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San Francisco Chronicle

Giants' Gorkys Hernandez improving from journeyman to solid starter

Henry Schulman

Oh to be a fly on the wall in Venezuela, as the new parents were cradling their son, and Mom shot Dad a death stare when he declared he wanted to name the boy after the Marxist Russian writer Maxim Gorky.

So, Hector it was.

But when Hector had a son of his own, he picked the name Gorkys, not because he was a Communist, not because he wanted to please his father. He thought it exuded strength.

Thirty years later, Gorkys Hernandez is fomenting a revolution in San Francisco. The Giants' center fielder is attempting to prove that a career backup outfielder suddenly can become a productive everyday player in the major leagues.

Hernandez also wants to stir the proletariat to like him — finally — and not be angry with the Giants for keeping him at the expense of prospect Steven Duggar, who might spend the entire summer in Sacramento honing his bat.

Hernandez hopes to win over fans who feel his mere presence on the roster is the ultimate

example of the organization's affection for older players and journeymen and past glories at the expense of progress and youth.

Let's just say social media and radio talk shows have not been kind to Gorkys Hernandez.

"Sometimes you're going to hear and read something," he said in the dugout at AT&T Park this week. "If your mind is strong, you say, 'I'm going to change their minds.' If they say something bad about me, I want them to say in the second half, or next year, 'Gorkys is doing a great job.' That's my mentality."

Even Hernandez's biggest critics have to be pleased with the way he wrested the everyday center-field job from ineffective newcomer Austin Jackson, bringing speed and a terrific glove to an outfield that lacks both, all while contributing at the plate.

In his third year with the Giants, Hernandez is hitting .283 with a career-best six home runs (after hitting none last year). He had raised his average to .327 on May 28 but will ride a 3-for-28 slide into Friday night's game against the Nationals in Washington.

Now, Hernandez faces the challenge of reversing the slide, to show he just needed a day off to rest and has not begun a conversion from carriage back to pumpkin; that he really is more than the journeyman who spent time with the Tigers, Braves, Pirates, Marlins, Royals, White Sox and Pirates again before the Giants signed him to a minor-league deal in October 2015.

Manager Bruce Bochy has liked the glove for a long time and believes in the bat.

"Gorkys has always been a gifted defender," Bochy said. "The hitting part has been questionable. He showed last year he can hit major-league pitching and he's doing it again."

Hernandez did not show it until the second half of 2017. He was hitting .160 around Memorial Day and .229 at the All-Star break. He raised his average as high as .273 in the second half before a rough September. Only later did the team reveal that Hernandez played the final month with a fractured hamate in his hand.

That injury ordinarily sends hitters to the operating room immediately. Hernandez played through it and had the operation in October.

“I wanted everyone to know I could play in pain,” he said. “When I had the opportunity to play, I said I can control the pain with adrenaline when I go onto the field. I can be strong.”

Hernandez’s background required strength, too.

His father left when Gorkys was a young boy, leaving mom Norelis to raise three children as a taxi driver who left the house at 5 a.m. and did not return until suppertime.

Gorkys, the oldest, worked in an aunt’s car wash after school to help make ends meet. Like so many children in Latin America with athletic talent, Hernandez saw baseball as a way to help his family. He was 17 when he signed with the Tigers for \$19,000.

His career path also was typical for so many who sign that young. The physical ability did not translate into sustained success. He reached the majors by 2012 with the Pirates, but two summers later found himself back in Venezuela, the father of three young children, without a job.

A 24-game stint in the Mexican League proved pivotal. He hit .378. That and a good winter-ball season in Venezuela got him another shot with the Pirates in 2015. A year later, the Giants signed him.

Hernandez’s manager at Triple-A Sacramento knew all about Hernandez’s defense. Jose Alguacil, also Venezuelan, remembers coaching third base in a winter-league game and sending two runners to their demises at the plate in the same inning. Hernandez threw both of them out from center field.

“He’s one of those players who always opened your eyes and you question how come this guy hasn’t been able to establish himself in the big leagues. Because you see all the tools,” Alguacil said.

Alguacil asked Hernandez that very question at the start of the 2016 Triple-A season. The player had no answer, but Alguacil did, at least partially. He heard from sources around the game that Hernandez did not necessarily possess the proper attitude.

Hernandez's body language in times of strife was terrible. He developed a reputation as a sulker, which can be a job killer.

Alguacil said he was determined to ride Hernandez on all fronts, to make him a better hitter and smooth the intangibles. Alguacil told Hernandez that by the end of the season, Hernandez would either love him or hate him.

By the end of the 2016 season, Hernandez was a starting outfielder for the Giants in their Division Series against the Cubs.

Two years later, Hernandez is the everyday center fielder — at least until Duggar gets the call — for a team with playoff aspirations. Hernandez's body language is terrific, especially in those camera poses the outfielders make after the final out of a win. Hernandez does not get to pick the poses. Andrew McCutchen does.

Hernandez has the confidence to believe he is good enough in center field to make a name for himself throughout baseball in his 30s.

"If I get to be there in center field every day, I think I have the opportunity to win a Gold Glove," he said.

Strong words from a player with a strong name and, as Giants fans are discovering, an even stronger game.

San Jose Mercury News

Five questions the Giants must answer over their final 100 games

Kerry Crowley

SAN FRANCISCO—As left hander Derek Holland doused shortstop Brandon Crawford with jug water, the Giants slapped hands with infielder Alen Hanson who delivered a pinch hit, game-tying two-run home run to make Crawford's walkoff single possible on Wednesday.

The 5-4 10-inning victory over the Diamondbacks capped off a 5-1 homestand in which rookies Andrew Suárez and Dereck Rodríguez combined to throw 13 innings of one-run ball and a six-game stretch in which Pablo Sandoval raised his batting average 17 points thanks to eight hits including two home runs.

Of all the Giants players listed above, only Crawford entered spring training with a roster spot in the bag. Yet after winning six of their last seven to climb back to .500, the Giants have positioned themselves for a thrilling summer thanks to impact contributions from a host of role players.

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The National League West likely won't be won on the shoulders of Holland, Suárez and Rodríguez, but with several regulars including ace Madison Bumgarner sidelined for significant portions of the first two months of the year, the Giants proved they could tread water.

"With all the injuries that have happened, everybody that came in and filled their spots, they did a good job of keeping us in this race," Holland said. "That's what's huge about this whole team. Each guy that's got the opportunity to come in and help this team, they've done what they've been asked to do."

With 62 down and 100 to go, the Giants sit 1.5 games out of first place, right in the middle of a hunt that promises to run through September. What must the Giants do to remain in playoff contention? Let's look at the questions they need to answer.

1. Can Johnny Cueto and Jeff Samardzija return to form?

The two high-profile free agents signed ahead of the 2016 season have spent much of the season on the shelf, but the Giants are hopeful both Johnny Cueto and Jeff Samardzija can contribute before the All-Star break.

Cueto was baseball's most dominant pitcher in the month of April before an elbow sprain forced him to the disabled list and put the rest of his season in jeopardy, while Samardzija has

dealt with a shoulder injury since the middle of spring training that's rendered him ineffective.

The Giants are paying the duo more than \$40 million in 2018 and every missed start forces a lesser option into action. San Francisco's bullpen has the pieces to be a special group, but if the Giants want a shot in the division, they need at least one of their high-dollar starters to return to the mound and eat innings every fifth day.

2. Are they capable of winning on the road?

The Giants have played 32 of their first 62 on the road and are headed for their fourth three-city trip of the season as they'll visit the Nationals, Marlins and Dodgers over their next 10 games.

With a 12-20 record away from AT&T Park this season, the Giants' winning percentage is more than 250 points worse on the road than it is at home, a statistic that must change. A brutal month of May featured 18 road contests against winning clubs, but the Giants' most difficult trips are out of the way.

The schedule is more manageable in June and downright favorable in July, which means the weeks leading up to the trade deadline will offer the front office a realistic idea of whether the franchise has enough assets in house to make a run.

3. Will Andrew McCutchen and Evan Longoria break through?

General manager Bobby Evans traded for two face of the franchise-type players this offseason, but neither Andrew McCutchen or Evan Longoria has provided the type of spark the Giants anticipated.

While both are still heart of the order hitters capable of hurting opposing pitchers, McCutchen is batting .253 with four home runs and is striking out at the highest rate of his career while Longoria has a .275 on-base percentage and is tied for the National League-lead in errors.

McCutchen has developed a reputation for breaking through in June and July while Longoria still boasts strong power numbers, but the Giants need more consistency out of both to climb atop the division.

4. Can the Brandons keep their pace for the final 100 games?

Even though Crawford's average hovered below .200 for most of April and Brandon Belt is expected to miss two more weeks due to an emergency appendectomy, both Brandons are poised to earn All-Star selections in 2018.

Crawford is far and away the most productive shortstop in the National League, dazzling with his glove and carrying the Giants' offense with a .423 average over his past 33 games. Belt

remains the Giants' leader in WAR at 2.5 and ranks third in the NL with a WRC+ of 160 (an average mark is 100), making him one of the most valuable players in the league to date.

If both left-handed hitters continue to scorch the ball deep into the summer, they'll lengthen a balanced Giants' lineup and ease the pressure on a starting staff that's relying heavily on run support.

5. Will enough regular starters hold up through the summer?

Aside from losing their top three starting pitchers to injury before the month of May, the Giants played without second baseman Joe Panik for four weeks and have spent a decent portion of the year searching for solutions in left and center field.

Manager Bruce Bochy oversees one of the oldest rosters in baseball and he's judicious when it comes to resting veterans, as evidenced by the 13 games catcher Buster Posey has already sat out. Bochy doesn't want to stress young starters or tax relievers too heavily, so the Giants have insisted on carrying 13 pitchers for most of the year.

For the Giants to gain ground in the division, they'll need younger starters like Panik, Mac Williamson and Gorkys Hernández to play and perform on an every day basis while a deeper bench featuring the likes of Hanson, Sandoval, Hunter Pence and Nick Hundley eases the load on other regulars.

The Dodgers, D'Backs and Rockies have all dealt with their share of injuries, too, so organizational depth should continue to play a role in deciding one of the tightest division races in baseball.

MLB.com

5 All-Stars underdogs in the NL West

A.J, Cassavell

SAN DIEGO -- The big names headed to this year's Midsummer Classic? You already know them.

But with 68 spots to fill on two rosters, the **All-Star Game** always features its share of upstarts. They're as much a staple of the event as the superstars.

• VOTE: 2018 Camping World MLB All-Star Ballot

That should be especially true in the National League West this season, where a handful of those stars have either struggled (think **Cody Bellinger**, **Evan Longoria**, pre-June **Paul**

Goldschmidt) or succumbed to injury (**Clayton Kershaw, Corey Seager, Wil Myers**).

Sure, **Buster Posey** and **Nolan Arenado** are probably headed to D.C. But the NL West could also see a handful of under-the-radar candidates emerge. Here's a look at one from each team.

D-backs: Daniel Descalso

The case for him: With the D-backs beset by injuries, Descalso has played all over the diamond, seeing time at third, second, first and left field. (He also pitched a scoreless 2/3 of an inning during a blowout loss to save the bullpen.)

At the plate, Descalso has been just as versatile, having started games at every position in the batting order but ninth. He owns a career-best 132 OPS+ and has seven homers in 178 plate appearances. He's been big in some clutch spots for the D-backs as well.

Descalso's name isn't on the ballot, and that's just as well. If he keeps up his solid start to the 2018 season and is good enough to earn an All-Star berth, it would only be fitting for him to come off the bench in a utility role.

Dodgers: Ross Stripling

The case for him: On a pitching staff with **Clayton Kershaw, Kenley Jansen, Rich Hill, Alex Wood** and even Rookie of the Year Award candidate **Walker Buehler**, it's Ross Stripling who leads the Dodgers, including position players, in **fWAR** at 1.9.

Stripling has appeared in 18 games, making seven starts, and he has posted a 1.52 ERA. His pace appears somewhat sustainable, too, as he owns a 1.99 FIP and 66 strikeouts over 53 1/3 innings.

No one questions the star power on the reigning NL champs. But when they struggled to start the season, Stripling's performance in the bullpen went a long way toward keeping them afloat. Now that he's transitioned to the rotation, the Dodgers are making a charge at the division lead.

Giants: Tony Watson

The case for him: Watson has been the steady left-handed presence the Giants so desperately needed at the back end of their bullpen in previous seasons.

He has posted a 2.25 ERA with 31 strikeouts over 28 innings. But perhaps most importantly, he's been a calming presence in a bullpen that's desperately needed one over the past two seasons.

Watson suffered consecutive poor outings in Pittsburgh early last month, but otherwise he's been excellent this year. Watson was an All-Star *for* Pittsburgh in 2014. Four years later, he might be headed back to the Midsummer Classic.

Padres: Kirby Yates

The case for him: You've probably heard this story before: The Padres claimed a slumping reliever off waivers, then he developed a new pitch and became one of the sport's top arms en route to being named an All-Star. It's precisely what happened to **Brad Hand**, who took part in the 2017 Midsummer Classic. Yates could soon follow in his footsteps.

Since his arrival in San Diego last April, Yates has developed a devastating splitter, and he's turned into one of the NL's best setup men. In 23 innings this season, Yates has posted a 1.17 ERA and 28 strikeouts.

Hand remains an excellent candidate for an All-Star berth. Now he's got company within his own bullpen.

Rockies: DJ LeMahieu

The case for him: Inasmuch as a two-time All-Star and a former batting champ can be under-the-radar, LeMahieu could sneak back into the conversation if he comes back strong from the left-thumb injury that sidelined him for two weeks.

There are early signs that he might. Entering play Thursday, LeMahieu was 7-for-24 since his return. He's got ground to make up -- especially given his somewhat pedestrian 100 **wRC+**. But LeMahieu has proven himself capable of doing that, and there could be space on the bench at second base.

Strangely enough, LeMahieu's downfall might be his inability to hit at Coors Field. He's posted a .995 OPS on the road this season, which is more than 350 points higher than his home mark of .631.

ESPN.com

Orioles 'slugger' Chris Davis is having a mind-bogglingly bad season David Schoenfield

It was a relatively slow day of baseball on Thursday, so indulge me as I go down the rabbit hole with Chris Davis. Hopefully we'll all come out alive.

Davis is having a terrible season. I didn't realize exactly how mind-boggling awful until

Wednesday morning when I noted that, despite playing in nearly all the Baltimore Orioles' games, he had scored just nine runs. I mentioned this on Twitter and one response I can print here came from robj1028, who wrote back, "I feel awkward liking a tweet that I don't really like the fact presented but there's no other reaction on Twitter."

Meanwhile, our old friend Diane Firstman pointed this out: Davis had entered his at-bats with 109 runners on base ... and driven in 11 of them. Things haven't turned around over the past two days. He went 1-for-4 with two strikeouts on Wednesday and 0-for-4 with three strikeouts in Thursday's 5-4 loss to the Blue Jays. He's still at nine runs scored in 55 games and is hitting .152/.232/.232. His OPS is barely better than Mike Trout's on-base percentage.

I wasn't the only one thinking of Davis. On Wednesday night, ESPN Insider contributor Dan Szymborski fired off a series of Davis-related tweets, including this one:

It's pretty frightening to be on an "on-pace-for" the worst season of all-time by a large margin when you're nearing mid-June. Chris Davis's on-pace-for in fWAR would rank him 81892 out of 81892 player-seasons since 1901. By NEARLY A FULL WIN.

10:54 PM - Jun 6, 2018

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473

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You're reading that correctly: With minus-1.7 FanGraphs WAR and minus-1.8 Baseball-Reference WAR, Davis is on pace for the worst season of all time. More on that in a moment. I want to start with that runs scored total.

Davis has nine runs scored. Four of those were home runs. On his other 26 hits and 19 walks and two hit by pitches and one reached on error, he has scored just five runs. Mookie Betts and Jeimer Candelario have both scored five runs in one game this season.

His five runs so fascinated me I even looked them up:

-- April 14: Doubled off somebody named Marcus Walden of the Red Sox and scored on two groundouts.

-- May 2: Singled off Eduardo Paredes of the Angels and later scored on Jace Peterson's triple. By the way, both of these runs came in the ninth inning of games the Orioles were losing 10-2 entering the frame. I can't even continue.

The Giants got ace Madison Bumgarner back in action, which could be the nudge they need to keep another title bid alive.

Anyway, the "record" for fewest runs in a season by a qualified player is Leo Cardenas of the 1972 Angels with 25. Davis is on pace for 24 in 146 games. Cardenas' achievement is pretty remarkable because he didn't just limp past 500 plate appearances -- he batted 602 times. He hit .223/.272/.282 with six home runs. That was a legendarily bad offensive team as the Angels averaged just 2.93 runs per game. No wonder the AL instituted the DH in 1973.

The only other two qualifiers with fewer than 30 runs scored are Fred Raymer of the 1905 Boston Beaneaters with 26 runs (he hit .211/.232/.247) and Mario Guerrero of the 1978 A's with 27 runs. Guerrero actually hit an almost respectable .275/.302/.345 in 546 PAs. Get this: He started 41 games in the third spot in the lineup and hit .333 ... and still scored just nine runs in those games.

So, to Dan's tweet about worst seasons ever. Here are FanGraphs' five worst position-player seasons (since 1900):

1. Jim Levey, 1933 Browns: -4.0 WAR
2. Jerry Royster, 1977 Braves: -3.8 WAR
3. Tommy Thevenow, 1930 Phillies: -3.6 WAR
4. Jim Levey, 1931 Browns: -3.3 WAR
5. George Wright, 1985 Rangers: -3.2 WAR

And the Baseball-Reference list:

1. Jerry Royster, 1977 Braves: -4.0 WAR
2. Jim Levey, 1933 Browns: -3.9 WAR
3. George Wright, 1985 Rangers: -3.7 WAR
4. Jose Guillen, 1997 Pirates: -3.3 WAR

5. Jim Levey, 1931 Browns: -3.1 WAR

5. Lou Piniella, 1973 Royals: -3.1 WAR

I would guess Davis has a shot, if only because of the most important criteria (besides sucking): playing time. Davis is signed for four more seasons after this one, at a hefty price of \$23 million per season. With such a heavy investment in Davis, and this season already lost, the Orioles may have little choice but to plow forward and hope Davis can figure things out.

And if he doesn't? As one reader responded to me, "I can't wait to tell my grandkids the Orioles couldn't sign Manny Machado because they instead signed Chris Davis."

OK, I said this was going to be a rabbit hole, so those lists beg the question: Who was Jim Levey? And how did he manage to have two of the worst seasons ever?

He actually has a pretty interesting little story. Born in Pittsburgh in 1906, he dropped out of school at an early age and at 16 was working in a steel mill, later quitting and joining the Marines. While stationed in Quantico, Virginia, he played baseball, football and basketball, and according to "The Big Book of Jewish Baseball," while on recruiting duty in Boston, he met a scout for the New York Giants who told him to go to New York for a tryout with John McGraw's team. Levey showed up without his glove or spikes and was told to beat it.

The book says he signed a few days later with the St. Louis Browns, so he must have been somewhere. After two seasons in the minors, he was installed as the starting shortstop in St. Louis in 1931. What did the Browns see in him? Well, you have to understand how bad the Browns were. They'd gone 64-90 in 1930 and drew -- not a misprint -- 152,088 fans. They had a little talent, less cash and few options.

Levey must have been a terrific athlete. In fact, there's an anecdote in another book about Jewish athletes that says he was going to race Ben Chapman -- who led the league in steals in 1931 -- that August. Apparently, players around the league had placed their bets. The Browns called off the race.

Anyway, Levey may have been fast -- he played three years in the NFL as a running back after his major league career ended -- but had trouble with everything else. In 1931, he hit .209/.264/.285 and made 58 errors. In 1933, he hit .195/.237/.240. The amazing thing about that season is he was moved into the leadoff spot for two weeks in late August and September. The Browns finished last and drew 88,113 fans all season.

The other weird thing: Levey actually hit .280 in 1932 and finished 19th in the MVP voting. The "Big Book of Jewish Baseball" quotes McGraw saying that year, "I'd trade my right arm, left leg

and seven ballplayers for that young fellow."

Levey played for a long time in the minors after 1933 while moonlighting in the NFL and apparently played basketball as well in those pre-NBA days. As for the Bronws? The franchise would eventually move to ... Baltimore.

Davis isn't the only former star who has had this happen to him. Adam Dunn just missed the top five with a minus-2.9 season in 2011 when he hit .159 for the White Sox. Willie McGee was the 1985 NL MVP, but had a minus-2.8 season in 1999 at age 40. Ted Simmons, George Scott and George Bell all had minus-2.5 seasons or worse.

What has happened? Davis is striking out a lot, but he always has struck out a lot. His fly ball rate is just 24.6 percent -- it was 46.9 percent in 2013, when he hit 53 home runs. When he has hit a fly ball, it has left the park just 8 percent of the time -- just half of the 16.5 percent rate he averaged from 2013 to 2017.

So the Orioles are left with a power hitter without enough power who is hitting a lot of ground balls. The team is bad, Machado probably will get traded and the future may be ugly.

Maybe Orioles fans should stay in the hole.