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Giants' Brandon Crawford, Joe Panik among longest-tenured partnerships

John Shea

It's a good thing the Giants didn't trade Joe Panik in the offseason. Right, Brandon Crawford?

"I definitely like coming into the season knowing Joe is my double-play partner, just the relationship we have and the comfort we have with each other," Crawford said.

"At this point, we know what each other's thinking at certain times in the game and what we're trying to do."

One week into the season, Panik has shown a surprising power stroke, hitting the team's first three home runs before his teammates finally joined the power parade and went deep five times the past two games, including three times in one inning Wednesday.

Panik is a .284 career hitter but takes more pride in his defense, joining Crawford as part of the Giants' stellar up-the-middle infield presence. It's their fifth season together, which puts them among the leaders in service time among shortstops and second basemen.

Which is a bonus, in their minds.

"We have a history," Panik said. "We've got the same mentality. We're on the same page. That's always important to have a double-play partner on the same page."

Panik got his first start at second base June 22, 2014. Madison Bumgarner pitched eight innings, and Crawford fielded Paul Goldschmidt's ninth-inning grounder and flipped to Panik to begin a double play, helping Sergio Romo save a 4-1 win in Arizona.

It was the first double play turned by Crawford and Panik, and they've been a partnership ever since then. In fact, theirs is among the longest-standing in the majors.

Wednesday's was the 366th game Crawford and Panik started together. Only two active double-play combinations have longer service time, according to David Smith of Retrosheet: Texas' Elvis Andrus and Rougned Odor (497 games) and Boston's Xander Bogaerts and Dustin Pedroia (389).

There's no comparison with Alan Trammell and Lou Whitaker, who spent 19 years together and were in the same lineup 1,612 times, the longest all-time affiliation for a shortstop and second baseman.

But these days, considering widespread turnover, five seasons together is significant.

"The familiarity they have with each other and the pitching staff, it makes a huge difference," Giants infield coach Ron Wotus said. "We're very lucky to have those two guys up the middle. Joe turns the double play as well as anybody in the league and has a Gold Glove, and Craw has three in a row.

"It's very advantageous. It makes my job easy."

Like Crawford and Panik, the Texas duo started in 2014 when Odor joined Andrus on the Rangers' infield, in May. The Boston combination dates back the furthest — Bogaerts started five games with Pedroia in late 2013.

(Pittsburgh's Jordy Mercer and Josh Harrison were teammates longer but not predominantly as a middle-infield unit, Harrison appearing at several other positions. Similar story with Minnesota's Brian Dozier and Eduardo Escobar.)

None of the above has turned a double play quite as significant as the Giants' infielders. The 2014 World Series is known for Bumgarner's fearless work on the mound, but Panik and Crawford get a consolation prize for their remarkable double play in Game 7.

It was the first World Series play overturned by a video replay, and it stunted a Kansas City rally in the third inning. Instead of first and third and nobody out, the double play left nobody on and two outs. The score remained 2-2, and the Giants won 3-2 for their third Series title in five years.

Crawford and Panik have turned other magnificent double plays, but all rank a distant second to that one. Panik's dive up the middle robbed Eric Hosmer, and his backhanded glove flip (from his belly) to Crawford forced out Lorenzo Cain. Crawford's throw to first initially was ruled too late, but a replay confirmed the double play.

“We’ve turned some good ones during the season, probably similar to that one,” Crawford said, “but not in that situation or of that magnitude.”

It was Panik’s rookie season but not the first time he hooked up with Crawford. They were teammates on the Scottsdale Scorpions in the 2011 Arizona Fall League, months after Panik was drafted and Crawford debuted in the majors. The Giants were converting Panik from a shortstop and the AFL was his training ground — and first connection with Crawford.

“He’s helped me along the way,” Panik said. “It’s good to have guys get along on and off the field. It helps.”

They were teammates on one other team, the 2015 National League All-Stars, the Giants’ first keystone combination in an All-Star Game since Rich Aurilia and Jeff Kent in 2001.

Aurilia and Kent were teammates six years (1997-02), though Aurilia wasn’t the No. 1 shortstop until their second year together. Jose Uribe and Robby Thompson shared the longest time in the team’s San Francisco era: seven years (1986-92), though Uribe’s time dwindled at the end.

Chris Speier and Tito Fuentes were a revered pair but for just four years (1971-74), the same amount of time Omar Vizquel and Ray Durham (2005-08) and Jose Pagan and Chuck Hiller (1961-64) were together.

Royce Clayton and Thompson overlapped five seasons (1991-95) but concurrently were everyday players for one season.

So Crawford and Panik have a chance to become No. 1 in seniority in San Francisco. Crawford is signed through 2021, the year Panik would be eligible for free agency.

So, yes, trading Panik would not have been ideal.

“They’re just going to get better together,” Wotus said.

MLB.com

Scouts agree: Giants can shake up NL West

Chris Haft

SAN FRANCISCO -- Many Giants fans are probably wondering exactly what they'll see, hear and read about as they follow the team's home opener Tuesday against the Mariners.

The Giants split their season-opening series against the Dodgers, but scored only two runs while doing so. The ballclub's offensive futility in general and the punchless starts by several players in particular -- namely, newcomers Evan Longoria (0-for-15 in the opening set), Andrew McCutchen (1-for-16) and Austin Jackson (1-for-12) -- left many of the orange-and-black-clad

faithful feeling as if Los Angeles had swept San Francisco.

A certain few well-trained professionals would tell the fans, "Stop worrying!"

These are pro baseball scouts, trained to be detached and dispassionate. Baseball's general public looks at the Giants and sees flaws aplenty. Scouts see the club as a resourceful bunch who can squeeze the maximum from the minimum -- as they did in Los Angeles.

As the Giants observed their scheduled off-day Monday, MLB.com caught up with three expert bystanders -- two scouts for National League clubs and a award-winning former pitcher who remains closely involved with Major League Baseball. The scouts echoed each other, and their consensus was that while the Giants have little margin for error, they aren't the dreadful, destined-for-last-place bunch that they might appear to be at a glance.

As the ex-pitcher said, "There are no concerns to be had right now."

These authorities pointed out that by the end of April, Jeff Samardzija should have rejoined the starting rotation, with Madison Bumgarner to follow several weeks later. "You don't have to worry about the Giants if they have those two guys, because of their presence in the clubhouse and their presence in the rotation," one of the NL scouts said.

This talent evaluator, assigned to cover the Giants-Dodgers series, raved about right-hander Johnny Cueto, who allowed one run in six innings Friday. "I think Cueto might step up," he said. "He looked as good as I've seen him look for a while."

The ex-pitcher agreed that Cueto can become a significant factor in the Giants' season. "If you have Mad Bum and Cueto, you're almost a shoo-in to at least win two games in a three-game series, and possibly three games in a four-game series if they can get one of the kids to step up."

The second NL scout attached similar importance to Samardzija, the classic innings-eater. "If Samardzija has a good year and goes deep into his games, that's really going to help the bullpen and help the team," he said.

The scout who watched every pitch of the series in Los Angeles saw more encouraging signs from McCutchen than discouraging ones. "Pitching's always ahead of the hitting at the beginning," this scout said. "This probably exemplified it. Offense takes a while to get going. I think Cutch is really close to breaking out. He's squaring some balls up. He's hitting them at people."

The observers' faith in Giants manager Bruce Bochy's skills also prompted favorable views of the team.

"Knowing Boch, he's going to make it happen," said the second NL scout. "That's just who he

is."

Said the ex-pitcher, "He always pulls a rabbit out of his hat, if he has one to pull out."

Scout No. 2 came down squarely on both sides of the issue regarding the Giants overall. "They've got a decent bullpen, they've got a great defense, they've got a great catcher and they've got a great offense," he said. "They just have to gel it together."

Yet this same scout termed the Giants' bench as "a little weak in their bench strength. If a couple of more key injuries occur, it could hurt them bad."

MLB.com
Sandoval proves his worth off Giants' bench
Chris Haft

SAN FRANCISCO -- Giants infielder Pablo Sandoval is demonstrating that a team should be judged not by its star performers, but by its subordinates.

After all, improving upon a ballclub's top players is often difficult. But reserves constitute the base upon which the roster rests. If a team's bench is weak, its regulars need not sustain excellence to hold onto their status. Or they must bear a disproportionate share of the responsibility for success. Yet, when a lineup is backed by a strong bench, the quality of its regulars tends to remain high, because they're being pushed to excel.

Or, to summarize: If Sandoval's your 25th man, you might have a decent ballclub.

"I think he shows you how much stronger we are," Giants manager Bruce Bochy said of the 31-year-old, who's a two-time All-Star, a .283 lifetime hitter and one of four players to homer three times in a World Series game.

Whether all this proves to be true for the Giants is questionable. Their 64-98 finish last season left an uncomfortable volume of room for improvement this year. Even if Sandoval's presence reflects an upgrade for the Giants, they're widely viewed as non-contenders in the tough National League West, which features 2017 postseason qualifiers Los Angeles, Colorado and Arizona.

Sandoval might not even be the Giants' 25th man. That label easily could be pinned on outfielder Gorkys Hernandez, utility man Kelby Tomlinson or any of a handful of relievers.

But the fact that the Giants can summon such a still-dangerous hitter to pinch-hit or fill in at the infield corners suggests that their offense might, indeed, take a quantum leap from last season, when they ranked last in the Majors in homers (128) and slugging (.380). They also finished next-to-last in runs (639) and on-base percentage (.309) and were 23rd in batting average (.249).

"I'm healthy," Sandoval said, alluding to the shoulder injuries that formerly dogged him, particularly during his ill-fated 2015-17 tenure with the Red Sox. "Bochy knows me very well. I'm going to continue to be healthy and keep working hard to be part of this team."

Sandoval might even return to his roots as a catcher, a position he stopped playing regularly in 2009, his first full big league season. He would be used behind the plate only in emergencies, if circumstances rendered both Buster Posey and Nick Hundley unavailable.

"I've talked to Pablo about this, and he's good with it," Bochy said.

"However I can contribute to winning games, I want to do that," Sandoval said.

Sandoval participated heavily in the Giants' most fruitful victory of the young season, Wednesday's 10-1 decision over Seattle. Replacing Evan Longoria at third base, Sandoval not only rocketed a three-run homer off Mariners ace Felix Hernandez, but also drew a bases-loaded, four-pitch walk to open the scoring in the first inning.

Forever known as an incurable free-swinger, Sandoval showed that he can be judicious at the plate. This illustrated what Bochy wants to see from the Giants, overall.

"I think that's going to be our strength. I think we're going to grind out these at-bats, really work the pitcher, run up pitch counts," Bochy said. "These guys are not afraid to see some pitches and take a strike. We want them to be aggressive, but at the same time have a good, quality AB up there."

Sandoval, who generated disappointment by making some bridge-burning remarks about the Giants when he fled to Boston in free agency, has revamped his attitude. He has become the type of teammate who's good for the ballclub, even when he doesn't play. In short, he's a leader, a link to the World Series-winning clubs of 2010, 2012 and 2014. Sandoval, Posey and Madison Bumgarner are the only active Giants remaining who played for all three of those teams.

"He's bringing it every game, even though he's not playing," Bochy said. "You see him around, you hear him and he's involved."

"A guy with that type of attitude, it's cool to see," right fielder Andrew McCutchen said. "You definitely get a little bit of that feel from when he was here in the past."

The Athletic

Six games, six Giants observations: What we've learned about McCutchen, Strickland, Panik and the NL West race

Andy Baggarly

The Giants are one week into their season, they are the proud owners of two series splits with the Dodgers and randomly, the Mariners, and, with an atmospheric river welling up near the Farallones, we might have to hang out here for a couple days.

So here are six things we've learned after watching the Giants for six games.

Right fielder Andrew McCutchen still has a center fielder's mentality

We know this because he said the words "I'm gonna have a center fielder's mentality" about a dozen times already in postgame interviews. McCutchen could have become hesitant after last Saturday's game, when he dove for Chris Taylor's sinking line drive at Dodger Stadium and the ball got past him for a triple that led to a run.

McCutchen did nothing of the sort. He made two running catches later in that game, leaving his feet for one of them.

"That's my mentality — go after the ball, try and catch it, and learn from the ones that you don't," McCutchen said. "That's what I'll keep on doing."

He took that mentality to AT&T Park, racing into the massive right-center gap to take a sure triple away from the Mariners' Kyle Seager. There were two on and two out at the time, with the Giants ahead 4-0 in the third inning. A triple there and it's a different ballgame.

Last year, no doubt, it would have found the gap and rolled to the wall. The Giants led the major leagues with 58 triples allowed last season — their most since 1977. Outfield defense was particularly brutal to Johnny Cueto and Jeff Samardzija. Flagging down those outs will not only help in the obvious sense, but they also will save stressful pitches and bear fruit in the form of longer outings.

The catch was a game changer. A season's worth of those catches could be a season changer.

"The ball here can hang up," McCutchen said. "If it's hit high enough, you have a chance to run it down. You just have to have the mentality to not give up on that ball and try to go get it. You don't have to worry about the wall out there."

There might be times that McCutchen's center field mentality backfires, as it did when he and Gregor Blanco nearly collided at Dodger Stadium on a ball that Blanco dropped for a damaging error. But chalk that up to the Giants weirdly giving Blanco and McCutchen almost no time together in the spring. This should be a short learning curve. It usually is for veteran players who know their abilities.

McCutchen's defensive contributions also make it a bit easier for him to keep from obsessing over starting the season in a 2 for 24 funk.

"If I'm not getting hits, I'm going to take them away," he said.

Shifting into overdrive

The Houston Astros stationed four outfielders and the infield dirt was eerily vacant when they defended against Joey Gallo last week. The Phillies embarrassingly fielded a double-play grounder but had nobody at second base.

Defensive shifting has its detractors, and pitchers will never stop moaning when a ground ball finds a hole that shouldn't be there. But it is here to stay, and it is becoming more and more involved.

As our Jayson Stark pointed out in his required-reading initial piece for The Athletic, there were 19,823 more shifts last season on balls in play than there were just five years ago. And if you look at what left-handed hitters are averaging on ground balls, they appear to be making a major impact.

The Giants employed shifts as efficiently as any team in the major leagues two seasons ago. The numbers took a dive, along with everything else, in 2017. But with Gold Glove third baseman Evan Longoria added to their mix, they are able to shift as they've never shifted before.

Last weekend at Dodger Stadium, Longoria and shortstop Brandon Crawford even switched positions when the count got to two strikes on Yasmani Grandal. They switched on Cody Bellinger, too.

There's a lot of game circumstances that go into it — whether there are runners on base or not, if the batter is a threat to bunt, etc. — but I was curious whether this was all handed down from the analytics department or whether the deployment of these shifting decisions are made in the moment.

After talking to Longoria and Ron Wotus, it's clear that the Giants are letting their Gold Glove infielders use their instincts. Crawford initiated the switch against Grandal. He and Longoria have discussed when it's ideal to switch positions, and what scenarios they would prefer to avoid.

For instance, if Longoria has to cover second base and turn a double play, he's far more comfortable doing that as a shortstop would and not a second baseman. Longoria played shortstop until that Troy Tulowitzki guy forced him to move to third base at Long Beach State.

I was going to write up all of this, but Alex Pavlovic beat me to the idea and his recommended story is a terrific summary.

Point is, if you pay attention to the infielders this season, you'll notice a whole lot of interesting stuff going on. And maybe, just maybe, Bruce Bochy will let Wotus go with that four-outfielder alignment at some point.

(Brandon Belt in left, an extra outfielder in Triples Alley and Longoria at first base? Makes sense to me. If you're going to play no-doubles, you might as well defend against doubles.)

Oh, and one more thing we learned about the outfield defense: opponents are reading their scouting reports on Hunter Pence's arm.

Hunter Strickland can hack it

Two save situations is a tiny sample size. But two save situations to preserve 1-0 victories at Dodger Stadium? Maybe those deserve a bit more weight.

Strickland was a different pitcher in spring training. He appeared to have more shape to his offspeed pitches, more precision with his fastball, and most importantly, more confidence in anything he threw.

How about doubling up on his curveball to end a nine-pitch confrontation with Logan Forsythe in LA?

Every reliever goes through their ups and downs, but here's betting that Strickland firms up the back end of this bullpen. And Tony Watson is off to a tremendous start, too. We didn't see this Watson in the spring, mostly because he arrived a bit late and was just tuning up his repertoire. It's pretty clear that he remains a top-tier relief presence. It's also pretty clear that the Dodgers might have royally effed up by not re-signing him.

Oh, and Reyes Moronta, who would've been the 15th pitcher on the staff if Madison Bumgarner, Jeff Samardzija and Mark Melancon hadn't opened the season on the DL, is blowing 98 mph cheddar. OK, then.

In the spin zone

If you could criticize Buster Posey for one thing, it was that he could get too fastball-happy at times while calling pitches. Posey is very smart and also very old school in many of his baseball sensibilities. "Establish your fastball" is something he had drilled into his head. He was once a pitcher, too, remember?

We're seeing some subtle changes this season. Posey is showing a greater willingness to pitch backwards with guys, whether it's a starter or a reliever. Cueto was effective against the Dodgers because he threw changeups and sliders his first time through the lineup. Then on second glance, there was the firm, 93 mph fastball.

Maybe we won't see Posey calling 24 consecutive curveballs, as Houston's Lance McCullers threw to clinch the pennant last season. But Posey acknowledged in the spring that pitch sequencing is undergoing a fairly major change in today's game, and he plans to be a part of it.

Joltin' Joe Panik could be following the Pedroia/Blackmon blueprint

I loved this Eno Sarris piece on Charlie Blackmon and the hit tool.

First you learn to be a hitter, then you learn to hit for power. So much of this seemed to describe what we saw from Panik in the first week of the season.

Panik turned his back foot slightly inward, which allows his hips to engage more in his swing. He also said he is spitting on those pitcher's strikes early in the count — something he feels able to do because he has enough success as a major league hitter to feel confident that he can compete with two strikes.

"I'm focusing on being aggressive with pitches I can drive," Panik said.

And that includes inside pitches.

He isn't merely trying to survive in the big leagues any longer. He's trying to thrive. And the Giants have to be thrilled that they didn't trade him on any of the dozens of occasions when they could have.

The NL West is going to be bunched

The division featured three playoff teams last season and it's not like the Dodgers, Diamondbacks or Rockies stripped down over the winter. But early signs show that perhaps the Dodgers won't zoom away from everyone as they did a year ago.

The Dodgers really missed Justin Turner against the Giants and their three left-handed starters last weekend. Kenley Jansen is throwing 89 mph. Clayton Kershaw's velocity is a bit of a concern, too. And while everyone was worried about the Giants' sluggish offense, the Dodgers haven't exactly raked in the early going.

Arizona is off to a 5-1 start and should have the starting pitching to be a playoff team this season. I'm going to go ahead and risk calling it now: I think the Diamondbacks are going to win the division, too.

My other prediction: the NL West title will go down to the final series of the season.