



SF Giants Press Clips Thursday, March 8, 2018

San Francisco Chronicle

Why Giants' Brandon Belt is the most polarizing player in the majors
Henry Schulman

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — On social media and inside the stadium, on talk radio and at the pub, no major-league player is more polarizing than the Giant who laces those size-15 cleats and trots to first base every night.

Brandon Belt is the best power hitter on the team, Brandon Belt strikes out too much. He is a great defender. He will never be a Gold Glover. His sense of humor is endearing. His body language is terrible.

The five-year, \$72.8 million contract extension that Belt signed in 2016 is a fair deal and other teams would love to have him. The Giants will live to regret that contract. Trade him!

Nowhere is the divide greater than inside the equally polarizing world of statistics.

Many old-schoolers scoff at a 6-foot-5 first baseman with a .268 career batting average who turns 30 in April, has not surpassed 18 homers nor 82 RBIs in any season, and strikes out a ton.

But Belt is a sabermetric darling who might be worth more than the \$16 million he will earn in 2018 as the big-money portion of his contract extension takes effect — or so say those who swear by Wins Above Replacement.

“He does a lot of things we like to see under the hood,” said Eno Sarris, a longtime Fangraphs reporter based in the Bay Area who was just named national analytics writer for the Athletic. “He’s got a great walk rate. He’s been a really good defender at first base. He has great non-homer power. He’s really good at spraying the ball around the field. I don’t know if people would know this, but he’s tied for 22nd in baseball in doubles the last three years, and he’s had way fewer plate appearances than (almost) everybody on the list in front of him.”

Indeed, the 21 major-leaguers ahead of Belt have averaged 1,946 plate appearances since 2015. Injuries (including concussions) have limited Belt to 1,662.

Another popular metric is wRC+, which tries to measure how many runs a player creates with all the singles, doubles, homers, etc. that he produces, adjusted to eliminate variances in the two leagues and 30 ballparks.

Belt's career wRC+ is 28 percent above the major-league average. By comparison, Eric Hosmer, who is 18 months younger and just signed an eight-year, \$144 million contract with the Padres, has been only 11 percent above average.

Belt's wRC+ in 2016 was 37 percent above average, which pushed him to the precipice of "great," according to a chart in the Fangraphs glossary.

Belt is well aware of the divide. When told that The Chronicle wanted to write about it, he smiled and said, "You mean why I look so good on paper and look (so bad) in person?"

"I can't help what people think," Belt said. "All I can do is play my game and let the numbers speak for themselves, whether that's your traditional numbers or whether that's metrics.

"I would say that I pay attention to some metrics because the traditional numbers don't always tell the full story."

Belt's story in 2018 will depend largely on whether he can avoid another concussion. His fourth cost him the final two months of 2017.

He has shown no ill effects during spring training, physically or psychologically, after acknowledging that he lapsed into a depression and behavioral change following his concussion that carried well into the offseason.

One need not parse many numbers to understand Belt's subpar 2017 season before the Aug. 4 concussion.

He got pull-happy and hit a lot more groundballs into the shift, which contributed mightily to a 34-point drop in his batting average from 2016. He needs to return to what made him a good hitter and use all fields.

Belt was tracking toward a career-high 28 homers when his season ended, but also a career-high 162 strikeouts. Whiffs are not a sin in modern baseball. Yankees rookie Aaron Judge struck out 208 times last year, but he also hit 52 home runs.

Maybe fans would let up on Belt's strikeouts if he hit for that kind of power, but that will not happen when he plays half his games at AT&T Park. And, though Belt insists he is not pouting when he returns to the dugout after a strikeout, fans still read his body language that way.

"We prefer our stars to be alpha males and never really show their struggles," Sarris said. "In a way, criticizing his shoulders is criticizing him more as an actor than a baseball player. You can look across the bay. Khris Davis has similar shoulders and a similar kind of gait. People read it very differently for some reason."

Belt wants to cut down on strikeouts, but not at the expense of what makes him so good at reaching base.

One big knock on Belt is the number of hittable pitches he takes, a product of having one of the best eyes in the game. He walks a lot, understands the importance of reaching base and often lays off pitches an inch or two off the plate that get called strike three.

“You’re right,” he said, “I leave it up to the umpire sometimes, but that’s my approach and I don’t think I’m going to change that, because it gives me the best opportunity to be successful.”

A much bigger paycheck could ratchet the pressure on Belt to be successful in 2018. He is confident he will be worth the money.

“I haven’t thought about it at all because they signed me for what I was doing,” he said. “I’m 100 percent positive I can do that and more. I’m not worried about it. I’m just going to go out there and play my game, be a good teammate and help this team win, and that’s all there is to it.”

San Francisco Chronicle

Giants’ Mark Melancon sounds uncertain after first post-surgery inning

Henry Schulman

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Closer Mark Melancon reached a milestone Wednesday, pitching in a game for the first time since a September operation to release pressure on the pronator muscle in his right forearm. The results were good. He faced the Padres’ Manuel Margot, Raffy Lopez and Wil Myers, and retired them all.

Melancon is aiming to be ready to close on Opening Day in three weeks, despite a slow approach this spring.

“That’s how we’re going about it,” he said.

And yet, Melancon struggled to find the right words several times when asked how his arm felt. The best answer for the Giants would have been, “Never felt better. Raring to go.”

Melancon did not say that. In fact, he deliberated for a good spell before he said, “It’s progressing. I don’t think we expected it to be perfect from Day 1. Part of having surgery is going through that.”

Reporters tried to parse the statement. Was Melancon going through normal discomfort, or did he feel something in the affected area?

“It’s hard to tell the difference sometimes,” he said. “Discomfort is part of the process. I don’t view it as a negative thing. That’s part of it.”

The Giants need a healthy Melancon for the back end of the bullpen, even with the additions of Sam Dyson last season and Tony Watson this spring.

Mark Melancon and Madison Bumgarner talked to reporters after pitching in Wednesday’s 4-4 tie with the Padres.

Melancon tends to be guarded when discussing his arm. The truer test is not what he says, but how often he takes the ball. A reliever ordinarily pitches every other day here. Melancon was unsure if he would pitch again Friday, saying he needed to discuss that with the staff.

Manager Bruce Bochy said he expects Melancon to be ready by Opening Day and should be able to pitch back-to-back days by the end of spring, the last box a reliever checks off. Bochy sounded confident that Melancon will be ready and, just as significant, that the 32-year-old is healthy.

“He’s thrown live BP,” Bochy said. “It’s not like he’s been hurt this spring.”

Briefly: Bochy said that Buster Posey, who has played just one game, had two at-bats and caught two innings in the Cactus League, is expected to start Friday. He originally was to play Wednesday, but the staff wanted him to test his left ankle in drills before having him play. ... Bochy played would could be his regular lineup against right-handed pitchers, minus Posey. Joe Panik and Brandon Belt hit 1-2, which they might do during the season, followed by Andrew McCutchen, Evan Longoria, Brandon Crawford and Hunter Pence. Bochy was coy about where Posey would be inserted. Bochy smiled and said, “seventh or eighth.”

San Francisco Chronicle
Giants’ Posey, fighting ankle injury, sits again
Henry Schulman

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — The Giants open the regular season three weeks from Thursday. Buster Posey has played in one Cactus League game, had two at-bats and caught two innings, and he did not play against the Padres on Wednesday as originally planned.

Is Posey’s left-ankle injury becoming a hindrance to his preparation for the season?

Probably not. Posey took batting practice and participated in a drill that required him to squat, and after the Giants and Padres played to a 4-4 tie in 10 innings, manager Bruce Bochy said Posey is expected to start Friday.

Bochy said Posey could have played Wednesday, but trainers wanted to see him run the bases and test the ankle after Tuesday’s day off before getting him into a game.

The Giants play a night game in Peoria on Thursday night, but none of the regulars is going after all but Posey played Wednesday. Johnny Cueto will make the trip to face the Mariners.

Bochy said he expects Posey to get sufficient at-bats and catching reps ahead of the March 29 opener at Dodger Stadium.

MLB.com

Panik, Belt set to top lineup vs. righties

Chris Haft

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. -- Giants manager Bruce Bochy ended an offseason of speculation Wednesday by declaring his preference to bat Joe Panik leadoff against right-handed pitchers, followed by Brandon Belt.

"There's no question" about this, Bochy said after the Giants' 4-4, 10-inning Cactus League tie with the San Diego Padres. Bochy's inclinations became clearer in recent weeks as Panik remained a fixture at the top of the order while personnel changed in other spots.

This virtually assures that the middle of San Francisco's batting order usually will consist of some combination of Buster Posey, Andrew McCutchen and Evan Longoria. Left fielder Hunter Pence, shortstop Brandon Crawford and the yet-to-be-named center fielder will complete the lineup.

Panik, batting .333 in Cactus League exhibitions, welcomed the news.

"I'm going to be hitting in front of a lot of great hitters," he said.

Entering his fourth season as San Francisco's regular second baseman, Panik batted leadoff in 11 starts last year. He hit .295 with a .354 on-base percentage in those games, statistics that were almost identical to the corresponding overall figures of .288 and .347 he compiled.

Making contact is one of Panik's primary assets. He was the National League's toughest hitter to strike out in each of the previous two seasons.

Belt, the Giants' everyday first baseman, hit only .215 in 32 starts while batting second last year. But his on-base percentage jumped to .362 due to his propensity for drawing walks. This spring, Belt is batting .421 (8-for-19).

By no means is the Giants' batting order established for 2018. Panik occupied every position in the batting order last year but fourth and fifth. His primary habitat was the second spot, where he started 61 games. Belt batted in six different positions, most frequently third (in 44 starts).

"We have guys who are versatile, and I think that's going to help them," Giants hitting coach Alonzo Powell said.

Offseason acquisition Austin Jackson remains a top candidate to enter the lineup and lead off against left-handed starters. Rookie center fielder Steven Duggar, a left-handed batter, also might fill the leadoff spot as he continues to mature.

MLB.com

Melancon cautious after first spring action

Chris Haft

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. -- Following right forearm surgery, an offseason of recovery and a 1-2-3 inning in his Cactus League debut Wednesday, Giants closer Mark Melancon wasn't quite sure how to summarize the state of his throwing arm.

"I think it's part of having surgery," said Melancon, 32. "Going through rust. That's why I say we're still progressing. It's in motion."

Melancon affirmed that he expects to be the Giants' closer on Opening Day.

"That's how we're going about it," he said.

Melancon looked mostly sharp while pitching the fifth inning of the Giants' 4-4, 10-inning tie with the San Diego Padres. He cited the joy of pitching competitively and mentioned that his changeup worked well against the Padres.

Melancon, who signed a four-year, \$62 million contract before last season, has been treated carefully this spring due to the procedure he underwent last Sept. 12 to relieve compression in his forearm.

Asked whether enough time remains in Spring Training for him to pass a reliever's preseason tests, particularly pitching on back-to-back days, Melancon replied, "There hasn't been one spring where I feel like I had enough time. I'm progressing. I don't think you can expect everything to be perfect Day 1. We're taking it slow. So we're still progressing."

Did he mean that in terms of command and performance or simply based on how his arm feels?

"Both," he said.

Asked whether he was experiencing discomfort or "[felt] something in there," Melancon said, "It's hard to tell the difference sometimes. Is discomfort part of the process? I don't know. I believe it is. It's just part of the process. I don't view it as a negative thing."

Addressing whether his surgery achieved its objective -- to relieve the compression in his throwing arm -
- Melancon again sounded cautious.

"I think it's still early, so it's hard to say one way or the other on that," he said. "We're still going through the process."

The Giants likely would use right-hander Sam Dyson or left-hander Tony Watson as co-closers if Melancon were sidelined for any considerable length of time. His forearm ailment forced him to go on the disabled list twice last year, when he finished 1-2 with a 4.50 ERA and 11 saves in 16 opportunities.

"I'd be comfortable with either one," Giants manager Bruce Bochy said.

Injury update: Catcher Buster Posey (left ankle), who has logged two at-bats and two innings behind the plate, will return to the lineup Friday, Bochy said. Bochy reiterated that though Posey is not seriously injured, the Giants' medical staff wants to exercise caution.

Up next: Johnny Cueto will get the start Thursday against Seattle when the Giants play their first night exhibition of the spring, beginning at 5:40 p.m. PT, live on MLB.TV and MLB Network. However, the spotlight will fall more squarely on three pitchers slated to follow Cueto, since they're competing for roles: Derek Holland (fourth or fifth starter) and Julian Fernandez and Reyes Moronta (back end of bullpen).

NBC Sports Bay Area

Posey's return date set while Bochy offers hint at possible regular Giants lineup

Alex Pavlovic

SCOTTSDALE -- Madison Bumgarner didn't look at the lineup card Wednesday morning, but his eyes grew a bit wider when he looked at the other starters warming up a few hours later. Bumgarner, the day's starting pitcher, was pleased to see Bruce Bochy go with most of the projected starting lineup.

There was one exception, but that will change soon. Buster Posey will start Friday after being held out for nearly all of the first two weeks of action. Posey has been nursing a tweaked left ankle. He was supposed to play Wednesday after a day off but he hasn't had a chance to test his ankle on the bases yet.

"Could he have played today? Yeah," Bochy said. "We could've pushed him but we wanted to give him a couple days."

Posey has just two at-bats and two innings caught this spring, but Bochy said there isn't any concern. He should still get the necessary at-bats, and they'll likely come among other stars.

"No question I do (want to get the lineup together)," Bochy said. "It was close today. Before we leave we'll have them all out there (together)."

Bochy wouldn't say where Posey would hit in a full lineup, but he offered a different hint Wednesday. Joe Panik hit first and Brandon Belt was in the two-spot, and Bochy said it's "very possible" that the two hit in those spots against right-handed starters.

NBC Sports Bay Area

With clock ticking, Mark Melancon makes 2018 spring debut

Alex Pavlovic

SCOTTSDALE — Mark Melancon has 22 days to get fully ready to potentially pitch the ninth inning of the season opener. Will that be enough time?

"There hasn't been one spring where I've felt I had enough time," Melancon said Wednesday, smiling.

This spring is different, though. Melancon underwent surgery last Sept. 12 to relieve compression in his right forearm, and while the results on the field Wednesday were encouraging, he admitted afterward that there is still some discomfort in his throwing arm.

“It’s part of the process,” Melancon said. “It’s part of having surgery. We’re still progressing with my arm.”

Melancon said he was confident that he’ll be ready by opening day, and the Giants have expressed no concern publicly that their closer won’t be good to go. The clock is ticking, though, and Melancon has just one spring inning under his belt after pitching a 1-2-3 frame against the Padres.

Melancon entered for the top of the fifth and faced the top of San Diego’s lineup. He got ahead of Manny Margot 0-2 before the pesky leadoff hitter bounced out to short. Raffy Lopez also went down 0-2 and grounded out harmlessly to first. Wil Myers hit a liner to left, but Hunter Pence tracked it down five feet in front of the track.

“It was fun. It was nice to be out there,” Melancon said. “It’s what you spend all the offseason waiting to do and you finally get to do it. I’m always happy with a 1-2-3 inning.”

Bruce Bochy said he liked what he saw, and he noted that Melancon has been throwing to hitters during live BP sessions, so it’s not like he’s fully two weeks behind the rest of the pitchers. Bochy said that if Melancon needs to be further slow-played early in the year, he’s comfortable using Sam Dyson or Tony Watson in the ninth on occasion.

Regardless of how Melancon fares the next three weeks, it has mostly been a positive spring for a bullpen that needs a bounceback. Josh Osich pitched before Melancon and had his fourth scoreless outing of the spring, and Watson followed with a good inning. Hunter Strickland, Dyson and Cory Gerrin have combined for seven scoreless innings.

NBC Sports Bay Area

Last season’s final game helped Giants reliever reach a goal

Alex Pavlovic

SCOTTSDALE — The 162nd game of the 2017 season was momentous for a number of reasons. Pablo Sandoval’s walk-off homer kept the Giants from clinching the No. 1 pick in the draft, or, if you’re glass-half-full, kept them from having sole possession of the worst record in the majors. It also all but wrapped up the Panda’s status as an important bench bat in 2018.

But there was another box checked off that day. In the eighth inning, with the Giants and Padres tied at four, Cory Gerrin entered with one out and Jabari Blash at the plate. On Gerrin’s sixth pitch, Blash flied out to right.

As Gerrin walked off the mound, the scoreboard behind him went into action. The first number on his ERA changed from a two to a one. That last out dropped Gerrin’s ERA to 1.99 for the season.

“It’s only a .01 difference between 2.00 and 1.99, but that was something that I wanted to do,” Gerrin said.

If you’re at all tempted to whine about personal stats taking precedent, understand first that Gerrin didn’t ask to chase 1.99. Gerrin and Hunter Strickland had set a sub-two ERA as a goal late in a season that went off the rails early, but it seemed unlikely as September started. Gerrin was at 2.24 after a

September 6 game, but he ran off nine straight scoreless appearances to finish the month. When he struck out two on September 30, Gearrin was at 2.00 exactly. Bruce Bochy approached him after the game and said that if he wanted to take a crack at 1.99, he would use him the next day.

“You appreciate the work these guys do for you and that (ERA under two) makes for a great year,” Bochy said. “This game is not about the numbers, I get that, but at the end of the year he can look back and he was under two and that’s just not easy to do. He’s done it now, and I wanted him to have that. I wanted him to have that opportunity and he went out and did it.”

Gearrin had posted a 1.80 ERA in 22 appearances for the Braves in 2012 but otherwise his low was 3.77. The final appearance last season was Gearrin’s 68th, easily a career-high. Lost in the 98 losses was a sneaky-good season for the snarling right-hander. Gearrin was seventh among NL relievers in ERA and tied for 18th in appearances.

Gearrin enters this season with a stranglehold on a relief role. The Giants are counting on him to get them out of jams in the sixth or seventh. On opening day, he’ll start back at 0.00, and now he has a new threshold to chase.

“To have the opportunity to do something like that, it means a lot to me to say that I did it,” he said. “It helps set a standard going forward for myself and the team, and that’s something that I want to build on.”

The Athletic

Although very different personalities, Pence and Iguodala are at a similar career crossroads

Phil Taylor

They are both 34, both widely respected veterans with championship jewelry, both such Bay Area fixtures by now that it’s easy to forget that they had highly decorated careers before they ever came West. They have both been not just elite supporting players but essential to the way their teams function in ways that go beyond numbers — one with a lighthearted, quirky personality that helps keep the clubhouse loose, the other with a more low-key wisdom that helps keep the locker room professional.

Hunter Pence and Andre Iguodala are nothing alike and yet they have everything in common.

That includes the similar circumstances in which they now find themselves — in the latter parts of their careers, their bodies having shown enough signs of wear and tear that it’s fair to wonder if they have enough left in the tank for at least one more good run.

As the Giants prepare for the regular season, something approximating the healthy, productive version of Pence — which they haven’t seen for a full season since 2014 — would do wonders for their chances of returning to contention. As the Warriors tune up for the only season that matters, the playoffs, they need Iguodala to rediscover the spring in his legs, as well as the jump shot, that has been mostly missing so far. The question for both teams is: How much can they continue to rely on their old reliables?

Lately, the signs have been encouraging for Iguodala and the Warriors. His season has followed what has become his usual pattern — a semi-hibernation for most of the first 82 games as he conserves his energy for the postseason, followed by a reawakening as playoff time approaches. The jumper has

looked broken at times, leading to his career-worst 25.0 percent 3-point shooting, and he hasn't always looked like the spry, active defender he has been in the past. But in the six games since the All-Star break, Iguodala has looked more like playoff Iguodala, making important defensive plays and leading the Warriors' second unit with his old athleticism. It's a sign of how limber Iguodala is feeling lately that in the Warriors' first 58 games he had 39 dunks, but in just the last six games, he has 10.

With the Warriors up three points against Atlanta last Friday, Iguodala stole the ball off of Kent Bazemore's dribble in the final seconds and sailed in for the clinching slam. Four nights later against the Nets, he had three steals in his first seven minutes and finished with a typical Iguodala stat line — six points, six rebounds, four assists and three steals in 26 minutes. His resurgence is beginning to justify the confidence that the Warriors have had that what Iguodala does before the All-Star break, in the words of Steve Kerr, "means nothing."

The Giants can have no such certainty with Pence, the one-time iron man who has been hurt off and on for much of the past three seasons. After playing at least 154 games for seven straight seasons, including all 162 in 2013 and 2014, he has fallen victim to back and hamstring issues, including surgery to reattach torn tendons in his right hamstring in 2016 and left hammy problems last year.

The Giants are banking that a return to health will help him reverse his declining numbers — he put up a career-worst .701 OPS last season — but unlike the Warriors with Iguodala, they can't afford to let him gradually ramp up. With Andrew McCutchen replacing him in right field, Pence shifts to left, and if he hits, he will solve the Giants' long-time problems at that spot. If he doesn't, the revolving door of left field auditions will start yet again. His health and some adjustments at the plate that our Andrew Baggarly documented make the Giants hopeful, but that's not the same as being confident.

Pence has been his typically upbeat self about the move.

"I think it's going to be a lot of fun to have a whole new perspective," he says. "It's kind of refreshing on the mind."

But it's not his mind that's in question, it's his body. The Giants don't expect him or need him to be the Pence who made two NL All-Star teams earlier in his career, just as the Warriors don't need Iguodala to do anything more than be the solid complementary piece to their Big Four that he's always been at playoff time. But if either player can't live up to his old standards, things suddenly get much more complicated.

Iguodala and Pence are both at least approaching the stage that the Warriors and Giants likely anticipated when they re-signed them to multi-year contracts to keep them in the Bay Area. The three-year, \$48 million deal the Warriors gave Iguodala after last season will take him through his age-36 season, which is a year more than the Warriors would have preferred, but they felt he was important enough to their present to risk the possibility that they will wind up overpaying him in the future. Likewise, the five-year, \$90 million deal the Giants gave Pence in 2013 looked much better then than it does now, when they are paying him \$18.5 million in the final year of the deal.

But then there are the memories of what Pence and Iguodala have already brought to the Bay Area, the contributions they each made to a pair of championships for their teams. There is Pence's leaping catch against the wall to rob the Nationals' Jayson Werth in the 2014 playoffs and his two-run homer off Kansas City's James Shields in Game 1 of the World Series that year, not to mention the part fire-and-

brimstone and part stand-up comedy motivational speeches to teammates and fans during the Giants' postseason runs.

With Iguodala, there is the memory of him selflessly agreeing to come off the bench at the beginning of the Warriors' first championship season, and then the tough, chest-to-chest defense he played against LeBron James in the 2015 Finals, which helped Iguodala walk away with the Finals MVP. There is his place in the Warriors' lineup of death that closed out so many victories and his presence with Stephen Curry, Draymond Green and Klay Thompson in the Hamptons meeting that helped lure Kevin Durant in July 2016.

Those are among the reasons that Iguodala and Pence have already carved out a prominent place for themselves in Bay Area sports history, no matter what happens from here on out. It's because they've given so much that the Warriors and Giants have faith that now, as the games are about to matter, Pence and Iguodala can still give them their money's worth.

The Athletic

**Giants notes: Jeff Samardzija is working to harness his spin better, Bumgarner keeps the Ks coming, Posey still sits
Eno Sarris**

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Spin rate. You might hear a lot about it, but it's not for Jeff Samardzija.

"Everything's not going to be ready right now. We don't need to be talking about spin rate until June," the Giants pitcher said in camp Wednesday. "I'm just trying to get my arm speed up right now. Without arm speed the ball won't do what you want it to do."

That doesn't mean spin doesn't figure into a new wrinkle he's working on this spring. He's got a new curveball grip, one that's designed to spin a certain way.

"We're just trying to get more efficient with the spin," said Samardzija of his work with new pitching coach Curt Young. "We wanted to do something where we didn't have to change the wrist to get the spin we wanted."

The pitcher modeled the before and after of the grips and the spins in the clubhouse. The first, original spin was coming out like his two-seamer, with a side-to-side look. The second spin, a spike curveball, is designed to look more like his four-seamer spin.

Spiking the grip — taking his index finger off the ball — puts the focus on the middle finger so he can get the curveball spin on the ball. The new seams placement changes the axis of the spin to better mimic his four-seamer's. Between the two things, this is a minor adjustment that can get more movement from existing spin, and also provide some deception to the batter.

The fact that the adjustment is minor was a big deal to the pitcher.

"You don't want to physically change your delivery," he said of spring work. "This way, we're not really doing much different."

Even though he doesn't mind making adjustments, Samardzija feels that spring is about getting ready. A major adjustment may take the emphasis off getting game ready and put you behind by Opening Day.

"I didn't really originally want to do it," he admitted. "Everything's not going to be ready right now. I have an issue making big mechanical adjustments in camp. You're making adjustments that you don't need to make in a month. You don't want to set yourself back."

That, plus his reticence to talk spin, meant that Young had a job to do to convince Samardzija to use the new tools at his disposal.

"I can handle this, it makes sense to me, it's not a complete overhaul," emphasized Samardzija. "If I can get an improvement out of it without changing much mechanically, I'm into it."

And so the righty was set to go watch some slow motion video of his new curveball with Young, who was also his pitching coach for a half season with the A's in 2014. New tools, no problem.

"Yeah, I've seen a little bit of difference, but we need to go watch today's bullpen to make sure it's spinning right," Samardzija said. "With this new grip, it feels good."

And then? Then he has to pay a little attention to the grip, but not too much.

"If you go work on it a ton, it just gets worse," Samardzija said of a new grip. "It's like a hot girlfriend. You can't give it too much attention, they know it and they got you and they spend all your money. But if you ignore them, they pay attention because they've never been ignored in their life."

Madison Bumgarner pitched well for most of his appearance Wednesday in a 4-4 tie with the Padres, adding another six strikeouts in 3 1/3 innings, bringing his spring total to 15 strikeouts in eight innings. Who cares about the five hits? Certainly not the pitcher.

"I'm just trying to make pitches and working on different stuff," Bumgarner said after his start. "Just trying to make sure that by the end of camp I'm ready to go."

The offseason was good to the lefty, who admitted that he might not have been 100 percent late last year.

"I feel completely normal now. I was pretty much normal when I came back, but we did come back on the faster side so it was pretty much normal," he said of his return from injury last season. "Now everything feels exactly the same as before."

That last pitch that Christian Villanueva hit for a double? Was he tired after 69 pitches?

"That might have been the best pitch I threw all day, just one of those things," Bumgarner said. "A backdoor slider, it was perfect."

Well, except for the result, I guess.

Brandon Crawford got a hit off of Padres' starter Tyson Ross in the first, no big deal you might think. A lefty, going up against a righty with a fastball and slider, Crawford would naturally have the advantage.

But Crawford is a paltry 3 for 21 against Ross in his career, all singles. Is there something the righty has that makes it tough on Crawford?

"He has good movement on his ball, he's one of those guys," Crawford said. "He was easy mid-90s when he was going good, whippy arm, and the slider's tough to pick, and a fastball moving both ways."

Don't look too hard at that small sample though, Crawford said. The two Bay Area natives and Pac-12 products (Ross pitched at Oakland's Bishop O'Dowd High and then Cal; Crawford went to Pleasanton's Foothill High before going to UCLA) have a long history and it hasn't all worked out like that.

"Look at the high school, college, and minor league numbers though," he said with a smile. "I raked against him then."

He worked out on the field, doing what you might call athletic activities, but Buster Posey didn't play in the game. After the feeling was that he would start the day after the Giants' off-day on Tuesday, was there something going on? Has the left ankle — the ankle that Posey injured in his big collision in 2011, the ankle that barked at him last year — become a real issue?

The catcher left early, and his manager didn't take the bait.

"Buster is going to start Friday," Bochy said after the game. "The reason we didn't start him today is that we haven't seen him run the bases and do those types of things, make sure we don't have a risk of another type of injury. Could he have played today? Sure, but we want to give him a couple days to do those necessary baseball activities and get ready."

Posey tweaked his ankle during a swing, and Bochy thought he would be fine catching, but he still feels it and they want him to be 100 percent before he gets in the game. Most hitters feel that 2-3 weeks is enough to be ready at the plate, so there's no need to hit the panic button just yet.

Mark Melancon has been pitching in Arizona, but he hadn't entered a game before Wednesday.

"It's exciting to get in the game," he said before making his spring debut, "but it's also just part of the process. I've been throwing all winter and it's all about being ready for the season."

The closer pitched a clean fifth inning with two groundouts and his manager was happy to see it.

"There's only so many live BPs you can take before you get really tired of it," Bochy said, "so I'm sure he was glad to be out there."