

Bauer continually pushing for improvement

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

GOODYEAR, Ariz. -- When Trevor Bauer packed his bags for a vacation in Iceland this past November, the pitcher made sure to include the essentials: His glove and a series of weighted baseballs. Not even a trip across the ocean was going to disrupt his training schedule.

"I have an insatiable desire to work and improve," Bauer said. "I take two days off and I feel guilty. No one will ever outwork me."

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The Indians' 2017 season ended like a punch to the gut against the Yankees in Game 5 of the American League Division Series -- far earlier than anyone on the team expected to experience the winter. Bauer took one day to clean out his locker, pushed any emotions to the side, and was on a mound in Arizona within the next 24 hours to complete his annual end-of-year biomechanics profile.

From there, Bauer's focus was fixed firmly on 2018.

Even coming off a career year, Bauer was not about to become complacent. He was dissatisfied with how the work on a split-change in the previous winter panned out and knew the slider he featured in the second half of '17 was bred out of survival more than anything else. No, Bauer needed to get right back to work, and his primary objective for this past offseason was developing a reliable slider.

"I want to be the absolute best," Bauer said. "I don't like the fact that there's someone sitting next to me who's better than me -- at anything."

The wording of Bauer's comments might have been coincidental, but his locker sits only a few stalls away from the one belonging to Indians ace Corey Kluber in the clubhouse at the team's spring complex. Kluber is one of the top pitchers in the game and is coming off a season in which he captured his second career American League Cy Young Award. Kluber was also a source of inspiration for Bauer during his winter training.

Three days after Cleveland's season concluded, Bauer sat down with his father, Warren, in California and began discussing which pitches they should study in order to work on a slider. Bauer estimated that their conversation spanned approximately six hours. Once they narrowed their search to the breaking balls of Kluber and Marcus Stroman, it was time to hit the mound.

What followed was a six-hour throwing session, in which Bauer fired a pitch, recorded it in slow motion and then studied the footage frame by frame before throwing again. He placed red push pins in the baseball to help track the movement and toyed around with the grips in an effort to get closer and closer to data similar to Kluber and Stroman. The righty tracked the spin rates, vertical and horizontal movement and velocity, and kept adjusting.

By midnight on that October evening, Bauer found two grips he felt could work. He said the moment the baseball did what he intended was "like a glimmer of hope."

For much of the following two weeks, Bauer continued to absorb video of the successful sliders, trying to burn the images of the throwing motion into his mind. He began facing batters in early December and spent the bulk of that month alternating between throwing sessions focusing on his slider and changeup. For the latter, he studied the movement profile of the offspeed pitch used by Stephen Strasburg.

"Working on what grip. Where do I put the knuckle? Where do I put the thumb?" Bauer said. "How much do I spike it? How much pressure do I put? Trying to figure out the control points for shifting the axis in the horizontal and vertical plane, so I can get a combination of the two on the axis to make it move the way I want. I did that all of December and then, finally, maybe like the first week of January, I felt like I had the slider moving how I wanted it to."

Last season, Bauer went 17-9 with a 4.19 ERA with 196 strikeouts against 60 walks in 176 1/3 innings for Cleveland, setting career bests in strikeouts per nine innings (10.0) and strikeout-to-walk ratio (3.3). The right-hander was particularly strong down the stretch, going 10-1 with a 2.60 ERA over his final 14 appearances. That finish was helped by a slider he developed on the fly -- by shifting the placement of his thumb on the ball -- but not one he felt really fit his repertoire.

Bauer is hopeful that the retooled version of the pitch will help net more consistent results over a full season.

When the Indians acquired Bauer from the D-backs prior to the 2013 season, the young pitcher was embarking on what he admitted was going to be a years-long project. It began with an overhauling of his delivery in an effort to stay healthy. The next phase was to focus on command training and improving velocity. Now, Bauer has moved on to refining specific pitches.

Bauer believes he is closing in on becoming the pitcher he envisioned so many years ago.

"I'm close," he said. "I might be this season, depending on how the slider works out. If I'm able to execute it reliably, then yeah, I'll be back where I envisioned myself."

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Kipnis hits sixth spring home run

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

GOODYEAR, Ariz. -- Another day, another home run for Jason Kipnis. The second baseman's Cactus League shots are becoming about as common as the sunshine in Arizona. The only problem is that Kipnis' stat line will reset to zero when Opening Day arrives.

"I mean, if I could have my choice, I'd be saving all of them," Kipnis said with a laugh.

During Tuesday's 7-6 loss to the Reds, Kipnis sent a pitch from Cincinnati right-hander Kevin Shackelford out to right field for a two-run shot, marking his sixth home run in six games this spring. Kipnis has homered in five of those games, which included a two-homer outburst on Feb. 27 against the A's. Kipnis' six shots are tied for the most by a Tribe batter in Cactus League play since the team returned to Arizona for Spring Training in 2009.

Kipnis did not overhaul his swing mechanics over the offseason. The veteran second baseman is not a recent convert to the so-called flyball revolution, either. No, this is just a player feeling healthy and enjoying a hot streak, which Kipnis is thrilled about following a turbulent offseason filled with trade rumors and in the wake of an injury-marred 2017.

"If you ever hear me say the words 'launch angle' or anything like that, I'm lying right to your face," said Kipnis, who has hit .529 (9-for-17) with a 1.588 slugging percentage so far this spring. "That's not anything I've ever worked on or cared about. I work on hitting the ball hard where it's pitched and staying balanced and on time."

"[Health] is the difference. I said it before, when you're not healthy, your time, your days are spent with treatment and rehab and kind of strengthening whatever's kind of ailing you, instead of being in the cages working on your craft and stuff like that. So, with the luxury of health, you have the luxury of time to work on stuff."

Last season, Kipnis appeared in only 90 games due to issues with his right shoulder and right hamstring, which led to three stints on the disabled list. Coming off a strong 2016 -- in which he had 23 homers, 41 doubles and a career-best .469 slugging percentage -- Kipnis turned in a .232/.291/.414 slash line last year.

"It's a new year," Kipnis said. "I feel healthy. I feel motivated. I think that's a better word. Trying to prove myself again is a good place to be for any athlete."

Camp battles

The lone vacancy in the Indians' bullpen might very well come down to one of Carlos Torres, Matt Belisle or Evan Marshall, who are all in camp as non-roster invitees. Torres took the mound against the Reds on Tuesday and allowed a home run to Jesse Winker in his one inning of work. "Between [Torres] and Belisle and Evan Marshall," Indians manager Terry Francona said, "the guys that have Major League experience, somebody's going to make our club. That's for sure. You try not to look too much at the first week, because guys are getting their legs under them. Belisle's only got one outing."

"So, we'll let them kind of get into their comfort zone and then hopefully in the next couple weeks you can kind of see the best of them. That's the goal."

Injury updates

- Right-hander Julian Merryweather, who is ranked No. 16 among the Indians' Top 30 prospects by MLB Pipeline, sought a second opinion on his throwing elbow from Dr. Keith Meister on Tuesday. Merryweather felt discomfort in the joint during a bullpen session on Feb. 16 and was diagnosed with a sprain of the ulnar collateral ligament. Francona said the team will have more information in the coming days.
- Left fielder Michael Brantley (right ankle) continues to go through agility work in his running program. Outfielder Brandon Guyer (left wrist) has advanced to front-toss drills in his hitting progression.

Quotable

"I love it. I'm probably showing my age, but I love it. Growing up, every team did it and I loved that. I think it's cool. I just thought it was a little personality and we're probably the only sport that can do something like that. I always loved that." -- Francona, on bullpen carts

Worth noting

- Asked on Tuesday if the rotation's fifth spot was down to Josh Tomlin or Ryan Merritt, Francona replied, "I don't know that there's a lot of competition right now for the five spots." The manager also mentioned track record as an important factor. That would make Tomlin the leading candidate for the final starting job, while Merritt (out of options) remains in the mix for a bullpen spot and as the next man up, if the rotation hits any snags.
- In recent seasons, ace Corey Kluber has worked mostly with catcher Yan Gomes and righty Trevor Bauer has been paired most often with Roberto Perez. Francona said he hopes to avoid any strict pairings of pitchers and catchers this year. Said Francona: "I just think it's a little healthier just to have our guys catching when it seems to make the most sense, as opposed to having to catch a certain guy."

Up next

Bauer is scheduled to take the mound for the Indians on Wednesday, when Cleveland hosts the Cubs in an 8:05 p.m. ET pairing of the 2016 World Series participants at Goodyear Ballpark. Relievers Nick Goody, Dan Otero, Zach McAllister, Jeff Beliveau, Ben Taylor and Belisle are also penciled in to pitch for the Tribe. Lefty Jose Quintana is slated to start for Chicago. Fans can catch all the action live on MLB.TV.

“I want to be the absolute best.

by Jordan Bastian

“I want to be the absolute best. I don’t like the fact that there’s someone sitting next to me who’s better than me. At anything.”

The conversation began with a simple inquiry. Since Trevor Bauer had focused so much on his retooled slider over the offseason, and concentrated on a two-pitch mix that included his fastball during winter throwing sessions, we were curious when he began working in his other offerings.

With his right arm propped up against his locker, which is in a far corner of Cleveland’s clubhouse—among a cluster of neighboring stalls belonging to Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco and Michael Brantley—Bauer stood and explained that he logged around 10 innings with his full repertoire against hitters before arriving to Arizona.

What followed was then more than a half-hour of discussion with Bauer, who delved into many topics.

In a wide-ranging conversation with MLB.com and The Athletic, Bauer discussed his scientific training, which has its roots in childhood workouts under the guidance of his father, Warren, an engineer. When he was a kid, Bauer and his dad would drill holes in baseballs softballs and fill them with fishing sinkers to create weighted balls. This past winter, Bauer stuck push pins into baseballs to study movement data on his pitches.

The technology has changed, but Bauer’s goals have not. He had a career year in 2017, but remains driven to put his name among the game’s elite pitchers.

This winter, Bauer developed a slider that he hopes has a similar profile to breaking balls thrown by Corey Kluber and Marcus Stroman. The righty also worked on refining a changeup, which is tried to pattern after the one featured by Stephen Strasburg. Bauer’s training was tireless, began shortly after the Tribe’s playoff run ended, and included a throwing session in Iceland.

What follows is the Q&A from a fascinating discussion with Bauer...

Q: When you’re modeling a pitch after one thrown by Kluber, do you consult him?

Bauer: “No, I haven’t actually talked to him about it at all. I know exactly how he throws it, because four years ago, I took film of him throwing it in a bullpen setting at 1,000 frames per second, so I’ve had that. I mostly got it for his two-seamer back then, because that’s what I was trying to work on. I have his two-seam, cutter, slurve, changeup. So, I’ve been able to study that. I pulled a bunch of slow-mo stuff online of Stroman. It’s not great, but it kind of helps. And then mostly I just looked at the movement profile.”

Q: How soon after the season ended did you return to throwing?

Bauer: “So my offseason started three days after the season ended. My dad and I spent 12 hours—started at Noon, talked until about 6 p.m.—figuring out exactly what movement profiles I wanted on the changeup and the slider. Once we knew what movement profile I wanted, we started thinking about what axis we need to accomplish that with Magnus force. So, we figured that out. I think I posted a picture of push-pins in balls and stuff. That was part of that process. Once we had the axis, then we started studying. Part of that axis discussion was looking at other peoples’ to see what the movement profile is. What’s their arm angle is like? So, is it even possible to throw that pitch with my arm angle?”

Q: How much of an adjustment do you have to make since you aren’t built exactly like Kluber or Stroman?

Bauer: “Stroman and Kluber throw slightly different than I do, but I figured my arm angle is close enough to it that I can throw it somewhat similar. The same thing with, like, Strasburg’s arm angle is similar enough to mine that he’s my main model for a changeup. So that’s all part of deciding what axis I need. Then I look at video of myself and how the ball comes out of my hand and how the ball comes out of their hand. I have some video of Kluber from 2,000 frames per second that I’ve taken over the years, but none of Strasburg or Stroman. Here’s how the ball comes out of my hand. How do I need to orient the seams in order to get the laminar flow aligned with Magnus force so it works in the same direction? That took six hours. Then we went up to my facility, Throw Zone, in California and spent six hours throwing on slow-motion film. Throw a pitch. Look at it. How did it come out of my hand? How are the seams spinning? Integrate it over and over and over until, at midnight, we had two grips and feels that modeled what I wanted to see spin axis wise. I took pictures of them in my hand, stuff like that, took some video, and watched it over and over and over for the next week and a half.”

Q: What’s the feeling like when the ball finally does what you want it to do? Is it a rush for you?

Bauer: “It’s like, ‘Yep, I can do it.’ It’s like a glimmer of hope. Then it’s like, ‘Well, I have to throw X amount of these so I can get it up to the level [I want].’ I’ve been throwing my curveball since I was 10. I have X amount of reps with my curveball, and I don’t have any reps with these pitches, so if it’s going to be reliable like the curveball, I have to get a certain amount of reps. But at least I know I can make the ball spin that way and in a comfortable way and whatnot. It was encouraging, for sure. Then, I just watched film for the next week and a half and burned it into my head. I knew exactly how it comes out of my hand, so when I throw one, I can say, ‘OK, I felt this. It doesn’t feel like what I see in my

head.' And then I started throwing it to hitters on Dec. 3. I started facing hitters. I got some preliminary numbers on it and the numbers didn't match what I wanted it to be."

Q: The numbers you're referencing are...

Bauer: "Velocity, spin rate, vertical, horizontal, all that stuff. So I got numbers against hitters starting in early December and then the majority of December was dedicated to [those new pitches]. I'd throw twice to hitters with fastball-slider and then I'd throw the next week twice with fastball-changeup. And the time I was throwing fastball-changeup, on the days in between, I was working on the slider. Working on what grip, where do I put the knuckle, where do I put the thumb, how much do I spike it, how much pressure do I put, trying to figure out the control points for shifting the axis in the horizontal and vertical plane, so I can get a combination of the two on the axis to make it move the way I want. I did that all of December and then, finally, maybe like the first week of January, I felt like I had the slider moving how I wanted it to. Going into the offseason, I figured if one of the two pitches worked out, it'd be a massive success. So, once I had a pretty good feel with the slider, I stopped throwing the changeup against hitters and just threw the slider so I could accumulate reps and feel for it. I'm still working on the changeup in practice, but I'm mostly focused on the slider."

Q: Visually, will the slider be more of a sweeping pitch rather than being tighter like a cutter?

Bauer: "So last year, it ended up being a pitch that broke that had like maybe negative-two—between zero and negative-two inches vertical—and like four inches lateral, which is OK. That's at the end of the year, once I changed the cutter into a slider. It's going to be about the same velocity as last year. That's not important. This year, hopefully, we're going to see on average about seven to eight inches lateral and zero inches [vertical]. That's ideal. It'll probably end up having about negative-two inches vertical, but it'll have twice as many inches [lateral]. I wanted a lateral breaking pitch."

Q: When you're selecting a pitch to study, do you cast a wide net and then narrow it down to Kluber and Stroman, or do you already have specific pitchers in mind?

Bauer: "You start with the most effective pitches in the league. If you can have the best fastball in the league with the best changeup and best curveball, that would be ideal, right? But, you also have to work that in the framework of what I currently throw. My curveball is already one of the top curveballs in the league. So, I have a vertical breaking pitch that I'm very comfortable with. I want something that's different than that. When I first started throwing the slider, it was like five inches lateral and negative-seven inches vertical. My curveball is like four inches lateral and 10 inches vertical. That pitch isn't going to do me a whole lot of good. It's just a worse curveball. So, I started trying to find pitches that I didn't have in my arsenal. I can make the ball run this way hard. I can make it run that way with a changeup at a middle speed. I can make the ball go down slow. I can make the ball stay straight or cut a little bit at a middle speed.

"I don't have anything that is slow and goes lateral, so I needed something that did that so I can split the plate multiple different ways and at multiple different speeds. And my changeup was a middle-speed pitch and it had a lot of run, but not a lot of depth. So, I wanted something that had more depth and went both ways, so that was the emphasis behind what I worked on. I felt that would give me three levels to go: 10 inches vertical on the fastball, zero on the slider and changeup and negative cut on the curveball, at three distinct speeds and with distinct movements arm-side and glove-side. So, to fill that hole on my arsenal, I needed something that had a lateral break. I needed a little bit more depth on the changeup. That's what I set out to do, so I found guys who had high swing-and-miss rates on depth changeups, which is like Strasburg. Kluber had one of the highest, but he hardly ever throws it, so it's hard to tell if it's a characteristic of that pitch or if it's just hitters aren't looking for that. Strasburg uses his changeup a lot, 30 percent of the time maybe. It's like his primary secondary pitch. It has one of the highest swing-and-miss rates on it in the league, so I figured that pitch—hitters know it's coming and they still can't hit it—so it's probably a good pitch to model.

"And the same thing with Kluber's slurve and Stroman's slider. They use it a lot, primary secondary offering and people don't hit it that well. So, that was the process I used on which pitches to model. And then I figured how I wanted to model them."

Q: You worked on a split-change last year. What was the goal for refining the change this time around?

Bauer: "Same thing, but last year it didn't work out. I wanted something I can throw middle-middle that ends up below the zone, but doesn't have enough movement where hitters can pick it up early. My curveball has too much movement to tunnel and be effective in combination with other pitches. If I throw a curveball for a strike, I have to throw a fastball, like, up above the head."

Q: To change the hitter's eye level...

Bauer: "Right. So, I need something that comes out upper thigh that then ends up just missing the zone, so it doesn't have too much movement where they can identify it, and that's something with zero vertical. My fastball is here, and a 10-inch vertical difference gets you to about the knee, so that shares the same initial trajectory and holds the line long enough that I don't get checked swings. I get a lot of checked swings on curveballs in the dirt that don't get called, so if I can share that tunnel for another five feet, I'll get calls or they'll fully commit to swinging. So, that's the idea behind having something with zero vertical, and that's what I was going for with the split, but I never could develop a grip to get side spin to get that movement that was comfortable that I could reliably execute."

Q: When you first came to the Indians in the trade, you were focused so much on your delivery. Then, you focused on velocity and now it's more pitch-specific work. Are you the pitcher you envisioned you'd be back in 2012 when you began this process?

Bauer: "Not quite. I'm close."

Q: You made it clear back then it was going to be a years-long process. How close do you think you are to becoming the pitcher you envisioned?

Bauer: "I might be this season, depending on how the slider works out. If I'm able to execute it reliably, then yeah, I'll be back where I envisioned myself. There's a hierarchy, though, in training. The first thing you have to do is you have to be able to do is stay on the field. Because, if you can't stay on the field, no amount of execution matters, because you're hurt and you don't get to compete. So the first and foremost was to focus on staying on the field. So, that's why I changed my delivery, because it was clear to me after 2012 that if I continued throwing like that, I wasn't going to stay on the field. So, I sacrificed 2013 and changed my delivery to help me stay on the field. That worked, clearly.

"And then, it was about learning how to be effective in that—refining the delivery. I function at like 95 percent efficiency. ... So, that's checked off. Base level: Stay on the field? Check. As much as it can be."

Q: That first season, you were upfront about the fact that the results wouldn't look good on the surface statistically...

Bauer: "Anytime you make conscious mechanical changes, you can't perform well. In order to perform well, you have to have a narrow external mind-set. There are two variables: There's narrow and broad and there's external and internal. The worst possible one you can have for performance is a narrow internal focus. How exactly am I moving this finger when I release the ball? The best possible one is, 'I'm going to throw this ball 100—narrow—to that spot—external. That's the best one you can have for performance. In 2013, I was internal the whole year, because I was trying to make physical change. So, performance suffered. As I've gotten more comfortable with the physical change, performance has increased, because I've been able to focus more externally."

Q: Because at this point it's muscle memory...

Bauer: "Right. Second-nature. So, the base level of the pyramid is taken care of: Stay on the field. The next one is I have to perform well enough to stay on the field so I don't lose my job. So, I have to have velocity. I have to be able to execute, throw enough strikes. I have to be able to generate swing-and-miss. So, over the past couple years, I've shown that I can do that to a certain level. It's increased every year. My performance has gone up every year. But, it's still not to the level that I want. But, that's the cycle: Be able to generate swing-and-miss, be able to punch people out, be able to throw enough strikes to compete. I've proven I can do that in spurts. So, then the next one is, high-grade everything pitch-mix wise and what pitches you throw and how you utilize it to make yourself the most effective version of me I can be. And so, I thought about developing a changeup, developing a cutter, developing a slider, developing all this different stuff. I modified my curveball a couple years ago to make the shape and spin rate more what I wanted to. High-grading the arsenal.

"So, I'm going to roll into this season with the most high-graded arsenal I've ever had, the most experience on how to utilize it that I've ever had, as healthy as ever. So, assuming the slider works out the way I envision it, the way it should, given the numbers I have on it so far, the only thing that would really be left is high-grading the changeup, assuming that doesn't work out. There's no data to suggest it won't be better than it was last year, but I haven't spent as much time on it. But, once I have this year under my belt, looking forward to next offseason, there's just not a lot of things to work on from an actual pitching standpoint. I can always get better and I will. I'm not ignoring that."

Q: You mean the bigger projects...

Bauer: "Right. So, I'll have the pitch mix. I'll have the knowledge of how to use it all, how to execute it. Then it just comes down to crushing differential command training, crushing physical [training]. Getting stronger, getting in shape, mobility, making sure that's all locked in. Studying film, doing deep learning, AI stuff on the best type of pitch mix for me personally, to back up my feelings with numbers, finding out what hitters can and can't hit with VR glasses. Just stuff like that. More theoretical stuff. Because, I'll already have the physical and performance stuff taken care of, and that's where I envisioned myself back in 2013."

Q: As an athlete, it'd be really easy to get caught up in results and revert to what works in the moment. How important is it to maintain that long view when trying to accomplish a larger goal in development?

Bauer: "The first thing about that is I have been very fortunate that I was good enough in college to be given the timetable in pro ball to do that. If I wasn't a first-rounder, I would've had 2013 and I never would've been [successful]. So, not everyone has the luxury of being able to take that approach. For a lot of guys, it's, 'I have to be good this year. It's my last year on the 40-man. I have to make the big leagues or I'm probably not going to get back up, because I'm going to be taken off the 40-man and then it's really hard to get back up.' Or, 'I've been a big-leaguer for two years and I feel like someone's going to take my job unless I do something.' So, it's hard for everyone to have this long-term view, because if you have a long-term view, you just never get there, because it's circumstantial.

"So, I've been very fortunate with that. That being said, I think having some foresight in what you work on in the offseason and a dedicated process and why you're doing this is super important. It could be as simple as, 'I need to throw harder or I'm going to be cut.' And so, then that's your process. That's part of the building block. But, I've already maximized my mechanical efficiency and I've already maximized my training, so I have taken care of it. I think it's super important to have a good secondary pitch. A lot of people struggle with that. They just don't have a good feel for a secondary pitch. So I think that's super important. Like, if Zach McAllister had a wipeout secondary pitch, that brings tremendous value to him, it brings tremendous value to the organization. He's put in a lot of work trying to develop something that he can throw reliably. If you transplant Andrew Miller's slider into Zach McAllister, all of a sudden you have a super durable reliever who can throw all the

time, throws hard and has a wipeout breaking pitch. That radically changes his career path, his role in the organization and whatnot. I don't mean to single out Zach. Just talking about concepts here.

"It all starts with being an accurate self-evaluator. Where am I right now? What can I do well and what can I improve on? And then finding a way to improve upon those things. That's why I spend a ton of my time doing research on the offseason: How do I high-grade my training regimen? How do I teach myself how to have command? Because, three years ago, all we talked about was my command. And now, no one mentions my command ... How do I go from a guy who can't throw enough strikes to compete—led the league in walks in '15—and then all of a sudden in '16 or '17, it's like, overnight, all of a sudden I command the ball and we don't talk about it anymore. How is that possible? Well, it's a high-graded command training regimen. I spent a ton of time in the offseason researching, 'How do I shorten the learning curve on this? How do I maximize this process?' And so I've been able to do that. I've been able to apply the same thing to pitch design and to velocity. I think that process in general, a science-based improvement process, is super important. Being able to take a long-term view and sacrifice a year is not something that a whole lot of people have the opportunity to do. I'm super fortunate that I was in a position and with an organization that would allow me to do that and understood what I was trying to do and believed enough in me to let me do it and let it play out."

Q: Given all the work you've put in, and that you are in such a good place mentally, how eager are you to get the season started so you can validate that all the training was worthwhile?

Bauer: "I'm ready to face hitters. I want to get in a game and compete. I love competing. I hate throwing bullpens. I used to throw bullpens all the time, because I wanted to work on stuff, but I hate throwing [bullpens]. I need to face hitters, because that's where I am on the development curve. I threw to hitters for 30 innings this offseason. Then, I come into camp and I'm throwing a bullpen, like, 'This isn't doing anything for me.' I want to see hitters. I want to go out and compete and pitch and learn. Mostly, I just want to be out there competing. I love that."

"I think being comfortable with the team helps. It takes a couple years for me to get comfortable with a new team. It did in high school. It did in college. So 2014 was really my first full year up, it was like half a year. Then, '15 and '16 happened and all of a sudden in '17, I was like part of the team and made strides and whatever. Same thing in college: Freshman year, the team didn't really like me; I was there half a year. Sophomore year, everyone was like, 'Eh, I don't know who this kid is.' And then junior year, it was like, 'Oh, he's not so bad.' And I was more comfortable. Same thing with high school. So that has helped a lot, getting past that initial two to three years of people getting to know me, me getting to know them and learning how to interact with each other, stuff like that. That's helped tremendously. But also, I feel like I can actually contribute to the team now, because I feel like I'm close."

"It's very hard for me—I want to be the absolute best. I don't like the fact that there's someone sitting next to me who's better than me. At anything. So when I know that I'm not the best, I don't feel like I'm contributing to my potential, to the level that I should be contributing. I was the best in high school. I was the best in college. I haven't been the best in pro ball, so I haven't felt I'm contributing to the level that I know I can. And so, it makes it hard to feel a part of the team, because I don't feel like I'm doing my work, if that makes sense. I feel like I did my job a lot better last season, especially toward the end of the season. I feel like I'll do my job better this year than I did at any point last season. So, I feel like I'm actually contributing how I'm expected to, which makes it a lot easier to feel a part of something."

Q: This has been a life-long project and process for you, and your dad obviously played a huge role in your development. When you were young, did you ever think, 'Why is he making me do this?' or thought some workout seemed silly?

Bauer: "My dad never made me do anything. He never forced me to practice. There have been plenty of things that have seemed silly. But, it all goes back to the process I talked about. My dad's an engineer. I was trained as an engineer. There's a certain mind-set. Where do I want to be? Design a process, test it, refine it, test it, refine it, integrate it. My dad never played baseball, so he didn't approach things as a baseball guy. He approaches it as an engineer. If I'm to believe that you want to stay inside the ball—everyone says to stay inside the ball—so how do we train that? Well you're going to stand six inches away from the fence and try to swing and not hit the fence. Stuff like that. So there's a reason behind it. There are different reasons for everything that we did. There's a direction, a reason for doing it. It was never, 'Hey, do this.'"

"At the beginning of last year, maybe the first month of the season, my dad told me, 'Hey, I want you to try something with your cutter. You use it high-arm side a lot, it's up in the zone a lot. I want you to try to move your thumb to the side of the ball and throw it like that. I want you to try to throw it a couple times in catch and let me know what you feel.' [I said], 'No, that's stupid.' I held the ball and was like, 'I can't throw a pitch like that.' I just didn't do it. And then a month later, he's like, 'Hey, I want you to try this. I think it might help. Just throw two or three in catch.' I was like, 'Fine. I'll throw two or three in catch.' I threw two or three in catch and [said], 'It doesn't work.' And then about a month and a half later, he's like, 'Hey, I want you to try this.' I'm like, 'Dammit. We already went over this.' So I went out and threw it in the bullpen and the ball was down where I wanted it to be, so I was like, 'Again, he's right. Great.' So, it pains me to tell him that, 'Yes, your idea was correct.' It's a pride thing. There have been plenty of things that have been stupid."

"[Some things] made sense the whole time. But, there are certain ideas, like building a laser grid so that when I throw pitches, I can measure exactly front to back from the hand. At first, I was like, 'That doesn't make any sense.' And the longer I think about the implications of it and start playing with it, this makes a lot of sense. I can see why we're doing this. At least, understand the process and the thought behind it. And for me, as long as there's a thought behind something and you put the time into thinking about it and you have a reason for doing something that you can explain well, I'm all for trying. I'm not much for someone saying, 'Do this because I said so.' That's what's always been done. But, if you say, 'Hey you should try this because here's this data.' OK, that makes sense. I can respect the process behind it."

"There are certain organizations that are really pushing it forward. I'm proud to be part of one."

Q: If everyone had the willingness to embrace outside ideas or be experimental, could there have been a pitchers decades ago who might've been a Hall of Famers and we just never would've known?

Bauer: "That's my main advantage is that I have an insatiable desire to work and improve. That's just what I choose. I take two days off and I feel guilty. No one will ever outwork me. Now, I'm not the most physically talented guy. I compete against a lot of guys who are massively more physically talented. They can dunk. They can run fast. They're powerful and they lift a lot of weights. They're super explosive. I'm none of those things. The only reason I'm here is because of my work ethic. No one's ever going to outwork me and that's my only way to maintain an advantage, because all these training things I do that I work so hard to push into baseball because I believe in them, then the super talented athletes get a hold of them and now their training routine is high-graded and I'm at a disadvantage, because they're doing the same training, but they're more athletically gifted. The only way I maintain my advantage is by putting in more hours than anyone else is going to. I think I do a good job of that. I'd challenge anyone to find a professional ballplayer at all who puts in more hours year-round than I do."

Bauer: "I flew out the night after to Arizona to throw a bullpen to get my biomechanics [work] done. Then, I flew home . [A couple days later], I was doing push-pins, throwing, starting the whole thing. So, a day to pack my locker, and then I started. I threw four times when I was in Iceland [on vacation in November]. I took weighted balls with me, played catch."

Q: You could never go on a honeymoon...

Bauer: "Yeah. Well, that would require me being married, which sounds miserable in its own right."

Cleveland Indians lose to Reds despite Jason Kipnis' sixth homer and a good start by Carlos Carrasco

By Paul Hoynes

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Carlos Carrasco struck out four in his first start of the spring and Jason Kipnis kept hitting home runs Tuesday afternoon as the Indians fell to Cincinnati, 7-6, at Goodyear Ballpark in Goodyear, Ariz.

Kipnis hit his sixth homer of the spring, a two-run drive in the third for a 3-1 lead. Kipnis is hitting .529 (9-for-17) with 12 RBI in six games in the Arizona desert.

Carrasco worked a scoreless first inning, but allowed a leadoff homer to Scooter Gennett and a double to Scott Schebler to start the second. Carrasco rebounded to strike out the next three Reds to end his afternoon.

In two innings, Carrasco threw 20 pitches, including 18 strikes. He went to the bullpen to throw more so he could reach his pitch count.

Francisco Lindor led the Indians' offense. He opened the game with a first-pitch homer off lefty Brandon Finnegan for a 1-0 lead. He added a two-run, two-out double off the fence in left center in the fourth for a 5-2 lead.

The Reds scored four runs in the fifth to take a 6-5 lead off lefty Shawn Morimando. Ben Revere's two-run triple and Schebler's sacrifice fly drove in three of the four runs.

Brian O'Grady made it 7-5 with a homer off Adam Plutko in the sixth. Drew Maggi pulled the Tribe to within one run with a two-out single in the eighth. Maggi is hitting .533 (8-for-15) with three RBI this spring for the Tribe.

The Indians are 7-5-1 this spring.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 03.07.2018

Cleveland Indians 2B Jason Kipnis launches sixth HR of spring training

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

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Jason Kipnis' torrid start to spring training at the plate continued Tuesday when he launched a 3-1 pitch from Cincinnati's Kevin Shackelford over the right field wall in the third inning for his sixth Cactus League home run in just six games.

Kipnis, who entered the game tied for fourth among MLB hitters in RBI, tied the Indians club record for Cactus League home runs held by Yan Gomes (2016) and Shelly Duncan (2012).

The blast broke a 1-1 tie and scored Francisco Lindor, who had drawn a walk ahead of Kipnis.

Cincinnati's Jesse Winker homered to right field off reliever Carlos Torres to make the score 3-2.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 03.07.2018

Carlos Carrasco takes the mound against Cincinnati: Cleveland Indians spring training lineup

By Joe Noga

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Carlos Carrasco gets his first start of the exhibition season Tuesday as the Cleveland Indians face Cincinnati at Goodyear Ballpark.

Carrasco, who made his spring training debut Thursday pitching the third inning against Texas, is coming off a career-high 18-win season in 2017 that saw him strike out 226.

Shawn Morimando, Carlos Torres, Adam Plutko, Neil Ramirez, Alexi Ogando and Cameron Hill are also scheduled to pitch for the Tribe.

Fan favorite Mike Napoli joins Carrasco in the starting lineup at first base. Napoli, signed to a minor league contract last week by the Indians, is in camp trying to auditioning for a job after spending time at a free agent camp in Bradenton, Florida earlier this spring.

Jason Kipnis, who leads all of baseball with five Cactus League home runs in just five exhibition games played, will bat second for Cleveland.

Cleveland is 19-19-5 against the Reds all-time in Cactus League play. The Indians won six of their first eight meetings (6-1-1) in Arizona, but are 13-18-4 over the last 34 matchups.

Feeling the Flow

Manager Terry Francona named Mike Clevinger to the Indians starting rotation after Monday's eight-strikeout performance.

Excess is good

The Indians have plenty of depth at multiple positions throughout the organization, writes cleveland.com's Paul Hoynes.

Dodgers rip Tribe

Yonder Alonso had two hits, including an RBI double and Ryan Merritt allowed four runs in the seventh inning as the L.A. Dodgers topped Cleveland, 8-1 on Monday.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 03.07.2018

Guarded optimism about Michael Brantley's return and 5 other things we learned about the Cleveland Indians

By Paul Hoynes

CLEVELAND, Ohio - Chris Antonetti, during a SportsTime Ohio broadcast of the Indians spring-training game against the Reds on Tuesday, sounded optimistic that outfielder Michael Brantley could be ready to play close to opening day.

The Indians open the regular season on March 29 against Seattle at Safeco Field.

Antonetti, president of baseball operations, told STO broadcasters Matt Underwood and Rick Manning when asked about Brantley, "The great news is he's unrestricted in hitting and throwing. And actually today, he started his outfield progression. He took some ground balls in either direction and right at him, which is the next benchmark for him to work through. He's continued to make good progress."

When asked what the goal is for Brantley's return, Antonetti said, "We are most focused on getting Michael Brantley back fully healthy. Whenever that might be, we'll be thrilled about it because we know when he's back and fully healthy he's a really good player. Right now we're on a good path for that to be very near or at the start of the season. Will that be opening day? We honestly don't yet know. But we expect it to be then or right around then."

When contacted by cleveland.com later, Antonetti said in a text, "For clarity, we still don't have a concrete timetable on him. We're not limiting it either way."

Brantley underwent right ankle surgery at the end of the postseason last year. The ankle injury limited him to 90 games last year, but he did make the All-Star team.

No. 1: Jason Kipnis goes deep yet again

Jason Kipnis hit his sixth homer in as many spring-training games Tuesday in a 7-6 loss to the Reds at Goodyear Ballpark. Kipnis is tied for the most spring-training homers by an Indians player since they returned to the Cactus League in 2009.

Kipnis told mlb.com he credits his hot start to being healthy after playing just 90 games last season because of three trips to the disabled list to treat a strained right rotator cuff and strained right hamstring.

Fact: @TheJK_Kid just tied the club record for most HRs in a Cactus League season! [?] #TribeSpring

His 6th(!) in as many games: pic.twitter.com/YHr4p3ATaC

-- Cleveland Indians (@Indians) March 6, 2018

"If you ever hear me say the words, 'launch angle' or anything like that, I'm lying right to your face," said Kipnis. "That's not anything I've ever worked on or cared about. I work on hitting the ball hard where it's pitched and staying balanced and on time.

"(Health) is the difference. I said it before, when you're not healthy, your time, your days are spent with treatment and rehab and kind of strengthening whatever is ailing you, instead of being in the cages working on your craft. So with the luxury of health, you have the luxury of time to work on stuff."

Kipnis is hitting .529 (9-for-17) with six homers and 12 RBI.

No. 2: Who will win the last spot in the bullpen?

Manager Terry Francona isn't sure if he'll open the season with a seven or eight-man bullpen. The first six jobs are expected to go to Cody Allen, Andrew Miller, Dan Otero, Zach McAllister, Tyler Olson and Nick Goody.

When asked about the pen on Tuesday, Francona said veteran relievers Carlos Torres, Matt Belisle and Evan Marshall have a chance to win a job. They are all in camp on minor league deals.

"Between Torres, Belisle and Evan Marshall, guys who have major league experience, somebody is going to make our club, that's for sure," Francona told reporters Tuesday morning in Goodyear, Ariz.

No. 3: The great race

DH Edwin Encarnacion and catcher Roberto Perez apparently made a bet on who was the fastest. Both men are built for power and not speed, but they raced anyway and Encarnacion emerged the winner.

It looked like EE beat Perez off the line. Perez has to work on his starts.

Why do we exist if not to deliver the race between @Encadwin and @robperez2015?

IG [?] : indians pic.twitter.com/lx00A3Dlyn

-- Cleveland Indians (@Indians) March 6, 2018

No. 4: That will ruin your spring

Right-hander Julian Merryweather, a member of the Tribe's 40-man roster, has a sprained UCL in his right elbow and is going for a second opinion. Merryweather hasn't thrown since a Feb. 16 bullpen session.

He went a combined 7-9 with a 5.32 ERA in 25 starts at Class AA Akron and Class AAA Columbus last year. He struck out 128 and walked 35 in 128 2/3 innings. Merryweather was a fifth round pick out of Oklahoma Baptist University.

No. 5: What about a bullpen scooter?

The Arizona Diamondbacks, according to ESPN, are bringing back the bullpen cart to bring relievers into games. According to the Diamondbacks the last bullpen cart to be used in a big league game was in 1995.

Francona, who zips between Progressive Field and his downtown lodging in Cleveland on a scooter, is all for it.

"I love it. I love it," said Francona. "I'm probably showing my age, but I love it. Growing up every team did it. We're probably the only spot that can do that. I think it's cool."

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 03.07.2018

Cleveland Indians' starting five should have a familiar ring to it barring the unexpected

By Paul Hoynes

CLEVELAND, Ohio - On Monday, manager Terry Francona said Mike Clevinger would open the season in the Indians' starting rotation. He was the fourth name to fall into place behind Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco and Trevor Bauer in what was the best rotation in the American League last season.

On Tuesday morning, reporters in Goodyear, Ariz., asked Francona if he was ready to name the fifth and final starter.

"I don't think we want to name our five guys," said Francona. "Too much can happen, whether it's injury and things like that."

Francona did drop a hint about who the fifth starter would be in the competition between Josh Tomlin and left-hander Ryan Merritt.

"I don't know if there's a lot of competition right now for the five spots," he said. "Saying that, things happen. So you keep your options open. You try to get the guys innings who need innings and things like that. Toward the end of spring, you can say here's how we're situated."

If there's not a lot of competition, that would probably mean that Tomlin is the fifth starter should he make it through spring training healthy. Tomlin has gone 36-29 since Francona became manager in 2013. He's 3-1 in the 2016 and 2017 postseasons.

Clevinger was named to the rotation after he threw three scoreless innings against the Dodgers on Monday. He retired the first eight batters he faced, six on strikeouts.

There was talk that Clevinger could start the season in the bullpen, seeing how Merritt is out of options. The Indians moved Clevinger from the rotation to the bullpen last season for the postseason and he struggled with his control.

"Some guys seem to have an extra click or two when they go to the bullpen," said Francona. "We think he could definitely do that. He also didn't have a chance to settle in (last year) because in the bullpen you have to make your pitches right now. That burned him a couple of times."

"As a starter he looks to be that guy who should be a 200-inning pitcher. He's big, strong and has a good delivery. Those are things you look for. As he learns to attack the zone, that's going to enhance his innings because he'll throw less pitches and won't be working behind in the count."

Last season Kluber won his second Cy Young award in four years. Carrasco and he won 18 games each. Bauer won 17, while Clevinger won 12 and Tomlin 10.

Congratulations to 2017 A.L. Cy Young Award Winner Corey Kluber

Carrasco made his first start of the spring on Tuesday against the Reds. He allowed one run on two hits with four strikeouts in two innings. He threw 20 pitches, 18 for strikes, and went to the bullpen to throw some more.

Last season Carrasco finished fourth in the AL Cy Young voting. Asked if he could ever reach Kluber's Cy Young level, Francona said, "He certainly has the stuff. I would say it's consistency. Every four or five starts he'll have that clunker. We keep telling him he's too good to let that happen."

"But he's made so many steps in the right direction. Look where he was four or five years ago and where he is now. He's made so many gains. If he's a 200-inning pitcher, just in that, you're going to see some really good statistics in the won-loss record and ERA."

Carrasco reached 200 innings for the first time last season. He set a career high with 226 strikeouts, while ending the season on a 8-1 run over his last 10 starts. In those 10 starts he allowed one or fewer earned runs seven times.

"To say a pitcher is going to get to Kluber's level, there's only one guy that does that every year," said Francona. "That's not easy. I'd say Carlos has already pitched himself into the top handful of guys in the league, which is pretty damn good."

"But I think to get to the ultimate, you have to be unbelievably strong mentally to get through the days when you don't have your good stuff."

The Indians have eased Carrasco into the spring schedule this year because of the amount of innings he threw last year. Francona said they want him to build his arm strength to where he's able to throw 85 pitches by the end of spring training.

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Danny Salazar injury opens up rotation spot for Mike Clevinger

For Dodgers and Indians, spring training is about turning the page from postseason heartache

Both teams won more than 100 games last season, only to come up short in October. Both now face doing it all over again for another chance at a better ending.

Salazar is a few weeks behind his originally scheduled throwing program but threw from 90 feet Monday, prompting Francona to say that the hard-throwing right-hander is "going in the right direction."

Francona did not say when Salazar will pitch in a spring training game but said he could resume throwing from a mound in a few days.

Salazar's injury provides an opportunity for Clevinger, who emerged as a reliable starter for Cleveland last season. Francona acknowledged that Clevinger is "going to be in the rotation" after the 6-foot-4 right-hander had six strikeouts over three scoreless innings in his spring start against the Dodgers.

"We're looking for 'Clev' to have a big year," Francona said. "He's strong, and he should be able to be that innings-eater type pitcher."

Clevinger, 27, went 12-6 with a 3.11 ERA in 27 games -- 21 starts -- for the Indians last season, recording 137 strikeouts in 121⅔ innings.

Meisel's Musings: Mike Clevinger earns a rotation spot, Bobby Bradley earns a mentor in Mike Napoli

By Zack Meisel 16 hours ago 5

When Mike Napoli arrived at Indians camp, he asked Terry Francona for recommendations on who he should mentor.

Francona told him: "The more time you spend around Bobby Bradley, the better off he's going to be."

Napoli played cribbage with Josh Tomlin and Adam Plutko in the clubhouse on Sunday morning. Sure enough, Bradley walked over and plopped down beside the group and watched the game.

Bradley dropped 30 pounds over the winter, with the help of his wife, who encouraged him to join her at Orangetheory Fitness. He attended a pair of Indians strength camps in Arizona as well. Now, he has Napoli, a 12-year big-league veteran with eight postseason appearances to his name, as his guide for the next few weeks.

That's not a bad setup for Bradley's first career stint in major-league camp.

A few thoughts on the Indians' rotation ...

1. Have at it: Mike Clevinger stressed all winter that he wanted to log 200 innings this season and earn his keep as a reliable force on the Indians' starting staff. He'll get his chance, as Francona revealed the team's plans to include Clevinger in the Opening Day rotation. Danny Salazar's gradual — Francona scoffed at deeming it "slow" — recovery from shoulder injury helped to seal Clevinger's spot.

Clevinger thrived — as many pitchers would — when dealing from ahead in the count last season, and his numbers suffered when he fell behind. That isn't rocket science (or even a class Trevor Bauer could teach), but the stark contrast in his splits speaks to how pivotal it is for Clevinger to throw strikes.

A reminder:

Clevinger, when ahead in the count last year: .370 opponent OPS

Clevinger, with an even count last year: .399 opponent OPS

Clevinger, when behind in the count last year: 1.193 opponent OPS

Clevinger believes he's in a better position to identify his mechanical slip-ups because of his offseason training, which focused on posture and body awareness. Now, he'll have the opportunity to try to build upon his 3.11 ERA (3.85 FIP) and 2.2 WAR from last season.

2. Role reversal: Francona and Co. maintained throughout the winter that they preferred Salazar to remain a starter. And that might be true. But they also might have wanted to protect the right-hander's trade value, and publicly selling the idea that Salazar could still offer the potential of delivering 180-200 innings could do that (though I'm not quite sure if anyone was buying it).

At this point, it would seem as though Salazar is destined for a relief role upon his return. It would expedite his recovery process, in that he wouldn't have to stretch out to 100 pitches. And it would seem like a natural fit, given his devastating fastball/changeup combination and the uncertainty surrounding the non-Miller/Allen ward of the Indians' bullpen (especially beyond 2018).

It's too early to make declarative statements about Salazar's future, of course. He's merely throwing from 75-90 feet at this point, trying to ease back into a throwing program while evading any more of the pesky inflammation that has bugged him off and on through the years.

3. Out of options: Josh Tomlin and Ryan Merritt are left to duke it out for the fifth rotation spot, but it might not be so clear-cut. The Indians have four off-days in the first three weeks of the season, including two bookending the club's voyage to Puerto Rico in mid-April.

The complicating matter is Merritt's lack of minor-league options. The Indians might have to get creative to keep from losing him, whether it's innovative disabled-list usage or some efficient roster construction. The team's starting pitching depth is especially lacking at Triple-A, with Cody Anderson still recovering from Tommy John surgery and Julian Merryweather shut down because of a sprained elbow ligament.

The Selby is Godcast: In this week's episode, TJ and I discuss the rotation, the options with Salazar and Merritt, Bauer's thoughtfulness (and what it requires to get him and other players to open up), whether the 2018 Indians pitchers could silence the booming bats of the 1999 Indians and more. Listen here.

Jason Kipnis is older, wiser, smarter and (he hopes) better, even though he needs a Red Bull to get out of bed

By Zack Meisel 4 hours ago

GOODYEAR, Ariz. — Jason Kipnis used to be able to roll out of bed, wipe the crust from his eyes, shake off the exhaustion, the soreness, the late night, the morning fog and get ready for that day's game. Just hand him a Red Bull and pencil his name into the lineup.

And now?

"I need a Red Bull to get out of bed," Kipnis said, laughing.

Kipnis has heard (and read) it all: He's older. He's slower. He's no longer in peak physical shape, no longer the optimal second baseman for the Indians, no longer worth his escalating salary. He's considered each of those claims himself, but he's fixated on the mention of his age (he'll turn 31 on April 3).

With age comes wisdom, and Kipnis believes he's smarter than ever. What he might lack physically, he thinks he can compensate for with experience.

"It's weird how often that's forgotten by some people who don't play the game," he said. "You always make the adjustments each year of working smarter instead of harder. You realize what actually is important in terms of success and what you need to do."

Instead of pushing limits on the bench press, Kipnis now devotes extra time to stretching. Instead of pushing curfews with his bedtime, Kipnis goes to sleep early and rises early. Instead of strolling into spring training with an aura of nonchalance, Kipnis prepares sooner; he started throwing and hitting before Thanksgiving at Curtis Granderson's indoor facility at the University of Illinois at Chicago. In the past, he held off on initiating his regimen until New Year's.

That might explain Kipnis' blistering Cactus League performance, highlighted by his six home runs. He hopes it's foreshadowing of a bounce-back season.

"When he's healthy he's proven he can be an All-Star type player," manager Terry Francona said. "We need that."

Kipnis suffered through a humbling offseason. It was simple to spot his name in trade rumors. It was difficult to place his name on the Indians' defensive lineup projections.

Kipnis questioned whether he was wanted in Cleveland, whether his tenure with the only big-league organization he's ever known was on borrowed time. He eventually converted the anger into fuel and he also came to understand how his salary — and his lack of production and health last season — weren't an efficient mix for the Indians' modest payroll.

"If I'm a fantasy GM or something like that, I could see it too, or at least (would) hear offers," Kipnis said. "But at the same time, once I realized that I have a season to get ready for, regardless of who it's for, that becomes your main focus instead of what the rumors are and what's going on behind the scenes because you don't have any control over that."

A few years ago, Kipnis probably wouldn't have handled it as well. He gained some perspective during his struggle-filled summer and winter of uncertainty. He said he acquired a new appreciation for baseball. And he knows the only path to reversing outside opinion is the narrow dirt-filled trail that begins at home plate.

"The way you change everyone's mind is by going out and producing, going out and playing well," Kipnis said. "No matter if people are on your side or against you, if you go out and play well, it's hard to say anything to that."

He has fared well in the past when equipped with such a grudge. After a dreadful 2014 campaign, Kipnis rebounded with a .303/.372/.451 slash line and an All-Star Game nod in 2015. That was, however, three years and plenty of wear and tear ago.

"It's like along the lines with young pitchers," Francona said. "When they're 22, they go out there every day and they let it fly and we remind them, 'Hey, you have one arm.' Once it doesn't feel good — be smart about it."

"You see that with position players, too, the same thing. They may have lost a half-step here, but they may have gained a full step mentally. As long as they're evolving, it works. And truth be told, as guys age, you have to do more in the offseason. It's not really fair, but that's just the way it is. Because if you don't, you are going to lose a step."

Kipnis has noticed it now takes him 45 minutes to an hour to complete a stretching routine that used to require a half hour. But he no longer minds the work. He knows he can't just guzzle an energy drink and jog up to the plate.

"I enjoy the process now of hitting in the cage for hours," Kipnis said. "I enjoy the working out and stretching, all that stuff. It's not stuff I could've said in years past. I was more of the gamer who would just show up and once the lights come on, 'Let's go.' But now it's a need to enjoy the process a little more and it's been fun for me. The game itself hasn't changed. When you put in the work and feel good, whether I was 24 or 30, when I feel good, I'm very confident that I can have success."