



**Minnesota Twins Daily Clips
Friday, September 7, 2018**

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5 pressing questions in the AL Central

Jeffrey Flanagan | MLB.com | September 6, 2018

There are less than four weeks to go in the regular season, and each team still has at least one or two burning questions they'd like answered.

So let's take a look at those questions as it pertains to the American League Central:

TWINS

The question: Can Miguel Sano finish strong?

Since returning in late July from a six-week stint in the Minor Leagues that also saw him work on his conditioning, Sano has remained inconsistent at the plate, but he has looked better defensively. Strikeouts are still his biggest problem, which is why his average has been in the low .200s before and after his time in the Minors. Sano has immense power, but he needs to improve his contact skills down the stretch to provide more optimism for next year. It's been a rough year for Sano, who was an All-Star just last season, but he at least has a chance to finish the year on a high note unlike fellow former top prospect Byron Buxton, who was not among Minnesota's September callups. Sano is dealing with a bruised left leg, but he is expected to return soon.

Former Twins star Guardado has son who's also a star — on silver screen

La Velle E. Neal III | Star Tribune | September 7, 2018

Eddie Guardado remembers a Saturday afternoon about 14 years ago when he wondered if his son, Niko, might not be a chip off the old block.

Niko, then 7, was pitching in a scrimmage game for a team near their home in Stockton, Calif. The coaches asked Eddie Guardado to umpire, so Eddie stood behind the pitcher's mound as his son threw.

"He was so nervous, he walked the first three guys," the Twins bullpen coach and former closer said. "As a dad, I'm trying to talk to him about it. He kept walking guys. I said, 'That's it, he's done.'"

Guardado noticed his son crying when he reached the bench, so they talked during the drive home.

"I asked him, 'Hey, do you really like baseball?' And he looks at me and goes, 'No, Dad, I just want to play because you played.' I almost teared up.

"I said, 'Hey, you be your own man. You go out there and direct your own path in life and your journey and do what you want to do.'"

For Niko, that meant acting lessons and waking up before sunrise for auditions. The auditions led to some commercials, then some appearances on sitcoms such as "The Goldbergs," then a Nickelodeon movie, "Lost in the West," that was filmed in Spain.

Guardado, now 21, then landed a role in the motion picture “A-X-L,” which was released Aug. 24. The film is about a motorcycle-riding youngster named Miles who befriends a robot dog that is the product of a military project gone wrong. Guardado’s character is named Scroggins, who is friends with a bully named Sam, who picks on Miles.

“It’s different because it’s my first major film I’ve been a part of that will be in theaters!” Niko Guardado said. “It’s been an amazing experience and this cast and crew is awesome ... and also the role was a little bit more quiet and timid as to where my previous roles have been very loud and outgoing.”

Being the son of a former professional baseball player means he’s been able to experience part of the lifestyle. Through the years, he’s worked as a clubhouse attendant, under the tutelage of longtime Twins clubhouse manager Rod McCormick. Niko likes the game and being around it.

Participating in the game was a different story, and he appreciated that his father did not force him to stick with it.

“I remember at a young age that I wanted to create my own path in life and step out of my dad’s shadow — although my dad’s shadow isn’t a bad thing,” he said. “I’m extremely proud of my father and the man he is, but I just wanted to pave my own path to success and I always loved acting, so it stuck.”

He still keeps one foot in the game. Even after the production of “A-X-L” wrapped during the baseball offseason, Guardado still worked in the Twins clubhouse for several days this season.

“It’s crazy when I visit because I realize I’ve been a part of this organization longer than every player in there,” Niko said. “It’s surreal. The clubbies and Rod have raised me. They were strong parental figures in my life, so coming here is like visiting family.”

Before Eddie Guardado left for spring training in February, he spent a day on the set with his son, leaving home at 5 a.m. and returning at 5 p.m. He saw his son enter his own private trailer to prepare for scenes. He met the entire crew, including the cooks, stuntmen and paramedics. He sat directly behind director Oliver Daly and watched his son get coached.

“At night we were driving home and he said, ‘How did you like it?’ and I loved it,” said Eddie Guardado, who also has a son Jakob, 16, and daughter Ava, 13, with wife Lisa. “‘What I liked the most was that you introduced me to all the people nobody knows. And you knew them all by name.’

“Niko said, ‘Well, I learned from the best.’ I teared up.”

Maybe Niko is like father, like son.

“He’s done real well,” Eddie Guardado said. “I’m very proud of him, his mom is proud of him, and his brother and sister are proud of him.

“Watching your son on the big screen, bro, eating some popcorn with a big Coke, there’s nothing like it.”

Twins need a winter of answers to a long summer of questions

Jim Souhan | Star Tribune | September 6, 2018

As the Twins begin another meaningless September homestand, what we know about the direction of the franchise is that we know nothing.

We have no idea whether the not-so-new front office can build a winner. The Twins have hired a lot of people and dramatically upgraded their analytics department and that could lead to championships or firings. Their only stretch of success so far capitalized on a brief surge from their predecessor’s best prospects.

We have no idea whether Byron Buxton and Miguel Sano will become the Twins’ support beams or cement shoes. Anyone suggesting they should be traded or cut is ignoring franchise history and embracing irrationality. Anyone professing certainty that they will become stars is engaging in understandable hopefulness but nothing more.

We have no idea whether the absence next season of Joe Mauer’s blame-everything-on-me contract will have any positive effect on the franchise. Nor do we know whether Mauer will return, or whether his return would be beneficial.

We have no idea whether the many trades Derek Falvey and Thad Levine have made will produce good big-league players. Remember that before Terry Ryan became the best trade-making general manager in baseball, from 1998-2006, he was the worst trade-making general manager in baseball, from 1995-97.

We have no idea whether the public's constant plea for the Pohlads to spend more money on players would have the desired effect. The biggest contracts in franchise history have not yielded championships, and the 10 richest contracts in baseball history have produced one World Series title — won by Alex Rodriguez with the Yankees in 2009.

We have no idea whether calling Buxton up to play in meaningless September games would have helped his career. He has produced two excellent Septembers in his big-league career. Neither led to him performing well the following season.

These examples of unenlightenment demonstrate the mysteries of baseball rebuilding.

Are analytics the answer? Not necessarily. Now that everyone is using them, it's harder to use them to gain an edge.

Is patience rewarded? Sometimes. The Royals stuck to their rebuilding philosophy and it worked. They won one World Series and almost won another. And all it took was about 25 years of dice-rolling and roster-flipping.

Is spending \$150 million or more on payroll the answer? It might be for the Red Sox, Cubs and Astros. It isn't for the Dodgers, Giants and Nationals.

Adding to the mystery is the very nature of September baseball. The Twins will be playing without pressure against expanded rosters. If a Twin excels this month, he might be succeeding in the autumn version of spring training, and that success might never translate into competence against good teams in a playoff race.

The Twins will spend this month playing games because they are required to play games. There is nothing to see here. We will learn nothing from a month devoid of baseball meaning.

What could matter is this winter.

If Buxton and Sano don't become stars, the Twins soon will be embarking on another rebuild with less-talented prospects. This winter, Buxton and Sano need to revamp their hitting approaches and come to spring training prepared to carry their team.

I heard this suggestion first from Twins analyst and former All-Star Roy Smalley: They should be sent to play for the same team in Sano's country, the Dominican Republic. They should be accompanied by whichever coach is deemed most likely to turn their careers around.

They should play every other day, and spend their off days working on technique.

What Buxton and Sano do this winter will matter more than anything that has happened over the past 11 months.

Forget September. Winter is coming, and it could mean everything to a stumbling franchise.

Twins-Kansas City series preview

Chris Miller | Star Tribune | September 6, 2018

THREE-GAME SERIES AT TARGET FIELD

Friday, 7:10 p.m. • FSN, 830-AM LHP Stephen Gonsalves (0-2, 9.90 ERA) vs. RHP Heath Fillmyer (2-1, 4.01)

Saturday, 6:10 p.m. • FSN, 830-AM RHP Jose Berrios (11-10, 3.92 ERA) vs. RHP Jorge Lopez (1-4, 4.24)

Sunday, 1:10 p.m. • FSN, 830-AM Both teams to be announced

Twins update

The Twins were swept by Houston, finishing a nine-game road trip 2-7. They have lost five in a row. ... 1B Joe Mauer has 596 extra-base hits, one behind Tony Oliva for fourth in Twins history. Harmon Killebrew (1,939) leads. ... LHP Taylor Rogers has pitched 15½ consecutive scoreless innings dating to July 30, the third-longest active streak in the American League. In Rogers' first 33 games, he had a 5.13 ERA; in his past 34 games, he has a 1.35 ERA with 39 strikeouts in 31½ innings. ... 3B Miguel Sano (bruised leg) and LF Eddie Rosario (left quadriceps) could return to action Friday.

ROYALS UPDATE

The Royals (46-93) won six in a row before losing their past two to Cleveland. ... IF Hunter Dozier had a seven-game hitting streak (13-for-28)

snapped Wednesday. ... Fillmyer will make his 10th start. He has a 2.87 ERA in night games and an 8.74 ERA in day games. ... Whit Merrifield is hitless in his past three games after extending his on-base streak to 22 games Monday. He is tied for the AL lead in stolen bases (30), including a major league-leading 11 steals of third. He is seventh in the AL in batting (.304), third in hits (162) and fourth in multi-hit games (47). He has started 93 games at second, 20 in center, eight at DH, seven in right, five at first and one in left field. ... Five-time Gold Glove winner Alex Gordon has 91 assists since becoming an outfielder in 2010, best in the majors. Amos Otis (116) has the franchise record.

Agency change could set Jose Berrios up for a rich future with the Twins

Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | September 6, 2018

Loyalty is important to Jose Berrios. That's why it was difficult for him to switch his representation to Wasserman Media Group this week.

Melvin Roman of MDR Sports Management had shepherded the Twins' rising young ace from his senior year of high school in Bayamon, Puerto Rico, up through his selection with the 32nd overall pick and subsequent signing for a bonus of \$1.55 million.

Based in Puerto Rico and with a client list headlined by Yadier Molina and Jose Quintana, Roman was there for Berrios when he debuted in the majors in 2016, kept his spirits up when he pitched to an 8.02 earned-run average as a rookie and celebrated with him as he went a combined 25-18 these past two seasons, earning his first All-Star selection in July.

That loyalty ran both ways.

"That's why I was there for almost seven years with him," Berrios said. "Then something happened, and I changed agents."

Finishing up his age-24 season and still another full season away from his first crack at salary arbitration, Berrios did not elaborate on what caused him to seek different representation. But he told the Pioneer Press in March he hoped to work out a multiyear extension with the Twins, who instead signed him for just one year at \$570,000.

"It's a business decision," Berrios said. "We will still be friends. I just moved on."

BAEZ FACTOR

Wasserman has a deep client list of big-leaguers, including Giancarlo Stanton, Chase Utley, Kenley Jansen, Trevor Bauer, Yu Darvish and Twins reliever Addison Reed. Chicago Cubs infielder Javier Baez, who is married to the sister of Berrios' wife, also is a Wasserman client.

As Berrios, a father of three young children, pondered his professional future, he was pulled in the direction of a larger agency. Nick Chanock, Wasserman's senior vice president for baseball, will work directly with Berrios.

"I met them three years ago because my brother-in-law (Baez) is a client," Berrios said. "This year we met formally twice, and that's why I signed with them."

The official move came Monday, but Berrios said the process took more than three months.

"I was thinking about it from almost the beginning of the season," he said. "I'm so excited to keep moving forward. (Wasserman) has a lot of good stuff to help me be better in the future. They're going to help me with my workout routine, my nutrition, everything. That's why we moved."

Reed did not help recruit Berrios to Wasserman, but when his clubhouse neighbor shared the news, he was effusive in praising the decision.

"I told him he'll love it," Reed said. "There's not a better group to go to war with than those guys at Wasserman. He put himself in a pretty good position."

Reed, who signed a two-year, \$16.75 million deal with the Twins in January, recalled his second year of arbitration eligibility, when he and the New York Mets settled for \$5.3 million before the 2016 season.

"We settled 45 minutes before the hearing," Reed said. "I spent a lot of time with everybody from Wasserman. They were all part of it. We had a little war room set up at the Vinoy Hotel in (St. Petersburg, Fla.). There were probably about 10 to 15 guys from Wasserman that had all sorts of information on me. We were talking about how we were going to go about the whole case."

Reed, who broke in as a Chicago White Sox closer and had 105 career saves by that point, was coming off a 2015 season in which he had settled back in to a setup role for the Arizona Diamondbacks and later the Mets, who reached their first World Series in a decade and a half.

"That was kind of a turning point," Reed said. "I was always close with those guys at Wasserman, but going through that, seeing how prepared

they were and just spending every minute of the day with them, that was the game changer. That's when I realized these guys definitely had my best interests (in mind)."

UNLIMITED POTENTIAL

Whether or not this week's switch will make a Berrios extension more or less likely, it's sure to be a running conversation throughout the winter.

The fact Wasserman has done so much recent business with the Twins, both on the geographically driven Reed deal and a nine-figure Darvish negotiation that ultimately fell short, certainly can't hurt. Darvish grew close with Twins general manager Thad Levine during their Texas Rangers days, and more good will was built up with last year's midseason reclamation project of another Wasserman client, Bartolo Colon.

"It could be a key piece for (an extension) in the future," Berrios said through a team-issued translator, "but right now I'm just focusing on my portion, my part that I can do on the field. It's the first time I've changed agents, but this move was a good thing."

Corey Kluber's five-year, \$38.5 million extension (plus two club options) remains the record for a pre-arbitration pitcher's deal, but he was coming off his first Cy Young Award at the time. Add in five-year pre-arb deals for Jon Lester (\$30 million guarantee), Madison Bumgarner (\$35 million), Yovani Gallardo (\$30.1 million) and Trevor Cahill (\$30.5 million), and the average outlay for that group is \$32.8 million.

Of course, the Twins might prefer to point to five-year deals for lefties Matt Moore (\$14 million) or Martin Perez (\$12.5 million plus three club options) while acknowledging the six-year deals signed by Chris Sale (\$45 million plus a club option) and Julio Teheran (\$32.4 million plus a club option).

Somewhere within that range lies the proper extension for Berrios, who has done nothing but impress the Twins from the moment he signed at age 18.

"He has unlimited potential and value if he stays healthy," Reed said. "There's no questioning his work ethic. That isn't going to change. It's almost unthinkable that a guy can continue to do as much stuff as he does. It's just incredible to see."

There was the morning after a night game in Kansas City earlier this season when Reed left the team hotel to get coffee at 8 a.m., only to bump in Berrios, in full workout gear, chugging through the hilly Plaza district.

This spring, at the Fort Myers, Fla., complex where a number of Twins players stay, Reed and his family were out for an evening walk when he glanced through the window of the workout room and saw Berrios.

"He's dripping sweat, working out again after a full workout at the facility earlier that day," Reed said. "His nickname is 'La Makina' for a reason. That's 'The Machine.'"

Reed shook his head and smiled.

"A guy like him shouldn't be stressing, shouldn't be worrying about what's going to happen in the whole arbitration process," Reed said. "Hopefully he's not stressing. I think he's a smart enough kid to know if he keeps on doing what he's going to do, there's no telling how much he could earn or how long he's going to play. I mean, it's limitless."

John Shipley: Twins made the smart decision with Byron Buxton

John Shipley | Pioneer Press | September 6, 2018

There has been some gnashing of teeth over the Twins' decision not to recall Byron Buxton for the tail end of the season. At first glance, the decision was a little shocking. Buxton is arguably baseball's best defensive outfielder and, still only 24, expected to be a cornerstone of the franchise for years to come.

As usual, the decision was made in large part because of money; by ending Buxton's season early, the Twins have gained an extra year of team control over the former No. 1 prospect in baseball. Unfair, cried the cognoscenti, and it might be if Buxton had done anything this season to earn an extra year of service time. But he didn't.

The Twins are winding down a disappointing season for many reasons, and Buxton is a big one. After winning a Platinum Glove and helping the Twins win a wild-card berth last season, he was expected to continue developing into the franchise player the team wants him to be. If he had, he and the Twins never would have been in this position.

Buxton played 28 major league games this season, leaving him 13 games short of erasing a year of team control on his future. He should have passed that well before the all-star break, but he didn't. Even if he had continued struggling at the plate — he hit .156 with a .182 on-base percentage and 28 strikeouts in the majors — his defense would have helped the Twins win games. But he wasn't here. Three trips to the disabled

list put him at Triple-A Rochester at the deadline to expand September rosters.

It wasn't his fault, but the Twins were faced with a serious, but easy, question to answer: Do we promote Buxton for a meaningless month and lose an entire season of team control, or let him play two weeks and give him credit for the season?

Teams do and always will use the collective bargaining agreement to their benefit, just as players do, and often — usually? — service-time rules are manipulated to the disadvantage of the player (see: Kris Bryant). That's certainly the case with Buxton, but is it unfair?

The inelegant way that Falvine StatCast Overdrive explained the decision hasn't helped, but it's hard to fault them for being honest. General manager Thad Levine told the Pioneer Press that service time should factor into every personnel decision the team makes. Should it not?

This is business and these are the rules. When Buxton's management team goes to arbitration, it will use those rules to get every cent it can for their client. It's interesting that so many sports fans seem to care for union members only when there are millions of dollars on the line as opposed to, say, a living wage — and yet this isn't the hill on which the Twins' critics are dying. Instead, it's a sense of indignity at the team's temerity to act in its best interests, and perhaps even to judge their player's 2018 season for what it was — a competitive bust.

By accounts official and anecdotal, Buxton is a good guy who works hard. He puts his body on the line in the outfield. He hustles. He's a good teammate. He's hard not to root for. But this isn't high school; this is big-boy sports. The Twins have been working on next season since they traded Brian Dozier, Eduardo Escobar and Lance Lynn at the non-waiver trade deadline.

One can make the argument that giving Buxton his two weeks of service time would be a nice goodwill gesture, a generous pat on the back for a player the Twins need to be, at least, a good major-leaguer. But there is no advanced stat on goodwill.

When Terry Ryan was running the place like a family, the pitchforks wanted objective, mathematical analysis. Well, now they've got it. You can't have it both ways.

Eddie Rosario's absence makes The Buxton Decision look worse
Derek Wetmore | ESPN 1500 | September 6, 2018

The Minnesota Twins have played five games since September began and introduced the possibility of calling up more than 25 players to the Major League roster. You've probably heard by now that the team chose to send Byron Buxton home rather than put him on the big league roster.

There's a tangled web of intention, consequences and explanations. And given his perceived status as an Important Player in the near future for the Twins, it's going to be important to track how it all plays out.

Just 5 games into Minnesota's final month of the season, a pattern has emerged.

There's no getting around it. Eddie Rosario's absence makes The Buxton Decision look worse.

Again, we're only talking about 5 games. And if Rosario can return from his strained quad on Friday and play most of the rest of the way, this picture will look different by October. For now, here are the Twins' leaders in plate appearances since rosters expanded this month:

Logan Forsythe: 21
Jorge Polanco: 21
Robbie Grossman: 19
Max Kepler: 18
Jake Cave: 18
Joe Mauer: 14
Tyler Austin: 14
Mitch Garver: 12
Ehire Adrianza: 11
Miguel Sano: 9
Johnny Field: 8
Chris Gimenez: 7
Willians Astudillo: 7
Gregorio Petit: 1

Now, to be fair, the Twins are mostly talking about outfield opportunities when they said there's just not enough room for Buxton this month. In their defense, Rosario is banged up and is expected to return very soon, so you'd have to imagine that he'll soak up a good chunk of these available plate appearances.

If you really wanted to stick your neck out to defend The Buxton Decision, you'd say what General Manager Thad Levine couldn't say: there's a difference between everyday plate appearances and spot-duty outfield innings for back-end-of-a-roster players.

In other words, "no playing time" for Buxton doesn't mean that there are zero innings available. It could just mean that they would rather see Jake Cave in the outfield every day; if Johnny Field or Robbie Grossman get some sporadic plate appearances while Rosario is on the mend, then that's a different task for a guy with Buxton's historic contact problems.

At least, that's the argument you'd make if you were really motivated to defend the Twins for their Buxton explanation. It requires some serious mental gymnastics, but it's one route that you could take.

Here's a look at the defensive innings at each position in September. Note: innings total is divisible by 8 instead of 9 because neither home team has needed to bat in the 9th inning to beat the Twins.

Here are the innings that have gone to all Twins players that would impact Buxton:

Right Field

Max Kepler has had the majority of the defensive innings in right field, sitting on the bench against left-handed Astros pitchers Dallas Keuchel and Framber Valdez. Johnny Field took over the starts on those two days and was lifted for a pinch hitter at the earliest convenience.

Kepler : 28 innings
Field: 12 innings

Center Field

Jake Cave has been the primary beneficiary of The Buxton Decision. An impressive early showing offensively makes you want to see more of him on a daily basis; and his early defensive work in Minnesota has made him look a bit more like a corner outfielder than a centerfielder down the road. Still, Cave has earned an extended look and he's getting it.

Cave: 34
Kepler: 6

Left Field

This is where the Twins look bad with Eddie Rosario out nursing an injury. Rosario has been the Twins' easy-choice MVP this year, and if the decision was Rosario over Buxton, I don't think as many fans would have been rankled. But it looks to me more like it's Cave over Buxton (oversimplified), and the Rosario injury makes it look to some casual observers like it's Field or Grossman over Buxton.

Grossman: 32
Field: 8

DH

Barring some practically unimaginable circumstances, Buxton is not a future DH. But this position reinforces the notion that there are plenty of plate appearances to go around on this club right now, and a handful of those opportunities could be going to Buxton.

Plate appearances as Twins DH in September:

Austin: 11
Grossman: 4
Astudillo: 2
Mauer: 1
Sano: 1
Gimenez: 1

Twins hope to have Sano back vs. Royals

The Sports Xchange | Fox Sports North | September 6, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS — The Minnesota Twins are hoping to have Eddie Rosario and Miguel Sano back in the lineup at some point this weekend when

they take on the Kansas City Royals at Target Field.

Sano bruised his lower left leg Tuesday night in a loss to the Astros and was expected to take batting practice Wednesday ahead of the series finale in Houston before the team's medical staff scratched the plan for precautionary reasons.

"My knee hurts right now but I feel much better than (Tuesday)," Sano said after Minnesota's 9-1 loss Wednesday. "(Thursday), we are going to go for rehab and work on my knee."

Twins manager Paul Molitor thought there was a chance the left fielder could be back as early as Friday for the series opener.

"He's doing well," Molitor said. "I wouldn't have surmised that would be the likely outcome at the time of the injury, but thankfully he's doing well. You're very concerned when it happens, thinking you're looking at some extended rehab again if things didn't turn out the way they did. Thankfully, maybe he learned something from it, that he's going to have some discomfort when he makes impact with that leg. But he survived it and he's doing well."

Rosario did take batting practice Wednesday, nearly a week after straining his right quad.

"I think he's getting a little anxious to play," Molitor said. "We'll just try to be smart with it."

The Royals are hoping to get one of their own back Friday.

Brett Phillips sat out Wednesday at Cleveland, still sore after suffering a shoulder contusion when he crashed into the outfield wall at Progressive Field the night before. He remained in the game for another inning after the collision but came out of the game in the third inning with Jorge Bonifacio taking his spot.

Acquired from Milwaukee at the deadline as part of the Mike Moustakas trade, Phillips is batting .202 with two home runs and seven RBIs in 27 games for the Royals.

"We'll just see how it goes each day with the treatment and how I respond," Phillips said. "I really don't know how long I'll be out."

Right-hander Heath Fillmyer gets the ball Friday for Kansas City.

Fillmyer allowed only two runs despite giving up nine hits while striking out six over seven innings in a 5-4 victory over Baltimore his last time out on Saturday. The rookie is 2-1 with a 4.01 ERA in 13 appearances, including nine starts, this season.

He lasted only three innings in his only appearance against the Twins this season, allowing three runs on five hits and three walks with three strikeouts before a rain delay of 1 hour, 31 minutes brought his day to an end.

"(It was) just a grind," Royals manager Ned Yost said.

The Twins turn to rookie left-hander Stephen Gonsalves, who hasn't worked past the fifth inning in any of his three big league starts. He was knocked around by Texas in his last outing last Friday, allowing six runs (three earned) on six hits and four walks before he was chased with two outs in the fourth.

"I think I was just nibbling a little bit," said Gonsalves, who is 0-2 with a 9.90 ERA. "I was living fractions off the corner of the plate. I think I need to set up and get that strike one first and then start expanding."

Minnesota had considered using an opener ahead of Gonsalves on Friday but ultimately decided to give the 24-year-old another shot.

The Opener Experiment is catching on. Will the postseason be its next testing ground?

Cliff Corcoran | The Athletic | September 6, 2018

Minds are opening to the opener. In the first four days of September, the A's, Twins, and Rangers combined to use an opener — meaning they started a game with a short outing by a pitcher who typically works in relief — five times. That usage is due in part to a confluence of expanded rosters and rotation injuries, but it speaks to the fact that other teams, including teams embroiled in pennant races like Oakland, believe the Tampa Bay Rays hit upon something this year when they pioneered the use of the opener.

In total, six teams have used an opener this year, including the Dodgers and Blue Jays, who did so a total of three times earlier in the year when their rotations wore thin. The Dodgers, Jays, A's, Twins, and Rangers have combined to use an opener a total of seven times this season. Through Wednesday's action, the Rays have done so 43 times.

Add in tandem starts and full-blown bullpen games, and the Rays have used some sort of unconventional pitching sequence in 56 of their first 139 games. That's 40 percent of their games on the season. However, since they traded conventional starters Chris Archer and Nathan Eovaldi in late July, they have been up to bullpen shenanigans in 60 percent of their games. Not coincidentally, the Rays are 21-11 (.656) since the calendar flipped to August and are just 2 1/2 games behind the sinking Mariners in the overall American League standings heading into Thursday's action.

Given that expanded rosters and the Rays' success appear likely to lead to an explosion in such unconventional use, I want to take a closer look at exactly how those 56 unconventional games have gone for the Rays, in the aggregate. Before I do, I need to define some terms, using a combination of conventional wisdom and a close examination of the Rays' pioneering pitcher usage this year:

A Conventional Starter is a pitcher with a recent history of starting pitching appearances of typical length, in the majors or minors, who is pitching on-turn in the rotation or otherwise stretched out for 80-plus-pitch outings.

An Opener is a pitcher who starts a game and pitches no more than two innings regardless of how well he pitches. A conventional starting pitcher who comes out of a game after no more than two innings due to injury, poor performance, or a long delay is not an opener.

A Follower is the first pitcher who enters a game after an opener who throws as many or more innings than the opener (minimum 2 IP). A pitcher can still be a follower if he gets knocked out of a game before exceeding the opener's innings total if he entered the game by the third inning and has an established a history of pitching as a follower.

A Bullpen Game is a game without a conventional starter in which either the starting pitcher throws more than two innings or no pitcher who enters prior to the fifth inning throws more than two innings.

A Tandem Start is a game in which the starting pitcher throws more than two innings and is followed by another pitcher who works a similar number of innings. Neither a tandem starter nor a follower needs to pitch immediately after the starting pitcher to qualify as such.

A bullpen game can have an opener, but not a follower.

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Through their first 139 games of the season, the Rays have had six tandem starts, seven bullpen games, and have used an opener-follower combination 43 times. Their current starting rotation effectively consists of conventional starters Blake Snell and Tyler Glasnow and followers Ryan Yarbrough, Yonny Chirinos, and Jalen Beeks. Ryne Stanek, Diego Castillo, and Hunter Wood are their current openers, though all three will also work in relief in between opening assignments.

The Rays grabbed headlines on May 19 when they started Sergio Romo against the Angels, an outing greeted at the time as the debut of the opener. However, a perusal of their box scores reveals that they had actually used an opener three times prior to that this season.

On April 8, Andrew Kittredge, who had made just 11 starts across seven minor league seasons coming into the year, started against the Red Sox at Fenway, allowing one run in two innings before yielding to Yarbrough, who allowed just one more run over four more frames. When the Rays returned to Boston at the end of the month, Chirinos threw two innings as an opener for Yarbrough on April 28, albeit with less success. On May 4, at home in Florida, Kittredge again opened for Yarbrough, allowing one run in two innings against the Blue Jays, after which Yarbrough allowed just one hit in five scoreless frames.

The success of the two Kittredge-Yarbrough games is likely what prompted the Rays to make the more obvious move of starting veteran reliever Romo in Anaheim, not only on May 19, but on May 20, as well. Romo opened five games for the Rays before taking over as the team's closer in the wake of the Alex Colomé trade, but his results weren't great. The Rays went just 2-3 in the games Romo opened, while Romo himself posted a 7.71 ERA across 4 2/3 innings in those games.

However, the Rays have had much more success with Stanek, who has opened 21 of the Rays opener-follower games as well as three bullpen games. In those 24 starts, Stanek has posted a 2.60 ERA, 0.98 WHIP, and struck out 33 percent of the batters he has faced. His workload has remained that of a reliever — those 24 starts have added up to just 34 2/3 innings — but he has faced the top of the opposing order in every single one of those games, which makes those numbers all the more impressive.

Stanek is an automatic record-holder. Not only does he own the record for appearances as an opener — Wood is second with eight — he has tripled the single-season record for most starts of two or fewer innings pitched (which used to be a bad thing). The career record for such starts is 40 by Hall of Famer, and least-accomplished 300-game winner, Early Wynn. If the 27-year-old Stanek, who is still technically a rookie, continues to average six or seven opening assignments per month, he'll break Wynn's career mark by next June, very close to the one-year anniversary of Stanek's first turn as an opener.

The current record-holder for follows is Yarbrough with 19. Beeks, acquired in the Eovaldi trade, is second with eight. Yarbrough has also been a key to the Rays' success with their new formula, posting a 3.41 ERA in 89 2/3 innings (an average of more than 4 2/3 frames per outing) as a follower. The Rays' best follower appearances have all been Yarbrough's, from his five scoreless frames against the Blue Jays in early May, to his 5 1/3 scoreless against the Royals in late August, with his seven-inning, eight-strikeout appearance against the Orioles on May 25 (his only run allowed a Jonathan Schoop solo homer), the longest and best of the bunch. Such outings suggest Yarbrough's future lies in conventional starting, but thus far this year, the 26-year-old rookie lefty has a 4.71 ERA in his six conventional starts, a mark 1.3 runs higher than his ERA as a follower.

As for the aggregate impact of these strategies. Well, there's a twist. It seems we've been celebrating the wrong role.

The American League as a whole has posted a 4.39 ERA in the first and second innings this season. The Rays' openers, who never pitch past the second inning, have combined to post a 4.43 ERA in the first two frames. Given that the Rays have a pitching-friendly home ballpark, that's not only not better, it's not as close as it looks.

However, check out what happens over the next five innings, innings three through seven. The AL has averaged a 4.25 ERA in those five frames. That's almost an exact match for the overall league average ERA of 4.26. The Rays' followers, who have averaged a bit more than 4 1/3 innings per outing thus far with the vast majority of those innings coming in the third through seventh, have a combined 3.51 ERA in that role. That's quite a bit better.

The Rays' conventional starters, the guys they consider good enough to start a game and throw close to 100 pitches, have combined for a 3.70 ERA on the season. The followers have bested them by nearly two-tenths of a run. Granted, the followers don't have to face the top and heart of the opposing order in the first two innings — that is, after all, the whole idea. However, when you take the conventional games as a group and compare them to the bullpen shenanigans games as a group, including tandem starts and bullpen games, the Rays have posted a 3.75 ERA in conventional games and a 3.59 ERA in shenanigans games. Bear in mind the fact Tampa Bay has employed those shenanigans to improve the performance of supposedly inferior pitchers, and the Rays, whose 59 relief appearances of three or more innings are the most by any team since 1987, are most definitely on to something. Indeed, Tampa Bay is 44-39 (.530) in conventional games and 31-25 (.554) in games with unconventional bullpen use.

So, how has it worked out for the other teams attempting to follow the Rays' lead? Well, the sample size is minuscule, but the Dodgers, Blue Jays, A's, Twins, and Rangers are a combined 2-5 with a 6.93 ERA in their seven games with an opener-follower combination and 2-2 with a 6.69 ERA in their four bullpen games.

Still, breaking out the individual roles, we find that the followers have been having success. Across 29 1/3 innings, the seven followers in those games have posted a 3.07 ERA. Take away one particularly rough outing by the Dodgers' Dennis Santana — whose appearance as a follower remains his only major league outing and was followed by the diagnosis of a rotator cuff strain — and that figure drops to a spectacular 1.75 ERA over 25 2/3 innings.

Again, the sample size is tiny, but it's telling that, in both the robust Rays sample and the tiny sample of imitators, the pitchers in the follower role are the ones benefiting from the strategy. Given that those pitchers throw roughly twice as many innings as the openers, that's a good indication that the opener-follower strategy is one worth pursuing.

What remains to be seen is if any team will pursue it into the postseason. The Astros were pretty creative with their use of starting pitchers in long relief outings last postseason and currently have both Lance McCullers and Charlie Morton on the disabled list and Brad Peacock and Collin McHugh averaging more than an inning per appearance in the bullpen. The Red Sox may also need to get creative if Chris Sale can't shake the shoulder inflammation that has put him on the DL twice in the last month and ex-Ray Eovaldi can't rebound from the 6.85 ERA he has posted in his last six starts. Lefty Drew Pomeranz, who threw four scoreless innings in relief after a rain delay on Friday, is a top candidate for their follower role.

If the A's can get past the Yankees in the wild card game — and they just took two of three from New York in Oakland — they might be the most likely to deploy the tactic in the playoffs. They used an opener-follower combination of Liam Hendriks and Daniel Mengden twice in the first four days of September. Both pitchers struggled against the Mariners on Sept. 1, but back at it three days later against the Yankees, they combined for 5 2/3 scoreless innings. With Sean Manaea likely out for the season, three other starters lost to Tommy John surgery, Brett Anderson still working his way back from an arm injury, and Edwin Jackson and Trevor Cahill each having contributed just one quality start in their last four turns, that Hendriks-Mengden combination, or one like it, just might be Oakland's second-best rotation option after Mike Fiers. It might even be the right choice for the wild card game, as Fiers is an extreme fly-ball pitcher who has allowed multiple home runs in both of his previous career starts at the new Yankee Stadium. Neither of the starters in last year's AL play-in contest made it past the second inning. Of course, that wasn't on purpose.