

Astros-Indians G3: Lineups, matchups, FAQs

By Jordan Bastian and Brian McTaggart MLB.com

HOUSTON -- Behind dominant pitching performances from Justin Verlander and Gerrit Cole and a shutdown bullpen, the Astros have held the Indians to six hits in two victories in Houston in the American League Division Series, and they can punch a ticket to the AL Championship Series with a win in today's Game 3 in Cleveland.

The Indians have managed only nine total bases and have struck out 24 times while drawing only four walks heading into a Game 3, in which they'll face former AL Cy Young Award winner Dallas Keuchel, a lefty. The Astros have taken advantage of the Tribe's aggressiveness at the plate, but Keuchel pitches more to contact and feasts on ground balls.

Meanwhile, the Indians have struck out the Astros only 10 times in two games, while allowing 39 total bases to Houston's offense. It will be up to right-hander Mike Clevinger to try to keep the defending champions from eliminating Cleveland.

Astros: Manager AJ Hinch has already said Brian McCann will start at catcher instead of Martin Maldonado, and Tony Kemp might get his first start in the outfield, as well, facing another right-hander. Carlos Correa (0-for-7) is likely to stay in the lineup because of his defense with hopes that his bat will come around.

1. George Springer, CF
2. Jose Altuve, 2B
3. Alex Bregman, 3B
4. Yuli Gurriel, 1B
5. Marwin Gonzalez, LF
6. Carlos Correa, SS
7. Tyler White, DH
8. Josh Reddick, RF
9. Brian McCann, C

Indians: With a lefty in Keuchel on the mound, there is a chance that the Indians could have one or both of Brandon Guyer (124 OPS+ vs. left-handers) and Yandy Diaz (103 OPS+ vs. lefties) in the lineup. Other than that possibility, expect the majority of the Tribe's nine to remain the same.

1. Francisco Lindor, SS
2. Michael Brantley, LF
3. Jose Ramirez, 2B
4. Edwin Encarnacion, 1B
5. Josh Donaldson, 3B
6. Brandon Guyer, RF
7. Yan Gomes, C
8. Yandy Diaz, DH
9. Jason Kipnis, CF

Who are the starting pitchers?

Astros: Keuchel (12-11, 3.74 ERA) put together a solid season following a slow start. He went 9-3 with a 3.23 ERA in his final 20 starts. This will be the 2015 AL Cy Young Award winner's eighth career playoff start. He's 4-2 with a 3.24 ERA in eight career playoff appearances, including one relief appearance against the Royals in 2015.

Keuchel is 4-1 with a 2.79 ERA in eight career games (seven starts) against the Indians, and he allowed 14 hits and six earned runs in 11 innings across two starts against them this year. He's 2-0 with a 2.57 ERA in four career starts at Progressive Field.

Indians: Clevinger (13-8, 3.02 ERA) will take the ball in Game 3, marking the first postseason start of his career. Clevinger finished the 2018 campaign with a career high in innings (200) and strikeouts (207), and he enjoyed a stellar second half. In 13 starts after the summer's intermission, the righty had a 2.31 ERA, which was the third-lowest mark in the AL in that span (minimum 60 innings).

Clevinger faced Houston twice this year, going 0-2 with a 6.17 ERA (eight earned runs in 11 2/3 innings) in back-to-back outings (May 18 and 24). In 17 starts this season at Progressive Field, the right-hander went 7-3 with a 3.14 ERA with 114 strikeouts vs. 29 walks in 106 innings.

How will the bullpens line up after the starter?

Astros: Ryan Pressly and Roberto Osuna pitched in the first two games of the series, and Lance McCullers Jr. went in Game 1. The Astros' other four relievers are well rested, and following Sunday's off-day, Pressly and Osuna should be ready to pitch again in Game 3.

Indians: Cleveland leaned on righty Trevor Bauer in each of the first two games, and he will likely continue to be a leverage option for Game 3. With the Tribe in must-win mode, Bauer will likely be leaned on for multiple innings if Clevinger runs into trouble. With the exception of starters Carlos Carrasco and Corey Kluber, it will be all hands on deck.

Are there any relievers who are unavailable?

Astros: None.

Any injuries of note?

Astros: Altuve appeared to tweak his sore right knee running to first base in the sixth inning of Game 2, but he said he'll be ready for today.

Indians: None.

Who is hot and who is not?

Astros: Bregman is 3-for-6 with two walks and two homers in the first two games, and Gonzalez is 5-for-7. White is 3-for-5 with two intentional walks. Meanwhile, Correa and Gurriel (1-for-7) have gotten off to slow starts.

Indians: After posting a .171 average and a .550 OPS in the ALDS a year ago, Cleveland's lineup has gone cold once again (6-for-60) to start October. The middle of the Tribe's order (Ramirez, Encarnacion and Donaldson) has gone especially frigid, with a 1-for-22 showing through the first two games. Lindor tried to light an offensive fuse in Game 2 with a solo home run off Cole, but that was the extent of the lineup's output.

Anything else fans might want to know?

The Indians went 49-32 this season at home, averaging 5.47 runs per game on offense and posting a 3.82 ERA as a staff. Cleveland's 151 home victories over the 2016-18 seasons trail only the Red Sox and Yankees (152 apiece) in the AL. The Indians have won an AL-high 289 home games under manager Terry Francona from 2013-18.

The Astros went 57-24 on the road this season, marking the second-best road record in the Major Leagues since the schedule expanded to 162 games in 1961. They won 15 of their final 18 games on the road in the regular season and averaged 5.2 runs per game away from home this year (4.6 runs per game at home).

Brantley savors playoff run after beating injuries

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- Rather than heading home to Texas two winters ago, Indians pitcher Josh Tomlin and his family remained in Cleveland for most of the offseason. One of the driving factors behind that decision was that Michael Brantley was staying back to focus on his rehab from a second right shoulder surgery.

Tomlin knew all too well the mental anguish of rehabbing an injury in solitude. He understood the thoughts that start to infiltrate a player's mind, causing confidence to erode when the finish line is far from view. Tomlin heard Brantley talk about spending his post-playing days at home in Port St. Lucie, Fla., where the outfielder could spend his down time fishing and playing with his kids.

Tomlin knew Brantley needed a close friend nearby to help swat such thoughts away.

"You need someone there pushing you," Tomlin said. "You need someone there telling you, 'Hey, you're full of crap. You're going to play. You're going to play again. You're one of the best players in the league. Keep fighting. Keep going forward.'"

Now, the only part of Brantley's future that is in doubt is which uniform he will don next year. Following three seasons hindered by health setbacks, Cleveland's veteran left fielder turned in a remarkable comeback campaign in 2018. Brantley's swing was as smooth as ever, and his presence in the lineup's No. 2 spot gave the Indians' offense a steady hand between Francisco Lindor and Jose Ramirez.

That is where Brantley will remain today, when the Indians will try to stave off elimination in Game 3 of the American League Division Series against the Astros. Cleveland is in an 0-2 hole, putting the club one loss away from an early offseason. That would also hasten the questions surrounding Brantley, who will be eligible for free agency after parts of 10 seasons in the big leagues with the Tribe.

Given his comeback, given his inability to impact the past two postseason runs and given his uncertain future, Brantley has been savoring as much as possible this year.

"Every day," Brantley said. "When you go through basically almost a two-year rehab, you don't always know that you're going to come back. Every day that I'm there to be with my teammates, that I'm healthy enough to be in that lineup, where I can joke around and know that I'm going out to left field to play with these guys, I'm very appreciative. I don't take it for granted."

In 143 games this season, Brantley hit .309 with 17 home runs, 36 doubles, 76 RBIs, 89 runs and an .832 OPS for the Indians. He was not the AL Most Valuable Player Award candidate that he was in 2014, but Brantley returned to his status as one of the elite contact-oriented hitters in the game. Brantley led qualified MLB hitters in contact rate (90.9 percent) and swinging-strike rate (4.0 percent), while ranking second in strikeout rate (9.5 percent).

It took countless hours of work behind the scenes for Brantley to become that type of player again.

Late in the 2015 season, an ill-fated dive on the road in Minnesota caused the initial injury to Brantley's right shoulder. He had surgery, but complications limited him to just 11 games in '16. When the Indians clinched the first of three straight AL Central crowns in Detroit that September, Brantley leaned against a wall outside the visitors' clubhouse at Comerica Park, observing the champagne celebration from afar.

Throughout the run to the World Series that October, Brantley stayed with the team, offering hitting advice or any other insight he could for his teammates. If he could not swing a bat, Brantley wanted to find some other way to help his club.

"I really looked at myself as a coach," Brantley said. "I was talking to guys about at-bats. I was talking to them about their approach with certain pitchers. If anyone had a question of me, I made sure I was in the dugout cheering them on and made sure they knew I was there. I accepted the role, even though I didn't want to."

Brantley returned by the start of the 2017 season and made the AL All-Star team, but then a severe right ankle injury that he sustained in August hobbled him for the remainder of the year. The left fielder made the ALDS roster against the Yankees, but he was playing hurt, and following New York's victory to clinch the series, Brantley exited Progressive Field in a walking boot.

"He's a dying breed," Tomlin said.

Brantley had no such setbacks this season. When the Indians clinched their latest division crown, the outfielder was in the thick of the party in the home clubhouse. All those monotonous hours in the training room or batting cage -- where Brantley would swing one-handed if that was all he could handle -- had paid off.

"On a personal level, I'm just so happy for him, that he can be a part of this," Indians manager Terry Francona said. "I saw what he went through. When everybody's getting announced during the World Series and all the excitement, he was back there [in the training room]. He never missed a day."

Brantley has at least one more day left with the Indians.

Come this afternoon, Brantley will take his place on the third-base chalk line, hear his name announced and soak in the roar from Cleveland's crowd. There will be no thoughts of grabbing a fishing rod back home in Port St. Lucie. Brantley will be focused on gripping a bat and doing what he can to help the Indians avoid an early October exit.

"You never know when it's going to be your last game or what could happen," Brantley said. "Every day that I came in this season, to be with that group that worked so hard day in and day out by my side, it's an honor."

Clevinger diligent in preparing for G3 start

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com

CLEVELAND -- This is the assignment Mike Clevinger craved. After spending the past two Octobers working out of the Indians' postseason bullpen, the right-hander earned the trust of manager Terry Francona and has emerged as one of the American League's most durable starting pitchers.

Clevinger will take the ball for the Tribe in a win-or-go-home Game 3 of the AL Division Series today against the Astros, who won the first two tilts at Minute Maid Park. Clevinger spent those games monitoring how Houston attacked starters Corey Kluber and Carlos Carrasco, and the righty is looking forward to trying to halt the Astros' momentum in front of a sold-out crowd at Progressive Field.

"Our backs are against the wall," Clevinger said during Sunday's workout. "We know that this could be our last game if we don't show up. So if anything, everyone is going to leave what they have out there, and that's going to be good to see at home."

Clevinger finished this season 13-8 with a 3.02 ERA in 200 innings, piling up 207 strikeouts against 67 walks and gaining steam as the starts piled up. The righty's fastball velocity ticked up as the summer wore on, climbing to 95 mph on average in September. In the second half, Clevinger turned in a tidy 2.31 ERA with 89 strikeouts and a .189 opponents' average in 78 innings.

While watching Houston's offense in the first two games of the ALDS, Clevinger said he was impressed on the Astros' ability to pounce on mistakes. Specifically, Houston hit .250 (7-for-28) with a .464 slugging percentage with two strikes in the first two games combined. For perspective, all MLB batters combined to hit .173 with a .274 slugging with two strikes overall this season.

"There's a few things," said Clevinger, when asked what he picked up from Games 1 and 2. "But something that's kind of eye-opening is how often they capitalize on mistake pitches. You don't see a lineup, top to bottom, really be able to do that every time you make a mistake."

"So I think really honing in on two-strike pitches and really paying attention to how you're setting them up is going to be a big key."

Worth noting

- With left-hander Dallas Keuchel starting for the Astros in Game 3, Francona plans to make a couple changes to his lineup. Right fielder Brandon Guyer (120 wRC-plus vs. lefty pitching) is expected to be in the lineup, along with right-handed-hitting Yandy Diaz.
- Francona noted that Diaz will likely serve as the designated hitter, with Edwin Encarnacion handling first base. That means first baseman Yonder Alonso will be on the bench. Alonso posted a 64 wRC-plus against left-handed pitching this year, and he is 0-for-6 so far in this ALDS.
- 5 things Tribe must do to stay alive in ALDS
- Francona noted that it will be "all hands on deck" for the most part in Game 3 today. Trevor Bauer will again be available out of the bullpen. The manager said Kluber offered to move to the bullpen, but that is not going to happen. If there is a Game 4 on Tuesday, Bauer or Shane Bieber would start.

Quotable

"I'd rather be up 2-0 than down 2-0, but it's still the first one to get to 3. And I'd rather have a chance than no chance. I mean, I understand that the odds start to go not in your favor. But I've been on both sides of this and come back and had people come back on us. So rather than spend a ton of time thinking about all that, we need to figure out a way to beat them, because the first two games, they've really kind of had their way with us. We need to change that." -- Francona

5 things Tribe must do to stay alive in ALDS

By Anthony Castrovince MLB.com @castrovince

CLEVELAND -- This was the series the Indians wanted. They wanted it last year, when they were a best-record-in-the-American-League-earning, 22-game-win-streak-creating machine. And they wanted it this year, when the poor quality of competition in the AL Central made the 162-game schedule feel like extended spring camp.

In Houston, Cleveland's players recognized an opponent structured similarly, with homegrown stars, stud starters and a certain swagger. But the Indians' meant-to-be matchup with the Astros in last year's AL Championship Series never came to be, because they let a 2-0 lead to the Yankees wither away in the AL Division Series.

This year's ALDS was supposed to be a reckoning, a flipped switch after the slog of a season. With a date with the Astros (with the Red Sox running away with the No. 1 seed, and the A's rotation falling apart) looking inevitable, the Indians added to their bullpen, took a calculated gamble on former AL MVP Award winner Josh Donaldson and got healthier in September. They felt ready.

They wanted the defending champs. And, well, they got the defending champs.

Houston might be a better October team today than it was a year ago, which is a frightening thought. The Astros have traumatized the Tribe in the first two games of a best-of-five set that could end as soon as today at Progressive Field. In Games 1 and 2 at Minute Maid Park, the Astros put a strikeout-laden stranglehold on a Tribe lineup that statistically was the toughest to K in 2018, and they battered Cleveland's key bullpen arms and staff ace Corey Kluber.

"We need to figure out a way to beat them," said Indians manager Terry Francona, "because the first two games, they've really kind of had their way with us. We need to change that."

So how do the Indians regroup, regroup and put themselves in the extreme statistical minority by making something of this series?

Here are five ways:

1. Try to win one game in one day, not three

Start with the most basic of baseball mantras: One game at a time. That's rudimentary, but most teams in Cleveland's position either lay down and die, or try too hard to get it all back in a day.

All told, 27 clubs have returned home in a best-of-five DS when facing an 0-2 hole. Just three of those clubs went on to win the series, and only 11 forced a Game 4 (and only four of those 11 were able to force a Game 5).

The Indians had a frustrating firsthand view of the framework for such a big, rare bounceback. Remember: The Yanks took Game 3 at home in 2017, and not by unloading their frustrations in some lopsided affair. They squeaked by with a 1-0 win, with the key moment coming when the 6-foot-7 Aaron Judge reached over the right-field wall to rob Francisco Lindor of a home run.

"If Judge is 6-foot-1 instead of 6-foot-9," Francona exaggerated, "we probably win Game 3."

The lesson? Get a taller right fielder.

Well, OK, if you can't follow that particular lesson, follow this one: Don't forget how one galvanizing moment can create even the slightest sliver of doubt in the mind of your opponent. That matters.

2. Take advantage of life after Verlander and Cole

Houston's Game 3 starter Dallas Keuchel and potential Game 4 starter Charlie Morton could capably front an October rotation. They're great.

But after what Justin Verlander and Gerrit Cole just did to this team, any stylistic shift ought to be embraced by the Indians with open arms.

Keuchel thrives primarily by killing worms (53.7-percent ground-ball rate) with his sinker and limiting hard contact and walks, and his improvement in the second half was in part due to improved feel for his changeup. Morton, who has recently battled a right shoulder issue, has elite four-seam velocity akin to Cole's (96.1 mph, on average), but he uses the pitch far less frequently and is less likely to challenge Cleveland hitters with it up in the zone.

The Indians crush fastballs (of all varieties) in the lower two-thirds and below the zone. Their .532 slugging percentage on such pitches was, per Statcast™, second only to that of the Yankees (.535). And there will be more opportunities against such pitches with Keuchel or Morton on the mound.

3. Get Frankie going

The leadoff role is important in any offense. And when the leadoff hitter happens to be just the fourth player in history with at least 25 steals, 35 homers, 40 doubles and 125 runs in a single season, that importance is outsized.

Save for one big swing on a Cole slider (and we're not dismissing the impressiveness of that poke, because it was literally the only damage done off Cole), Lindor has been kept quiet by the Astros' arms thus far in this series. Lindor is a bit more susceptible to right-handed pitching, in general, and especially right-handed pitchers who can command the fastball up in the zone.

Keuchel presents a more Lindor-friendly profile. Lindor has fantastic numbers against lefties (.343/.423/.583), and amazing numbers against changeups (his 20 extra-base hits against the pitch were the most by any player since 2006, according to Sports Info Solutions). Lindor can't do it all on his own (Nos. 2-5 hitters Michael Brantley, Jose Ramirez, Edwin Encarnacion and Donaldson have been essentially invisible, and Ramirez's struggles stretch back a month and a half), but he will be in a better position to generate traffic and opportunity in Game 3 than he was in Games 1 and 2. That's a start.

4. Beat Ryan Pressly

Astros manager AJ Hinch has made it clear that Pressly is his go-to bridge guy in this loaded bullpen, and why wouldn't he be? In 25 2/3 innings with Houston, Pressly has struck out 35 of the 92 batters he's faced and allowed just two runs on 11 hits with four walks. It's hard to imagine a scenario in which Cleveland escapes these damning odds without overcoming Pressly at least once.

How do you do that right now? Uh, I have no idea, honestly. But back when Pressly was with the Twins earlier this season, the Tribe beat him on June 3 with a couple of walks and an Encarnacion homer that erased a 3-1 deficit. So... I guess, just do that again!

5. Startering

"Bullpenning" was an October approach of the A's and Brewers, but the Indians have to do things differently. Cody Allen looks unusable right now, Andrew Miller had absolutely no feel for his slider in Game 2 (rendering moot much of the optimism associated with his September return from a shoulder issue), and while Brad Hand has been a fantastic in-season addition, the Astros' right-handed-heavy lineup is not an ideal matchup for him to provide multi-inning relief.

The X-factor is the same as it ever was. Can Trevor Bauer effectively piggyback the starter?

Francona's use of Bauer arguably came two innings too late in Game 1 and three batters too late in Game 2. It goes without saying that Cleveland needs a strong start from Mike Clevinger today, and the key to Clevinger's 2018 rise up the ERA leaderboard (further development of the slider) profiles well against a Houston lineup that was middle-of-the-pack in batting average (.213) and slugging percentage (.354) against right-handed sliders this season.

But if the moment comes to go to the bullpen in a close game, Bauer needs to be prioritized in a way he wasn't in Games 1 or 2. Heck, at this stage, you can't rule out the possibility of Kluber coming out of the 'pen, even though he clearly wasn't at his sharpest in Game 1. There's no way the Indians are going to survive this thing without improvement from actual relievers, and using Bauer in Game 3 takes him out of the running for the Game 4 start. But get the outs in front of you first and worry about the rest later.

Indians notebook: Trevor Bauer gets positive reviews from first outing since coming off disabled list

By Ryan Lewis

CLEVELAND: For the first time in quite a while, Trevor Bauer felt like a little kid again, anxious and excited with nerves.

That was Thursday night, on the eve of Bauer's return from the disabled list. He started Friday's game against the Boston Red Sox, throwing 34 pitches and getting four outs before walking off to a standing ovation. Bauer was on a strict pitch limit in his first outing back from a stress fracture in his right fibula.

"I couldn't really sleep [Thursday] night. I had a good bit of adrenaline," Bauer said. "Generally, I sleep pretty well the night before a start, so it was kind of cool to be like a little kid again and looking forward to the tournament on the weekend, or the big game coming up on Saturday, or whatever the case is."

The reviews were all positive. Bauer allowed two hits, walked one and struck out one.

"I mean, all things considered, I thought that was at the higher end of expectations," manager Terry Francona said. "He had pretty good velocity. He didn't command like he will, but I thought he looked pretty damn good. Probably more importantly, he felt good."

Bauer's command actually topped what he was expecting as a pitcher who sometimes needs time to regain his feel.

"Generally, after a long layoff, I spray balls everywhere," Bauer said. "I was at least somewhat around the plate [Friday night]. So, I definitely was happy with that. Stuff was better than it was in live [batting practice] and I would expect that to be better again next time."

That next time will be Tuesday's start, in which he's scheduled to throw 60-65 pitches.

Brandon Guyer has played sparingly recently due to a right shoulder issue, according to Francona. Guyer sat out three games prior to Thursday, then he appeared in two consecutive games but only played seven combined innings. He was pulled midway through Friday night's game.

Francona said on Saturday that head athletic trainer James Quinlan only wanted Guyer to play half a game.

"Just because his shoulder had been barking a little bit," Francona said. "He hadn't played in about five days, they just thought it would be — instead of going nine, I don't want to say ease him, but just seemed to make sense."

Up and down

Following a mechanical adjustment in which he focused on getting the ball out of his glove a split-second earlier in his delivery, Cody Allen seems to be on the right path. He, too, has been used sparingly recently.

Allen hasn't allowed an earned run in September but also has just one appearance since Sept. 12. The Indians have been monitoring his workload now that he has his delivery issues worked out.

"He's gonna throw a bullpen [session] and he'll be ready to pitch for us," Francona said. "I'll be really glad when we can just go out and try and win a game and not, you know, do half the game and this guy is available, this guy's not."

A look at the key sixth inning that led to the Indians' Game 2 loss

Beacon Journal/Ohio.com

HOUSTON— The Indians took a one-run lead in Saturday's American League Division Series Game 2 in Houston before their hopes of tying the series crumbled.

That happened in the sixth inning, when the Astros rallied to take a 2-1 lead en route to a 3-1 win that put the Indians one loss away from elimination. That inning had two key decisions, and in both cases the Indians made the choice they wanted even with hindsight as an option.

The first decision was Josh Donaldson's.

The Astros' Jose Altuve tapped a ball down the third-base line leading off against starter Carlos Carrasco. Altuve tripped trying to get out of the batter's box, and the ball rolled right along the foul line, leaving its destination unknown. Altuve can fly down the line, but the trip had stalled his takeoff. So Donaldson decided to charge the grounder and fire to first, but his throw was high and offline.

Having a runner on first forced Carrasco to pitch out of the stretch, and he then walked Alex Bregman to put the go-ahead run on base, which came back to bite the Indians.

For Donaldson, it was an in-between play. Normally, a player as fast as Altuve forces a third baseman to see where the ball ends up, leaving the play up to fate. Since Altuve tripped, Donaldson went for the out, which would have been a massive one considering the game situation, instead of allowing Altuve to step back into the box as one of the toughest outs in baseball.

"Normal circumstances, he got out of the box well, I let it go every time," Donaldson said. "But with the circumstances, I feel right now I'd still make the play. I would just make a better throw. I felt like if I made the throw, it's an easy out."

Decision No. 2

The next decision was manager Terry Francona's. After a line-drive out and two runners on, Francona had three options. The first was to stick with Carrasco, who to that point had blanked the Astros over 5 1/3 innings.

The counterpoint to leaving Carrasco in at that point is twofold. First, Marwin Gonzalez, who was coming up to bat, was 2-for-2 in the game against Carrasco. More important, Carrasco had also just allowed a single, walked a hitter and then gave up some hard contact to Yuli Gurriel, who rifled a ball to left field where Michael Brantley just happened to be waiting.

The combination of single-walk-hard contact, while holding a one-run lead and Gonzalez coming up on a day in which he had found some success was enough for Francona to pull the trigger for the bullpen.

At that point, Francona could have brought in Trevor Bauer, who has been the Indians' best pitcher all season and had appeared to be mostly sharp in his recent outings. The Indians have been wanting to get him some work regardless. But, it wasn't the matchup the Indians liked the most, statistically.

So Francona went with option No. 3, taking Carrasco out of the game and bringing in left-hander Andrew Miller. Batter-versus-pitcher matchup stats can be finicky, and sometimes should be taken with a grain of salt. In this case, Gonzalez entered Saturday with seven career at-bats against Miller, and he had one hit and had struck out five times.

It's not a huge sample size, but it's also a pretty severe case.

"With a one-run lead, and with Gonzalez coming up the way he had swung the bat against him prior and Andrew's history, I felt really good about it. Didn't work out the way we obviously planned," Francona said. "No, we wanted Andrew. That's what we wanted right there."

The rest is history. Gonzalez slashed a two-run double to right field — which wasn't helped by Melky Cabrera misplaying the ball and allowing the second run to score — and the Astros went on to win and take a commanding 2-0 lead in the series.

In the Indians' case, Game 2 was lost more on execution than the decisions made. Against the Astros, even the right path can lead to an unwanted destination.

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When it rains, it pours: Cleveland Indians facing elimination Monday against Astros in Game 3 of ALDS

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com phoynes@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -The Indians even lost the plane ride home.

The Houston Astros' charter flight landed at Hopkins International Airport on Saturday night. They collected their bags, boarded their buses and headed for the team hotel without a hitch.

The Indians' charter flight packed with owners, players, coaches, wives and families landed a bit later. When they got off the plane and were waiting for their bags at plane side, a rain storm hit, drenching a band of weary travelers and ballplayers.

So, Houston is really up, 3-0, in the ALDS. They won Game 1 and Game 2 of the best of five series in convincing fashion at Minute Maid Park. And they won the plane ride.

One more win in Game 3 on Monday afternoon at Progressive Field and the Indians' 2018 season is over. For good and forever.

Mike Clevinger will start for the Indians at 1:30 p.m. at Progressive Field. Houston will counter with left-hander Dallas Keuchel.

The situation is so dire that Clevinger, not prone to cliches, had to go with a "our backs are against the wall" comment during his meeting with the media on Sunday afternoon. The way the Astros have handled the Indians the first two games, they've driven their backs halfway through the way, not against it.

"The biggest vibe from this team is that we can leave it on the field," said Clevinger, "because we know this could be our last game if we don't show up. If anything, everyone is going to leave what they have out there, and that's going to be good to see at home."

Forget leaving it on the field. How about just having two or three batters string together consecutive hits? How about a sign of life from Jose Ramirez or anyone else? Ramirez is 0-for-7, but the only batter with more than one hit is Francisco Lindor. There are a lot of holes that need to be filled in the lineup if the Indians are going to play past Monday.

Yonder Alonso is 0-for-6, Michael Brantley is 1-for-7, Melky Cabrera is 1-for-6, Josh Donaldson is 0-for-8, Edwin Encarnacion is 1-for-7, Yan Gomes is 1-for-5. They've struck out 24 times and scored three runs.

"Speaking for myself, they've made some pretty good pitches, no question about that," said Alonso, who will not start against Keuchel on Monday. "When they've made some mistakes, we haven't been able to capitalize on them. Come playoff time, in these situations, you have to realize that when they make a mistake, you have to make them pay."

As for what Tribe's options are in Game 3, Alonso gave the answer anyone would give.

"We've got to win," he said. "We've got to win. We've got to put pressure on them. We have our fans behind us and we're ready to get them excited."

When the Indians lost Game 1 on Friday, 7-2, they were already in serious trouble. Since the LDS went a 2-2-1 formula, the team that wins the first game has gone on to win the series, 75 percent of the time.

The odds are even worse now, just don't tell manager Terry Francona.

"It seems silly to waste time trying to do addition or multiplication or whatever it is that I probably can't do," he said. "It doesn't matter. The first team to win three gets to move on. It's a little easier to do if you don't put yourself in a hole, but I've been on both sides of it. I've come back from being down. Been up two and lost. You've got to get to three."

It's not only the players who feel the heat when their postseason is threatened with an earlier than anticipated end. In Saturday's Game 3 loss, Francona's moves in the sixth inning did not work out. He replaced Carlos Carrasco, who had one out, two on and a 1-0 lead, with lefty Andrew Miller to face Marwin Gonzalez. Carrasco had thrown only 77 pitches, but Gonzalez already had two hits against him.

Gonzalez was 1-for-8 with six strikeouts against Miller, but he lined his second pitch to the wall in right field as Houston took a 2-1 lead it never gave up. Should Francona have stayed with Carrasco, should he have brought in Trevor Bauer instead of Miller?

Francona said no. He wanted Miller to face Gonzalez. Said Miller, "I blew the game for us."

Encarnacion walked with two out in the ninth. Some felt Francona should have pinch-ran for him. If Encarnacion was the tying run, no question Francona would have used Rajai Davis or Greg Allen to pinch run. But the Indians were down, 3-1, so he was not the tying run.

Before the start of the ALDS started, Francona explained his in-game decision making process.

"You do what you think is right," he said. "You answer the questions, be confident enough in what you're doing and move on. Because if you win, that's what you showed up to do."

"If you don't, be confident enough in what you're doing, explain it, then move on."

One way or the other, after Monday's game, Francona and the Indians will have some explaining to do.

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ALDS Game 3 pitching matchup: Houston Astros LHP Dallas Keuchel vs. Cleveland Indians RHP Mike Clevinger

By Joe Noga, cleveland.com jnoga@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Houston sent a pair of flamethrowers to the mound against Cleveland in games 1 and 2 of the American League Division Series, and the Indians had trouble catching up to the heat. In Game 3, Indians hitters will have to adjust to a different kind of speed altogether.

Sinker-balling lefty Dallas Keuchel gets the start Monday for manager A.J. Hinch after Houston received dominant efforts from both Justin Verlander and Gerrit Cole in two games at Minute Maid Park.

Keuchel (12-10, 3.74) will be making his ninth career postseason appearance (eighth start). In last year's playoffs, he went 2-2 with a 3.58 ERA and 32 strikeouts in five starts as the Astros won their first World Series championship.

Mike Clevinger (13-8, 3.02) will be making his seventh playoff appearance and first career start for the Indians. He does not have a postseason decision, but has an ERA of 6.43 with nine walks and six strikeouts in six relief appearances. Clevinger made two relief appearances in last year's ALDS against the New York Yankees allowing two earned runs in 1 1/3 innings with three strikeouts.

The Astros are hitting .349 against Clevinger in two starts this season (both Indians losses) with two home runs, two doubles and 10 strikeouts. He pitched well in a May 18 start at Houston, striking out six in 6 1/3 innings. Yuli Gurriel has four hits in nine at-bats against Clevinger (.444) while Alex Bregman and George Springer each have hit home runs.

Game 3 starter Mike Clevinger prepares to face Houston

Keuchel represents a departure from the power arms that Houston has thrown against Cleveland in the first two games of the series. His average four-seam fastball velocity is 89.6 mph according to Fangraphs.com. He relies on location and his sinker on the outside part of the strike zone to keep hitters off balance.

Keuchel led AL starting pitchers in soft contact rate (22.4 percent) and gave up the lowest percentage of hard contact in the league at 28.1 percent.

Cleveland is hitting .304 against Keuchel in two starts this season with a home run, six doubles and eight strikeouts. Jose Ramirez has four hits in eight at-bats against Keuchel (.500) while Michael Brantley has a home run.

Indians manager Terry Francona said Keuchel presents a challenge because he can short-circuit rallies with his ability to induce ground balls.

"He can sink that ball arm side and off of that throw his changeup," Francona said. "You have to stay true to what you believe against him, because you're always one pitch away from him getting out of a rally because he can sink it so low."

Keuchel is a workhorse, tying for the lead in the AL with 34 starts and tossing 200 innings for the third time in his career. He led the majors in groundball to flyball ratio (2.58) and groundball rate (54.7 percent) while ranking ninth in the AL in fWAR (3.6). In his last 20 starts Keuchel went 9-3 with a 3.23 ERA, including 13 quality starts.

Clevinger ended the regular season on a strong run, going 6-3 with a 2.31 ERA in 13 second-half starts. He set career highs in wins (13), starts (32), innings pitched (200), strikeouts (207) and WHIP (1.15). Clevinger also notched a career-best 21 quality starts, third-most in the AL.

Hinch said Clevinger mixes his secondary pitches nicely, as Corey Kluber and Carlos Carrasco did before him, but he also brings a good four-seam fastball that he uses up in the strike zone more than his teammates.

"He just has a different style, and he handles left-handed hitters a little differently than right-handed hitters," Hinch said. "He pitches with a ton of energy and a ton of emotion, as opposed to maybe a little more stoic first couple starters for them."

Clevinger said Houston's ability to capitalize on mistake pitches stands out when preparing a game plan to pitch against the Astros lineup.

"You don't see a lineup top to bottom really be able to do that every time you make a mistake," Clevinger said. "Honing in on two-strike pitches and really paying attention to how you're setting them up, I think, is going to be a big key."

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Baseball Bob, 72, still plays and has this advice for Tribe: Relax and enjoy

By Michael K. McIntyre mmcintyre@plaind.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio - For so many baseball fans, some of whom are only fans when the Indians are in the postseason as they are now, the games bring back long-ago memories of the sandlot, rubbing infield dirt on your hands and jumping on fastballs when you're ahead in the count.

Baseball has that effect on Bob Leech of Seven Hills, who isn't just a fan during the postseason and isn't just an Indians fan. He's known to many as "Baseball Bob."

"For us older guys, it brings back the kid in us," the 72-year-old told me last week. "Putting your spikes on, stepping onto the grass, oiling your glove, the sound of a bat, a wood bat, smacking a ball."

He's not digging deep into the memory banks for that one. Not thinking back to his days at Lincoln High School in Cleveland, or The Plain Dealer AAA league where he faced future big leaguers. He's not thinking back to his six years in the U.S. Army where his job was to play on the Army baseball team.

He's thinking two weeks ago, when he tore the cover off the ball and pitched in an all-ages tournament in Cooperstown. And he's thinking about next month, when he is to play in the Roy Hobbs World Series in Fort Myers, Fla., in the 60-and over, 65-and-over, and 70 and over divisions.

Leech, like so many fans, will watch from the family room when the Indians play the Houston Astros this afternoon in Game 3 of the American League Division Series at Progressive Field. But he has tickets Tuesday and is planning to watch Game 4 from the stands at Progressive Field.

He's pulling for them to accomplish what's eluded the Tribe since Bob was just a toddler in 1948 - a World Series victory.

"To see the Indians do it would be the greatest thing that's ever happened in this city. Cleveland would be radiating so brilliantly, we would shine throughout the world," he said. "I think I'd go bananas, really. It's been so long."

He knows what he's talking about. He has attended a game in 39 different World Series in his lifetime. And, here's his major character flaw, he has celebrated loudly after some of them, the most recent in 2009. Because of his childhood idol Mickey Mantle, Leech, who grew up in sight of the steel mills on West 7th Street, is a Yankees fan.

"I'm a baseball fan, first and foremost," he said, sitting in a small office stuffed with mind-blowing memorabilia collected over his lifetime. Dozens of signed baseballs - Mickey Mantle, Bob Feller, Joe DiMaggio, Stan Musial. Enough genuine game-used bats, including a Lou Gehrig bat, to ring the room. Bobbleheads and ticket stubs and various other pieces of nostalgia.

But, come on, a Cleveland kid who also loves the Yankees?

His wife Marilyn, who stood in the doorway because "I get the hives" due to the dust and clutter of his mini museum, tried to help.

"We just got back from a trip, and he wore his Indians coat and his Yankees hat," she said.

Leech is retired now. He was a salesman who worked at The Plain Dealer, and then a number of sign companies including Brilliant Signs. He served on Seven Hills City Council for 26 years, 18 as president. He spent 52 years selling programs at Browns games and worked as an attendant for 12 years starting in 1974 in the visitor's clubhouse for the Indians, where players might take a liking to you and leave a bat or sign a ball.

Now, he umpires high school baseball and fast-pitch softball games, as well as refereeing volleyball and basketball games. And this after recovering three years ago from an injury that left half his body paralyzed and hospitalized him for three months when a 14-year-old ballplayer took a practice swing as Leech, who was umpiring, was walking by.

"He took me out!" Leech said. He was back on the field as soon as he healed. He plays -- hardball, not softball -- in a league where games are three times a week, plus a bunch of tournaments. Maybe 75 games a year.

Two weeks ago at a tournament at Abner Doubleday Field in Cooperstown, N.Y., hitting fourth behind his son Mickey (told you he loves Mantle), Leech gathered more RBIs than any player (nine) and the best on-base percentage thanks to 10 walks.

He attributes his keen eye and switch-hitting prowess to the batting cage set up in his backyard for 28 years, where he worked on his swing in his free time and helped his own kids -- Mickey, 49, Christine, 42, Bobby, 40 -- become accomplished switch-hitters. He also taught hundreds of local children how to make solid contact.

"I'd give their dad a beer and sit him on the patio and say, 'Take notes if you want, but don't say anything for the next hour,'" he said.

What would he tell the Indians now?

"They're pros. There's nothing I can say that they don't know," he said, before coming up with something anyway. "If you relax and you enjoy the moment, you will always play better. You'll hit the ball, you'll throw that pitch thinking 'that sucker ain't gonna touch it.' You just gotta relax and enjoy it."

Good advice for fans, too.

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Cleveland Indians will try to stave off elimination at home against Houston's road warriors

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com phoynes@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio - The Indians are going to need all the help they can get on Monday to beat Houston and avoid a three-game sweep in the ALDS.

The fact that Game 3 will be played at Progressive Field is a start. The Indians lost the first two games of the best-of-five series at Minute Maid Park in Houston. During the regular season they were a much better team at home (49-32) than on the road (42-39).

"They're played pretty much perfect baseball up to this point." said Tribe third baseman Josh Donaldson. "We've had a couple of mistakes in the first couple of games. Now it's our time to respond. We get to play at home now in front of our fans and get something going early and often."

The Astros certainly will have something to say about that. They won 103 games during the regular season and 57 of those wins came on the road. Their road record of 57-24 was the best in the big leagues.

When asked why the Astros played so well on the road, manager A.J. Hinch told reporters during Sunday's workout at Progressive Field, "Because we're good. Not to be cocky about it, but we're a good team. . . We don't care where we play. Pick a building anywhere in the country and I'll bring this team and feel good about it."

"Wearing the gray pants is good. We like hitting first. I don't have an answer as to why. But I'll take this team anywhere."

Houston split a four-game series this season at Progressive Field.

Indians shortstop Francisco Lindor, in particular, liked hitting at Progressive Field this year. During the regular season he hit .304 (97-for-319) with 72 runs, 20 homers and 50 RBI at home. On the road, he hit .251 (86-for-342) with 18 homers and 42 RBI.

Lineup change: Houston will start lefty Dallas Keuchel against Mike Clevinger on Monday in Game 3 at 1:30 p.m.

Manager Terry Francona said he'll start Yandy Diaz at DH, move Edwin Encarnacion to first and start Brandon Guyer in right field. The moves mean Melky Cabrera and Yonder Alonso will be on the bench. Alonso and Cabrera are a combined 1-for-12 in the series.

It will be the first starts of the series for Guyer and Diaz. Guyer hit .233 (24-for-103) with five homers and 17 RBI against lefties during the season. He's hitting .400 (6-for-15) against Keuchel in his career.

Diaz is hitting .289 (13-for-45) with six RBI against lefties this year. He has never faced Keuchel.

Order of the day: Francona says the Indians, facing elimination if they lose Game 3, have a simple goal Monday.

"We need to figure out a way to beat Houston," he said, "because the first two games, they've really kind of had their way with us. We need to change that.

"I'd rather be up 2-0 than down 2-0, but it's still the first one to three wins. And I'd rather have a chance than no chance."

He added that Monday "all hands will be on deck" in regard to pitching. Should the Indians force a Game 4, Francona said that Trevor Bauer or Shane Bieber would probably start.

"I know on Saturday, (Corey) Kluber asked if should go to the bullpen," said Francona. "It's that time of year where guys want to help."

Kluber started and lost Game 1 on Friday.

Enjoy the ride: Michael Brantley, like several other Indians, will become a free agent after the World Series. He has spent his entire big-league career in Cleveland and has made a point to enjoy the season.

"When you go through, almost a two-year rehab, you don't always know that you're going to come back," said Brantley. "Every day that I can be with my teammates, that I'm healthy enough to be in that lineup, where I can joke around and know that I'm going to be in left field, I'm very appreciative of that.

"I don't take it for granted. You never know when it could be your last game or what can happen throughout the day."

No secret: The Indians confirmed over the weekend that right-hander Julian Merryweather is the player to be named headed to Toronto to complete the Aug. 31st trade for Donaldson. Merryweather has been on the disabled list all season since undergoing Tommy John surgery on his right elbow in spring training.

Merryweather was a fifth-round pick by the Indians in 2014.

Finally: Clevinger picked off six runners during the regular season. He ranked second in the AL. It's the most pickoffs by a Tribe pitcher since Tom Candiotti and Greg Swindell had six each in 1989. . . This is the Indians 10th appearance in the ALDS, third most behind the Yankees (21) and Boston (13). They entered Game 2 with a 56-51 record in the postseason overall.

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7 things to know before the Indians fight for their playoff lives

By T.J. Zuppe 1h ago 6

CLEVELAND — In the hours leading up to Game 7 of the 2016 World Series, Terry Francona sat on a stage overlooking the press interview room in the lower level of Progressive Field. He cracked open a small orange Gatorade just as the first question was tossed his way by a reporter in the front row.

“Would you call this a must-win game?” the writer asked sarcastically.

Francona nearly fell out of his chair in laughter.

“I never would have thought I’d see the day that you’d bring levity to my day,” the manager responded, howling in approval.

However, as fate would have it, the Cubs would later secure the last laugh.

That “must-win” would evade the Indians for a 68th consecutive year.

Surrounded by a much smaller group of local reporters and media — fewer standup comics this time — Francona sat in nearly the same position on Sunday afternoon, but the giggles that accompanied the lack of hyperbole two years ago were absent — even if the joke applies just as much today.

With the Indians trailing the Astros in the best-of-five ALDS series 0-2, the tone during Sunday’s workout at Progressive Field was far more business-like. The answers were short, sweet and a little predictable, just as you’d expect after being thoroughly outplayed in the first two games of the playoff series.

Baseball is a game built on the immediate chance for redemption, but there will be no “tomorrow” without victories in each of their next three games. And if any of the must-wins ahead escape their grasp, it will mark the third consecutive season in which their playoff campaign ends in extreme disappointment on their home turf.

“Right now, we want to get to Game 4,” Francona said. “It may take all hands on deck to get there.”

With that in mind, let’s examine what we know of the plan ahead.

Who is available in Game 3?

Uhh, if you’re planning to attend Monday’s game, bring a glove.

Mike Clevinger will start. From there, they could toss it all — kitchen sink included.

With the exception of Carlos Carrasco, who threw 77 pitches in Game 2, essentially every pitcher could be called upon to record an out or two. Even Corey Kluber, the ace who left many scratching their heads after a rotten Game 1 performance, had asked the coaching staff whether he should join the rest of the pitchers in the bullpen over the weekend.

Ultimately, if they think anyone on the staff can help ensure a Game 4, they won’t hesitate.

“You get into these situations, and it’s kind of all hands on deck,” Francona said. “You do whatever you can to help.”

So, who would pitch Game 4 if the Indians win?

Shrug emoji

No, really.

Francona indicated it would come down to either Trevor Bauer or Shane Bieber, but they won’t hesitate to signal for Bauer for a third consecutive game. And they shouldn’t, particularly given the struggles of Cody Allen in Game 1 and Andrew Miller in Game 2.

Beyond Brad Hand, Francona is currently a little thin in the known commodity department. So, while Bauer hasn’t been perfect in each of the Tribe’s losses in the series, he’s offered enough — the velocity looks good, his breaking balls have shown bite — to earn Francona’s faith.

If they use Bauer in victory, Bieber would likely slide into the starter position for Game 4, and the process begins again.

That’d be a hell of a way to make a playoff debut — postseason life at stake — but Bieber has battled a little extra adrenaline in almost every appearance this year.

“It feels like every start for me this year has felt like a first,” the rookie said. “Whether it was a first against the Yankees, first at Fenway, first career start or whatever it may be. I suspect this will be a little bit different, maybe be a little more exciting with a lot more on the line.”

When is the soonest Carrasco would be available in relief?

Francona said Game 4 might be “pushing it,” but that’d be the “soonest” we’d see him trot out of the center-field bullpen.

The plan all along was for Carrasco to be available in a Game 5 situation — in fact, it seems like they almost anticipated using him out of the bullpen if they got there — but given the limited pitch count in Game 2, it's plausible he could likely toss an inning or two on just two days' rest.

Carrasco was dominant into the sixth inning Saturday, recording three strikeouts and generating 11 ground ball outs before the quick hook led to the Astros' go-ahead rally. It felt risky to pull him at the time, and with the benefit of hindsight, perhaps Game 2 plays out differently had Francona left Carrasco in to deal with his own one-out jam.

If Clevinger and Bauer shoulder a large load in a Game 3 win, it's fair to ponder whether Carrasco could play a similar role with Bieber in Game 4.

How is Mike Clevinger handling the stress of starting a must-win game?

A few short years ago, Clevinger paced back and forth with nervous energy before throwing to hitters in spring training. He puked before his first career start in Cincinnati.

In September, in the midst of a start against the Red Sox while chasing his 200th strikeout of the season, he walked five, battling a little extra adrenaline.

The long-haired hurler has never been one to operate in complete control of his emotions.

But his herky-jerky delivery and energetic movements on the mound have become almost endearing, and there's no debating how well he pitched over the final two months, posting a 2.17 ERA and using a late-season adjustment to add more velocity to his fastball.

He's a different pitcher from the last two times he appeared in the postseason, but how he'll handle the pressure is as mysterious as his theories an alternate universes and parallel dimensions.

"Our backs are against the wall," Clevinger said. "But, I mean, we can leave it on the field. We know that this could be our last game if we don't show up."

What about a Game 5 scenario?

Ha!

It's really impossible to say how they'd handle a do-or-die game back in Houston because we have currently have no idea how the series returned to Minute Maid.

Were each of the games in Cleveland nail-biters? Was every pitcher on the staff used, including Kluber? Were they routs? When did Bauer pitch? How often?

There's too much on their plate to even piece together a plan now.

Win. And then deal with the consequences. If that means creating a new challenge in a potential Game 5, so be it. With the offense struggling, can we expect any lineup changes in Game 3?

Perhaps Francona would have considered a few changes regardless, but the presence of left-handed starter Dallas Keuchel will shift Yandy Díaz into the lineup for a struggling Yonder Alonso.

Alonso has been in a funk to begin his first postseason — he's 0-for-6 with four strikeouts (not that others have fared much better). Díaz, while getting a lot of playing time against left-handers over the final month, posted a .305/.395/.441 slash line in September. That's worth a look.

How Díaz matches up against the sinker-tossing Keuchel should be fascinating (it will be a bad day for worms residing in the Progressive Field infield).

On top of the Díaz addition at DH, Edwin Encarnacion will shift to first base and Brandon Guyer is projected to slide into the starting lineup for Melky Cabrera.

Francona has used similar lineups against lefties this season, so those decisions aren't necessarily a reaction to their lowly hit total. That said, a shakeup of any sort felt necessary — and the lack of Justin Verlander and Gerrit Cole might be the largest positive factor.

And if it all ends Monday afternoon?

It would mark just the second time the Indians have ever been swept in a postseason series — the first being their World Series loss to the Giants in 1954.

More important, it would justify every concern weaknesses we saw emerge throughout the regular season.

It would confirm those skeptical of the bullpen and offense. It would fuel silly narratives about Kluber's sudden inability to pitch in the postseason. It would add some serious questions about how they'd improve upon a strong core that still needs more support.

What a rotten way to spend a perfectly good October afternoon.

"I'd rather be up 2-0 than down 2-0, but it's still the first one to get to three," Francona said. "So, rather than spend a ton of time thinking about all that, we need to figure out a way to beat them. Because the first two games, they've really kind of had their way with us. We need to change that."

ALDS: Indians need 'Sunshine' ... Mike Clevinger ... to provide a ray of hope against Astros

Chris Assenheimer | **Chris Assenheimer** | **The Chronicle-Telegram** | **Published on Oct. 8, 2018** | **Updated 6:22 a. m.**

CLEVELAND — Perhaps it's fitting that right-hander Mike Clevinger will be on the mound for the Indians today as they fight for their postseason lives.

Thus far in the Division Series against the defending World Series champion Houston Astros, there's been no sunshine for Cleveland.

Clevinger, aka "Sunshine," is scheduled to square off against 2015 Cy Young award winner Dallas Keuchel in his first career postseason start with the Indians facing elimination — down 2-0 to an Astros team that has outplayed them in every facet.

"I mean, we're definitely ... our backs are against the wall," Clevinger said. "But I think the biggest vibe (with our team) is we can leave it on the field because, I mean, we know that this could be our last game if we don't show up. If anything, everyone is going to leave what they have out there, and that's going to be good to see at home."

The Indians are facing elimination because a lineup laden with former All-Stars at every position has all but been shut down by a Houston pitching staff that has limited them to three runs and six hits — three in each of the first two games at Minute Maid Park.

Cleveland's batting .100 (6-for-60) as a team, with its big guns — Francisco Lindor (2-for-8), Jose Ramirez (0-for-7), Michael Brantley (1-for-7), Edwin Encarnacion (1-for-7) and Josh Donaldson (0-for-8) — doing next to nothing.

Lindor has at least shown a little life, collecting one of the Indians' hits in a 7-2 Game 1 loss, and accounting for the only run in a 3-1 Game 2 defeat with a solo home run in the third inning.

Outside of Game 2 starter Carlos Carrasco, briefly, Cleveland's pitching hasn't been that much better.

Ace and two-time Cy Young award winner Corey Kluber was rocked in the series opener, allowing three runs on three homers, while failing to last five innings, while Andrew Miller melted down in a horrendous outing Saturday in the second game.

Cody Allen allowed a solo homer in the Game 1 loss, and though he got them out of a jam Saturday, the Indians' so-called weapon out of the bullpen, Trevor Bauer, has surrendered runs in each of his appearances.

And now, Cleveland is turning to Clevinger, who had a breakout performance this season as a sequel to an impressive rookie year, reaching 200 innings and joining Kluber, Bauer and Carrasco to give Cleveland the first MLB foursome with 200-plus strikeouts.

But his six career postseason appearances have all come in a relief role.

"I think whatever you throw at Clev, he'll be OK," Francona said. "I think when you know what's in front of you, you can certainly prepare."

A lack of hitting and pitching is a sure way to end any postseason run. So something has to change for the Indians or it's going to be an early October exit for the second straight year.

"I'd rather be up 2-0 than down 2-0, but it's still the first one to get to three," Francona said. "I'd rather have a chance than no chance. I understand that the odds start to go not in your favor. But (I've) been on both sides of this and come back and had people come back on us.

"So rather than spend a ton of time thinking about all that, we need to figure out a way to beat them, because the first two games, they've really kind of had their way with us. We need to change that."

In some twisted way, the Indians can use themselves as a reference to rally. They led the Yankees 2-0 in last year's Division Series before dropping the next three games.

"I think that's kind of been the trend of our team, too," Clevinger said. "We might have had some little, cold stretches where we weren't putting pieces together, but the second we got that good team win and that good roll, it seemed like no matter who came around us, we were going to beat them.

"So I think just getting that good team win at home could steamroll this into something special."

Indians notes: Jose Ramirez, MVP candidate in first half of season, still hitless in ALDS

CLEVELAND — Jose Ramirez's second-half slide has continued into the first two games of the Division Series.

Ramirez, a candidate to win the American League MVP award in the first half, is hitless in seven at-bats, striking out three times in two losses to the Astros at Minute Maid Park.

Ramirez, who hit .270 with 39 home runs, 105 RBIs and 34 stolen bases during the regular season, owned a .302 batting average, 29 homers and 70 RBIs at the All-Star break. But a significant second-half slump saw him bat .218 with only 10 homers and 35 RBIs — .174 over the final month.

Since hitting a combined .360 (14-for-39) in the 2016 ALDS and World Series, Ramirez has struggled on the postseason stage. He went 2-for-20 without an RBI in the ALDS loss to New York last year and is 2-for-27 with one RBI in his last seven playoff games.

Change-up

With left-hander Dallas Keuchel scheduled to start for Houston in Game 3 today, manager Terry Francona said he will tinker with his lineup.

Francona said Sunday he would start Brandon Guyer in right field, putting Melky Cabrera on the bench, and that Edwin Encarnacion would start at first base over Yonder Alonso. Yandy Diaz will make his first postseason appearance at DH.

"That's kind of what we've been doing, you know, the last six, eight weeks when everybody's healthy," Francona said of his lineup when facing a lefty.

Keuchel doesn't throw as hard as the first two pitchers Cleveland faced — Justin Verlander and Gerrit Cole — but the 2015 Cy Young award winner clearly presents another tough test for Indians hitters.

"Obviously different than the first two guys," Francona said. "One, he's left-handed and not the power pitcher that those two guys are. I think the best way to say it is he probably always feels like he's a pitch away from a double play.

"He can sink that ball arm side and off of that throw his change-up. You have to stay true to what you believe against him, because you're always one pitch away from him getting out of a rally because he can sink it so low."

Klub-not

Indians ace Corey Kluber's first five postseason starts were all but brilliant — three earned runs and 35 strikeouts over 30 1/3 inning, but the last four, beginning with Game 7 of the 2016 World Series, have far from followed the trend.

The two-time Cy Young award winner, who is a candidate to win his third this year after going 20-7 with a 2.89 ERA, has allowed 17 earned runs — nine homers — over only 15 innings.

Roundin' third

Former Indians slugger Travis Hafner is scheduled to throw out the ceremonial first pitch in Game 3 today. It's another former Cleveland player's turn, Ellis Burks, if there is a Game 4 on Tuesday.

Baseball | ALDS: Indians, down 2-0, search for answers

By Tom Withers The Associated Press

CLEVELAND — The Indians are very familiar with the postseason hole they're currently stuck in. They saw one just like it last October — from above.

At least they know it can be scaled.

But Cleveland's climb in this American League Division Series seems much steeper than just the 2-0 deficit it's facing after dropping the first two games in Houston. The defending World Series champion Astros have shown their exceptional pitching and depth while outplaying the swing-and-miss Indians in every facet of the game.

"They've played pretty much perfect baseball to this point," the Indians' Josh Donaldson said following Saturday's 3-1 loss. "We have had a couple mistakes the first couple games, and now, it's our time to respond."

Or another Cleveland baseball season will end before the leaves change colors.

Houston's in complete control.

Astros aces Justin Verlander and Gerrit Cole dominated Cleveland's hitters in Games 1 and 2 as Houston's pitchers combined on consecutive three-hitters. The Astros piled up 24 strikeouts against one of the league's most balanced lineups, which is batting a combined .100 in this ALDS. The Indians' offense was so anemic Saturday that they didn't have a single at-bat with a runner in scoring position.

If not for Francisco Lindor's solo homer, Cleveland would have been shut out.

But as bleak as things appear for the three-time AL Central champions, who will start Mike Clevinger in Game 3 on Monday against Dallas Keuchel, they only have to look back to last October for inspiration. As painful as that might be.

The Indians jumped out to what appeared to be a commanding 2-0 lead in the ALDS before the New York Yankees won three straight to advance, denying Cleveland a return trip to the World Series and extending the club's title drought to 70 years.

The Yankees paved the comeback trail. It's up to the Indians to follow it.

"It might be a little unfortunate that we know it can be done," said reliever Andrew Miller, who replaced starter Carlos Carrasco in the sixth inning and gave up Marwin Gonzalez's go-ahead, two-run double in Game 2. "We aren't giving up just yet."

History isn't on Cleveland's side, either. Of the teams to take a 2-0 lead at home in 2-2-1 format, 24 of 27 have gone on to win the series.

The Astros, though, are Cleveland's biggest problem.

Despite trailing 1-0 in Game 2 and having little success against Carrasco, Houston put together a rally that began innocently with star second baseman Jose Altuve reaching on an infield dribbler after he nearly fell on his face trying to exit the batter's box. Carrasco then walked Alex Bregman before getting Yuli Gurriel on a fly to left.

That's when Terry Francona turned to Miller, an October supernova two years ago when he nearly carried Cleveland to a World Series title. But the left-hander's second pitch was pounded into the right-field corner, where Melky Cabrera struggled to corral it as Altuve scored easily and Bregman slid home just ahead of a relay throw.

The Astros' lead was just 2-1, but with Cleveland's bats dormant, it felt like 12-1.

Francona didn't second-guess his decision to bring in Miller, but the left-hander's struggles this season might make him re-consider using him again. Cleveland has no margin for error, and Francona, who guided Boston to a 3-0 comeback in the 2004 ALCS, knows the Astros have few flaws.

"Part of why they're good is, obviously, their pitching, but they always push," he said. "They continue to push. And they put heat on you all the time. They have a lot of ways to beat you."

With expiring contract, Game 3 Astros starter Dallas Keuchel savors postseason

Chandler Rome

CLEVELAND — Before he grew the beard and befriended a city, Dallas Keuchel drugged in the darkest days of Astros history. He was a homegrown holdover from a losing era, among the prospects playing for a job while a new regime orchestrated a teardown.

Cleaning his locker on Sept. 30 became a rite of passage, even as signs of an organizational turnaround were palpable. The hollow feeling of spectating while 10 other teams chase a World Series title doesn't fade. Nor does beginning your major league career on two teams that lost 100 games.

All who remain from those torturous 2012 and 2013 seasons — Keuchel, Jose Altuve and Marwin Gonzalez — concur. Talk to any of them during this golden age, and each is quick to lend it the proper perspective only they can share.

"I'm just trying to enjoy myself as much as possible," Keuchel said Sunday, "because I know how short this ride can be. But how long it also could be as well."

Monday afternoon at Progressive Field, in perhaps his final month with the franchise, Keuchel can pitch the organization to the sixth League Championship Series of its 57-year history.

Free agency looms for the 30-year-old lefthander, uncertainty he acknowledges has lent more purpose to his seventh season in Houston.

"This season has been more meaningful, I think, just because it could potentially be my last," Keuchel said Sunday. "I've never taken for granted anything to this point with the Astros or my own career. You start to cherish the little things when, potentially, it could be ... you could be in a different spot next year."

Keuchel has grown from a middling seventh-round selection in an otherwise doomed 2009 draft class — just six of the Astros' 51 picks played in a major league game — to a Cy Young winner and unquestioned ace of a wild card-winning club.

Compartmentalizing an uncertain future with a present task at hand is difficult. Keuchel conceded as much Sunday. Pitching coach Brent Strom said this month the lefthander was "concerned about it" early in his season.

"But when you break it down, we've got 25 guys in there who are going to battle every day and trying to win another championship," Keuchel said. "So when you really think about it, it's just showing up to the park and enjoying yourself and making sure that you're doing everything you can to help those other guys out."

There came a point this season when Keuchel didn't feel he was. After his start against the Mariners on June 5, Keuchel's ERA was 4.45. He was 3-8, although he infamously proclaimed to reporters he "knew what 3-8 feels like, and this isn't it."

Problems were mental and tactical. He incorporated more four-seam fastballs and changeups while curtailing his predictable reliance on a cutter. In the ensuing 20 starts, he produced the fourth-best ERA among American League pitchers, finishing with a 12-11 record and 3.74 ERA for the regular season.

"He did all the work," manager A.J. Hinch said. "He did all the study. He takes meticulous care of his body. He prepared himself on a start-by-start basis, rather than try to carry a bunch of baggage from the first part of the season into the rest of the season."

Gone, too, was Keuchel's fixation on the future. He admitted Sunday he often peeked more at the starting pitcher he opposed — whether it be Corey Kluber or Luis Severino — than the lineup before him.

"I focused too much on the days ahead instead of the day that I needed to be present at," Keuchel said.

To right the ship, he said he "really kind of beared down and continued to just take it day by day and in between starts really work on what I wanted to do the next time out and was able to make a few more quality pitches there for a five-, 10-, 15-start stretch."

Keuchel can extend that Monday. Justin Verlander and Gerrit Cole preceded him with masterpieces. The Indians struck one extra-base hit against them in 121/3 innings. A rested bullpen and proficient defense back the contact-centric southpaw, too, should he encounter trouble.

"He's a professional," Altuve said. "He knows how to get ready, how to prepare for any performance. I have all my confidence in him. I really believe that we're going to win this game tomorrow."

Doing so would prompt another clubhouse champagne celebration, the sort of scenes Keuchel savors.

"This team has made it easy to come to the ballpark every day and just enjoy it," Keuchel said. "So I have enjoyed it, and whether or not this is my last run with the Astros, like I said, it's easy to come to the ballpark with this group. I've cherished it enough that I know how to go about my business and do things the right way."

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Astros' Jose Altuve says he feels good after hurting his knee in Game 2

Chandler Rome ,

CLEVELAND — A day after the distressing sixth inning plate appearance during which he aggravated an injured right knee, Jose Altuve hit, ran and was a full participant in the Astros' workout day at Progressive Field.

"I feel good," Altuve said. "Obviously you see me testing it today because it was very important to see how I felt after that crazy play yesterday. But the results today were good and we're good to play."

During Houston's 3-1 win in Game 2, Altuve banged his knee on the dirt when he reached for an outside pitch. Altuve dribbled it down the third-base line and stumbled from the batter's box.

Altuve limped noticeably around the bases but still managed to score the game's tying run on Marwin Gonzalez's two-RBI double off Andrew Miller. He played defense during the final three innings without noticeable hindrance.

"We've been playing all year long to be in this situation we are right now, playoffs (up) 2-0," Altuve said. "You don't want to miss any games. You want to go out there and try to win as many games as possible and advance to the next series. I want to be part of this. There's nothing to worry about, nothing going to keep me off the field."

Added manager A.J. Hinch: "I think we're all happy that it's a day off. It's probably a good time for us. But I'm not expecting any problems."

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Brian McCann holds different role this postseason for Astros

Chandler Rome

McCann's 2018 postseason debut will come Monday, when he is scheduled to catch Dallas Keuchel in Game 3 at Progressive Field.

The emergence of Martin Maldonado has relegated McCann, a 14-year veteran in the final year of his contract, to a bench role, either a lefthanded bat in a pinch hit situation or a replacement should manager A.J. Hinch decide to hit for Maldonado.

"I'm kind of getting used to it on the fly," McCann said. "(I'm) reading the game and situations that I may come up to pinch hit or may go in late in the game just to get my preparation right and be ready at any moment."

Through two games, Hinch has shown reticence to remove Maldonado given the defensive prowess he exudes. Maldonado has started both games and caught every inning.

In Game 2 on Saturday, after Andrew Miller loaded the bases in the sixth, a pristine pinch hitting situation presented itself. Trevor Bauer was summoned.

With two outs, Hinch opted to let Maldonado hit. McCann was 5-for-19 lifetime against Bauer. Tony Kemp was also on the bench, too. Instead, Maldonado struck out on three pitches to end the rally.

Perhaps more importantly, though, the Astros escaped with a lead. They maintained Maldonado's shutdown defense behind the plate and McCann was left on the bench.

"He lays everybody out there. He's certainly prepared at a moment's notice to come in the game," Hinch said of McCann. "It will be a different experience for him because I know what his expectations are and his want to play every inning, but I'm really happy that we have that stability if we need him."

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Why Ryan Pressly has become the Astros' most important reliever

By Jake Kaplan

CLEVELAND — Before he threw his first career postseason pitch, Ryan Pressly peered into the Minute Maid Park stands. As a way of slowing down the moment, veteran Tony Sipp had suggested to Pressly he locate from the mound his family and friends in their seats.

The exercise proved futile when Pressly couldn't find his personal cheering section through the sea of orange. "It's a lot easier to find them in the minor leagues," he would say later. "I can tell you that much." The 29-year-old right-hander spiked his first pitch and a run scored easily from third. Welcome to October baseball.

By month's end, Pressly should be vastly more experienced pitching in the games in which the stakes are highest. If the first two games of the Astros' ALDS against the Indians prove to be any indication, manager A.J. Hinch will rely on Pressly in high-leverage, non-closing situations more than any other reliever.

It could be the sixth inning like in Game 1 on Friday or the eighth like in Game 2 on Saturday. If the opposition's best hitters are due up in a tight game, Pressly has emerged as Hinch's go-to weapon out of the bullpen.

Astros relievers have been tasked with 17 outs through their first two victories against the Indians. Pressly has gotten seven, the same amount as closer Roberto Osuna has. Collin McHugh, Will Harris, Josh James and Tony Sipp will enter Game 3 on Monday afternoon at Progressive Field yet to even appear in the series.

"I'd like to get some other guys some action, but that means we need to have some different circumstances, or [starter] Dallas [Keuchel] can throw the whole game," Hinch said on Sunday at Progressive Field. "I don't think I can go in set up with any preconceived notions. We're trying to get 27 outs. How we use and who we use, the matchups we use, the game will dictate more so than me pre-planning it. We've not used some pretty good relievers. We've got some options in some areas that now we have some new looks, or maybe we go back to Press and Osuna and close out a win. That's fine too."

Having Lance McCullers Jr. as an option to set up Osuna this postseason makes it easier for Hinch to use Pressly earlier in games if the scenario warrants it. And Pressly's arsenal makes him a good matchup for the Astros against both right-handed and left-handed hitters. Any hitter who has trouble with the ball up in the zone is vulnerable to his 96 mph riding four-seam fastball. Those who struggle with power breaking balls will see a heavy dosage of his 90 mph slider or his 83 mph curveball.

Hinch telegraphed Pressly's increased October usage by how he managed the reliever's workload late in the regular season. He didn't use him for more than three outs in any of Pressly's final 23 appearances and used him only once, for an inning, in the team's final six games. Even so, Pressly led AL relievers in appearances with 77, 51 of which he made before the July 27 trade from the Twins to the Astros. His 71 innings ranked only 15th in the AL.

"I feel good," Pressly said before Game 2. "It's my job every day to get my body ready no matter what, no matter what the situation is. It's postseason too, so your adrenaline's kicking pretty hard."

A few notes ahead of Game 3

— The next home run by George Springer or José Altuve will set an Astros' record for career postseason homers by an individual player, with nine. Springer and Altuve are currently tied with Carlos Beltrán with eight. Carlos Correa has seven, and Alex Bregman (6) is quickly catching up.

— Brian McCann is expected to catch Dallas Keuchel in Game 3, a reflection of both Indians starter Mike Clevinger's drastic righty-lefty splits and Keuchel's ability to control the opponent's running game. But even in this scenario, Martín Maldonado will all but certainly play a role in the game. Expect Hinch to treat Maldonado as the catcher version of Jake Marisnick, an elite defensive replacement he deploys in the sixth inning or later.

— Hinch used identical lineups in Game 1 and Game 2 but Clevinger's vulnerability against left-handed hitters (.726 opponents' OPS in the regular season as opposed to a .586 versus right-handed hitter) presents an opportunity to switch things up. In addition to playing McCann, Hinch could consider starting Tony Kemp over Tyler White at designated hitter to get an extra left-handed bat in the bottom third of the lineup.

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