



CHICAGO CUBS DAILY CLIPS

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Cubs.com

Cubs drop series finale as Brewers close gap

By Carrie Muskat

CHICAGO -- The Brewers made a statement by taking two out of three against the Cubs at Wrigley Field. If the Cubs are to repeat as National League Central champs, they need to find some energy and their offense.

"We're still in first place," Chicago's Javier Baez said after a 5-1 loss to Milwaukee on Wednesday night. "We've just got to go out there and play. Nobody is going to beat us if we go out there and play."

Curtis Granderson had three hits, including a solo homer, and scored three runs to spark the Brewers, who now are within one game of the division-leading Cubs.

"That's a really good team and they've been playing us close," Chicago starter Kyle Hendricks said. "They're definitely coming for us -- we can feel it. That's why we have to focus on what we do and play our brand of baseball."

This was the last regular-season meeting between the teams, who could face off again in the NL Division Series. Still to be determined is who will win the NL Central. Right now, manager Joe Maddon's crew could use a nap.

Wednesday was Day 23 of the Cubs' arduous stretch of 30 days with a game scheduled.

"I don't want it to sound like an excuse, but we do need the rest," Maddon said. "[The players] need a break and it's not happening for another week, and we have to figure it out somehow. They're a very tightly knit group and I know we'll get through it somehow. They just need to lay the body down for one day."

"I mean, it's September," Chicago's Anthony Rizzo said. "You figure out ways to get going. Just do what it takes that day to get ready for the game and you figure it out. You do the same thing the next day."

Hendricks gave up two runs over five innings and was lifted in an attempt to find some offense. Granderson homered off Steve Cishek in the ninth for the Chicago-area native's first blast at Wrigley Field since June 2006, when he connected against Mark Prior. Milwaukee added insurance runs when Mike Moustakas added a two-run single off Brian Duensing.

"Granderson is good and he really played the wind perfectly. Give him credit," Maddon said. "We needed to do the same and we didn't. That third run was large, regarding bullpen usage the rest of the game and how that ninth inning set up."

Milwaukee starter Chase Anderson threw four scoreless innings and the Cubs tallied with two outs in the fifth on Kris Bryant's RBI double off Jacob Barnes. However, they had to face Josh Hader one more time, and he struck out three of the four batters he faced.

"He's been big for them," Baez said of Hader. "I mean, if we don't make the adjustments against him, they're just going to keep bringing him in against us. It's hard because the way he throws and the way we hit -- a lot of power hitters in the lineup -- it's tough to catch up the way he pitches. We'll see what happens during these last two weeks and October."

The Cubs' offense has sputtered and Maddon hasn't been able to pinpoint a reason for the malaise.

"The offense has taken a hit, there's no question -- no pun intended," Maddon said. "We've got to get better. There's no other way to look at it. We have to find that within ourselves."

In six games against the Brewers this month, the Cubs scored 16 runs. They haven't gotten much of a spark lately from new leadoff man, Daniel Murphy, who is 0-for-12 in his last four games.

"Obviously, it's not been the same but he'll be fine," Maddon said of the veteran. "Probably he needs a day off as much as anybody."

The Cubs did take the season series, 11-8, but this is a different Brewers team than the one they faced in April.

"It's a 162-game season," Milwaukee manager Craig Counsell said. "They've earned every bit of our respect, for sure, and they're the ones who have ended up on top. We've still got a little work to do. We haven't got there yet."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

In a pinch: Pinch-hitter Tommy La Stella greeted Barnes in the fifth inning with a single, his Major League-leading 23rd pinch-hit. La Stella reached second on a throwing error by shortstop Hernan Perez, moved up on Addison Russell's groundout and scored on Bryant's double. It was Bryant's fourth double since coming off the disabled list Sept. 1. He's showing signs of getting on track.

"We need to do it as a group," Maddon said of the offense. "We need to get contagious again, we need to swarm again like we had been doing. I don't have any solid reasons other than, without making excuses, there just might be some fatigue in there that they're not admitting to but it's just a fact."

Closer situations: The Brewers had a runner at third in three straight innings. In the sixth, Milwaukee had a runner at third and two outs, but Randy Rosario struck out Eric Thames to end the inning. In the seventh, the Brewers had runners at second and third with two outs against Jesse Chavez, but right fielder Ben Zobrist made a running catch of Lorenzo Cain's fly ball to end that. With two outs in the eighth, Moustakas reached third, but Cishek struck out pinch-hitter Jesus Aguilar.

"We did a lot of good things," Maddon said. "We made some great plays but so did they. They just got us in the end."

MITEL REPLAY OF THE DAY

Bouncing ball: Granderson tripled to left to lead off the game, but the umpires conferred and signaled home run. A crew-chief review showed the ball didn't clear the basket rimming the outfield wall but hit the yellow rope rimming the edge of it, so the call was overturned and Granderson was sent back to third. He then scored on Cain's single.

HE SAID IT

"It's a bad one for sure. We've had some tough trips in the past. We've been through a lot. It makes you tougher in the end. That's the approach we take, is don't count us out, kind of a little bit of an underdog. We'll make it through this stretch all right." -- Hendricks, on the Cubs' long stretch of consecutive workdays

"It happens. It's happened to us all year. We've hit well, we haven't hit well. I think overall, the attitude and the energy is where it needs to be. I think we're in a very good position to win this division. We've just got to keep playing good baseball." -- Rizzo, on the Cubs' inconsistent offense

TIME CHANGE

Friday's game against the Reds at Wrigley Field was moved to a 7:05 p.m. CT start to give the team a little bit of a break after playing a makeup game on Thursday against the Nationals in Washington. Friday's game had been scheduled for a 1:20 p.m. start. The gates will open approximately two hours before the start of the evening game. No ticket exchange is necessary. [More >](#)

UP NEXT

Mike Montgomery will get the start on Thursday in a makeup game at Washington against the Nationals. This will be Montgomery's 16th start this year, and he's 4-4 with a 3.43 ERA as a starter. Montgomery last faced the Nationals in a relief appearance on Aug. 11. The Nats will counter with Joe Ross, who will be making his official season debut after his initial start was washed away after five outs. First pitch is scheduled for 3:05 p.m. CT from Nationals Park.

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Friday start pushed back after Cubs' quick trip
By Carrie Muskat

CHICAGO -- Friday's Cubs game against the Reds at Wrigley Field was moved to a 7:05 p.m. CT start to give the team a little bit of a break after playing a makeup game on Thursday against the Nationals in Washington.

Friday's game had been scheduled for a 1:20 p.m. start. The gates will open approximately two hours before the start of the evening game. No ticket exchange is necessary.

The Cubs were headed to Washington after Wednesday's game against the Brewers, part of a stretch of 30 consecutive days in which they have a game scheduled. The makeup game was necessary when Sunday's contest between the Cubs and Nationals was postponed because of rain. Thursday was the first mutual off-day. The trouble is, it was the Cubs' only off-day after a stretch of 23 games in 23 days. Their only break since Aug. 20 will now be Sept. 20.

It doesn't help that Hurricane Florence is headed for the East Coast as well.

"Even if it was 72 [degrees] and balmy, that would not matter," Maddon said Wednesday. "It's about 30 consecutive days. I think that's not being spoken about enough. The emphasis is on the weather and rightfully so. It's a hurricane, and it's going to impact a lot of lives. That's a totally different subject and one that's much more worthwhile. For us, in a baseball world, playing 30 consecutive days, that's the difficult part. For me, I don't think that's been discussed enough regarding whether to play or not."

Everybody is making it into a weather-related issue. For me, it's a 30-day issue. That's my bigger concern."

Mike Montgomery will start for the Cubs against the Nationals at Nationals Park, while Joe Ross will make his official season debut (his start last Friday was washed away after five outs). The Cubs will not bring their entire September roster and will have players like Kyle Schwarber, who has been battling back issues, and Friday starter Cole Hamels stay in Chicago.

"That's tough scheduling, for sure," Milwaukee manager Craig Counsell said Wednesday. "But it also means they've gotten a break at some point [earlier this season] with not playing and being able to get some rest through a segment of the schedule. Maybe not planned rest, but still got some rest. I've really found that the baseball schedule presents every team at points in the season with huge challenges. We had our challenges before and after the All-Star break, and it probably took a toll on us at some point. You recognize it as part of the schedule, that you're going to have tough moments. Anytime you have to go to a city for one day, that's not ideal."

The Nationals were playing in Philadelphia on Wednesday while the Cubs played host to the Brewers.

"Obviously, there's a really bad hurricane coming, so everything is still up in the air, but as far as we know, [Wednesday] is the game we need to worry about and then we'll get [to Washington] when we get there," Nationals manager Dave Martinez told reporters in Philadelphia. "But, hopefully, first and foremost, everybody is safe and listens to the weather channel because people need to evacuate. It's going to be bad."

The Nationals will ride a bus to Washington after Wednesday's game. The Cubs will fly after Wednesday's game. Maddon said the players haven't grumbled about the makeup date.

"Nobody's really happy -- that's disingenuous if I said that," Maddon said. "I'm certain the Nationals aren't really happy about this either. It's one of those things where neither team is excited about it, but it's a little more difficult for us. ... We all of a sudden have to get on a plane to go back there."

Said shortstop Addison Russell: "We're pretty much in our mindset that we're going to play. I think a lot of us are excited to play. It's just going to test us as players, test us as a team."

What if it does rain on Thursday? The forecast for Thursday in Washington calls for a 40 percent chance of rain. If the weather is bad on Thursday, Maddon said the teams won't wait long.

"If it looks bad at all, I'm pretty certain they'll call off the jam and we'll get back on a plane and come back home," Maddon said.

The only other option for a makeup game would be Oct. 1 after the regular season has ended.

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Cubs.com

Morrow seeks return next week; Yu has surgery

By Matthew Martell

CHICAGO -- Cubs reliever Brandon Morrow threw a 35-pitch bullpen on Wednesday and said he is aiming to return to games by the end of next week. However, even if all goes well in his return, the right-hander is not expecting to return to the closer's role.

"I'm just looking forward to coming back and contributing at all," Morrow said. "There haven't been any hiccups from [Pedro Strop], so there's no reason to switch up what's been working, even if I come back at 101 percent."

Morrow said he was "pleasantly surprised" with where his velocity sat during Wednesday's bullpen, especially because he wasn't throwing at maximum effort. The next step for Morrow will be a simulated game, which he said should be within the next few days, though no official date for that has been set.

Manager Joe Maddon said the Cubs will determine how exactly to use Morrow once he's ready to return to games, though he likely won't take on a substantial workload right away. Instead, Maddon said Morrow's usage will be similar to the gradual approach the club took with shortstop Addison Russell when he came off the disabled list on Sept. 1.

"The guy's been out for a long time, and other guys have been pitching well," Maddon said. "Of course, we want him to be that guy, of course you do. But if he's not ready yet then don't force it."

Both Morrow and Maddon said the Cubs don't need to rely on Morrow at the back end of their bullpen to win games. What matters is that Morrow is "able to participate in the bullpen effectively," Maddon said.

"We still have the best record in the National League without me for half a year. So obviously, I'm not the key," Morrow said. "But I think that everybody helps, and I think I bring at least a little bit of experience from last year."

The way Morrow pitched earlier this season, though, indicates he's more valuable than just a veteran with postseason experience. He's posted a 1.47 ERA with 22 saves in 35 games this year.

Darvish undergoes debridement surgery

Yu Darvish had arthroscopic debridement surgery for his right elbow on Wednesday in Dallas after receiving a second opinion from Dr. James Andrews, the Cubs said.

The club said Darvish is expected to be healthy and ready to pitch in time for Spring Training, which the 32-year-old starter also said Wednesday on Twitter.

The purpose of the procedure is to clean up some of the damage within his right elbow. Darvish had already been ruled out for the remainder of the season after suffering a setback during a Minor League rehab start with Class A South Bend last month, so the surgery has no impact on this year.

Darvish originally went on the disabled list at the end of May for right triceps tendinitis, and in his attempt to return, he was diagnosed with a right elbow impingement. Following his final rehab start in South Bend, which was cut short and lasted just one inning, an MRI a few days later revealed a stress reaction on his pitching elbow as well as a triceps strain.

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ESPNChicago.com

Cubs know Brewers are coming for them as NL Central tightens

By Jesse Rogers

CHICAGO -- Chicago Cubs manager Joe Maddon often says a team has to go out and take what it desires because nothing is going to be given in baseball -- not over 162 games.

The Milwaukee Brewers are heeding Maddon's advice, as two September series wins over their rivals have brought them within a game of the National League Central lead.

The Cubs are hearing footsteps.

"They're definitely coming for us," said Kyle Hendricks, Wednesday's losing pitcher. "We can feel it."

The Brewers have a combination of left-handed thump at the plate and a generational left-hander on the mound. Reliever Josh Hader faced 10 Cubs hitters in the two Milwaukee victories. He struck out nine and gave up a base hit. In fact, according to Elias, going back to his past three appearances, Hader is the fourth pitcher in the past three seasons to strike out at least nine in a row. He was electric, sucking the life out of the Cubs and the Wrigley Field faithful.

"He's hard because the way he throws," Javier Baez said, stating the obvious. "It's tough to catch up."

It doesn't help that the Cubs are about as fatigued as a team can be right now. After Wednesday night's 5-1 loss, they were packing their bags for an overnight flight to Washington, where -- weather permitting -- they'll play a makeup game with the Nationals before coming right back to Chicago for a weekend series against the Cincinnati Reds. Then comes a quick trip two time zones west for three games against Arizona before another overnight flight home and finally -- after 30 straight days at the ballpark -- a day off.

The stretch might be one reason the Cubs aren't scoring. Even all-world hitter Daniel Murphy is in a slump. He was 0-for-11 in the series against Milwaukee.

"I got my teeth kicked in," he said.

The same can be said for the entire offense, as well as the Chicago bullpen. The hold the Cubs have had on the division feels like it's slipping away. And the Brewers are ready to pounce.

"The games have been tight, especially the games here at Wrigley," Milwaukee manager Craig Counsell said earlier Wednesday. "For me, it's two good teams battling each other. It's what you would expect."

Right now the Brewers have an edge, particularly in the form of Hader. A best-of-five playoff series with two off-days built in would give Counsell the chance to max out the lefty. If the Cubs and Brewers end up meeting in October, there could be a changing of the guard, just as there was in 2015, when the Cubs took what the St. Louis Cardinals had owned for so long: division supremacy.

"That's a really good team over there," Hendricks said. "They've been playing us close between last year and this one. They're our biggest rival for sure at this time."

There it is: the "R" word. It wasn't long ago that Cubs pitcher Cole Hamels declared there was no rivalry because so many Cubs fans were invading Miller Park, giving the visitors a distinct home stadium feel. But a tight race to the finish might change how everyone looks at the Brewers -- if that hasn't happened already.

"That was a big series," Hendricks said. "We played OK, but they played better than us."

But before anyone counts out the Cubs, consider the culture Theo Epstein and Maddon have created. They've mastered taking it one day and one game at a time. There's no better evidence of that than the 2016 World Series, in which the Cubs trailed three games to one before rallying to victory.

Or how about their hangover year in 2017? Maddon & Co. navigated the expected physical and mental letdown associated with winning the franchise's first World Series in 108 years, eventually pushing the right buttons for a third straight trip to the NL Championship Series. Can they rally again in the midst of an arduous schedule?

"We're in the same place [mentally] we've always been," Hendricks said. "Maybe a little tired, to be honest, but we're fine. We know where we are. We know where we want to get to."

So do the Brewers. They're no longer the little upstart team that faded last September. They are as dangerous as anyone in the NL, including the team that is just a single game ahead of them in the standings. Maddon hears those footsteps as well and is asking his team for more, especially on offense. The Cubs tallied just six runs in this series.

"We have to get better," Maddon said. "There is no other way of looking at it. We need to swarm again, like we had been doing earlier this year. There might be some fatigue in there. They're not admitting to it, but it's just a fact."

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NBC Sports Chicago

We're about to see what these Cubs are made of

By Tony Andracki

At this point, the Cubs holding onto their fragile one-game lead in the division might feel more like trying to mount a comeback against Josh Hader.

The arrows for the Cubs and Brewers are pointing in completely different directions with two-and-a-half weeks still remaining in the regular season.

But things aren't necessarily that dire for the Cubs. Yes, they still have another week to go in an absolutely ridiculous, brutal stretch. But if they can somehow get through that with their head above water, they'll be OK.

After all, they do control their own destiny — two games up on the Brewers in the loss column and a heavy slate of games at Wrigley Field (where the Cubs are 45-26) to close out the season.

This next week will be crucial. We're about to see just how mentally — and physically — tough this Cubs team.

This Cubs offense right now is struggling enough even when they don't have to face Hader twice in a three-game span. Maddon keeps pointing to a lack of rest as the reason behind the struggles and even Kyle Hendricks — who is relentlessly positive — admitted to feeling the fatigue.

And it doesn't get any better, as most of the Cubs had to get on a flight after Wednesday night's loss, get in about 4 a.m. ET, get a few hours sleep, go play a game, get back on a flight and get back to Chicago for a three-game series against a Reds team that now has Joey Votto back in the middle of that lineup.

As you've heard plenty by now, the Cubs' next off-day isn't for another week as they still have seven days left in a stretch of 30 in a row where they've had to show up to the ballpark for a full day's worth of work (or waiting).

"It's just a tough stretch, man," Maddon said. "Fatigue is nasty. When you get a tired mind, it's not easy to play at your top level. It's just not. We all know what it's like when you feel like your brain's swimming a little bit."

On a daily basis over the last week, Maddon has praised his players for how they've handled this tough stretch.

Yet, they certainly appear as if they've run into a wall.

The Cubs have lost four of their last five games at a time when the Brewers are on fire. If the Cubs hadn't started this stretch of games with a 7-1 record against a bunch of non-contenders (Tigers, Reds, Mets), they would be in a world of hurt right now.

Offensively, this lineup badly misses Jason Heyward, which would've seemed like a crazy statement a year ago.

The struggles at the plate go far beyond the bottom of the order, though Albert Almora Jr., Willson Contreras, Addison Russell and Ian Happ have been in their respective ruts pretty much since the All-Star Break.

Daniel Murphy — who was heralded as a savior of this lineup when he first arrived — hasn't gotten a hit since Saturday and is in the midst of an 0-for-12 slump.

Anthony Rizzo hasn't had a hit in a week, going 0-for-16 in that span.

Javy Baez — the MVP candidate — hasn't driven in a run in 11 days.

Kyle Schwarber looked like he was about to get hot but has been unavailable with a back injury lately and did not make the trip to Washington D.C.

At least Kris Bryant is starting to look more like himself and Ben Zobrist is furthering his case as the NL Comeback Player of the Year.

The Cubs did have a bunch of solid at-bats Wednesday night and hit into some crummy luck, but those at-bats cratered when Brewers manager Craig Counsell boldly went to his bullpen in the fifth inning.

The Cubs bullpen, meanwhile, gave up 3 runs on 6 hits and 3 walks in 4 innings Wednesday night and looks to be running out of gas at the absolute wrong time.

The rotation has been the only saving grace of late with this team and figures to continue to be a strength assuming Jon Lester's balky back will allow him to make his scheduled start against Cincinnati over the weekend.

Hendricks turned in another solid outing Wednesday but had to be pulled early again in an effort to drum up some offense (Tommy La Stella, who pinch-hit for Hendricks, scored the Cubs' only run).

Maddon always says momentum in baseball depends on your next day's starting pitcher and that may be exactly what carries the Cubs the next week. While Mike Montgomery will head to D.C., Lester, Hendricks, Jose Quintana and Cole Hamels will all stay behind in Chicago to get a much-needed day of rest, so they should be fresh and raring to go this weekend at Wrigley and next week in Arizona.

If any team can withstand this kind of tough stretch, it's the Cubs, whose incredible depth will need to show out over the next week in a big way.

When they return from Arizona, they won't leave Chicago for the rest of the season, able to sleep soundly in their own beds for at least 11 consecutive nights. That's also when Heyward and Brandon Morrow could be returning to provide some late-season reinforcements.

And Rizzo is doing his part to keep things loose on the flight to D.C., dressing up in full uniform:

"It's a pretty bad scenario, for sure," Hendricks said. "But we've been through so much adversity. We've had some tough trips in the past. Even in playoffs, we've had a couple brutal travel days.

"So it's just more of the same for us. We've been through a lot. I think it just kinda makes you tougher in the end. So that's the approach we take.

"Don't count us out. [We're] kind of a little bit of an underdog. We'll make it through this stretch alright."

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NBC Sports Chicago

Cubs feeling the heat from Brewers: 'Don't count us out'

By Jared Wyllys

The good news is that the Cubs won't see any more of the Brewers this year. At least in the regular season.

Thanks to Wednesday night's 5-1 loss, the Cubs are holding on to what feels like a tenuous one game lead in the NL Central. And amidst a grueling stretch that will ultimately keep them going for 30 days without a break, they'll have 17 games to hold that lead.

But despite what feels like something of an ominous loss, Kyle Hendricks, who tossed 5 two-run innings Wednesday, wasn't feeling the doom and gloom.

"We've been through so much adversity," Hendricks said. "We've been through a lot. It kind of makes you tougher in the end, so that's the approach we take. Don't count us out."

Hendricks acknowledged that the scenario of traveling to Washington for one game and then returning home Friday forced by the bad D.C. weather last weekend is a tough one, but he said that the team has been through other brutal travel days, so they expect to be just fine. They're tired, he admitted, but not out for the count.

In this tough stretch, the Cubs have had some of their best pitching of the season, so the problem has been with bats that have gone collectively quiet for days at a time. The offense can be contagious, for good or for bad.

Manager Joe Maddon talked before Wednesday's game about how some of that lately has been due to fatigue, he suspects, and unfortunately, there's no rest coming soon.

"I don't have any solid reasons other than, without making excuses, there just might be some fatigue in that they're just not admitting to," Maddon said of his flagging offense. "We do need a rest. It's not happening for another week."

The problem with Thursday's makeup game, Maddon stressed during his pregame press conference Wednesday, isn't about the weather. It's about 30 days in a row and what that does to a team fighting a very tough battle to win its division.

The offense mustered a run Wednesday in the 5th inning, which at the time pulled them within a run of Milwaukee, but they posed no real scoring threat after that. There was plenty of hard contact, but it all seemed to find leather instead of grass.

"We hit the ball pretty hard the whole series, just right to somebody," Javy Baez said after Wednesday's loss.

That kind of contact, the kind that Maddon said throughout the series against the Brewers has been lacking, can often mean that a turnaround is soon to come.

"We're just trying to do our best to take off, and I feel like that's coming soon," Baez said.

If the offense does start clicking again and it lines up with the quality pitching the Cubs have had, the next 17 games could go rather smoothly. Otherwise, it might be a grind to the end and leave the rain delay and rescheduling debacle of the last week to loom large.

Both Baez and Hendricks spoke to the team's experience as being on their side, especially when it comes to overcoming adverse situations like rough scheduling. And maybe that self-belief is enough to help them soldier through for another week before their next day off.

"Obviously it's been a tough stretch for us, but we're fine," Hendricks said "We know where we are, we know where we want to get to, and we always have confidence in the group that we have in that clubhouse, so we know what needs to be done."

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NBC Sports Chicago

Joe Maddon likened noted Cub-killer Lorenzo Cain to old Cubs favorite

By Jared Wyllys

Cubs manager dropped a Dexter Fowler comp on Brewers center fielder Lorenzo Cain before Tuesday night's game and his warm words continued on Wednesday.

"He plays the game with a joy about him - he's very loose. Him and Dexter have that same kind of a leadoff mentality," Maddon said Tuesday. "They go out there with a joy for the game and I appreciate that about him."

Cain has hit at the top of the order in 86 games for the Brewers this season, including Monday night's 4-5 performance in the 3-2 Cubs loss. He's been a .299 hitter in that spot on the season. In the 2016 championship season, Fowler hit .277 as the leadoff hitter, with 13 home runs and 25 doubles.

In 2018, Chicago has had to endure the latest Cubs-killer in Cain, who the Brewers signed to a five-year deal last winter. He's hit .333 against the Cubs this year with a few shoestring catches in center field as the icing on the cake.

"Cain plays at a very energetic, high level defensively and offensively," Maddon said. "The catch he made yesterday [Monday] on Lester was a gamechanger, as it turned out."

Before Wednesday's game, Maddon said that although they are both hitting well, he's not sure Cain and Christian Yelich are quite getting their just recognition.

"I don't know that they get the credit that's due each one of them," Maddon said. "Cain, a complete game. And he's a winner, he's done it before."

Cain, of course, was a part of the 2015 World Series-winning Royals team. Fowler came to the Cubs in 2015, played a key role in the 2016 title, and then departed for the Cardinals, where his success as a leadoff hitter has not followed.

Maddon managed against Cain from 2011-2014, when Maddon was in Tampa Bay and Cain in Kansas City. Back then, Maddon had a nickname for the outfielder.

"I've always been a fan - I called him Citizen Cain in Kansas City," Maddon said. "He's outstanding. He's one of the best leadoff hitters in the game right now, if not THE best."

On Wednesday, batting third in the order, Cain drove in the first Brewers run of the night after Curtis Granderson tripled, so even outside of the leadoff spot, he's still killing the Cubs.

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NBC Sports Chicago

'He's not backed down': Jorge De La Rosa a bullpen surprise worth playoff consideration

By Jared Wyllys

Left-handed reliever Jorge De La Rosa was released by the Diamondbacks at the non-waiver trade deadline, and since the Cubs picked him up on August 10, De La Rosa has been carving out a place for himself in the talented Chicago bullpen.

In 11 appearances with the Cubs, De La Rosa has a 1.76 ERA, and he has proven valuable in more than one high-leverage spot. What that means come October might not be clear yet, but De La Rosa will be ready to contribute.

"Wherever they need to help this team," De La Rosa said Wednesday about the possibility of pitching in October. "If they need me on the bullpen [postseason] roster, I would be happy to."

The playoffs are still a little too far away to project with certainty how the postseason bullpen might play out, but De La Rosa has at least pitched well enough to enter the conversation.

Successful pitching in the playoffs often comes down to keeping runners off of the bases, and De La Rosa's WHIP of 0.91 would be appealing, and Cubs manager Joe Maddon knows it.

"Every time we call him, he's done really well. I don't know if he's had a bad outing yet," Maddon said Wednesday.

Maddon might be partially wrong there -- De La Rosa gave up three runs runs in a third of an inning against the Brewers on September 4 -- but as a whole, De La Rosa has been the kind of pitcher needed for the stretch run of September as well as the postseason. He has otherwise given up only one run in the rest of his appearances.

Maddon said that De La Rosa's consistent strike-throwing to both righties and lefties has been a big part of why he has felt more and more confident turning to the southpaw in big moments such as on Tuesday when he pitched in the setup role with a three-run lead.

De La Rosa, who debuted with the Brewers in 2004, said that his experience has helped him handle the pressure. Particularly, he said, coming in to a tight division race in the NL Central.

"Last year when I was with Arizona, that was kind of the same. We were in the race all year. That was a tough division too," De La Rosa said. "That's not a big deal for me. I've been pitching for a long time, and I try to go out there and not think too much. Do my job and that's it."

Victor Caratini said that as a young catcher, working with someone like De La Rosa makes his job easier, and he recognizes the value of the reliever's time in the league.

"They brought him in to high-leverage matchups, and he's done really well because he's been in the league so long he knows what he needs to do to attack the batters," Caratini said.

De La Rosa said that his key is not wasting pitches and going right after opposing hitters. He credited the pitching coaches in Arizona for some of his success with the Cubs because he is continuing to do some of what they worked with him on, but working under Cubs pitching coach Jim Hickey has been a plus for him as well.

It's just been a month since De La Rosa's first appearance in a Cubs uniform, but his impact has already been felt. With the construction of the Cubs bullpen in a bit of a flux thanks to injuries to Brian Duensing and Brandon Morrow and Mike Montgomery needed in the rotation, De La Rosa has been all the more valuable.

"I've been trying to figure him out, and trying to break him into the moment slowly, and he has not backed down," Maddon said.

Along with Jesse Chavez, Maddon added, De La Rosa has been a vital piece of a very successful Cubs bullpen.

"Both of those guys have added a layer that we did not have earlier," Maddon said.

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NBC Sports Chicago

When/if Brandon Morrow does return, where would he fit in Cubs bullpen?

By Tony Andracki

The narrative around Brandon Morrow has shifted from if he could possibly return to when and in what capacity?

There's still a strong possibility he could experience a setback, of course, but Morrow has been feeling so good in his bullpens Sunday and Wednesday that it's looking more and more likely he'll be able to make it back to the Cubs bullpen before October.

That's not to say he'll be 100 percent or will absolutely be throwing 98 mph or pitching more than an inning or anything like that.

Morrow will return in some sort of a diminished capacity — that much is for sure. The bone bruise in his forearm hasn't gone away completely, but he's in a much better spot than he was a month ago.

Morrow threw approximately 35 pitches in Wednesday afternoon's bullpen and will throw a simulated game against teammates over the next few days with an eye on returning to game action after the Cubs' off-day on Sept. 20.

"I wouldn't say I really unleashed [Wednesday], but I definitely gave it a little bit extra," Morrow said. "They have all the equipment down there, too, so I was pleasantly surprised with some of the velocities towards the end of it even though I wasn't putting too much behind it."

Morrow has been throwing every pitch in his arsenal and understands he's already against the clock with less than three weeks left in the regular season.

Once Morrow and the Cubs really understood what they were dealing with in regards to his bone bruise, it became clear he would have to pitch through some discomfort even if he did return.

That changed the timeline to give Morrow as much time to heal as possible while still having an opportunity to realistically make it back before October, and to save bullets for when it mattered most. If there's going to be discomfort anyways, why have him throw more than necessary in the regular season?

"We did it with the hope of getting him enough appearances where he could be ready to roll by October," Theo Epstein said. "So we'll see if that comes to be. He's doing everything he possibly can—he really wants it. He signed here to pitch in October and obviously he's a weapon."

The Cubs won't just hand Morrow the closer's role immediately upon his return, though that's obvious given how his first few outings will be as scripted as possible without benefit of a minor-league rehab assignment.

But with the extreme importance of bullpens in October nowadays and the shakiness of some Cubs relievers of late, just adding another reliable arm in Morrow would be very helpful, even if he doesn't ever throw a pitch in the ninth inning.

"It would matter that he's able to participate in the bullpen effectively," Joe Maddon said. "That's what we have to determine. And if he happens to be pitching well enough and he can recover and he feels great and he's throwing like that, then you make him the closer again."

For his part, Morrow doesn't care where or when he pitches. He just wants to be back on a mound pitching and he's watched what Pedro Strop has done as the de facto closer the last two months (11-for-13 in save chances).

"I don't think it matters," Morrow said. "We got guys to cover all the innings. I'm hoping to be back and contribute in any way. It doesn't matter what inning it is for me. I'm just looking forward to coming back and contributing at all.

"There haven't been any hiccups with [Pedro Strop in the closer's role], so there's no reason to switch up what's been working even if I come back at 101 percent. So I don't think there's any reason to change anything right now. That guy's been great."

The Cubs signed Morrow over the winter to be "that guy" out of their bullpen in the postseason. He emerged as the Dodgers' most reliable reliever besides Kenley Jansen last fall (including shutting the Cubs down in 4.2 innings in the NLCS).

Still, he downplayed his importance to this team.

"They don't need me to win games — that's been evident," Morrow said. "Still the best record in the National League without me for half the year. So obviously I'm not the key, but I think that everybody helps. I think I bring at least a little bit of experience from last year and gonna be happy to get back."

As Morrow works back to game action, the key will be how long he will need between outings to recover.

The extra time off the last few weeks has already helped Morrow in the recovery process. He threw off a mound in Pittsburgh Aug. 18, but didn't feel as good after and didn't get back on a mound again until this week.

"The recovery for the day after has improved," Morrow said. "That was the problem with the bullpen in Pittsburgh — I became more, I've been using the word 'achy' because it's not really a soreness. So more 'achy' later in the day and the next day.

"After that first bullpen [Sunday], I started feeling better throughout the day and that was kind of a big change, so I thought that was positive and led us to keep going forward."

If all goes according to plan, there is enough time for him to get four or five outings in games in the final week-and-a-half as the Cubs could "script" out an outing of 10-15 pitches every couple of days as necessary. A full complement of relievers in September helps make that a possibility.

There's also the possibility the games in that final week or 10 days are of less importance for the Cubs if they can take care of business over the next week or so and put some more distance between themselves and the Brewers in the division.

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Chicago Tribune

A Cubs-Brewers encore in October is just what baseball needs

By Paul Sullivan

The Cubs and Brewers finished their season series Wednesday night at Wrigley Field, but hopefully this isn't the last we see of them together.

It may or may not be a true rivalry, depending on you define the word, but the Cubs and Brewers have provided some great entertainment all year long, and an encore in October would be most welcome.

Really, would you want it any other way?

Um, yeah, Cubs shortstop Addison Russell said Wednesday before the series finale.

“With us being in the same division, I’d much rather get them out of the way,” Russell said. “We know what they bring to the table. They’re a great team. But any time you can get a team out of there, we’d want to get a team out of there.”

So the Cubs would rather have the Brewers out of the postseason altogether?

“Absolutely,” Russell said. “They have a great bullpen and great hitters as well. This is a hard division to win and they’re definitely one of the top teams so you definitely want to avoid that.

“And if we can help by (winning) tonight, we should do it tonight.”

But the Cubs couldn’t get the job done Wednesday night, losing 5-1 to the Brewers at Wrigley Field as their lead in the National League Central was trimmed to just one game. The Cubs have 17 games remaining, the Brewers 15.

Cubs fans seemingly have underestimated the Brewers all season, looking down on the small market team with a rotation that doesn’t include any recognizable faces.

But manager Joe Maddon has been singing their praises for quite some time, and the Cubs players know they’re in for a street fight whenever the two teams collide.

“You’re talking about a team that has been in it for three or four years,” Anthony Rizzo said.

Actually only two years, I reminded him. Rizzo was including the 2014 Brewers team that spent 133 days in first and was 19 games above .500 in June before going 9-17 in September and winding up 82-80.

They fired manager Ron Roenicke the next year and replaced him with Craig Counsell, then brought in a young general manager in David Stearns to execute a rebuild that happened quicker than anyone expected.

“I know that’s an external term that was used,” Stearns said. “But I was pretty careful never to use that term because I never thought that’s what we were going through in a conventional sense.”

OK, so if it wasn’t a rebuild, then what did Stearns call it?

“Our goal was to acquire and develop as much young talent as possible,” he replied. “We felt like we could do that in a timely manner and be competitive at the major-league level.”

They did just that, and Stearns added veterans Lorenzo Cain and Christian Yelich last offseason and Mike Moustakas and Jonathan Schoop in July, making the Brew Crew a real force.

“They have Lorenzo Cain, who’s kind of like the leader of the pack there,” Rizzo said. “They have a good lineup. Have to beat their starters, because the bullpen is pretty dangerous.”

That bullpen includes Josh Hader, who struck out all six batters he faced Monday night and three of four Wednesday, making the Cubs look impotent.

Rizzo, the leader of the pack in the Cubs lineup, had just three home runs in 16 games against the Brewers, while hitting just .150 (9-for-60) He has been stymied several times by the Brewers' defensive shifts that probably have stolen a handful of hits from him over the season.

"Yeah," Rizzo said, ending the conversation.

The Cubs may not be the only ones who don't want to see the Brewers in the postseason. You have to figure MLB would much prefer the Dodgers getting a wild-card spot, winning the game and facing the Cubs.

Obviously the Cubs and Dodgers both are national draws, while the Brewers' audience basically runs from Sheboygan County to Kenosha County, not that there's anything wrong with that.

Despite the fact this is the second straight year the Brewers have hung with the big-market Cubs into mid-September, and despite having the second-best record in the league on Wednesday, they didn't even merit a token appearance on ESPN's "Sunday Night Baseball."

"We have not," Counsell said. "That's a ratings thing, man. That's a business thing to me. That's how these things work. That's how I've always seen it.

"I mean the same teams are on "Sunday Night Baseball," the Red Sox and Yankees. ... I can't fight that. I don't think it will ever change."

Maybe not, but the Brewers can force their way into nationally televised, prime-time games this October, introducing themselves to America in the postseason.

And if the Cubs and Brewers are fortunate enough to meet again in an I-94 showdown, MLB would be lucky to have them.

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Chicago Tribune

3 things we learned from the Cubs-Brewers series at Wrigley Field

By Mark Gonzales

Here are 3 things we learned from the Cubs-Brewers series at Wrigley Field, in which the Brewers won two of three games:

1. Cubs' offense desperately needs a kick start.

Javier Baez can't carry the offense by himself, and no one has stepped up since Daniel Murphy's struggles started last weekend.

To make matters worse, the Cubs have generated no offense from the bottom of the order. The threat of the long ball has diminished somewhat while Kyle Schwarber copes with a stiff back. The lack of offense is wasting the Cubs' dependable starting pitching at a crucial time.

2. Josh Hader is scary good.

Like what Aroldis Chapman did for the Cubs during their stretch drive to the 2016 World Series, Hader possesses similar dominance for the Brewers. Even when he misses his target — as the reliever did Monday against Baez, he's still effective.

If the Cubs meet the Brewers in the playoffs, they will need to get a lead before Hader enters the game.

3. Lorenzo Cain has become a Cubs killer.

Cain might not be as speedy toward the final years of his five-year, \$80 million contract, but his legs and bat haunted the Cubs.

Cain robbed Baez of a hit by catching his sinking line drive near his knee while running at full speed in the fourth.

He was a constant nuisance for the Cubs, as he collected hits that figured in all of the Brewers' rallies in Wednesday's win. Cain has batted .338 in 19 games against the Cubs, including a .457 average in his final nine games.

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Chicago Tribune

It's time for the Cubs to pull out all the stops in their NL Central race
By Mark Gonzales

You can expect every possible resource to be used by every Cubs player expected to play in Thursday's makeup game at Nationals Park in an effort to protect their lead in the National League Central.

"It's September," Anthony Rizzo said late Wednesday night before the Cubs left Wrigley Field following a 5-1 loss that trimmed their lead to one game over the Brewers. "You figure out ways to get going. Just do what it takes that day to get ready for the game, and you figure it out.

"The energy is where it needs to be. We're in a good position to win this division. We just got to play baseball."

And play productive baseball. The Cubs' offense has gone into a funk since beating Aaron Nola and the Phillies 8-1 on Sept. 2. Since then, their five-game lead has been cut to one, and Javier Baez has been stuck on 30 home runs and 100 RBIs.

"We're still in first place," Baez said. "I'm not worried about that. We know what we can do as a team. If we keep playing with the (struggles), we're going to have pressure. We're going to keep having pressure on us.

"We got to go out there and play. That's what I think. Nobody is going to beat us if we go out there and play."

Baez, like Rizzo, downplayed fatigue as a factor for the offensive struggles. But should the Cubs and Brewers advance to the playoffs and face each other, the Cubs will have to cope with left-hander Josh Hader, whom manager Craig Counsell used wisely in securing two wins at Wrigley Field.

Hader struck out nine of the 10 batters he faced, including Kris Bryant, Rizzo and Bryant twice with the aid of a 97 mph fastball.

“He’s been huge for them and doing it all year,” Baez said. “If we don’t make that adjustment against him, they just going to keep bringing him in against us. It’s hard. The way he throws and the way we hit with a lot of power hitters in the lineup, it’s tough to catch up to the way he pitched.

“But we’ll see what happens these last two weeks or October, I guess.”

The Brewers have now won seven of their last 11 games against the Cubs with a more fortified roster that includes Curtis Granderson and Mike Moustakas, as well as a healthy Hader.

“We got the experience to be in the playoffs,” Baez said. “That’s where we got to control ourselves better. Hopefully we never have to face them in the playoffs. But if we do, we got the experience.”

Manager Joe Maddon, Rizzo and Baez were grateful that the City of Chicago assisted in allowing the Cubs to move the starting time of Friday’s game against the Reds from 1:20 p.m. to 7:05 p.m. so the players can get more rest following their zigzag venture to Washington, D.C.

“(But), we got a tough day (Thursday) in Washington,” Baez said.

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Chicago Tribune

Cubs move Friday's game at Wrigley to 7:05 p.m.; Thursday's makeup game in Washington still scheduled

By Mark Gonzales

The Cubs scored a minor consolation in the wake of their trip to Washington, D.C., to play a makeup game Thursday against the Nationals.

The team, with help from the city of Chicago, was able to change the starting time of Friday’s game at Wrigley Field against the Reds from 1:20 p.m. to 7:05 p.m.

The Cubs sought a switch in the start time of Friday’s game after their apparent hopes of rescheduling Thursday’s game at Nationals Park to after the end of the season didn’t materialize. After Wednesday night’s game with the Brewers, the Cubs will fly to Washington to play Thursday’s makeup game of Sunday’s rainout at 4:05 p.m. Eastern time, then return to Chicago after the game to open a three-game series against the Reds.

Manager Joe Maddon said during Wednesday’s pregame session that he already plans to keep some starting pitchers and outfielder Kyle Schwarber, who has a stiff back, at home. Left-hander Mike Montgomery, who is scheduled to start Thursday’s game, elected to fly with the team to Washington despite the anticipated short rest.

Montgomery, who hasn't pitched since Sept. 4, will likely oppose Joe Ross, who is 5-3 with a 5.01 ERA and 1.466 WHIP. Cy Young Award favorite Max Scherzer had been scheduled to start, but Nationals manager Dave Martinez reportedly is juggling the rotation.

Hurricane Florence is bearing down on the East Coast, and the Cubs have expressed concerns that weather could delay the game or their efforts to fly home Thursday night.

Left-hander Cole Hamels is scheduled to start Friday's game. Gates will open two hours before the first pitch.

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Chicago Tribune

Cubs' Central lead shrinks to 1 after scoring only 6 runs in losing 2 of 3 to the Brewers

By Mark Gonzales

The major issue for the Cubs no longer is trying to get through the mental grind of a 30-day stretch before their next scheduled day off Sept. 20.

Their biggest concern is generating the offense that helped them possess a five-game lead in the National League Central as recently as Sept. 3.

That offense has fizzled, which makes matters urgent as they embarked to Washington for a one-game trip for a makeup game Thursday with the Nationals. After flailing and failing in a 5-1 loss to the resurgent Brewers on Wednesday night at Wrigley Field their lead over Milwaukee in the National League Central is down to one game.

The Brewers scored single runs in the first and third innings off starter Kyle Hendricks before tacking on three runs in the ninth, one off reliever Steve Cishek and two off Brandon Kintzler.

"Maybe we're a little tired," Hendricks said after the game. "It has been a tough stretch for us. But we're fine. We know where we are and where we need to get to.

"We know what needs to be done — go to Washington and win that game."

The Cubs (84-61) scored only six runs in losing two of three to the Brewers (84-63), who trailed by five games before winning four of six from the Cubs in a pair of three-game series over a 10-day stretch.

"They're a different team than they were earlier," Cubs manager Joe Maddon said.

Before the game, Maddon sensed his batters have been afflicted with a combination of fatigue and high velocity from opposing pitchers.

That was apparent in the eighth when Josh Hader struck out Kris Bryant, Anthony Rizzo and Javier Baez — all on 97 mph fastballs. Hader struck out nine of the 10 batters he faced in this series.

The Cubs were limited to five hits through seven innings by Chase Anderson and relievers Jacob Barnes, Corey Knebel (who busted a 98 mph fastball past Albert Almora Jr. to end the sixth) and Joakim Soria.

After a dazzling start since being acquired from the Nationals, Daniel Murphy is hitless in his last 12 at-bats with four strikeouts. But he is only one of several hitters who have struggled.

Anthony Rizzo is in an 0-for-16 rut, and he stranded Kris Bryant at second base to end the fifth after Bryant hit an RBI double that nearly cleared the basket in left-center field.

"Our offense has taken a hit," Maddon said. "No question. It has to get better. There's no other way to look at it."

After reaching the 30-home run, 100-RBI mark on Sept. 3, Javier Baez is 5-for-30 with 14 strikeouts. Maddon said that Thursday would have been the perfect time to rest Baez, but that option was lost with the makeup game that the Cubs unsuccessfully hoped would have been rescheduled for after the regular season.

One possible theory for their hitting woes that Maddon dismissed was the change in hitting philosophy from the launch angle former hitting coach John Mallee stressed (that resulted in 822 runs) to more of an emphasis on using the entire field and hitting more efficiently with runners in scoring position under the tutelage of Chili Davis and Andy Haines.

“The guys work all the time, whether it’s with Chili or Andy,” Maddon said. “They devour video and data information. Right now, the hard contact is not there for the most part. I don’t have any solid explanations. I don’t.”

Maddon reiterated he doesn’t want his players taking extra batting practice, especially during this daunting stretch.

“It has been more of the same for us,” Hendricks said. “We’ve been through a lot. It kind of makes you tougher in the end. That’s the approach we take.”

But the Cubs have scored three runs or fewer in three of their last four games entering play Wednesday, and the overall power and production of Willson Contreras and Addison Russell have tailed off significantly from 2017.

“We do need a breather,” Maddon said. “It’s not happening for a week. So we have to figure it out somehow. We will.”

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Chicago Tribune

Cubs’ Yu Darvish undergoes elbow surgery, expected to be ready for spring training

By Mark Gonzales

Cubs pitcher Yu Darvish underwent arthroscopic surgery Wednesday to remove debris from his right pitching elbow.

Darvish, who was shut down three weeks ago after being diagnosed with a stress reaction on the top of his elbow, is expected to be ready for spring training.

The surgery was performed by Rangers doctor Keith Meister after a second opinion by Dr. James Andrews.

“He’s had some issues all year,” manager Joe Maddon said. “The conclusion is he needed this procedure.”

Darvish hasn’t pitched since May 20 because of elbow issues. He was 1-3 with a 4.95 ERA in eight starts in the first year of a six-year, \$126 million contract.

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Chicago Tribune

Cubs will travel to Washington without Kyle Schwarber, some starting pitchers

By Mark Gonzales

Some Cubs players will get a break by not accompanying the team on its two-hour flight to Washington after Wednesday night's game.

Manager Joe Maddon said several starting pitchers and slugger Kyle Schwarber will stay in Chicago while the team plays the Nationals at 3:05 p.m Thursday in a rescheduled game at Nationals Park.

Schwarber has been dealing with a stiff back. Starting pitchers Kyle Hendricks, who started Wednesday night, and left-hander Cole Hamels, who is scheduled to pitch Friday's series opener against the Reds, are among those expected to stay in Chicago.

Left-hander Mike Montgomery didn't fly to Washington ahead of the team. He was set to fly on the team charter before facing the Nationals will little overnight rest.

Meanwhile, left-hander Jon Lester remains on schedule to pitch Saturday as he recovers from a back spasm. Lester threw on the side Wednesday.

"He's fine," Maddon said. "I'm working under the assumption he'll be fine."

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Chicago Sun-Times

Tough loss to Brewers? Now season gets really tough for Cubs

By Gordon Wittenmyer

The Cubs and the Brewers are finally done playing this season.

But make no mistake: Neither of the top contenders in the National League Central is done with the other.

"They're definitely coming for us. We can feel it," said Cubs starter Kyle Hendricks after the Brewers' 5-1 victory Wednesday night squeezed the Cubs' lead in the division to one game over the second-place Brewers.

As tough as it looked losing this series to the Brewers, it only gets tougher from here, as they continue a 30-day stretch without a day off with a one-day detour Thursday to Washington for a makeup game before resuming their homestand Friday against the Reds.

They're 13-9 so far in that stretch with losses in four of their last five games, and six of nine since they owned a season-high five-game lead in the division Sept. 2.

"We're still in first place," said Javy Baez, one of three strikeout victims of Brewers relief ace Josh Hader in the eighth inning. "I'm not worried about that because we know what we can do as a team. If we keep playing with [struggles], we're going to have pressure, we're going to keep having pressure on us. You've got to go out there and play.

"Nobody is going to beat us if we go out there and play."

Whether they admit it or not, fatigue is becoming a factor.

“It’s going to sound like an excuse, but we do need a rest,” manager Joe Maddon said. “They just need to lay the body down for one day.”

That’s not happening anytime soon for a team that has two more games to play down the stretch than each of their rivals from Milwaukee and St. Louis.

Thursday’s makeup of Sunday’s rainout in Washington is just the start of a 17-game fight for their October lives, including a three-day trip to Arizona starting Monday, a three-game season-ender against the Cardinals at home and a lone, compromised day off in between when they arrive back in Chicago around 5 a.m. following the Arizona trip.

“It’s a pretty bad scenario for sure,” said Hendricks (11-11), who allowed two runs in five innings before being lifted for a pinch hitter. “But we’ve been through so much adversity; we’ve had some tough trips in the past, even in the playoffs we’ve had some brutal travel days.

“I think it kind of makes you tougher in the end. So that’s the approach we take: Don’t count us out. Kind of a little bit of an underdog. But we’ll make it through this stretch all right.”

At the very least, it promises to be the most compelling finish for the Cubs since their four-year competitive window began in 2015.

Pressure? Anxiety? At least a different vibe this time around?

“Nothing changes,” said center fielder Albert Almora Jr., who spent much of Wednesday night filling a defensive highlight reel against Travis Shaw, Christian Yelich and Mike Moustakas.

“There’s a few more cameras, a lot more media people,” Almora said. “But it’s got that good feel, that feel of playoff baseball. And that’s what we play for. That’s where we want to be; we want to be in this situation where we’re competing for a World Series.”

They’ll have the Brewers — and possibly the third-place Cardinals — to contend with in the division before they get too far into that thought process.

After winning eight of the first nine against the Brewers this season, the Cubs lost seven of the final 10 meetings. They haven’t won a series against Milwaukee since April.

“It’s been outstanding all year actually. We kind of got them a little bit early, but I knew that was not going to sustain itself. They’re a different team than they were early,” said Maddon, pointing to trades the Brewers made to better balance their lineup and bench, and moves to strengthen their pitching. So none of this is surprising.”

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Chicago Sun-Times

Cubs won’t force Brandon Morrow back into closer role when he’s back from injury

By Gordon Wittenmyer

After an encouraging bullpen session Wednesday, right-hander Brandon Morrow vowed to return to action this month for the first time since mid-July.

But can he be the closer in October the Cubs envisioned when they signed him to that two-year deal last winter?

“I don’t think it matters,” said Morrow, who threw all his pitches and reached 90-plus mph during a 35-pitch session at less than full throttle.

“I think we’ve got guys to cover all the innings. I’m hoping to be back and contribute in any way. There haven’t been any hiccups with [Pedro Strop], so there’s no reason to switch up what’s been working, even if I come back 101 percent.”

Even with Strop’s 11-for-13 performance in save situations since Morrow went on the disabled list at the All-Star break because of an elbow issue, the Cubs and the fan base don’t view Morrow’s return with the same ambivalence.

“It would matter that he’s able to participate in the bullpen effectively,” manager Joe Maddon said. “And then if he happens to be pitching well enough and he can recover and he feels great, then you make him the closer again.

“Of course, you want him to be that guy. But if he’s not ready yet, you don’t force it.”

Morrow, 34, who still deals with “achiness” because of a bone bruise in his elbow, said he has “more pep in my step” as he has seen progress the last week and expects to throw a simulated game in the next few days.

Barring a setback, that would be the final step before a return to the mound in a low-leverage game situation, possibly by the end of next week.

Morrow, who was a key force in the Dodgers’ bullpen on the way to the World Series last year, is 22-for-24 in save chances with a 1.47 ERA this season. And his return is considered a key to the Cubs’ playoff plans.

“It’s definitely unfair to everyone else [in the bullpen],” he said. “They don’t need me to win games; that’s been evident. We still have the best record in the National League without me for half the year, so it’s obviously not like I’m the key.

“But I think everybody helps. I bring at least a little bit of experience from last year, and I’m going to be happy to be back and ready.”

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Chicago Sun-Times

Yu Darvish undergoes ‘debridement surgery’; Cubs expect him ready for 2019

By Gordon Wittenmyer

Right-hander Yu Darvish said during his lengthy rehab process that he expected to avoid additional surgery on his achy elbow.

But after being shut down for the season in late August, Darvish sought another medical opinion. On Wednesday, he underwent an arthroscopic debridement — or “clean-out” — of the elbow in Dallas.

It's unclear what "debris" was removed, but the Cubs characterized the surgery as routine. And they expect Darvish to return healthy and ready when spring training starts in February.

"It sounds like it was not highly invasive, but anytime you have surgery, it's surgery," manager Joe Maddon said.

"I don't know if surprise or not surprised is the right word. He's had some issues all year; we know that. And the conclusion is that he needed this procedure. I barely got my doctor of letters as an honorary degree in 2010. I was on the 35-year plan at Lafayette."

Darvish, who was diagnosed with triceps tendinitis and eventually a stress-reaction bone bruise in his surgically rebuilt elbow, went 1-4 with a 4.95 ERA in eight starts in the first year of his six-year, \$126 million contract.

Gordon Wittenmyer

@GDubCub

Darvish got second opinion on elbow from Andrews. Had arthroscopic "cleanout" surgery on elbow by Dr. Meister in Texas. Expected to 100% by spring.

Jon Lester, who left his start Monday because of back spasms, was well enough to play with his sons at the ballpark before the game and remains on his regular schedule to start Saturday against the Reds.

"I'm working under the assumption that he's going to be fine," Maddon said.

† Left fielder Kyle Schwarber, who has made one start since leaving a game Sept. 5 with back pain, still is bothered enough by the injury that he'll stay behind when the team travels to Washington for Thursday's makeup game. Four starting pitchers and anybody else ruled out for availability also will stay back.

† The Cubs' 1:20 p.m. scheduled start time for the series opener Friday against the Reds has been pushed back to 7:05 p.m. to help accommodate the turnaround from the quick trip to Washington.

† Maddon said he expects to continue to pair backup catcher Victor Caratini with left-hander Cole Hamels, but, otherwise, slumping Willson Contreras remains his regular starter. Contreras was 3-for-24 since Aug. 30 entering play Wednesday.

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Chicago Sun-Times

The struggling Cubs say they're tired; nobody wants to hear it

By Rick Morrissey

So here the Cubs are, clinging to a sliver of a division lead and going to a place they don't want to be to play a game they don't want to play.

A 5-1 loss to Milwaukee on Wednesday at Wrigley Field featured the same whisper of an offensive attack that has plagued them since their five-game lead in the National League Central started to shrink at the beginning of the month. The lead over the Brewers is down to one game.

Now the Cubs have to fly to Washington to play the Nationals on Thursday in a makeup game of Sunday's rainout. It will be their 24th game in 24 days. By the time they get to their next off day, they'll

have played 30 games in 30 days, including two doubleheaders. If you haven't heard about this, you live alone in a cave.

It's why the Cubs lobbied so hard for the makeup game to be pushed to the end of the season. Major League Baseball said sorry, no. And what's left is the echo of the Cubs' complaints about having to play so many games in a concentrated period.

Too bad.

There's only one way for them to deal with this. And that's to deal with it.

Play the games in front of you, even if they're strung together like Christmas lights.

No whining. No complaining. No eulogies for dead legs and arms.

You play. And if you're as good a team as you think you are, you'll still be standing when the playoffs come.

September has taken on a strange emptiness for the Cubs, a club that thrived the previous three seasons down the stretch. Wherever they are right now is not a fun place to be, and if they don't get themselves out of it soon, they'll be watching the playoffs on television. Wednesday's loss was their fourth in five games, and what seemed like a ridiculous thought – a postseason without the Cubs – isn't quite so out there anymore.

They're not done. It would be silly to say that about a team that has been to three straight NL Championship Series. It would be ridiculous to write an obituary for a team that is still in first place and has 10 of its final 17 games at home.

But as Wednesday night dragged on, one team rose to the occasion and another stared blankly into space. The Brewers never stopped, and the Cubs never started. You can blame it on fatigue, but that sounds suspiciously like an excuse. It doesn't sound like a team that has prided itself on being fresh when it mattered.

And it's not as if the Brewers have been out pricing swimsuits. Wednesday's game was their 21st in 23 days. A day off here and there, yes. Weekends and holidays off, no.

"We're in the same place as we've always been," said Cubs pitcher Kyle Hendricks, who took the loss Wednesday. "Maybe a little tired to be honest. Obviously it's been a tough stretch for us, but we're fine. We know where we are; we know where we want to get to. And we always have confidence in the group that we have in that clubhouse."

If you talk about something enough, it can take on bigger proportions. This 30-in-30 stretch is starting to sound like 40 years in the desert. And Moises Alou isn't here to lead them out.

Reporters have asked manager Joe Maddon about the long string of games, and he has dutifully answered every question. This might have been the time for him to go against his nature and offer something worthy of the button-lipped Bill Belichick.

But he didn't. On Monday, he talked about the effect of rainouts on a ballclub.

"When you get rained out, it's not a day off," he said. "People have to understand that. Your motor's still running, you go through your routine, you practice like you normally practice, you do the normal stuff, you get ready, and then you sit and then the game's not played, which might even be worse than having to actually play

"... You're going to get the semantic argument about that. And my best answer would be, walk in their shoes, the players' shoes. I guess from the outside looking in you could possibly manipulate your thoughts to the point where you could convince yourself that it was a day off, but I'm telling you it's not."

If a player wasn't tired before listening to that, he is now.

No Cub looked like he was going to get a hit Wednesday night. There was hardly a suggestion of it. That's how bad it was. The team scored six runs in the three-game series against the Brewers.

This isn't about unfair scheduling, bad luck or the demands of a baseball season. This is about a team that has lost its way of late. Time for the Cubs to try to rediscover themselves in Washington.

They'd prefer not to be there? Again, too bad. There will be plenty of time to rest in a city of their choice when the season is over. Time to go to work. If not now, then never.

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Daily Herald

'We've got to get better': Cubs offense struggles again against Brewers

By Bruce Miles

One of the favorite axioms of Chicago Cubs manager Joe Maddon is that "September creates its own energy."

The Cubs have been struggling to find that energy on offense lately.

Such was the case again Wednesday night in the series finale against the Milwaukee Brewers at Wrigley Field. The Brewers scored early and held on for a 5-1 victory, taking two of three in the series and moving back to within 1 game of the first-place Cubs in the National League Central.

Curtis Granderson had a triple, single and a home run for the Brewers. His ninth-inning homer gave Milwaukee a 3-1 lead.

Even in victory Tuesday, the Cubs managed just 3 hits. Wednesday, they struggled to put runs across against starting pitcher Chase Anderson and the Brewers' bullpen.

They kept themselves in the game with decent pitching and outfield catches by Ben Zobrist and Albert Almora Jr., who atoned for a first-inning error with a pair of diving catches.

"The offense has taken a hit, there's no question, no pun intended," said Maddon, whose team fell to 84-61. "We've got to get better. There's just no other way to look at it. I think we have to find that within ourselves."

The Cubs are in a stretch of 30 straight scheduled game days with a makeup game set for Thursday afternoon at Washington followed by a Friday night game back at home. They're doing their best to put on a brave face, but it looks like fatigue has definitely set in.

"We're still in first place," said infielder Javier Baez. "I'm not worried about that because we know we can do it."

Maddon said his players are doing their best to conjure up September energy despite the schedule and the quick up and back to D.C.

"Our guys have been spectacular," he said. "Of course, nobody's really happy. That's disingenuous if I said that. But we're going to get on a plane and we're going to play."

"I spoke about it yesterday, about keeping a switch on. Because if you don't, you're going to get your butt beat tomorrow. But I'm certain the Nationals are not really happy about this either. It's one of those things that neither team is excited about, but it's a little more difficult for us."

The Brewers (84-63) picked up a run in the first off Kyle Hendricks. Granderson led off with a triple to left-center. The play originally was ruled a home run, but replay showed the ball bounced off the basket in front of the bleachers. After Christian Yelich popped out, Lorenzo Cain singled home Granderson. The ball got past Almora for an error, but no further runs scored.

Hendricks gave up 3 singles to load the bases in the third. Travis Shaw hit a sacrifice fly to give the Brewers a 2-0 lead.

Anderson was gone after 4 innings, and the Cubs got a run off Jacob Barnes in the fifth when Kris Bryant doubled home Tommy La Stella, who led off with a pinch single, going to second on a throwing error and moving to third on a groundout.

"We're at the same place we've always been, maybe a little tired, to be honest," said Hendricks, who fell to 11-11. "It's been a tough stretch, but we're fine. We know where we are. We know where we want to get to, and we always have confidence in the group we have in that clubhouse."

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Daily Herald

Cubs move Friday's game against Reds to 7:05 p.m. start

By Bruce Miles

Cubs manager Joe Maddon prefers night games to day games, and he'll get another night game Friday when the Cubs host the Cincinnati Reds.

The team announced Wednesday night that Friday's game has been moved from 1:20 p.m. to 7:05 p.m. The switch, which needed approval from the city of Chicago, was made to help ease a scheduling burden.

The Cubs and the Washington Nationals will play a makeup game Thursday at 3:05 p.m. CDT in Washington, and the Cubs will fly home after that. Last season, the Cubs played their first regular-season Friday night game in September to provide relief after a Thursday night game at Pittsburgh. The team's agreement with the city prohibits them from playing Friday night home games during the regular season.

"To play later in the day Friday would definitely be a boon to us somehow," Maddon said. "The thought of playing in Washington and getting out of there late, we do gain an hour coming back, obviously. But nevertheless, the later start, just a little bit of rest, a little bit of sleep will help the guys a lot."

Morrow gets closer:

Brandon Morrow threw "about 35 pitches" off the bullpen mound Wednesday, and the erstwhile Cubs closer said he may be ready for game action by the end of next week.

The Cubs will play the White Sox in a three-game series at Guaranteed Rate Field Sept. 21-23.

"I feel like I'm on the right track and like I'm getting stronger and progressing toward a sim (simulated) game, which I don't have a date for but it should be in the next 2-3-4 days," he said. "I wouldn't say I unleashed, but I definitely gave it a little bit more extra. They have all the equipment down there, too, so I was pleasantly surprised with some of the velocities toward the end of it."

Morrow has been on the disabled list since mid-July with right-biceps inflammation. The Cubs signed him to a two-year contract last December to be their closer after he worked primarily as a setup man for the Los Angeles Dodgers. He appeared in all seven World Series games last fall.

Pedro Strop has picked up the slack at the back end of the bullpen, and he entered Wednesday with 13 saves. The Cubs won't throw Morrow back into the closer's role when he first comes back, and he might not close for the rest of the regular season or the postseason, if the Cubs make it.

"I don't think it matters," he said. "We've got guys to cover all the innings. I'm hoping to be back and contribute in any way. I don't think it matters what inning it is for me. I'm just looking to coming back and contributing."

Darvish undergoes procedure:

The Cubs said pitcher Yu Darvish underwent an arthroscopic debridement (cleanup) of his right elbow Wednesday after getting a second medical opinion.

Darvish has not pitched since May as he has been out since then with right-triceps tendinitis and elbow discomfort.

The Cubs said Wednesday's procedure was minimally invasive and that they expect Darvish to be fully recovered by spring training.

Score that one a hit:

Joe Maddon said he'd like batters to get credit for a hit on balls misplayed by infielders playing in the outfield while shifting.

"I think if a second baseman is playing on the outfield grass and the ball's hit to him and he's unable to complete the play, the hitter should get a hit on that play," Maddon said. "If you want to create some kind of fairness or standard within the game, you've already put the guy (the hitter) at a disadvantage by putting the fielder in such a depth situation."

"I'd like to put that out there to be talked about because we've been hurt a little bit, our guys have. It's tough. They go out there and they're already set up defensively. I'm not complaining because I was involved in that several years ago, the shift thing."

"But if the guy can't make a play and he starts on the grass and ends on the grass, you've got to give that guy (the batter) a hit because that is no longer a routine play.

"Last point, when you're fielding the ball off the grass, it's totally different than fielding it off the dirt. There's a different everything about it."

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The Athletic

Cubs try to regroup as Brewers turn up the heat in NL Central race: 'They're coming for us. We can feel it.'

By Patrick Mooney

Here's a clear-eyed view of the 2018 Cubs: Sometimes it's hard to tell if this team is the National League's World Series favorite or on the verge of a system-wide collapse. This is beyond the R-E-L-A-X portion of the year or it's-a-long-season reminders. The big picture is everything that's happening right now.

Kyle Hendricks shrugged his shoulders while sitting in the Wrigley Field interview room after Wednesday night's 5-1 loss to the Milwaukee Brewers cut the division lead down to one game. Javier Báez shook his head and said no excuses as he stood at his locker while the Cubs packed for an overnight flight to Washington and Thursday afternoon's rescheduled game at Nationals Park.

What's obvious is that the Brewers are for real after years of shrewd moves, growing pains, Twitter trolling and mind games about whether or not this is actually a rivalry.

"They're definitely coming for us," Hendricks said. "We can feel it. That's why we just have to focus on what we do and play our brand of baseball."

What is that, exactly? The rotation is finally starting to roll, but manager Joe Maddon felt the need to pinch-hit for Hendricks after five innings and 77 pitches, looking for an offensive spark in a 2-0 game. The Cubs won one game during this three-game series while scoring five runs (four earned) and hitting .157 (14-for-89) with 29 strikeouts and only four extra-base hits (zero homers).

You know it's a bad day for the Cubs when the good news is a compromise with city officials for Friday night lights at Wrigley Field, moving the first pitch against the Cincinnati Reds from 1:20 to 7:05 p.m., accommodating a team without a real day off between Aug. 20 and Sept. 20.

Even one of the team's greatest strengths — its ability to rise to the moment and perform when it matters most — can sometimes feel like a weakness when the Cubs flip it like an on/off switch.

"We've been here before," shortstop Addison Russell said. "We know how to handle the situation and the pressure."

While still a defensive standout, Russell looks nothing like the clutch hitter who generated 21 homers and 95 RBIs during the 2016 World Series campaign. The MVP buzz is beginning to wear off for Baez, who reached the 30-homer and 100-RBIs marks on Sept. 2 and has been stuck there ever since. It's getting harder and harder to tell the difference between All-Star catcher Willson Contreras — who's put up a .616 second-half OPS and no home runs since Aug. 1 — and backup Victor Caratini. Even Daniel Murphy has cooled off since his game-changing August waiver trade from the Nationals.

Big-game pitcher Jon Lester exited his last start with lower-back tightness. Gold Glove outfielder Jason Heyward and closer Brandon Morrow are still on the disabled list. Outfielder Kyle Schwarber won't travel with the team to Washington while getting treatment for his back issue.

Bullpen stalwart Steve Cishek (2.34 ERA in 71 appearances) has given up at least one run in five of his last nine outings. Enigmatic reliever Carl Edwards Jr. has faced 17 batters in September and given up six walks and four hits.

"There shouldn't be panic," unofficial closer Pedro Strop said. "We all know it's going to be a battle because (the Brewers) have a really good team. Even the Cardinals have a good team. That's the fun part. If you don't have somebody to fight, it's not going to be fun."

After Thursday's makeup game in Washington, the Cubs will play 13 of their final 16 games in Chicago, including three against the Cardinals (currently 3 1/2 games back) to close out the regular season and potentially decide the NL Central. But a hallmark of this golden age at Wrigley Field has been the ability to block out all the external noise, distill each at-bat and shift the focus onto the next pitch.

"It's the only way to live," Maddon said. "In this game, 162, it is about the moment. Every inning, I yell out, 'Let's win the inning.' You yell out, 'Just get an out.' You don't want to look beyond that. And if you do win innings — and if you do just concentrate on getting an out — it all piles up by the end of the game.

"When you think in the macro in those moments, then all of a sudden it becomes ominous. You try to piece it together, it becomes more difficult. Let it play out, moment by moment. Take care of the moments and eventually you can have a good result."

After the Brewers swept a three-game series at Wrigley Field almost exactly a year ago (Sept. 8-10) to close within two games of first place, veteran outfielder Jon Jay, now an Arizona Diamondback, called a team meeting to remind the Cubs how hard they worked to get to that point and reassure the younger players in the clubhouse.

"We have a lot of veteran guys come through this team," Strop said. "They bring a lot of positive stuff into this clubhouse and to the young guys. I remember David Ross and those guys used to say, 'One at a time. One at a time. Every time.' Now it's become part of us."

Those Brewers still finished last season six games behind the Cubs and out of the playoffs, but this is a superior Milwaukee team with Lorenzo Cain and Christian Yelich, a dynamic bullpen and a much deeper roster after a series of trade-deadline deals.

Who are these Cubs? We're about to find out.

"We have so much confidence in our guys and what we do," Hendricks said. "We just take it one game at a time. No game is bigger than the next. Our focus now is to go to D.C. and try and win that ballgame."

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The Athletic

With the Cubs desperate for rest, their bats continue to slumber

By Sahadev Sharma

A May rainout in Atlanta had this stretch of 23 games in 23 days circled on the calendar for a while. The fact that the Cubs offense came limping into that stretch with four straight games of scoring just one run (all on solo homers) didn't leave many feeling optimistic. That they started the stretch extending that streak to five games made many wonder if it would lead to their eventual demise.

But then something clicked. The offense got going, the Cubs won games started by Noah Syndergaard, Jacob deGrom and Mike Foltynewicz and capped off the first 13 games of a dreadful stretch by beating Aaron Nola and heading to Milwaukee on a 10-2 run (10-3 to start the 23 straight). But then they lost two of three to the Brewers in Miller Park. Then two of three in a shortened, rain-soaked series in Washington that extended their stretch without a true off day to 30 straight days. And with Wednesday's 5-1 loss, they now sit just a measly one game ahead of Milwaukee for first place in the division and look completely gassed with another week before they'll get a full day off.

"We're still in first place," Javier Báez said. "I'm not worried about that because we know what we can do. As a team, if we keep playing (this style), we're going to keep having pressure on us. We just gotta go out there and play. That's what I think. Nobody is going to beat us if we go out there and play."

The MVP candidate started his night with a walk and a 106-mph lineout (one of a few well-hit balls that found an outfielder's glove on the night), but then struck out in his final two at-bats, the last of which came against Josh Hader, who faced 10 batters in the series and struck out nine of them. In that 8-1 win 10 days ago against Nola and the Philadelphia Phillies, Báez went 2-for-5 with a triple and a homer. Since then, he's 5-for-30 with just one extra-base hit and 15 strikeouts.

That sudden downturn is symbolic of the entire offense's struggles of late. In the nine games since that eight-run outburst in Philly, the Cubs are 3-6 and averaging 3.56 runs per game. That's actually below the mark they averaged in the 31 games after the All-Star break (3.65), which ranked 28th in baseball during that span. It seemed as though they'd turned a corner during that 10-2 run, averaging 5.83 runs per game, but they're right back in that rut.

"It happens," Rizzo said. "It's happened to us all year. We've hit well, we haven't hit well. But overall, the attitude and the energy is where it needs to be. I think we're in a very good position to win this division and we just gotta keep playing good baseball."

The Cubs are certainly in a good position to win the division. That's always the case when you're in first place (by two games in the loss column) in mid-September. But it feels very tenuous when considering the way the last week-plus has gone and the fact that they haven't had a normal day off since Aug. 20 and don't have another in sight until Sept. 20.

"It would sound like an excuse, but we do need the rest," Maddon said. "They need a break. It's not happening for another week, so you gotta figure it out somehow. They will. They're a very talented group. So I know we'll get through this somehow and come out better at the end. But they just need to lay the body down for one day."

There's no doubt this stretch is a test of the Cubs' will and character. They've shown they'll never be a mentally weak group. But more so it's the physical toll this will take, and already has taken, on them that they must somehow figure out a way to overcome.

It's not just Báez who is struggling. After starting his Cubs career slashing .316/.339/.579 in 59 plate appearances, Daniel Murphy has just two singles in his last 20 at-bats. Rizzo had a 1.253 OPS over a stretch of 22 games, but now finds himself in an 0-for-18 slump. Ben Zobrist is still hitting a bit, but Maddon has been finding ways to rest him on a consistent basis.

And if there are doubts that the long stretch of play is the reason for this performance, Kris Bryant is evidence of the benefit of rest. The former MVP came off the disabled list on Sept. 1 and is finally hitting his groove. While the rest of his team looks completely spent, Bryant is putting together some of his best plate appearances since he hurt his shoulder in mid-May. He's been hitting the ball much harder (his average exit velocity since he returned is about three miles per hour higher than it was after the shoulder injury) and on Wednesday he went 2-for-3 with a walk and a double that missed being a game-tying home run by inches.

But that's about all that's gone right for this offense of late.

"The offense has taken a hit, there's no question," Maddon said. "We gotta get better. There's just no other way to look at it. We have to find that within ourselves. We're just not consistently making hard contact by any means. And I can't defend that."

Take a look at the team's six, seven and nine hitters on this night. Willson Contreras has a 44 wRC+ in his last 30 games. Albert Almora has a 47 wRC+ in his last 54 games. Addison Russell has a 2 wRC+ in September (yes, that's a two) and a 35 wRC+ in his last 42 games. Those three players combined to go 1-for-10 with a single and walk on Wednesday.

"Right now, the hard contact is not there for the most part," Maddon said. "I don't have any solid explanations, I don't. We try to lay low before we left regarding extra BP and not swinging so much. I don't know if the malaise, if the part of (23) in a row and now up to 30 in a row. I don't even know if you could tie it into that somehow also. But, it's true. We just have not struck the ball nearly as well. I don't know if it's plus velocity plus fatigue equals soft contact. I don't know what exactly is going on but we gotta get back to hitting the ball hard like we can."

Entering the day, the Cubs were 24th in baseball with a 32.3 percent hard-hit rate. That's down two points over the past week, and since the All-Star break, they're 29th in baseball at 31 percent. It's led to an ISO of .149 since the break, 24th during that stretch.

But as much as Maddon will talk about the team clearly being tired and having to push through, the players don't seem to want to hear it.

"Are we in a long stretch of something?" Rizzo asked, perhaps not sarcastically.

They know they have to get back on track. A late-night trip to the nation's capital will have them getting to bed around 4 a.m. Thursday morning. They'll hope to miss any rain there and head back home for a night game on Friday (after Wednesday's loss, Maddon made sure to thank whoever was responsible for changing that from a day game) and then head all the way to Arizona Sunday night before returning late Wednesday to finally get a day off at home on Thursday.

As the Cubs have watched their division lead shrink from five games to one, the past 10 days have provided many lessons. They've shown that in baseball, fortunes can change quickly, and have also proved how important a mere day's rest can be. One of those two truths will likely end up defining this Cubs season.

But the Cubs are not going to make excuses. They'll take the challenge head on, even if it knocks them out of first place and into a do-or-die wild-card situation — or worse. This isn't the first challenge this group has faced, but at the moment, it feels like one of the toughest.

“We’re just trying to do our best to take off,” Báez said. “I feel like that’s coming soon.”

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The Athletic

Can the Cubs flip their switch and beat the Nationals on Thursday?

By Jon Greenberg

On Tuesday afternoon, the crux of the media pack’s interactions with the Cubs in the clubhouse had to do with the instability of the schedule.

Would the Cubs get a day off this week? Would they have to fly into Washington D.C. with Hurricane Florence bearing down on the East Coast? Could they play a makeup game in Milwaukee? Chicago? Could they simulate the game on PS4? Maybe a Fortnite battle royale?

Cubs president Theo Epstein tried to speak his truth into existence all week, telling reporters and radio shows “Common sense will prevail” and “Major League Baseball will not send us into a dangerous situation and I can’t imagine that they would send us somewhere with rain.”

Well, after all that, the Cubs are going to Washington D.C., where common sense (checks notes) doesn’t always prevail. And the Cubs are going there with a one-game lead in the NL Central after losing two of three to Milwaukee. A 5-1 loss to the Brewers on Wednesday sent them on their less-than-merry way.

The potential weather problems — you know, a hurricane — in Washington D.C. is bad enough, but the Cubs are just as concerned with their lost off-day. Wednesday was supposed to be the end of the 23-in-a-row streak that was already over the standard limit for consecutive games because of a makeup contest in Atlanta. If the Cubs play Thursday, it’ll be 30 in a row.

Cubs manager Joe Maddon mentioned that fact once or 30 times this week.

“The weather sounds good,” he said Wednesday of an improved forecast for Thursday’s late afternoon game. “But that has not been my personal issue regarding all this. Even if it was 72 and balmy, it would not matter. It’s about 30 consecutive days. I think that’s not being spoken about enough. The emphasis is on the weather, and rightfully so. It’s a hurricane that’s going to impact a lot of lives. That’s a totally different subject, one that’s much more worthwhile. For us in the baseball world, playing 30 consecutive days, that’s the difficult part. So for me, I don’t think that’s been discussed enough regarding whether to play or not. Everybody’s making it into a weather-related issue. For me, it’s a 30-day issue. That’s my bigger concern.”

Whether it’s 30 days in a row or 20 days, Anthony Rizzo joked he could use a day away from seeing the same faces in the clubhouse. When did the Cubs report to camp? Mid-February? The Cubs have it good, working wise, but it’s still a job.

“I love all my teammates but seeing them 30 days in a row is not what I intend to do on a daily basis,” he said Tuesday. “The one day away from them goes for two weeks seeing them.”

Anyone in particular?

“Just the collective unit,” he said.

What about the beat writers? Wasn’t he glad he gets to see familiar faces every day for a month?

“You guys fucking take off!” he said, before pointing to one reporter. “I haven’t seen him at a fucking weekend (game) all year.”

Rizzo, who has built good relationships with the Chicago media as his speaking duties have increased, was in good spirits when he dropped those f-bombs. I’m less sure he’s as chipper to fly out to D.C. and then come right back for a weekend series against the Reds. At least the Cubs got the city’s approval to move Friday’s game from 1:20 p.m. to 7:05 p.m.

While they won’t get their dearly desired off-day, at least they can sleep in Friday.

Some players say they’d rather have this schedule crunch now, with expanded rosters. But the timing is pretty dreadful. The Cubs should be getting geared up for October, mentally and physically, but the schedule looks like it’s taking a toll. They’re not playing like they’re ready for a long postseason run. It probably doesn’t help that everyone is harping on the schedule, but like the weather, it’s just something that’s easy to talk about.

“Fatigue is nasty,” Maddon said the other day. “When you get a tired mind, it’s not easy to play at your top level. It’s just not. You know what it’s like when you feel like your brain is swimming writer’s block and writer’s cramp.”

Do we ever. I can barely write coherently after night games anymore. If I wrote about 30 games in a row, my 30th column would just be 1,000 semi-colons. But the Cubs players are in better shape than sportswriters. They’re built for this kind of exertion.

The Cubs are 13-9 since their last official off-day back on Aug. 20 and their next off-day comes next Thursday after a night game in Arizona and before a weekend series at Guaranteed Rate Field.

Things haven’t gone that bad during this stretch, the Brewers have just caught up to them, making up four games with some head-to-head success.

Playing all these games in a row would be one thing if the Cubs were humming right now. But they’re not. The starting pitching has been good, but the bullpen has been shaky in certain spots and the hitters have been inconsistent to downright bad.

“I don’t know if plus velocity or plus-plus velocity plus fatigue equals soft contact,” Maddon said before Wednesday’s game, in which the Cubs managed six hits, five of which were singles, and struck out 10 times. “I don’t know exactly what’s going on but we gotta get back to hitting the ball harder.”

With a one-game lead, the Cubs might indeed find themselves playing on Oct. 1, the day after the regular season ends, which is where they wanted this makeup game moved (if necessary). That’s when the Cubs and Brewers would play a tiebreaker game.

But that’s a long way off. The Cubs are still in the driver’s seat, and can help themselves by not complaining about the schedule, showing up to play Thursday, rain or not. That’s something Maddon is preaching to his players in private when he’s not making his point known to MLB, publicly.

“You always gotta keep the switch on,” Maddon said he reminded Rizzo of on Tuesday. “When you get through a rain delay, you’ve always got to think you’re going to play. When you’re scheduled to play in Washington on Thursday and there’s a potential hurricane you’ve still got to think you’re gonna play.

“The trap there is to think you don’t want to play or you’re not going to play and then all of a sudden you are and then you’ve got to turn the switch on. That normally creates a bad result. It’s a tough stretch, one of the worst you’re going to go through in baseball, but you’ve got to keep the switch on.”

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