want to continue to do what he did and make him proud," Graham said, adding that being a clubhouse manager isn't all sunshine.

"It's a lot of long days and short nights," he said. "Fans see the clean uniforms and equipment, but the night before someone washed those uniforms and got things ready. The guys (players) appreciate it."

As home clubhouse manager, Graham organizes players, coaches, and team personnel's lockers and equipment, manages team laundry (personal and team uniform), makes sure the clubhouse is clean and well maintained on a daily basis, responsible for tracking and keeping an adequate inventory of supplies and equipment, among other things.

As visiting clubhouse manager, he coordinated travel and equipment delivery with visiting personnel, instructed/operated visiting team equipment distribution, instructed interns/bat boys daily responsibilities, scheduled interns/bat boys work schedules, planned pre-game and post-game meals for players and team personnel, prepared a budget for meals, equipment and part-time staff and managed the daily cleaning of clubhouse and other team facilities.

Graham spent February and March as one of six Cleveland Indians spring training clubhouse assistants in Arizona, including Fletcher Wilkes (head minor league clubhouse manager in Arizona) and Shad Gross (Akron RubberDucks clubhouse manager). Both had worked for Pruzinsky for the past nine seasons.

Graham's jobs included distributing team apparel and equipment to players and staff, inventory team apparel and equipment, assisting in cleaning player and staff personal laundry and team uniforms, coordination of team equipment distribution to organization affiliates and helping with miscellaneous clubhouse operations.

He started out as a home clubhouse intern for the Clippers in April of 2013.

Graham graduated from Otterbein in 2015 with a degree in sports management after he enjoyed a stellar baseball career at New Philadelphia before graduating in 2011.

Graham is close to former Tribe farmhand Shawn Armstrong, who has helped spearhead a "Go Fund Me" account for Pruzinsky's wife, Shannon, and twin sons, who were born in February. More than \$109,000 has been raised so far.

"It was great to see people, many who didn't know him, donate to a worthy cause," said Graham, who noted that Pruzinsky was known as "The 26th Man."

Wilkes came up with the idea for the "Matti P 26" patches the team wore on their caps during spring training.

The Clippers have partnered with apparel company 108 Stitches and will be selling a "26th Man" T-shirt with all proceeds going to Shannon and the boys. The shirts will be available through the team.

The Clippers started out on the road this season and will play their home opener tonight at Huntington Park, which is expected to be very emotional.

The players will be wearing a memorial patch on their uniforms throughout the season.

"I really believe he was the best and I learned from the best," Graham said of Pruzinsky. "I hope I can be half the guy he was."

Bats 8, Clippers 2 | Clippers starter Shawn Morimando yields all 8 runs

Sebastian Elizalde doubled in the third inning Wednesday night to drive home what proved to be the winning run, and he was one of six Louisville Bats players who had more than one hit in the 8-2 win over the Clippers at Slugger Field in Louisville.

Elizalde also had a two-run single in the fourth off Clippers starter Shawn Morimando (1-1), who gave up 14 hits and all eight runs (all of them earned) in five innings. He walked one and struck out none.

Rosell Herrera collected three hits for the Bats, including two doubles. No Louisville player tripled or homered in the game.

Bats starter Robert Stephenson was as dominant as his team's batters. He allowed three hits over seven innings, walking three and striking out 10. He allowed one run, unearned, in the third inning, when he mishandled a Greg Allen sacrifice bunt, and Mike Papi, who had led off with a double, scored from second base.

The Clippers added a run in the ninth off reliever Kyle Crockett. Brandon Barnes singled with two outs and came home on an Adam Rosales double.

Clippers | Staff in overdrive for Huntington Park opener

The Columbus Dispatch

Those in the Clippers front office will share the excitement with spectators and players when the team opens its home schedule against the Durham Bulls after being on the road for six days.

When the first pitch is thrown at 6:35 p.m. Thursday, though, the staff might be taking in the sights through bloodshot eyes after weeks of labor to get Huntington Park ready.

"We were out there really hitting it hard in March, getting rid of the layers of grime and dirt from the winter," team President and general manager Ken Schnacke said. "But the weather was so horrible that we would take two steps forward and one step back. It has been a whirlwind catching up."

Huntington Park is only 10 years old, but every toilet, sink, faucet, waterline and electrical fixture must be checked, windows must be washed, and seats and flooring must be power-washed.

"We're putting banners up and umbrellas out today," Schnacke said Wednesday. "We're also putting up bunting, and the Huntington Park logo is being painted on the field. We're stocking the concession and souvenir stands. We've had a checklist and go over it one by one."

Fans will see a \$1 million scoreboard with LED lighting and a new grass field. The 17-foot-high screen in right-center field has been extended to the right of the batter's eye to take away cheap home runs.

Schnacke cautioned that it will take time for fans to adjust to netting put in front of the scoreboard for protection against fly balls.

"It was distracting for me the first time I went to Charlotte's stadium and saw the netting in front of their LED scoreboard," he said. "It was just fine after three innings."

Fans will see Cleveland's latest top prospects: center fielder Greg Allen, catcher-outfielder Francisco Mejia and shortstop Yu Chang.

"I've heard a lot of great things about the city and facility," Allen said.

Two years ago, Allen thought his time in the organization had ended when he was part of a trade package to Milwaukee for catcher Jonathan Lucroy. However, Lucroy invoked his no-trade clause, and the deal was terminated.

"There is a lot that goes through your mind, and I had a lot of emotion," Allen said. "It was nice to be valued, but on the other hand, I didn't want to leave this organization. The trade didn't go through, and I'm happy it didn't."

Allen, 25, might bring memories of Kenny Lofton, the Indians' former All-Star center fielder, because of his speed, athleticism and enthusiasm.

"When you are young, you play with your natural skills and instincts and develop them," he said. "But I'm here to become more efficient in all aspects — at bat, defensively and on the bases. I have never met Kenny Lofton, but I've heard a lot of good things about him. I think he should be in the Hall of Fame. I wouldn't mind modeling my game after him."

SPORTS Indians 5, Tigers 1: Tribe bats emerge from slumber to back Carlos Carrasco

Chris Assenheimer | **Chris Assenheimer | The Chronicle-Telegram** Published on April 11, 2018 | Updated 2:02 a. m.

CLEVELAND — It wasn't the tropics, but the weather was warmer at Progressive Field on Wednesday night — 54 degrees at first pitch.

So were the Indians bats.

Cleveland produced a season high with 10 hits and reached its highest run count of the homestand in a 5-1 victory over the Tigers that extended its winning streak to four games — 10 straight over Detroit dating to last season.

"That was really nice," manager Terry Francona said of the offensive surge. "I felt really good for our hitters."

He said he was "thrilled" for hitting coach Ty Van Burkleo and assistant hitting coach Victor Rodriguez.

"I know they've been going home at night and probably not sleeping real well," Francona said.

The Indians scored their first four runs in the fourth inning, with five of the first six batters reaching on singles.

Jose Ramirez and Michael Brantley started the uprising with consecutive base hits to lead off the inning, then after Edwin Encarnacion struck out, Yonder Alonso delivered a two-run single down the right-field line for the first runs of the game.

Tyler Naquin and Francisco Lindor also drove in runs, with Lindor collecting his first RBI of the season.

Brantley, who joined Lindor as the only Cleveland players with more than one hit, scored Jason Kipnis with a single in the seventh.

"We knew it was coming," said Kipnis, who snapped an 0-for-23 skid with a double in the seventh. "Like I said before, we were a little less worried than everybody else. Obviously, you can smile that we were winning games with four hits or less. It used to be four runs or less that we needed or had. But guys are too good of hitters to have it go on for too much longer. I think you're going to see guys start warming up as the weather does, too."

The Indians' stellar pitching to start the season continued, with right-hander Carlos Carrasco notching his third win — and first complete game — in three starts. He allowed only a run on three hits and struck out six.

In what was easily his best outing of the year, Carrasco allowed a hit to the first batter, then retired eight straight. After allowing an infield single in the third, he set down 17 of the final 20 hitters.

All three of the hits went to Leonys Martin, who hit his first home run for Detroit's lone run in the sixth.

"He pitched a heck of a game," Francona said of Carrasco, who lowered his ERA from 5.40 to 3.48. "He pounded the zone. His off-speed (stuff) is so effective coming off of his fastball, and he stays down with it so consistently that he just gives himself a chance against every hitter."

"That was the goal, establishing my fastball first and then I can go with my off-speed," said Carrasco, who recorded his ninth career complete game, but first at Progressive Field. "My curve, my slider, my change was really good, the two-seamer was as well."

There was a scary moment early when Tigers starter Jordan Zimmerman was hit in the face by a line drive from Kipnis on his seventh pitch. The exit velocity was 105 mph off Kipnis' bat.

Zimmerman left the game, but passed concussion protocol and underwent X-rays on his jaw.

"You never want that," said Kipnis, who was visibly shaken after Zimmerman went down. "Everyone's out there competing. You want it to be decided by talent and skill and all the other stuff. You don't want it to be because someone got injured or anything like that, so you never root for anyone to get injured. It was a scary moment. Tough SOB just to walk off like that. He's got a strong jaw."

"Boy, it was so nice to see him get up and walk off," Francona said. "It happened so fast and I guess everybody is kind of holding their breath. When he walked off, he actually looked like he was OK."

Carrasco had flashbacks to April 15, 2015, in Cleveland, when a liner from Chicago's Melky Cabrera glanced off his glove and right hand before striking him in the face.

"I think (I was) lucky because it got a little bit of the glove. I don't know about him," Carrasco said. "He was hit really hard. I hope everything is fine with him."

Indians Notes: Tito says players aren't grinding over slow offensive start to the season

Chris Assenheimer By **Chris Assenheimer** | **The Chronicle-Telegram** Published on **April 11, 2018** | Updated **6:23 a. m.**

CLEVELAND — A season-opening offensive slide has not gotten into the heads of Indians hitters, according to manager Terry Francona.

Cleveland entered Wednesday night having scored only 31 runs over their first 11 games, while batting a major league-low .158.

"I'm really proud of our guys," said Francona, whose club won six of the 11 games despite the offensive woes. "It's not a lot of fun going through periods where you swing the bat like this. But they're playing the game with enthusiasm. They're into it. They're picking each other up."

"I think they know they're going to hit. But I've seen teams that maybe pout a little bit and because of that you lose a couple of games and that doesn't help anything. I'm proud of them. Their effort's been terrific."

Nearly everyone is struggling, with only one player in the lineup Wednesday — Tyler Naquin — batting over .200.

"Believe me. That will change," Francona said. "It's easy when you can step outside and think, well, in August this might cost guys three or four points on their batting average. In April, when it's all you've got, it's hard to do. Guys gotta live through it."

Frigid temperatures since the team returned to Cleveland weren't conducive to emerging from the team-wide slump.

"Guys don't feel comfortable in this cold weather, especially me — and we're not from (Cleveland), even though I stay here in the offseason," catcher Roberto Perez said. "We're going to get out of this, man. I believe in my team, and we are confident in ourselves."

In an effort to keep the confidence up, hitting coach Ty Van Burkleo met with players and provided statistics that show the Indians are barreling up the ball and hitting it hard. They just haven't gotten positive results.

"That's the biggest thing is that you don't want guys saying 'This isn't enough, so I've got to do more,'" Francona said. "Because inevitably more turns into trying to do too much. And then you get guys rolling over and that's not what you want."

"You want them to stay with what works. Even if in the small sample it hasn't. Because it will. It's amazing. Guys get to their level. It's the damndest thing, but they do."

New guy

Francona said the transition from pitching coach Mickey Callaway to Carl Willis has been a smooth one.

"Carl has been tremendous," Francona said of Willis, who served as Cleveland's pitching coach from 2003-09 under manager Eric Wedge. "He's fun to be around. We knew he would be. Following Mickey is not easy because of what he meant and what he did here. Carl is the perfect guy to do it."

Under Willis' watch, four pitchers have won Cy Young Awards — CC Sabathia (2007 with Cleveland), Cliff Lee (2008 with Cleveland), Felix Hernandez (2010 with Seattle) and Rick Porcello (2016 with Boston).

Miller time

Left-hander Andrew Miller isn't locked in yet, but the numbers tell a different story. Entering Wednesday, Miller had not allowed a run over five games, striking out nine in 5 1/3 innings.

"My goodness, it doesn't feel like he's hit his real stride, but you look at his stats," Francona said. "He's pretty good ... this just in."

Miller has had runners on base, allowing four hits, three walks and hitting two batters.

Ahead of the curve

Right-hander Zach McAllister relies on his fastball, but he's been trying to develop a curveball to give him another weapon.

"He's worked so hard on trying to be able to have a lead breaking ball to get you into a count or back into a count," Francona said. "It's not something that has come as easy as his fastball. But it's something he's spent a lot of time working on. You can tell by watching him how much it's getting better."

Tomlin tribute

Right-hander Josh Tomlin bounced back from a brutal season debut to pitch like the Tomlin of old Tuesday night, shutting out the Tigers on four hits over five innings of a 2-1 victory.

"We're not going to lose confidence in him after one start," second baseman Jason Kipnis said. "Other people might, but we're not going to. We've seen him have a bad start before."

"The guy has proven to be a major league pitcher. And I don't think anybody in here wanted to count him out after one bad start. And he got right back on there and shut these guys down and gave us a chance to win. He's one of those guys that goes out and competes each time."

Roundin' third

The Indians are the first team since 1908 to win four of its first 11 games of the season recording four or fewer hits.

Cleveland entered Wednesday with a 35-9 record within the division since July 1.

The Indians had won nine straight against the Tigers through Tuesday.

As Indians bats show signs of life, hitting coach Ty Van Burkleo explains why modern metrics matter

By T.J. Zuppe 3h ago 1

Francisco Lindor sent the second pitch he saw from Tigers starter Jordan Zimmermann screaming toward right field.

Despite leaving the bat at 105.7 mph — a rocket shot — the ball's trajectory carried it into the waiting arms of right fielder Nick Castellanos for the first out of the inning.

A barreled ball. A harmless fly out.

Watching the play unfold, Indians hitting coach Ty Van Burkleo had one thought: "God, here we go again."

The Tribe's bad luck at the plate has been pretty well documented by now. Despite their standing as baseball's least productive offense, most have probably realized the underlying hard contact hasn't matched their actual numbers.

Still, it's pretty jarring when they began the day Wednesday with just one hitter in their lineup — Tyler Naquin — sitting above the Mendoza line.

"The scoreboard is ugly right now," Van Burkleo said. "I kind of feel like I should take my phone out there and take a picture of it, so I can hold it up and show them in July and say, 'Remember this?'"

That's one memory hitters would probably rather send to the recycle bin. And then throw in a dumpster. And then light the dumpster on fire.

Sure, the entire performance can't be blamed entirely on the bad luck and poor weather. But when you enter the day with baseball's largest gap between their actual slugging and expected slugging — calculated by a combination of exit velocity and launch angle data — and you add that to other huge gaps between their expected and actual batting averages, weighted on-base averages and the number of barreled balls that haven't led to typical production, at what point do they throw your hands up, begging the baseball gods for some mercy?

Here were the numbers entering Wednesday's matchup:

Expected average: .241

Actual average: .158

Expected slugging: .475

Actual slugging: .284

Expected wOBA: .343

Actual wOBA: .238

Number of barrels: 24 (8th in MLB)

MLB production on barrels: .697 AVG

Indians production on barrels: .458 AVG

BABIP rank: 30th

Some of that is defense related. Some of that is related to how the ball travels in the cold. Some of that is probably due to the layers guys are forced to wear or the equipment that doesn't function as well in the frigid temperatures.

It's a perfect storm of suck.

"It's unsustainable to be able to maintain that," Van Burkleo said. "It was something ridiculous."

That's one of many reasons why, when meeting with hitters prior to the Tigers series, Van Burkleo and assistant hitting coach Victor Rodriguez brought in many of the advanced numbers to help prove a point. Maybe that effort isn't necessary for everyone, but they wanted to show hitters their exit velocity numbers — and the lack of luck on those hard-hit balls — in an effort to keep anyone from pressing or changing their approach.

"(You) just lay it out," Van Burkleo said. "Let them know, 'Hey, we're right where we need to be. We're right where we were last year and we're right where we need to be.' I really appreciate the modern day metrics to be able to point that out. Ten or 15 years ago, we knew it, but (now it's tangible)."

Van Burkleo's faith in the metrics demonstrate why they've become such a big part of analysis and reporting. These aren't just numbers pulled out of thin air to back a narrative. Teams utilize this data every day to help paint a more complete picture of their players.

While some might appreciate the metrics more than others, the additional information can be used to help calm the early-season waters of panic.

"It's nice, with the modern day metrics, to be able to point things out," Van Burkleo said. "We all see it, but to be able to have that raw data to say, 'Look, this is where we're at. We've hit a lot of balls 95-plus and we've got a lot of outs on those balls.' So, yeah, it's frustrating for them, but they've done a good job of staying the course."

Thankfully, Lindor's lineout in the bottom of the first Wednesday night wasn't a precursor for more frustration. The Indians offense broke through with a four-spot in the bottom of the fourth, an outburst that must have felt like the cracking of the outer dam walls.

Prior to Wednesday night, the club was average just two runs per game over the first half of their 10-game homestand. In comparison, finishing with five runs for their fourth consecutive win was an offensive explosion.

Yonder Alonso, who has felt the sting of bad luck as much as anyone, knocked in a pair with a ground ball single — at 100.8 mph, the single was earned — while Lindor, Naquin and Michael Brantley also contributed RBI hits. And while Carlos Carrasco didn't need much support during his one-run complete game effort, it certainly didn't hurt to offer a little rare breathing room.

"That was really nice," Terry Francona said. "I felt really good for our hitters. I was thrilled for VanBo and Victor. I know they've been going home at night and probably not sleeping real well because they care so much."

Van Burkleo, however, kept the focus on his hitters.

"Well, I mean, you feel for the guys, you know?" he said. "You look at some of the balls Alonso hit and then you look at his numbers. And you say, 'Man, this guy could be hitting .350 with five homers right now.' But, he's done a real good job of saying, 'I'm just going to keep finding the barrel and just keep barreling it up.' He's done a real good job of that."

Luckily, the weather should eventually warm, and so should the bats.

In the meantime, the Indians are thankful to have friendly data to pass along to the frost-bitten hitters. Someday, they'll all be able to look up at the scoreboard and see a much prettier picture.

For now, they'll just weather the storm.

"It's going to change," Van Burkleeo said. "There are a lot of good hitters in this room. Usually, you'll have a couple guys that get off to a rough start. This has been everybody. The beauty of it is our pitching's been so good that we've been able to win ballgames. That's a real good sign, but there's going to be times during the season when we're hitting and scoring a lot of runs and taking pressure off the pitching."

The Thursday Conversation: Michael Brantley on shedding the injury-prone label

Zack Meisel 3h ago 3

Michael Brantley crossed the plate, shook hands with Yan Gomes and hustled back to the dugout after Yonder Alonso's two-run single in the fourth inning Wednesday night. He didn't favor his surgically repaired right ankle after his 180-foot dash.

Check.

Moments earlier, he and Jose Ramirez pulled off a double steal. Brantley arrived at second base in one piece. He didn't grimace in pain or limp around the bag.

Check.

Brantley recorded his first multi-hit game of the season Wednesday. He slapped a couple of singles through the infield, a familiar result for the two-time All-Star. His shoulder woes? Those are a thing of the past.

Check.

At this point, it's natural to monitor Brantley's every move. Is he walking properly? Can he shift laterally in the outfield? Can he evade a Gatorade shower during a postgame interview?

He certainly looked like himself Wednesday.

"That's why I say, 'Put him in left, leave him alone and just let him play the game,'" Terry Francona said. "He's so reliable and consistent."

Brantley has started five of six games since the Indians activated him from the disabled list at the start of their homestand. It'll take longer for him to escape the label of injury-prone. He knows that. But he also stresses that it's out of his control. He didn't choose to tear his shoulder labrum when he dove for a fly ball at Target Field in September 2015. He didn't choose to injure his ankle last season. He has spent the past three winters on the recovery trail, rather than on a mission to improve areas of his game.

He's heard the comparisons to Grady Sizemore, his former teammate. He's read the pleas for the Indians to sever ties with him and the gripes that the team stuck with someone who can't seem to stay on the field.

He hopes, this period of doctor visits, MRIs and inquiries about his status will eventually represent only a footnote in his biography. Brantley spoke with The Athletic about shedding the injury-prone label, blocking out negative thoughts and returning to his old form.

ZM: Jason Kipnis was saying recently how, when you spend time on the DL, you start to wonder what could've been. What could my numbers look like? How many more wins could we have? Could I have been able to make some changes that would've made me even better? He noted how it's not healthy to think that way, but how hard is it to block that out?

MB: My No. 1 goal is always just to get back on the field and be with the guys — nothing more than that. I want them to win as many games as possible when I'm not available and then when I come back, I just want to be able to contribute in a positive way and help the team win a baseball game.

ZM: The more you go through it, though, is it easier to brush aside the negative thoughts?

MB: No, I think it's the same every time. If you care about this game and really treasure this game for what it's worth, it hurts every time you're not out there with your team. It doesn't make it any easier if it's one time or five times. Just not being there with your family, basically, out there competing, it's not fun.

ZM: Two winters ago, Kipnis spent a week with you in Cleveland to help you through your monotonous rehab. How much can something like that do when you've had to go through what you've gone through?

MB: It's like family. We spend so much time with one another throughout the entire year. Just being back and seeing familiar faces and being able to joke around and laugh — I enjoy being around the guys. You hear it all the time, that one of the biggest things that's missed when people retire is the locker room and just hanging out with the guys. When you're on the DL, you miss them when they're on a road trip and you're excited when they get back. Then you also think about being able to play with them again.

ZM: How much are you looking forward to getting to a point in which no one asks you about injuries?

MB: That'd be phenomenal. But injuries are out of my control. I'm going to play the same way I've played my entire life. I play hard. I enjoy it and take one game at a time and go from there.

ZM: Did the All-Star Game nod last year serve as validation for the work you poured in to make your way back from the two shoulder surgeries?

MB: It wasn't my goal by any means. My goal is very simple: the game and task that day, and that's it. It was just a lot of hard work that paid off, a lot of sweat and knowing that staying in Cleveland the entire offseason, having my family here the entire offseason instead of going back home, was the right move, and that I made the right choices to put myself in that situation. So I was just very thankful.

ZM: Do you feel like yourself yet this year? I assume it'll take more than a handful of games to round into form.

MB: Not yet. It's going to take a little bit of time. I'm still getting adjusted. It's going to happen. Everybody in here, especially at the start of the season, you get into a flow. You get into a rhythm. But I'm close. I'm very happy with where I'm at. I've been swinging the bat well. I'm not mad over where my swing is. I'm not mad at how I feel every day when I wake up. I feel good. I've had a great, positive attitude going into this year and I'm excited to be here.

ZM: Is that partially the result of being able to swing during the offseason, which you hadn't been able to do after the shoulder procedures?

MB: Yeah, it gave me a head start on where I was last year. I hit all spring. Coming here, I was ready to hit and be in hitting shape. I'm really happy with where I am mentally. That's probably the most important part of it, not beating myself up, staying positive every single day and understanding what's going on with my body. Baseball, family, everything's positive.

ZM: You mentioned during spring training that the Indians maintained communication with you, so you never felt like you weren't coming back. How pleased were you, then, when they exercised your option?

MB: Very grateful. I've said it before. I'll say it again. This is the only place I want to play, the only team I want to be with. I grew up here. They gave me this first opportunity to play here and I'll never take that for granted. This is where I want to finish what we started. We have a great group of guys in this locker room who work hard every day to continue to achieve that goal and I just want to be a part of it.

ZM: Does it feel like this might be the last chance to do it with the group of guys — Kipnis, [Josh] Tomlin, [Lonnie] Chisenhall, [Cody] Allen — that has been here for a long time? A bunch of guys are eligible for free agency at the end of the season, including yourself.

MB: It could be. But you don't know that until the offseason. If you start thinking about that, then it's a distraction from the task, which is winning against the Detroit Tigers. We need to get our job done here this year and that's all that matters.

ZM: Would you consider yourself the king of blocking out distractions at this point?

MB: One hundred percent. But I've learned from it. I've grown from it. It's not easy, by any stretch of the imagination. I've heard more negative talk toward me than I've ever heard in my life. It affected me at a time, but at the time, I had a great support system around me. They get you right back on track.

ZM: Just being labeled injury-prone, stuff like that?

MB: Being labeled injury-prone. Being compared to former teammates who were huge influences on me, great players who had things happen. I understand that injuries are out of my control. I can't help what happened. I dove for a ball. I hit a bag wrong that I hit a million times before in my life. But at the same time, I understood where they were coming from. I get it. But I'm going to stay positive and keep pushing.

ZM: Do you channel that as fuel or just completely dismiss it?

MB: I completely block it out. My family is the reason why I play this game and my teammates are the reason why I play this game. No more than that. I really respect everybody's opinions and thoughts, but when it comes down to playing baseball, it's about me and my team going out there and competing.

'Not a fun night at the ballpark' for the Tigers

By Max Bultman 1h ago

CLEVELAND — As Ron Gardenhire sat in the Progressive Field visiting manager's office Wednesday evening, you got the sense that his team's latest one-run effort against the Indians was third, at best, on his list of concerns.

On this night, a slumping offense took a back seat to perspective.

Gardenhire had just seen his Opening Day starter take a line drive to the face, lie on the ground and then leave his start seven pitches in. He had gotten reasonably good news — Jordan Zimmermann passed the concussion protocol — but it was a terrifying moment.

In the aftermath of that play, he had to send outfielder Mikie Mahtook, a player he really likes, down to Triple-A to make room for another pitcher on the roster.

"Not a fun night at the ballpark," Gardenhire summarized.

It was only the first inning when Indians' second baseman Jason Kipnis sent a Zimmermann fastball right back at him with an exit velocity of 105.6 mph. The ball hit Zimmermann in the face, and he crumbled to the ground. The severity was immediately obvious.

"It was terrifying, and it made a terrible sound," Gardenhire said. "We couldn't tell right away if it got glove, but I don't believe it got glove."

"I heard two noises," said catcher James McCann. "And everyone kept saying, 'It hit him flush, hit him flush.' Well, I guess, his right shoulder's pretty sore, I guess it nicked his shoulder, and that probably saved him, to be honest with you."

It happened fast, but Zimmermann — who was in the clubhouse after the game sporting a bump on his right cheek — did say he had a little mark on his shoulder. Still, he added: "(The contact) was pretty square."

As he lay on the turf, though, none of that was clear. Kipnis, who had hit the ball, had a stunned look even as he ran to first. He was out, but crouched and waited on the field as Zimmermann was tended to. He came over to pat Zimmermann on the back before returning to the dugout.

"You never want that," Kipnis said afterward. "Everyone's out there competing. You want it to be decided by talent and skill and all the other stuff. ... It was a scary moment, tough SOB just to walk off like that. He's got a strong jaw."

Gardenhire had seen pitchers hit before — including Robbie Ray last season in Arizona — but it's not something you can fully emotionally prepare for. "Your heart drops, and when you go out there you just don't know what you're going to see," he said.

Zimmermann left the field under his own power, the first in what would be a slow-but-sure caravan of positive developments. Gardenhire would eventually say Zimmermann may not even miss a start, and that he was cracking jokes in the clubhouse.

Still, there were few spirit-lifters for Detroit.

The Indians, one of the few teams who have struggled more than the Tigers offensively this season, briefly found their stroke and took a 4-0 lead in the fourth, which was just about insurmountable given Detroit's current slump. Cleveland won, 5-1.

In fact, the only Tiger to get a hit was the much-maligned center fielder, Leonys Martin, who finished the day a triple shy of the cycle. Once again, that was far down the list of significant events.

After the game, the clubhouse was late to open. Naturally, curiosity began to set in about what might be happening. Gardenhire didn't wait long to reveal the answer.

"Our pitching is in a little bit of dire straits right now, so we're gonna actually send Mahtook back down to Triple-A, and we're gonna add a corresponding move (Thursday) — we're gonna add a pitcher, because (of) everything that's been happening the last couple days," Gardenhire said, letting out a sigh. "Tough decision. Not fun at all. I really like Mikie, He's kind of scuffling right now a little bit, but I told him he needs to go down and get his swing together and get his confidence back, and he'll be right back up here."

It was a surprising move — Mahtook is off to a tough start, slashing .129/.200/.161, but he's still one of the Tigers' more promising pieces. He's coming off a .276, 12-homer season and brings a crucial energy to the clubhouse.

Gardenhire would go on to explain the rationale, but even through that, he made no effort to hide how torn up he was.

"This will help him, but it doesn't make me feel very good, because I really like that young man," Gardenhire said. "I like his enthusiasm. And I know he's spinning a little bit offensively — he's trying to find his swing, and it'll come. He did it here last year and he'll do it again this year. So this is not much fun. This is the worst part of being a manager."

The logic seems to be for Mahtook to go down, refine his swing reasonably quickly, and come back up.

"There's no panic in my mind," Mahtook said. "Obviously it's not ideal to get sent down, but I know that I'm going down there for a reason. I'm going to go out there, I'm going to play well, and I'm going to be right back here."

That optimism from Mahtook — albeit cut with a perfectly fair dose of disappointment — was a rarity in the clubhouse Wednesday night.

Between losing the game, the injury concern for one teammate and the unexpected demotion of another, there just wasn't much room for levity. Damn near nothing went right. Indeed, it was not a fun night at the ballpark.