

How the inner workings of the Indians' front office have helped build a sustainable winner in Cleveland

Zack Meisel 2h ago 7

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — In the summer of 2002, a Mets marketing intern named Mike Chernoff chauffeured a player to an autograph signing at a Sports Authority store.

On the way back to Shea Stadium, as they approached a fire station in the heart of New York City, the player instructed Chernoff to pull over. They exited the car, walked into the building and thanked the firefighters for their service, a gesture greatly appreciated by those in the department.

Few days were so eye-opening for the intern, who still had a year's worth of college credits to accrue before he obtained his economics degree. Chernoff helped hand out bobbleheads at the ballpark gates on game days. When he interned with the Indians a year later, he accepted minor-league pitch charts via fax and transferred every handwritten pitch result, one by one, into the team's database.

"You felt like you were just pressing the button a thousand times, over and over and over again," Chernoff told *The Athletic*.

Technological advances have eliminated some of the busywork once bestowed upon those at the bottom of the front-office hierarchy. When Chris Antonetti joined the Expos in 1997, he made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, sold ice cream and served as the official scorer at Gulf Coast League games.

Once, when the Indians were on a road trip and CC Sabathia was rehabbing in Cleveland, the club needed someone to catch his bullpen session. Chernoff wasn't far removed from his playing career at Princeton, where the light-hitting infielder was team captain. He strapped on some gear, said his prayers and received the hard-throwing southpaw's tosses.

Those sorts of experiences occur less frequently today. A fresh-faced 23-year-old didn't catch Trevor Bauer's side sessions last month or retrieve Chernoff's dry cleaning.

In fact, Eric Binder, the club's director of baseball operations, can recall his third day in the office in 2013, after he joined the organization as an advance scouting intern. He was brewing a cup of coffee when Antonetti asked him whom that night's opponent, the Blue Jays, were sending to the mound.

"What do we have on him?" Antonetti asked.

"I was shocked he was asking me," Binder told *The Athletic*. "I was trying to walk through the scouting report the best I could. He was truly interested in what the attack was. It was just astounding to me. It really opened my eyes to the culture of the office."

For the Indians to construct a sustainable, winning product on the field — without the benefit of a boundless payroll — development is essential. The Indians contend their player development system is a competitive advantage, and a swift examination of the starting rotation, anchored by four previously undervalued trade acquisitions who blossomed under the organization's watch, supports that claim.

But take a peek at the staff directories across the league. Notice how many front office members have roots in Cleveland, how many stem from the tree planted by Mark Shapiro and Antonetti. For the Indians to evolve into a model, midmarket franchise — not just a short-lived, brief-occupant-of-your-memory-bank winner — it requires the right people in decision-making positions, and that requires development of people off the field, too.

"As soon as we stand still," Antonetti told *The Athletic*, "that's an opportunity for everybody to pass us by."

For Derek Falvey, lunch was the most important meal of the day.

When Falvey interned with the Indians a decade ago, he was often tasked with ordering lunch for the office. He had nightmares of Shapiro, then the fourth-floor boss at Progressive Field, receiving the wrong meal. So, when he placed everyone's orders, he would request the exact same meal as Shapiro. That way, if the restaurant botched Shapiro's order, Falvey would claim the screwed-up sandwich.

"Those things were nerve-wracking," Falvey told *The Athletic*.

Now, Falvey serves as the Twins' executive vice president and chief baseball officer. All because of his innovative sandwich-securing system. OK, not quite.

When Falvey joined the Indians in late 2007, he didn't intend on climbing the ladder toward a premier position within a major-league front office. Chernoff didn't, either. Now, he's the Indians' general manager. And on his first day with the Tribe in 2003, he didn't even eat lunch. He wasn't sure if he was supposed to stuff a brown bag with goodies or if his new colleagues would invite him to a nearby restaurant. Turns out, neither happened. Those loud rumbles echoing throughout downtown Cleveland on that day 15 years ago originated in Chernoff's stomach.

Both Falvey and Chernoff adhered to a simple tenet that Shapiro and Antonetti stressed: Each week, complete your 40 hours of work in your particular field. It's what you do with the rest of your time that will define your career trajectory.

When Antonetti wasn't driving Expos prospects to and from the airport in a van, he studied player development, hitting philosophies and defensive techniques.

"It was like a graduate school in baseball," he said.

Even as an intern, superiors encouraged Chernoff to contribute on projects he considered “way above (his) pay grade.” During his tenure in Cleveland, Falvey held roles in player development, scouting, baseball operations and administration. By his final years with the club, he joined the team on many road trips and served as a conduit between Terry Francona, the coaching staff and the decision-makers back in Cleveland.

“You very rarely heard, ‘No, you can’t learn about that area,’ or, ‘Stay in your lane,’ ” Falvey said.

And when people broaden their knowledge base, it allows for the organization to fill voids left by those who earn promotions elsewhere. The Twins poached Falvey from the Indians to oversee their entire operation. Falvey and David Stearns worked side by side as the Indians’ directors of baseball operations in 2012, before Stearns advanced to an assistant GM role with the Astros. The Brewers named Stearns their GM in 2015.

Shapiro tabbed longtime Indians executive Ross Atkins as the Blue Jays’ GM when he relocated north of the border three years ago. Neal Huntington, whom Antonetti considers a mentor, spent a decade in the Indians’ front office before he earned the Pirates’ GM gig in 2007. Diamondbacks GM Mike Hazen initiated his front-office career as an intern with the Indians nearly 20 years ago. He also held roles in advance scouting and player development.

The familiarity certainly helps ease communication between the Indians and other front offices. And it offers up-and-coming executives examples of the benefits of working in Cleveland.

“Chris has said this a lot: ‘We’re just looking for good ideas,’ ” Falvey said. “ ‘We don’t care where they come from. I don’t care if it’s from the intern who’s been there for three days or a tried-and-true person who’s been there for 20 years.’ If we have a good idea, we’re trying to bring it to the table.

“That’s really valuable, because it’s no longer just a system based on the time you put in. Too often in a lot of industries — and in baseball for a long time — it was, ‘You have to put in the time before you can have that conversation with the general manager.’ In (Chris’) case, it was, ‘I value your input. I want to see it. Bring it to me and we’ll find ways to incorporate it.’ That really is empowering for a junior employee to know that they have that level of direct access. And then it’s not only empowering, but then you feel a sense of obligation, where you have to keep to that level of standard and that becomes a cycle. If you keep that cycle going, that becomes the environment and culture that you’re supporting and, ultimately, you’re building.”

The Indians have never forked over nine figures for a free agent. Their payroll ranked in the middle of the pack this season, a franchise record of about \$142 million.

Misfires on Nick Swisher and Michael Bourn hamstrung them for a bit. Edwin Encarnacion has paid dividends, though even his lucrative contract creates some hurdles.

There’s little margin for error when functioning with such restrictions. The Indians aren’t alone in that regard. Billy Beane’s bunch built a 97-win club in Oakland this year with one of the league’s stingiest payrolls. Now, is it sustainable? The Athletics hadn’t qualified for the postseason since 2014, and they haven’t escaped the ALDS since 2006.

The Indians have amassed more victories since 2013 than any other AL club. This will be their fourth foray into the playoffs in that span (sorry, Kenny Lofton). But they’re also staring at the sport’s longest title drought, which stands at 70 years.

When operating with limited financial resources, unearthing other competitive advantages is essential.

“There’s a lot of focus right now in the development space,” Falvey said.

The player development system is the backbone of any big-league organization. That’s especially valid with the Indians, since free agency isn’t the most accommodating avenue by which to acquire talent.

Patience is often the key to the exercise, as evidenced by the paths that Carlos Carrasco, José Ramírez, Trevor Bauer and others traveled to reach stardom.

Before the Indians acquired Mike Clevinger, he was contemplating other career choices in wildlife control or biology. Indians scouts identified some attributes they liked, and when they completed the trade with the Angels for Vinnie Pestano, they overhauled Clevinger’s pitching delivery. A few years later, he bloomed into a 200-inning, 200-strikeout hurler.

The Indians converted Corey Kluber from a non-top-30 Padres prospect into a two-time Cy Young winner, thanks to pitch refinement, instruction and plenty of diligence from the right-hander.

It’s different for everyone. Shane Bieber breezed through the Indians’ system in two years. Conversely, the Indians were careful with top prospect Triston McKenzie this season. Brady Aiken didn’t throw a single pitch for an Indians affiliate, as he spent the summer in Arizona working on his velocity and command.

They have worked to enhance their drafting process over the years, an initiative Brad Grant spearheaded when he took over as amateur scouting director in 2007. Grant handed off those reins to Scott Barnsby last winter. After a decade of spending 200 nights a year in various Marriotts from Carlsbad to Cape Cod, Grant assumed a role supporting Antonetti and Chernoff in a cozy, fourth-floor office.

They have made strides on the international front, as well, especially at the lower levels. This year, Anna Bolton left her post as team translator to, among other assignments, implement a curriculum for the prospects at the team's Dominican academy. If players can communicate better, learn more quickly and feel more comfortable in their foreign surroundings, it will aid their pursuit of a baseball career.

"All of these areas," Falvey said, "that, when I came into the game, certainly there was some focus, and we felt in Cleveland we were a little bit ahead of the game."

The Indians have discovered ways to stand tall in each facet of the front office. That's the most sensible way for a club based outside of New York, Boston, Los Angeles and Chicago to compete on an annual basis. Even with a handful of players destined for free agency next month, the Indians plan to contend again in 2019 and beyond.

Clevinger (through 2022), Ramírez (through 2023), Bieber (2024), Brad Hand (2021) and Francisco Lindor (2021) are under team control for the long haul. Carrasco and Bauer are tied up through the 2020 season.

As those years pass, there will surely be changes to the Indians' staff directory. It seems as though the club has a never-ending pipeline.

Six years ago, Binder was pitching for the Trinidad Triggers of the independent Pecos League and the Joliet Slammers of the independent Frontier League. He also spent time at the Texas Baseball Ranch, where he and Bauer developed a friendship and studied lower-half pitching mechanics.

He interviewed with the Indians for an internship, started his new job and, a couple of days later, delivered a scouting report to Antonetti. Now, he regularly travels with the team, acting as a resource for the coaches and a liaison between the team and the rest of the front office.

"It's like, 'Hey, what are you seeing on the field? How can we support that?' " Binder said. " 'What can we dig into for you guys to help see what we see in the numbers?' And then, we really just try to work with them the best we can, and they have a great feel on how to break it down or how to present it to the players. We have a really healthy back and forth and really get to a root cause and effect."

The collaborative culture has paid dividends, and the Indians continue to churn out capable front-office executives, whether they're pinpointing a potential tweak in a pitcher's delivery, unearthing a talented prospect or catching an ace's bullpen session.

"I talk to a lot of my peers," Chernoff said. "It's unique. And it's why, even though a lot of people have obviously left for great jobs, a lot of people have made decisions to stay here."

Inbox: Will Tribe address Ramirez's struggles?

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

What is your read on Jose Ramirez at this point? Is he worn out? Pull happy? He's been in this slump for about six weeks now, and it's concerning with the postseason just days away.

-- Mark K., Wickliffe, Ohio

Ramirez ended his regular season with no hits in four plate appearances against the Royals on Sunday, but the slugger made some progress one night earlier. He homered, doubled and singled, and he admitted after Saturday's game that the pursuit of some in-season milestones may have hindered his concentration and approach.

"I think you'll be able to see the difference a little bit here," Ramirez said via team interpreter Will Clements. "Maybe before I wasn't as focused, and I was trying to hit the ball out a little bit too much. I just really don't think I was as focused as much as I am now."

Obviously, there is no statistical category called "Focus" that we can examine. What we do have available shows a distinct change in approach on the part of pitchers against Ramirez in the month of August. In September, perhaps it was a mix of fatigue or a hangover effect from the previous month, but Ramirez struggled to do what he did so well for the first four months.

In August, pitchers dramatically decreased the number of fastballs thrown to Ramirez, and for good reason. On the year, the switch-hitting All-Star posted a .673 slugging percentage against fastballs, compared to a .394 slugging against offspeed pitches and a .333 mark against breaking pitches, per Statcast™. So following a July in which Ramirez saw 57.8 percent fastballs, the rate dropped to 45.9 percent in August.

Ramirez still hit fastballs well overall in August, turning in a .625 slugging against all variety of heaters. The problem was that in September, when the fastball percentage climbed back to 53.6 percent (north of his season rate of 52.7), Ramirez slugged .404 off heaters. That was uncharacteristically low, and -- one would think -- it would improve given the same approach by pitchers in October.

After Aug. 6, when Ramirez's season average last stood at .300 (to go along with a .410 on-base percentage and .629 slugging), he hit at a .205/.338/.380 clip. One difference between those two samples within Ramirez's season was the pitchers' approach in 0-0 and batter-ahead counts. From Aug. 7 through the end of the season, Ramirez saw more offspeed and breaking pitches in what are typically fastball counts.

The good news is that Ramirez knows what pitchers are doing to him, and he understands that he may see the approach more magnified on the postseason stage. Expect the Astros to send Ramirez a steady stream of breaking balls in the American League Division Series. It will be up to Ramirez to make the adjustment.

"Everything is going to turn out fine," Ramirez said. "In the postseason, it's a totally different time, so I think everything is going to turn out fine."

If Indians manager Terry Francona has not altered the lineup by now -- with Ramirez's struggles nearly two months long and Josh Donaldson now added to the fold -- I would not expect a change in the ALDS. An unexpected lineup change at the most critical point of the season could also send the wrong message throughout the clubhouse.

Francona loves having two switch-hitters (Francisco Lindor and Ramirez) on either side of No. 2-hitter Michael Brantley. The manager also likes Ramirez's contact ability (87.7 percent), walk rate (15.2 percent) and baserunning (MLB-high 11.6 base runs above average, per Fangraphs) ahead of sluggers Edwin Encarnacion and Donaldson.

With Trevor Bauer looking back to normal, why not start him in Game 2 in Houston? His career record in Houston should back this theory up. -- Ben, Youngstown, Ohio

Three career starts at Minute Maid Park is hardly a large enough sample size to draw much of a conclusion. But since you brought it up, Carlos Carrasco (Game 2 starter) actually has a slightly better ERA in Houston. Carrasco has a 1.17 ERA in three starts on the road against the Astros and Bauer has a 1.45 ERA in three starts there as well.

There is a chance we see both Carrasco and Bauer pitch in Houston, though. I would not be surprised if the Indians have Bauer or Mike Clevinger on call out of the bullpen for Game 1. If they are not used, Cleveland could then have its pick for Game 3 or a potential Game 4. We will learn more about the Indians' rotation plans in the coming days.

It is also worth remembering that Carrasco has performed better on the road in his career. The right-hander has a 3.10 ERA in 105 career games away from home, compared to a 4.37 ERA in 102 career games in Cleveland.

I think the Indians will try to avoid a short-rest scenario, but things can change. Cleveland did not plan on going with three starters in the ALDS last year against the Yankees, but the team shifted gears and went with Bauer on short rest in Game 4. So could Kluber return on three days' rest for Game 4 this year? I wouldn't rule it out. I think the preference is to have Bauer or Clevinger handle Games 3 and 4, with Kluber and Carrasco primed for a Game 5 should the series last that long.

Another call for Tribe Q's ahead of the ALDS. Submit them here with #IndiansInbox or send to jordan.bastian@mlb.com with name/hometown. The Inbox returns to <http://Indians.com> on Monday.

Francona indicated that Yan Gomes (laceration on right thumb) might be able to have the two stitches he received removed by midweek, and the manager was optimistic about the catcher being ready for the ALDS. If that happens, I do not think Cleveland will need to carry three catchers. Roberto Perez can slide into the starting role if needed, but Gomes should be OK for the ALDS roster. His progress will be closely monitored over the next four workout days, leading up to Friday's roster announcement.

The Indians led the Majors with 135 stolen bases this season. That was a huge part of the team's offensive identity, and rookie Greg Allen got in on the action with 21 thefts in 25 attempts. If he is on the ALDS roster, Allen could make sense as a late-inning defensive replacement for Jason Kipnis in center field and as a weapon on the basepaths.

Indians meet high expectations for 2018 regular season

By David S. Glasier dglasier@news-herald.com @nhglasier on Twitter 13 hrs ago Comments

When the regular season began March 29 in Seattle, the Indians were prohibitive favorites to win a third straight American League Central Division title.

When it ended on Sept. 30 in Kansas City, the Indians were 91-71, AL Central champs and on their way to the playoffs for a third straight season.

In most respects, the 162-game journey through the regular season would have to be judged a success for the Indians collectively and individually.

They moved into first place in the weakest of Major League Baseball's six divisions for good on April 21 and remained there for the next 168 days, finishing 13 games ahead of the second-place Minnesota Twins.

No other team in baseball won its division by more than eight games.

At the plate, the Indians worked their way through some mystifying dry spells to finish near the top in many offensive categories, including team batting average (.259, third), home runs (216, sixth), RBI (787, third), runs scored (818, third) and stolen bases (135, first).

Indians batters struck out 1,189 times, the least among the 30 big-league teams.

Shortstop Francisco Lindor (.277, 38 home runs, 40 doubles, 92 RBI, 129 runs, 20 stolen bases) and third-baseman-second baseman Jose Ramirez (.272, 39 home runs, 39 doubles, 106 RBI, 110 runs, 34 stolen bases) gave the Indians a record-setting one-two punch at the top of the batting order.

Lindor and Ramirez became the first duo of switch-hitting teammates in major-league history to each have 20 or more home runs and 20 or more stolen bases in a single season.

Ramirez is the 25th player in major-league history to finish with regular-season totals of at least 30 home runs, 30 stolen bases, 100 RBI and 100 runs scored.

They got plenty of help at the top of the batting order from designated hitter Edwin Encarnacion (.246, 32 home runs, 107 RBI), left fielder Michael Brantley (.309, 17 home runs, 76 RBI), and first baseman Yonder Alonso (.250, 23 home runs, 83 RBI).

On the mound, Indians pitchers combined for a team earned run average of 3.77, the ninth-lowest in the game. Their totals of strikeouts (1,558, fifth) runs allowed (648, 24th), earned runs (611), bases on balls (407, 29th) and opponents' batting average (.242, 12th) were impressive, too.

Two-time AL Cy Young Award winner Corey Kluber (20-7, 2.89 ERA, 22 strikeouts) reached the 20-victory plateau for the first time in seven-plus seasons.

One of baseball's best starting rotations was rounded out by Carlos Carrasco (17-10, 3.38 ERA, 231 strikeouts), Mike Clevinger (13-8, 3.02 ERA, 207 strikeouts), Trevor Bauer (12.8, 2.21 ERA, 221 strikeouts) and Shane Bieber (11-5, 4.55 ERA).

The Indians are the first team in major-league history to have four pitchers notch 200 or more strikeouts in the same season.

It was another banner season for Indians manager Terry Francona, too. He has guided the Indians to four postseason appearances in his six seasons as the team's manager.

The Indians' regular-season record of 545-425 during those six seasons is the best in the American League. Only the Los Angeles Dodgers of the National League at 564-408 have a better record over that span.

Ingraham: Jason Kipnis finally hitting like Jason Kipnis ... and just in time for the postseason, too
Jim Ingraham | The Chronicle-Telegram Published on Sept. 30, 2018 | Updated 3:27 a. m.

He's now a square peg — but a classy one — in a round hole.

While many of us, especially this typist, were giving up on Jason Kipnis, he was reinventing himself.

For most of this season, the Indians' third highest-paid player (\$13.6 million) was their biggest disappointment. For a 2½-month Saharian stretch in the first half of the season — from April 2 to June 15 — he hit .190. Repeat: .190. For 2½ months! Sixty-two games. He had a .268 on-base percentage, a .293 slugging percentage, with more strikeouts (57) than hits (46).

He buried himself. It was a full-blown avalanche. A mine cave-in. The Kip-skid covered a whopping 242 at-bats, the equivalent of almost half a season of hang-with-'ems. His season was dead in the water. Flatlining.

His bat didn't need pine tar. It needed jumper cables. Defibrillator paddles.

It's not a given that a quality player can salvage a season by crawling from the wreckage of nearly half a year's worth of batter's box butchery. Look no further than Orioles Oh-fer Oligarch Chris Davis.

In 2013, Davis walloped a league-leading 53 home runs, drove in a league-leading 138 runs and finished third in the MVP voting. In 2015, he again led the league in taters, with 47.

This year he averaged a strikeout every other at-bat en route to what some analytics crunchers are calling the worst season by a hitter in major league history. He struck out 192 times, had just 79 hits, 51 of them singles and hit .168. That's for the year. His WAR number, as computed by Baseball-Reference, is 2.8, which means he basically was not any better than you or I would have been, had we played first base all year for the Orioles.

Kipnis, a career .268 hitter coming into this season, didn't get his batting average out of the 100s for good until June 18. He didn't get his batting average over .230 until ... well ... now. He went into Saturday night's game hitting .231, which was the highest his average has been since the second game of the season. His .708 OPS going into Saturday's game was the highest it's been since Opening Day.

In other words, Kipnis is finally getting started, just as the season is ending. The regular season, anyway. Actually, even that's not quite accurate.

Kipnis began to quietly drag his season out of the gutter in the last two weeks of June. Nobody noticed, of course, because even then his batting average still languished somewhere south of Cape Horn.

But a 1-for-3 here, a 2-for-4 there and all of a not-so-suddenly he was lukewarm and getting warmer.

In his last 39 games — since Aug. 11 — Kipnis is hitting a Kipnisian .271, with an .845 OPS, seven home runs and 30 RBIs. The best of that run has occurred since he was moved from second base to center field.

In 131 games at second base he hit .228 with a .685 OPS. In his first 12 games in center field he hit .275 with a .908 OPS.

For all of this, Kipnis deserves tons of credit. Because of his brutal first half of the season, Kipnis, as Terry Francona has pointed out, knew he was going to have to live with the ugly numbers flashed on the scoreboard whenever he was hitting.

Kipnis lived with it. Owned it. Refused to let it defeat him. He never, as many do, made excuses or blamed all those days of hitting under .200 on all the things that are available for blame, should a player choose not to be accountable for his performance.

Kipnis continued to say all the right things. Continued to be a team player. Accepted his removal from second base and reassignment to the outfield with the same grace with which he accepted it last year. He put the team first, which tends to be a trademark for players who play for Francona.

Now it's late September and Kipnis' professionalism and perseverance has paid off. He's once again a significant offensive contributor — and not a moment too soon, since the postseason beckons.

Through the weeks and months of nothingness it would have been easy for Kipnis to take the money and sulk. To his credit, he didn't. He kept grinding, kept Kipnising, and he eventually came out of it, which is great news for the Indians, because in some ways he's a barometer for how they play.

Kipnis' batting average in Indians wins is .307. In games they've lost he's hit .129. He's also, despite the brutal start, still one of the team's best hitters with runners in scoring position (.299) and with two outs and runners in scoring position (.309).

He's even making diving catches in the outfield.

Hats off to the square peg.

Here's how the 10 postseason teams were built

By Jonathan Mayo and Jim Callis and Mike Rosenbaum MLB.com @JonathanMayo and @JimCallisMLB and @GoldenSombrero

The Red Sox and Cubs built two of baseball's best teams in similar fashion. They mostly used homegrown hitters to fortify their lineups and trades and free agents to construct their pitching staffs.

Boston drafted its stellar outfield of Andrew Benintendi, Mookie Betts and Jackie Bradley Jr. and signed Xander Bogaerts and Rafael Devers internationally. Chicago parlayed its 2011-15 first-round picks into Javier Baez, Albert Almora Jr., Kris Bryant, Kyle Schwarber and Ian Happ and found Willson Contreras in Venezuela. The Red Sox's projected playoff rotation and closer all came via trades (Chris Sale, Eduardo Rodriguez, Rick Porcello, Craig Kimbrel) or free agency (David Price), as is true with the Cubs (free agent Jon Lester and trade acquisitions Kyle Hendricks, Cole Hamels, Jose Quintana and Pedro Strop).

Despite the similarities between Boston and Chicago, there's no set blueprint for putting together a playoff club. The Rockies lead all off the postseason clubs with 12 homegrown players on their projected 25-man roster, while the Athletics have just four. Oakland tops them all with seven free-agent signings, while the Dodgers have just two. The A's, Brewers and Yankees each swung deals for 14 of their players, while Colorado picked up just five players in trades.

Here's a more detailed breakdown of how each of the playoff teams was built, based on projected Division Series rosters, which will be set prior to the beginning of each series:

AMERICAN LEAGUE

A's

Homegrown (Draft + Int'l): 4 (WAR: 16.5)

• Draft: 4 (WAR: 16.5)

• International: 0 (N/A)

Free Agents: 7 (WAR: 5.6)

Trades: 14 (WAR: 25.3)

The four homegrown players on the A's projected roster is the fewest among postseason teams. They're all products of the Draft, a group highlighted by 2014 first-rounder Matt Chapman, who's emerged as baseball's best defensive third baseman and a franchise cornerstone for the A's, and 2012 comp pick Matt Olson. Together, the duo combined to hit 53 homers and 75 doubles during the regular season. Trades in recent years for players such as AL home run leader Khris Davis (2016 from Brewers), Marcus Semien (2014 from White Sox), Jed Lowrie (2015 from Astros) and Stephen Piscotty (2017 from Cardinals) have helped the A's fill out a potent offense, and the same can be said for the club's elite bullpen trio of Blake Treinen (2017 from Nationals), Jeurys Familia (2018 from Mets) and Fernando Rodney (2018 from Twins). And while season-ending injuries ultimately shelved much of their Opening Day rotation, the A's managed to effectively patch holes with free-agent veterans Brett Anderson, Trevor Cahill and Edwin Jackson and then acquired Mike Fiers from the Tigers in August.

Astros

Homegrown (Draft + Int'l): 10 (WAR: 26.0)

• Draft: 8 (WAR: 18.5)

• International: 2 (WAR: 7.5)

Free Agents: 5 (WAR: 7.8)

Trades: 8 (WAR: 16.9)

Waivers: 1 (WAR: 2.0)

Rule 5 Draft: 1 (WAR: 2.5)

Four of the best players on the defending World Series champions were taken with a No. 1 or 2 overall pick in the Draft: Astros draftees Carlos Correa (No. 1, 2012) and Alex Bregman (No. 2, 2015) and blockbuster trade acquisitions Justin Verlander (No. 2, 2004, Tigers) and Gerrit Cole (No. 1, 2011, Pirates). By contrast, Houston also has a former MVP and a former Cy Young Award winner who vastly exceeded expectations in Jose Altuve, signed for \$15,000 out of Venezuela in 2006, and Dallas Keuchel, a seventh-rounder two years later. George Springer, a 2011 first-rounder, also was on hand when Jeff Luhnow took over as GM later that year. In addition to overseeing the Correa and Bregman drafts

and making the Verlander and Cole deals, Luhnnow made a number of smaller acquisitions that have paid off such as plucking Marwin Gonzalez in the Rule 5 Draft, claiming Collin McHugh off waivers and signing Charlie Morton as a free agent.

Indians

Homegrown (Draft + Int'l): 7 (WAR: 19.8)

- Draft: 5 (WAR: 15.6)
- International: 2 (WAR: 12.1)

Free Agents: 5 (WAR: 11.0)

Trades: 12 (WAR: 13.0)

Waivers: 1 (WAR: -0.5)

The Indians' secured their third straight AL Central title in 2018 with a largely unchanged roster compared to previous years. Homegrown phenoms Francisco Lindor (first round, 2011) and Jose Ramirez (international free agent, '09) are MVP candidates once again and headline an Indians offense that also features free-agents signings Edwin Encarnacion ('16) and Yonder Alonso ('17). On the mound, trade acquisitions Corey Kluber (2010), Carlos Carrasco ('09) and a combination of Trevor Bauer ('12) and Mike Clevinger ('14) give the Indians a top-flight rotation, and the club dealt a top prospect for bullpen help for a second time in three years when it landed Brad Hand and Adam Cimber from San Diego at the Trade Deadline and then acquired Josh Donaldson from Toronto the following month.

Red Sox

Homegrown (Draft + Int'l): 10 (WAR: 22.2)

- Draft: 8 (WAR: 18.4)
- International: 2 (WAR: 3.8)

Free Agents: 4 (WAR: 13.3)

Trades: 11 (WAR: 19.9)

With a notable free-agent exception (J.D. Martinez, David Price) in each case, the Red Sox have compiled the best record in baseball and won their third straight American League East title with a lineup built around homegrown hitters and a pitching staff assembled through trades. MVP frontrunner Betts was a fifth-round pick in a 2011 Draft that also yielded supplemental first-rounder Bradley, while Benintendi was a 2015 first-rounder and Bogaerts signed for \$410,000 out of Aruba in 2009. President of baseball operations David Dombrowski sacrificed top prospects to acquire Sale and Kimbrel, who have starred in Boston. Previous GM Ben Cherington dealt for Rodriguez and Porcello when the Red Sox were rebuilding.

Yankees

Homegrown (Draft + Int'l): 8 (WAR: 22.8)

- Draft: 4 (WAR: 11.7)
- International: 4 (WAR: 11.1)

Free Agents: 3 (WAR: 4.0)

Trades: 14 (WAR: 24.2)

The Yankees' best hitter (2013 first-round choice Aaron Judge) and best pitcher (Luis Severino, signed out of the Dominican Republic for \$225,000 in 2011) are homegrown products. Yet for the most part, trades are the backbone of a team making its third postseason appearance in four years. The Giancarlo Stanton deal was a splashy move that generated a lot of headlines, but GM Brian Cashman also has excelled at making stealth moves for the likes of Aaron Hicks (from the Twins in exchange for John Ryan Murphy), Didi Gregorius (D-backs for Shane Greene), Chad Green (Tigers for Justin Wilson) and J.A. Happ (Blue Jays for Brandon Drury and Billy McKinney). And in a rare year where the Yankees were sellers and not buyers, they grabbed Gleyber Torres in a package from the Cubs for Aroldis Chapman in 2016.

Indians first baseman Yonder Alonso set for first postseason 'surrounded by a bunch of good guys'

By Michael Beaven

When first baseman Yonder Alonso entered free agency this past winter, he considered his options.

In addition to seeking a lucrative contract, he also wanted to play for a team that could contend for a World Series championship.

Enter the Indians with a talented pitching rotation and a dynamic batting order that was in need of a first baseman after the departure of free agent Carlos Santana to the Philadelphia Phillies.

"He has been wanting this since he signed with us," Indians shortstop Francisco Lindor said of Alonso in a recent interview at Progressive Field. "That was the first thing he mentioned when I first saw him. He said, 'I want to be in the playoffs.' And I was like, 'Yeah, we have got a winning atmosphere here and it will be completely different from where you are coming from.'

"He is very excited because he has been wanting to play in the playoffs. Obviously, a lot of good things happen in the postseason."

This week Alonso will experience the MLB playoffs for the first time in his playing career when the Indians (91-71) meet the defending World Series champion Houston Astros (103-59) in an American League Division Series.

Games 1 and 2 are in Houston on Friday and Saturday, and then the series shifts to Cleveland for Game 3 on Oct. 8. Games 4 and 5, if necessary, are scheduled for Oct. 9 in Cleveland and Oct. 11 in Houston.

Alonso, 31, bats in the middle of an Indians lineup that features playoff veterans Lindor, Michael Brantley, Jose Ramirez, Edwin Encarnacion, Josh Donaldson, Melky Cabrera, Yan Gomes and Jason Kipnis.

Indians vs. Astros preview podcast

Ryan Lewis previews the ALDS with Rob Oller of the Columbus Dispatch.

"I am lucky that I am in this position, obviously," Alonso said in the Indians clubhouse before a recent Saturday night game. "I am surrounded by a bunch of good guys, and for me, specifically, I am going to enjoy the moment but understand that it is just a baseball game. It is not anything different. It is still the game. You have 27 outs and you gotta score more runs than the other team.

"Other than that — just enjoy the moment, have fun with it and try not to put so much pressure on yourself."

Alonso compiled a .250 batting average (129-for-516) with 23 home runs, 83 RBI and 64 runs scored in 145 games for the Indians this season.

Alonso came to Cleveland with eight years of MLB experience with stints in Cincinnati, San Diego, Oakland and Seattle. The Reds selected Alonso in the first round pick of the 2008 draft, and after three trades and a free agency courtship by the Indians, he is finally getting the opportunity to play postseason baseball in October.

"That was the main priority and why I came here," said Alonso, who was born in La Habana, Cuba, and now makes his home in Miami. "I knew they have gone to the postseason quite a bit, and that is something that I wanted to experience. I came over here and in December I said, 'Hey, I am going to come here with the main priority to win, get to the playoffs and have some fun.'"

Alonso observed from a distance as the Indians had fun and went to the playoffs in 2016 and 2017 as the American League Central Division champions.

The 2016 Indians went 94-67 in the regular season, and then beat the Boston Red Sox and the Toronto Blue Jays in the American League playoffs before losing to the Chicago Cubs in seven games in the World Series.

The 2017 Indians put together an American League-record 22-game win streak en route to a 102-60 regular-season record, and then were eliminated by the New York Yankees in an AL division series.

"I leaned on everybody — Kipnis, Brantley, Lindor, Encarnacion — during my transition to coming here," Alonso said. "All of those guys have been good teammates. They have given me a lot of advice and I continue to get the advice and ask questions."

Alonso said he attended a World Series game in 1997 when the then Florida Marlins hosted the Indians in Miami.

"It was electric in the stadium," Alonso said. "I expect that atmosphere. It is definitely going to be a lot of fun."

Akron Beacon Journal LOADED: 10.02.2018

Cleveland Indians, Francisco Lindor get another crack at October: Can they 'finish' the job?

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Francisco Lindor did his speed and power thing on the last day of the regular season Sunday in Kansas City. He scored a run on two errors and two stolen bases in the first inning. In the third, he hit his 38th and final home run.

The Indians won, 2-1, with both runs being signed, sealed and delivered by Lindor.

What better way to prepare for the postseason which is steaming toward the Indians on Friday night at Minute Maid Park? Good muscle memory to lean on. Some positive momentum as well.

Maybe that's how it appeared from the outside looking in. But from the inside looking out, Lindor had something else in his line of vision.

"To be honest, we're done," said Lindor, when asked about carrying Sunday's game into the ALDS. "You know what I'm saying? We're done.

"Whatever we did in the regular season, nobody cares. You can hit .110 in the regular season and go into the postseason and hit .300. Last year I hit 33 (homers), drove in 89 (runs), did a bunch of good things and went into the postseason and only had two or three hits (two). You know what I'm saying?"

Francisco Lindor excited that it's time for the postseason

It's hard to forget the Indians winning 102 games last season only to waste a 2-0 lead in the ALDS against the Yankees. Lindor hitting .111 (2-for-18) with one homer and four RBI and Jose Ramirez going 2-for-20 (.100) in that series still causes pain in the the soul of every Tribe fan.

"It doesn't matter," said Lindor. "Whatever we did in the past is in the past. Now we're focused on enjoying the next couple of days and then focus on Houston."

The Indians will play Houston in the best-of-five ALDS starting Friday at Minute Maid Park. The Astros won home-field advantage by winning a franchise record 103 games. The Indians won their third straight AL Central title with a 91-71 record.

Lindor has not forgotten what it felt like to be bounced out of the postseason season last year much earlier than expected by the wild-card Yankees. He is looking for redemption.

"Definitely," said Lindor. "I can't wait. Last year wasn't a good feeling. Hopefully, this year will be a better one."

Redemption isn't the only thing Lindor is seeking. Since the start of spring training, he's talked about finishing the job at hand. It's a job that has gone uncompleted since 1948 when the Indians won their last World Series.

"That's why I played nine innings (on Sunday)," said Lindor. "They asked me to come off, but I wanted to finish. I want to finish. . . I want to finish. We all want to finish. We're all looking forward to it."

It is quite a season Lindor just turned the lights out on. Here are the basics: .277 (183-for-661), 129 runs, 42 doubles, 38 homers, 92 RBI, 70 walks, 107 strikeouts, 25 steals and an OPS of .871.

In the AL he ranks first in at-bats, tied for first in runs, third in games played (158), fourth in hits, tied for sixth in homers, tied for seven in doubles, eighth in stolen bases and tied for eighth in OPS.

Among AL shortstops Lindor ranks first in runs, hits, homers and at-bats. He ranked second in doubles, RBI, games and OPS, third in stolen bases and fourth in batting average. He is the only shortstop in MLB history to put together a season at least 35 homers, 40 doubles and 20 stolen bases.

If you asked Frankie how he would've wanted his last regular season game of 2018 to go, it probably would've looked something like this ...#FrankieMVP pic.twitter.com/eYylaF9Q3D

-- Cleveland Indians (@Indians) October 1, 2018

All those at-bats have come at a cost. Like Ramirez, his switch-hitting double play partner, Lindor will enter the postseason struggling. He's hitting .217 (28-for-129) since Aug. 29. Ramirez is in a deeper slump, hitting .172 (25-for-145) since Aug. 14. If they repeat their ALDS flop against the Yankees, the Indians could be in for another short postseason.

But like Lindor said, the postseason is a new season. In the Tribe's clubhouse there is no question who makes the Tribe go.

"He's a five-tool player," first baseman Yonder Alonso, when asked about Lindor. "They say five-tool player, but he's also got a sixth tool - his head. He's a guy who understands the game. Who knows how to play the game the right way. I have 80 (83) something RBI and it feels like on half of them he's the one scoring."

Added third baseman, Josh Donaldson, "I've been saying it for a couple of years now: He's been one of the most exciting, young players in the game. For him to be able to continue to evolve as a player, continue to get better and do it on a day-to-day basis, it's pretty special. He affects the game at every level: defense, offense, on the bases. That's what you see from great players and that's what he does."

And now Lindor and the Indians get another chance to finish the job in the postseason.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 10.02.2018

Cleveland Indians vs. Houston Astros ALDS could be the arms race everybody anticipated last year

By Joe Noga, cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Two of the top pitching staffs in Major League Baseball are set to clash Friday when the Cleveland Indians and Houston Astros meet in Game 1 of the American League Division Series at Minute Maid Park.

It's the matchup that many had anticipated in last year's AL Championship series that never materialized after New York rallied from a 2-0 deficit to upset the top-seeded Tribe in the divisional round. By any measure, Cleveland and Houston have been among the elite teams in all of baseball when it comes to pitching performance in the last two seasons.

"Yeah, they're good, they're really good and we knew that," Indians manager Terry Francona said of the Astros. "Shoot, this will be quite the test, but that's what you play for. It's so good to be a part of. It's an honor."

Both teams feature a good mix of veteran pitchers and young talent, and both staffs can rack up high strikeout numbers.

This year, Houston's starting rotation of Justin Verlander, Gerrit Cole, Charlie Morton, Dallas Keuchel and Lance McCullers set an MLB record with 10.37 strikeouts per nine innings. The Astros staff set a MLB record with 1,687 total strikeouts, beating the previous record set last season by the Indians (1,614).

Meanwhile, Cleveland's starting five of Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco, Trevor Bauer, Mike Clevinger and Shane Bieber posted an all-time record 4.37 strikeout-to-walk ratio. The Indians' 17 shutouts were the most in the AL and second only to the Cubs (18) for the most in the big leagues.

Francona said Indians coaches and scouts will hold several meetings this week to prepare for what the Astros will throw at them.

"We had guys out on the field that will come in and spend some time with the analytics guys and kind of put everything together," Francona said. "By the time we get there, we're comfortable. That doesn't mean you're comfortable with who you're playing. I mean, you're comfortable that you know kind of what you're up against, because that can also be difficult because what you're up against is pretty good."

In fWAR, the 2018 Indians rotation (22.9) ranks 18th all-time, while the 2018 Astros rotation (22.5) is 22nd all-time. Houston's 30.7 fWAR as a staff led all of baseball and came close to Cleveland's record in 2017 (32.0)

Tribe starters also recorded 98 quality starts, tops in MLB and Cleveland's most in a single campaign since registering 108 in 1968. Indians pitchers posted 30 starts with at least 10 strikeouts, second-most in MLB behind Houston (31).

Astros pitchers lead the AL in ERA (3.11), opponent average (.217), WHIP (1.10), starter's ERA (3.17) and bullpen ERA (3.00).

Of course no other MLB pitching staff had boasted four 200-strikeout pitchers on the same staff in a single season until the Indians reached that mark on Sept. 22.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 10.02.2018

Cleveland Indians' Corey Kluber flushed memories of 2017 ALDS vs. Yankees a long time ago

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio - Manager Terry Francona has said Corey Kluber and Carlos Carrasco will start Games 1 and 2 of the ALDS which begins Friday at Minute Maid Park.

Houston manager A.J. Hinch told reporters that he's going to wait to announce his pitching plans until Tuesday, but it's safe to speculate that Justin Verlander and Gerrit Cole will start the first two games for the Astros.

Those four pitchers have had fine seasons, but out of the four it would seem Kluber would have the most to prove. Verlander won his World Series last year after the Tigers traded him Houston. Last year at this time Cole had just finished going 12-12 for the Pirates. This is Carrasco's seventh season with the Indians, but when he starts Saturday in Game 2, it will be just his second postseason appearance.

Kluber and the postseason know each other well. He went 4-1 with a 1.83 ERA in six postseason starts in 2016. Three of those starts, all on short rest, came in the World Series.

Last year Kluber pitched well enough in the regular season to win his second Cy Young award in four years. In the ALDS against the Yankees, he made two starts and they both went sideways. The Indians managed to win Game 2 in 13 innings, but in Game 5, he allowed three runs in 3 2/3 innings as the Yankees won, 5-2, to eliminate the Indians.

This year Kluber is once again a Cy Young contender. He won 20 games for the first time in his career and led the AL in innings pitched, while recording more than 200 strikeouts for the fifth straight year.

When the Indians were in Kansas City over the weekend, their last stop on their last regular season trip, Kluber was asked if he sees the approaching ALDS as a chance to make things right. A chance to fix what went wrong last October.

"I don't want this to come off the wrong way," he said. "I think fans tend to dwell on things like that a little bit more than we do as players. When we were eliminated last year there was disappointment. Just like when we lost Game 7 of the World Series, there was disappointment.

"But I think part of preparing yourself for the next year is putting that behind you and getting ready for the next spring training, the next season, the next postseason. Just kind of always having that mentality of looking forward. There is enough to worry about without having to make up for last year, however you want to word it."

Personally, that's how Kluber handled his ALDS performance.

Corey Kluber and the @Indians have their eyes on the ultimate prize. #RallyTogether pic.twitter.com/QtjAfaOD6B

-- SportsTime Ohio (@SportsTimeOhio) September 30, 2018

Yes, he was disappointed, but not any more than the disappointment he felt when the Indians lost Game 7 of the World Series to the Cubs.

"Obviously, the situation didn't turn out the way we would have liked it to," said Kluber. "Like I said it's no different than if you have a bad start during the season. The best way to cope with that it is to flush it. If you sit and dwell on it, those things kind of eat away at you and you start carrying weight around that makes trying to do things that are difficult even more difficult. Whether it's a pitcher pitching poorly or a hitter in a slump, guys who have experience push that aside and concentrate on the task you have for the day."

Play ball: The Indians, who had an optional workout at Progressive Field on Monday, will have a full-scale practice Tuesday. It will include an intrasquad game.

Outfielder Tyler Naquin, rehabbing from right hip surgery in Goodyear, Ariz., returned to Cleveland on Sunday and is scheduled to play in the game. Lonnie Chisenhall was also in Goodyear on a rehab assignment for a strained left calf, but manager Terry Francona said Chisenhall had been given permission to go home to North Carolina because of possible hurricane damage to his home.

"Naquin will play in the game, so we can get a look at him," said Francona. "Lonnie had a choice of staying in Goodyear or going home with his family because they had some stuff going on with the hurricanes."

As for Chisenhall's injury, Francona said, "He's actually doing OK. He's running the bases hitting and everything."

Chisenhall will be a free agent after the World Series.

In 2016, the Indians sent several players to Goodyear, including Ryan Merritt, during the postseason. The idea was to keep them sharp in case the Tribe advanced and they were needed as a roster addition.

The Indians will not do that this year. They say they can accomplish what they need to get done at Progressive Field.

Dynamic duo: Switch-hitters Francisco Lindor and Jose Ramirez finished the regular season with a combined 239 runs, 81 doubles, 77 homers and 198 RBI.

"I don't think (we've seen the best) from Frankie and Josey," said Francona. "There might be more in there."

Francona loves Lindor in the leadoff spot. He finished the year with 129 runs, tying Mookie Betts for the most in the big leagues.

"When he plays with that energy like that, it's infectious for our whole team," said Francona. "We remind him of that all the time because so often, as he goes, we go. That's a good thing."

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 10.02.2018

Astros vs. Indians ALDS matchups: First base

Steve Schaeffer

Yuli Gurriel did some of his best work in September and also thrives with runners in scoring position. The Indians' Yonder Alonso boats the edge in power.

Before the Astros-Indians American League Division Series begins Friday at Minute Maid Park, Houston Chronicle baseball editor Steve Schaeffer will break down the positional matchups between the teams.

First base

Looking for a guy who might be an October hero? Despite starting the season late because of a carry-over suspension and surgery on his left hand, Yuli Gurriel finished with a solid .291 average and 85 RBIs in 136 games, and he brings one of the Astros' hottest bats (.356/.379/.567 in September) into the playoffs. He also hit .403 in 139 at-bats with runners in scoring position, and his ability to make scoops was a factor in the Astros' MLB-best .989 fielding percentage.

Astros vs. Indians ALDS matchups: Second base

Steve Schaeffer

Before the Astros-Indians American League Division Series begins Friday at Minute Maid Park, Houston Chronicle baseball editor Steve Schaeffer will break down the positional matchups between the teams.

Second base

Defending AL MVP Jose Altuve and last year's third-place finisher, Jose Ramirez, now man the same position after a September switch by Cleveland moved the latter from third base.

Ramirez easily had the better season, producing an OPS of .944 with 39 homers, 39 doubles, 34 steals, 110 runs, 106 RBIs and 106 walks. But he hit only .223 after the All-Star break and fell out of MVP consideration with a miserable September (.185/.330/.337).

Injuries kept Altuve from being his usual 200-hit self, but his .315 batting average still ranked third in the AL. And watch out once the series gets to Cleveland: Altuve's road splits (.346/.400/.491) were vastly better than his home numbers (.283/.369/.408).

EDGE: EVEN

Houston Chronicle LOADED: 10.02.2018

Astros vs. Indians ALDS matchups: Shortstop

Steve Schaeffer

Oct. 1, 2018

The Indians' Francisco Lindor (left) and Astros' Carlos Correa represent two of baseball's top talents at shortstop.

Before the Astros-Indians American League Division Series begins Friday at Minute Maid Park, Houston Chronicle baseball editor Steve Schaeffer will break down the positional matchups between the teams.

Shortstop

To say the least, Carlos Correa's injury-riddled season, which includes career worsts of .239/.323/.405 and 15 home runs, has been much more disappointing than his injury-riddled 2017, when his .315/.391/.550 and 24 homers were all career highs.

Francisco Lindor, who like Correa entered the majors in 2015, has pulled ahead when it comes to meriting recognition as the American League's best shortstop and might finish among the top five in MVP voting.

In addition to slashing .277/.352/.519, Lindor co-led the majors with 129 runs, hit 38 homers, totaled 92 RBIs from the leadoff spot, and stole 25 bases.

EDGE: INDIANS

Astros vs. Indians ALDS matchups: Third base

Steve Schaeffer

The Astros' Alex Bregman made dugout camera stares a rite of summer while making himself an MVP candidate. Josh Donaldson was a late addition to the Indians after being injured with Toronto.

Before the Astros-Indians American League Division Series begins Friday at Minute Maid Park, Houston Chronicle baseball editor Steve Schaeffer will break down the positional matchups between the teams.

Third base

Alex Bregman has simply been the Astros' best player in 2018, when he became the first third baseman in major league history with a 30-homer, 50-double season. (He had 31 and 51, respectively.)

Throw in a .286/.394/.532 slash line, 105 runs, 103 RBIs, 96 walks, 10 steals, Gold Glove-caliber defense and a penchant for delivering in the clutch, and you've got a probable top-five MVP finisher.

Josh Donaldson, who has won an MVP award, went to Cleveland in an August deadline deal with the Blue Jays and, seemingly past injuries that limited him to 36 games with Toronto, hit .280/.400/.520 with three homers in 16 games with the Indians.

EDGE: ASTROS

FAQs Astros face as they head to playoffs

A second consecutive American League West title and a team-record 103 wins have the Astros feeling pretty good about themselves entering the postseason, which gets underway for them Friday in Game 1 of the AL Division Series against the Indians at Minute Maid Park.

The deep AL postseason field features three 100-win teams and an A's team that pushed the Astros in the division until the final week of the regular season. No team has repeated as World Series champions since the Yankees won three in a row from 1998-2000.

• So let's take a look at some FAQs facing the Astros heading into the postseason:

Q: How do the Astros match up against the Indians?

A: The Astros went 4-3 against the Indians this season, with all seven meetings coming in a 10-day span in May. Houston won two of three at home from May 18-20 and split a four-game series in Cleveland from May 24-27. The Astros squandered a five-run lead after eight innings in a 10-9, 14-inning loss on May 27.

The Astros hit .293 and scored 45 runs in seven games against the Indians, averaging 6.4 runs per game. They had a team ERA of 3.95 in seven games against the Tribe, allowing 29 runs (4.1 runs per game).

Jose Altuve feasted on Cleveland pitching this year, hitting .469 (15-for-32), with Yuli Gurriel (.355) and George Springer (.323) also bashing Indians pitching. Marwin Gonzalez (5-for-22) and Carlos Correa (7-for-30) scuffled against the Tribe. On the mound, Charlie Morton is 2-0 with a 2.08 ERA in two starts against the Indians. Dallas Keuchel has also made two starts against Cleveland this year, going 0-1 with a 4.91 ERA.

Justin Verlander, Houston's likely Game 1 starter, didn't pitch against Cleveland in the regular season, but he has a lot of experience against the Indians from his 13 years in Detroit. He has nine more losses in his career against the Tribe than any other team, going 20-24 with a 4.71 ERA in 52 starts.

Games 1 and 2 will be at Minute Maid Park on Oct. 5-6, Games 3 and 4 will be at Progressive Field on Oct. 8-9 and Game 5 would take place Oct. 11 in Houston, if needed.

Q: What will the pitching rotation look like?

A: Hinch is going to announce his rotation on Tuesday, but I think it's safe to say Verlander (16-9, 2.52 ERA) will start Game 1, Gerrit Cole (15-5, 2.88 ERA) will start Game 2, Keuchel (12-11, 3.74 ERA) will start Game 3 and Morton (15-3, 3.13 ERA) will start Game 4. That would put Verlander in line to start a possible Game 5 in Houston.

The Indians have announced that two-time AL Cy Young Award winner Corey Kluber will start Game 1 and Carlos Carrasco will start Game 2.

Q: What's the health status of Correa, Morton and Lance McCullers Jr.?

A: Correa was on the disabled list from June 26-Aug. 9 with a sore back, and he hasn't performed well since. He hit .180 with six extra-base hits in his 123 at-bats after being activated from the DL, and he was given another week off late in the regular season. He appeared to clear a big hurdle when he homered and doubled in Game 1 of Saturday's doubleheader win over the Orioles.

Morton, who's been battling a sore shoulder, threw three innings without any issues in Sunday's season-finale loss. McCullers threw in relief on Saturday and Sunday, and he looked ready to go as well. He was on the DL from Aug. 5-Sept. 24 with an elbow injury.

Q: What are some of the big decisions the Astros face concerning their ALDS roster?

A: The Astros will carry 11 pitchers in a five-game ALDS, meaning they'll carry seven relievers. There's plenty of competition among those spots, which could put players who were on the postseason roster last year -- like Brad Peacock, Will Harris and Chris Devenski -- in limbo. Hard-throwing rookie Josh James has put himself in the mix for a relief spot as well. The club also has to decide whether to carry Max Stassi as a third catcher or Myles Straw as a pinch-runner in sort of the same role that Derek Fisher served last year.

Q: Which position player could be a key factor that we're not thinking about?

A: Catcher Martin Maldonado. Acquired in a July trade from the Angels, the veteran has a cannon for an arm and can control the running game. The Indians were second in the Majors in stolen bases attempted in the regular season, and Maldonado will be on their minds any time they want to get aggressive. If the Astros beat the Indians and advance to the face the Red Sox, they'll play a Boston team that was third with 156 steal attempts. Maldonado can provide the occasional pull homer, but he's here because of his arm.