



CHICAGO CUBS DAILY CLIPS

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April 11, 2018

- Chicago Sun-Times, **Home schooled: Cubs try to learn new digs, 'right approach' in 8-5 opening loss**
<https://chicago.suntimes.com/sports/home-schooled-cubs-try-to-learn-new-digs-right-approach-in-8-5-opening-loss/>
- Chicago Sun-Times, **How Cubs plan to cover loss of Anthony Rizzo during first DL stint**
<https://chicago.suntimes.com/sports/efren-navarro-called-up-from-iowa-as-anthony-rizzo-goes-on-cubs-10-day-dl/>
- Chicago Sun-Times, **Wrigley looking good, neighborhood looking good, but what about the Cubs?**
<https://chicago.suntimes.com/sports/wrigley-looking-good-neighborhood-looking-good-but-what-about-the-cubs/>
- Daily Herald, **Pirates thump Cubs, who continue to look blah out of the gate**
<http://www.dailyherald.com/sports/20180410/pirates-thump-cubs-who-continue-to-look-blah-out-of-the-gate>
- Daily Herald, **Cubs honor Loyola Ramblers at home opener**
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- Daily Herald, **Constable: There's less of Schwarber, but still plenty to love**
<http://www.dailyherald.com/news/20180410/constable-theres-less-of-schwarber-but-still-plenty-to-love>
- The Athletic, **Reality bites: Cubs will always be judged by 2016's hot start**
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Chicago Sun-Times

Home schooled: Cubs try to learn new digs, 'right approach' in 8-5 opening loss

By Gordon Wittenmyer

Manager Joe Maddon called it “awkward,” referring to the Cubs’ cross-country odyssey out of spring training that took them to four cities for 11 games and a rainout, covering more than 3,600 miles of travel.

And then they got home to three inches of snow, a home-opener postponement and a new, wider, weirder dugout that redefined “awkward.”

“There’s a couple of little things we’re going to talk about,” Maddon said of the deeper, two-tiered dugout with two rows of benches and a railing over the heads of most players and staff standing up. “There are different design things about it that we might be able to alter to make it a little more functional.”

Although the weather improved dramatically from Monday, the Cubs’ ability to move baserunners did not. And when starter Tyler Chatwood struggled for much of his five innings of work, it added up to an 8-5 loss to the Pirates in the Wrigley Field opener.

“We haven’t played our best, to be honest,” catcher Willson Contreras said of the Cubs’ 5-5 start. “Especially offensively. With men on second and third or less than two outs, we haven’t had the right approach in those kind of situations.”

This from the player who singled twice and doubled to right-center. Then, again, Contreras never budged after that leadoff double in the fourth off Ivan Nova as Kyle Schwarber and Addison Russell followed with strikeouts, and Jason Heyward popped to shallow center.

The Cubs trailed 5-2 at that point. Francisco Cervelli’s two-out, three-run homer off Mike Montgomery in the seventh made it 8-2 and started fans toward the exits.

The fourth didn’t cost the Cubs the game. But it was an example of a young lineup’s biggest weakness in the early going.

“We’ve got to learn to just move the baseball,” said Maddon, who emphasized the Cubs aren’t the only team in baseball struggling with that in the age of launch angles and extreme bullpen velocity.

In the meantime, another potential advantage with the new, relocated dugout is how much closer it is to third base — and in particular third-base coach Brian Butterfield, whose position on the field is now almost directly in front of Maddon at the dugout steps.

“Poor Butter,” Maddon said. “You think he’s real close, but he’s always doing one of these [looking behind, left and right, for signs]. I apologized for that.”

They discovered Tuesday it just might be easier to chat.

“I’m going to go verbal, I think,” Maddon said. “Either that, or just throw sunflower seeds at him.”

From the end of the first until the Cubs loaded the bases with two out in the eighth, Maddon and Butterfield had plenty of time to chat or work on their seed throwing.

Only Javy Baez crossed Butterfield's path in that span, briefly, when running out two solo homers.

"The first 10 games we haven't done our job, our best job," Contreras said. "The pitchers have been really good, especially the bullpen. But it's our fault when we lose a game by two or three runs, because we're not getting on base at the right time or just going out there without the right approach."

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Chicago Sun-Times

How Cubs plan to cover loss of Anthony Rizzo during first DL stint

By Gordon Wittenmyer

The Cubs survived their series against the Brewers with star first baseman Anthony Rizzo sidelined, winning two of the three games he missed last weekend.

That wasn't the case in their home opener Tuesday, when the Cubs played from behind most of the day, could muster little against Pirates right-hander Ivan Nova and lost 8-5 in their first game after Rizzo officially went on the 10-day disabled list.

"It stinks, especially not being able to play the home opener," said Rizzo, whose sore lower back put him on the DL for the first time in his career. "But it's a long season, and you've got to be smart. It's just a matter of getting it right for the long haul."

The decision to put Rizzo on the DL was made so the Cubs could take advantage of the maximum-allowed five days to backdate such a move. He will be eligible to return Monday against the Cardinals.

"It felt good [Monday]; it feels good today," Rizzo said. "We'll test it out probably more over the weekend and really ramp it up. The plan for me is hopefully to be back on Monday."

The Cubs have missed Rizzo's presence in the No. 3 spot in the lineup, even though he was off to a 3-for-28 start with only one home run.

Manager Joe Maddon said not having Rizzo means less protection for No. 2 hitter Kris Bryant and creates a domino effect by forcing him to move pieces around to compensate.

"Everything's impacted," Maddon said. "Plus, he's so good at first, we can't run all of our defenses without him. It's almost like missing your quarterback or your middle linebacker.

"I talked to him [Monday] in the training room, and he was going through this myriad of exercises that you could see he wasn't 100 percent comfortable yet. I really believe he's going to be fine at the conclusion of this DL stint. But [with the cold] weather and he's not 100 percent — let's not push it."

The Cubs selected the contract of first baseman Efen Navarro, 31, from Class AAA Iowa to replace Rizzo on the roster. Navarro, who was signed as a minor-league free agent in January, had played parts of five seasons with the Angels and Tigers. He made his Cubs debut as a pinch hitter in the fifth inning and reached on an infield single.

Rizzo typically has dealt with tightness in his upper back once or twice a year, but it usually costs him no more than two days. This time it was the lower back, and he said it locked up worse early last week.

He said he first felt pain April 2 in Cincinnati, then felt well enough after two days off to play through lingering soreness Thursday in Milwaukee. But it worsened overnight.

Rizzo and Navarro have known each other since they were Class AAA foes in 2011 in the Pacific Coast League. Rizzo greeted Navarro on Tuesday by shouting, "Navi!" and giving him a big hug.

"I was able to see him grow and become the man he is now," said Navarro, who added he tries to emulate the younger Rizzo on and off the field.

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Chicago Sun-Times

Wrigley looking good, neighborhood looking good, but what about the Cubs?

By Rick Telander

The Cubs were the last team in the major leagues to have a home game this season, and you have to wonder if the big event couldn't have been delayed a tad longer until, like, Wednesday?

The original home opener was scheduled for Monday. Oops, snow.

On Tuesday, the snow was gone, but it was 44 degrees at game time, with a wind chill dipping into the 30s. That is to say, it was indoor basketball weather.

Which made some sense, since members of Loyola, the NCAA Tournament darling, were in attendance to sing during the seventh-inning stretch.

Well, not all of them got the chance.

"I thought I was going to sing," said star point guard Clayton Custer, sitting with teammates in the cafeteria across the aisle from the cramped radio broadcast booth as coach Porter Moser, Ben Richardson and Marques Townes bellowed about peanuts and Cracker Jack.

He looked saddened, there in his maroon and gold letter jacket, and not because the Cubs were in the process of losing 8-5 to the Pirates, though one assumes that didn't thrill him.

"It's definitely sad," he said about senior pal Richardson being done with college, while Custer has another year of eligibility left. "We played on the same teams since third grade. We're the same age, but I had to redshirt for a year after transferring from Iowa State."

These young men will recover just fine.

But you have to wonder just a tad, about the Cubs.

They're not playing very well right now, except for maybe catcher Willson Contreras and steady third baseman Kris Bryant. Contreras has a bazooka for an arm, and his 3-for-4 day raised his average to .333. Then, too, there was infielder Javy Baez moving away from a bad start with a pair of solo home runs.

Having first baseman Anthony Rizzo out this early with a bad back isn't good news, of course. And if center fielder Ian Happ (.156 batting average, 18 strikeouts in eight games) doesn't put things together soon, the Cubs can start their leadoff-man hunt all over again.

They're 5-5 now, and the division-leading Pirates are 8-2. Nothing to get worried about, really, but the Pirates?

OK, panic is not a word you even bring up until at least mid-June. So, steady is the pace.

"They're good," said Cubs manager Joe Maddon of the Pirates. But with 152 games to go, it's all just dust in the wind.

"We're not giving up," said the slimmed-down Kyle Schwarber. Indeed. Folding now would be the earliest surrender since the crew cut surrendered to the mullet.

Schwarbs, who doesn't cut nearly as epic a figure as he did before losing 20-plus pounds in the offseason, helped himself a bit by going 2-for-4, including a sharp RBI single to left in the first inning. That's a direction the left-handed batter often doesn't go.

The Cubs' pitching was bad, courtesy of starter Tyler Chatwood's nine hits and five earned runs given up in five innings. Middle-innings man Mike Montgomery wasn't any better (two innings, three earned runs).

But as everybody knows and says: It's early.

What you notice is the continuing redevelopment of Wrigley and the surrounding neighborhood. Folks were actually looking out their room windows at the new Hotel Zachary across from the park on Clark Street.

Hi everybody! Enjoy the view of the grass patio, the statues and maybe a narrow view down an aisle to the ballyard.

There's something very new cooking on Addison Street across from the south side of the park, too. Soon you may not be able to find Wrigley amidst all the new buildings, although we suspect the squat Cubby Bear Bar will anchor the corner of Addison and Clark in perpetuity the way Plymouth Rock anchors that first pilgrim stop near Cape Cod.

Certain Wrigley Field rituals seem unlikely to change anytime soon, as well. For example, when the Pirates' Starling Marte hit a long homer to left field in the fourth, nobody threw the ball back onto the field. The crowd booed, with the chorus growing louder and louder until—ta-da!—not one, but two purported home-run balls came flying out of the bleachers and onto the grass.

That's how it goes.

Oh, did I mention the famous Sister Jean was at the game, underhanding the first pitch from her wheelchair? The good Loyola nun was there. And she was cheery and nice.

As Cubs fans should be. For awhile.

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Daily Herald

Pirates thump Cubs, who continue to look blah out of the gate

By Bruce Miles

From the beginning of spring training, Cubs manager Joe Maddon talked about the need for a fast start.

Last year, with the World Series "hangover" lingering, Maddon's Cubs were 6-6 and 6-7 in the early going and didn't really get over the hump until past midseason.

After Tuesday's home-opening 8-5 loss to the Pittsburgh Pirates at Wrigley Field, the Cubs are a mediocre 5-5 while the Pirates are the surprise team of the season at 8-2. So how long does the "start" of the season last? After all, the Cubs could win five straight and have a nice-looking 10-5 record before too long.

Or it could be another month or two of fits and starts.

"I'd say 25 games is, like, reasonable, maybe the first month is a reasonable barometer to where you're at with all that," Maddon said after the game. "We're finally getting home for the first time after being on the road. You get a chance to establish yourself on a fairly consistent routine.

"We have a night game (Wednesday) and then several days (day games) after that, which is fine this time of the year. We'll see. The first month is an indicator of what's going on a little bit better."

Of course, Cubs teams these days are going to be compared with the world-champion 2016 Cubs, who went 17-5 in April and 18-10 in May.

Ten games still represent a small sample size, but "energy and enthusiasm" were the watchwords of spring training, and this group has looked rather blah out of the gate.

A .228 team batting average and little production out of the leadoff spot will contribute to the blahs. And the Pirates took the air out of the opening-day crowd of 40,144 with 3-run innings in each of the third and seventh innings.

"I see it as strong," said second baseman Javier Baez, who thrilled the crowd with a pair of home runs. "With haven't been hot, everybody, but we're battling. We expect other guys to play as a team and trust your teammate who is behind you."

Even with Monday's snowout of the regularly scheduled opener, Maddon went Tuesday with No. 5 starting pitcher Tyler Chatwood, who displayed good velocity on his fastball early before running up his pitch count in the second and third innings.

The Cubs scored single runs in the first and second innings, with Baez putting them ahead 2-1 in the second with a booming home run to left field, with the ball landing just below the videoboard.

But the Pirates sent nine men to the plate in the third, scoring three times. They got a solo homer in the fourth by Starling Marte to go up 5-2. But the pitch Chatwood wanted back resulted in a run-scoring single to No. 8 hitter Jordy Mercer in the second.

"They're just placing balls pretty well out there," said Chatwood, who fell to 0-2 with a 4.91 ERA. "I think the big one was Mercer. I had the pitcher on deck. I didn't have to give in right there. He put a good swing on a fastball up."

Maddon saw it much the same way.

"He had good stuff, and he came out hot, almost too hot, like 96 (mph), a lot of strikes." he said. "Good stuff. They just got him. Couple pitches I know he'd like to have back, maybe even pitch selection back. But stuff wise, outstanding."

The Cubs were down 8-2 in the seventh after a 3-run homer by Francisco Cervelli off Mike Montgomery before Baez's homer in the bottom half and a 2-run rally in the eighth. "We played well again," Maddon said. "They hit the ball well today."

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Daily Herald

Cubs honor Loyola Ramblers at home opener

By Bruce Miles

Even though the Cubs lost their home opener 8-5 to the Pittsburgh Pirates, a good time was had by the Loyola University men's basketball team.

The Cubs honored the Ramblers for making to the NCAA Final Four.

Coach Porter Moser and players threw out a ceremonial first pitch and then sang during the seventh-inning stretch. Team chaplain Sister Jean Dolores Schmidt, who gained fame at 98 with her charm and enthusiasm, also tossed out a first pitch from her wheelchair.

"It was an awesome day," said guard Clayton Custer as he signed baseballs in the media lunchroom.

"We were definitely excited, and you could feel it in the crowd," said Ben Richardson, who made key shots on the way to the Final Four. "It's special to interact with Chicagoans and hear how the run made them feel and how proud they were. That means the world to us."

The players said they were touched by the Cubs wearing Loyola T-shirts at batting practice during their season-opening series at Miami.

Manager Joe Maddon talked in Miami of wanting to take Sister Jean out for ice cream in his station wagon. Maddon spent time with Sister Jean on the field before the game.

"It was really fun to have that conversation with her," Maddon said. "I've been looking forward to that. I was hoping to have that conversation."

It's official: Rizzo to DL:

Anthony Rizzo had one piece of advice for teammate Ben Zobrist when it comes to playing first base.

"Yeah, catch the ball," Rizzo said Tuesday. "That's what I tell everyone. That's your job over there. Just catch it. That's what I tell every kid whoever asked me what he should do at first. Just catch the ball."

The Cubs made it official Tuesday, placing Rizzo on the 10-day disabled list with lower-back tightness and selecting the contract of Efran Navarro from Class AAA Iowa.

The move on Rizzo was retroactive to April 6, and he will be eligible to return next Monday, when the Cubs open a home series against the St. Louis Cardinals.

"It stinks, especially not going to play the home opener," he said. "But it's a long season. You've got to stay smart and that's what we're doing. It's a matter of getting it right for the long haul."

Zobrist was in the lineup for Monday's snowed-out home opener. He was back again Tuesday.

"I have to be on my toes over there," he said. "Make sure I'm in the right spot. Do the best I can to be instinctual. You're going in the opposite direction of the ball on the infield a lot of times. It's just different. The instincts are different over there than they are in other places."

A middle infielder by trade, Zobrist had played in 23 games at first entering this season.

The new guy:

Efren Navarro, who turns 32 May 14, went to spring training as a nonroster man with the Cubs. He has 153 games of big-league experience with the Los Angeles Angels and Detroit Tigers. Last year with the Tigers, Navarro played in 23 games. He has a lifetime line of .243/.306/.334 with 3 homers and 22 RBI.

He singled in Tuesday's fifth inning as a pinch hitter.

"Efren Navarro is really good at first base," said Joe Maddon. "He's really good, he's not just OK. He's a really good thrower, too. As first basemen go, he really throws well. I'm a big proponent of that."

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Daily Herald

Constable: There's less of Schwarber, but still plenty to love

By Burt Constable

Chicago Cubs slugger Kyle Schwarber set the all-time team record for postseason homers as a rookie in 2015, staged a miraculous comeback to become a World Series hero in 2016, and hit a whopping 30 homers last season even after spending a couple of weeks in the minor leagues to improve his swing. But there's more to Schwarber than the numbers. Fans feel as if Schwarber is one of them.

"He's not the most physically in-shape guy. He mirrors me a little bit," says fan Don Kramer, 54, of Grayslake, who wears his World Series gold Schwarber jersey to Tuesday's Opening Day at Wrigley Field. Having lost more than 20 pounds during the offseason, Schwarber still doesn't have the chiseled body of teammates such as Jason Heyward or Javier Baez, Kramer says.

"And he's 0 for 14 in his last five games," says daughter Stephanie Kramer, 26, who wears an Anthony Rizzo jersey, as does her friend, Jimmy Gray, 30, of Wadsworth.

"He's going to turn it around," promises Don Kramer.

And just like that, Schwarber singles in the first run of the season at Wrigley Field to give the Cubs an early 1-0 lead.

That Schwarber success soon fizzled as the Cubs lost 8-5 to the first-place Pittsburgh Pirates, who now lead the Cubs by 3 games.

"I just got my Schwarber jersey on Sunday," says Jennifer Burkett, 42, a St. Louis resident who became a Cubs fan because of her boyfriend Aaron Schultz, 41, who grew up in Kankakee. Schultz suggested Burkett buy a Rizzo or Kris Bryant jersey as Schwarber, whose best position is designated hitter, might

be traded to an American League team soon, or even sent back to the minors. But Burkett knew she wanted Schwarber.

"He's real. I know he's been through a lot," Burkett says. "But he worked really hard in the offseason and got in super-duper shape, and he's cute."

Fan Dan Sutton, 32, of Kansas City says he chose a Schwarber jersey in part because he grew up in Indiana and Schwarber was a star at Indiana University.

"He's got the Schwarber 2.0 body this year, but he still probably could put back a couple of beers," says Sutton. The fan says he loves how Schwarber missed almost the entire 2016 season and came back to hit .412 in the World Series. He has faith that Schwarber will rise to the occasion again.

In the fourth inning with a runner on second, Schwarber takes a called third strike. He grounds out in the sixth inning and singles in the eighth. Schwarber did raise his average from .172 to .212, which is boiling hot for water, but not for a batter.

"It's hit or miss," notes Burkett. "You never know what's going to happen, but even if he goes to another team, I'm not going to stop wearing his jersey."

"Everybody focuses on Rizzo and Bryant and the other guys, and I just like Schwarber," says Scott Buttlere, a 26-year-old fan from Homer Glen. "Even if he's traded, he's still the man."

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The Athletic

Reality bites: Cubs will always be judged by 2016's hot start

By Jon Greenberg

Last year was last year and the year before was the year before. And the 2018 Cubs should be judged on their own team, schedule and situation.

But that's not reality.

From now until they break up this team, if the Cubs start strong, the question will be: Was it 2016 strong, when they won 25 of their first 31 games?

If they start slow, as they're doing somewhat right now, the narrative will be: are they like the 2017 Cubs, who started 6-3 and lost four in a row, finishing the month with a 13-11 record? That April presaged a 12-16 May and a 15-13 June and a whole lot of hand-wringing until the All-Star break ended.

Usually you say wait a month to make rash decisions about a baseball team, but as Theo Epstein said in Milwaukee the other day, "Last year it was more like two months and then it became three. We were at the rationalization stage."

The early part of the season "is made for overreactions," Epstein said that day.

The Cubs lost for the fifth time in 10 games in their belated home opener Tuesday in a quirky start to the season with nine road games in a row, one cancellation and a one-day postponement.

They returned home to a snow-out and then opened their season with an 8-5 loss to the Pittsburgh Pirates, a team no one expected much from but has won eight of their first 10 games.

The Pirates set the Cubs on their downward spiral last spring, not quite revenge for the 2015 wild card game, but the few remaining players from that team would sure like to pin a few Cubs pelts on the old visiting locker room wall. (They'll go well with the rodents under the lockers.)

It's obvious that from now until whenever this ride ends, the Cubs will be compared to the 2016 team or the 2017 team. Maybe both.

Starting off fast isn't a Cubs goal. Every baseball team wants that early cushion. Look what it did for the 2005 White Sox.

"Everybody's trying to do it," Maddon said. "We got a 10-gamer out of our system right out of the gate. Hopefully now they've got a chance to settle in and maybe we continue along on what we consider consider a great start."

Last year on May 1, Jon Lester told me not compare them to the 2016 team — "I mean, let's be honest," Lester said then. "Last year we got off to a historically good start. You can't do that every single year." — something he repeated to reporters again recently.

"That was an abnormally great start," Maddon said. "I've been involved in two of those. Once with the Rays and a couple years ago here. I just like the way we're playing right now. We're catching the ball pretty well, pitching has been...the first time through, pitchers weren't as sharp but they've gotten sharper. The bullpen has been outstanding. Our record would be outstanding right now if we got a couple hits when we needed to. As baseball team playing game of baseball, I'm pleased. We just haven't gotten hits that would have permitted us to be three or four games over .500 at least, which we could've been just by getting the right hit at the right moment."

Observing how his team is playing, not just counting wins, is part of Maddon's job (though it's a little tougher to observe from his awkward perch in the new dugout) and he's not wrong to sugarcoat some of the team's early failings.

While the 2016 Cubs started off 8-2 and went 17-5 in April, Cleveland that year went 5-5 and then 10-11. The 2017 Dodgers went 5-5 and 14-12. The Astros last season were slightly better, 6-4 and 16-9. In 2015, both World Series participants, the Mets (7-3 and 15-8) and the Royals (8-2 and 15-7), got off to similar starts.

In 2014, the Giants started 6-4 and 17-11 while the Royals went 4-6 and 14-12. In 2013...honestly, we could do this all day. As Ben Zobrist told me in Milwaukee, "We haven't really started the season yet."

But while everything evened out, record-wise, last season, the slow start contributed to the Cubs' playoff performance, at least according to Zobrist and popular opinion. What a good start can do is give a team cushion to gear up for October.

If people want to complain about the Cubs' early play, they have a right to. But now that the Cubs are back home, they can cross off one excuse, put away their rationalizations and focus on stringing together some wins to make their April record more palatable to everyone, themselves included.

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The Athletic

Hey, down in front: What do the Cubs think of their new Wrigley Field dugout?

By Patrick Mooney

The marketing genius of the Cubs is taking some of the most fundamental parts of a big-league stadium — like the home dugout — and making it seem exotic enough to be on your local newscast after another round of Wrigley Field renovations.

The new spacious dugout is like an old house that has been quickly rehabbed — great at first sight with a few quirks you notice on a second look.

The cameras tracked Joe Maddon as he did a pre-home opener walkthrough late Tuesday morning, dressed for playoff weather, wearing a ski cap and a heavy blue jacket. But he wasn't exactly thrilled with the new setup, which isn't quite tailored for the manager who wants a comfortable spot to watch his team.

“Just a couple things little things we’re going to talk about,” Maddon said after an 8-5 loss to the Pittsburgh Pirates in front of 40,144 fans. “It’s different being where we’re at, but we’ll get used to it. There are different design things about it that we might be able to alter to make it a little bit more functional. We needed a couple games, at least, to find out so we could give the guys positive feedback. But, I mean, the work done is fabulous.”

The biggest issue is probably the new location, shifted 30-some feet toward the left-field foul pole, from the edge of Section 15 to Section 14. An in-game measurement from The Athletic counted 24 seats from the start of the old dugout at Section 15 to Maddon’s spot halfway into Section 14. (The visiting dugout was moved as well.) In a spring training press conference, president of business operations Crane Kenney said it was moved 28 feet, though you have to add on a few more feet to where the dugout steps are located.

Essentially Maddon's view went from just to the left of the on-deck circle to just outside of the third base coach's box. What adds to the distance is the dugout now begins with a TV camera well and drifts closer to what had been the old exposed bullpen in foul territory. One positive is Maddon shouldn't get any signs mixed up with third base coach Brian Butterfield.

“The perch is different,” Maddon said. “Of course, it’s OK. It’s just different. Poor Butter. You think he’s really close but he’s always doing one of these.”

Maddon started whipping his head back and forth.

“I apologized for that and I’m going to go verbal,” he said. “Either that or just throw sunflower seeds at him. One seed, bunt. Two seeds, hit and run. He’s that close.”

Between last year's bullpen move and this reconfiguration, the Cubs added more premium seating, including some for the new 1914 Club. But the Cubs said that's not why the dugouts were moved.

“We did not move to accommodate the club,” Cubs vice president of communications Julian Green wrote in an email to The Athletic. “The new configuration aligned with the access points for the expanded home and visiting clubhouse.”

A problem that can be easily rectified is that players can't currently hang over the fence, a baseball tradition, because there's no step and only a very small ledge. The previous dugout had a warning track

on a second level for the players to hang out. During the game, you could see players standing up at the fence, giving them just enough space to see over it.

No one expects to see much on the field while sitting down in the back row of a dugout, which is so far removed from the action that it could double as a meditation room. Sit down next to the bat rack and you can't see the center-field scoreboard because the back of the front bench blocks your view. If players sit on top of the back seats — with their backs against the dugout wall — they can see decently enough, but the roof would be pretty close to their heads.

The Cubs and their design firm Populous, which is based in Kansas City, worked with the players to redesign the dugout, according to Green.

“And just like the clubhouse,” he wrote in an email, “we'll make tweaks as we show (how) the players use the space over the homestand.”

One addition that would make dollars and sense would be a Target ad on the back wall for when angry players want to slam their bats against something. The old, dented water fountain is no longer in the dugout.

So far the players aren't complaining. At least not to reporters.

“At the end of the day, it's a lot bigger,” said Anthony Rizzo, the All-Star first baseman now on the 10-day disabled list and watching while he rests a stiff back. “It's going to be an adjustment, but I think they're really nice. They did a good job.”

“It's huge,” second baseman Javier Baez said. “A little different, but there's a lot more space.”

Given the breadth of their \$1 billion-or-so urban development project that has transformed their chunk of the Wrigleyville neighborhood and the ballpark, dugouts probably weren't the Cubs' biggest concern, though perhaps more thought could've been put into the new location and Maddon's job requirement to watch the game and argue calls.

That view could be worse. It was only 10 years ago when the Cubs lowered the field by 14 inches as part of an improved drainage project headed by White Sox groundskeeper Roger Bossard. Before that change, Cubs managers had to deal with crowning of the turf that obstructed their view.

“When I first came here, you look in the dugout where Lou [Piniella] was, and you literally could only see the right fielder from the waist up,” Bossard told Paul Sullivan back in November 2007. “Now you can see the athlete from the dugout from the shoe on up. I know I read that Lou said he couldn't argue a call because he couldn't see the call. Now he's going to be able to see everything.”

While the Cubs have been an easy target — Remember the days of cakes and giant cards in the trash? — they have nailed much of the renovations, from the green space on Clark St. that has turned into a family park instead of just a beer garden to the underground state-of-the-art clubhouse and training facilities. The Cubs were so enthusiastic about their new below-ground improvements back in 2016 that president Theo Epstein took a tour with reporters to show it off. In the park itself, the video boards have blended into the landscape and added to the Wrigley experience.

So the players, who have been given all of the amenities they have ever wanted, probably can't complain about bad sight lines after one game.

“Awesome,” outfielder Kyle Schwarber said. “I think we got to find out a little bit of a different situation for the ballboy there.”

If you weren't paying close attention, it did kind of look like a security guard sprinting onto the field to tackle a streaking fan when the batboy did his job.

“But the dugout’s super-pro,” Schwarber said. “We can all just feel like we’re not crowded and have a good time in there.”

Like seemingly everything about an iconic stadium that has hosted 103 home openers for this franchise, the dugout will be a work in progress, from the handrails to the in-and-out flow of players.

“You don't actually know what works until the players and coaches are in the space,” Green wrote. “Given the schedule and Spring Training you don't get that feedback in advance. Again, we'll make tweaks as we hear from players and coaches. It's a work in progress and we'll address as we go “ Maddon agreed.

“Everybody here expected us to get in there, check it out and then give them our best advice,” he said.

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The Athletic

Pirates make this a Wrigley opener for Cubs to forget
By Patrick Mooney

At least Joe Maddon finally got to meet Sister Jean.

The day after snow showers postponed the 103rd Wrigley Field opener, the Cubs tried to manufacture some buzz. Loyola basketball coach Porter Moser and players from his Final Four team were in the house. Sister Jean had her own pregame media scrum behind home plate and threw out one of several first pitches, along with Hall of Famers Andre Dawson, Billy Williams and Ryne Sandberg. You saw the obligatory gigantic American flag unfurl across the field. You heard the flyover. You could smell fresh paint.

But there are only so many sick days and excused-absence notes and only so much emotional investment after witnessing eight playoff rounds and an unforgettable World Series in the last three years. The Pittsburgh Pirates made this one for the Cubs to forget.

Hazleton Joe, meet Sister Jean.

“She was awesome,” Maddon said, responding to the first question in the interview room after Tuesday afternoon’s 8-5 loss. “Really, really sharp, lucid lady. It was really fun to have that conversation with her. I’ve been looking forward to that. I was hoping to have that conversation. Having gone to parochial school for eight years and growing up where I did (in Pennsylvania), I have a lot of respect for nuns.

“I asked her [about] her order. I told her I was raised by the Daughters of Mercy.”

It had been 173 days since a 10-run elimination-game loss to the Los Angeles Dodgers in last year’s NLCS. The Cubs imported two of the best pitchers from that Dodgers team, signing Yu Darvish and Brandon Morrow and spending more than \$216 million on free agents. After traveling through Miami,

Cincinnati and Milwaukee, the Cubs returned home after the franchise's longest season-opening road trip since 1899, back when they were called the Chicago Orphans.

It was 43 degrees at first pitch when Tyler Chatwood blew a 92-mph fastball by ex-Cub draft pick Josh Harrison (a future All-Star traded away in the 2009 John Grabow/Tom Gorzelanny deal). Chatwood — the Coors Field change-of-scenery guy targeted for that offseason spending spree on pitching — lasted five innings and gave up five runs on nine hits.

“They’re hot right now,” said Chatwood, who also struck out seven of the 25 hitters he faced. “It seemed like whenever they put the ball in play, good things happened for them. They found some holes, but that’s going to happen. You got to be able to get out of it.”

The small-market Pirates, meanwhile, traded away the face of their franchise (Andrew McCutchen) and last year’s Opening Day starter (Gerrit Cole), dismantling pieces from the 2015 team that lost to Jake Arrieta in the wild-card game. (The Pirates also continued their awesome tradition of acquiring players who look like pirates. See: Red-beard third baseman Colin Moran, a prospect the Cubs considered with the No. 2 overall pick they used on Kris Bryant in the 2013 draft.)

Just as the Brewers seem to enjoy getting under Cubbie skin, the Pirates aren’t waving the white flag now, winning eight of their first 10 games and racing out in front of the NL Central.

“We got to check out their pitching all the way through,” Maddon said. “They got some young, talented starters, too. But the team on the field — you saw it today — it’s primarily a veteran group that’s really swinging the bats well right now.

“They’re going to go as their pitching goes, because the team on the field is pretty good.”

Maddon knows Pirates catcher Francisco Cervelli, who has shown up at the manager’s Tampa home to party during the Gasparilla Pirate Festival. You could actually hear the boos in the seventh inning after Cervelli launched a Mike Montgomery fastball into the left-center field bleachers for a three-run homer and an 8-2 lead.

The crowd of 40,144 didn’t get really loud until the eighth inning, chanting “JAV-Y! JAV-Y!” Javier Baez had already crushed two home runs off Pittsburgh starter Ivan Nova. But this time — down three runs with two runners on — Baez struck out swinging after three pitches from hard-throwing lefty closer Felipe Vazquez (who recently changed his last name from “Rivero”).

The Cubs are 5-5 and very much aware that this is a long season. Outfielder Kyle Schwarber stood at his locker and laughed when someone asked if the Pirates look like division leaders.

“Like you said, it’s early,” Schwarber said. “There’s 152 games left, so we’ll see how it all plays out.”

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The Athletic

Anthony Rizzo’s absence leaves Cubs without their ‘quarterback’

By Sahadev Sharma

The Cubs lineup is built on depth and length. When Ben Zobrist struggled last season, the Cubs called upon Ian Happ to bolster their offense. When Addison Russell was out for a month, Javy Báez stepped up with both the glove and the bat.

But even for a team loaded with offensive talents, there are certain players who feel irreplaceable. Anthony Rizzo, who was officially placed on the disabled list with lower back tightness prior to Tuesday's home opener, falls into that category.

"You saw what happened the other day when KB [Kris Bryant] was walked intentionally," manager Joe Maddon said. "No concern on the other team's part, just walk him. That's why I put Zo [Ben Zobrist] behind him. I talk about lineup protection. It's so important to be able to do those kinds of things. When he's not in the lineup, it's not as long. You send it over and they look for spots or holes. Their pitcher and pitching staff has an easier day with the matchups later in the game. Everything is impacted."

There have been plenty of studies done on the impact or lack thereof of having lineup protection. The conclusions have been scattered, but even advanced analysis has suggested that there is some impact. One thing is clear, Maddon, and many people involved in baseball believe the impact is quite significant. And for an offense that has carried its erratic 2017 ways into this season, Rizzo's consistent production would be a welcome presence.

Rizzo had a big home run in the season's first game, but had since managed just two singles as he'd posted a rough .107/.219/.214 line through six games. But that's hardly indicative of the player he is, and neither are the seven strikeouts and one walk he'd posted during that time. Nobody believes that's the performance Rizzo will deliver in 2018. This is a player with a 130 career wRC+, one who dropped his strikeout rate to a minuscule 13 percent last season, pairing it with a career-best 13.2 percent walk rate. Opponents know that's who Rizzo is, and they'll tread lightly when they see him waiting in the on-deck circle while Bryant digs into the batter's box. As talented as Zobrist is and as good as he's looked early on, he just doesn't provide the same type of impact as Rizzo.

Of course, there's more than just the offensive side of things. First-base defense is often overlooked, but not only is Rizzo a deserved Gold Glove winner, he also provides a unique skill set that seems to work especially well with the way defenses are run on the North Side. Maddon went out of his way to praise Efran Navarro's defense. The veteran first baseman was called up from Iowa to take Rizzo's spot on the roster. Zobrist started at first on Tuesday and along with Victor Caratini, the three will hold down the position in Rizzo's stead.

Rizzo's advice for playing first?

"Catch the ball," he said matter of factly.

Of course, as Ron Washington will tell you, it's a bit more complicated than that. Especially when considering the way the Cubs run things on defense.

"He's so good at first," Maddon said. "We can't run all of our defenses without him. It's almost like missing your quarterback or middle linebacker. We miss all that."

The Cubs utilize out-of-the-box bunt defenses that have worked remarkably well in the past. They use Rizzo in very unique ways in those formations, taking advantage of his good hands and his impressive, aggressive throwing ability. Rizzo has also gotten comfortable playing with Jon Lester, who has issues throwing over to first base, thus communication and deciding who will field slow rollers, bunts and how to handle Lester's bounce-throws are all key.

Rizzo's back has caused him to miss time in the past and it flared up once again while in Cincinnati. He tried to play through it after a rainout and a day off gave him what he thought was enough rest. But

after waking up with stiffness following an 0-for-4 night with two strikeouts in Milwaukee, Rizzo was scratched from Friday's lineup, remained sidelined throughout the weekend and with another postponement on Monday, the Cubs decided to make the move.

"Never this early," Rizzo said when asked about the recurring injury. "Usually if it's July, August, September, you mentally grind through it and as long as you can move, you can play. But this is one of those things where we talked and I don't want to be locked up the entire year. Hopefully we put a nip to it the next five days and I don't have to deal with this hopefully the rest of my career."

The Cubs offense put up five runs in Tuesday's loss to the Pittsburgh Pirates. There's enough firepower for them to survive another five days without the face of the franchise. But Rizzo's first career DL stint is a reminder that the mere presence of certain players can alter the thinking of the opposition and the intimidating feel of the Cubs lineup.

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Cubs.com

Javy's 2 homers not enough in home opener

By Carrie Muskat

CHICAGO -- Javier Baez did his best to give the crowd of 40,144 at the home opener something to celebrate on Tuesday, but the Cubs came up short.

Baez smacked two home runs, both solo shots, in the Cubs' 8-5 loss to the Pirates at chilly Wrigley Field. Francisco Cervelli hit a three-run homer and Starling Marte added a solo shot to power the Pirates, now 8-2 for the season, their best start since 1992.

"Right now I'm really impressed with their team on the field," Cubs manager Joe Maddon said of the Pirates.

Baez was 0-for-7 in his career against Pittsburgh starter Ivan Nova, but launched the first pitch he saw with two outs in the second for his first home run of the year.

With one out in the seventh, Baez connected again, hitting a 2-0 pitch again into the left-field bleachers. It was his second career multihomer game and first since Aug. 7, 2014, at Colorado, which was Baez's third career game. Baez did have a multihomer game in Game 4 of the National League Championship Series against the Dodgers last October.

"We know he can do that, that's no big surprise," Maddon said of Baez.

"To be honest, I was trying to hit the ball on the barrel and not get jammed because of the weather," Baez said. "I stayed short to the ball. The second at-bat [in the fifth], I came back to the old at-bats against him. He got me, but I got him back again."

Baez struck out against Nova in the fifth, one of six K's in the game for the right-hander.

"The first one, I was trying to go sinker down and away," Nova said of Baez's first homer. "The ball did nothing, came right back to the middle. The other one, I was trying to throw a four-seamer and do the same thing. The last one, I was behind in the count. I know he's pretty aggressive. I was looking to locate a pitch and get a quick out, but it didn't happen. He put some good swings on it."

The Cubs had two on and two out in the eighth, but Felipe Vazquez struck out Baez to end the inning. Baez wasn't thinking home run then.

"I was just keeping my same approach," Baez said. "We play them a lot and the way they've been pitching to me the last couple years, I've been making my adjustments. I was just trying to make contact and get a good pitch to hit."

Tyler Chatwood took the loss in his first Cubs start at Wrigley Field, giving up five runs over five innings, but he felt good about the outing.

"I felt I had really good stuff today and they were able to foul it off rather than get weak contact outs or something, so they did a good job of that," Chatwood said. "They're hot right now. It seemed like whenever they put the ball in play, good things happened for them. You've got to be able to get out of that."

Maddon felt there were two turning points in the game. In the first, Kyle Schwarber hit an opposite-field RBI single, but Willson Contreras, who was on first, was called out at third trying to advance after a review of the play. Maddon also wasn't happy about Cervelli's homer off Mike Montgomery in the seventh, which opened an 8-3 lead.

"[The Contreras play] was a big moment," Maddon said. "We were a little bit into Nova's head at that point. All of a sudden, you let them up. That, to me, was a turning point."

"We didn't play badly," Maddon said. "They hit the ball well today. They're swinging the bats really well right now this early in the season, so you have to give them credit."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Getting the job done: There were bright spots on offense. The Cubs had two on and one out in the first when Schwarber beat the shift with a single to left. One run scored. Jason Heyward also delivered a two-run single in the eighth against Vazquez when the Cubs had the bases loaded and two outs.

Rally time: The Pirates trailed, 2-1, in the third and had two on and one out when Josh Bell smacked an RBI double to tie the game. Corey Dickerson followed with a two-run double to put the Bucs ahead, 4-2. Cervelli reached on an infield single that shortstop Addison Russell knocked down. Cubs pitching coach Jim Hickey went out for a visit and Chatwood got Jordy Mercer to hit a comebacker, enabling the Cubs to force the runner at home.

QUOTABLE

"I guess I'm lucky. It's a cool experience, especially when you have one here. All the fans. All the chatter, a lot of things they say against you when you're warming up in the bullpen that you use in your favor. You get that energy that they think is negative to you, it's good. Use it in your favor and have a good game."

-- Nova, on spoiling the Cubs' home opener -- the second time this season he won in his opponent's first home game

"It's early. What are we, 10 games in? There's 152 left. We'll see how it plays out."

-- Schwarber, on the Cubs' 5-5 start

MITEL REPLAY OF THE DAY

The Cubs had runners at first and second in the first when Schwarber hit an RBI single. Contreras slid into third and was called safe. The Pirates challenged the call, saying Contreras came off the bag. After a review, the ruling was overturned and the inning was over.

WHAT'S NEXT

Jon Lester will make his first start at Wrigley Field on Wednesday at 7:05 p.m. CT. The left-hander threw six shutout innings against the Brewers in his last start to pick up the win. He's ahead of last year's pace, when it took him six starts to get his first "W." He even tested -- and completed -- his first bounce throw to get a baserunner. It's also the first night game of the season at Wrigley Field.

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Cubs.com

Cubs place Anthony Rizzo on disabled list

By Carrie Muskat

CHICAGO -- Anthony Rizzo's back wasn't loosening up, so the Cubs placed the first baseman on the 10-day disabled list Tuesday, retroactive to Friday.

"It stinks, especially to not be able to play the home opener," Rizzo said Tuesday. "It's a long season, it's a marathon and you have to stay smart, and that's what we're doing."

Rizzo, who had never been on the DL before, has missed the Cubs' past three games and was not in the lineup for Monday's scheduled home opener because of tightness in his lower back. If all goes well, Rizzo would be eligible to play Monday against the Cardinals.

It was warmer on Tuesday than Monday, when the Cubs' home opener was postponed because of snow. That doesn't matter, Rizzo said.

"I think if it was 80 degrees right now or 20, it doesn't matter," he said. "It's right to get it better for the long haul."

Rizzo has had back issues in the past, but usually later in the season.

"Usually it's July, August, September," he said. "You mentally grind through it, and as long as you can move, you can play. This is one of those things where we talked and I don't want to be locked up for the entire year."

Ben Zobrist started at first base on Tuesday and the Cubs called up first baseman Efen Navarro from Triple-A Iowa. Navarro, 31, played parts of five Major League seasons with the Angels and Tigers.

"I talked to [Rizzo] yesterday in the training room, and he's going through a myriad of exercises and you could see he wasn't 100 percent comfortable," manager Joe Maddon said. "Let's not rush it. I really believe he'll be fine at the conclusion of this DL stint."

Rizzo said he felt some discomfort one week ago when the Cubs were in Cincinnati, and got a break when the April 3 game was postponed because of rain. He did play Thursday in Milwaukee, but his back locked up again.

"I think the next time I go [to Cincinnati], I'll sleep on the floor," Rizzo said. "I just have to take care of myself better."

That means more core exercises for the first baseman. One thing Maddon would like to see is Rizzo taking fewer swings in batting practice.

"I still believe guys swing too much," Maddon said. "I came here this morning and I'm hearing cracks of the bat down the hallways in the batting cage. I don't think Billy [Williams] did that, I don't think [Ron] Santo did that, I don't think Ernie [Banks] did that. They probably didn't have a batting cage to do that in.

"With Anthony, I'm trying to convince him to back off -- no pun intended -- a little bit, because swinging too often can exaggerate the issue," Maddon said. "If more swings were the answer, everybody would hit .300."

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Cubs.com

Zobrist dusts off first-base mitt for rare start

By Carrie Muskat

CHICAGO -- Ben Zobrist made his first start at first base since 2010 on Tuesday, filling in for Anthony Rizzo, who was placed on the disabled list because of back problems. Did Rizzo have any advice for Zobrist?

"Catch the ball," Rizzo said Tuesday. "I tell everyone, 'That's your job over there. Just catch it.' I tell that to every kid who asks me what you should do at first, 'Catch the ball.'"

Zobrist worked out at first base in Spring Training, but Victor Caratini played there in the three games that Rizzo has missed. Tuesday was Zobrist's first start there since Sept. 23, 2010, when he played for the Rays against the Yankees.

"I'll have to be ready," Zobrist said. "I'm sure [the Pirates] are aware I haven't played there that often, too. I have to be ready for everything.

"Rizzo's been doing it for so long, it's second nature and he doesn't have to think about any of that," Zobrist said. "I think Vic did a phenomenal job the last few days in Milwaukee. He made it look like he's been there a lot. That's my goal -- to try to make it seamless."

The Cubs did call up first baseman Efen Navarro from Triple-A Iowa to take Rizzo's spot on the roster. Navarro notched a pinch-hit infield single in the fifth inning in his first at-bat with the Cubs.

- Zobrist's wife, Julianna, sang "God Bless America" prior to Tuesday's game.

"We just enjoy the experience," Ben said. "I don't get nervous, but I get excited that we get to do that together."

- Cubs shortstop Addison Russell spent a lot of time with infield coach Brian Butterfield working on shortening his throwing motion. Manager Joe Maddon said he can see the difference.

"I think he looks great," Maddon said of Russell. "I've always loved his mechanics, but I think what they've figured out is how to get the most out of his arm. And with that is the confidence -- he's

throwing with a ton of confidence right now. Beyond just better footwork coming through the baseball, the confidence factor is adding to that factor, too. You're seeing Addy at his best at shortstop."

- Maddon got his first look at the new, wider dugouts at Wrigley Field on Tuesday. They are about 28 feet further down the line, which will give him a slightly different view -- he's now lined up more with third base. Maddon said he can tell he'll have a different perspective of balls and strikes from his new perch.

"It's different where we're at," Maddon said. "There are design things about it that we might be able to alter to make it function."

For example, the Cubs may ask to have one of the hand rails moved to provide a better sight line.

One thing that's different is Maddon is much closer to third-base coach Butterfield, who had to turn his head awkwardly to get the signs.

"I'm going to go verbal [with the signs], I think," Maddon said. "Either that or just throw sunflower seeds -- one seed, bunt, two seeds, hit and run, he's that close."

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ESPNChicago.com

Loyola's Sister Jean at Wrigley Field for Cubs opener

By Bradford Doolittle

CHICAGO -- It feels like winter in Chicago, so it's only appropriate that the Loyola-Chicago men's basketball team, joined by Sister Jean, participated in the pregame ceremonies before the Cubs' home opener at Wrigley Field on Tuesday.

Sister Jean Dolores Schmidt, 98, a chaplain for the Loyola-Chicago men's basketball team, became a national celebrity for her outspoken support of the Ramblers during their surprise run to the 2018 Final Four. Her rise to fame included a bobblehead doll created in her honor.

Sister Jean and several members of the Ramblers watched the pregame festivities on the field before the Cubs and Pittsburgh Pirates squared off for the first game of the 2018 season played at The Friendly Confines. She received a rousing ovation after she tossed a first pitch from her wheelchair, which bounced to home plate as she covered her face in laughter. Her lap was covered with a No. 18 "Sister Jean" Cubs jersey that she had received.

Loyola coach Porter Moser and guard Ben Richardson also threw out first pitches. Several members of the Ramblers are scheduled to lead the crowd during the seventh-inning stretch rendition of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame."

Loyola became just the third No. 11 seed to reach the Final Four last month. It was the Ramblers' first trip to the Final Four since they won the 1962 NCAA title.

It was another frigid day at Wrigley Field, where the Cubs and Pirates were playing a day after the originally scheduled opener was postponed because of snow.

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NBC Sports Chicago

Situational hitting is still Cubs Achilles' heel, but they may be moving in right direction

By Tony Andracki

Major League Baseball is in the midst of a revolution.

The focus for hitters is on launch angle and exit velocity, sacrificing contact. The focus for pitchers is on strikeouts, sacrificing walks.

Which makes for a radically different game in terms of situational hitting from a decade or two ago. The two factions slam into each other when there's a runner on third base and less than two outs.

Hitters used to emphasize contact in those situations — shortening their swing, choking up on the bat, anything to get the run in with a productive ball in play.

Now we're seeing a whole lot of strikeouts in such instances.

"That's all I've been watching," Joe Maddon said before Tuesday's Cubs home opener. "I was sitting on the couch yesterday watching games and all I saw was teams cannot drive in a run from third base with less than two outs.

"It's not just something an individual team has to overcome."

Maddon attributes a lot of that to the increase in strikeout pitchers around the game, in large part thanks to a velocity spike.

Almost every relief pitcher can dial it up to the high-90s now and strikeouts are up at a record pace around the league — in any situation.

Pitchers are going for the strikeout more than ever. It's not about soft contact anymore (unless your name is Kyle Hendricks).

Maddon admitted he's specifically told Cubs relievers to go for the whiff several different times on the mound in the season's first 10 games.

"I give the ball to the guy and I'll say, 'Listen, you've got a base open. Go for the strikeout,'" Maddon said. "Meaning, even if he gets down like 2-0 [in the count], don't just throw a cookie in there. Go for the strikeout."

The issue of getting a runner home from third with less than two outs has been a huge Achilles' heel for the Cubs thus far in 2018, continuing a trend from last season.

Through the first nine games of the season, the Cubs had 25 plate appearances in which there was a runner on third base and less than two outs. They got the runner home in just 5 of those situations (20 percent success rate).

What's even more incredible is 3 of those 5 situations came in one inning — that wacky top of the ninth in Milwaukee Saturday evening when Ben Zobrist legged out an infield hit, Ian Happ lined a two-run single to left-center and Jon Lester laid down a perfect squeeze bunt.

So apart from that one inning, the Cubs are just 2-for-22 in succeeding on getting the runner home from third — a 9 percent success rate.

"We need to do it," Maddon said. "That's what we need to nail down. Most major-league managers are gonna say the same thing.

"Most of the time after a close loss, somebody's gonna talk about leaving runners on third. It's just an industry-wide issue. If we can nail that play down, we're gonna be really, really good."

This Cubs offense was supposed to be developing into the "elite" territory in baseball this season after scoring the second-most runs in the National League last season.

Yet they entered play Tuesday 25th in baseball in OPS (.568) and 27th in average (.176) with runners in scoring position.

They went 2-for-7 with runners in scoring position in Tuesday's 8-5 loss to the Pirates. Both hits were soft, bouncing ground balls in the perfect spot through the shift from Kyle Schwarber and Jason Heyward, leading to three runs.

It's not like Schwarber and Heyward crushed their hits, but Maddon and the Cubs coaching staff could point to any contact in such situations as a moment to learn from.

"That's what you're trying to do," Maddon said. "... It's not always gonna be perfect, but definitely our application is good. We're gonna get better at it."

Schwarber — who began the season 0-for-9 with 4 Ks with runners in scoring position — also saw his first-inning two-strike hit and Heyward's eighth-inning single as positive moments the Cubs could draw on down the line.

"Definitely a really good sign for us," Schwarber said. "Obviously it wasn't the outcome we wanted, but if we keep doing that as an offense, good things are gonna happen for us.

"You're not going up there trying to strike out. We're all up there always trying to put the ball in play. Sometimes that can work against you, if you try to put the ball in play too much and tell yourself you're not gonna strike out.

"You just gotta go with that and trust your plan and trust yourself and your abilities. I feel like we all did a pretty good job today with the offense."

The next five games will be a true test for the Cubs' situational offense with Anthony Rizzo — probably the team's best two-strike hitter — now on the disabled list.

In a game that swings heavily from one side to the other based on luck, sometimes good things can happen just by putting the ball in play, as Tuesday proved (even if it didn't lead to a Cubs victory).

"We just gotta learn to move the baseball," Maddon said. "For me, that's to concede. To make concessions. I'm talking about mental concessions. How you don't try to be as big, do so much.

"You're attempting to use the middle and opposite field. These are the kind of thoughts, to me, that get you away from that punch-out in that moment and that's what we're trying to nurture."

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NBC Sports Chicago

The art of the walk-up song: How Cubs choose their music

By Tony Andracki

Kyle Hendricks may not show emotion on the mound, but smiles come easily when he's not between the foul lines.

Especially when he's talking about his walk-up song.

The always-self-aware Hendricks understands the running joke about his expressionless demeanor and comes out to Aerosmith's "Sweet Emotion" when pitching or hitting at Wrigley Field.

He'll use the same song again in 2018.

"No reason to change it now," he said, smirking. "Gotta give the people what they want."

Walk-up songs have become a huge deal at the corner of Clark and Addison in recent years.

Back before the video boards were installed in the 2015 season, players didn't have the luxury of choosing their own music and injecting some of their personality into the middle of the game experience at Wrigley Field.

2018 will be the fourth year in which players have walk-up songs, meaning it's the only life players like Kris Bryant and Addison Russell have ever known at the corner of Clark and Addison.

"It's just something that I like to hear whenever I'm walking up to the plate," Russell said. "It gets me goin'. You're able to express yourself a little bit in your music choice and what you like to put out there for everyone to hear.

"It's definitely a fun process for selecting the song that you want out there."

Music and dancing are everywhere around Wrigley Field, from bullpen dancing after home runs to the Seventh Inning Stretch to organist Gary Pressy to the walk-up songs that are now a staple at "The Friendly Confines."

Walk-up songs are also a great way for players to endear themselves to fans, like Hendricks having fun with "Sweet Emotion" or Anthony Rizzo playing Taylor Swift and Selena Gomez/Kygo ("It ain't me") last year.

David Ross — aka "Grandpa Rossy" — used "Forever Young" as his walk-up song when he played and now Cubs fans associate the Alphaville track with him.

Starlin Castro's walk-up song at Wrigley became an entire chill-inducing experience with 42,000 people clapping and stomping along with the rhythm of "Ando En La Versace":

Ben Zobrist uses the opportunity to promote his wife's music, using Julianna Zobrist's rendition of "Benny and the Jets" the last couple years. Julianna is signing the National Anthem before Sunday's game and her husband acknowledged he would be using more of her music as his walk-up songs in 2018...though may throw a curveball in there, too.

Rizzo changes it up every at-bat. Kyle Schwarber may do the same thing this year, though he said he plans on sticking with "Thuggish Ruggish Bone" as one of the songs.

The Cubs slugger has used the Bone Thugs-n-Harmony song as part of his lineup since making his big-league debut in 2015, honoring the hip hop group that hails from his home state of Ohio. The funny part about the song, however, is it was released in 1994, the year after Schwarber was born.

Russell may mix it up, too, using different songs for different at-bats or rotation through a cycle over the course of the season.

"It's a song that I like, a song I can relate to, something that gets me going," Russell said. "I think I'm gonna have a few this year. I think I might repeat one, but at a different point in the song.

"For the most part, it's just all about what I dig, what's kinda hot at the time. Just something to get me pumped up as I get into the box."

The song choice can be a strong motivational factor for each player. Music can trigger a bunch of different emotions and thoughts for different people and thus a walk-up song can serve as a mental trigger for professional athletes.

A well-selected song can also inject feelings of relaxation and mental clarity into the situation, as is the case with veteran reliever Steve Cishek, who's about to make his Cubs Wrigley Field debut this week.

"I always choose a song that fires me up and that I've listened to that gets my blood pumping a bit," Cishek said. "This year, I kinda went a different route because I know I'm gonna be fired up going into Wrigley.

"I tried to pick a little bit of a slower song to calm down a little. Who knows? I might change it through the season if I need some extra jice. But whatever gets the adrenaline pumping. Some songs just tend to do that for me."

Some players don't really give it much thought ahead of time, like reliever Justin Wilson, who hadn't yet decided on a walk-up/out song after the first week of play.

Newcomer Tyler Chatwood will be the first Cub of the 2018 season to have his walk-up/out song played at Wrigley Field when he takes the ball to start the first inning of the home opener Monday (weather permitting).

As each Cubs player's walk-up song is played throughout the homestand, we'll keep a running list:

Albert Almora Jr. —

Javier Baez — "Chambea" by Bad Bunny

Kris Bryant — "Warm it Up" by Kris Kross (same as last season)

Eddie Butler —

Victor Caratini —

Tyler Chatwood — "Rollin" by Calvin Harris, Future & Khalid

Steve Cishek —

Willson Contreras — "Dura" by Daddy Yankee

Yu Darvish —

Brian Duensing —

Carl Edwards Jr. —
Ian Happ — "Welcome Back" by Mase
Kyle Hendricks —
Jason Heyward — "This Girl" by Kungs vs Cookin' on 3 Burners (same as last year)
Tommy La Stella —
Jon Lester —
Mike Montgomery — "The Show Goes On" by Lupe Fiasco (same as last year)
Brandon Morrow —
Jose Quintana —
Anthony Rizzo —
Addison Russell — "Lemon" by Rihanna/N.E.R.D.
Kyle Schwarber — "Thuggish Ruggish Bone" by Bone Thugs n Harmony (same as last season)
Pedro Strop —
Justin Wilson —
Ben Zobrist — "Benny and the Jets" by his wife, Julianna (same as last season)

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Chicago Tribune

It's too early to worry about the Cubs — so buckle up for the next 18 days
By Dan Wiederer

From his new perch in a newly renovated Wrigley Field dugout, Joe Maddon had a lot to sift through Tuesday afternoon. Among the most notable moments Maddon took in during a somewhat disappointing home opener:

One slippery Willson Contreras slide with the catcher's right foot slipping off the front of third base after Kyle Schwarber's RBI single off Ivan Nova. Contreras was tagged out. First-inning threat: over. "That was a big moment," Maddon said. "We were a little bit into Nova's head at that point I thought. And then all of a sudden, you let him up."

Two Javier Baez homers, both lasers into the left field bleachers. "We know he can do that," Maddon said. "No big surprise right there."

Oh, and eight party-spoiling Pirates runs, the last three coming on a three-run bomb hit by Francisco Cervelli off reliever Mike Montgomery in the seventh. "Didn't like that one," Maddon said.

The 8-5 loss was the Cubs' fifth already this season and punctuated Wrigleyville's opening day celebration with a fizzle. Instead of the year's first rendition of "Go Cubs Go!" organist Gary Pressey played a glum crowd toward the exits with a subdued medley.

So much for rewarding the patience of a fan base that a) is sick of all this April chill and starving for a hot streak; b) waited a week-and-a-half into the season for the first game at Wrigley; and c) is beginning to scribble down a log of Cub deficiencies to at least consider fretting about.

Leadoff hitter Ian Happ? That opening-day first-pitch blast into the right field seats at Marlins Park is now a distant memory. Happ is 4-for-31 since and has whiffed 18 times. And yes, Maddon is taking daily questions about his desire to keep Happ in the leadoff role. (For the record, the Cubs manager has no major urge to yank the plug so quickly.)

"I'm not overly concerned," he said.

Situational hitting? The Cubs left seven more runners on base Tuesday and are now up to 90 for the season. They failed to advance Contreras after a leadoff double in the fourth. And while Jason Heyward's two-run single on an 0-2 count with two outs in the eighth was encouraging, it wasn't enough.

Fifth starter Tyler Chatwood? His impressive first inning Tuesday – 1-2-3 in a 10-pitch frame – was followed by a shaky third in which the Pirates batted around and used a two-run Corey Dickerson double to take the lead for good.

“He didn't have his normal command,” Contreras noted. “He missed a couple spots and he paid.”

Oh, and Anthony Rizzo.

Before Tuesday's game, Rizzo stood at his locker stall lamenting his 10-day trip to the disabled list, a layoff necessitated by back issues that seem to pop up annually but almost never so early.

“Usually,” Rizzo said, “it's July, August, September. You just mentally grind through it. And as long as you can move, you can play. But this is one of those things where we've talked and we don't want it to be locked up the entire year.”

From the Cubs' vantage point, it's not something to freak out about. Just something to keep an eye on. Like so many little things with this team after 10 games.

And to be clear, it's only been 10 games even if the Cubs' ordinary 5-5 record has predictable discussions circulating around the city as to how much worry should be warranted.

The short answer: very little. And yes, it's OK to expect more out of this team while still stopping well short of alarm.

Still, every hiccup and every stumble and certainly every back spasm will draw heightened scrutiny until the Cubs' first big winning streak. Especially in a city that, for the first time in a decade, won't have any Blackhawks or Bulls playoff series to command some of the spotlight.

The Cubs, then, must work to find their groove soon. A Wednesday night start by Jon Lester offers the next chance to ignite the fast start they desire. And the Cubs should be aiming to compile a more impressive body of work by month's end.

April 29. Early evening. Save the date.

Consider it an invitation for the first formal review of the 2018 Cubs season. By that point, the season will be exactly a month old. Weather pending, the Cubs will have played 26 games. They will have seen eight different opponents. They'll have played 14 games on the road and a dozen at Clark and Addison. They will be on their sixth cycle through the pitching rotation. And they will be coming off another significant four-game series with the division-rival Brewers.

By that Sunday evening later this month, the sample size of a season with World Series potential will be large enough to separate significant concerns from premature worry.

By April 29, the Cubs should know whether their early inconsistency — like this dispiriting April chill — has decided to stick around longer than it is welcome.

Maddon is OK with that timeline. Asked Tuesday afternoon what his measuring stick will be for the good start the Cubs have been vowing to produce, the manager was direct.

"I'd say 25 games is reasonable," Maddon said. "Maybe the first month is a reasonable barometer to judge where you are."

Fair enough. So buckle in for the next 18 days. Resist the urge to process the season's first month like a breathless CNN anchor sifting through election results six hours before the polls close.

The Cubs will file away losses like Thursday's as disappointing. But they're also well aware that any such disappointment can also be quickly erased with a surge of timely hitting or a string of quality starts from a talented rotation.

From his perch at the top of a new and spacious dugout, Maddon hopes he'll see the momentum begin to build soon.

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Chicago Tribune

Javier Baez makes case for promotion in Cubs' batting order

By Mark Gonzales

Javier Baez's two home runs off Ivan Nova were significant, particularly because he was 0-for-7 against the Pirates pitcher before Tuesday's game.

Perhaps a more intriguing issue entering Wednesday night's game is whether Cubs manager Joe Maddon elects to move Baez from the eighth spot to afford him more opportunities against left-hander Steven Brault.

Baez is 3-for-7 lifetime against Brault, who has held left-handers to a .220 batting average (9-for-41) since 2017. Left-handed batters are 1-for-7 with three strikeouts against Brault this season.

"It don't matter, to be honest," Baez said of batting eighth, where he's batted in all eight of his starts. "They're going to pitch to me one way, even though it might be a little different with the pitcher behind me. But it's even better when I'm not hitting with the pitcher behind me because I see more strikes. I'm still working on a lot of adjustments, and I feel comfortable here."

Baez had only four hits entering Tuesday's game but remains confident that his production eventually will climb.

"I'm a guy who keeps warming up during the season," Baez said. "I don't have (any) pressure, no rush on getting hot. I'm just trying to see the ball, hit the ball and make good contact."

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Chicago Tribune

Wrigley Field is changing, for better or worse

By Paul Sullivan

The days of spending \$2 for a coffee and a fried egg sandwich at Yum-Yum Donuts seemed like eons ago as the Cubs opened their home season Tuesday on another chilly afternoon at Wrigley Field.

The iconic ballpark has been swallowed up by new buildings on the south and west sides, and the cost of progress means everything around Wrigley is nicer, shinier and much more expensive than it used to be.

Perhaps that's why they've installed an ATM in the visitors' tunnel to the dugout, knowing the players might need some extra cash for a \$4 scoop of ice cream at the new, premium ice cream shop across the street.

Some of the changes are for the better.

It's always nice to have more food and drinking options outside the ballpark, and as much as we like to wax nostalgic about Yum-Yum, the longtime greasy spoon wasn't really good for anyone's digestive system.

And inside the park the Cubs' players and coaches were mostly happy with the new, spacious dugouts, which give everyone a little more room to maneuver. They're also farther from home plate, which isn't beneficial for watching the hitters.

"It's different where we're at, but we'll get used to it," Cubs manager Joe Maddon said. "It's different design things about it that (we) might be able to alter to make it a little bit more functional.

"We needed a couple of games to find out, so we can give (business management) positive feedback. But the work done is fabulous. The design, the attention to detail, the way it looks."

What are the functional issues?

"Just movement in the dugout, in and out, absolutely," he said. "Hand rails might be moved a bit. My perch is different. Of course it's OK."

For all the hype, it should be better than "OK." Maddon said he felt sorry for third base coach Brian Butterfield, who gets signs from Maddon in the dugout.

"Poor 'Butter,'" he said. "You think he's really close, but he's always (turning his neck). I apologize for that. I'll go verbal (signs), or just throw sunflower seeds. One seed (is) bunt. Two seeds — hit and run. He's that close."

The Pirates also were satisfied with the changes on the visitors' side, including the bigger dugout and the expanded batting cage outside the clubhouse.

"It's much more accommodating," Pirates manager Clint Hurdle said. "I've always loved to come to Wrigley. However, now it has caught up to the times. There are so many nice parks around. For a while, you had to go hit out in the (bleacher batting cage). So when it rains or the weather is rough ...

"It's just a change. Now you have ample room in the dugout. You have video room. You have ample space everywhere. It's really nice. It has made a jewel with one blemish pretty much an all-around jewel now."

Pirates first baseman Josh Bell said the changes make a big difference for the visiting players, who tend to like Wrigley, blemishes and all.

“It makes the preparation that much better,” Bell said. “It makes sitting and watching the game that much more enjoyable. But regardless, it’s still Wrigley. I feel like we all still get chills every time we come out here. It’s a special place.”

Yes, it’s still a special place, but not all of the changes are for the better.

The new photo pits are so small some of the photographers had to shoot the game from unfamiliar positions around the park because they couldn’t all fit. And fans sitting in Aisle 6 near the old home bullpen down the left field line were shocked to see the width of their seats had been reduced in the renovation.

When the Cubs decided to move and enlarge the dugouts and build a swanky, exclusive club behind home plate, they also changed some of the seats down the left- and right-field lines, making them smaller.

Some complained those aren’t big enough for regular-sized fans. One said they were built for “middle school students,” and another wondered if they were modeled after middle seats in the back of airplanes. One fan called it the “120-pound or less section,” and another called the section “the Spirit Airlines of stadium seats.”

“It’s a huge difference (from last year),” said Don Cameron, a Cubs’ fan from Barrington who was wedged into a seat rubbing shoulders with his son. “I suppose it’s better now than it’ll be in August when it’s 95 degrees and we’re all sweating.”

That’s an issue the Cubs will have to deal with as the year goes on. Some of the season ticket holders said they already have lodged complaints.

But it’s too late to make the seats any bigger, so they’ll just have to suck it up, literally and figuratively.

No one said change was easy.

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Chicago Tribune

Joe Maddon thinks Cubs, especially Anthony Rizzo, should back off extra batting practice
By Mark Gonzales

Cubs manager Joe Maddon didn’t mind the sound of the alarm after nine hours of sleep Monday night as much as the crack of the bat distrubed him emanating from the batting cages at 9:30 a.m.

Maddon has been a proponent of limiting on-field batting practice and wondered if Anthony Rizzo’s recent back woes might have stemmed from too much early work in the cages.

“I’m trying to convince him to back off,” Maddon said Tuesday shortly after the Cubs officially announced Rizzo was placed on the 10-day disabled list, retroactive to Friday.

As a former minor-league instructor with the Angels, Maddon recalled throwing early batting practice to the starting position players at their Class A affiliate in Palm Springs, Calif., as early as five hours before a night game.

"A lot of my thoughts have changed over time with repetition," Maddon said. "If more swings were the answer, everyone would hit .300. To hit to your level, it's not just about your swings. It's about understanding the strike zone."

Maddon said he would leave it up to hitting coach Chili Davis to curtail the early work some if he thinks it would help.

"I don't think Billy Williams (took extra batting practice)," Maddon said. "I don't think (Ron) Santo did that. I don't think Ernie (Banks) did that. They didn't even probably have a batting cage to do that in."

"I do believe the point of diminishing returns sets in, whether it's physically or mentally. I'm not a huge proponent of all that extra stuff we do. We should do (just) enough."

Shades of turf: The Cubs collectively praised their grounds crew for preparing the field after snow caused postponement of Monday's scheduled home opener.

One noticeable difference was that balls scooted faster through the infield and outfield, with the cold temperature likely serving as the reason.

"It's playing a little bit fast," left fielder Kyle Schwarber said. "I'd say the whole surface is playing a little bit faster. But we're not complaining."

Extra innings: Javier Baez's two-homer game was his first since Aug. 7, 2014, at Colorado in his third major-league game. ... Willson Contreras has three multiple-hit games in his last five and raised his batting average to .333 after going 3-for-4 in Tuesday's 8-5 loss to the Pirates.

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Chicago Tribune

Cubs show some life on offense but lose home opener to Pirates 8-5

By Mark Gonzales

For Cubs followers fretting over a .500 start after listening to the importance of starting the season fast, manager Joe Maddon provided some distance to allay concern after Tuesday's 8-5 home opening loss to the Pirates.

"I think 25 games is reasonable," Maddon said after the Cubs fell to 5-5 before a chilled crowd of 40,144 at Wrigley Field. "Maybe the first month is a reasonable barometer to (judge) where you are."

The first 10 games have been choppy and the Cubs offense will need to navigate at least five more without slugging first baseman Anthony Rizzo, who's on the 10-day disabled list with a stiff lower back retroactive to Friday.

On Tuesday, there were some positive offensive signs such as Javier Baez's two home runs, Kyle Schwarber's two-out RBI single in the first and Jason Heyward's two-out, two-run single in the eighth off hard-throwing left-hander Felipe Vazquez that brought the tying run to the plate.

But there were missed opportunities as well, such as Willson Contreras over-sliding third base that thwarted a promising rally ending the first inning.

And Tyler Chatwood, who threw all 10 pitches for strikes during a perfect first, paid the price for a couple of mistakes that resulted in him being lifted for a pinch-hitter after throwing 100 pitches and giving up five runs on nine hits in five innings.

“We haven’t been hot with everybody, but we’re battling,” said Baez, who struck out against Vazquez to end the eighth. “With Rizz out of lineup now, we expect other guys to play us as a team and trust your teammate, whoever is behind you and in front of you.”

The Cubs struck out “only” eight times, increasing their season total to 101. But Maddon pointed out the Cubs rank near the middle in the National League in that category, so the bigger and more pertinent issue may be their ability to drive in runners in scoring position.

The fourth mirrored what Maddon would like his batters to accomplish, and what they have failed to achieve on a regular basis.

Contreras led off the inning applying a Maddon preference when he poked an Ivan Nova pitch into right-center field for a double. But Contreras was left stranded, and Ben Zobrist flied to left with runners at first and second to end the fifth.

“Willson hits well because he’s willing to do that as consistently as anybody in this lineup, maybe the most consistent among this whole group,” Maddon said. “He hits (foul) line to (foul) line. That’s what separates him.”

Meanwhile, the pesky Pirates (8-2) capitalized on two mistakes. With Nova on deck, Chatwood threw an outside fastball that Jordy Mercer poked into right field for a game-tying single in the second.

And in the seventh, Francisco Cervelli, a former customer at a Tampa fitness center co-owned by Maddon’s wife Jaye, smacked a three-run homer off Mike Montgomery that put the game out of reach.

“(Cervelli) has attended my Gasparilla parties (for wounded veterans), so I don’t like him,” Maddon said in jest.

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Chicago Tribune

Anthony Rizzo's back injury creates void for Cubs, opportunity for journeyman Efen Navarro
By David Haugh

Nobody cherished the Cubs home opener Tuesday more than backup first baseman Efen Navarro.

Not Loyola basketball coach Porter Moser, the lifelong Cubs fan who enthusiastically sang during the seventh-inning stretch with Ramblers players Ben Richardson and Marques Townes. Not Sister Jean Dolores Schmidt, Loyola’s adorable 98-year-old team chaplain who giggled after bouncing an underhand toss from the infield grass for the ceremonial first pitch.

Not the incomparable Wayne Messmer, the anthem singer performing his 34th straight Cubs opener just one day after the 24th anniversary of when he was shot and nearly killed. Not any of the 40,144 fans who braved the 43-degree temperature at Wrigley Field to watch a lousy 8-5 loss to the Pirates.

“Just being here today is very special,” Navarro said, putting on his new No. 50 jersey. “When they told me, I was in shock. I was emotional. I was excited.”

Anthony Rizzo's roster replacement was in Des Moines, Iowa, lifting weights when Triple-A manager Marty Pevey called Navarro to inform the 31-year-old journeyman the Cubs had promoted him. When Navarro entered the clubhouse Tuesday morning to join his new teammates for an indefinite stint likely to last about a week — depending on Rizzo's back tightness — the novelty had not yet worn off.

"I've been around the game a long time, and knowing my situation I was surprised yet ready for anything that comes my way," said Navarro, who singled in the fifth pinch hitting for starter Tyler Chatwood. "I appreciate it a lot more because it is opening day and the history here."

Navarro's history increased his appreciation too.

A native of Lynwood, Calif., he has played in 1,474 minor-league games over 12 seasons since the Angels selected him in the 50th round of the 2007 draft. Only three players were drafted after Navarro with the 1,450th selection — and he found out only when a local television reporter showed up at a summer-league game looking for Navarro's reaction. He cried during his major-league debut with the Angels in 2011. His first big-league home run came against Justin Verlander.

The first person Navarro called with the good news was his mother, Guadalupe, back home in California.

"It's such a pleasure to be here," said Navarro, a lifetime .243 hitter in parts of five seasons with the Angels and Tigers.

One man's pleasure came at the expense of another's pain.

Rizzo missed his fourth straight game, which put him on the 10-day disabled list for the first time in his career. The move, retroactive to Friday, makes Monday's series opener against the Cardinals the soonest Rizzo could return to the lineup. That would mean he will have missed nine of the Cubs' first 15 games — the equivalent of an NFL franchise quarterback missing a Week 2 start.

"It stinks, especially not being able to play in the home opener," Rizzo said at his locker. "But it's a long season, a marathon, and you have to stay smart."

Everybody else can work on staying calm.

As deep as the Cubs are, they can ill afford an extended absence by arguably their most valuable player. Forget that Rizzo's slash line of .107/.219/.214 looks like a misprint. Nobody means more in the clubhouse or the lineup — especially as protection behind Kris Bryant. The Brewers, for example, intentionally walked Bryant twice in successive games during the weekend series to get to the slumping Kyle Schwarber, who struck out and sacrificed.

"When he's not in the lineup, they look for spots and the (opposition) pitching staff has an easier day of it," Cubs manager Joe Maddon said of Rizzo.

Ben Zobrist can fill in capably at first, and Maddon raved about Navarro's defense — even complimenting his throwing — but neither player is Rizzo. Neither fills the gaping void. Defensively, Maddon said the Cubs also will limit what they do without Rizzo.

"It's almost like being without your starting quarterback or linebacker," Maddon said. "It just doesn't look the same without him."

Maddon downplayed the injury as something that will hamper Rizzo throughout the season, but back issues are nothing at which to sneeze, figuratively or literally. The slightest thing can trigger a twinge or weeks can pass without the discomfort becoming intolerable. Rizzo mentioned the bed in his Cincinnati hotel room contributing enough that he will consider sleeping on the floor the next time the Cubs stay there.

Unseasonably cold weather can't help, even if Rizzo insisted it didn't matter if it were 80 degrees or 20. Rizzo's annual back issues usually crop up during the heat of summer, which means he either will be fine after this flare-up or will have to cope with this all season. The Cubs' consistency rests on it being the former.

"I don't want to be locked up the entire year," Rizzo said. "Hopefully, we put a nip to it the next five days and don't have to deal with it."

Every North Side baseball fan nervously nods in agreement.

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Chicago Tribune

Cubs honor Loyola, Porter Moser and Sister Jean at home opener

By David Haugh

Tom Ricketts awaited an interview before Tuesday's game at Wrigley Field when a local television producer approached the Cubs chairman.

"You just have to wait five more minutes and then Porter Moser will be done," the producer told Ricketts.

"That's OK, I know where I stand," Ricketts cracked with a smile. "Porter is the man."

Such is the life around Moser, the Loyola basketball coach and still toast of the town 10 days after his Ramblers lost their Final Four game against Michigan. Ricketts knows firsthand the impact of Loyola's run; his brother Todd, a Loyola graduate, flew to every NCAA tournament site with a group of Ramblers fans.

"I am going to enjoy the heck out of today," Moser said in front of the Cubs dugout. "Opening day, Cubs, are you kidding me? It doesn't get any better than this."

Moser, a lifelong Cubs fan who grew up in Naperville, wore a No. 10 jersey with "SANTO" on the back. He shook hands with manager Joe Maddon and slugger Kyle Schwarber, mingled with Ricketts and acknowledged the hundreds of Cubs fans who yelled congratulations for the historic season. He smiled as Wayne Messmer sang the national anthem wearing a maroon-and-gold Loyola scarf.

Sister Jean Dolores Schmidt, Loyola's 98-year-old team chaplain, joined Moser and Ramblers players on the field during pregame festivities. Sister Jean wore a blue Cubs jacket, and the team presented her with a personalized jersey, No. 18. She giggled after her underhand throw from the edge of the infield grass bounced across the plate. The crowd roared.

On the mound, Loyola senior Ben Richardson delivered a strike as Moser and three teammates applauded. Two Loyola players wore Anthony Rizzo No. 44 jerseys and clearly got a kick out of recording pregame introductions of the Cubs before retreating to the stands.

“I’m going to sit down with no cameras around, have some Big League Chew, some bubble gum, and be a little kid,” said Moser, who looked forward to his fourth stint singing “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” during the seventh-inning stretch.

Life as Moser knows it never will be the same, though he has tried to maintain as much normalcy as possible. He hit the road to recruit quickly after Loyola’s season ended — “I’ve got to capitalize on the Final Four,” he said — and admitted he has yet to watch the season-ending loss to Michigan. He watched Villanova beat the Wolverines for the NCAA title at home with his wife, Megan, and four children.

“It’s starting to set in,” he said, “but during so much of that run, I was in the moment, preparing, and it’s really neat now to interact with people and see how excited they were.”

Athletic director Steve Watson and Moser remain in talks about a contract extension likely to include a hefty raise. Watson told WSCR-AM last week that programs with vacancies had approached Moser, but both sides felt confident about working out a new deal.

Asked how he is different after the Final Four run that generated millions of dollars’ worth of publicity for Loyola, Moser found himself at a rare loss for words.

“I’m the same person,” he said. “I know I’m not any different.”

The same can’t be said for Loyola’s basketball program.

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