



Minnesota Twins Daily Clips
Friday, April 6, 2018

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Twins' 3 HRs include Garver's first in Majors
Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | April 5, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS -- Mitch Garver picked an opportune time to connect on his first Major League homer.

The rookie backup catcher hit a go-ahead solo homer in the seventh inning after Miguel Sano tied the game with a two-run homer in the sixth to help lift the Twins to a 4-2 win over the Mariners in the Target Field opener on a chilly Thursday afternoon that saw a game-time temperature of

38 degrees.

"In a spot like that, that's one I'll never forget," Garver said. "I tried to get the ball in the air and give our team a chance in the late innings with our bullpen. That was something special. Nothing compares to hitting a home run in the big leagues. It has to be the best feeling in the world."

Garver, who had never homered in his previous 52 at-bats in the Majors, capitalized on a mistake from reliever Dan Altavilla, as he hung an 0-2 slider that Garver didn't miss. Garver crushed it, as it left his bat at 105.4 mph at a launch angle of 32 degrees, going a projected 409 feet, per Statcast™. Balls hit at similar exit velocities and launch angles go for hits 89 percent of the time.

"He picked a good time," Twins manager Paul Molitor said. "He fell behind in the count, but the guy left one over the middle. I'm sure that was a load off his back to add one to the homer column."

For the third straight game, the Twins found themselves in an early hole, as the Mariners scored twice in the first against Kyle Gibson, but for the second straight game, they found a way to win despite being down 2-0 after the first inning. Sano made a throwing error to home that led to a run before Daniel Vogelbach smacked an RBI single into right.

Mariners lefty James Paxton, who dealt with a bald eagle landing on his non-pitching shoulder during the national anthem, was sharp early before serving up the two-run homer to Sano in the sixth that knocked him from the game. Paxton went five-plus innings, surrendering two runs on four hits and a walk with seven strikeouts.

"The one pitch to Sano was the one that hurt today," Paxton said. "He hit a pretty good pitch. It wasn't a very good two-strike pitch, but it was down in the zone, a curveball he put a good swing on."

Gibson lasted 4 1/3 innings, surrendering two runs (one earned) on seven hits and a walk with three strikeouts. But the new-look bullpen continued the strong start to the season, combining to toss 4 2/3 scoreless innings, including the first save of the season from Fernando Rodney. Rodney, who shot an imaginary arrow at the Target bullseye in center field after completing the save, received an insurance run on a solo homer from Eddie Rosario in the eighth off reliever Nick Vincent.

"I saw the crowd stand up and receive me," said Rodney, who uses Lil Jon's "Live the Night" as his entrance music. "I tried to have a quick inning but walked the first batter. I tried to keep my fastball down. If they hit it, fine."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Sano doubter: Paxton looked dominant against the Twins, but they were able to run his pitch count up to 88 leading into the sixth inning. Joe Mauer sparked the rally with a leadoff single before Sano jumped on a 1-2 curveball from Paxton to tie the game. The homer had an exit velocity of 104.3 mph and a high launch angle of 33 degrees, traveling a projected 386 feet, per Statcast™.

"To me, the pitcher made one mistake only," Sano said. "And when he made that one mistake, you had to go hit it. If we get the chance, we'll take it. If they make a mistake, they'll pay."

Pressly, Duke escape jam: Seattle threatened in the seventh after Jean Segura walked and Robinson Cano dropped in a bloop single against reliever Ryan Pressly to put runners at the corners with nobody out. Pressly was able to strike out Mitch Haniger before turning it over to Zach Duke, who got Kyle Seager and Vogelbach to ground out to escape the jam.

"[Pressly] hung in there and made some good pitches to get the strikeout," Molitor said. "And Zach is probably my best guy, along with Trevor Hildenberger, on getting ground balls. He got a couple of them. We took a sure out at home, and then Duke got the next guy."

QUOTABLE

"Wow. That's the first time I've ever seen that. When I saw that, I said, 'Wow. That's baseball. A lot of things happen.'" -- Rodney, on seeing an eagle land on Paxton's shoulder during the national anthem

SOUND SMART WITH YOUR FRIENDS

Sano's two-run homer in the sixth was the 10th of the year for the Twins, but the first with men on base, as they had nine straight solo shots to open the year and 12 straight going back to last season. The Twins have now hit 12 homers through their first six games, breaking the club record of 10 homers through six games set in 2009.

"I like to think we're going to compete with long balls," Molitor said. "We've leaned on them a little bit in terms of runs scored, but that's OK. Those things go in cycles. Today, all four runs were home run-related, but we can score a lot of different ways."

WHAT'S NEXT

After an off-day on Friday, right-hander Jose Berrios will take the mound for the Twins against the Mariners on Saturday at 1:10 p.m. CT. Berrios

is coming off the best start of his career, as he threw his first career shutout against the Orioles on Sunday. Eduardo Escobar and Logan Morrison were held out of the lineup on Thursday, but they are expected to return on Saturday.

The U.S. Men's Curling Team threw out the first pitch before the Twins game and ... it was something
Michael Clair and Jerrid Denney | MLB.com | April 5, 2018

It was the greatest show on ice: The U.S. Men's Curling Team went from Olympic underdogs to Olympic darlings as they blitzed the field and brought home gold for the first time in history. Befitting this ragtag group that calls the Duluth Curling Club their home, they were brought out before the Twins hosted their home opener against the Mariners on Thursday (and after an eagle attacked the opposition, natch).

Dressed in matching white jackets like they were the next hot boy band, and with large gold medals hung around their necks, the group approached the infield grass ready to make the first pitch. This is when they revealed why they do their work with stones and brooms, and not baseballs. (Notice: One team member did try and curl it in, with great success):

description

Hey, just because someone is a gold medalist in one thing, doesn't mean they're a gold medalist in all things. I'd love to see Miguel Sano try to drop his hammer onto the button. Sorry, it's a curling thing.

Twins manager Paul Molitor was a big fan of having them in the park. "It was great to have those guys here," Molitor said. "They were happy to be here. I'd never had a chance to even hold a gold medal, let alone put one around my neck, so that was kind of fun."

Cold open: Festivities frigid at Target Field
Jerrid Denney | MLB.com | April 5, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS -- It took an entire community to get Target Field ready to host a baseball game in the days leading up to Thursday, which marked one of the most frigid home openers in franchise history.

"I have to give kudos to everybody who worked pregame to get that field ready after what's been happening in the Twin Cities," Twins manager Paul Molitor said. "It was pretty impressive. We appreciate the grounds crew and the front office for helping out."

Minnesota defeated Seattle, 4-2, with the temperature reading 39 degrees at first pitch. It may not have been the coldest home opener in franchise history -- that honor still belongs to the 1962 Twins, who played in 34-degree weather at the Met Stadium in mid-April -- but it still required some getting used to.

"I was surprised -- I thought it was gonna be a little colder today, to be honest with you," Brian Dozier said before the game. "It is what it is, though. It's not the warmest, but we've gotta play. Both teams have to take the field, right?"

Dozier joked that the best way to avoid the effects of the cold is to avoid long innings.

"You just have to make sure you keep your hands warm out there -- everything else will be fine."

One group that wasn't deterred by the weather was the Olympic gold medal-winning U.S. Men's Curling team, on hand to throw out the ceremonial first pitch for the Twins and sing "Take Me Out to the Ball Game."

Tyler George, Matt Hamilton, John Landsteiner, Joe Polo and John Shuster were part of the first U.S. team to capture the gold medal in the event during the Winter Olympics. All but Hamilton -- who was born in Wisconsin and cheered for the Brewers as a kid -- were born in Minnesota and grew up as Twins fans.

"The days that I looked forward to most as a kid were the ones that we spent driving down to the Twins games," Shuster said. "Literally, one of the more memorable moments of my life was when Kirby Puckett hit the walk-off home run in Game 6 of the World Series, and then we had tickets to Game 7."

Molitor was given the chance to wear one of the gold medals before first pitch, and he and Minnesota's players had a chance to talk with the Olympians.

"It was great to have those guys here," Molitor said. "They were happy to be here. I'd never had a chance to even hold a gold medal, let alone put one around my neck, so that was kind of fun."

Thursday's best: Athletics prospects thrive for Nashville

William Boor | MLB.com | April 5, 2018

No. 81 overall prospect Nick Gordon (Twins' No. 4) showed off both his speed and bat, going 4-for-5 with a triple and an RBI for Double-A Chattanooga. Gordon, who hit .270 in 122 games with the Lookouts a season ago, tripled and scored in the first and then singled in three of his final four at-bats.

Here are the Minors' 10 most talented teams

Jim Callis | MLB.com | April 5, 2018

10. Chattanooga Lookouts (Twins, Double-A)

Top 100 prospects: 2

Team Top 30 prospects: 9

Left-hander Stephen Gonsalves (No. 79) and middle infielder Nick Gordon (No. 81) possess high floors and have progressed steadily through the Minors. After joining Rafael Palmeiro as the only players ever to win the Southeastern Conference triple crown last spring, outfielder/first baseman Brent Rooker signed as a supplemental first-rounder and hit 18 homers in pro ball. Lefties Lewis Thorpe and Tyler Jay and righties Zack Littell (who led the Minors in wins with a 19-1 record in 2017) and Kohl Stewart add to an intriguing pitching staff.

Home runs lift Twins to victory over Seattle in chilly Target Field opener

La Velle E. Neal | Star Tribune | April 6, 2018

Twins manager Paul Molitor, after witnessing the events of Thursday's home opener, could describe it only one way.

"That was a classic," Molitor said with a smile.

Actually, Molitor was referring to the hard right turn the bald eagle Challenger made on his way to the pitcher's mound during the national anthem, when he briefly landed on the right shoulder of Seattle starter James Paxton, who was standing at attention in left field.

But Molitor might be forced to use the same description when speaking about how his team plays.

While beating the Mariners 4-2 at Target Field, the Twins showed how they might win a lot of games this season. They eventually got a big hit off the talented Paxton, unveiled their remodeled bullpen and flexed their long ball capabilities.

Home runs from Miguel Sano, Mitch Garver and Eddie Rosario helped the Twins win back-to-back home openers for the first time since 2010-11.

"We have played every game all the way through," Molitor said. "We have trailed in some of the games we have been able to come back in.

"It would be nice to play from a lead with these guys."

It gave an announced sellout crowd of 39,214 reasons to cheer on the second-coldest home opener in Target Field history. The game-time temperature was 38 degrees, the seventh sub-40 start since the park opened.

Until the late innings, the loudest cheers came when the gold medal-winning U.S. men's curling team threw out the first pitch. There were cheers for Challenger, too — more like cries of bewilderment when the bird visited with the Canadian-born Paxton before his handler retrieved him.

The lefthander was not flummoxed one bit. He took the mound and began firing 98 mph fastballs while holding the Twins to two hits over the first five innings.

"Paxton was tough today," Twins second baseman Brian Dozier said, "especially with the shadows."

The Mariners scored twice in the first inning off Twins righthander Kyle Gibson. Dee Gordon scored from third when Sano fielded a grounder and threw wildly to home plate, and then Daniel Vogelbach added an RBI single.

Gibson was charged with one earned run over 4 ½ innings, but he labored and ended up with 80 pitches.

Paxton sailed until the sixth inning, when Joe Mauer slapped a 97 mph fastball to left for a single before Sano deposited a knuckle-curve over the wall in left to tie the game at 2-2 and end Paxton's day.

“The pitcher made one mistake,” Sano said. “When he made a mistake, we got it.”

Garver blasted a 409-foot home run, the first of his major league career, in the seventh off Dan Altavilla. Then Rosario ripped a down-and-in pitch from Nick Vincent out to right in the eighth. The Twins have scored 17 of their 30 runs after the fifth inning.

Molitor activated his new late-inning relief corps after getting the lead. Zach Duke got two outs in the seventh. Addison Reed pitched a 1-2-3 eighth, striking out two and lowering opponents’ batting average against him to .063. Fernando Rodney gave up a walk in the ninth but still earned his first save as a Twin. The Twins bullpen is on a run of 13 ½ scoreless innings.

The ability to keep games close and score with one swing of the bat are good traits to have, and the Twins hope those traits stick with them all season.

“We hung in there,” Molitor said. “We battled. We found a way back in the game with Miggy’s homer and added on a couple more.”

Mitch Garver steps up as an unlikely hero in Twins' home-opening victory

Patrick Reusse | Star Tribune | April 6, 2018

Mitch Garver had been hitting his way through the Twins minor league system since the summer of 2013. He spent most of last season producing at Class AAA Rochester and finally received a call to the Twins on Aug. 18.

Garver was primarily a catcher and, in his 1,819 minor league at-bats, he batted .271 with 51 home runs and four triples. After arriving with the Twins, Garver played sparingly, with 23 games, 46 at-bats and a .196 average.

That amounted to nine hits. None was a home run. Three were triples.

If proposition bets on such things were available in a Nevada sports book, what odds would you have received to wager Garver, a rookie catcher with power, would hit three triples before he hit a home run in the big leagues?

Enormous odds. Case Keenum 61 yards to Stefon Diggs odds. Three triples in six weeks — after a total of four in 4½ years in the minors — can’t happen, but it did.

The Twins were well-set at catcher when Garver replaced an injured Robbie Grossman on the roster last August. Jason Castro was the regular, and Chris Gimenez was solid as the backup.

Teammates gathered around Mitch Garver to congratulate him on his first career home run, which was the game-winner.

Yet, Garver was ready to turn 27 in January, and the Twins had to find out if his solid hitting would carry over to the big leagues. Gimenez was not offered a deal, setting up Castro/Garver as the combination to start this season.

Garver had one start in the first five games, catching Jose Berrios’ shutout last Sunday in Baltimore. He was in the lineup again in the home opener on Thursday, as the Twins faced a lefthanded starter for the first time in Seattle’s James Paxton.

The Twins are loaded with lefties as regulars: Joe Mauer, Logan Morrison, Eddie Rosario, Max Kepler and Castro, plus switch-hitter Eduardo Escobar.

Manager Paul Molitor broke out Garver and right fielder Ryan LaMarre as righthanded hitters and switch-hitters Grossman and Ehire Adrianza to bat righthanded.

The lineup did not look nearly as potent as the lefty-heavy bunch that faced five righthanded starters in Baltimore and Pittsburgh. Molitor admitted it was a batting order that took some time to construct.

“First lefty we’re facing,” he said. “I tried to not get caught up in that it was our home opener. ... You try to play the right people as best you can.

“I’ve talked to our five lefthanded hitters that will play pretty much against all righthanded pitching. We’re going to have to rotate those guys through on some of these lefty matchups.”

Paxton has had injury issues, but when healthy he’s among the American League’s better lefties. There were a few seconds during the pregame display of patriotism when it looked as if the Twins might avoid the matchup.

Challenger, the oft-available bald eagle, was supposed to swoop from center field to home plate as the national anthem concluded. Instead, the confused raptor took a right and tried to land on Paxton, as he was standing alone in left field.

“I was worried about Paxton,” Garver said. “That was amazing. I probably wouldn’t be as cool and collected in a situation like that as Paxton.”

That coolness continued through five innings. The Twins had two singles and were trailing 2-0. Then, Mauer, one of the two lefties in the order, singled to open the sixth.

Paxton followed with the mistake of throwing an 1-2 knuckle curve to Miguel Sano rather than one of his 97-mph fastballs. The big man reached down and yanked that off-speed pitch into the left-field stands.

Just like that, Paxton was gone, successful in fending off a puzzled raptor but settling for a 2-2 tie and no-decision vs. the Twins.

The Seattle reliever was Dan Altavilla, 25, a righthander with a reputation for an outstanding slider. He had three strikeouts among four outs when Garver came up in the seventh.

“I faced him several times in the minors,” Garver said. “I don’t think I ever got a hit off him.”

Garver was behind 0-2 in the count when Altavilla threw a slider that was reachable. Garver hit a 409-foot home run into the second deck for a 3-2 lead. It was home run No. 1 in the big leagues and the winning run in what became a 4-2 victory.

“I wasn’t necessarily looking for the slider, because he has a good fastball, too,” Garver said. “I was looking for something up.

“To hit a home run in a spot like that, that’s something I’ll never forget. It couldn’t get any better for the first one.”

Fly, eagle, fly! Bald eagle takes detour, lands on Seattle pitcher Paxton

Phil Miller | Star Tribune | April 6, 2018

Turns out that Super Bowl LII wasn’t the only shocking turn of events involving eagles and patriots in a downtown Minneapolis stadium this year.

As rap artist Dessa sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" before the Twins’ home opener Thursday, Challenger, a bald eagle who has soared into dozens of sporting events over the years, including several times at Target Field, was released from his center field perch, an inspirational accompaniment to the patriotic moment.

Then something weird happened. “I’ll be danged if it didn’t come down,” Mariners manager Scott Servais marveled, “and land on our starting pitcher.”

Yes, just before four T-38s executed a flyover above the packed stadium, Challenger did one of his own — over Seattle starter James Paxton, who was standing at attention in the outfield, where he was beginning his warmups before the anthem began. The huge raptor apparently became confused by the crowd, and rather than fly to its handlers standing on the pitcher’s mound, swinging a target for it to locate, Challenger changed directions and began circling Paxton.

“I saw it flying toward my face, so I kind of ducked it,” Paxton said. “It was, I think, trying to stand on my back. And then I thought, ‘OK, if I can stand up slowly, maybe it’ll just rest on my shoulder. But as I stood up, he kind of fell off my back a little bit, and was kind of clawing to try to get back up on my shoulder.’”

The bird fell to the ground, then tried again to climb on Paxton’s back. “It must have thought I was the [handler]. I think it fell off my shoulder because I didn’t have the perch on my shoulder for it to grab onto.”

Paxton could feel the bird’s talons scrambling for a toehold, but he remained amazingly placid.

“You try to imagine if you were in that position, you would be able to be as calm,” Twins manager Paul Molitor said. “It was ignoring the whistle” that its handler was blowing.

But Paxton figured he had no choice. “I’m not going to outrun an eagle, so I might as well see what happens,” he said. “The talons didn’t puncture me. They were kind of sharp on my back. I don’t have any scratches, I don’t believe.”

It made for a bizarre sight, though, until the handler raced to the outfield and retrieved the bald eagle. Videos of the incident quickly went viral.

“My phone is blowing up. ... The guy said it was the first time that had happened,” Paxton said. “I guess the eagle knew I was Canadian.”

The Twins were just as incredulous. “First time I ever see that,” Twins closer Fernando Rodney said. “When I saw that, I said ‘Wow, that’s baseball. A lot of things happen.’”

“Honestly, we were like, ‘Yeah, get him! Kill!’” Brian Dozier joked. “But it was funny.” Had it happened to him, though?

“Eh, bring it on,” Dozier said.

Byron Buxton wasn’t so sure. “I’m running,” the Twins’ speedster said. “When he flew by the first time, I’m running. He wouldn’t have had a chance to get on my shoulder.”

Tough offseason isn't slowing Twins' Miguel Sano **Sid Hartman | Star Tribune | April 6, 2018**

The Twins and manager Paul Molitor must feel lucky that just six games into the season they are 4-2 and have third baseman Miguel Sano already performing at the All-Star level he showed last season.

With Sano coming off offseason surgery on his left tibia and then facing an MLB investigation, which eventually was closed for lack of evidence, there was some uncertainty whether he would start the season with the big league club.

But Sano is not only back and healthy, he provided the spark to the Twins’ 4-2 home opener win over the Mariners at Target Field on Thursday.

The Twins went 2-for-16 as a team through the first five innings and hadn’t manufactured much of a threat to Seattle starter James Paxton. But after Joe Mauer led off the sixth inning with a single, Sano came to the plate and on a 2-1 curveball clubbed a home run to left-center to even the score at 2-2.

“It’s impressive,” Molitor said. “He has a chance to do some special things with the talent that he has. I think he is still learning. He’s going to become a better hitter, as well as a better power hitter. I like the fact that he’s using the whole field a little bit better.

“But that home run today, we were having a tough time with Paxton out there, and with one swing he gets us back to even.”

Through the first six games of the season Sano is hitting .280 with three homers and seven RBI, and that is on par with the great start that he had last year for the Twins, when he hit .350 with two homers and eight RBI in their first six games.

The Twins as a team have really been on to start the year, hitting 12 homers in six games. Compare that to just five homers in the first six games of 2017.

Molitor was asked if he had any nervousness about possibly not having Sano at the start of the season.

“I think our front office were open to listening to various things throughout the winter [regarding the MLB investigation], but for him to come back from that surgery and have a healthy spring training, we had to build him up a little bit early, but he’s anxious to play,” Molitor said. “It hurt him not to play down the stretch last year, and I have a feeling he’s going to be on a little bit of a mission this year.”

Sano made a throwing error at third on Thursday, but Molitor chalked that up a bit to the cold weather and the effect it can have on an infielders’ fingers. He said Sano is getting better in that area.

“He takes a lot of pride in it. He has had to work to get to the level that he is at, and we think there is more in there,” Molitor said. “He can make some spectacular plays, but we’re trying to work on consistency and confidence.”

And while some people have complained about Sano’s conditioning, Molitor thinks he is coming along great for a player who had to rehab a big chunk of the offseason.

“I think that he is doing fine conditionally,” he said. “I think he is trying to do better because he lost some time this winter, but he is moving around fine. I’m happy to see he’s running as well as he is, and defensively he’s getting some of that quickness back.”

Sano sees best team

Last year Sano was putting up the kind of numbers the Twins front office had dreamed of since the Twins signed him as a free agent in the Dominican Republic for \$3.15 million in 2009.

He finished 2017 hitting .264 with a .352 on-base percentage, .507 slugging percentage and .859 OPS and made his first All-Star team.

Still it has been a difficult couple of months for Sano after he went down with a stress reaction in his right tibia on Aug. 19 last season, then couldn't be with the Twins as they made the push for the postseason, and then had to deal with three months of rehab and the MLB investigation.

Sano said on Thursday that he is happy to be with his teammates and he thinks the work the front office did in the offseason was tremendous.

"It's a great start for us, really good. We lost that first one, but we have won four games and this is one of the best teams in my life," he said. "We have pitchers, we have hitters, and we have defense."

Morris likes new staff

The Twins pitching staff put together another sterling performance on Thursday, even if Kyle Gibson labored a bit in allowing two runs, one earned, on seven hits and a walk in 4⅓ innings.

The bullpen provided 4⅓ innings of scoreless relief, allowing just one hit and three walks. Fernando Rodney, acquired as a free agent in the offseason, recorded his first save for the Twins.

The Twins staff has allowed just 14 earned runs in the first six games, posting a 2.33 ERA, and Jack Morris, who will enter the Hall of Fame later this season, said that Chief Baseball Officer Derek Falvey and General Manager Thad Lavine knew what they needed to do to give this team a chance to compete not only for the playoffs but for the World Series.

"That's the part of the game they needed to address. The outfield defense is solid, the overall defense I think is solid, they're going to score their share of runs, this is a young team that can generate offense. What part of the game did they need to address? Pitching," Morris said. "They went out and got three starters, added a couple guys in the bullpen, I think they did a good job."

Bullpen bolstered

While Lynn and Jake Odorizzi were the big-name starters added to the club, Morris thinks that relievers Addison Reed, Zach Duke and Rodney will be just as important to the long term success of the staff.

That was evident on Thursday, when they picked up Gibson, and through six games the relief staff is 2-1 and has allowed five runs in 20⅓ innings, good for a 2.24 ERA. Reed has retired 17 of the 20 batters he has faced, allowing just one hit.

"Reed is a guy that I think will really be the anchor in that bullpen," Morris said. "Rodney is going to be a little bit of a roller-coaster ride because of his command, but he is a veteran who has been around and embraced this role for a long, long time. The bullpen I think strengthened overall, and that's a plus."

On top of that Morris noted that the Twins are off to a great start without Ervin Santana, who is dealing with a broken finger.

"You have the ace of their staff of the last few years coming back in the rotation in the next month or so, so that will be a big plus," he said. "Somehow these guys, [Jose] Berrios and Gibson in particular, have to take the next step forward, and they have done that so far."

At Twins opener, it's buy me some parkas and trappers hats

Emily Allen | Star Tribune | April 5, 2018

Some blamed it on an early start to the season. Others pointed to global warming.

Whatever the reason, fans turning out for the unusually chilly Twins home opener Thursday afternoon were gamely wearing layers and carrying blankets at Target Field as they waited for the home team to take the field against the Seattle Mariners.

Kathy Malaske, 68, of Minneapolis, said she wore a fur-lined hat to a Twins' game in mid-April a couple of years ago. She hauled it out again for Thursday's game.

"If you have something on your head, you'll stay warm," Malaske said. "And warm socks too! Because there's nothing worse than standing and your feet get cold."

Malaske and her husband, Tom, 62, gave out plenty of free advice on bundling up to shivering out-of-towners a couple of months ago as Super

Bowl volunteers. On Thursday both were wearing their blue volunteer coats, and Tom had on a Twins cap covered with 48 lapel pins from other ballparks they've visited around the country. A lot of them are nice, he said, but Target Field was "the best of the best."

The Malaskes have been to every Opening Day at Target Field since it opened in 2010. The first opener was "a perfect day," Kathy said, but she added that this year's chill was no big deal for folks from the so-called Bold North.

"Minnesotans can handle anything," she said.

Robin Holscher, 58, of Minneapolis, agreed. She watched the Twins play a couple games in Fort Myers, Fla., during spring training, and has been to nearly every opener, she said. She was afraid she would miss this year's game because she was in Florida and only just realized that the regular season began March 29.

Holscher said it was hard to fly from balmy Fort Myers to snowbound Minneapolis, but she said it would have no effect on the Twins. After all, she said, they beat the Pirates Wednesday night during a Pittsburgh snowstorm. It's just a matter of getting in the right mind-set, she said.

"They gotta get the Yankees off their back, too," Holscher said. "They're not going to be perfect all the time, but [the Twins] are just as good."

Cheryl McCoy, 54, of Stillwater, was bundled up along with her young grandson. She's been to almost every Opening Day at Target Field with her daughter, who couldn't make this one because she's studying in Mexico.

"We got our June 1st game prepared, though," she said.

While McCoy couldn't remember a chillier opener, she recalled a game when it was so cold she was able to get better seats closer to the field.

"And free hot cocoa," she said.

Ervin Santana will go to New York for a checkup

La Velle E. Neal | Star Tribune | April 5, 2018

Twins righthander Ervin Santana is expected to head to New York sometime next week for a checkup on his surgically repaired middle finger, and also get cleared to start some sort of throwing program.

Santana, who had surgery on Feb. 6 to remove a calcium deposit, initially had trouble bending the finger and gripping a baseball. But he's improved in recent days, during which he's flipped a ball against a pitch back-type machine as part of his rehabilitation.

So it appears that Santana is about to reach a checkpoint in his comeback.

"I think he's fairly comfortable with his baseball grip," manager Paul Molitor said. "At this time, trying to figure out what his program is going forward in terms when he is going to throw, how much and how far and how long that is going to take."

The Twins expected Santana to miss 10-12 weeks following the surgery, but 10 weeks looks to be too ambitious at this point.

There's still an outside chance that Santana could return before the 12-week window closes. That would be in early to mid-May.

As advertised

The first time Twins fans saw their new (old) closer, he walked leadoff hitter Dee Gordon on four straight balls and brought the tying run to the plate in the ninth inning.

Not to worry. "It's something he's kind of used to," Molitor shrugged.

Sure enough, Fernando Rodney kept throwing his fastball and quickly found the strike zone. He threw only three more balls, recording outs against the next three hitters: Jean Segura (strikeout) Robinson Cano (forceout) and Mitch Haniger (flyout).

"He's going to have traffic from time to time, but he's got stuff to pitch his way of it," Molitor said. "He had to go through the tough part of their lineup, and even after a leadoff walk, he made some good pitches."

All but one of his 15 pitches were fastballs, most of them 94-96 mph. "In the [cold] weather, I wasn't sure the offspeed was working good. Most times it's going to be hanging," Rodney said. "It's something you don't want to happen. So I was just trying to find my spot with [the fastball]."

At 41 years, 18 days, Rodney became the oldest Twin ever to record a save. Only one other Twin has saved a game in his 40s. The last of Al Worthington's 88 saves with the club came on Sept. 22, 1969, at the age of 40 years 229 days.

That's no big deal either, said Rodney, who now owns 301 career saves. Pitching at 41 isn't much different than at 31. Well, with one exception.

"It's a little cold for 41," he said.

The Sultan of Slap

The venerable Ichiro Suzuki hit the first pitch he saw from righthander Kyle Gibson on Thursday, grounding a single to left field for the 3,083rd hit of his decorated career. It was the kind of hit that inspired a Seattle writer years ago to nickname him The Sultan of Slap.

Suzuki, 44, signed with Seattle late in free agency as he waited for a team to come calling. It ended up being the Mariners, the team he broke in with in 2001 and played with for 13 seasons.

Molitor, who was Suzuki's hitting coach in 2004, certainly knows about being a 40-something player. But he marvels at how Suzuki is taking that to another level.

"It's impressive any way you look at it," Molitor said. "To come over here after a fairly long run over there in Japan and still get his 3,000 [hits] here. He told me in 2004 he wanted to play until he's 50. I'm not surprised he's tried to continue to play."

Etc.

Problems with ticket scanners at Target Field led to long lines and forced many fans to miss the first pitch.

Thursday's Twins-Seattle game recap

La Velle E. Neal | Star Tribune | April 5, 2018

GAME RECAP

IMPACT PLAYER

Mitch Garver, Twins

The catcher's home run in the seventh inning gave the Twins the lead for good.

BY THE NUMBERS

13½ Scoreless innings by the Twins bullpen.

161 Sellouts at Target Field.

32-26 The Twins' record in home openers.

On deck

The Twins will enjoy an off day on Friday. Jose Berrios will get the start on Saturday when the Twins face the Mariners at Target Field.

Paul Molitor rests some lefties; Ervin Santana wants to start throwing on sidelines

La Velle E. Neal | Star Tribune | April 5, 2018

Twins manager Paul Molitor did not take the home opener in consideration when writing out his lineup. Not with lefthander James Paxton on the mound for Seattle. Joe Mauer and Max Kepler are the lucky lefties who get to face Paxton. Molitor explained that he's going to rotate his lefty hitters against lefty pitchers.

Robbie Grossman, who batted cleanup a few times last season when Molitor was low on options, is back there today. Ryan LaMarre gets his first Twins start, which should thrill a certain family in Edina. And Mitch Garver makes his second start.

"This one was difficult to construct," Molitor admitted.

Mariners

Dee Gordon, CF
Jean Segura, SS
Robinson Cano, 2B
Mitch Haniger, RF
Kyle Seager, 3B
Daniel Vogelbach, DH
Ryon Healy, 1B
Ichiro Suzuki, LF
David Freitas, C

James Paxton, LHP

Twins

Brian Dozier, 2B
Joe Mauer, 1B
Miguel Sano, 3B
Robbie Grossman, DH
Byron Buxton, CF
Max Kepler, RF
Ryan LaMarre, LF
Ehire Adrianza, SS
Mitch Garver, C

Kyle Gibson, RHP

Fernando Rodney said the coldest game he's played in was in the World Series when his Tigers faced the Cardinals. Game time temperature for Game 5 was 42 degrees.

He's facing a little colder weather today when the Twins play host to Seattle in their home opener, but it's no big deal to him.

"There's nothing you can do about it," said Rodney, who was sweating from a pre-game workout.

And that will be the only mention of the weather here.

When Twins righthander Ervin Santana had surgery to remove a calcium deposit from his right middle finger on Feb. 6, the club expected him to be out 10-12 weeks. They hoped it would be closer to 10 weeks, but they have given up on that, as it took longer for Santana to be able to grip a baseball again.

There's still an outside chance that Santana can return before the 12 week window closes. He's headed to New York next week for a checkup - and the Twins hope he also will cleared to start a throwing program.

Santana will be examined by Dr. Charles Melone, who preformed the surgery in February

Brian Murphy: Perfect day for Twins power to heat up **Brian Murphy | Pioneer Press | April 5, 2018**

The boys of summer joined our endless winter Thursday afternoon as the Twins opened the icebox known as Target Field for the teeth-chattering souls who layered up for a 2018 season that has been hijacked by a polar vortex.

Buy me some kindling and hand warmers.

I don't care if I ever thaw out.

After surviving wind chills and swirling snow in Pittsburgh, Minnesota returned home to maintenance workers and the grounds crew scrambling to clear nine inches of fresh snow this week that blanketed the aisles and basepaths. They are bona fide heroes who deserve a parade if the drifts hadn't narrowed Hennepin Avenue to a bike lane.

How appropriate the gold-medal winning U.S. curling team continued its victory lap from the Winter Olympics with four Minnesotans throwing out ceremonial first pitches that were not nearly as precise as their stone sweeping.

Twins players autographed one of the shovels used in the great dig out to be housed in a future display case. In the eighth inning, pure sunshine had surrendered to random snowflakes.

It was entertaining in a Minnesota kind of way, especially after the Twins scraped the permafrost from their bats and belted home runs in the sixth, seventh and eighth innings to carve out a 4-2 comeback victory over Seattle.

And then you glance at the extended forecast through fanned fingers. Keep the snow blower fueled and arsenic at arm's length.

Five off days in the first two weeks of the season, including Friday, already have the ballclub idling more than usual. Toss in some likely weather cancellations and momentum from Minnesota's 4-2 start will be as fleeting as your lawn looked the other day.

"It's not overly optimistic the things that might happen the next three, four or five days," said manager Paul Molitor. "But don't worry about tomorrow, today has enough concerns of its own. We'll just tackle that when we get there."

Baseball is a game of feel and nuance. It is absurd to see fielders wearing ninja thermal hoods and bench players shivering around dugout campfires in down comforters like the Packers at Lambeau Field.

At least the Twins are not complaining about playing a 10-game homestand in the shadow of Santa's sleigh.

"I wouldn't say you get used to it," said starting pitcher Kyle Gibson. "You never really get used to pitching in the 30s, but I kind of enjoy it. I was disappointed it wasn't snowing at game time. I'm the warmest guy out there."

Not so much on Thursday. The Mariners opened a 2-0 lead on Gibson, who only lasted 80 pitches over 4 1/3 pitches as Molitor tries to protect his pitching arms from shattering.

Miguel Sano must have worn a hit-it-to-me thermal in the first inning. The hulking third baseman had a hand in all three outs. He also sailed a throw toward his dugout after charging Mitch Haniger's roller up the line, yielding an unearned run off Gibson that lingered like a stink bomb in the frosty air.

Seattle lefty James Paxton survived an eagle attack during pregame ceremonies and kept Minnesota's bats on ice through five innings before his ill-fated sixth.

Sano made good on his defensive gaffe with a towering two-run homer into the left-field bleachers, his third long ball of the season. Mitch Garver answered with his first career home run in the seventh before Eddie Rosario smoked his first of the season into the right-field seats in the eighth to ice the comeback.

Don't look now but Molly's wall bangers have slugged 13 home runs, accounting for 43 percent of the Twins' offense so far. Sano's blast off Paxton was the only one with a man on base.

Still, Minnesota's power is heating up, which Molitor did not expect this soon out of spring training.

"Not particularly," he said. "We're relying on the long ball a little bit, percentage-wise, in terms of runs scored, and that's OK. But I think we can do other things, too."

Byron Buxton did what he does, too, entertaining the frostbitten faithful with another dazzling catch. He raced to the warning track in right-center in the fifth, leaped high to snag Haniger's extra-base hit bid and crashed into the fence, emerging with a grin across his face.

At least the part that wasn't covered up like Nanook of the North.

"Yesterday was (cold); today topped that," Buxton said.

Just wait until the weekend.

Bob Sansevere: Error on eagle's wrong turn, kudos for pitcher's calm under fire

Bob Sansevere | Pioneer Press | April 5, 2018

Toward the end of the national anthem, sung by Minnesota rapper Dessa just prior to the Twins' home opener on Thursday, a bald eagle was set aloft in center field at Target Field. The plan was for the eagle to circle Target Field and land on the outstretched arm of a handler waiting on the pitcher's mound.

Well, you know what they say about best laid plans of mice, men and bald eagles.

The majestic bird and symbol of America, named Challenger, needs a better GPS system, or perhaps an ophthalmologist. He missed his mark before the Twins' 4-2 victory Thursday over the Seattle Mariners. Missed it by a lot.

Challenger is no novice at this sort of thing. He has performed at hundreds of major events such as the World Series, the Daytona 500, the BCS Championship game and presidential inaugurations. He had been perfect more than 400 times, circling events and landing just as the Star Spangled Banner or another patriotic song is wrapping up.

Much like Cal Ripken's Iron Man streak of consecutive games ended, so has Challenger's streak of perfect landings.

Challenger landed nowhere near the pitcher's mound. He never even left the outfield, flying toward Mariners starting pitcher James Paxton, who was standing in left field, and landing nearby for a moment. Then took flight again.

Paxton might have been mistaken for a small tree, lending credence to a bad eyesight theory, because Challenger landed on Paxton's back.

There's another theory, tossed out by a member of the Twins' public relations department, that Challenger may have mistaken Paxton's glove for his landing spot. Challenger's handlers do wear a protective leather sleeve on their arms.

But a baseball glove mistaken for a protective sleeve?

And besides, Paxton said his glove was on the ground in front of him during the anthem. Challenger's eyesight really may be going. He is, after all, getting up there in years. At 29, Challenger is the same age as Paxton but, for an eagle in captivity, that makes him a senior citizen.

It's always tough when the great ones struggle, and Challenger isn't just a great one. Among bald eagles, he is the greatest one. According to the American Eagle Foundation website, eagles.org, "Challenger's image is on a Tennessee specialty license plate and on specialty coins issued by the the U.S. Mint. No other specific animal has ever had its image placed on a coin minted by the U.S. Mint."

Meantime, Challenger's handlers were said to be devastated and unavailable for comment.

As for Paxton, a bald eagle on your back beats a monkey on your back any day, right?

"That's true," Paxton said.

Challenger sunk his talons into Paxton's upper back and right shoulder, and well, here's how Paxton remembers it: "It landed right in front of me and then took off and started flying toward my face. I didn't run. I figured I'm not going to outrun an eagle. I ducked so it wouldn't fly into my face. It landed on my shoulder. I thought if I got up slowly it could balance on my shoulder. Then it fell off. The guy came and got him."

Paxton dealt with Challenger much better than President Trump handled another bald eagle named Uncle Sam, who, while perched on a desk, pecked at the president's hand and frightened our commander in chief something awful.

"That was classic," Twins manager Paul Molitor said of Paxton's interaction with Challenger. "I tried to imagine being in his position, being that calm."

Though he's a lefty and Challenger landed on the right side of his back and shoulder, Paxton still had the perfect excuse in case he pitched a lousy game: A talon-related injury.

It didn't go down that way — at least not through the first five innings, when Paxton held the Twins scoreless. Then in the sixth, Joe Mauer singled and Miguel Sano followed up with a home run. And Paxton was done.

A delayed talon-related injury, perhaps?

“I was fine. It didn’t really phase me,” Paxton said. “I’m not going to blame the eagle. It was not a well-executed pitch (to Sano). That’s definitely the first time I had an eagle land on me. The talons, I don’t think punctured me. They were kind of sharp. Nothing hurts.”

Except maybe Challenger’s pride.

“I guess the eagle got confused,” Paxton said.

Unfortunately for Challenger, there apparently are no mulligans when you mess up a choreographed flight. And he wasn’t given a chance to redeem himself during the seventh-inning stretch and rendition of “God Bless America.”

Then again, Challenger has had just one screw-up in more than 400 attempts. Nobody, er, no bird of prey is perfect.

Twins ride Mitch Garver’s first home run to 4-2 home-opener win over Mariners **Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | April 5, 2018**

Mitch Garver had a busy Friday planned, regardless of what happened in the Twins’ home opener against the Seattle Mariners. He and wife Sarah are moving into a new apartment for his first full season as a rookie backup catcher in the major leagues.

After his seventh-inning heroics in Thursday’s 4-2 victory over the Seattle Mariners, the couple had something else to celebrate first: Garver’s first big-league homer. His tiebreaking shot came off a no-ball, two-strike slider from hard-throwing reliever Dan Altavilla and traveled 401 feet into the second deck of the left-field bleachers.

Coupled with Miguel Sano’s two-run blast an inning earlier and Eddie Rosario’s solo homer in the eighth, that late power surge was enough to lift the first-place Twins out of a 2-0 hole.

“Nothing compares to hitting a home run in the major leagues,” Garver said. “That’s got to be the best feeling in the world.”

Game-time temperature was 38 degrees under clear skies, so no club records were broken for foul conditions. Fernando Rodney worked the ninth inning for his 301st career save and first with the Twins, but it was Garver’s self-described “one shining moment” that provided the headline.

Coming off a 17-homer season at Triple-A Rochester as the Twins’ minor-league player of the year, the 27-year-old Garver showed enough potential to convince the Twins to take veteran backup Chris Gimenez off the 40-man roster in November.

A knee injury slowed Garver for a few days this spring, when he hit .171 in 35 at-bats, but he held off veteran Bobby Wilson for the role of Jason Castro’s understudy. Sunday in Baltimore Garver took a Manny Machado follow-through off the left side of his catching helmet, but the ninth-round draft pick out of the University of New Mexico still managed to catch all nine innings of Jose Berrios’ first career shutout in the majors.

Thursday it was Garver’s turn for a career first, that homer coming on his 53rd big-league at-bat. No longer could speedy outfielder Zack Granite, now back at Triple-A, tease Garver about having more career homers in the majors.

“It couldn’t have come at a better time,” Twins manager Paul Molitor said. “We know he’s got a bat that can play, but I’m sure that was a bit of a load off his back. He’s been carrying that.”

Sano, atoning for a first-inning throwing error, wiped out a 2-0 deficit in the sixth with his third home run and the Twins’ first with a man on base this year. Sano connected on a 1-2 curve from Mariners lefty James Paxton, against whom he is now 4 for 8 with a walk.

“We play all 27 outs,” Sano said. “If we get a chance, we take it. If they make (a mistake), they pay.”

The Twins opened the season with nine straight solo homers, one shy of their record to begin a season (2016).

Garver had a hand in that rally as well, fouling off five two-strike pitches from Paxton before taking a cutter for the strikeout on the 10th pitch. Before Garver stepped in, Paxton had nearly gone through the Twins’ order two full times on 76 total pitches.

When Sano connected on Paxton’s 98th pitch, the power lefty’s day was over and the game had turned.

“I fouled off a few good hard sliders,” Garver said. “That was a good chance for me to see some extra pitches and kind of get that groove that I’m looking for. For Miggy to clip him there, that was huge to get us into the bullpen and give our guys a chance to see another arm.”

After opening the year with 21 straight scoreless innings, Twins starters have given up nine first-inning runs (eight earned) over the past three games. This time Kyle Gibson, coming off six hitless innings in Baltimore, gave up singles to the first two batters of the game and was eventually lifted at 80 pitches in the fifth.

Five Twins relievers took it from there, extending the bullpen's scoreless streak to 13 1/3 innings and leaving the Mariners 2 for 17 with runners in scoring position. After catching all 150 pitches and handling an overflow media throng, Garver was able to exhale and look ahead to Friday's move-in day.

At least, it was suggested, he and his veterinarian wife no longer needed to look for a proper mantelpiece.

"That's true," Garver said. "I have a nice little baseball to put there."

Despite chill, Twins fans turn home opener into a party

Andy Greder | Pioneer Press | April 5, 2018

Thursday marked not only the Twins' home opener but an unofficial start of patio season.

Despite a snowstorm that buried and temperatures that froze Target Field earlier this week, fans not only embraced the elements for an outdoor baseball game but had pregame drinks outside in nearly 40-degree temperatures.

More than 100 fans in red, white and blue trampled the unshoveled snow on part of the Cowboy Jack's shadowed rooftop a block away from the stadium before the game. Dozens of other fans willingly stood in the sun on the patio outside Fulton Brewery. From that raised perch, one particularly brave man, wearing shorts but no Twins gear, casually walked on the sidewalk across the street.

Inside the gates, fans occupied all 10 tables on the partially sunny patio at Hrbek's Pub behind home plate. Some went for the outdoor drink rail at the newly branded Bat & Barrel down the right-field line and the Budweiser Roof Deck down the left-field side.

The temperature was 38 degrees for Kyle Gibson's first pitch, five degrees above the coldest Twins home opener in 1962. The majority of the sellout crowd of 39,214 were in their seats at the start, with the outfield and third-base side with an advantage in the sun that lasted until the fifth inning.

More than two hours before the game, Deb Kalsbeck was inside Cowboy Jack's only "because there were only two bartenders" on the patio and the line was too long, she said with a laugh.

Standing in the snow on that patio, Shelby Koskela of Minnetonka wasn't shying away when the snow dumped down and the low temps dipped into the single digits earlier this week. She had taken off work and was just glad the game wasn't called off.

"This is Minnesota," her mother Becca Koskela said. "Buck up."

At Fulton, Marty Durdahl was preparing for his 10th Twins opener, including some at Metropolitan Stadium. The only cold memories he has at the Bloomington venue were from pony keg taps freezing in the subzero weather before Vikings games.

"With the sun, it's gorgeous," he said Thursday, tilting his head up to catch more rays under his "TC" hat. He was wearing only two layers and was somewhat banking on the Twins' sweatshirt giveaway if it got chilly in his center-field seat.

Few fans were as prepared as Norm Cooper of Titonka, Iowa. He had a T-shirt, long-sleeve long-john layer, Carhart overalls and a thick jacket. His overalls were unzipped on the pant legs as he waited in line outside Gate 34. Despite this week's snow, he said there was never a doubt he and family members would make the 3 1/2-hour drive north.

About three hours before the game, the Murphys from Mason City, Iowa, were on another rooftop on parking ramp A. They added their layers, grabbed hand-warmers and sipped Bud Lights. They were also undeterred by the weather forecast.

"We're Midwesterners," father Scott Murphy said.

By the seventh inning, clouds covered the warming sun and a lot of fans retreated from their seats to the overhead heaters along the concourse and bar areas.

Elizabeth Scott of Prior Lake said she has been to 18 straight home openers, with the 2013 game the coldest she remembers; it was 35 degrees

when Vance Worley threw the first pitch. Scott wore thick mittens Thursday, which precluded her from digging into a cup of French fries in her hand. She had gotten cold in the sixth inning and was leaving, heading out for her son's first baseball practice of the spring — indoors.

She missed the snow flurries in the eighth inning.

Twins could send Ervin Santana back to hand surgeon for another look

Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | April 5, 2018

Two months after undergoing finger surgery on his throwing hand, Ervin Santana continues to progress slowly in his rehabilitation process.

Gripping a baseball is something he has been able to do as well as some very light throwing with a regulation ball, but the Twins are considering sending him back to New York City for another follow-up visit with Dr. Charles Melone, who performed the surgery.

“I think having the surgeon review (his recovery) is critical to assessing where he is in that timeline,” Twins chief baseball officer Derek Falvey said before Thursday's home opener at Target Field. “No setbacks. He's in a good place. He feels good. We just want to make sure the timeline is right.”

At the time his surgery was announced on Feb. 6, Santana was slated to return to the Twins' big-league rotation by late April or early May. A \$14 million vesting option for 2019 would require Santana to throw another 200 innings in the majors this year, which no longer appears feasible.

The Twins could still choose to pick up Santana's option even if it doesn't vest, or they could opt to pay him a \$1 million buyout.

“It's a little bit up in the air right now,” Twins manager Paul Molitor said. “We're trying at this time to figure out what his program is going to be going forward in terms of when he's going to throw and how much and how far and how long that's going to take. I think it's just kind of one of those fluid situations, and then we see how fast the improvement comes.”

EXTENSION TALK

Falvey declined comment on a Yahoo Sports report that the Twins recently offered multiyear contract extensions to Byron Buxton, Max Kepler, Jose Berrios and “two other young players” only to be turned down in each case.

The lack of progress in Buxton talks was reported last month by the Pioneer Press, according to people with direct knowledge, and there is reason to believe left fielder Eddie Rosario was approached as well after falling three days shy of Super 2 salary arbitration status.

That service-time setback cost Rosario nearly \$3 million in 2018 salary, according to estimates early last offseason by MLBTradeRumors.com.

“I'm not going to comment on anything along those lines,” Falvey said. “I would say that, by and large, we don't like to have those carry into the season. If something comes to you, I never (rule out) anything ... but I would say that we don't intend to have dialogue going further now that the season has started.”

Eleven current Twins project to be arbitration-eligible next offseason, including first-timers such as Buxton, Kepler, Rosario, Miguel Sano and Taylor Rogers. Berrios won't be eligible for arbitration until after 2019, and the same holds true for shortstop Jorge Polanco, currently serving an 80-game steroid suspension.

“These are all part of the process,” Falvey said. “Every team goes through this. Some you think about, some you don't, and we'll continue to move forward from there.”

JOE 2K

Off to a 5-for-15 start through Wednesday, first baseman Joe Mauer had moved within nine hits of 2,000 for his career but wasn't spending much time thinking about that quest.

“I'm not counting down, no,” he said. “(Communications director Dustin Morse) kind of gives me a heads-up on some of those milestones. For me it's just being out there every day, available and ready to help this team win. That will be a nice little moment when it happens, but we're looking to do some big things this year.”

Heading into Thursday, Mauer needed 11 doubles to tie Kirby Puckett for first on the Twins' all-time list. With 44 more doubles he would reach 1,000.

HUGHES PLAN

Veteran right-hander Phil Hughes, on the disabled list with a mild oblique strain, inherited Matt Belisle's corner locker in the home clubhouse.

How soon Hughes returns to claim it, however, remains an open question.

In his first rehab start Thursday night for Class A Fort Myers, Hughes threw five innings on 65 pitches (47 strikes) while allowing three earned runs on eight hits and a walk. Hughes, who gave up four doubles, also struck out five Charlotte Stone Crabs.

Barring any weather-related postponements, the Twins would need a fifth starter as soon as April 11 against the Houston Astros. Molitor suggested the Twins will leave their options open as Hughes opens a 30-day rehab window.

“We’ll see how it goes,” Molitor said. “He’s on a DL rehab. We can decide accordingly moving forward.”

Righty Aaron Slegers, who made three big-league starts last season, is slated to start Friday’s opener for Triple-A Rochester. That would make Slegers a candidate to start against the Astros on April 11 on normal rest.

Wetmore’s 5 thoughts: A chilly ballgame, a bald eagle landing, and the new closer shuts it down **Derek Wetmore | ESPN 1500 | April 5, 2018**

MINNEAPOLIS – A bald eagle made a perch out of the starting pitcher’s shoulders and the first pitch of the game was thrown with the air temperature outside at 38 degrees.

Other than that, it was a fairly typical day at Target Field.

The Twins fell behind by a couple runs early but came back with power and the bullpen to beat the Mariners, 4-2, in Minnesota’s home opener Thursday. This column presents 5 thoughts from the opener.

1. The temperature outside was 38 degrees Fahrenheit at first pitch.

I thought Joe Mauer said it best when he described the early-season weather in Pittsburgh the day before as “a little chilly.” I loved the “a little chilly” line when I was growing up. It was such a versatile phrase. For us, it basically ran from 30 degrees all the way down to 10-below. And if it got to single-digit temps, the A Little Chilly crack was said with a half-smirk, much like Mauer said it Thursday.

The weather this week is the obvious story, with the Twins home for a 10-day homestand that figures to be mostly cold. But it’s more than a narrative in this case. It really affects performance.

“It’s not overly optimistic about some of the things that might happen [with the weather] in the next 3, 4, 5 days,” manager Paul Molitor said before the game. But he said that he’s not looking too far ahead. “Don’t worry about tomorrow; today has enough concerns of its own,” he quipped.

Mauer said that as a high schooler in St. Paul he had a couple early season baseball games cancelled for snow. After he signed his pro contract with the Twins, he played a 17-inning game at low-A in Quad Cities and by the end of the game the thermometer read 26 degrees.

“You just plant little seeds about the mindset that it takes,” Molitor said. “Everyone has to find a way to go out there and perform to the best of your abilities. It’s a tough game when conditions are perfect, much less adverse like we’ve seen them in a couple of games so far.”

“I used to think about: ‘Maybe there are some guys on the other team that didn’t want to be out there,’” Molitor said.

Besides the discomfort and some possible limb or digit stiffness, Molitor said there’s a higher risk of injury risk “when conditions are as unfavorable with these cold temperatures.”

2. An encouraging sign for Max Kepler: He was in the starting lineup for the home opener.

The Twins had their first matchup against a left-handed starter Thursday, in Seattle’s James Paxton. Molitor went with a few righties from the bench: Robbie Grossman, Ryan LaMarre, Ehire Adrianza and Mitch Garver.

Kepler was still in the lineup – Rosario sat to start the game – despite the rightfielder’s documented struggles against lefty pitchers last season. Molitor didn’t necessarily want to call that lineup placement as a ‘vote of confidence’ for Kepler, although his pen speaks volumes.

“He’s battled, he’s done fine, he’s actually swinging the bat very well so far against lefties and righties,” Molitor said.

Kepler’s had a few impressive plate appearances, including a high-leverage, 11-pitch walk in a late rally earlier this season and a good showing against a lefty reliever Josh Smoker in Pittsburgh. (Eddie Rosario, for what it’s worth, failed to run out an infield popup and was thrown out Wednesday in Pittsburgh, although I’m not sure that it had anything to do with his sitting; Rosario entered the game as a pinch hitter and later

homered to give the Twins some extra cushion in the 8th inning.)

3. A bald eagle perched on James Paxton in left field during the pregame ceremonies.

I would not have believed that sentence was true if I didn't see it happen with my own eyes. The giant bird of prey, Challenger, flew in from center field during the pregame festivities as part of opening day, just as local rapper Dessa was finishing her rendition of the Star Spangled Banner.

Paxton was impossibly calm as the eagle landed on the ground a few feet in front of the Mariners' starting pitcher. The bird's handlers, who were standing in the infield, had to have been a little bit nervous. Then the bird jumped back into the air and tried to land on Paxton's right shoulder. Shortly thereafter, one of the handlers was out to check on Paxton and to bring the bird back to safety.

"That was a classic," Molitor said. "It made for a nice moment and entertaining moment. I always think the pre-games at Opening Day, I get a little emotional when they flash names up on the board, people we've lost over the last year and then you combine that with how we honor our flag and our servicemen — a lighter moment. It was a nice way to start the game."

4. New game, new city, and three more Twins added home runs.

Miguel Sano hit another one out to left field, Eddie Rosario knocked one out in the 8th after coming off the bench two innings earlier, and Mitch Garver hit the first of his big-league career. Garver's was the surest blast of the trio.

Last year the Twins hit 206 homers, good for ninth in the American League. This lineup looks more powerful on paper. They lost a half-season of Jorge Polanco but will add a full year of Logan Morrison; hope to keep Sano healthy (so far, so good); and could be witnessing the coming out parties for all three young outfielders.

I don't think it's out too far on a limb to say that the Twins should eclipse last year's home total. They're off to a good start.

5. Fernando Rodney earned career save No. 301, his first in a Twins uniform.

Fans will be nervous from time to time with the 41-year-old closer. He walked more than 11% of the 231 batters that he faced last year with Arizona. But if you wipe out the ugly April from his stats last season, they actually look really good, and I think he should get a little more benefit of the doubt than he received on social media Thursday.

I asked Molitor if Rodney's appearance with a lead brings a sense of calm to the dugout.

"Believe it or not, I was fairly cool today," he said. "The leadoff walk is something I think he's used to. He's going to have traffic from time to time but he's got stuff to pitch his way out of it. He had to go through a tough part of the lineup and even after the leadoff walk made some really good pitches."

He gave up a walk-off homer to Adam Jones in extra innings in Baltimore, but he bounced back to get his first save – and fire his first fake arrow – in Minnesota. Rodney walked Dee Gordon to start the inning, but he struck out Jean Segura and got Robinson Cano and Mitch Haniger out to end the threat and close the game.

From May 1 until the end of the season last year, Rodney posted a 2.38 ERA in 45 1/3 innings, with a 29.2% strikeout rate and a 10.7% walk rate. He'll put on some base runners and make fans itchy at times, but I don't believe that he's any sort of massive liability to what should be a solid Twins bullpen.

Zulgad: Mitch Garver an unlikely hero as he becomes latest to joins Twins' power parade

Judd Zulgad | ESPN 1500 | April 5, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS – Mitch Garver drew the assignment as the Twins' catcher on Thursday afternoon for their home opener, despite having had a rough spring in which he had only six hits in 35 at-bats.

Garver's troubles at the plate in Florida seemed to have followed him into the regular season. He was 0-for-6 on the season when he stepped into the batter's box with the Twins and Seattle tied at 2-2 and no one on base with one out in the bottom of the seventh inning. Mariners reliever Dan Altavilla used a four-seam fastball and a slider to get ahead in the count 0-2 before coming back with another slider.

That proved to be a mistake.

Garver, hitting ninth in the lineup, turned on the pitch and sent it sailing 411 feet into the back of the left-field bleachers at Target Field. Garver's first big-league home run – which came in his 53rd at-bat – put the Twins ahead in what turned into a 4-2 victory.

“I have had a few (home runs) in the minor leagues, but nothing compares to hitting a home run in the major leagues,” said Garver, who has taken over for Chris Gimenez as the backup to Jason Castro. “That’s got to be the best feeling in the world.”

Six games into the season, the Twins are getting used to the feeling of circling the bases. The game-time temperature at Target Field on Thursday was only 38 degrees — the third-coldest home opener in Twins’ history (33 in 1962, 35 in 2013) — but that didn’t stop the Twins’ power surge.

All four runs were the result of homers.

Starter Kyle Gibson gave up two runs in the top of the first inning, but the Twins tied the score with no outs in the bottom of the sixth when Miguel Sano blasted a knuckle-curve from M’s starter James Paxton into the left-field seats.

Garver’s homer an inning later put the Twins ahead and an inning after that Eddie Rosario, who had pinch-hit for left fielder Ryan Larmar in the sixth, put the ball into the right-field stands to account for the final score.

That gave the Twins 12 homers on the season and was their third multi-homer game of the year. Minnesota entered the day fifth in the American League with nine homers, trailing Chicago (14), Los Angeles (11), the Yankees (11) and Toronto (10).

When asked if he expected to get this much power from his team, Twins manager Paul Molitor said: “Not particularly. I like to think that we’re going to compete with the long ball, but we’ve relied on it a little bit percentage wise in terms of runs scored. But that’s OK.

“Those things kind of go in cycles and today for us to score four and all home run related ... we think we can do other things, too, two-out hits, and running the bases and those type of things. But, yeah, we’ve got a lot of guys that can hit it over. You can guestimate how many guys have a chance to hit 15 or more or whatever and the list gets pretty high.”

Last season, the Twins had six players who hit more than 15 home runs. This list included Brian Dozier (34), Sano (28), Rosario (27), Eduardo Escobar (21), Max Kepler (19) and Byron Buxton (16). The Twins’ 206 homers were the ninth most in the AL – their 815 runs ranked fourth – and their 106 homers after the All-Star break were fifth in the AL.

Sano’s homer on Thursday was his third of the season and the first by the Twins that wasn’t a solo shot. Paxton, a 6-foot-4, 220-pound lefthander, led Seattle with 12 victories last season and had a 2.98 ERA. He had given up no runs and two hits, while striking out seven, before Sano’s home run chased him with no outs in the sixth.

Although Paxton struck out Garver with a 2-2 cutter in the fifth, Garver was able to extend that at-bat to 10 pitches and helped to increase a pitch count that ended up at 98. Two innings later, Garver’s home run left him with a memory to last a lifetime. The Twins’ ninth-round pick in the 2013 draft also got the baseball back, trading a signed bat for the souvenir.

Despite Garver’s struggles in Fort Myers, Molitor downplayed concern about the catcher and whether he came close to not going north with the Twins.

“Not really,” Molitor said. “It was more just trying to get him to relax. I think he understood that there was some competition there, a chance to make an Opening Day roster for the first time. I think he’s made some adjustments offensively trying to pull the ball a little bit more, so I think it’s a combination of trying to make a good impression and trusting his new swing a little bit. The defense has been there and we know that he can hit.

“He’s got to gain a little bit more confidence. We’re trying to get him a little bit more aggressive. He’s got that passive approach where he takes that strike one a lot and he’s kind of hitting uphill. He did it all of his at-bats today, took that first pitch, but he’s going to have to start picking his spots to be a little bit more aggressive.”

If his final at-bat Thursday was any indication, Garver seems to be getting into the swing of things.

Rod Carew on Adrian Beltre passing him on the all-time hit list: ‘It’s a brotherhood feeling that we all have’

Derek Wetmore | ESPN 1500 | April 5, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS — Standing in the long line of people waiting to congratulate Adrian Beltre will be Hall of Famer Rod Carew.

Beltre got credit for career hit number 3,054 on Thursday afternoon with a double to left field in the 2nd inning of the Rangers-A’s game. Beltre is now alone in first place on the all-time hit list among players born in Latin America.

Meanwhile, Carew was in Minneapolis taking in the Twins’ frigid home opener against the Mariners. But Carew was aware that his record —

which stood for 32 years — was in jeopardy. No hard feelings, though. Rodney was pulling for Beltre.

“Oh yeah, I was, and I was pulling for Ichiro,” Carew said Thursday. “We know how tough it is to get there, so when we do it’s like, ‘We did accomplish something.’ Yeah, I was happy for him today when I heard it. I’m going to give him a call, too.”

Beltre, who turns 39 years old later this week, was born in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. He’s putting the finishing touches on what should be a Hall of Fame career, a cornerstone for the Rangers franchise for the past 8 seasons.

Carew, from Panama, played 19 seasons in the big leagues and is No. 26 on MLB’s all-time hit list.

Ichiro, in the dugout opposite the Twins, picked up hit No. 3,083 in the U.S during Thursday’s game. He’s 22nd on the all-time list. Twins manager Paul Molitor is No. 10, with 3,319 hits in his big league career.

“I think we all pull for each other, no matter how many hits he gets. As soon as you get to 3,000,” Carew said of the club that could soon add another member with Albert Pujols (2,975 hits as of this writing).

“He’s played a long time and he’s done a heck of a job,” Carew said of Beltre. “When you get to that 3,000 mark you’ve got to feel good for everybody. It’s just like Ichiro. It’s a brotherhood feeling that we all have for each other. Because we have to be special to be able to do that.”

Report: Twins tried to sign several core players to long-term deals this winter

Derek Wetmore | ESPN 1500 | April 5, 2018

The Minnesota Twins tried this winter to extend long-term contracts for young players Byron Buxton, Max Kepler and Jose Berrios, according to a report from Yahoo’s Jeff Passan. Those offers were “rebuffed,” according to the report.

The figures of contract offers from the Twins weren’t reported in this story, but the exploration itself is interesting.

Since they took over the Twins in November of 2016, Chief Baseball Officer Derek Falvey and GM Thad Levine have talked about the desire to build a sustainable “championship-caliber” club. Some teams historically have had success by signing good young players to long-term contracts before those players reach arbitration — and well before they reach free agency.

This can be seen as sort of a win-win for the player and team. A player signing that deal, who perhaps has a higher career earning potential but more volatility, gets the security of a paycheck and a promise. A promise that you are our guy and we’re going to take care of you financially before the rules say that we have to.

On the other hand, it can also be a great deal for teams. Sure, they take on some risk that the player will flop and not meet the most optimistic of projections. But assuming his development and career track close to the way the team was hoping — assuming they were good at that exercise and also a little lucky — then the contracts wind up looking like a bargain.

The most famous example is probably Evan Longoria’s contract that he signed a couple weeks into his rookie season with the Devil Rays. That one effectively was for 9 seasons (3 free-agent) years and about \$44.6 million, once you include the 3 team option years at the end of the deal. This contract perfectly illustrates the incentive for teams. A little risky to pay a rookie? Sure it is. But between 2008 and 2013, Longoria was worth more than 35 Wins Above Replacement — making him embarrassingly underpaid from a production standpoint.

Anyway, the game has changed since Tampa Bay signed Longoria. (Heck, Longoria is now playing for the San Francisco Giants after a decade of dutiful service as the face of a franchise.) These days the truly great players seem to think that they can earn way more over their pro career by waiting it out rather than taking the instant security (and likely paycut) of a contract extension. The Indians reportedly tried to sign star shortstop Francisco Lindor to a contract worth more than \$100 million this winter, and he said no.

Two established stars got big contract extensions this year — Jose Altuve and more recently Charlie Blackmon. But those deals are very different, in all likelihood, than what a team would try to offer a player who hasn’t even hit salary arbitration yet.

That type of contract could look more similar to the one the Reds gave Eugenio Suarez (26 years old, 7 years, \$66 million plus a team option). Or Ender Inciarte with the Braves (26 years old, 6 years/\$39.525 million with a team option). Or Odubel Herrera with the Phillies (25 years old, 7 years/\$54.5 million with two club option years).

It’s still a few years before this inability to get a long-term deal done becomes any kind of an issue. What we think we know right now is that the Twins tried, the players valued themselves more than the offers explored, and we’ll wait and see what next winter holds — in free agency and in the world of extending contracts to pre-arbitration players.

MLB serves up a frosty start to new season, more snow coming

Staff Writers | Associated Press | April 6, 2018

Steady and sure-handed, Minnesota Twins second baseman Brian Dozier is a confident mitt man.

But the Gold Glover didn't feel that way this week, standing in the snow globe of PNC Park in Pittsburgh.

"I always want the ball to hit to me, but that was the one time where I was hoping it wouldn't be hit my way," Dozier said. "It would have been very tough trying to catch a popup in those conditions."

From Yankee Stadium to Great American Ball Park to Comerica Park, the big winner so far this season is the wintry mix. Eight games already postponed amid a chilly spring, several others held in frosty settings.

Players and fans might not catch a break anytime soon, either. The weekend forecast in several spots is for weather better suited for throwing snowballs than pitching baseballs.

Snow is predicted at Coors Field in Denver, Nationals Park in Washington and the Bronx.

At Target Field in Minneapolis, there's an outside chance Seattle and Minnesota could play the coldest game on record in major league history. The current mark is a first-pitch temperature of 23 degrees when Colorado hosted Atlanta in 2013.

Mariners manager Scott Servais said the heated benches and hot air blowers will help.

"Mind over matter. If you don't mind, it shouldn't matter," he said.

Maybe, said Boston outfielder Mookie Betts.

It was barely above freezing at Fenway Park as he tried to limber up before Thursday's home opener against Tampa Bay.

"It's cold. You keep trying to play mind tricks, but it's still 40 degrees. No matter how much you say 'mind over matter,' it still matters," Betts said.

Red Sox manager Alex Cora wore three layers and a jacket for the game, which the AL East champions won 3-2 in 12 innings.

"It's funny because it's cold in April, but it's never cold in October. And the weather is still cold in October. But it's something about it in October we don't care. And in April we do," he said.

"Where are we shooting to go? It's going to be cold in October. This is a dress rehearsal," Cora said.

The season began on March 29 and marked the earliest start date in the majors, excluding special openers in international sites such as Japan and Australia.

As part of the labor agreement between players and owners, this season will span 187 days, instead of 183. That will allow for extra days off and more room to reschedule makeups. It also sets up for Game 7 of the World Series, if needed, to be played in October, rather than November.

Chicago White Sox general manager Rick Hahn admits it's tough to see games played in flurries and frigid conditions. He also said the additional four days off will benefit teams later in the spring and summer.

"It's a part of the price to pay for that, I think," he said. "Unless you're going to push back the postseason, which I think is distasteful to a lot of people, or shorten the season, which is probably a long shot, I would say there's probably not much we can do."

As in, no going back to a 154-game schedule or adding in a bunch of doubleheaders.

MLB has tried to adjust the schedule in the past to have teams with warmer climates and indoor parks play first. A lot of them did open at home this year, including the Los Angeles Dodgers, Arizona, San Diego, Miami, Atlanta and more.

But some openers are bound to be in New York, Kansas City and Detroit. Plus, not every club wants to begin with a week on the road.

The Tigers are playing their first 25 games in Chicago, Cleveland, Pittsburgh and Comerica Park.

"You're not going to get me to criticize Major League Baseball. I've already seen my face enough on TV," said Detroit manager Ron Gardenhire, who was ejected on opening day.

"I'm not a schedule-maker. I just let them do their thing," he said. "We've always said it would be nice to start down South for the first week and play in better weather areas. Eventually, you're going to have a home opener soon. Our folks don't want to wait."

In the meantime, players do their best to cope.

White Sox teammates Leury Garcia and Yolmer Sanchez said they slathered Vaseline on their bodies to keep warm. Earlier this week, a few Mets built a snowman at Citi Field – balls for buttons, bats for arms – after their game against Philadelphia was called off.

It was 42 degrees for Washington's home opener Thursday, an 8-2 loss to the Mets.

"Your hands being cold. Gripping the bat. I mean, that's probably one of the hardest things," Nationals star Bryce Harper said.

The wind chill factor was in the 20s on Wednesday night in Pittsburgh, and snow fell on and off all game. The announced crowd was 20,186 – even with a \$1 ticket promotion, maybe there were 10,000 people inside the park.

Twins closer Fernando Rodney closed out a 7-3 win. At one point, he tilted back his head on the mound and caught flurries with his mouth.

"No, I'm not cold. But it is cold," he said. "But you know it's cold outside. Nothing we can do. Just try to find a way to get out of the inning as quick as you can."

Twins battle back in chilly home opener, top Mariners 4-2

Staff Writers | Fox Sports North | April 5, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS — The Minnesota Twins had to bundle up for their home opener.

The extra layers sure didn't limit their strength.

Mitch Garver hit the go-ahead home run in the seventh, one inning after Miguel Sano tied the game with a two-run shot, and the Twins powered their way past the Seattle Mariners for a 4-2 victory on Thursday afternoon.

"We've got a lot of guys who can hit it over," manager Paul Molitor said.

They've got more guys who can throw it over, too, thanks to a bunch of offseason additions to the pitching staff.

After Eddie Rosario went deep in the eighth to pad the lead, Fernando Rodney worked the ninth for his first save with the Twins. That capped a stretch of 4 2/3 scoreless innings by the bullpen in relief of Kyle Gibson. Zach Duke (1-0) picked up the victory, and Addison Reed striking out two in a perfect eighth.

"They're lights out," Garver said.

James Paxton started strong for the Mariners with five scoreless innings after a first-pitch temperature of 38 degrees and a startling moment during the pregame ceremony. The bald eagle that was supposed to fly to the mound before the national anthem instead circled Paxton, a Canadian, where he was standing alone in left field on a break from his warmup throws. The confused bird wound up landing its large talons on the lefty's right shoulder, before being lured away by the handler.

"Nothing hurts. I was more thinking about the game," Paxton said.

The remarkable poise shown by Paxton was challenged in the sixth, when Joe Mauer started with a single. Sano followed with a drive off a 1-2 curveball into the second deck, the only one of Minnesota's 12 home runs this season that has come with a runner on base.

"He made one mistake only," Sano said. "When he makes a mistake, you have to get it."

Rodney, who gave up the game-winning home run on opening day at Baltimore last week in the 11th inning, walked Dee Gordon to start the ninth. Gordon stole second base as Jean Segura struck out, but Rodney retired the next two on a grounder and a line drive. That gave the sellout

crowd of 39,214 at Target Field the chance to see the 41-year-old's signature arrow-shooting move after a successful save, which he aimed toward a red bulls-eye high above right-center field, the logo for Target, the eight-year-old ballpark's corporate namesake.

"A little cold today for 41," Rodney said, "but we're here. I feel good. I'm in good shape."

Garver's drive, his first major league homer, reached the second deck, too, against Dan Altavilla (0-1).

Gibson beat the Orioles last week with six hitless innings, but he was behind 2-0 after the first against the Mariners following consecutive singles by Gordon and Segura to begin the game. Mitch Haniger drove in Gordon on a grounder to third, where Sano threw wildly past Garver on the attempt to get the runner at the plate. Then Daniel Vogelbach sent Segura home with a two-out single.

"Opportunities are there. Guys are doing a good job getting on base," Mariners manager Scott Servais said. "We've just got to continue to execute better with guys on third base, less than two outs."

COLD OPEN

The sun was shining for the first half of the game, making the conditions more tolerable than anticipated following an early-spring storm that dumped about 8 inches of wet snow on Target Field until ceasing on Tuesday night. Twins employees brought shovels to the ballpark on Wednesday to help clear the playing surface .

There's no game on Friday, a good thing considered the forecast high of 23 degrees, but the weekend weather is on track to be just as wintry. The snow could return on Sunday, and the temperatures aren't supposed to go much above 30.

"Nothing we can do," Rodney said. "Just try to get out of the inning as quick as we can."

TRAINER'S ROOM

Mariners: Catcher Mike Zunino, on the DL with a strained left oblique muscle, will be slowed down in his rehab program to be safe, Servais said, considering the cold weather in Minnesota this weekend.

Twins: RHP Ervin Santana, on the DL following surgery on his middle finger, is behind the original schedule for recovery. The club is considering another medical examination for the ace, Molitor said.

UP NEXT

Mariners: RHP Mike Leake (1-0, 2.57 ERA) is scheduled to start on Saturday afternoon. He pitched seven innings for the victory in his season debut.

Twins: RHP Jose Berrios (1-0, 0.00 ERA) is slated to take the mound for the middle game of the series, coming off the first complete-game shutout of his career.

The eagle has landed ... on James Paxton's shoulder

Staff Writers | Associated Press | April 5, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) The pageantry and patriotism accompanying the buildup to the Minnesota Twins' home opener forced a pause for James Paxton in his warmup routine, leaving the Seattle starting pitcher standing alone in left field while a giant flag was unfurled nearby.

The bald eagle brought in for a ceremonial flight over the field was the final piece of the pregame pomp, prior to the playing of the national anthem.

Well, the big bird didn't want to visit the mound, perhaps wary of Major League Baseball's new rule limiting such trips to keep the pace of play. Instead, it picked out another target at Target Field.

And Paxton wound up as the landing spot, sticking its talons into his back.

"I guess the eagle knew I was Canadian. I don't know. But it came for me," the left-hander said on Thursday evening after the Twins rallied past the Mariners 4-2 .

Even on a 38-degree afternoon against a big-swinging lineup, the toughest task for Paxton might have been keeping his composure during that

startling moment before the game when the pastime of bird watching took on a whole new meaning.

"Figured I'm not going to outrun an eagle," Paxton said. "So might as well see what happens."

Rather than soaring to the mound to reach his summoning handlers, the bird took a path straight toward Paxton, causing him to jerk his upper body backward to avoid being grazed. Then the eagle, named Challenger, landed in the grass before circling back to find a perch on Paxton's right shoulder. One of the trainers hustled out to lure the bird safely away and make sure Paxton was all right.

"I kind of ducked it so it wouldn't fly into my face. It was, I think, trying to stand on my back," Paxton said. "And then I thought, 'OK, if I can stand up slowly, maybe it'll just rest on my shoulder. But as I stood up, he kind of fell off my back a little bit and was kind of clawing to try to get back up on my shoulder. But then as I stood straight up, it fell back onto the ground."

So he simply resumed warming up.

"The talons, I don't think, punctured me. They were kind of sharp on my back. I don't have any scratches, I don't believe," Paxton said. "That's not the first time I've seen a bald eagle, but it was the first time I've had one try to land on me."

Talk about poise under pressure.

"I was just standing there, trying not to panic," he said.

Both teams had a good time reliving the moment. Mariners manager Scott Servais said he thought fellow starting pitcher Felix Hernandez would have run away. Twins center fielder Byron Buxton had no trouble admitting that would have been his reaction, too.

"When I saw him like perk up on Paxton's arm, I'm gone," Buxton said. "He wouldn't have a chance to get on my shoulder."

Twins catcher Mitch Garver said the large-talon landing was "terrifying." Twins closer Fernando Rodney joked about using one of the imaginary arrows he shoots into the air after converting a save to try to bring down the bird.

"When I saw that, I said, 'Wow,'" Rodney said. "That's baseball. A lot of things happen."

Minnesota fans, meanwhile, could probably appreciate an eagle-free sporting event at this point. The Vikings lost to the Philadelphia Eagles in the NFC championship game this winter, of course, before the Eagles came to Minneapolis two weeks later to win their first Super Bowl.

LOOK: A bald eagle mauls Mariners pitcher James Paxton in the outfield during the national anthem

Cody Benjamin | CBS Sports | April 5, 2018

It's not often you can double as a starting Major League pitcher and a bald eagle handler, but ladies and gentlemen, James Paxton did just that on Thursday.

And he did it without any warning.

The festivities before the day's bout between Paxton's Seattle Mariners and the host Minnesota Twins were proceeding as planned, with Paxton minding his business in the outfield during the national anthem. But when Challenger, the eagle assigned to a pre-game fly-in ceremony, decided to go rogue and live up to his name, the Mariners lefty had no choice but to play it cool and let said eagle land on him, fly off him and then land on him again.

@MikeBerardino

Challenger the Bald Eagle just attacked #Mariners LHP James Paxton after the national anthem.

Well-trained, that bird.

We should note that Challenger is apparently an esteemed member of the American Eagle Foundation and has taken his talents to five World Series, plenty of other huge sporting events and even Disney's Animal Kingdom (his rumored childhood stomping grounds), so Thursday's slip-up was pretty out of the ordinary for him.

At one point, in fact, he looked darn close to thrusting his talons right into Paxton's shoulder (it was at this point, we'd guess, that Paxton, who hit the disabled list in August for a strained pec muscle, really started to worry). But the pitcher also never lost his composure, never once looking like this:

Watch: Bald Eagle Lands on James Paxton Before Mariners-Twins Game

Charlotte Carroll | Sports Illustrated | April 5, 2018

The Twins brought out a bald eagle for the national anthem before Thursday's home opener against the Mariners, and as wild animals tend to do, it wasn't as cooperative as expected.

Instead, the bird landed on Seattle pitcher James Paxton's shoulder.

Somehow Paxton didn't freak out, and he took it like a champ, standing still.

Unlike what my reaction would be, he was smart enough to realize there's not much you can do when a 10-pound bird is trying to land on you.

While likely a random landing, the bald eagle's choice has us wondering a motive as Paxton is Canadian. But Paxton was a friendly Canadian and let the bird be.

Nicknamed the Big Maple, Paxton proved he was the perfect landing spot for this eagle.

Let freedom ring and land wherever it wants.

Follow the game here.

MLB pitcher incredibly keeps his cool as bald eagle lands on his shoulder

Mike Oz | Yahoo! Sports | April 5, 2018

Let it never be said Seattle Mariners pitcher James Paxton is a man without poise.

He proved it Thursday as the Mariners were going through pregame pageantry in Minnesota, where the Twins were hosting their home opener. The home opener often calls for as much pomp and circumstance as possible. Enter a bald eagle.

A bald eagle that, apparently, liked Paxton a little too much. During the national anthem, the eagle decided to leave its spot on the field and go land on Paxton's shoulder. Maybe it wanted a better view? Here was the scene — and it was hilarious:

All the props in the world to Paxton, who didn't run away or get scared or anything like that. He kept his composure better than most. Check it out in slo-mo and think about what you'd do. Most of us wouldn't handle it as well as Paxton.

Paxton was the starting pitcher Thursday for the Mariners. If he does well, who knows, he might have to get a bald eagle on his shoulder before every start. You know how baseball is with its superstitions.

Eagle lands on James Paxton's shoulder during national anthem

Bill Baer | NBC Sports | April 5, 2018

Doug Pederson wasn't the only Eagle stealing the pre-game spotlight on Thursday. An eagle mistook Mariners starter James Paxton for its handler, landing on the left-hander's non-throwing shoulder during the national anthem prior to Thursday afternoon's game in Minnesota against the Twins.

Paxton didn't seem fazed at all by the eagle. As of this writing, he's tossed a pair of scoreless innings against the Twins.

Coincidentally, Paxton appeared in a commercial for the Mariners before the season in which he seemed to have an affinity for birds — provided they aren't Blue Jays or Orioles.

Breakout Prospects At Every Position

Ben Badler | Baseball America | April 5, 2018

While we published our Top 100 Prospects ranking in January, we're always looking for players who could leap on to the next Top 100.

With the minor league season opening on Thursday, these are players at each position—one in the upper levels of the minors, one in the lower

levels—who are not in the Top 100 Prospects right now but have breakout potential.

The prospects at the lower levels could all jump into the Top 100 by the end of the season. The prospects at the upper levels might graduate before they ever enter a Top 100, but they all have often-overlooked skill sets that could help them turn into better big leaguers than many people expect. Here's a look back at the same breakout picks from last year.

Upper: Zack Granite (Twins). With Byron Buxton, the Twins already have a potential franchise cornerstone player in center field. So whether it's in Minnesota or another club, Granite has the ability to be an everyday player. Granite, who hit .338/.392/.475 in 313 plate appearances last year in Triple-A Rochester, shows great barrel awareness, an all-fields approach and a sharp eye for the strike zone with the plus speed to be a stolen-base threat once he gets aboard.

U.S. Men's Curling Team Hilariously Botch First Pitch at Twins Game: 'Stick to Winter Sports!' **Char Adams | People | April 5, 2018**

The U.S. men's curling team may dominate on the ice. But when it comes to the baseball field? Not so much.

On Thursday, the team — comprised of skip John Shuster, Tyler George, John Landsteiner, Joe Polo and Matt Hamilton — stepped up to the mound to throw out the ceremonial first pitch at the Minnesota Twins' home opener just before the team took on the Seattle Mariners.

Fresh off their history-making, gold medal win at the 2018 Winter Olympics, the men appeared confident as they waved on the field while wearing matching parkas, Twins jerseys and, (of course) their gold medals.

"Before you throw, maybe you wanna take off your parkas. What do you think?" the announcer is heard saying to the men before the big moment. The curlers took off the jackets and carefully adjusted their medals before grabbing the baseballs.

They then threw their pitches — but things didn't quite go as planned.

Two of the pitchers sent a pair of players running for cover. Hamilton, however, decided to stick to what he knows — he curled the baseball!

Despite the less-than-stellar pitches, Twins manager Paul Molitor told Cut4 that he was glad to have the beloved Olympic team at the park.

"They were happy to be here," he said. "I'd never had a chance to even hold a gold medal, let alone put one around my neck, so that was kind of fun."

The amusing pitches were not the only surprising thing that happened before the game. A bald eagle that was supposed to fly over the field during the national anthem and then land on the shoulder of his handler, instead perched himself on Seattle Mariners pitcher James Paxton, who was in the outfield warming up.

"It was not the first time I've seen a bald eagle," Paxton said afterwards, per the Seattle Times. "But it's the first time I had one try to land on me. That was interesting. It was coming right for me. I'm like, 'the guy is over there and I'm not eagle guy.' But I guess this eagle just got confused."

Everything you wanted to know about home run robberies, as tracked by Sports Info Solutions **Mark Simon | The Athletic | April 5, 2018**

One of your favorite highlights from the first week of the baseball season was probably Ichiro Suzuki bringing back memories of his best days by robbing Indians third baseman José Ramírez of a home run with a leaping catch at the left-field fence.

You know you've seen that before. It gets you as excited as a home run does. Home runs are easy to track. Home-run robberies are not.

But we keep count.

At Sports Info Solutions, we've been tracking Home Run Robberies during the regular season since the start of 2004, so this is our 15th season tallying data. Our standards are high because home-run robberies are special.

Our rules are that it must be definitive that the ball would have been over the fence. We'll watch the fielder and the ball 10 times in slow motion and consult multiple people to make a determination on whether it was a robbery, or just another catch at the fence that robbed an extra-base hit.

In honor of this being our 15th season, let's come up with 15 fun facts about home-run robberies.

1. Who has the most?

Ichiro is close, but he's not atop the leaderboard. Carlos Gómez took one giant leap for baseball and one small step into our record books with his homer-robbing catch against the Yankees on Tuesday.

Gómez now has 13, one more than Torii "Spiderman" Hunter, who had a dozen in his time with the Twins and Angels. Gómez also has the single-season mark with five in 2013.

Here are the top five:

Carlos Gómez	13
Torii Hunter	12
Mike Trout	10
Ichiro Suzuki	10
Adam Jones	10

We've mentioned center fielders and right fielders exclusively so far. So, how about this fun fact: The leader among left fielders over the last 15 seasons is Jason Bay with nine.

6. The thrill of victory, and the agony of defeat

The fine line between elation and despair is felt with any home-run robbery, but especially so with these. In the last 15 seasons, there have been four game-ending home-run robberies in situations for which, if the ball cleared the fence, it would have been a go-ahead or walk-off home run.

Season	Elated HR Robber	Unhappy Robbery Victim
2017	Keon Broxton	Randal Grichuk
2016	Ender Inciarte	Yoenis Céspedes
2013	Carlos Gómez	Joey Votto
2008	Torii Hunter	Richie Sexson

Twins' massive 'team-building' effort digs out Target Field in time for opener **Dan Hayes | The Athletic | April 5, 2018**

Power washers. Snow shovels. Mops. Team presidents. And general managers.

In no specific order, that's how the Twins managed to prepare Target Field for Thursday's Opening Day festivities shortly after a winter storm dumped nine inches of snow on the venue on Tuesday.

Doesn't matter who you are or what you do, if you work for the Twins, there's strong chance you grabbed a shovel Wednesday as part of an all-hands-on-deck effort to get the stadium ready. More than 100 club employees, including president Dave St. Peter and GM Thad Levine, helped clear snow and de-ice Target Field ahead of the Twins' sold-out home opener against the Seattle Mariners. What emerged from the effort was a pristine ballpark with only a tiny bit of snow remaining atop the right-field fence.

"Getting nine inches of snow 36 hours before first pitch was not part of the master plan," St. Peter said. "It was good old-fashioned teamwork.

"Our biggest task was to get the seating bowl and the pedestrian walkways cleared of snow and ice. That required a coordinated effort led by our grounds crew, our ballpark ops staff and as many bodies as we could find."

Those bodies were still busy at work in the hours leading up to Thursday's 3:15 p.m. first pitch. Ushers put on the finishing touches as they used snow shovels to clear away any remnants. Members of the ballpark operations staff followed by mopping up puddles that had accumulated in the first row. Aside from the strip of snow in the right-field corner, nothing remained of the latest massive snowstorm to hit the Twin Cities.

"I thought they were going to be snowed out," said fan Bernice Haskins. "How could they do it so fast with all that rough weather?"

Haskins, 90, attends five games a season at Target Field and has been to Opening Day every season since the park opened in 2010. The Bloomington, Minn., resident and her friend, Marguerite Dillon, had seen the pictures that emerged after Tuesday's storm, including one of an employee clearing snow off seats with a power washer with hot water estimated to be 130 degrees. They were surprised to find the ballpark in such good shape.

"It's wonderful," Dillon said. "The power of the hoses is something."

The playing surface, which is the primary responsibility of head groundskeeper Larry DiVito, also received rave reviews. Pitcher Jose Berrios offered a thumbs up after he played catch outside before noon. He was impressed with the final results after following along with the massive cleanup on social media.

“It’s nice,” Berrios said. “I saw the pictures. They worked hard and did a good job.”

DiVito said the storm was unlike anything the Twins have dealt with since they moved into Target Field. The team has had to remove snow before during the season after a spring storm. But they’ve never had a winter storm backed by low temperatures.

The cold required that contracted crews worked throughout the night to clear snow and ice, St. Peter said.

Despite temperatures that dipped into the low teens at night, a lush green playing surface was revealed Thursday because of an underground heater that heats the grass at 68-70 degrees and allows it to grow.

“The amount of snow, and you go through the winters, and it amazes me every time to see the green grass,” second baseman Brian Dozier said.

While the grass is heated, the warning track is not. It was the primary focus for DiVito’s grounds crew, as it would freeze at night and become mushy as it thawed the following day. DiVito, who first worked as a groundskeeper at Triple-A Pawtucket in 1995, said the rain tarp gathered only a thin crust of ice and no snow because of the heated field.

As he worked on the field, DiVito had a good view of the effort to clear the stands going on around him.

“That was impressive, though some of them put snow where they shouldn’t have and I was giving them a hard time about that,” DiVito said with a laugh. “It’s a great organization to work for and people really put forth a lot of effort and they care about our fans and our stadium.”

Standing in the press box on Thursday, St. Peter spoke with pride about the effort. He and Levine were among the more than 75 members of the front office shoveling on Wednesday.

“If you worked for the Twins, you were invited to grab a shovel, throw on a pair of gloves and boots and go help us dig out,” St. Peter said. “I described it as a massive team-building exercise. I was proud of our staff. They really stepped up.

“Quite a transformation.”

Six games into 2018, the Twins are showing a knack for coming back

Dan Hayes | The Athletic | April 5, 2018

It’s far too early to call it a trend, but the Twins offense has begun to develop a knack for the comeback in 2018. If they can find a way to sustain what they’ve done so far, the Twins could be a pretty dangerous team this summer.

For the fourth time in six games (twice successfully), the Twins battled back from an early deficit on Thursday afternoon. Despite being held scoreless by Seattle starting pitcher James Paxton into the sixth, the Twins rallied for a 4-2 victory in front of 39,214 at Target Field in their home opener.

The win improved the Twins’ record to 4-2 as they head into a scheduled day off. Veteran Joe Mauer, who started the game-tying rally with a sixth-inning single, thinks the early efforts are a carryover from lessons learned by a young team during the 2017 season.

“It’s very early still, but I think that’s one of the things our guys learned last year throughout the season, never give up until that last out,” Mauer said. “That’s just learning and getting a few more years and a few more at-bats. It’s been nice to see so far that we’re in every game and to come back and get the win (Thursday) is huge.”

Paxton was superb through five innings. Working with a fastball that touched 98 mph and a cutter that sat 88-91, he kept the Twins off balance.

Even when they had their chances early, Paxton delivered. He struck out Ehire Adrianza with two in scoring position to end the second inning and was even more masterful in the third. That’s when he struck out Mauer with a man on third and one out and then got Robbie Grossman swinging after issuing a walk to Miguel Sanó.

But the Twins finally struck gold with Paxton’s pitch count nearing 100 when Mauer singled to left field and Sanó ripped a 1-2 knuckle-curve for a game-tying, two-run shot. The 386-foot drive to left chased Paxton from the game.

“We play for 27 outs,” Sanó said. “We’ve got a positive mentality that we can win the game. We never put our heads down. We try to keep our head up and do something different to change the game. We play like a team. We play together and we do the little things.”

In doing the little things, Sanó referenced making sure you play sound defense if you aren’t hitting and vice versa. His third homer of the season helped make up for a run-scoring error in the first that gave Seattle an early lead.

The latest rally is just another example from the Twins that they aren’t giving up easily. On Opening Day in Baltimore, the Twins put together a series of tough plate appearances in the ninth inning to rally and tie the score at 2. They lost in 11 innings, but the tone was set and carried over the next two days as the Twins outperformed the Orioles and won the series.

After falling behind by five runs on Monday in Pittsburgh, the Twins rallied to within a run and had several chances to tie the game before losing 5-4. But the Twins rallied from an early deficit to win on Wednesday night and did so again on Thursday. It’s the kind of mentality that breeds confidence within a talented group.

“We’ve played every game all the way through,” manager Paul Molitor said. “We’ve trailed in some of the games and been able to come back, even the first game in Pittsburgh after giving up five.

“It’d be nice to play from the lead, but these guys are confident. They stayed with it. Paxton did a nice job. He’s not an easy task. We did get his pitch count up there a little bit. Even though he was putting zeroes up, we knew we had a chance to get to the ‘pen at some point and Miggy hitting a home run we were able to turn it over and get the gates open.”

Starting pitcher Kyle Gibson said the rotation’s confidence in the offense offers everyone extra incentive to keep it close, even on a bad day. The Twins know they have a quick-strike offense capable of big production. Grinding through and preventing even one run from scoring can make the difference between a win or a loss.

Gibson fought through an outing in which he yielded seven hits in 4 1/3 innings. But the right-hander didn’t break and kept the Twins close as he limited the Mariners to two runs (one earned).

“We’re going to put up runs quick and at opportune times,” Gibson said. “That’s going to be the identity of our offense.

“We know we’ve got a pretty good offense and as a starting staff, we try to do it consistently, try to keep the other team under three or four runs. If we do that, we’re going to win a lot of games.”

Lookouts' Gordon opens '18 with a flourish **Andrew Battifarano | MiLB.com | April 5, 2018**

Nick Gordon used Spring Training not only as a proving ground, but he soaked in all he could, hoping what he learned at big league camp would help propel him early in this season.

One game in, it looks like things have stuck with the fourth-ranked Twins prospect.

Gordon opened the 2018 campaign with four hits, including a triple, but Double-A Chattanooga fell to Birmingham, 5-4, on Thursday night at AT&T Field.

"It definitely felt good," he said. "It was definitely a good crowd we had tonight, so it was fun to be out there and to be able to play. Last year after winning it all, Chattanooga was out there supporting us. We fell short, but it was definitely a fun night.

"I'm definitely not taking anything for granted. I'm going out there, playing every single game like it's my last, every single at-bat like it's my last. I plan on doing that for the rest of my career."

MLB.com's No. 81 overall prospect spent 15 games with the big club this spring, putting up a .417/.440/.625 slash line with two triples and a double. The playing time was valuable for Gordon, who admitted the tips he picked up from a longtime Twins outfielder were just as important for his development.

"It was definitely learning in big league camp," the 22-year-old infielder said. "It was definitely something that I got the feel for, and going into the season, just trying to keep it rolling. ... I talk a lot with Torii [Hunter], he helps us out a lot -- we're pretty close. I get to talk to a lot of those guys, it definitely teaches you as a young player."

Facing No. 15 White Sox prospect Spencer Adams to lead off the bottom of the first inning, Gordon worked the count full before lacing an

opposite-field triple down the left field line. As he pulled into third, the 2014 first-round pick couldn't help but think that his pre-game approach had paid off.

"It was just getting something that I could drive," Gordon said. "I laid off some good pitches; he made some good pitches. It's definitely something that I've been working on, not trying to chase so much. I feel like I'm good enough to hit any pitch, but it's not about that. It's definitely about getting a pitch you can drive. I got myself into a good count and I saw a fastball over the middle of the plate."

With one out in the third, the Florida native ripped a 2-0 pitch back up the middle to plate Ryan Walker from second. Two innings later, Gordon fanned after a five-pitch at-bat. The shortstop said he knew he'd strayed from his game plan, so he made a quick mental note of what he needed to do later in the game.

"It was kind of just sticking with the plan," Gordon said. "Even on the strikeout, I chased, and I said I'm definitely not perfect, but it's something I'm getting better with and fine-tuning. It's definitely something I need -- I've cut down on my chasing a lot. I'm a little mad at myself in that at-bat for chasing. But it's definitely about making adjustments."

Gordon kept that in mind in his final two at-bats, lining singles to center in the seventh and ninth innings. The four-hit performance followed a 2017 season in which he hit .270/.341/.408 in 122 games in the Southern League. Although he might be knocking on the door at Triple-A, the younger brother of Mariners outfielder Dee Gordon is focused on what he can improve upon in Chattanooga.

"It's definitely trying to compete -- don't throw away any at-bats," Gordon said. "There are statistical things, of course, but for me it's [about] getting better. I want to be as consistent as I can. Some things are out of your control. Wherever I'm at, no matter what uniform I have on I have to go out and compete. That's what I'm going to do."

Walker went 3-for-4 and finished a triple shy of the cycle for the Lookouts, while Chris Paul had two hits, including a double.

For Birmingham, ninth-ranked White Sox prospect Zack Collins walked three times and drove in a run and No. 23 Seby Zavala delivered a two-run double in the seventh.

Red Wings GM Dan Mason ever-confident, even about the weather **Leo Roth | Democrat & Chronicle | April 5, 2018**

With a forecast calling for 41 degrees and rain at 6:05 p.m. Friday, it appears Rochester Red Wings General Manager Dan Mason is about to strike out on his annual "50-degree guarantee" for Opening Day.

That's if the game is played at all.

The Red Wings host the Buffalo Bisons at Frontier Field to christen the start of Rochester's 132nd year of professional baseball.

If the temperature doesn't reach 50 by first pitch, fans in attendance will receive a free ticket to a game of their choice in April or May by turning in their stub.

"It's looking in jeopardy, yes, but I've lived here long enough to realize that the weather changes all the time, so I'm still holding out hope and being optimistic," said Mason who watched 60 mph wind gusts take down a party tent Wednesday before awakening to a snow-covered field on Thursday.

Mason has been the Red Wings GM since 1995 and this is his 29th season with the club overall.

The Democrat and Chronicle caught up with the Pied-Piper of Promotions in his office as he checked yet another weather update on his computer.

D&C: With the weather bound to be frigid, why the nighttime start?

Mason: "We had to do it. We have less parking available for weekday day games now with MCC and more companies utilizing the Kodak lot. If we did have a huge crowd for Opening Day we just wouldn't be able to accommodate it from a parking perspective. During the year, most of our games are at 7:05 p.m. so it shouldn't be an issue. We have some weekday day games, but we don't anticipate those crowds being to the level of what an Opening Day crowd is usually."

Q: It was a drama-filled off-season as the ballclub and Monroe County hammered out a new lease. How close was the team to playing its home games out of town in 2018?

Mason: "I think we were always confident that we'd get a deal done, but certainly it makes you appreciate Opening Day even more. I think our fans are appreciative Opening Day is here in Rochester and at this point, we're just looking forward and not behind. We're looking forward to working with (county executive) Cheryl (Dinolfo) and her team and making some great improvements here and keeping Frontier Field a great facility for fans for the next 20 years."

Q: What improvements can fans look forward to seeing in 2018, if any?

Mason: "There's a lot of painting scheduled that fans will notice and much of that we can't really do until it's warmer. That will take place throughout the season and some of the other improvements will take place over the next two or three years."

Q: One thing that's been mentioned is creating a 360-degree concourse, extending behind the outfield walls. Is that going to happen?

Mason: "Don't know that yet. Some of the things that will get done are things needed to keep the facility viable. It's like owning a home, you're not always getting a new kitchen or bath, sometimes you need a new roof and furnace. So, we're getting things like new HVAC (heating, ventilation, air conditioning), replacing some plumbing, painting the steel superstructure, the bathrooms. Other fan amenities we're still talking with the county and figuring out what's best for us and our fans."

Q: It's been a frustrating handful of years on the field, not making the playoffs since 2013 despite fielding winning records. How do you like the team the Minnesota Twins have put here this season?

Mason: "I like it a lot. The Twins did a great job of putting together a roster for us which has that blend you need of experience as well as guys coming up through the system. They went out and signed some really good free agents for us, but also some guys at the Major League level, which forced some guys down here that quite frankly are Major League talents. They'll be back in the big leagues this season, but will start out here."

More: Getting Frontier Field ready for Opening Day is in the Genes for the Buonomos

More: New Red Wings manager Joel Skinner has truly lived a life in baseball

Q: Pitching appears a strong suit led by the return of Aaron Slegers (15-4, 3.40) and getting guys such as Zack Granite and Kennys Vargas helps in the hitting department.

Mason: "The arms we have both in the rotation and bullpen, there is a lot of talent there. And there is certainly a lot of hits in the lineup. Having a guy like Kennys Vargas come back, he's a real fan favorite who drives in a lot of runs. A guy like Zack Granite, who was IL player of month in June after a torrid stretch and he plays awesome defense. He's a spark plug at the top of order and can steal a lot of bases. It's going to be a fun season."

Q: You've had a lot of fine managers come through the clubhouse, what's your thoughts on Joel Skinner?

Mason: "I think Joel is going to be a tremendous fit both for the Twins and the Red Wings. He has the right mentality, he's no stranger to managing in this league which will also help. He won't have that adjustment period, he's been with Buffalo and Charlotte, so he's been to all the cities and ballparks. And he's a guy who likes to win. That bodes well for our fan base and our organizations. He has an awesome personality to boot."

Q: What's your thoughts on the new pace-of-play regulations Minor League Baseball has put in place for 2018? Will they have an impact?

Mason: "It remains to be seen. It's a big focus of the commissioner to speed up the game at the Major League level and here in the minors. Any rules changes down here, if they work, it's something they'll try up there."

Q: The most radical move is starting all extra innings with a man on second base. That could have a major impact don't you think?

Mason: "It will be interesting to see how managers use the rule. Do you immediately bump a guy over to third or take three shots at getting a single or better and bringing the guy home? It's intriguing but just because a team scores in the top of the 10th doesn't mean the other team won't score in the bottom of the 10th."

Q: We realize the toll extra innings can have on pitching staffs, but is baseball that broken? Are our attention spans that poor?

Mason: "I'm a traditionalist but I'm also for trying whatever Minor League Baseball and Major League Baseball thinks we need to do to improve the game. If it works and helps the fan experience, helps the players, helps the game itself, I'm for it. We'll see. That particular rule of starting

with a man on second is done in international play, and that's made for some exciting finishes in the World Baseball Classic.”

Q: So what about the forecast? What's it say now?

Mason: “We check it about every hour this time of year. It's never ending, but that's all right.”