



SF Giants Press Clips Sunday, May 13, 2018

San Francisco Chronicle
For Giants, bad luck, losing streak continue
Henry Schulman

PITTSBURGH — The great baseball divide has little to do with sabermetrics versus eye test, swinging for the fences or moving the runner over, high socks or low. It's all about luck and whether a team can take it off the table by playing excellent ball.

Judge for yourself when considering a key moment in Saturday night's 6-5 loss, the strangest and most competitive of the Giants' sixth straight setbacks.

They were down 5-4 in the eighth when Alen Hanson singled and Austin Jackson ripped a two-out line drive toward the left-field corner. Had the ball cleared the fence, Jackson would have had his first homer of the year and the Giants a 6-5 lead.

Hanson could have jogged home ahead of Jackson. Instead, he had to fly around the bases. As he rounded third he hurt his left hamstring, down toward the knee, forcing him out of a game in which he hit his fourth homer and adding another player to the long list of injured.

Manager Bruce Bochy said Hanson was day-to-day. Hanson said he will not know how bad he hurt it until he rises Sunday morning, but the Giants' most dynamic player will miss a game they

need to avoid going 0-for-Pennsylvania.

Either way, the Giants are assured of a losing trip — either 4-6 or 3-7 — after starting 3-0 with a sweep in Atlanta.

The mere fact the Giants were still in the game when it ended Saturday gave Bochy hope.

“It was a good ballgame, a hard-fought game,” Bochy said. “I’m good with that. The energy was better and we fought back hard to get back into it.”

But the Giants need more than fight. They need to end a long losing streak during which they seem incapable of accomplishing the little or big things required to shake hands after nine innings, particularly on the road.

Long before former Pirate Tony Watson hit Jordy Mercer with a pitch to force home the winning run with one out in the eighth inning, Jeff Samardzija fell one strike short of walking off the mound content with a six-inning, three-run effort, which these days for the Giants truly counts as a quality start.

However, Samardzija left a two-strike, two-out fastball in Francisco Cervelli’s sweet spot. The Bucs’ catcher hit an opposite-field, two-run homer to break a 3-3 tie.

Samardzija looked as good as he had in any start since he returned from his pectoral injury. Toward game’s end he was getting gobs of swings and misses with improved stuff.

“There’s two ways to take it,” Samardzija said, referring to stuff versus results. Asked which way he took it, he said, “Five and two-third innings, five runs. That needs to be better. You need to be positive in this game, but I’ll keep that to myself.”

Samardzija got no decision because the Giants got a fourth run on Brandon Belt’s two-out RBI single in the seventh ahead of Jackson’s tying double in the eighth.

Watson allowed a leadoff double in the eighth to Josh Bell before the inning really got weird.

With runners on the corners and one out, a clear run-on-contact situation for Bell, David Freese hit a hard shot that Evan Longoria backhanded behind the third base bag. Instead of running, Bell froze several steps past third. Longoria lunged to tag him, but Bell shimmied and jukeed his way back to the bag.

Longoria decided to eat the ball rather than wing a long throw to first, and the bases were loaded for Mercer.

“The bottom line is I’ve got to execute pitches to the next guy,” Watson said. “Hitting a batter to get the winning run in is unacceptable, especially after the inning we just had to tie the game.”

One bright spot was Andrew McCutchen, who continues to get an ovation every time he steps to the plate. He started two scoring rallies with doubles and has an 11-game hitting streak.

San Francisco Chronicle **Giants bullpen coach Matt Herges manages reliever shuttle** **Henry Schulman**

PITTSBURGH — Reliever **Derek Law** got the call and flew across the country to be activated for Wednesday night’s game in Philadelphia. A day later, he was back on a plane to Sacramento. His crime? Throwing 39 pitches in an 11-3 loss and saving the rest of the bullpen.

Law had replaced **D.J. Snelten**, who threw 54 pitches in Monday’s 11-0 loss and also got a ticket back to California.

This is roster management in 2018. Teams that once made roster moves sparingly use Triple-A teams as temporary storage.

The Giants have dipped into storage a lot with two top starters out, especially during their six-game losing streak, during which the starters have totaled 272/3 innings and the bullpen has thrown 201/3.

“They understand,” said **Matt Herges**, whose job description as bullpen coach now includes

counseling for pitchers with minor-league options. General manager **Bobby Evans** and manager **Bruce Bochy** also try to be honest with the pitchers about the club's situation. "It doesn't make it easier," Herges said, "but they're not going home and saying, 'Hey, Mom and Dad, I'm getting screwed. You know what? They said this is how it is and I'm just a casualty this time.'"

The Giants have made 16 reliever transactions since Opening Day. Law has been up and down three times, **Roberto Gomez** twice. **Steven Okert** was promoted and demoted on successive days in April without throwing a pitch. **Josh Osich** came off the disabled list and immediately was optioned.

Sometimes, performance has nothing to do with it. But sometimes it does, and Herges tries to send that message.

He tells pitchers, "Listen, make it to where we can't do without you. There are plenty of guys who've gone through a career and didn't burn one option because the team needed them. Then you're not the guy who gets shuttled."

But sometimes, Herges said, he has to tell them, "I'm sorry. You did nothing to get sent down. We just need a body."

Pence playing: Bochy said he has a hard time imagining the Giants restoring a 12-man pitching staff, but at some point they have to bring **Hunter Pence** back from Triple-A. To activate him, the Giants would have to demote a pitcher, or another outfielder would have to be dropped or put on the disabled list. Pence restarted his minor-league rehab assignment Saturday for Sacramento.

Asked if Pence might return on the upcoming homestand, Bochy said, "I guess there's a chance. We'll see how things go, one, how he feels, his thumb, but we'll also look at how he's swinging the bat and his timing. We'll see how many at-bats he needs."

San Jose Mercury News

Here's what the Giants need Hunter Pence to prove on his rehab assignment

Kerry Crowley

PITTSBURGH—Neither of the Giants top two left fielders are healthy, but one of them is set to begin playing again.

Hunter Pence has been sidelined since April 18 with a sprained thumb, but after a six-day pause on his rehab assignment, Pence will return to the lineup for the Triple-A Sacramento River Cats on Saturday.

Pence began a rehab assignment on April 27 and went 6-for-27 with seven strikeouts before he took a break to allow his injured thumb to continue healing.

The Giants are also without left fielder Mac Williamson, who has been out since April 24 with a concussion. Williamson isn't expected to clear concussion protocol for about a week, and in the meantime, the Giants have kept just four outfielders on their 25-man roster.

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For Pence to return to the roster, manager Bruce Bochy said he must do more than simply prove he's healthy again. The Giants are concerned about Pence's ability to be productive at the plate, and Bochy said the team will closely monitor Pence's timing.

"We'll see how this goes," Bochy said. "One, how it feels, his thumb, but how he's swinging the bat. Where his timing is and those things. We'll see how many at-bats he needs."

Bochy didn't rule out the possibility of Pence returning to the club during the Giants upcoming homestand, but it's clear the Giants expect him to prove he can provide the team with a lift at the plate.

Pence, 35, is in the final year of his contract with the Giants and was the 12th different Opening Day left fielder for the club in the last 12 seasons.

A leader in the clubhouse throughout his tenure with the Giants, Pence is remaining upbeat about his future according to Bochy, who said Pence is eager to return to the field.

“He’s been upbeat and he showed up, he’s very excited about playing again,” Bochy said. “He’s doing fine mentally through all of this. I just think he’s ready to get back on the field and get back to playing baseball.”

The Giants are carrying 13 pitchers and may not have a roster spot for Pence to take this week if he doesn’t force his way back onto the club with a productive rehab assignment. The last five Giants starting pitchers have combined to throw 22 innings and the club hasn’t had a starter work into the sixth inning since Sunday.

San Francisco does have two off days in the week following a seven-game homestand, but Bochy said the Giants may not be ready to drop a pitcher so they can carry 13 position players.

“We’ll see where we’re at but right now I would say no,” Bochy said. “I think it’s going to be important for us to carry an extra pitcher so we don’t overuse anybody.”

Rain in the forecast

The groundkeepers at PNC Park covered the infield about 90 minutes prior to first pitch on Saturday and a rain delay remains possible.

Showers are expected into the night and through Sunday, but the Giants do not return to Pittsburgh this season so the Pirates will likely take whatever measures are possible to ensure the next two games are played.

Giants lineup

A night after the Giants lost 11-2, Bochy will roll out the same lineup as starter Jeff Samardzija returns to the mound to make his fifth start of the year.

The Giants have struck out at least 11 times in each of their past five games. The Giants can tie a franchise record for most consecutive games with a double digit strikeout total with six set in May 1997 against the Pirates on Saturday.

1. Gregor Blanco LF
2. Andrew McCutchen RF
3. Buster Posey C
4. Brandon Belt 1B
5. Evan Longoria 3B
6. Brandon Crawford SS

7. Alen Hanson 2B
8. Austin Jackson CF
9. Jeff Samardzija

MLB.com

Giants drop back-and-forth game vs. Pirates

Bob Cohn

PITTSBURGH -- Another former Pirate was in the limelight for the San Francisco Giants on Saturday. **Tony Watson** would have preferred to stay a bit more in the shadows.

The day after **Andrew McCutchen** returned to PNC Park in a Giants uniform to a rousing ovation, Watson similarly drew cheers from Pirates fans, but for different, and for him, wrong reasons.

View Full Game Coverage

A left-hander, Watson hit **Jordy Mercer** in the leg with a fastball in the eighth inning with the bases loaded to score the deciding run in San Francisco's 6-5 defeat to the Pirates on Saturday at PNC Park. It was the Giants' sixth straight loss, a season high.

"Hitting a guy to score the game-winning run, that's unacceptable," said Watson, who pitched for the Pirates from 2011-17 and was a National League All-Star in 2014. "It's frustrating for sure."

Watson and Mercer were close when they played together. Watson said he knew Mercer was looking for something outside, so he wanted to come in. He did, but a bit too far.

"I just have to execute better next time out," Watson said.

In a wild game delayed 93 minutes by rain, **Josh Bell** scored what proved to be the winning run. Fittingly, that was set up by an odd play. Bell led off the home half of the eighth with a double and went to third on **Corey Dickerson's** groundout. **Francisco Cervelli** was intentionally walked, and **David Freese** pinch-hit.

With runners on first and third, Freese hit a grounder speared by third baseman **Evan Longoria**, who thought he would start a double play until he saw Bell hanging around third. He went to tag Bell, but Bell did a little dance to elude the tag and got back safely. Then he scored when Mercer got hit.

After the rain delay, Giants starter **Jeff Samardzija** had a rough beginning, laboring through a 25-pitch first inning and giving up two runs. The Giants tied the game in the second against right-hander **Chad Kuhl** when Longoria led off with his eighth home run of the season and, one batter later, another ex-Pirate, **Alen Hanson**, hit his fourth homer.

McCutchen, again greeted warmly before each at-bat, led off the third with a double and eventually scored on **Brandon Crawford**'s sacrifice fly for a 3-2 lead. The Giants could have had more after Hanson walked to load the bases, but **Austin Jackson** grounded out.

After Samardzija retired the side in order in the second, **Gregory Polanco**'s solo homer the next inning made it 3-3. Samardzija, who failed to get past the fifth inning in four prior starts, then settled down, seemingly headed toward his best start of the season until Cervelli launched a 1-2 fastball 395 feet, per **Statcast™**, into the right-center-field seats for a go-ahead two-run homer in the sixth inning.

"Two homers, two heaters up," Samardzija said.

Samardzija acknowledged he pitched better than he has, but added, "There are two ways of looking at it."

How did he look at it?

"The way it was," he said. "Five and two-thirds innings, five runs. It has to get better."

McCutchen lashed another double with one out in the seventh, advanced to third on **Buster Posey**'s long fly ball and scored on **Brandon Belt**'s single to cut the deficit. In the eighth, Jackson redeemed himself with a game-tying double off **George Kontos** that missed going out by just a few feet. That scored Hanson, who had singled. Hanson would later leave the game after tweaking his left hamstring.

With the game tied at 5, **Felipe Vazquez** relieved Kontos and fanned pinch-hitter **Kelby Tomlinson**, but **Gorkys Hernandez**, another pinch-hitter, walked. That left it up to McCutchen, with two on and two out -- his moment. He grounded out, ending the Giants' threat.

"We've got a lot of things going on," Longoria said. "We have to get better, top to bottom."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Longoria made a great play to spear Freese's shot in the eighth. He got the ball from his glove to start a double play but never expected to see what happened next, Bell showing some nifty moves to safely get back to the base, and eventually score the winning run.

"He just retreated," Longoria said. "I couldn't get the ball out of my glove. I was gonna throw it home. And there he is."

HE SAID IT

"You know what? It's a good ballgame. It's a hard-fought game. I'm good with that. The energy was better. They fought back. We got down early, they came right back. We had a couple of chances and got a bad break with the hit batsman." -- *Giants manager Bruce Bochy*

UP NEXT

Left-hander **Derek Holland**, another member of the Giants' reconstituted pitching staff, will try to rebound from an uneven outing when he faces right-hander **Ivan Nova** (2-2, 4.84 ERA) and the Pirates on Sunday at PNC Park at 10:35 a.m. PT. Holland lasted five innings his last time out, giving up three runs on six hits in a 4-2 loss to the Phillies. Overall, he is 1-4 with a 5.66 ERA. His last road win was May 21, 2017, while pitching for the White Sox in Seattle.

MLB.com

Pence (thumb) resumes rehab assignment

Bob Cohn

PITTSBURGH -- The battered Giants got some encouraging news on Saturday when outfielder **Hunter Pence** resumed his rehab assignment with Triple-A Sacramento.

The 35-year-old veteran went on the 10-day disabled list with a sprained right thumb on April 20 after sustaining the injury on April 3. He experienced recurring soreness while rehabbing with Sacramento and was temporarily sidelined last week.

View Full Game Coverage

Asked if Pence might rejoin the big league club during its seven-game homestand that starts Monday, manager Bruce Bochy said, "I guess there's a chance. We'll see how this goes -- how it feels, his thumb, how he swings the bat, where his timing is and those things. We'll see how many at-bats he needs."

Bochy said Pence's spirits have been "good" throughout the ordeal.

"He's been upbeat," Bochy said. "He's doing fine mentally through all of this. I just think he's ready to get back on the field and get back to playing baseball."

Pence is among a large assemblage of key sidelined players. Pitchers **Madison**

Bumgarner, Johnny Cueto and Mark Melancon, second baseman **Joe Panik** and outfielder **Mac Williamson** all are on the 10- or 60-day disabled list.

Maybe. Maybe not.

Like several clubs, the Giants carry 13 pitchers. With off-days looming on May 21 and May 24, Bochy was asked if he is considering reducing the number to 12 and adding a position player at some point.

"Right now I would say no," he said. "I think it would be important for us to carry the extra pitcher, so we don't overuse anybody. But we'll wait, we'll see where we're at when these off-days come. We might be able to get by for a few days with an extra player."

NBCsportsbayarea.com

Jeff Samardzija, Tony Watson can't make Giants' rallies hold up

Alex Pavlovic

PITTSBURGH — Jeff Samardzija was not brought here to be the ace or leader of a staff. He wasn't even the biggest pitching addition of his own offseason, as the Giants signed Johnny Cueto a couple weeks after inking Samardzija.

But this is Samardzija's staff right now. Cueto is hurt and Madison Bumgarner is a month away from his own return, leaving Samardzija to lead a group that includes three young pitchers and a non-roster invitee. So it was notable when Samardzija put the onus on the pitching staff after being asked about this strange road trip.

"We *pitched* in Atlanta," he said of the three-game sweep that preceded six losses. "That's the best way to describe it."

They have not in the state of Pennsylvania, and that includes Samardzija. Saturday was his best outing of the season, but that's a low bar, and it still was nowhere near his standards. Samardzija was a strike away from a quality start and six innings but Francisco Cervelli took him deep to give the Pirates a two-run lead. When the Giants rallied to tie it, Tony Watson gave up the go-ahead run. The Giants lost 6-5. They are now 3-6 on the road trip. Samardzija said there's only one way to turn it around. As always with this organization, it starts with pitching.

"As a veteran guy you've got to get in there and talk to these guys and let them know what's important," he said. "Definitely at this point as a starting staff we've got to get in there and throw more innings."

Samardzija wasn't able to finish the sixth, and he was a spectator when a weird rally put the Pirates on top for good. Watson had been unbeatable before returning to his longtime home, but he gave up a three-run blast Friday. On his first pitch Saturday, Josh Bell stroked a double.

After a groundout, Cervelli was intentionally walked to put the pressure on pinch-hitter David Freese. He hit a chopper to third and Evan Longoria scooped it as his momentum took him to the plate. Bell had broken for home, but he spun and whirled around Longoria, who paused for a second and missed his chance to throw Freese out at first or tag Bell. That loaded the bases, and Watson hit Mercer to bring in the winning run.

Halfway into his third answer a few minutes later, Bruce Bochy pivoted and credited his players for showing more energy and playing a cleaner game. It certainly beat the ball they played in Philadelphia or on Friday, but this was still a night with too many negatives.

Alen Hanson, who hit his fourth homer early on, pulled up while scoring the tying run and was pulled with a tight left hamstring. He'll be reevaluated Sunday, but the Giants are in a bind. They already have just four players on their bench and Kelby Tomlinson, who will start Sunday, has served as their only backup middle infielder.

The roster is so imbalanced because of the staff's desire to carry eight relievers, and Bochy doesn't anticipate that changing anytime soon. But it will have to. This is unsustainable for the position players — several of whom could use a day off. The easiest way to cut a reliever would be to get length from the starting staff.

For a moment, it looked like Samardzija would finally do it. But on a night when he got better as the game went on, he could not finish what he started.

"That's the most frustrating thing," he said. "When you feel you have your good stuff you want to take advantage of that."

NBCsportsbayarea.com

Giants put a twist on recent form in sixth straight loss

Alex Pavlovic

THE GIANTS INSIDER PODCAST

BOX SCORE

PITTSBURGH — The Giants at least put a twist on things Saturday night. Their lineup did not strike out quite as often. Their starting pitcher lasted just a bit longer.

But the end result was the same.

Tony Watson, a former Pirate, hit Jordy Mercer with the bases loaded in the eighth inning of a tie game. The Giants lost 6-5, dropping their sixth straight game in the state of Pennsylvania. Watson had been just about perfect until returning to his longtime home, but he has given up

late runs in both games of this series.

Here are the other details...

—- Jeff Samardzija’s stuff took a noticeable tick up in the fifth and sixth, and he was a strike away from a quality start and an outing to build off. But with two outs and two strikes in the sixth, Francisco Cervelli smoked a two-run homer into the right field seats. After a single, Samardzija’s day was done. He was charged with five earned. He has a 6.94 ERA.

—- Andrew McCutchen got ovations before all of his at-bats again, and he doubled the second time up. It appeared he wanted to show the Pirates he’s still got that speed. Per Statcast, he was going 29.7 feet/second on his way to second, his fastest recorded time this year and the fourth fastest by a Giant. McCutchen also doubled and scored in the seventh.

—- Alen Hanson drilled a solo shot to right to tie it up in the top of the second. The homer was his fourth since getting into the Giants’ starting lineup. He never hit a homer in 92 at-bats for the Pirates in 2016 and 2017. Unfortunately, he appeared to hurt himself running the bases in the eighth.

—- Evan Longoria got the Giants on the board with a laser shot to left. The homer was his team-leading eighth. All the dudes who played third base for the Giants last season combined for just nine homers.

The Athletic

Dumb luck costs Giants in Pittsburgh, but in many respects, they are fortunate to be 19-21 at the quarter pole

Andrew Baggarly

PITTSBURGH – By the time Evan Longoria ranged down the third base line and picked a short-hop ground ball in the eighth inning Saturday night, he already had whittled down the possibilities in his mind.

He knew he had no shot of starting a double play that would end the inning. His momentum would carry him too far into foul territory to attempt a throw to second base.

And he figured Josh Bell, the runner at third base, almost certainly sprinted home on contact. That is what the scoreboard dictated: runners at the corners, one out, tie ballgame, you’re dashing home on any ground ball. Better to sacrifice an out at the plate than a double play.

Longoria wheeled around in an arc and had the ball out of his glove, ready to fire home.

“And he was already coming back towards me,” Longoria said.

Bell wended safely around Longoria while making what Pirates manager Clint Hurdle termed a “Houdini move.” It’s an old skipper’s crutch: give ‘em a bit of homespun humor to cover for one of your players when he makes a mistake.

Longoria tried to correct course and apply a tag, but the ball was already out of his glove and there was no time to transfer it back. He considered winging it across the diamond to first base, but decided it wiser to give left-hander Tony Watson a shot at getting another ground ball with the bases loaded.

Instead, Bell trotted home when Watson tried to bust a former teammate inside. Jordy Mercer allowed a fastball to glance off his thigh to force in the tie-breaking run and the Giants dropped their sixth consecutive game with a 6-5 loss to the Pirates at rainy PNC Park.

What’s worse than bad luck? Try being the victim of dumb luck.

“I’m not sure what Bell was doing,” Watson said. “I assumed he’d be going on contact, but he froze.”

Said Longoria: “Either he just made a really good baseball play and thought it through, or ...”

Bell’s idiot savant play on the bases wasn’t the only bad break Saturday night for a team that has seen its deficiencies exposed in these past six games against the Phillies and Pirates. The Giants have been creating plenty of their own misfortune. They didn’t need the baseball universe to turn against them, too.

They could point to Austin Jackson’s drive in the eighth inning – a tying double that missed going over the left field fence by the length of a Primanti Bros. sandwich. Not only did Jackson’s near miss deprive him of his first homer as a Giant and what would’ve been a go-ahead shot, but second baseman Alen Hanson ended up tweaking his left hamstring when he sprinted from first to home.

A bit more carry from Jackson’s drive and the Giants not only take the lead, but they take the field for Sunday’s series finale with a backup infielder. Instead, they’ll probably roll the dice and play shorthanded. Giants manager Bruce Bochy characterized Hanson as day to day with no roster move likely (although Miguel Gómez is nearby at Double-A Richmond). Hanson said he couldn’t be sure of the injury’s severity until he wakes up Sunday morning.

Bochy attempted an overall positive spin, saying he was encouraged to see the Giants play a competitive game after they’d been outscored 43-10 in the previous five losses.

“You know, it’s a good game, a hard fought game,” Bochy said. “I’m OK with that. The energy was better. Watson, he got the ground ball. If that’s to (Longoria), the inning is over.”

In the broader sense, though, the Giants cannot moan over misfortune. They are darn lucky to be 19-21 after 40 games, given a minus-33 run differential that ranks as the 11th-worst among the 15 National League teams.

They are lucky to have ceded just 1 1/2 games in the standings to the NL West-leading Arizona Diamondbacks over their six-game skid. They are lucky to stand a reasonable 5 1/2 games back.

They are lucky that the arch-rival Dodgers are in even worse shape, and threatening to become a hopeless cause before May is out.

They are lucky to be 19-21 through a quarter of the season despite entering Saturday with the worst strikeout-to-walk ratio in the National League.

Oh, sorry. We didn't specify whether that belonged to their pitchers or their hitters.

It's both, actually.

The Giants have an accomplished roster. That much we knew before the first workout of the spring. But is this roster talented enough? That's the part we haven't figured out yet. It's the part they haven't proven yet.

Right now, they look like a team that can be world beaters one series and non-competitive the next. That is the essence of a .500 team. Seven steps forward, six steps back is a fine lesson in perseverance. It doesn't lead to popping bottles.

It was funny to go through the postgame clubhouse and hear Jeff Samardzija talk about how the pitching staff needs to be more effective to take pressure off the offense, and then venture over to Longoria's locker to hear him talk about how the offense needs to do more to take the pressure off the pitchers.

You couldn't do comic irony better without Samardzija selling his hair to buy Longoria a watch fob.

The truth is somewhere in the middle, of course, but there's no denying the rotation needs to be better. Samardzija got within one strike of meeting the minimum standards of a quality start (six innings, three earned runs) when Francisco Cervelli hit a two-run home run to give the Pirates a 5-3 lead.

Samardzija didn't retire another batter. The Giants have gone seven consecutive games without a quality start. And now, the rotation's 4.50 ERA ranks 12th among the 15 NL teams.

It doesn't matter what the offense does. If the rotation ERA finishes the season better than only the Marlins, Reds and Padres, then the Giants aren't going to be playing meaningful games in September. Simple as that.

Bochy said he was encouraged by the way that Samardzija settled down after giving up two runs in the first inning, even though the right-hander also surrendered a homer to Gregory Polanco in the third after the Giants had rallied to take a 3-2 advantage.

But the time for baby steps is over. It's true, Samardzija had just one rehab start of 60 pitches before the Giants rushed him back into the rotation. He was getting back up to speed in his first handful of starts. But this was his fifth outing and he still hasn't completed six innings. He rediscovered his 97 mph heater in Philadelphia and seemed to have better secondary stuff against the Pirates. Yet the result was not the innings-chomping night the Giants needed.

“Couple heaters up in the zone,” Samardzija said. “If you can sum it up in any way, it would be that, you know. Two homers, two heaters up. They did a good job battling to get the other two (runs). Good hitting team. They’re playing well right now. It’s just too bad.”

Samardzija acknowledged that he hasn’t been pitching deep into games – something he did with regularity last season while leading the NL with 207 2/3 innings. His 205 strikeouts were nothing to sneeze at, either, and his K/BB ratio were gold cufflinks adorning the sack cloth of a 98-loss season. It almost allowed you to look past all those home runs he allowed, which led to plenty of mediocre outcomes.

Now he is giving up home runs, *and* not pitching deep into games. And that is an acute issue now that Madison Bumgarner and Johnny Cueto are not available to carry their usual weight.

Shouldn’t Samardzija expect more from himself by this stage?

“Yeah, no doubt,” he said. “I think that’s the most frustrating thing, when you feel like you’ve got your good stuff, especially compared to what you had before. You want to take advantage of that and throw up six or seven zeroes. So there’s two ways to take it tonight, for sure. Just depends on how you look at it.”

Which way does he look at it?

“What way do I look at it? I look at it the way it was, which was 5 2/3 and five runs,” he said. “That needs to be better. Part of you needs to be positive in this game, but we’ll keep that to myself. It is what it is. Need to be better.”

The Giants need Samardzija to lead this rotation because aside from Dereck Rodriguez, a six-year minor league free agent pitching well at Triple-A Sacramento, they do not have any other alternatives bubbling up from the minor leagues. And that lack of organizational depth, in part, stems from the sacrifices they made to build a starting five that bears little resemblance to their current group.

Along with the five-year, \$90 million contract that Samardzija received prior to the 2016 season, the Giants paid an additional opportunity cost. They sacrificed their first-round draft pick (18th overall) in the 2016 draft — the first time they punted a top pick since 2005.

Take a deeper peek at that 2016 draft and you’ll find the sacrifice was more Teotihuacán in scale as the Giants gave up younger blood to acquire older players. Second-round pick Bryan Reynolds went to the Pirates last December in the trade that netted Andrew McCutchen. Their fourth-round pick, Matt Krook, and their eighth-rounder, Stephen Woods, went to the Tampa Bay Rays for Longoria.

There are no other standout prospects from that draft. Third-rounder Heath Quinn hit .228 last year at High-A San Jose and is repeating the league (and got carried off the field with an injury earlier this week). Sixth-rounder Gio Brusa is also repeating with San Jose after hitting .237 in the Cal League last season. The only players taken in the top 10 rounds to matriculate to Double-A thus far are shortstop Ryan Howard and pitcher Garrett Williams.

Then there is the hit the Giants took to acquire failed left-hander Matt Moore, trading Bahamian shortstop Lucius Fox along with third baseman Matt Duffy. It's not just that they sacrificed Fox, a player they signed for \$6 million while blowing past their international bonus pool allotment in 2015. Because they had to spend the next two years in the penalty box due to the Fox signing, unable to offer a top bonus of more than \$300,000, they also sacrificed a two-year opportunity to compete for top international free agents.

The front office blueprint called for a rotation with Bumgarner, Cueto, Samardzija and Moore as its pillars.

Instead, those pillars at present are Chris Stratton, Ty Blach and Andrew Suárez – the pitchers that should have been relied upon as strong back-end starters or to shore up a bullpen that lacks a long reliever.

There's nothing to be done about Bumgarner dirt biking on a day off or getting hit in the hand by a line drive. You'll have bad luck in this game. You'll have dumb luck, too.

You'll also have risks that don't pan out. And you'll have total and complete miscalculations.

Make enough of those, and spend enough seasons under .500, and that is when you have regime changes.

The next three-quarters of the season will be interesting, to say the least.

The Athletic

Giants Analytics: The case for Andrew McCutchen hitting leadoff Owen Pointdexter

After being swept by the Phillies and losing the opener in Pittsburgh, the Giants are now losers of five straight. In that time, they averaged only two runs a game. Scoring runs has been a persistent issue, and while ultimately the solution is better hitting, they also need to maximize what they're working with right now, and there is one improvement Bruce Bochy can make in that direction just by rearranging a few names on the lineup card.

The case I want to make here asks you to look past names (and their associated pedigrees) and focus on performance, so let's start with a blind player comparison. Here are two Giants, through Friday's game against the Pirates.

	PA's	AVG	OBP	SLG	SB	CS
Player A	94	.272	.319	.386	3	2
Player B	156	.248	.359	.380	3	1

The two players have similarly middling power, but Player A has a better average, while Player B has walked much more, driving his OBP significantly higher than Player A's. Player A runs more often, but needs to get his success rate up to add value via the stolen base.

Who would you rather have as your leadoff hitter?

Lineup philosophy has changed over the years. It used to be that each slot, at least the first four, had specific roles, like a band of superheroes with complementary skill sets. The typical lineup went: speedy guy who is a decent hitter, speedy guy who makes a lot of contact, high average hitter with some power, high power hitter with some average, and then the rest in descending order of hitting ability, with righty-lefty alternation where possible. While that ethos is of an older generation, it is still visible in today's lineups. According to the old school, your leadoff hitter is probably Player A, aka Gregor Blanco.

Now the guiding principles are to have high-OBP guys at the top of the lineup and to generally put the best hitters early, so that they will come up to bat more often. In a previous generation, having one of the game's top sluggers bat leadoff, as Bryce Harper has for a few weeks, would be blasphemy. Today, it's more of a curiosity.

Blanco is a great guy to have on base, but I'd rather give those first at-bats to someone with decent speed who reaches base more often (and makes outs less often). That's why I would bump Blanco down to seventh or eighth in the order and move everyone else up, meaning the leadoff spot would be taken by Player B, otherwise known as Andrew McCutchen.

There is context that you likely already know, but is worth a quick mention: Joe Panik is hurt and Austin Jackson is still hitting below replacement level, with a .222/.297/.256 line. Under normal circumstances, either would make a perfectly logical leadoff hitter, and we wouldn't be having this discussion (caveat: even if Jackson, who was the team's primary leadoff hitter for the first three weeks of the season, were batting his career line of .274/.335/.399, there's still a good case to hit McCutchen leadoff).

There is one more relevant piece of context: McCutchen hasn't hit for much power this year. We're used to thinking of him as a middle-of-the-order threat, but this year he's derived the large majority of his value from getting on base. Not every manager cares about maximizing their power hitters' chances of coming up with runners on base (see: Harper, Bryce), but it's a worthy consideration, and one that has kept McCutchen out of the leadoff spot for his career. This year, however, that same idea recommends that McCutchen bat first, to maximize baserunners and minimize outs when the middle of the order comes up.

There's one more factor: batters higher in the order come to the plate more, and it's not helpful to guarantee the most plate appearances to the, at best, sixth best hitter on the team. In the ninth inning of a close game, you'd prefer to see McCutchen over Blanco, or if McCutchen was going to come up anyway, that extra plate appearance could go to Brandon Belt, Evan Longoria or Buster Posey.

It's taken a lot of intervening events to get to this point, but here we are: With their current roster and player performance, the Giants can maximize their chances by batting Andrew McCutchen leadoff.

The Athletic

Giants pitching prospect Joey Marciano is packing a big punch for Augusta

Melissa Lockard

It perhaps isn't surprising that a pitcher with the surname Marciano would have a big hook. That Giants prospect Joey Marciano is actually related to the former heavyweight champion makes it even more appropriate that he uses his curveball as knockout pitch.

Marciano, who says he has never been particularly interested in boxing despite the familial connection, has an underdog backstory that Rocky Balboa would envy. A native of Chicago, Marciano didn't start playing baseball until he was 15 years old.

"I was in the lunchroom (at Roberto Clemente HS) and saw on a bulletin board that they were having tryouts," Marciano said in a phone interview on Thursday. "I liked baseball, but I hadn't really played. I thought, 'I'll give it a shot. I'll try out.' I ended up making the team. I originally was an outfielder, but I wasn't really any good. They'd seen I had a decent arm and they put me on the mound. It kind of took off from there."

By his senior year, Marciano was pitching well enough to continue in college, but he wasn't noticed by scouts or recruiters until he went to an uncommitted prospects showcase in his home state of Illinois. There he connected with the John A. Logan College baseball team, and he moved onto the junior college after high school.

Marciano posted ERAs of 1.93 and 2.52 and struck out well over a batter an inning in his two seasons at Logan, but his name wasn't called in the 2014 or 2015 MLB Drafts, so he continued his pitching career at a four-year college. After a recruiting visit to nearby Southern Illinois, Marciano became a Saluki. He spent two seasons as a weekend starter at SIU, and finally heard his name called in the 36th round of last year's draft by the Giants.

"I knew it was going to happen (going in the draft last season), but I wasn't really sure where I'd go," he said. "The Giants liked what they'd seen. They decided to give me a shot and I haven't looked back ever since."

The odds of making the major leagues even as a high-round pick are tough, but they are exponentially more difficult the later a player is selected in the draft. First impressions often make or break players who are taken after the 20th round. So far, Marciano has put his best foot forward.

Last season, the 6-foot-5, 250-pound left-hander posted a 1.57 ERA and a .215 BAA in 28 2/3 innings for the Rookie-level Arizona League Giants. He struck out 26 and walked 12. This year, Marciano has been even better against more advanced competition in the Low-A South Atlantic League. In 32 2/3 innings for the Augusta GreenJackets, Marciano has a 1.65 ERA and a .205 BAA. He's striking out more than a batter an inning (38) and his command has improved considerably.

Marciano's approach is straightforward — throw strikes early and use his plus curveball to put hitters away when they are down in the count.

“Every start, I just try to keep it simple and not try to overdo it,” he said. “I’ll pitch off my fastball, get ahead strike one and then once I’m ahead in the count it’s fun because once you’re ahead in the count, you actually get to pitch. Just get them ahead with strike one and try to put them away and not try to nibble at ‘em.”

Marciano has primarily been a two-pitch pitcher — fastball and curveball — but in what is likely disconcerting news to the rest of the Sally League, Marciano is adding another weapon to his tool belt, a split-changeup. The development of the changeup as that third pitch will be key for Marciano if he wants to remain a starter in the upper levels.

In his latest start, Marciano used the changeup more than he has in any other outing, throwing it 15 times out of 88 pitches thrown. Although Marciano did allow a season-high four runs in the outing, he struck out eight and walked only one in 4 2/3 innings.

“It’s been really good. It’s been consistent down in the zone,” he said of the new pitch. “I’m just trying to get a feel for it. It complements my fastball and curveball, so I’ve been throwing it a lot more.”

Marciano’s fastball sits in the low-90s, and he uses his big frame to hide the ball well. His curveball is of the Barry Zito variety with its 12-6 break and it induces plenty of swings and misses.

Built more like a defensive end or a small forward than a pitcher, Marciano says that aside from pickup basketball, he never played any other sport than baseball.

“They wanted me to play football in high school and in college, but I decided to stick to baseball,” he said.

At 23, Marciano is on the older side for the Low-A level. If he continues to retire Sally League hitters at the rate he has thus far this season, he will be a strong candidate to move up to the High-A California League. For now, his goals are focused solely on helping the GreenJackets win the first-half Southern Division title and punch their ticket to the postseason.

“I’m trying to just control what’s in front of me. If I’m doing well handling what’s in front of me, the results will fall into place,” he said. “I just want to keep pitching how I am, win the league, go to the championship at the end of the year and win that championship. The team success is what I’m looking for. At the end of the day, as long as I’m doing what I have to do here, the other stuff will come along. I’m just focused on the team right now.”

ESPN.com

Inside Jonny Venter’s emotional comeback, 3.5 Tommy Johns later Eddie Matz

Call it the upside of rehab.

For the better part of the past six years, ever since he underwent the second of his 3½ Tommy

John surgeries, Jonny Venters had the good fortune to spend an inordinate amount of time with his family. To have dinners together and handle carpool duty and scratch off items from a honey-do list. A couple of months ago, that upside subsided.

Just days after the birth of his baby girl in February, Venters -- a former All-Star pitcher with the Braves who was trying to make it back to the majors for the first time since 2012 -- kissed his wife and kids goodbye and, for the first time in forever, headed south to spring training. Two months later, there he was in Durham, home of the Tampa Bay Rays' Triple-A affiliate, dreaming of two things: a family reunion and a call-up (not necessarily in that order).

EDITOR'S PICKS

- **After 3 Tommy John surgeries, Jonny Venters back in majors**

Jonny Venters has made a successful return to the majors after enduring three Tommy John surgeries and a six-year absence.

On Wednesday, April 25, Venters and the Durham Bulls were supposed to host a 10:35 a.m. getaway game. The Bulls were scheduled for a day off on Thursday, followed by a three-game weekend series in Gwinnett, Georgia. So right after the final out on Wednesday, Venters would make the six-hour drive from Durham to Suwanee, the Atlanta suburb where his wife and three young children lived. They would spend an entire day and a half together, pretending they were a normal family.

As fate would have it, that Wednesday morning getaway game started out in a rain delay that threatened to keep Venters in Durham longer than planned, threatened to keep him from his family. An hour or so into the delay, right around noon, Venters found himself in manager Jared Sandberg's office, hearing the words he thought he might never hear again.

You're headed to the big leagues.

Once the initial shock wore off, once it sank in that finally, at the age of 33, he had made it all the way back, Venters called his wife and gave her the news. He wasn't coming to Gwinnett. Instead, he was on his way to Baltimore, where later that night, the Rays would take on the Orioles at Camden Yards.

The family reunion would have to wait.

Since being called up, Venters has made three more appearances, all of them clean. Of the 12 batters he's faced in all, only one has reached base without his consent (he issued one intentional walk). AP Photo/Chris O'Meara

THE MEDICAL HISTORY of Jonny Venters reads like a children's folktale.

The first time his elbow went pop, in 2005, they took tissue from his left wrist and inserted it where the torn ulnar collateral ligament was. The second time his elbow went pop, in 2013, they took tissue from his left hamstring and inserted it where the torn left wrist tissue was. The third time his elbow went pop, in 2014, they took tissue from his right hamstring and inserted it where the torn left hamstring tissue was. The fourth time his elbow went pop, in July 2016, they took a timeout.

"That was a tough one to swallow," says Venters, who signed a minor league deal with the Rays in March 2015, six months after his third Tommy John. A nearly unprecedented number (former big leaguer Jason Isringhausen is the only other player to have had more than two Tommy John procedures), all three surgeries came standard with a notoriously grueling rehabilitation process that's more accurately measured in years than in months. After the third one, he told himself that if it didn't succeed, he would likely hang up his cleats. And now here he was, on the wrong side of 30 and four years removed from his last big league appearance, faced with the crushing reality that his left elbow had betrayed him yet again.

"Once it failed, it kind of sunk in that I'm probably done," Venters says. "It was tough. It was tough on everybody in my family."

It was toughest on his wife.

Viviana Venters was driving home when her husband called with the news. As she pulled up to their modest, four-bedroom house -- they had downsized after the third surgery, selling off an 8,000 square-foot mansion -- she couldn't believe her ears.

It's torn again, Jonny said. I'm coming home.

Unlike the last time, when Viviana lost it right there in Dr. James Andrews' office, there were no hysterics. No tears. Only numbness.

"I was just in shock," she says.

As Viviana sat there in her black GMC Denali, she thought about the labyrinthine path they had taken ever since they started dating back in high school. About how, for better or worse, baseball and family always seemed to be intertwined. She thought about watching Jonny play in his first and only All-Star Game, when she was pregnant with their oldest son, Wyatt. About how the joy of bearing a second child, a boy named Walker, was tinged with the bitterness of Jonny's withstanding a second Tommy John just five weeks later. About how they had closed on their dream home, only to get the nightmare news the very next month that Jonny would need surgery a third time. Now it was happening again, and it was more than Viviana could handle.

With her in-laws there for moral support, she sat in the deafening quiet of her husbandless home. They waited for Jonny to return. Eventually, shock turned into depression.

"I was heartbroken for him," says Viviana. "He'd been through so much. We were all just in tears because we were like, 'This is it. That's the end.'"

They spent the next couple of months discussing new beginnings. They talked about coaching but agreed that if Jonny was going to do something different, it didn't make any sense to pick a career that would have him on the road and away from his family. They talked about the possibility of Viviana, who had studied interior design at the University of Florida, putting her degree to use. Maybe Jonny, who was drafted out of high school and never attended college, would get his real estate license and together they could flip houses. But no matter which alternate reality they pondered, they kept coming back to pitching. In retrospect, the reason Jonny Venters didn't quit is because he couldn't quit.

"There was nothing to lose, except for maybe a little bit of time. I didn't want to be 40 years old and looking back and wishing I would've done something differently or worked harder or tried it again."Jonny Venters

"This is all I know," says Venters, tears welling up his eyes. Standing in front of his locker at Camden Yards the day after his improbable call-up, he's mostly matter-of-fact in recounting his epic journey. But when the conversation veers toward institutionalism, toward the gravitational pull of the only vocation he has ever known, he chokes up like a little leaguer using his big brother's bat. "It's not like I have a ... I didn't go to college and get a degree, so this is all I've done."

It's a common struggle for those who've been through what Venters has been through.

"It's definitely a shot of reality," says Royals lefty Danny Duffy, who underwent Tommy John surgery in 2012. "You've got to make sure you know who you are."

Adds Pirates hurler Jameson Taillon, another Tommy John survivor: "As a pitcher, your job is to go out and compete for your team. When you can't do that, you feel helpless. So when you're not pitching, you really have to find what your worth in life is off the baseball field."

Ultimately, Venters decided that his potential worth on the diamond, even after a fourth surgery, was greater than his value off it. The decision was aided by the fact that this injury was slightly different than the previous three. Instead of the ligament fraying in two and requiring a graft, it had detached from the bone. As such, Dr. Neal Elattrache, who had performed Venters' third Tommy John (Dr. Andrews did the first two), was offering a less invasive reattachment procedure that would result in a shorter rehab period. Not that time was of the utmost

concern.

"There was nothing to lose, except for maybe a little bit of time," says Venters. "I didn't want to be 40 years old and looking back and wishing I would've done something differently or worked harder or tried it again. If it didn't work out, we weren't out anything."

Ironically, if it did work out, his family stood to lose more.

If the surgery, which Venters refers to as his third and a half Tommy John, was a success and he somehow managed to make it back to the big leagues, the family dynamic would change drastically. Instead of Venters staying at home as he had for the better part of his children's lives, he'd be living the life of a fully functioning pro athlete. His sons would be without a father, his wife without a husband, for months on end. It's a risk Viviana was willing to take -- not necessarily because of the money (at the league minimum of \$545,000, Venters' salary would be a third of what it was the last time he was in the show), but because of a promise she made 10 years ago.

"My job as his wife and his partner in life is to support him no matter what," says Viviana, who married her high school sweetheart, the man she still calls Jonathan, back in 2008. "If he felt like he could come back, if that's what he wanted to do, then I'll support him. I'll ride this thing to the end."

The end. For Viviana, that has been the hardest part of the past year and a half. Ever since TJ No. 3.5, she has been waiting for the other shoe to drop, afraid to answer the phone or check her texts for fear that the end has finally come. Every checkpoint, from the first long toss to the first bullpen session to the first time throwing live batting practice, brought with it a new level of angst. If she didn't hear from her husband for too long afterward, her wheels would invariably start turning.

"It's sad that you get to that point," says Viviana. "I was just kind of preparing myself."

But through it all, that fateful call never came. Through every milestone and every minor league level -- Venters returned to action last June and, pitching competitively for the first time in five years, ascended all the way to Triple-A by September -- the news was good. Through spring training this year and the first two weeks of the minor league season, the news was good. Then, on Wednesday, April 25, right around noon, Viviana's phone rang. On the other end was her husband, and the news was once again good. Like, really good.

"The Rays wanna call me up," Jonny told her.

Viviana screamed. She cried. She paced back and forth, trying not to drop Evie, the baby girl she held in her arms, the one who had been born just seven days before Jonny left for his first spring training in forever.

Then she started packing.

THE FAMILY REUNION didn't have to wait long.

Just like it would've been easy enough for Viviana Venters to put the kibosh on her husband's cockamamie comeback at any number of stops along the way, it would've been easy enough for her to not make the trip to Baltimore. Easy enough to say, "I love you so much honey, but it's such short notice and I'm knee-deep in diapers, and last I checked, we don't have a private jet or a nanny, so good luck and we'll all be watching from home." But that's not what happened.

Instead, what happened is this: Viviana hung up with her husband, called her mother-in-law, went online and purchased six plane tickets, threw a bunch of stuff in suitcases, squeezed all three kids in the car with her father-in-law driving faster than Georgia state law allows, boarded a 5 p.m. flight that landed at 7:50 and hopped a ride to Camden Yards, where she and her kids and their grandparents arrived in the fourth inning, just in the nick of time.

The whole thing happened so fast that when Venters came on to pitch in the bottom of the sixth inning of a game that he says "felt like making my debut again," he wasn't even sure his family was there to witness it. His family, on the other hand, knew exactly where he was.

Even though Viviana was seated behind home plate, more than 500 feet away from the bullpen in left-center field, even though it had been over 2,000 days since Venters had last pitched in a major league game, she recognized the shape of her husband from the moment he started warming up. He wasn't the only lefty in the Rays' pen, but he was the only one with the black glove and the high socks. Moments later, after retiring Orioles slugger Chris Davis on a groundout to shortstop, Venters became the only one -- on the Rays or any other MLB team, this year or ever -- to make it all the way back after 3½ Tommy John surgeries.

It was such an emotional moment that the mother of Tampa Bay second baseman Joey Wendle, who was sitting in front of the Venters family, was moved to tears.

"He's not even my son and I'm crying," said Wendle's mom, craning her neck around toward the gaggle of Jonny Venters fans seated behind her. "I'm so happy for your family."

After Venters' game, 700 miles from its originally scheduled location, the family reunion finally became official.

"You did it," Viviana told her husband as he emerged with from the visiting clubhouse flashing a

gargantuan grin. "Even if that was your last chance, you still did it."

Of his return to the mound in the bottom of the sixth inning, Venters says it "felt like making my debut again." Mitchell Layton/Getty Images

FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH, that four-pitch outing in Baltimore wasn't Venters' last chance.

Since then, he has made four more appearances. Of the 16 batters he has faced in all, only two reached base without his consent (he issued one intentional walk). While the Rays seem understandably hesitant to lean too heavily on Venters -- he has worked just five times in 18 days since being called up -- they haven't shied away from using him in high-leverage situations: Against the hard-hitting Red Sox at Fenway Park, the veteran lefty came on with two on and one out and promptly retired both Mitch Moreland and Rafael Devers to extinguish the rally. Despite the initial success, he's well aware that he's not the same pitcher he once was. "My stuff's not as good. I don't throw as hard," says Venters, whose fastball used to sit in the mid-90s but now checks in a few ticks slower. A strikeout machine in his previous incarnation, he has yet to record a single whiff. Not that he cares -- the 2018 Venters vintage is less worried about miles per hour and more concerned with guiles per hour. "I'm older, maybe a little bit smarter. I'm still learning how to pitch with the stuff that I have now. Hopefully, I just continue to learn and get better."

As for the elbow, no news is good news.

"I feel fine physically," he says. "Right now, I'm just taking it day by day, and if it happens, it happens."

And what if it does happen? What if Venters' bionic elbow goes pop one more time? Surely, another Tommy John surgery would be out of the question. Or would it?

"I don't see myself trying to do it again," says Venters, his voice trailing off. He takes a long pause and looks off into the distance, while simultaneously looking inward.

"But I've said that before."