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Kepler takes break with bruised left hand

Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | May 11, 2018

ANAHEIM -- Twins right fielder Max Kepler was held out of the starting lineup Friday for precautionary reasons after being hit on his left hand by a pitch in Thursday's 7-4 loss to the Angels.

Kepler was hit by a 92.4 mph fastball from Jose Alvarez on a pitch that was ruled a foul ball in the sixth inning Thursday. Kepler remained in the game and homered to right on the next pitch. But his left hand remains bruised and a bit swollen, so he wasn't in Friday's lineup with Robbie Grossman getting the start in right field against Angels lefty Tyler Skaggs. Kepler pinch-hit during Minnesota's ninth-inning rally and was intentionally walked, then scored the go-ahead run in a 5-4 Twins victory.

"He took a pretty good shot last night," Twins manager Paul Molitor said. "He's played a lot and he's earned it, including the at-bats against left-handed pitching. But he's got a little bit of swelling and bruising in that hand today."

Kepler, 25, is off to an impressive start this season, hitting .275/.356/.508 with five homers, 11 doubles and 14 RBIs in 33 games. And notably, he's improved greatly against lefties, as he hit .152/.213/.240 with two homers and 40 strikeouts in 125 at-bats versus lefties last year, but is hitting .357/.419/.714 with two homers and four doubles and four strikeouts in 28 at-bats against southpaws this season.

"Just getting my pitch to hit," Kepler said. "Last year, I was swinging at waste pitches. I was being too aggressive in certain count situations. I think patience has helped me a lot this year. Doesn't matter, righty or lefty."

Kepler has cut down on his chase percentage each year he's been in the big leagues, as he swung at 38.9 percent of pitches outside the zone in his first taste of the Majors in '15, but it's down to 27.9 percent this year. He's also become more aggressive swinging at strikes, as he swung at 60.7 percent of pitches in the zone last year, but it's up to 71.8 percent this season.

"I'm up there looking for my pitch instead of hitting their pitch," Kepler said. "It's just going in there knowing what zone you want to hit and laying off the rest."

Kepler added he believes his struggles against lefties last year was an aberration, as he never had that issue in the Minors, including hitting .319/.390/.473 against left-handers in 2015, when he won the Southern League MVP with Double-A Chattanooga.

"I think it was blown out of proportion," Kepler said. "I think it was just mental, from the people who were talking about it and then it got to me mentally. Not that I want to bring up my career in the past, but I've hit lefties fine. It's all mental at this level. Once you let a little mental thing get to you, it makes it harder for yourself."

Buxton impressed by Ohtani

Twins center fielder Byron Buxton was a star pitcher and center fielder at Appling County High School in Georgia but said he couldn't imagine being a two-way player like the Angels' Shohei Ohtani, who homered and hit a double against the Twins on Thursday and will start Sunday.

Buxton said he hit 99 mph off the mound twice -- saying he must've been really mad when he threw those pitches -- but admitted he never liked pitching. When Molitor was informed Buxton hit 99 in high school, he jokingly asked if Buxton hit 99 batters. But jokes aside, Buxton said he believes Ohtani is good for baseball and is hopeful more two-way players emerge in the Majors.

"It's a very unique thing," Buxton said. "To me, it's pretty cool. To have somebody who can go both ways and finally break through. It's incredible. It's like the NFL with offense and defense. Why can't anyone play both? And now in baseball, we finally have someone break through who can hit and pitch."

Worth noting

- Twins third baseman Miguel Sano hit on the field, took grounders and ran the bases for the second straight day at Angel Stadium as he continues to make progress with his strained left hamstring. But he's still not expected to be activated from the disabled list this weekend and the club will decide by Sunday whether he'll need a rehab assignment before returning.
- The Twins released lefty reliever Mason Melotakis on Friday. Melotakis, a second-round pick in 2012, has a career 3.04 ERA in the Minors and had a 3.07 ERA in eight appearances at Triple-A Rochester this year. But the 26-year-old has been plagued by injuries in recent seasons.

Twins win in way they haven't all season
Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | May 11, 2018

ANAHEIM -- It was the kind of game the Twins have seen go the other way several times this season, but this time it was a late comeback by Minnesota to steal away a win.

The Twins, who have suffered five walk-off defeats and entered 0-14 on the year when trailing after eight innings, rallied for a three-run ninth to stun the Angels in a 5-4 win Friday night at Angel Stadium. Eddie Rosario sparked the rally with his second solo homer of the game, while Mitch Garver tied the game with an RBI single down the right-field line after a key double from Logan Morrison, and Bobby Wilson plated the go-ahead run with a sacrifice fly against his former team.

"One of our better wins," Twins manager Paul Molitor said. "It didn't look particularly good. We weren't swinging the bats great and we found a way. Rosie stepping up with a couple of homers and Morrison getting the double gave us an opportunity."

The Twins entered the ninth down by two runs, but Rosario connected off Justin Anderson, who was trying to pick up his first career save. It seemed to energize the club, giving them new life against a stout Angels team that has had bullpen issues.

"I wanted to push the game closer," Rosario said. "I wasn't trying to hit a homer. I was trying to hit it hard and have a good at-bat. I think after my homer, everybody tried to make the comeback [happen] in that game."

After Morrison's one-out double, pinch-hitter Max Kepler was intentionally walked and Jim Johnson was brought in to face Garver. He delivered with a pinch-hit RBI single down the right-field line that allowed Kepler to reach third. Wilson delivered the go-ahead sacrifice fly to left to lift the Twins to their sixth win over their last seven games.

"It's just one of those games it feels particularly good to find a way to come back," Molitor said. "We've shown a lot of comeback ability that didn't turn into wins. If you keep that mindset of trying to play the 27 outs the best you can, sometimes it's going to turn and tonight we got one back."

The bottom of the ninth was also dramatic with closer Fernando Rodney allowing the tying run to reach on a one-out single, while all three outs were hit hard with Mike Trout lining out to short to end the game on a ball that had an exit velocity of 118 mph, per Statcast™.

The win helped bail out right-hander Lance Lynn, who lasted 4 2/3 innings, allowing four runs on eight hits and two walks to see his ERA rise to 7.34.

Lynn's troubles began in the third, when he gave up a leadoff single to Kole Calhoun and a hit-and-run single to Martin Maldonado. The Angels

got on the board on an RBI groundout from Zack Cozart before a red-hot Justin Upton connected on a two-run homer, marking the first time he's homered in four straight games.

After Lynn walked Upton to put two runners on with two outs in the fifth, Molitor came to the mound to talk his starter and left him in the game to face Shohei Ohtani. Ohtani singled to left on a pitch down and away to load the bases. Lynn remained in the game to face Andrelton Simmons, but walked him to bring home a run. It was Lynn's 25th walk in 34 1/3 innings this season and knocked him from the game.

"It's an everybody-did-good-but-me type thing, pretty much," Lynn said. "That's how it goes sometimes."

The offense was mostly held in check early by Angels lefty Tyler Skaggs, who gave up two runs over six innings. Both runs came on solo homers, with Brian Dozier hitting a shot in the first and Rosario launching one in the sixth. Rosario's homer came after Dozier was thrown out trying to advance to second on a ball in the dirt, potentially costing Minnesota a run.

SOUND SMART

Trout's line drive to shortstop Gregorio Petit to end the game was the third-hardest hit ball in the Majors this year and the hardest hit by an Angels player since Statcast™ was introduced in 2015. It was also the first out ever recorded on a ball hit that hard in the air since '15.

"Maybe check Petit's hand," Molitor said with a laugh. "See how he's feeling. You're going to get fastball-change and he's such a good hitter. We all know if he elevates the ball there with that type of exit speed, it's a different outcome. Some of the misfortune, maybe it turned around for us."

HE SAID IT

"No matter how we get them, just get a win. These are exciting but I think every offensive player in here would say they want to score 20 runs a game and blow everybody out. But that's not the case, not going to happen. Too much talent around the league. These guys do a really good job of turning the page. It's not what we've done. It's what we're going to do. I think it's a good culture here." -- Morrison

UP NEXT

Right-hander Kyle Gibson (1-1, 3.49 ERA) will take the mound for the Twins in the third game of their four-game set against the Angels on Saturday at 8:07 p.m. CT. Gibson has improved his strikeout rate this season, striking out 26.8 percent of opposing batters, which is well above his career mark of 16.5 percent. He pitched well in a no-decision last time out, allowing three runs on four hits over 6 2/3 innings against the White Sox. The Angels will start right-hander Nick Tropeano (1-2, 3.42 ERA), who will be reinstated from the disabled list after a bout with inflammation in his throwing shoulder.

Twins give bruised and battered Max Kepler the night off

La Velle E. Neal III | Star Tribune | May 11, 2018

ANAHEIM, CALIF. – Twins right fielder Max Kepler showed his left hand to reporters before Friday's game against the Angels, revealing swelling and a bruise at the point where he was hit with a pitch in the sixth inning Thursday.

The hand was the main reason why Kepler was not in the lineup Friday. And that makes what he did the night before even more remarkable.

Kepler was hit as he attempted to check his swing on a pitch thrown by Angels lefthander Jose Alvarez. The ball caught part of his bat, so it was called a strike. After needing a couple of minutes to shake off some of the pain from the plunking, Kepler stepped into the batter's box and pummeled Álvarez's next pitch into the seats in right for a home run that tied the score at 4-4.

"That was an interesting sequence there," manager Paul Molitor said. "The whole play, the way it unfolded, and then to respond and hit the next pitch out, which tied the game."

Kepler, understated as usual, said his plan was to get back in the batter's box and battle through the at-bat.

"I was locked in for sure, because the adrenaline was rushing through," Kepler said. "I just reacted."

Molitor chuckled when asked how he could bench a player who took a shot — and then delivered one. "I told him [Thursday night] we'll see how it went," Molitor said. "I was thinking about giving him a day."

What can't be overlooked about Kepler is that he's turning the corner when it comes to hitting lefthanded pitching. Check that. He's burning rubber as he emerges from that corner.

Kepler is batting .357 against lefthanders, tops among Twins regulars. He has a .419 on-base percentage (Joe Mauer, by the way, has a .542 OBP against lefties) and a .714 slugging percentage. This from a guy who hit .152 against lefties last season and .195 for his career.

The transformation comes down to understanding what pitchers are trying to do to him.

“Just get my pitch to hit,” Kepler said. “Last year, I was swinging at waste pitches, being too aggressive in certain counts and certain situations. Patience has helped me out a lot this year.”

Kepler also made things harder for himself by fretting about hitting lefties or being benched against certain lefties.

“With Max, he will be the first to tell you it got in his head a little bit last year,” Molitor said. “People talked about it every time we faced a lefty.”

Kepler’s emergence against lefties is wrecking opponents’ game plans against the Twins. Mauer is batting .353 against lefties himself, so teams can’t plug in lefties in late-inning situations and expect success.

Kepler did end up getting used in Friday’s game — and he was promptly intentionally walked as a pinch hitter in the ninth inning. Kepler came around to score the eventual winning run on Bobby Wilson’s sacrifice fly.

Sano progresses

Miguel Sano spent his 25th birthday Friday navigating through a battery of drills and workouts as he tries to recover from a sore left hamstring. One of the drills included light running around the bases.

“I think there’s still a little stiffness in there,” Molitor said. “I’m not sure if it’s from the injury or from the work we’ve been putting him through, maybe a combination.

“We’ll see how tomorrow goes and then Sunday we’ll probably have to determine if he needs to continue to do what he’s doing or if we have to start thinking about getting him out somewhere to play or what we want to do as far as his status here.”

Melotakis released

Class AAA Rochester released lefthander Mason Melotakis, a Twins second-round pick in 2012. The 26-year-old was 2-1 with a 3.07 ERA this season.

Twins likely to play home games in March in 2019

Phil Miller | Star Tribune | May 11, 2018

The Seattle Mariners will make an unscheduled stop at Target Field on Monday night, delaying their return home from a Toronto-Detroit road trip by a day in order to complete some unfinished business. The game was supposed to be played on April 8, but temperatures in Minneapolis never reached the 30s that day, and who wants to play baseball in that?

Wait. Brian Dozier does.

"Just bundle up, that's all I've got to say," the Twins' second baseman reminisced about the Twins' snowy first month. "It's hard to play your best in that weather, no doubt, but it's the same for both teams. And this is our job. We're still alive and playing baseball, so that ain't bad."

Dozier's Zen in the face of April's wind ch-ch-chill, remarkable for a Mississippi native, is instructive for his home state, too. If there was a lesson learned during the wintry first month of the 2018 season, it's this: Get used to it, Minnesota. Baseball on ice is just part of life in the Bold North, and there are no easy ways to change it. In fact, it may get worse before it gets better.

"This April was by far the harshest April we've had since moving to Target Field," Twins President Dave St. Peter said. "I hope Minnesotans realize it wasn't just here. Major League Baseball had more winter-weather disruptions this year than at any time in the history of our game."

It gets worse. The Twins haven't seen their preliminary 2019 schedule yet, but they know what it will almost certainly say: Minnesota next spring will play its first-ever outdoor home games in March. The NCAA basketball Final Four is scheduled across downtown for April 6-8, and hotel availability dictates that the Twins must be on the road that weekend. Since the MLB season will open on March 28, the Twins' choices are to play in Target Field before the basketball players arrive, or spend two weeks on the road before coming home.

"It's my expectation that we'll open at home, but people need to remember — the Gophers played at Target Field in March [in a ballpark test-run against Louisiana Tech in 2010], and temperatures were in the mid-50s," St. Peter said. "It's not ideal, but we'll hope that Mother Nature cooperates."

The MLB season, beginning this year, opens four days earlier than its traditional first-Monday-in-April start, because the players, in the latest collective bargaining agreement, succeeded in moving Opening Day back by four days in order to create more days off during the season. Some of those off days — tomorrow against the Mariners, say — will be consumed by makeup games, something southern teams won't experience as often. "Once you get through April, though, you're glad to have more breaks," Dozier said.

The Twins took a respite from Minnesota's long winter by playing two home games in San Juan, Puerto Rico, a "fantastic experience," as Dozier called it — but one the Twins aren't interested in making an annual ritual. Wait, wouldn't moving two or three games each April to Hawaii, or Mexico, or Cuba, or Puerto Rico, make sense for a team playing on frozen turf?

"Not really. Not to me," said Twins manager Paul Molitor. "I wouldn't want to give up home games. There are enough climates north enough that will always be a problem. It was just an extreme year this year."

St. Peter echoed the same — the Twins are eager to take part in growing the game internationally, and April is ideal, given the weather. But it should be a special occasion, not a schedule gimmick, he said. For one thing, the Twins make money on Target Field games, even when the crowd is miniaturized by cold weather. And it's not fair to fans to constantly move games, he said, and not fair to the team to take on a competitive disadvantage.

"I loved going to Puerto Rico, it was great fun," Dozier added. "It's tough giving up home games, though. They're big for us."

April games, good weather or bad, are the poorest-drawing games on a schedule, since kids are still in school. So teams in domes or warmer climates balk when their schedules are loaded with April home games, meaning Twins players should get used to wearing stocking caps and long underwear in April.

There is one adjustment the Twins — players, manager, president — would like to see: Play division foes in April, at least where weather is a concern. The Twins had to postpone three straight games this year for a mid-April blizzard; if they hadn't been playing the White Sox, who come back two more times, St. Peter said, they would have had to move the games to a dome or warmer climate, "and we don't ever want to do that to our fans."

That's as much of an adjustment as can be made, Dozier said. "We just need to be smarter with the schedule. Make the schedule flexible by playing division opponents, so [postponements] aren't such a big deal. You can't fix the weather, but we can be smarter about how we deal with it."

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

The Twins have gotten quite a boost by calling up rookie righthander Fernando Romero, who didn't allow a run in his first two career starts. But other AL Central teams may soon try to get a similar upgrade. Here are a few new faces to watch for:

Indians: With plans to defend their division title and a weak farm system, Cleveland has no impact rookie on the horizon. But they signed veteran outfielder Melky Cabrera in April, and he is at Class AAA Columbus now, fine-tuning his swing. If Cabrera, 33, has anything left, he can help an offense that's hitting just .241.

Royals: Righthander Jason Adams struck out 17 in 11 dominant minor league innings, so the KC native was called up last week to buttress a bad bullpen. Recall the name? The Royals traded him to the Twins for Josh Willingham in 2014, but Adam developed elbow trouble. Tommy John surgery revived his arm, and career.

Tigers: Toledo manager Doug Mientkiewicz vouches for the plate discipline of outfielder Christin Stewart, a 24-year-old outfielder who hits monstrous home runs and is batting over .300 in Triple-A. If Detroit can move veteran Leonys Martin, Stewart could be in line for an early promotion.

White Sox: They're bound to stop giving starts to 30-somethings James Shields, Miguel Gonzalez and Hector Santiago soon. When they do, prized pitching prospect Michael Kopech, famed for his 103-mph fastball, figures to give the last-place Sox a chance to cheer for strikeouts: Kopech averages 11.5 per nine innings.

Twins score three in the ninth to beat Angels

La Velle E. Neal | Star Tribune | May 11, 2018

ANAHEIM, CALIF. — Somehow, the evening ended with righthander Matt Magill getting a lefthanded toast in the clubhouse after the Twins' 5-4 comeback victory over the Los Angeles Angels on Friday night.

“And a little beer shower, too,” said Magill, who picked up his first major league win by pitching a scoreless eighth inning.

A lefthanded toast is a nod to the standings, where the win column is on the left side. How the Twins avoided the loss column took a roster-wide effort that made manager Paul Molitor describe the game as “one of our better wins.”

Unable to generate any offense — besides solo home runs by Eddie Rosario and Brian Dozier — the Twins trailed 4-2 heading into the ninth but struck for three runs. The first was Rosario's second home run of the night. The second came on Mitch Garver's pinch-hit, two-strike, cueball shot down the right field line. The third, and final, run came home on a sacrifice fly by former Angels catcher Bobby Wilson.

The runs were scored off of Angels relievers Justin Anderson and Jim Johnson, two of the many relievers Los Angeles manager Mike Scioscia is using to finish out games.

The list of Twins heroes continues, as Logan Morrison hit a key double in the ninth and scored the tying run. After Twins starter Lance Lynn lasted just 4 2/3 innings, the bullpen of Taylor Rogers, Trevor Hildenberger, Zach Duke and Magill pitched shutout baseball to get the game into the ninth inning.

Fernando Rodney had his moments in the ninth. He gave up a one-out single to Martin Maldonado, who just missed hitting a tying home run on a ball that went just foul. Rodney eventually faced Mike Trout with two outs. Trout squared up a pitch and sent a screamer through the infield that socked right into shortstop Gregorio Petit's glove for the final out of the game.

MLB.com's Statcast clocked the batted ball at 118 miles an hour — only the 18th ball since the service was launched in 2015 that has been hit that hard. Trout's was the first one that was hit for an out.

"May check Petit's hand," Molitor said, "see how he's feeling."

Molitor could afford to joke after he watched a number of players have a hand in a comeback victory on the road — while getting a little luck.

"We hung in the game," Molitor said. "It's just one of those games it feels particularly good to find a way to come back."

For Rosario, who supplied a multihomer game for the fifth time in his career, it was a familiar feeling that was a little overdue.

"I think that's the team like last year," he said. "That was the key last year. Come back in a lot of games, and win a lot of those games. That's good for the team."

Last year, how about the night before? The Twins were down 4-0 and came back to tie the game before the bullpen faltered in a 7-4 loss. Their first game of their current road trip was a walkoff loss in Chicago. They have gone on to go 6-2 on the trip and you could argue that they could have at least have one more victory.

Now they have guaranteed a winning road trip, they can get greedy, win the next two games and take the four-game series in Anaheim.

"No matter how we get them, just get a win," Morrison said. "These are exciting, but I think every offensive player in here would say they want to score 20 runs a game and blow everybody out. But that's not the case, not going to happen. Too much talent around the league.

"These guys do a really good job of turning the page. It's not what we've done. It's what we're going to do. I think it's a good culture here."

Japanese star Shohei Ohtani is wasting little time, living up to the hype

Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | May 11, 2018

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Sometime Thursday, before facing the Twins for the first time in his budding big-league career, Shohei Ohtani turned to his translator with a question.

"He wanted to know what kind of a place Minnesota was," said Ipeei Mizuhara, who has worked with Ohtani for the past five years. "I told him it was nice but cold."

That should give you an indication of just how thoroughly Ohtani, 23, considered joining the Twins as an international free agent back in December. In other words, they didn't just fail to make his preliminary cut to seven finalists; their very region remained an unexplored mystery to the two-way Japanese superstar.

It was enough to make you wonder just how closely Ohtani even read the Twins' responses to his infamous questionnaire, one that remains shrouded in secrecy nearly a quarter of the way through his rookie season.

A person familiar with the process said the Twins pitched their ability to contend, their talented young core and their "willingness to provide an environment for (Ohtani) to succeed." Even with a new-age front office committed to modern analytics and coming off their first postseason appearance in seven years, the Twins couldn't get a foot in the door.

Ohtani and his representatives met with five West Coast teams plus the Chicago Cubs and the Texas Rangers before agreeing to an artificially low \$2.315 million signing bonus. The Angels also paid a \$20 million posting fee to the Nippon-Ham Fighters, who signed former Twins reliever Michael Tonkin to a two-year deal as part of their attempt to replace a generational talent.

Had Ohtani, who is making the major league minimum of \$545,000, waited two more seasons before making the jump, he might have secured a \$200 million contract on the open market.

Asked if he had been allowed to craft answers to any of Ohtani's questions, Twins manager Paul Molitor shook his head and smiled.

"No, I didn't get a chance," he said. "My involvement was pretty much nonexistent other than the fact I was informed regularly of our continued interest and we weren't sure how it was going to go. I did spend a little time wondering how it would be to manage a guy that potentially would do both things for you. How you would want to work that?"

Did Molitor ever hear how many questions Ohtani, set to face Twins rookie right-hander Fernando Romero in a Mother's Day pitching match-up on Sunday, included in his speed-dating reconnaissance?

"Not really," he said.

What's the one word he would use to describe the Ohtani recruiting process?

"It was probably 'unprecedented,'" Molitor said. "I don't think anyone else has tried to use that approach."

Then again, there hasn't been anyone quite like Ohtani in the majors since, well, Babe Ruth.

SUDDEN IMPACT

Ohtani hasn't wasted any time introducing himself to the rest of the major leagues. After ripping a double and a 414-foot home run in a 7-4 victory over the Twins on Thursday, the part-time designated hitter was batting a cool .354 with a .400 on-base percentage and a .677 slugging percentage in 65 at-bats.

His park-adjusted weighted runs created ranked fourth out of 277 big-league hitters with at least 70 plate appearances, according to Fangraphs.com. Only Mookie Betts (Red Sox), Matt Adams (Nationals) and Angels teammate Mike Trout were doing more damage by that measure.

The left-handed hitter doesn't get cheated at the plate.

"He's an aggressive hitter," Twins pitcher Jose Berrios said through a translator. "You can tell that he wants to swing, he wants to hit. It's just (a matter of) making good pitches against him to get him out."

There's the problem.

"He's dangerous," Molitor said. "He's got a power swing but he also seems to have pretty good instincts for getting the bat on the ball when he's behind in the count and needs to put it in play. He gets fooled and still hits balls hard. Obviously he's skilled offensively. If he gets pitches, he's going to hit them."

With a whiff rate of 12 percent and a chase rate of 39 percent, Ohtani isn't just holding his own, he's making an impact. After going 4 for 32 (.125) with 10 strikeouts in spring training, it was right to wonder whether Ohtani would need a lengthy adjustment period.

"I didn't expect it," Molitor said of the fast start. "I thought the pitching might be there. From what I heard and read about spring training, the offense was a little bit suspect even though he had numbers he'd put up in Japan. Maybe he just needed the lights to go on."

Molitor, who served as hitting coach for the recently retired Ichiro Suzuki with the 2004 Seattle Mariners, knows well the stories of Ichiro's underwhelming first spring after coming over in 2001.

"(Ohtani) seems to be able to handle coming over here and having the attention he did and getting signed and making the transition," he said. "Plus, he's got a pretty good team around him, which helps, I'm sure."

IMPRESSING TROUT

Even Trout, a two-time American League MVP widely acknowledged as the game's best overall player, marvels at Ohtani's talent. Trout and Ohtani recently added a formal dugout bow in each other's direction when Ohtani homers, which he's done five times now.

"Just his batting practice is unbelievable," Trout said. "He's in our group, and as a hitter he's pretty impressive. Then you've got to think to yourself he can throw 100 (mph) too and his splitty goes every which way, so it's pretty remarkable."

Ohtani's performance on the mound — considered his primary skill — has been a bit more modest than what he's done with a bat in his hands, but not by much. He will take a 4.10 earned-run average into Sunday's showdown with Romero.

Ohtani doesn't bat on the days he pitches, but in order to allow him to play both ways the Angels have made him their regular Sunday starter. He struck out 12 and flirted with a no-hitter in his second career start on April 8 against the Oakland A's, but he had to leave his next start, against the Boston Red Sox, because of a blister on his pitching hand.

Command has been an issue at times — his nine-inning walk rate is pushing four — but he has produced three quality starts while fanning nearly 11 batters per nine innings. It's been quite a turnaround from the spring struggles that saw Ohtani surrender eight earned runs and three home runs in just 2 2/3 Cactus League innings.

"He's a really smart guy for his age," said Angels catcher Martin Maldonado, coming off his first Rawlings Gold Glove Award. "He has a plan. He knows what to do. He knows where he wants to go as a pitcher. He knows what he needs to do as a hitter. He has the ability to know himself more than anybody. I think that's impressive."

Angels left fielder Justin Upton is a former Detroit Tigers teammate of Miguel Cabrera and Justin Verlander, so he's not easily impressed.

"What's most impressive to me is the transition, the poise he's had, going from Japan to here," Upton said. "Even with all the media attention in spring training and not being successful, being able to block that out and just play the game. He's stayed calm and he's been able to perform, which has been impressive to me for a 23-year-old guy."

HIGH BAR

The high standards Ohtani places upon himself are evident in the postgame news conferences he holds for nearly two dozen Japanese media and a steady stream of national media as well. Even after ripping the two hardest-hit balls by exit velocity Thursday against the Twins, he sounded as if he were still searching for the right feel at the plate.

He has muted his high leg kick in favor of a toe tap, for instance.

"I don't feel the adjustment is perfect yet," he said through his translator. "I'm still making little adjustments every day, each at-bat. And sometimes it goes bad, so that's when I need to fix it. I don't feel like I have adjusted perfectly."

If there is any perceived weakness for Ohtani in the early going, it's his susceptibility to hard fastballs in on his hands. Molitor mentioned the importance of "(making) him aware of the inside part of the plate," an approach Ohtani expects to continue even as teams probe for additional soft spots.

"Early in the year I felt like they were throwing me inside a lot more than now," he said. "I was able to still hit the ball pretty well and keep a good average. Maybe they are trying to test pitching me away. I still feel like they don't know how to pitch me. Everything is still in progress."

Asked the biggest key to his fast start on both sides of the ball, Ohtani credits those around him.

"In spring training, when I didn't have too good of a result, the team, manager, teammates, staff — they all tried to make me feel comfortable and tried to make an environment so I could focus on baseball," he said. "I think that's been the biggest thing."

Molitor, tongue in cheek, added another possible factor in Ohtani's rapid assimilation.

"Can't beat the weather," he said.

Miguel Sano could be nearing a rehab assignment

Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | May 11, 2018

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Twins third baseman Miguel Sano went through a similar early workload on his 25th birthday, hitting on the field and indoors, doing some agility work and taking grounders at third while firing across the diamond.

He also tested his strained left hamstring for the first time by running the bases lightly.

"I think there's still a little stiffness in there," Molitor said. "I'm not sure if it's from the injury or from the work we've been putting him through."

Sano, out since April 27, will likely work out again Saturday on the field before the Twins decide Sunday whether to send him out on a rehab assignment or have him fly back with the team for a nine-game homestand that starts Monday.

"I've been watching every game, every day," Sano said. "I saw everybody do what they're supposed to do every day. The pitchers are doing their job — hitters, defense, everything. I hope I can soon be on the team and play my game too."

Sano also clarified the exact play on which he injured his hamstring. It happened in the sixth inning on a long fly to center off Amir Garrett.

“It was after a long (fifth) inning when we were on the field for 20 minutes,” he said. “I thought the ball was out but there was a lot of wind and I pushed myself to try to take second base. That’s when I felt it.”

KEPLER RESTS

Right fielder Max Kepler was out of the starting lineup for just the second time all season and the first time since April 10 against Houston left-hander Dallas Keuchel.

That was due in part to the pitch Kepler took off the back of left (throwing) hand on Thursday night, one pitch before drilling a game-tying home run to right off lefty reliever Jose Alvarez. According to Twins manager Paul Molitor, Kepler had some swelling and bruising on his hand, but he showed full range of motion during some early work in the outfield.

No X-rays were taken.

“He’s played a lot, and he’s earned it,” Molitor said.

Kepler’s 1.134 combined on-base/slugging percentage against lefties leads all left-handed hitters with at least 30 same-sided plate appearances. Atlanta Braves right fielder Nick Markakis (1.075) is the only other lefty swinging in quadruple digits in that category.

This comes after a 2017 season in which Kepler hit just .152 with a .453 OPS in 137 trips against lefties.

“He’ll be the first to tell you it got in his head a little bit last year,” Molitor said. “People talked about it every time we faced a lefty, and sometimes he’d play and sometimes he wouldn’t. He had a nice camp facing lefties and he’s just been able to carry it over.”

BERRIOS’ SLIDE

Right-hander Jose Berrios (3-4) has allowed just four homers to right-handed batters since the middle of last August. All four, however, have come over his past four starts, when Berrios has gone 1-3 with an 8.84 ERA.

The latest long balls came in Thursday’s 7-4 loss to the Angels, when Berrios gave up homers to Ian Kinsler and Justin Upton on a pair of hanging curveballs. During this stretch Gary Sanchez (Yankees) and Jose Abreu (White Sox) also took Berrios deep from the right side.

In his prior two starts, including an emotional homecoming in Puerto Rico, Berrios had fanned 16 in 14 shutout innings, walking none and giving up just six hits (all singles).

“My last four starts, I haven’t been able to throw my curveball over the plate like I’m used to,” Berrios said through a translator. “It’s not my usual breaking ball I’m accustomed to throwing. When I’m throwing on the side in bullpens, I throw it good because there’s nobody standing there, but it’s not the same as a live game.”

BRIEFLY

Right-hander Trevor May (elbow surgery) is scheduled to make his first rehab start for Class A Fort Myers on Saturday in Dunedin, Fla. May, who made it through multiple starts in extended spring training without a setback, is eligible to be activated off the 60-day disabled list as soon as May 28 in Kansas City.

Lefty reliever Mason Melotakis, once ranked among the top 20 Twins prospects and added to the 40-man roster after the 2015 season, was released despite a 3.07 ERA in eight relief outings for Triple-A Rochester. That included a 1.80 ERA in the past 10 innings for the 26-year-old former second-round pick in 2012.

Told that Byron Buxton claimed to “hit 99” off the mound at Appling County High School in 2012, Molitor was skeptical. “He hit 99 people?” he cracked.

Twins use three-run ninth to stun Los Angeles Angels, 5-4 **Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | May 11, 2018**

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Just when the Twins appeared headed for a second straight loss in the shadow of Disneyland, they staged a feel-good comeback sure to please sleep-deprived fans throughout the Upper Midwest.

Rookie Mitch Garver’s pinch single past first scored Logan Morrison with the tying run, and fellow catcher Bobby Wilson, a former Los Angeles Angels backup, added the go-ahead sacrifice fly off veteran reliever Jim Johnson to key a three-run uprising in the top of the ninth against his old team.

“I think that’s the team like last year,” Twins left fielder Eddie Rosario said after this 5-4 win on a soggy Friday night at Angel Stadium. “That was the key last year: Come back in a lot of games and win a lot of those games. That’s good for the team.”

Rosario’s second solo homer of the night started the winning rally off hard-throwing reliever Justin Anderson. Morrison had been 2 for 21 before lashing a one-out double the other way to chase Anderson.

Max Kepler, hitting for Byron Buxton, was then intentionally walked as Angels manager Mike Scioscia defied convention by putting the potential winning run on base.

“No matter how we get them, just get a win,” Morrison said. “These guys do a really good job of turning the page. It’s not what we’ve done. It’s what we’re going to do. I think it’s a good culture here.”

The jubilant sounds of that culture could be heard through the doors of the postgame clubhouse, where Twins first baseman Joe Mauer doled out more than his usual allotment of game balls on a night filled with heroes. There also was a beer shower for journeyman right-hander Matt Magill, who earned his first career win in the majors with a scoreless eighth.

“(Magill) started it,” Morrison said. “He tried to get (Brian) Dozier with water on the neck, and then everyone started pouring stuff on him. We got a bunch of stuff on him: Shaving cream, I had Powerade and everyone else had beer. So that was fun.”

Twins manager Paul Molitor pushed all the right buttons in the ninth, using a pair of pinch hitters and a pinch runner as the Twins won for the first time in 16 tries when trailing after seven innings.

“One of our better wins,” Molitor said. “We hung in the game. They’ve shown a lot of comeback ability that didn’t turn into wins. If you keep that mindset of trying to play the 27 outs the best you can, sometimes it’s going to turn and tonight we got one back.”

Fernando Rodney handled the ninth against his former team (2010-11) for his sixth save in nine tries, but as usual there were a couple of heart-stopping moments. First, Martin Maldonado’s long one-out fly ball teased the left-field foul pole before hooking harmlessly.

Mike Trout’s game-ending lineout to shortstop Gregorio Petit — another former Angel from 2016 — carried an exit velocity of 118.0 mph. Since Statcast’s introduction in 2015, just 18 balls have been hit in the air with at least that exit velocity; Trout’s liner was the first that went for an out.

“One-eighteen?” Molitor said. “May check Petit’s hand, see how he’s feeling.”

Molitor and head athletic trainer Tony Leo went out to check on struggling starter Lance Lynn after his first pitch to Justin Upton in the third. Lynn, who threw a couple of warmup tosses and gave up a two-run homer four pitches later to Upton, described the momentary concern as a “stinger” that “kind of shot up through the lower back and hip.”

He said he’s had them before, but “not so much” since signing this spring with the Twins, who have seen him pitch to a 7.34 earned run average through seven control-challenged starts.

“I’ve had it before; it’s not the first time,” Lynn said. “I do get it every once in a while when you’re really trying to get on a pitch or something like that. Just a big body coming down a mound — it happens sometimes.”

Upton, who has homered in a career-best four straight games, had been 0 for 10 with five strikeouts off Lynn. After a two-out walk to Upton in the fifth, Molitor went out to chat with Lynn again, this time leaving him in to face Japanese rookie Shohei Ohtani.

A line single to left loaded the bases, and Lynn walked Andrelton Simmons to force in a run and put the Twins in a 4-1 hole. Five Twins relievers, starting with Taylor Rogers, held the Angels scoreless the rest of the way.

Rogers has stranded eight of his 10 inherited runners. Sidewinder Trevor Hildenberger got four outs, three by strikeout.

“Sometimes it’s a long game,” Rosario said. “It was 4-2. It wasn’t too far. You want to have a good at-bat. Morrison had a good at-bat. Garver had a good at-bat. Wilson had a good at-bat. I think after my homer, everybody tried to come back in that game.”

Dozier started the night with a solo homer against lefty Tyler Skaggs, who struck out seven across six innings while pitching out of a bases-loaded jam in the third. Dozier, who also homered Thursday for just the second time in 120 at-bats, ran his streak to eight plate appearances reaching safely before a fly out in the eighth.

Just ahead of Rosario’s homer in the sixth, Dozier was thrown out at second trying to advance on a ball in the dirt.

Buxton, playing his second straight game since missing 21 games due to migraines and a fractured left big toe, is 0 for 5 with a walk and four strikeouts. He also grounded sharply into a double play for just the fifth time in 181 career opportunities (2.8 percent).

Twins prospect Wander Javier to undergo season-ending shoulder surgery
Ashley Varela | NBC Sports | May 11, 2018

Twins shortstop prospect Wander Javier will undergo season-ending surgery to repair a torn labrum in his left shoulder, per a report from La Velle E. Neal III of the Minneapolis Star-Tribune. The procedure has been scheduled for May 18, after which the 19-year-old infielder will be facing 6-9 months of recovery time.

Heading into the 2018 season, MLB Pipeline ranked Javier no. 5 among the club's top prospects. His time in pro ball has been routinely hampered by injuries — a hamstring injury in 2016, followed by a shoulder issue in 2017 — but he still managed to persevere through 50 games at the rookie level, slashing a combined .301/.386/.497 with 23 extra-base hits and an .883 OPS in 210 plate appearances over the last two seasons.

The Twins aren't hurting for depth at the moment; even with starting shortstop Jorge Polanco serving an 80-game PED suspension, they've been cruising along with Ehire Adrianza and Eduardo Escobar (and fellow top infield prospects Royce Lewis and Nick Gordon wait in the wings as well). Prior to his shoulder injury, meanwhile, Javier had yet to log a single at-bat above rookie-level ball. Should his recovery go as planned, he's likely to make his next appearance during spring training in 2019 before continuing to work his way through the Twins' system.

Rosario homers twice, Twins rally in ninth, beat Angels 5-4
Associated Press | Fox Sports North | May 11, 2018

ANAHEIM, Calif. (AP) The Minnesota Twins finally got the comeback win they had been close to staging so many times this season.

Eddie Rosario homered twice, Bobby Wilson hit a go-ahead sacrifice fly in the ninth inning, and the Twins rallied for a 5-4 victory over the Los Angeles Angels on Friday night.

"If you keep that mindset of trying to play the 27 outs the best you can, sometimes it's going to turn, and tonight we got one back," Twins manager Paul Molitor said.

Rosario's solo shot to right pulled Minnesota to 4-2 in the sixth and his drive in the ninth cut the deficit to 4-3. Logan Morrison then doubled to left, and pinch-hitter Mitch Garver drove him in on a single down the first base line to tie it at 4. Wilson's sac fly scored pinch-runner Max Kepler to cap the three-run ninth.

The Twins had been 0-13 when trailing after eight innings.

"It was a good team win. Bullpen shut the door, didn't give up any runs, and the offense came back and won it for us. Everybody did good but me pretty much, but that's how it goes sometimes," said Twins starter Lance Lynn, who gave up four runs and eight hits in 4 2/3 innings.

Fernando Rodney got Mike Trout to line out to short with a runner on first for his sixth save. The ball came off Trout's bat with an exit velocity of 118 mph, the hardest-hit ball by an Angel since Statcast was introduced in 2015, but the low trajectory sent it right to Gregorio Petit.

"You can check Petit's hand, see how he's feeling," Molitor said. "We all know that if he elevates the ball there with that type of exit speed, it's a different outcome. Some of the misfortune tonight maybe turned around for us."

That wasn't the case early on, as the Angels capitalized on a second chance in the third inning to take the lead. Justin Upton hit a two-run homer to left to put the Angels ahead 3-1 two pitches after Joe Mauer misplayed a pop-up in foul territory down the first base line that would have been the third out. The ball landed past the outstretched arms of a diving Mauer, allowing Upton to hit his fifth home run in six games.

The Angels only got one run across with the bases loaded in the fifth, with Andrelton Simmons drawing a full-count walk to make it 4-1, and the Twins punished the home team for their wastefulness.

Matt Magill (1-0) picked up the win for his scoreless eighth inning in relief. Justin Anderson (0-1) gave up three runs in 1 1/3 innings.

Brian Dozier homered for the second consecutive game to give the Twins a 1-0 lead in the first. It was his seventh home run of the season.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Twins: Kepler (left hand) was held out of the starting lineup as a precaution after being hit by a pitch Thursday.

Angels: 1B Albert Pujols got the day off to rest, with Luis Valbuena taking his place in the infield. ... RHP Blake Wood (elbow) could receive a rehab assignment after throwing two bullpen sessions this week.

OHTANI CLEANS UP

With Pujols sitting, Angels two-way star Shohei Ohtani batted fourth, going 1 for 4. Ohtani has a hit in 15 of the 17 games he has started as the designated hitter and is batting .471 (8 for 17) in his last six games.

SKAGGS DOES HIS PART

Angels starter Tyler Skaggs gave up two runs, six hits and two walks while striking out seven. It was his third straight start giving up two or fewer runs, which highlights the continued struggles of the Angels bullpen. Excluding closer Keynan Middleton, the other seven available relievers have converted three saves from nine chances.

"We definitely felt that Justin had enough to get through the ninth, but, unfortunately, it didn't work," Angels manager Mike Scioscia said.

UP NEXT

Twins: RHP Kyle Gibson (1-1, 3.49) gave up three runs in 6 2/3 innings in a no-decision at the White Sox on Sunday. Gibson has won his last two decisions against the Angels.

Angels: RHP Nick Tropeano (1-2, 3.42) will make his first start since May 1 against Baltimore. Tropeano did not give up a run in 6 1/3 innings in a no-decision against the Orioles, but went on the disabled list the next day because of inflammation in his right shoulder.

For first time in his MLB career, Matt Magill gets the beer shower celebration **Dan Hayes | The Athletic | May 11, 2018**

ANAHEIM, Calif. — The party was long and loud on Friday night. It lasted at least 10-12 minutes after the final out was recorded.

The hastily thrown-together celebration began with individual Twins players, who could be heard yelling inside the visiting clubhouse. Then came several collective roars from the group. The beer shower for one was the last to arrive.

At the center of it all was Twins rookie reliever Matt Magill. The right-handed pitcher had participated in the delivery of a beer shower or two during his 11-year professional career. But at long last on Friday, Magill was finally the recipient.

Courtesy of a wild, ninth-inning rally, Magill earned his first major-league victory as the Twins bounced back to top the Los Angeles Angels 5-4 in front of 43,521 at Angel Stadium. After pitching a scoreless eighth inning, Magill watched from the dugout as his team scored three times and then survived a Mike Trout-Fernando Rodney showdown to secure the Twins' sixth win in seven games.

"I knew what was going to possibly take place," Magill said. "But until the beer hits you — you can't really describe it. It's incredible.

"This is what you dream of when you're a kid getting a win in a big-league game. It's incredible. I don't really have words right now."

There was plenty to celebrate within the Twins clubhouse as a team that believes it has started to emerge from an early funk rallied to win a contest it had no business winning. Lance Lynn didn't pitch as bad as his pitching line might indicate, but the Twins still trailed 4-1 when he left with the bases loaded in the bottom of the fifth inning.

Somehow the bullpen cobbled together 4 1/3 scoreless innings, which gave the Twins a chance to rally against a suspect Angels bullpen. Eddie Rosario, whose sixth-inning homer got the Twins with two runs, started the ninth inning with another solo drive off Los Angeles reliever Justin Anderson. After a Robbie Grossman strikeout, Logan Morrison then doubled to left-center to put the tying run aboard. Angels manager Mike Scioscia elected to intentionally walk pinch-hitter Max Kepler and replace Anderson with Jim Johnson, then pinch-hitter Mitch Garver's opposite-field single tied the game at 4. Catcher Bobby Wilson's sac fly completed the stunning comeback and put the Twins in front for good.

Rosario said the comeback was reminiscent of the 2017 season when the Twins posted 40 come-from-behind victories, including three ninth-inning comebacks. Friday's was their first win of 2018 when trailing after eight innings in 15 tries and their eighth come-from-behind victory.

"It's a long game," Rosario said. "It was 4-2. It wasn't too far. You want to have a good at-bat. Morrison had a good at-bat, Garver had a good at-bat, Wilson had a good at-bat. I think after my homer, everybody tried to come back in that game."

"(Rallies were) the key last year. Come back in a lot of games, and win a lot of those games. That's good for the team."

The Twins have shown a lot of fight in the early portion of the season, even at the outset of their dreadful 14-game stretch with rallies in Tampa Bay. They battled back from down four runs in Thursday's game only to later lose. Manager Paul Molitor wants his team to continue to play the entire way knowing that good things can happen. Morrison said he's felt it early in the season on the bench even on a team that has experienced its share of bad bounces.

“No matter how we get them, just get a win,” Morrison said. “These guys do a really good job of turning the page. It’s not what we’ve done. It’s what we’re going to do. I think it’s a good culture here.”

Magill is emblematic of that attitude. A lifelong starting pitcher, he’s discovered new life as a reliever. With a four-seamer averaging 95 mph and a nice cutter to accompany it, he’s recently provided an at-times flimsy bullpen with some stability.

When he arrived, Magill said he was confident in his stuff as long as he remembered to attack hitters. He’s done just that, striking out eight in nine innings with only a run allowed. His teammates followed suit and attacked him with beer, water and shaving cream late in the evening after noting it was his first career win.

“It was a little loud,” Magill said. “It was fun ... it’s everything I could have imagined it to be.”