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April 13, 2018

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- Cubs.com, **Baez fires back at Hurdle after 'respect' criticism**
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- ESPNChicago.com, **Javier Baez upset after Pirates manager Clint Hurdle questions his respect for game**
http://www.espn.com/mlb/story/_/id/23140991/chicago-cubs-javier-baez-calls-pirates-manager-clint-hurdle-trash-talk
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- NBC Sports Chicago, **The Cubs are perfectly fine with how they police themselves**
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<http://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/baseball/cubs/ct-spt-cubs-joe-maddon-javier-baez-hustle-20180412-story.html>
- Chicago Tribune, **Kyle Schwarber can't do it alone as Cubs drop series to Pirates with 6-1 loss**
<http://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/baseball/cubs/ct-spt-cubs-pirates-20180412-story.html>

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<https://chicago.suntimes.com/sports/cubs-javy-baez-fires-back-at-clint-hurdle-as-bucs-manager-makes-series-personal/>
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The Athletic

Joe Maddon is happy with his team's maturity, regardless of what others think

By Sahadev Sharma

Playing the game the right way can mean different things to different people. Each clubhouse may have a different way of going about things. Thirty teams, 30 ways to play the game the right way.

Kris Bryant doesn't like to admire his home runs. He's not the flashiest of players, but since he's arrived in the league, he's put up MVP-caliber numbers on a yearly basis and has been able to flash his smile on Red Bull cans and Express ad campaigns across the country. Ian Happ plays with an edge that leads teammates to gravitate toward him while at the same time frustrating opponents. Kyle Schwarber likes to say there's an art to pinging a home run.

Emotion is a big part of this game. Allowing a player's personality to come through is a great way to sell the game to a young fanbase that's becoming more and more enamored with the enigmatic personas all around the NBA and NFL. To try and stifle the few captivating players in baseball would be folly.

But there are always lines. And perhaps Javy Báez, one of the most unique and enthralling players in the game today, crossed one of them on Wednesday night. In the seventh inning of that evening's 13-5 Cubs win, Báez popped a ball up high into the air. Frustrated with himself, he tossed his bat up high into the air and as Báez put his head down and slowly moved toward first, the bat bounced in front of him, traveling well down the first-base line after arching high above him.

After the game, one in which Báez hit two home runs for the second night in a row and scored the go-ahead run with his heads-up baserunning, the young infielder owned up to his mistake and was ready to learn from it.

“You know what I really got out of today?” Báez said. “You know what I learned? How ugly I looked on that fly ball. I tossed the bat really high. I didn’t run to first base. A lot of teammates came up to me, and they said it in a good way.

“You learn from it. Especially me, I don’t take the AB before to the plate. After I hit that fly ball where I tossed the bat really high, I was kind of mad about it. Not because of the fly ball, just the way I looked for the kids and everybody that follows me. That’s not a good look, so I learned that from today.”

On Thursday morning, while Pirates manager Clint Hurdle was in his office lamenting how Báez and Cubs catcher Willson Contreras, who had some issues with the umpire after some close pitches, weren’t respecting the game, manager Joe Maddon extolled the virtues of his team and how they’ve done such a good job policing each other and holding everyone to a high standard.

“That’s definitely the needle moving in the right direction,” Maddon said when Báez’s comments from the previous evening were brought up. “There’s no question. When they’re accountable, which I believe our guys are, as a group they really do police each other well. They’re unbelievably good at that. It’s been going on the last couple years, but more recently, this spring training was incredibly different in all the best ways. They were getting together just to talk about stuff. Not just baseball, but stuff. I’ve never been around that. I’ve been really impressed with where they’re going mentally as human beings, which I think is going to spill over to the baseball level and benefit us too.”

Opponents may see a brash group that celebrates every victory like Game 7 of the World Series. They see a flashy second baseman with a beaming smile who admires home runs and wags a finger when an attempted stolen base inevitably turns into an out. A catcher who barks at opposing dugouts and pounds his chest when overcome by the raw emotion of success. They see a group as a whole that revels in winning. That has become known for it, in fact, and carries themselves with a swagger that was once unseen on the North Side of Chicago.

Of course that would rub them the wrong way.

But as far as the Cubs are concerned, their only thought should be, “Who cares?” They can let the opposition stew about real or imagined slights. Maddon would rather focus on a young group he believes is continually maturing on a daily basis.

“That is wonderful,” Maddon said. “In practice, here comes a guy, ‘Javy, we don’t do that here.’ Javy [says], ‘You’re right, I made a mistake.’ What else could you possibly ask for? I don’t think that’s going away. I want to believe that through both good and bad, you’re going to see that method incorporated. I think it could really be helpful when things aren’t going well to have that kind of stability among the group. They need to see that from me that I don’t overreact to situations.”

Maddon likes that the players are getting together on their own and having meetings. He said that perhaps in years gone by, that would have been looked at as some sort of knock to the manager or front office. Almost as if they were going around them and subverting their authority. That’s not the atmosphere that’s been fostered in Chicago by Maddon along with team president Theo Epstein and general manager Jed Hoyer. Nothing showed that more than the prank wars between Tommy La Stella and the front office during spring training.

But as much as Maddon has enjoyed his team's maturation off the field, the one on it continues. His offense continues to run hot and cold as it often did last season. But Maddon is seeing signs of growth. In particular, he wants to see the offense continue to use the entire field like they did on Wednesday night.

"It really comes down to, when the student is ready, the teacher will appear," Maddon said. "You can talk about that until you're green in the face. But if a guy's not ready to do it, it does not matter. That's what I'm talking about with the maturation of the players as hitters. If you're not ready to hear this message, you're not capable of doing it."

Maddon praised former hitting coach John Mallee for laying the foundation, but now Chili Davis has come on as the teacher this team believes it needs now.

"They're hearing a message just a little bit differently," Maddon said. "And now they're ready to hear it. I want to believe that's where we're at. That's where the real success will come offensively. Because these guys are just dripping with talent. If you're not willing to make these kind of overall adjustments, you're going to be limited in your success. If you're willing to accept the whole field and understand why, it's going to be so much more difficult to pitch to us."

The Cubs entered Thursday's game with a 45.2 percent pull rate, third highest in baseball and tops in the National League. There are fleeting moments when it seems the lessons are seeping in. Báez's first home run on Wednesday was to right-center. Addison Russell and Willson Contreras both hit doubles to the opposite field. That's how a group "dripping with talent" puts up a 13 spot. And to really live up to their potential, they'll need to continue to grow in this area.

Soon enough the maturity off the field will lead to some consistency on it. In the meantime, the Cubs will happily secure a few wins over rivals who are too concerned with what's happening in another clubhouse, one that actually seems to take care of business just fine without any outside help.

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The Athletic

Javier Baez fires back at Clint Hurdle, Pirates: 'I bust my ass every day to play hard...they can save it'
By Patrick Mooney

The Cubs are becoming a team that people love to hate. Of course, Joe Maddon's boys feel the love in front of all those record-setting crowds in spring training and whenever they walk into Chicago's trendy restaurants. The players are treated like rock stars in every road city. Cubs fans follow them all across the country.

But it's not too early to draw this conclusion about a season that's only two weeks old: that target Maddon designed – seemingly a million t-shirt ideas ago – isn't going away. It feels like that sense of jealousy and frustration has been building as the Cubs created a no-rules culture and shed their label as Loveable Losers.

Pittsburgh Pirates manager Clint Hurdle called out Javier Baez and Willson Contreras during Thursday morning's press briefing at Wrigley Field, interpreting a bat flip and a reaction to a called third strike as signs of disrespect on Wednesday night. Baez didn't hear about it until after a 6-1 loss, getting the news while showering in the clubhouse and coming out ready to face the reporters at his locker.

"I bust my ass every day to play hard," Baez said. "No one plays this game harder than me. I respect 90. I respect whatever. But you don't go out there and talk trash about someone. To be honest, I got a lot of things I can say right now. But I don't control what's out there, what people talk about me. I'm just going to keep playing my game."

Quoting Hurdle's rhetorical question – "Where is the respect for the game?" – unleashed all sorts of reactions on Twitter — from a clip of Sean Rodriguez attacking a Gatorade cooler during a playoff loss to the Cubs, to reminders of Starling Marte's 80-game drug suspension last season, to how the low-budget Pirates sold off Andrew McCutchen and Gerrit Cole this winter.

This also brought up questions about baseball's culture wars and coded language. Pirates broadcaster Steve Blass last year described Baez as "a difficult player for me to root for" because of his "flashiness."

"There is entitlement all over the world," Hurdle said. "Sometimes, when you have a skill, you can feel special and you don't get what it looks like. Most of the time here, we try to show our players what (that looks like). And that's usually enough."

Except the Cubs had already said something to Baez. The night before – in the middle of a superb all-around game where he blasted two home runs – Baez flipped his bat in frustration after popping out and immediately fessed up to reporters afterward, admitting it was a bad look.

"To be honest, if I got to apologize, I got to apologize to my teammates and my manager," Baez said. "Not to the other team. We won [13-5] and I think it got to [Hurdle]. We lost the series, but we're still the same. I'm happy. There's music in the clubhouse when we lost. There's nothing to take personal."

"But like I said, people that talk about me, they can save it. I don't control it. I don't really care about it."

Hurdle's state of the game address also happened the day after the New York Yankees and Boston Red Sox brawled at Fenway Park and the Colorado Rockies and San Diego Padres had a Royal Rumble at Coors Field.

These tensions between the Cubs and Pirates escalated during that surprising turnaround in 2015. Chris Coghlan destroyed Jung Ho Kang's left knee with a takeout slide that September. (Kang hasn't been able to get a U.S. work visa this year after his third drunk-driving conviction in South Korea.) Jake Arrieta trolled Pittsburgh fans before the wild card game, saying he wanted it loud at PNC Park and then silencing the blackout crowd. Both benches cleared during Arrieta's complete-game shutout when the Cy Young award winner got drilled with a pitch.

After Pittsburgh management appeared to write off this season, Hurdle's Pirates have banded together so far and taken the early lead in the division, winning nine of their first 12 games.

"Yeah, they got rid of some big names," said Kyle Hendricks, who put together a quality start before lefty reliever Justin Wilson blew the game wide open during a four-run seventh inning. "But the young guys that are coming up for them are really playing well. They're hungry and I think they have really good veteran leadership still over there."

"It looks like it's a team that's jelling really well together, something we haven't really seen [from] this side in the last few years."

The Cubs and Pirates will play 16 more times this season. This followed an intense four-game series at Miller Park where Contreras yelled "Fuck you!" across the field toward an unidentified Milwaukee

Brewer. Contreras said the hostility can be traced back to an incident years ago while playing winter ball in Venezuela.

Hurdle felt like Contreras showed up umpire Dan Bellino on Wednesday night with the way he gestured after a called third strike and suggested he would have been ejected from the game in another era.

During spring training, Contreras gave this response when Major League Baseball announced the pace-of-play initiative that would cap mound visits at six per game: Fine me.

"I don't really care," Contreras said. "If I have to go again and pay the price for my team, I will."

"He plays with an edge, and that always rubs opponents the wrong way," Cubs general manager Jed Hoyer said that day at a Cactus League media event. "He's one of those guys you always want to have on your side. He makes his teammates better. You know he competes every night. That's a beautiful thing when a catcher has that much energy."

The truth is baseball needs more personalities like Baez and Contreras, who play with passion at an elite level and show genuine emotions. Warning: The fun police will be out in force next week at Wrigley Field when the St. Louis Cardinals arrive for the renewal of a rivalry that always runs hot. Baez – who homered four times during this three-game series against the Pirates – isn't going to change anytime soon.

"I'm going to play hard every day," Baez said. "Whoever likes it, fine. Whoever doesn't like it, that's you."

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Cubs.com

Hendricks, Cubs unable to contain rival Bucs
By Carrie Muskat

CHICAGO -- Kyle Hendricks struggled with his fastball command on Thursday, Javier Baez didn't slug any more home runs, and the Cubs learned the Pirates aren't going to be pushovers in the National League Central.

Gregory Polanco outslugged the Cubs, hitting a pair of solo home runs, and Francisco Cervelli sealed the win with a three-run shot to back Trevor Williams and power the Pirates to a 6-1 victory at Wrigley Field.

"We were making good pitches, putting together good [at-bats], but so are they," Hendricks said of the Pirates. "They're really good right now and putting together good quality at-bats. They're a tough team."

Pittsburgh took two out of three games in the series. Williams scattered four hits, including a solo home run by Kyle Schwarber leading off the fourth, to improve to 3-0. His ERA dropped to 1.56, which ranks among the top five in the National League.

With the loss, the Cubs are now .500 for the sixth time this season.

"It's definitely early," Schwarber said. "I think we'd like to piece some wins together. We're not going out there and pressing for that. We know if we go out there and do what we need to do, things will happen. It's just been an unfortunate series of events with everything that's going on. We'll keep going out there and playing our ballgame."

The Cubs miss Anthony Rizzo, and they are 3-3 since he went on the disabled list with tightness in his back. The offense has been on a rollercoaster ride early in the season.

"We have to do better clumping runs together," manager Joe Maddon said. "I liked some at-bats today. Schwarber, [Ian] Happ had better at-bats. [Kris Bryant] continues to have good at-bats. ... I thought we had some decent at-bats. We have to be able to string it together as runs. Overall, I'm seeing better stuff."

Hendricks was frustrated by his outing. It's the second straight start that Hendricks has served up a pair of home runs, although in the previous outing against the Brewers, both came in the same inning. The right-hander posted a quality start on Thursday and struck out seven over six innings.

It was an odd day, weather-wise, at Wrigley Field. The game-time temperature at the start was 74 degrees with a hitter-friendly northwest wind of 14 mph. By the fourth inning, the wind had shifted to the northeast at 16 mph and the temperature dropped to 57 degrees.

"In the snap of the fingers, it went from balmy to embalming, I guess," Maddon said. "It got cold very quickly. You could see the wind came on. It did impact. The ball still carried, it seemed. It was two different ballparks completely. That's the beauty of the place."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Start me up: The Pirates lead the National League in runs scored, and Polanco added to that total when he launched an 88.6-mph four-seam fastball from Hendricks into the bleachers with one out in the first. Polanco notched his second homer of the game with one out in the seventh, this time off lefty Justin Wilson, who also gave up Cervelli's homer. Maddon wasn't happy when Wilson walked Josh Bell, which set up Cervelli's blast.

"That was the perfect slot for [Wilson]," Maddon said. "I had that written down before the game. I felt really good about it. It just did not play out."

Cooler by the lake: The wind shifted at Wrigley Field and temperatures became much cooler. That didn't affect Schwarber, who led off the fourth with his third home run. He smacked a 3-2 sinker into the right-field bleachers to tie the game at 1. According to Statcast™, the ball traveled 404 feet and had an exit velocity of 108.6 mph. Schwarber also defied the Pirates' defensive shift when he bounced a double down the left-field line with two outs in the sixth.

"If they keep doing [the shift], hopefully there's more hits that way," Schwarber said. "You never know what's going to happen."

QUOTABLE

"Looking back on it, I think this series is going to sparkle for some fans. ... The Cubs are world champions. They're a good team. They're a team to beat in the Central. It's good for us to take two out of three here, especially early on." -- Williams, on the Pirates winning their first series of the year against the Cubs

SOUND SMART WITH YOUR FRIENDS

The Cubs have homered in 12 straight home games, dating back to last season. That's tied for their longest streak since Aug. 12-Sept. 19, 2015 (17 games).

WHAT'S NEXT

Friday's game vs. the Braves will mark Yu Darvish's Wrigley Field debut and his first game there since Game 3 of the NLCS when he beat the Cubs. In his last start, the right-hander had good fastball command and a sharp slider, holding the Brewers to two hits over six innings and striking out nine. Darvish's only regular-season game at Wrigley Field was July 16, 2016, when he lasted 4 1/3 innings. First pitch is scheduled for 1:20 p.m. CT.

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Cubs.com

Baez fires back at Hurdle after 'respect' criticism

By Carrie Muskat

CHICAGO -- Cubs infielder Javier Baez took issue with comments critical of him made by Pirates manager Clint Hurdle, as a back-and-forth between the rival National League Central clubs lasted into a second day.

Hurdle questioned Baez's "respect for the game" following Wednesday night's tilt, after Baez flipped his bat when he popped up in the seventh inning of a Cubs win. Baez, who acknowledged on Wednesday that he had learned from the incident, nonetheless had little use for Hurdle's criticism, which he didn't find out about until after Thursday's 6-1 loss to the Pirates.

"No one plays this game harder than me," Baez said. "But you don't go out there and talk trash about someone.

"To be honest, I have a lot of things I could say right now," Baez said. "I don't control what's out there, what people say about me. I'm just going to keep playing my game."

Baez has a distinct flair for the game, which can rub some players the wrong way. He heard it last season.

"Last year, there was a player talking about my game style; now this year, it's a manager," Baez said. "Like I say, I don't control it. Whatever I get from it, I learned from the bat flip. That's all I've got to say. If anybody has any negative stuff to me, they can save it, to be honest. That's all I have to say."

Cubs manager Joe Maddon didn't see Baez flip his bat on Wednesday. But Hurdle did, and so did Baez's teammates, and one of them said something to the second baseman about it in the dugout.

Hurdle wasn't surprised someone said something.

"You watch [Baez] flip that bat in the air last night -- where's the respect for the game?" Hurdle said. "The guy hits four homers in two days, so that means you can take your bat and throw it 15-20 feet in the air when you pop up like you should have hit your fifth home run? I would bet that men over there talked to him, because I believe they've got a group over there that speaks truth to power -- and the kid's showing physical power."

There was a moment during one of Baez's at-bats on Thursday when he had an exchange with Pirates catcher Francisco Cervelli. Did Cervelli talk about it?

"He did, but in a great way," Baez said. "At the same time, I was talking to the umpires. I didn't really pay attention to it."

Asked if he felt he needed to apologize to the Pirates, Baez said no.

"There's nothing to take personal," Baez said. "People who talk about me can save it. I don't control it. I don't really care about it."

Maddon was pleased that the Cubs players took care of matters immediately.

"That's definitely the needle moving in the right direction when they're accountable, which I believe our guys are, and as a group they police each other," Maddon said Thursday.

Cubs players have been able to handle things internally without Maddon or the coaches interfering. Sometimes, the discussions aren't about baseball, either.

"I've never been around that," Maddon said. "I'm impressed where they're going mentally right now as human beings, which I think will spill over on the baseball level and benefit us, too. The fact [Baez] said that I do believe is a residue of those meetings.

"It's nothing I've done," Maddon said. "I stay out of their way. This is something they wanted to do among each other."

"That's actually a proud moment," Maddon said. "If the players feel strongly that they're free that they can have these kind of conversations independent of us to galvanize the culture even further, that's wonderful. In practice, here comes a guy, 'Javy, we don't do that here.' Javy [says] 'You're right, I made a mistake.' What else could you ask for?"

- Albert Almora Jr. had three hits Wednesday night in the leadoff spot, but Ian Happ batted first on Thursday against Pirates' right-hander Trevor Williams.

"[Almora] did really well yesterday, because there were some really good matchups," Maddon said. "Furthermore, he was ill. I really prefer that he feels good. I was worried about pulling muscles, because you get dehydrated."

Almora told Maddon he was good to go one hour before first pitch, but the manager said the outfielder "looked like Gumby or something with the color" in his face.

This early in the season, Maddon is looking for the best matchups and trying to share the at-bats.

"It's April 12. There's a lot of baseball left," Maddon said. "There's a lot of overreacting that occurs at the beginning of the season."

- When Baez hit his first home run Wednesday night in the second inning, the Cubs relievers did their celebratory dance in the bullpen. It was Steve Cishek's first dance.

"I looked around and everyone said, 'Let's go,'" Cishek said.

Cishek got several text messages from friends Thursday morning about his moves.

"I have to work on my footwork," Cishek said. "I have big feet, and I stand out."

- Anthony Rizzo, on the 10-day disabled list because of tightness in his lower back, took some swings off a batting tee on Thursday. He is eligible to come off the DL on Monday.

"It's slow and steady, like a turtle," Rizzo said of his progress.

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ESPNChicago.com

Javier Baez upset after Pirates manager Clint Hurdle questions his respect for game

By Jesse Rogers

CHICAGO -- After learning about Pittsburgh Pirates manager Clint Hurdle's critical remarks about his style of play, Chicago Cubs infielder Javier Baez fired back at Hurdle on Thursday afternoon.

"I bust my ass every day to play hard," Baez said after the Cubs' 6-1 loss to the Pirates. "I don't think anyone plays this game harder than me. I respect [the game]. I respect whatever, but you don't go out there and talk trash about someone. I have a lot of things I could say right now, but I don't control what's out there, what people talk about me."

Hours earlier, before the game, Hurdle criticized Baez for a bat flip from the night before -- after Baez popped out in the seventh inning.

"You watch their kid flip that bat last night?" Hurdle said, according to the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. "Where's the respect for the game? The guy hits four homers in two days, so that means you can take your bat and throw it 15, 20 feet in the air when you pop up like you should have hit your fifth home run? I would bet that men over there talked to him, because I do believe they have a group over there that speaks truth to power."

In fact, Cubs reliever Pedro Strop did talk to Baez on Wednesday about the flip, leading to Baez bringing it up, unprompted, after the game.

"You know what I learned?" Baez said late Wednesday night. "How ugly I looked on that fly ball. I tossed the bat really high, didn't run to first base and one of my teammates came up to me and said it, in a good way. You learn from it. ... I was mad about it. Not the fly ball, just the way I looked for the kids and everyone that follows me. That's not a good look. I learned that from today."

Hurdle was also critical of catcher Willson Contreras, but the Baez issue has some history with the Pirates. Broadcaster Steve Blass went after Baez last season during a broadcast, calling him a "difficult player to root for," due to his "flashy" nature. Baez was well aware of what Blass said and then learned of Hurdle's comments in the shower after Thursday's game.

"If I have to apologize, I have to apologize to my teammates and my manager," Baez said. "Not to the other team. We're playing against them. ... We won [13-5 on Wednesday] and I think it got to them."

Baez seemingly held back saying more, and insisted -- just as he did last year -- he wouldn't change his style. He hit four home runs in the first two games of the series, but the Pirates won two of three.

"I'm happy," Baez said. "There is music in the clubhouse, but we lost. People that talk about me can save it."

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NBC Sports Chicago

Explaining the Ian Happ-Albert Almora Jr. lineup conundrum

By Tony Andracki

The Cubs aren't planning on giving up on Ian Happ anytime soon.

Nor do they plan on writing Albert Almora Jr.'s name in permanent marker in the leadoff spot every night.

The leadoff spot and center field have become polarizing topics among Cubs fans, and they go hand-in-hand.

The lineup has been pretty stable to begin 2018: Happ leads off and plays center against right-handed starting pitchers while Almora leads off and plays center against lefties. There have been some exceptions, of course, but that's the general rule of thumb.

There are many reasons behind why Joe Maddon writes his lineups out this way, but the most prevalent is matchups.

Just because the Cubs scored 13 runs on one day when Almora led off against a lefty doesn't mean Maddon will automatically keep the lineup the same the next day against a righty.

"He did really well [Wednesday] because there were some really good matchups for him and there are others coming up," Maddon said.

Maddon also pointed to the fact Almora has been feeling under the weather this week, comparing the young outfielder to a "Gumby" color Wednesday night.

The Cubs manager typically makes his lineup a day or two ahead of time, letting players know the day before they're supposed to be playing. It's all based on the other team's starting pitcher and what kind of defense the Cubs want out on the field behind their own starter.

"I think it's wise to stick with the plan," Maddon said. "If you go willy-nilly all the time — in this game, if you just wanna deal with emotional success on a daily basis — I think you're gonna go wrong a lot."

This Almora playing time debate was a hot topic of discussion last last season, as well, as Cubs fans wondered why he wasn't starting every day.

A huge part of the reason why Cubs fans see the best of Almora so often is how Maddon and Co. deploy him.

Almora struggles against sliders and other breaking pitches from righties, but typically finds success when facing some right-handers who throw a lot of first-pitch fastballs.

It's more complicated than that and the Cubs won't divulge their entire gameplan, of course, but the simple math is: Almora is an aggressive hitter who swings early in counts and that style can match up well with a pitcher who tries to get ahead early with his fastball instead of a breaking pitch like a slider.

"The righty that you didn't want him to see a couple years ago which is kinda black and white is becoming more gray," Maddon said. "He's made some really good adjustments. He's gonna be that [every day player] eventually, 'cause he knows...what he has to do to play every day."

Almora has a career .299 on-base percentage and .709 OPS against righties, and that's with the Cubs carefully choosing which right-handed pitchers he faces.

The Cubs aren't just going to banish Happ to the bench because he struck out a bunch to start the season. This is the first time he's ever been playing Major League Baseball in March or April.

Happ is still only 23 years old. There's a lot of development left.

But the Cubs already like what they've seen from him — a switch-hitter with power (26 homers in 401 big-league ABs) who will take his walks and has positional versatility. Happ has the speed to play center field and is still learning the position after spending much of his time at second base prior to last season.

For all of Almora's defensive prowess, he just does not possess elite speed, which will always limit his range in center, even with the incredible breaks and routes he takes.

Yes, Happ should've dove Tuesday in a big moment in the series opener against the Pirates, but he also was positioned in left-center against a hitter that often goes the other way and had to run a long way for this ball:

Some fans were also upset with Happ's effort on Cervelli's triple in the second inning Thursday. But that ball was tailing away from Happ due to a howling wind blowing directly out to right-center and he was already running full-speed with the unforgiving brick wall rapidly approaching.

Almora is a much more natural defender in center given that Happ is still learning the position, but Almora doesn't automatically make these catches.

The Cubs are playing the long game, with eyes on another World Series championship. They won't overreact to a couple weeks' worth of games in March/April to determine how guys should play.

"As you move forward into the season, things are going to happen," Maddon said. "Somebody's gonna get hurt. More playing time just based on probably injuries as much as anything else. Albert's been wonderful. They all get it.

"Actually, I addressed that in my first meeting in spring training this year. Talking about that specifically where I think the guys all have one common goal and that's to have that pile-on at the end of the season. Play the last game of the season and win it."

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NBC Sports Chicago

Javy Baez fires back at Pirates: 'You don't go out there and talk trash about someone'

By Tony Andracki

"Four homers in two days and he doesn't respect the game!"

One Cubs player shouted that sarcastic comment across the home clubhouse Thursday evening as Javy Baez addressed a group of media around his locker following the 6-1 loss in the series finale with the Pirates.

Roughly 6 hours earlier, Pittsburgh manager Clint Hurdle targeted Baez for the bat he threw in frustration in the seventh inning of the Cubs' 13-5 win Wednesday night.

Hurdle and the Pirates apparently took exception to Baez, who hit his fourth homer in the series his next at-bat.

"Where is the respect for the game?" Hurdle asked Thursday morning.

Baez immediately took ownership of his bat-toss after Wednesday's game, calling it embarrassing and a mistake to learn from.

The dynamic infielder didn't even find out about Hurdle's comments in the Cubs clubhouse after the series finale Thursday and was as fired up meeting the media as he's ever been.

"I bust my ass every day to play hard," Baez said. "I don't think anyone plays this game harder than me. I respect 90, I respect whatever, but you don't go out there and talk trash about someone.

"To be honest, I got a lot of things I can say right now, but I don't control what's out there, what people talk about me. I'm just gonna keep playing my game. Last year was a player talking about my gamestyle and now this year, it's a manager.

"Like I said, I don't control it. However it gets to me, I learn from it, learn from that bat-flip last night. That's all I gotta say. If anybody got stuff to say, they can save it."

Baez said he chatted with Pirates catcher Francisco Cervelli about the incident during the course of Thursday's game, but said the veteran backstop went about it "in a great way" and the two players wound up joking with each other about Baez's at-bats.

"If I gotta apologize, I have to apologize to my teammates and my manager," Baez said. "Not to the other team. We're playing against them. We won 13-something. I think it got to them.

"We lost the series, but we're still the same. I'm happy. There's music in the clubhouse after we lost. There's nothing to take personally. People that talk about me, can save it.

"...It's just a game. I'm gonna play hard every day. Whoever likes it, fine. Whoever doesn't like it, that's you."

Before Hurdle's comments became public, Maddon spoke at length about the Cubs' clubhouse policing itself and none of Baez's teammates or coaches had any issues with how he went about his business.

Kyle Schwarber noted how Baez was actually smiling and joking around even while the Cubs were losing Thursday, keeping things positive in the dugout.

"He's a really good human being," Schwarber said. "He really enjoys the game."

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NBC Sports Chicago

The Cubs are perfectly fine with how they police themselves

By Tony Andracki

Joe Maddon didn't sound defensive and it sure didn't seem like he was engaged in a war of words.

There was no "Sopranos" reference from the Cubs manager and he wasn't trying to fire his team up to shed the "little brother" mindset.

This was a manager calmly and rationally protecting his guys and letting the world know his team can police itself, thank you very much. Though at the time Maddon met with the media ahead of Thursday's series finale with the Pirates, the pointed comments of Pittsburgh manager Clint Hurdle had not yet been made public.

The issue in question was Javy Baez's bat-flip in the seventh inning of Wednesday night's 13-5 Cubs victory. Baez popped up to the shortstop and sent his bat sailing 20 feet in the air and almost halfway down the first-base line in frustration.

That prompted Pittsburgh Pirates manager Clint Hurdle to sound off Thursday morning on how MLB players should police their own clubhouses (h/t The Athletic):

"Where is the respect for the game?" Hurdle said. "He's hit four homers in two days, does that mean you can take your bat and throw it 15-20 feet in the air when you pop up, like you should have hit your fifth home run? I would bet that men went over and talked to him, because I believe they've got a group there that speaks truth to power."

But it didn't stop there. An unnamed Pirates player also commented on the matter before Hurdle went on to discuss Willson Contreras' at-bat early in Wednesday's game where he was called out on strikes with runners on base:

"That's just the Cubs being the Cubs," one player said. "It could be a little less sometimes, maybe."

"The catcher, I mean ... he's a talented young man," Hurdle said. "There is a day, he would have been thrown out as soon as he (gestured) that the ball was high. Those are things you try to help your young players with as they go through it that's not respect for the game, that's not the way we do things here."

Even if Maddon had heard these comments before his press conference, he's fine with where his team is at.

After all, it was a player who came up to Baez and told him that was the right way to act, and Baez immediately owned up to his mistake after Wednesday's game, spending more time talking about how embarrassed he was at the bat-toss than on discussing his second straight two-homer game.

Maddon is a very hands-off manager, known for letting his players be themselves. There are almost no rules in Camp Maddon and players are encouraged to handle matters internally without getting any coaches involved.

"That's actually a proud moment," Maddon said of the incident where a Cubs player approached Baez in the dugout. "Those are the kind of things that if the players feel strongly that they're free in a sense — not only from my perspective, but Theo [Epstein] and Jed [Hoyer], etc. — that they could have these kinds of convos independent of us to really attempt to galvanize the culture even further, that is wonderful.

"Then, in practice, here comes a guy — 'Javy, we don't do that here.' Javy: 'You're right, I made a mistake.' What else could you possibly ask for?"

"I don't think that's going away. I wanna believe through both good and bad, you're gonna see that method incorporated."

The season is only a few weeks old, but the Cubs are already marveling at the "chemistry" that is brewing within the clubhouse.

Some pundits deny any possible boost that clubhouse chemistry can provide, but players and coaches around the game swear by it and constantly refer to how a team meshes together.

Ben Zobrist is in his 13th MLB season and said this 2018 Cubs group is conversing at a higher level than any other team he's been on before. Brian Duensing — a 10-year veteran — said the same thing.

Maddon — a 64-year-old baseball lifer — is on the same wavelength and pointed to how the moment indicates the maturation of Baez.

"That's definitely the needle moving in the right direction," Maddon said. "There's no question. Listen, when you're accountable — which I believe our guys are as a group — they really do police each other well. They are unbelievably good at that.

"It's been going on the last couple years but more recently, this spring training was incredibly different in all the best ways, meaning that they were getting together just to talk about stuff. Not just baseball, but stuff.

"I've never been around that. Really impressed with where they're going mentally now as human beings, which is going to spill over into baseball and benefit us, too."

It typically takes time for chemistry to develop, but this Cubs core has been together since 2015 now with Maddon and a handful of coaches. So even when a bench coach, two hitting coaches, a pitching coach, a former Cy Young piece of the rotation, a veteran closer and a "glue guy" outfielder leave in the offseason, enough pieces remain to keep the culture intact.

"We have done a better job than I've ever seen any team do at bouncing ideas off of each other early in the season and in spring training and in the first week of a season," Zobrist said last weekend in Milwaukee.

"Everyone can rest assured that there are a lot of conversations happening behind closed doors. There's a lot of thought being put into what's happening on the field. You still have to go out and execute and you have to find a way to get things going."

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Chicago Tribune

Column: Respect the game? Clint Hurdle should respect Javier Baez and leave him alone

By Teddy Greenstein

Javier Baez flipped his bat, and Clint Hurdle flipped out.

The Pirates manager fashions himself as baseball's Judge Judy, scolding those who don't conform to his narrow view of how baseball players should act on the diamond.

Baez made amends with his teammates for a misdemeanor — flipping his bat in frustration and dogging it to first base after an infield popup Wednesday night. Veteran reliever Pedro Strop addressed Baez in

private, and — unprompted — Baez said he felt bad about “the way I looked in front of the kids and anyone who follows me.”

Cubs manager Joe Maddon applauded his players for self-policing, calling it “a proud moment” and one that “galvanizes the culture” of the team.

That should have ended the story.

Yet Hurdle felt the need to chime in Thursday morning.

“You watch their kid flip that bat last night? Where’s the respect for the game?” Hurdle told reporters. “The guy hits four homers in two days, so that means you can take your bat and throw it 15, 20 feet in the air when you pop up like you should have hit your fifth home run? I would bet that men over there talked to him, because I do believe they have a group over there that speaks truth to power.”

OK, Judge. Thoughts on any other Cubs?

Actually, yes.

Hurdle apparently thinks he’s fit to manage both teams. He said of catcher Willson Contreras, who reacted angrily to a called third strike: “The catcher ... he’s a talented young man. There is a day, he would have been thrown out as soon as he (gestured) that the ball was high.”

And then Hurdle again cited “respect for the game.”

As you can imagine, Baez’s teammates found Hurdle’s comments absurd.

“Four homers in two days and he doesn’t respect the game; you should have hit five, Javy,” Anthony Rizzo said loud enough in the clubhouse for everyone to hear.

Asked about Hurdle’s “respect the game” line, Kyle Schwarber offered a look of what on earth are you talking about?

Said Schwarber: “He is full of energy and loves the game, and the way he goes about it rubs off on everyone. Like today, we’re down 6-1 and he has a big smile on his face even though he’s 0-for-4. He’s a really good human being and really enjoys the game.”

Baez found out about Hurdle’s remarks while showering after the Cubs’ 6-1 loss.

“I bust my ass every day to play hard,” he said calmly. “I don’t think anyone plays this game harder than me. I respect 90.”

“If I have to apologize, I have to apologize to my teammates and my manager, not to the other team. We’re playing a game, we’re winning 13-something (Wednesday) and I think it got to him. We lost the series but we’re still the same. I’m happy; there’s music in the clubhouse. People who talk about me, they can save it. I don’t really care about it.”

Baez plays with a flair that most fans love.

Schwarber said before the game and before the silly controversy that “it’s so good to have him on our side. I got wowed every time by what he does. He’s the same guy every day, always having fun. Doesn’t matter if he’s 0-for-20 or 20-for-20.”

Maddon is of the generation as the 60-year-old Hurdle, who should have known better than to jump on an opposing player — two of them, actually.

Last year Maddon compared Baez's flashy style to a Harlem Globetrotters player and said: “The moment you try to subtract from his joy on the field by making him into your perception of what he’s supposed to look like, you may lose a very good player.”

Maybe that’s what Hurdle wants and why he came down on Baez.

Guess what? It’s not his courtroom.

Baez only has to answer to his teammates, his manager and himself.

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Chicago Tribune

Kyle Schwarber can't do it alone as Cubs drop series to Pirates with 6-1 loss

By Teddy Greenstein

The pregame vibe at Wrigley Field was giddy — temps in the 70s, sun shining, flags flapping in the direction of the rooftops.

Wait, could it actually be shorts weather in Chicago?

“In the snap of the fingers it went from balmy to embalming,” manager Joe Maddon said. “It got cold very quickly.”

The big chill accompanied more mediocrity from a Cubs team that fell to 6-6 after a 6-1 loss to the Pirates.

Kyle Schwarber was the Cubs’ hitting star, cranking a 404-foot home run and going opposite field for a double and single. But it wasn’t nearly enough. An eighth-inning rally died when pinch-hitter Tommy La Stella grounded to second off right-hander George Kontos, a Niles West and Northwestern alum.

Kyle Hendricks (0-1) took the loss but was impressive, limiting the Pirates to a pair of solo home runs in six innings. He allowed five hits, and all three of his walks were intentional.

Justin Wilson replaced him for an outing he’d like to forget. He walked three and gave up two home runs: a solo blast by fellow lefty Gregory Polanco, his second of the game, and a three-run shot by Francisco Cervelli.

“That was the perfect slot for him,” Maddon said. “I had that (stretch) written down before the game. I felt really good about it; it just did not play out.”

The Cubs entered with a 1.55 bullpen ERA, third-best in the National League. At least Steve Cishek and Carl Edwards Jr. recorded the final seven outs with no fireworks.

The game-time temperature was 74 degrees, dropped to 57 in the fifth inning and dipped into hoodie weather before it ended.

Schwarber thrived in every climate.

Before the game he vowed not to get homer-happy, saying: "That's the danger zone that some players will get into, especially maybe some visiting teams. They go out and take batting practice and the ball is flying out all over the place. You try to lift one and you get under one or you miss a pitch. I think we stay to our approach."

After grounding out his first at-bat, Schwarber hammered a 3-2 offering from Trevor Williams (3-0) for his third home run.

Then with the Pirates infield shifted to the right, he slapped a ball down the line that appeared to hit third base, resulting in a double. He singled to left in his final trip, staying back on a breaking ball.

Asked which hit he favored, Maddon replied: "I can enjoy both, can't I? It was great to see him utilize (the left side) and if continues to do that, it will create a little bit of a shift. The home run was nice to watch. Two strikes, he did not try to do too much and got it on the fat part of the bat."

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Chicago Sun-Times

Cubs' Javy Baez fires back at Clint Hurdle as Bucs manager makes series personal
By Gordon Wittenmyer

The Pittsburgh Pirates went into Wrigley Field this week and won two out of three games against the two-time defending division champions in the teams' first series of the year.

Message delivered?

Without a doubt.

It just wasn't the one the Pirates and their manager, Clint Hurdle, hoped to send.

In fact, when Hurdle became the latest "back in my day" old white guy from the Pirates organization to rip Cubs second baseman Javy Baez for not respecting the game, it was a message heard loud and clear by a team with 16 more shots at the Pirates this year.

"There's no one that plays the game harder than me," Baez said after the Cubs' 6-1 loss to the Pirates in the series finale Thursday. "I bust my ass every day to get here and learn something.

"If anybody's got negative stuff to [say to] me, they can save it."

If a Cubs player has a right to hold a personal grudge against the Pirates, it might be Baez. He was an on-air target of Pirates pitcher-turned-broadcaster Steve Blass, who called Baez "difficult to root for" because of his "flashiness."

On Thursday, Hurdle called out Baez for flipping his bat high in frustration over a popup he hit between his two home runs in the Cubs' blowout victory Wednesday.

“Where’s the respect for the game?” said Hurdle, who also criticized Cubs catcher Willson Contreras for arguing with an umpire and related a story about how he learned respect for the game as a young big-leaguer.

As Baez talked with reporters after the game Thursday, teammate Anthony Rizzo raised his voice from across the clubhouse:

“Four homers in two days, doesn’t respect the game!” Rizzo said. “Should have hit five, Javy.”

With two homers in each of the first two games of the series, Baez became the first Cubs player since Alfonso Soriano 10 years ago with back-to-back multihomer games.

He also made a point Wednesday to chide himself for the bat flip. Teammate Pedro Strop took him aside after the game and told him how bad it was, and Baez said he learned “how ugly I looked on that [play]” and was disappointed in himself for “the way I looked for the kids and for everybody that follows me.”

Baez is certainly flashy, and Contreras is beyond fiery. But to call either disrespectful or to insinuate selfishness is to not watch them play or to not know how they fit in a tightly knit clubhouse.

“He’s a really good human being,” left fielder Kyle Schwarber, whose fourth-inning homer briefly tied the score, said of Baez. “He’s full of energy and he loves the game of baseball and he just kind of rubs off on everyone with the way that he goes about it.”

Disrespect?

“Would you rather I toss that bat flip on a home run or a ball that I missed?” Baez said. “If you do that on a home run, you’re in trouble; you’re showing somebody up. I didn’t show up anybody.

“I’m going to play hard every day. Whoever likes it, fine. Whoever doesn’t like it, that’s you.”

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Chicago Sun-Times

Cubs’ Kyle Schwarber: Social media can be a ‘taxing thing on the game’

By Madeline Kenney

It doesn’t take much time to surf through one’s Twitter timeline to know how fans feel about the possibility of Kyle Schwarber returning to the Cubs’ leadoff spot. That’s what “block” and “mute” are for.

But how does the burly slugger himself feel about it?

Schwarber started laughing Thursday when a hypothetical question was posed, then said he’d do whatever the Cubs want him to do, including bat anywhere in the lineup.

Not that he’s rushing to displace 2018 experimental leadoff guy Ian Happ, who has struggled to get his bearings at the top of the lineup.

“It’s weird,” Schwarber said. “Last year I experienced leadoff, and it was different for me because I just wasn’t me last year. And it’s so early in the year right now that people want to come to quick judgments on things, and it’s just that there’s still [150] games left.

“There’s a lot of things to be figured out throughout the year. I’m really comfortable with our guys who are doing it right now.”

Schwarber took quite a beating on social media last season after struggling in the leadoff spot. Players like to say they ignore those kinds of things, but dealing with negative comments can be “a taxing thing on the game,” Schwarber said.

“It’s part of the game now,” he said. “It’s part of the younger generation of people with social media and putting out messages. I think it’s something you have to put in the back of your mind.”

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Chicago Sun-Times

Blame the mattress for the sore back? ‘Ridiculous!’ Cubs’ Anthony Rizzo says

By Gordon Wittenmyer

Keep your mattress to yourself, Bill from Schaumburg. That goes for you, too, excitable sports talk radio host.

Anthony Rizzo’s back will be just fine by the time he gets to that next hotel room on the road.

“Ridiculous,” the Cubs’ achy first baseman said of all the deep analysis and airtime devoted this week to the mattress quality at hotels in Cincinnati after he casually mentioned that’s where his back started bothering him last week

It was just a throwaway line, he said. “But people decided to run with it,” said Rizzo. “It doesn’t just happen in Cincinnati.”

Rizzo, who’s expected to return from the 10-day disabled list as soon as he’s eligible on Monday, took swings off a tee Thursday as he tested his lower back during a lengthy workout.

There is no simple, single reason for why his back tightens annually, he said, or why in this case it lasted more than the usual one or two days – least of all a single mattress.

“You have certain hotels where you wake up and you’re a little more stiff,” he said. “But we played a 17-inning game, we had a long road trip, traveling, the beginning of the season – it’s a number of things.”

It’s not hard to understand the consternation and attention Rizzo’s back is drawing from the Cub faithful – and organization.

The three-time All-Star is the left-handed half of the right-left, Kris Bryant-Rizzo tandem the lineup is built around.

Cubs manager Joe Maddon has talked to Rizzo about taking fewer swings in the batting cage as part of his routine.

“I believe guys swing too much,” said Maddon, who said he heard the crack of the bat in the indoor cage when he got to the ballpark for the home opener at 9:30 a.m. Tuesday. “I don’t think Billy [Williams] did that. I don’t think [Ron] Santo did that. I don’t think Ernie [Banks] did that. They probably didn’t even have a batting cage to do that in.

"The point of diminishing returns always sets in, whether it's physically or mentally," he added. "I think you should do enough, not more than enough. With Anthony I'm trying to convince him to back off, no pun intended, a little bit, because swinging too often can actually exaggerate the issue I think."

Rizzo said he agrees with the principle, but he's not going to dramatically change his routine. Even with the recurring issue, swinging has not tended to specifically bother his back, he said.

"Guys do tend to hit a lot, and I'll fall into that category a couple times throughout the year," he said. "But I try to limit my swings and stay as fresh as I can."

"I'm going to do whatever I do. I've been doing the same thing for 10 years of my professional career, especially the last four or five years, I've had the same routine," he said. "I don't know if I'm necessarily going to change that. I'll tweak it. But I'll probably just stick with what I know best."

And if the mattresses start showing up in the mail?

"Hey, the more the merrier," he said.

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Daily Herald

After Pirates take series, Cubs' Maddon again faces lineup questions

By Bruce Miles

Once, twice or three times every season, Cubs manager Joe Maddon has to explain his lineup configurations.

Usually, questions arise when a player has a good game -- see Albert Almora Jr., who went 3-for-5 Wednesday -- but sits the next day.

Almora did not play in Thursday's 6-1 loss to the Pittsburgh Pirates at Wrigley Field. He spent time before the game sipping a bottle of Pedialyte for a bad stomach.

Maddon put Ian Happ and Kyle Schwarber into the lineup, and those two players have taken some fan and media heat for going cold.

Neither was at fault for Thursday's loss. Happ went 2-for-4 with a double, and Schwarber had a single, a double and a homer on a day that started warm with a friendly breeze blowing out but changed to chilly with the wind howling in.

Somehow, the Pirates excelled in both conditions, outperforming the Cubs 4-1 to take two of three games in the series.

"Wow," said Maddon, whose team fell back to .500 at 6-6. "Like in the snap of the fingers, it went from balmy to 'embalmy,' I guess. It got cold very quickly. You could see the wind came on in. But you could see it didn't impact the ball. It still carried, it seemed. I was really surprised by that."

Cubs starting pitcher Kyle Hendricks (0-1) gave up a solo homer to Gregory Polanco in the first and another to Adam Frazier in the fifth for the lone 2 runs he allowed up in 6 innings.

Polanco hit a solo homer off Justin Wilson in the seventh, and Francisco Cervelli touched Wilson for a 3-run homer later in the inning.

The lone Cubs homer came from Kyle Schwarber, in the fifth, as he lined one to right after the wind had changed.

As for the lineup, Maddon is a firm believer in matchups and the notion that past performance, no matter how recent, is no guarantee of future success.

I think it's on the Einstein painting about, 'We use the same lineup today because yesterday's lineup won,'" Maddon said, referring to one of the inspirational paintings he unveiled during spring training. "(Almora) did really well (Wednesday) because of some really good matchups for him, and there are others coming up. And furthermore, he was ill. And I really prefer that he feels good. I was worried about pulling muscles. You get dehydrated. So they were pumping him full of electrolytes just trying to get him back beyond that. I talked to him in my office before the game. I said come back and see me at 6 o'clock, because it was about 4:30. He said he was good to go. Oh, my God, he looked like Gumby or something.

"I think it's wise to stick with the plan. If you go willy-nilly all the time, in this game if you just want to deal with the emotional success on a daily basis, I think you're going to go wrong a lot."

Maddon is in his fourth season as Cubs manager, and everyone paying attention knows his lineups change from day to day. In fact, the "set lineup" that some long for wistfully is a thing of the past all around the game.

So Almora, Schwarber, Happ and Ben Zobrist all have come to expect that they will start on some days and not on others.

"You just got to go out there and give it your best when your name's in that lineup," Schwarber said. "When it's not in the lineup, you've got to be in there still mentally locked in because your name's going to get called on the bench in some way. With the way Skip runs the bench, there's always going to be guys getting in there -- substituted, double switched or pinch hit, whatever it is. So you're always staying locked in. You can always impact the game.

"If you're not starting, you can come in and make a great defensive play, or you could make a great pinch-hit at-bat. Just go from there."

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Daily Herald

Cubs' Baez on Hurdle: 'People that talk about me can save it'

By Bruce Miles

The Pittsburgh Pirates may not have liked Javier Baez flipping his bat and not running out a popup, but the Cubs showed they can police themselves.

When Baez stepped to the plate for his first at-bat Thursday, he and Pirates catcher Francisco Cervelli had a brief, and what seemed to be a nonconfrontational, conversation.

The previous night, Baez homered his first time up. In the seventh, he popped out to shortstop but flipped his bat into the air and did not initially run out of the box. In his next at-bat, he homered, giving him a pair of 2-homer games in two days.

Pirates manager Clint Hurdle wasn't amused, but he didn't know the whole story.

"Where is the respect for the game?" Hurdle said to the Pittsburgh media. "He's hit (4) homers in two days. Does that mean you can take your bat and throw it 15-20 feet in the air when you pop up, like you should have hit your fifth home run? I would bet that men went over and talked to him, because I believe they've got a group there that speaks truth to power."

They did indeed. Baez said after the game that a teammate talked to him about it and that he learned from the experience.

Baez said Thursday he was not aware of Hurdle's comments until he was in the shower after a 6-1 loss to the Pirates.

"I'm not mad at him, but like I say, I bust my (butt) every day to play hard," he said. "I don't think (anyone) plays this game harder than me. I respect 90 (feet down the baseline,). I respect whatever. You don't go out there and talk trash about someone. To be honest, I've got a lot of things I can say right now, but I don't control what's out there, what people talk about me. I'm just going to keep playing my game.

"I learned from that bat flip last night. That's all I got to say ... People that talk about me can save it."

Baez's teammates had his back.

"Four homers in two days and doesn't respect the game," said first baseman Anthony Rizzo sarcastically. "You should have hit 5, Javy."

"Obviously, he's one of those guys who's full of energy and loves the game of baseball," said left fielder Kyle Schwarber. "He just kind of rubs off on everyone with the way that he goes about it. He's a really good human being, and he enjoys the game. I think with that aspect, with the negative thing there, it is what it is."

Cubs manager Joe Maddon said that was all good that Baez and his teammates handled it themselves.

"That's definitely the needle moving in the right direction," Maddon said. "There's no question. Listen, when they're accountable, which I believe our guys are. As a group, they really do police each other well. They're unbelievably good at that. It's been going on the last couple years, but more recently, this spring training, like I've talked about, was incredibly different in all the best ways, meaning that they were getting together just to talk about stuff, not just baseball, but stuff.

"And I've never been around that. I'm really impressed with where they're going mentally right now as human beings, also, which I think's going to spill over on the baseball level and benefit us, too.

"The fact that he said that, I do believe, is the residue of the meetings. I think that's a perfect example of why these meetings have been so great. It's nothing that I've done. I stay out of their way."

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Daily Herald

Scouting report: Chicago Cubs vs. Atlanta Braves at Wrigley
By Bruce Miles

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Cubs vs. Atlanta Braves at Wrigley Field

TV:

NBC Sports Chicago Friday and Saturday; WGN Sunday

Radio:

WSCR 670-AM

Pitching matchups:

The Cubs' Yu Darvish (0-0) vs. Anibal Sanchez (0-0) Friday; Jose Quintana (1-1) vs. Sean Newcomb (1-1) Saturday; Tyler Chatwood (0-2) vs. Julio Teheran (0-1) Sunday. All games 1:20 p.m.

At a glance:

The young, prospect-rich Braves are off to a 7-5 start, which had them second to the Mets in the NL East entering Thursday. Veteran Freddie Freeman is off to a .325/.518/.625 start with 2 homers and 11 RBI. Ozzie Albies has 4 homers, and Dansby Swanson is 16-for-46 (.348). Peter Bourjos, who went to spring training with the Cubs before being released, is 2-for-14 with the Braves. The Braves and Cubs rank 2-3 in early team batting average and 3-4 in team ERA in the National League. Darvish will be making his first career start against the Braves. Weather could be dicey for much of the weekend.

Next:

St. Louis Cardinals at Wrigley Field, Monday-Wednesday

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