

J-Ram snaps power funk, but Tribe drops finale

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

ST. PETERSBURG -- Jose Ramirez kept his eyes fixed on the ball as it soared deep to left field Wednesday afternoon. The towering drive avoided Tropicana Field's catwalks and kept carrying over the wall for a home run, ending the Tribe slugger's prolonged power outage.

Ramirez's seventh-inning shot also helped the Indians sidestep history.

The blast halted left-hander Blake Snell's bid at the second no-hitter in Rays history, but it was not enough to stop the Indians from absorbing a 3-1 loss to wrap up the three-game series. With the defeat, Cleveland's magic number remains at three, meaning the earliest the club can clinch the American League Central crown is Friday.

"We've all seen it. You know it's there," Indians manager Terry Francona said of Ramirez's power. "And you know he's going to get hot. Especially off a guy like [Snell], that'll do him some good."

Snell, who padded his AL Cy Young Award case by improving to 19-5 with a 2.03 ERA on the year, held the Indians to an 0-for-18 showing before Ramirez broke through in the seventh. The Indians second baseman received a 3-2 curveball over the heart of the plate and subsequently crushed it for his 38th homer of the season.

That marked Ramirez's first homer since Aug. 17, when he went deep in the first inning against the Orioles. Between blasts, the switch-hitter hit .159 (14-for-88) with a .205 slugging percentage in 107 plate appearances.

"That's always good to see," Indians outfielder Brandon Guyer said of Ramirez ending his home-run drought. "You know he's going to come out of whatever he's going through. And to hit a home run off one of the best pitchers in the game, that's always good."

Ramirez's shot was the lone blemish on Snell's line, which included nine strikeouts, two walks and 104 pitches. The lefty entered the afternoon with a 1.54 ERA in his past 18 turns for Tampa Bay and kept that roll going. Snell showed his fastball enough, but focused more on using his curveball (in and out of the zone) and changeup (nine balls in play) to generate swing-and-misses and induce weak contact.

Overall, Snell featured 59 curves and changeups combined, compared to 41 fastballs.

"He mixed it up really good," Guyer said. "If he got behind, really in any count, he could throw his offspeed and throw it for strikes, or for the most part, make it look like strikes and go out of the zone. It's hard to lay off it."

"So, when you have a good fastball like that, obviously, as a hitter you want to hit that pitch if you get it. But, he was mixing it up really well. So, you've just got to tip your cap, man. He was on his game today."

That performance put the magnifying glass over any mistakes made by Indians starter Carlos Carrasco, who worked seven innings and was hung with the loss. The righty allowed three runs, including two on a first-pitch home run by Ji-Man Choi in the first.

"He ends up going seven and giving up three," Francona said. "It just seemed like more, just because of the way their guy was throwing."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Pham's rally-starting scorcher: After Carrasco opened his outing with two quick outs, Tommy Pham got the Rays' offense going by pulling a 2-1 pitch to the left side of the infield. Per Statcast™, the loud grounder had an exit velocity of 109.5 mph, and third baseman Erik Gonzalez was unable to glove the ball cleanly. Pham reached with an infield single and Choi followed with his two-run homer off Carrasco.

Donaldson comes up empty: The Indians emptied their bench in an effort to get something going against reliever Chaz Roe in the eighth. Pinch-hitter Greg Allen was called out on strikes, but then Yonder Alonso (also pinch-hitting) drew a one-out walk. That led to the Tribe sending slugger Josh Donaldson in to pinch-hit for Gonzalez. Donaldson pulled a pitch from Roe to third baseman Joey Wendle, who started a 5-4-3 double play to end the threat.

YOU GOTTA SEE THIS

With no outs and a runner on first in the fifth, Mallex Smith sent a sharp grounder up the middle. The ball seemed destined for center field, but shortstop Francisco Lindor had other ideas. Lindor ranged to his left and dove to snare the grounder. In one smooth motion, the shortstop then flipped the baseball with his glove to Ramirez, who stepped on second for a highlight-reel forceout.

HE SAID IT

"He's extremely intelligent about how teams are pitching him and what they're trying to do to him. He's just had a little bit of a lull here, but he'll get going again. He can hit any pitch. It's not like he can't hit a certain pitch or he can't get to a fastball. He'll be fine." -- Francona, on Ramirez's recent slump

"He commanded all his pitches. His breaking ball is just almost devastating. And he's throwing his fastball through the glove better -- certainly better than he did before. And it'll continue to get better." -- Francona, on Andrew Miller's scoreless eighth inning

SOUND SMART

Carrasco has received two runs or fewer of support in all nine of his losses this season. He's received one run or fewer of support in six of those outings. Carrasco has gone 13-0 this season when gifted with at least three runs of support.

UP NEXT

Following a team off-day Thursday, Donaldson is expected to return to the Tribe's lineup in the opener of a weekend series against the Tigers at 7:10 p.m. ET on Friday at Progressive Field. Righty Josh Tomlin (1-5, 6.63 ERA) is slated to start for Cleveland. Left-hander Matthew Boyd will start for Detroit.

Kipnis optimistic about 2nd go-round in CF

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

ST. PETERSBURG -- Jason Kipnis ran across Tropicana Field's turf, extended his arm and made a nice catch on the baseball that was dropping over his head. It was a smooth grab for the Tribe's new center fielder, even if it was just a ball being tossed from the dugout for Kipnis to use to warm up.

During Tuesday's 2-0 win over the Rays, Kipnis had exactly zero balls sent to center field in his first game of the season at the position. The former second baseman -- out of Wednesday's lineup against Tampa Bay -- is making the transition to help accommodate the arrival of Josh Donaldson, who is taking over at third base, forcing Jose Ramirez to second. Day one consisted of jogging from the dugout to center and a few tosses between innings.

"It's very nice of our pitching staff ... to give me a day to get my legs under me," Kipnis quipped. "I needed it, because that's a long run out there."

After the win Tuesday, Indians manager Terry Francona cracked a smile.

"I thought Kip played a clean center field," Francona joked. "He looked good throwing the ball in-between innings."

All kidding aside, Kipnis was happy to spend a day getting acclimated to center again -- similar to late last year. The difference last September was that Kipnis was moved to the outfield from second immediately upon being activated from the disabled list after a hamstring injury, and he had not played the outfield since his first year of professional baseball in 2009.

This time around, Kipnis has last season's experience to lean on, along with the fact that he is healthy. He also has roughly three weeks to accumulate innings in the field in preparation for the postseason.

"We weren't even standing on two good legs," Kipnis said of the move to center in 2017. "So, it's nice and hopefully we'll have enough time and health to get done what we want to and accomplish what we want to. We'll see. I might even be able to break in one of my own gloves here before October. That'd be nice."

For the time being, Kipnis is using former teammate Austin Jackson's backup glove from last year.

"He shapes it closest to the way I would, so that's why," Kipnis said. "I tried out some other ones. This was the closest one I could get to mine."

The glove did not get much use Tuesday, but that was fine by Kipnis.

"It's going to take some time," he said. "It's good to get day one underneath the belt here. ... We didn't get any balls, but we were ready. The legs were ready. We've been taking them off the bat in BP and getting good breaks and stuff. Hopefully, when we get back home, it'll continue."

Worth noting

- Tribe ace Corey Kluber said Wednesday that he was fully on board with the decision to back up his next start until Sept. 18, meaning he will have seven days of rest between outings. The approach helps Cleveland line Kluber up for the postseason, while meeting his request of having an extra day off before his first October start.

"Eventually, things had to be shuffled around, whether we did it now or did it later," Kluber said. "I think maybe we just felt that doing it now kind of gives a chance to get back on more of a traditional routine before the postseason starts. But, I don't think that it makes that big of a difference when it happened."

- Donaldson went 0-for-4 in his Cleveland debut Tuesday and was given a scheduled day off (while being available off the bench) Wednesday. Following the team's off-day Thursday, the third baseman is expected to be back in the lineup for Friday's game against the Tigers. "He woke up today feeling great," Francona said. "He looked good. He took some pretty healthy swings, too. It's a lot more fun to watch that swing when he's in your uniform."

Jose Ramirez's HR breaks up Blake Snell's no-hit bid, but Tampa Bay Rays beat Cleveland Indians, 3-1

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com phoynes@cleveland.com

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. - Jose Ramirez hit his first home run in almost a month, but it wasn't enough to save his team from Tampa Bay's Blake Snell.

Snell no-hit the Indians for six innings Wednesday afternoon before Ramirez started the seventh with a home run to left field. It was Ramirez's 38th homer, but just his first since Aug. 17 as he continues to work his way through a long slump.

"That will do him some good," said manager Terry Francona, following a 3-1 loss to the Rays at Tropicana Field.

Ramirez hit a 3-2 pitch from Snell, who passed Corey Kluber to take the MLB lead with 19 victories. Seeing how Ramirez is in a 16-for-95 (.168) skid, it qualifies as his best at-bat in weeks.

"That was a really good at-bat," said teammate Brandon Guyer. "I feel like that at-bat he was fouling off a lot of pitches and saw just about every pitch (from Snell). You know he's going to come out of whatever he's going through. And to hit a home run off of one of the best pitchers in the game, that's always good to see."

Snell (19-5, 2.03) has won seven straight starts. Two of his last three have come against the Indians.

Edwin Encarnacion, who hit his 30th homer on Tuesday night, said Snell used a different approach Wednesday afternoon than he did on Sept. 1 when he beat the Indians, 5-3, in Cleveland. It dealt with the use of his fastball. Snell teased the Indians with it, but didn't throw it in the strike zone.

"That was the difference with him today," said Encarnacion. "We had a different approach and he didn't throw the fastball at all. He just showed it and then came with the change-up and curveball."

Fifty-nine of Snell's 104 pitches were curves or change-ups, according to baseballsavant.com, compared to 41 four-seam fastballs.

"He's got the whole package," said Francona. "I mean he's in the other uniform (so you want to beat him), but my goodness. He's got velocity, breaking ball, change-up. Just seeing how much he's improved from one year to the next - that's pretty special stuff."

Snell struck out nine in seven innings. He allowed one hit, one run and two walks.

Carlos Carrasco (16-9, 3.43) allowed a two-run homer to Ji-Man Choi in the first and a sacrifice fly by Kevin Kiermaier in the fifth. It wasn't a lot of damage over seven innings, but it was enough to get him beat.

He said he was trying to get Choi to hit the ball on the ground, but his two-seam fastball ran right over the middle of the plate at 90 mph.

"Sometimes when you make those mistakes you're going to pay for it and that's what happened," said Carrasco. "I just tried to get a ground ball. It came right back over the middle and he swung at the first pitch."

In the fourth inning, Snell went up and in to Encarnacion, who stared at him for several seconds before walking. Carrasco pushed Choi off the plate in the sixth, prompting another staring match.

"He smiled, so I smiled," said Carrasco. "There was no problem."

What it means

The Indians, with 16 games left to play, trail Houston by 10 games to host the best-of-five ALDS starting on Oct. 5. The AL West-leading Astros, who have won 10 of their last 11 games, beat the Tigers on Wednesday.

The Tribe's magic number to clinch the AL Central, with the Twins playing the Yankees on Wednesday night, remained at three.

The pitches

Carrasco threw 101 pitches, 61 (59 percent) for strikes. Snell threw 104 pitches, 62 (59 percent) for strikes.

Thanks for coming

The Indians and Rays drew 10,654 to Tropicana Field. First pitch was at 1:10 p.m. with a temperature of 72 degrees inside and 88 degrees outside.

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Can crack of Edwin Encarnacion's bat serve as rallying cry for reassembled Cleveland Indians?

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com phoynes@cleveland.com

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. - Edwin Encarnacion's ears were ready for the sound of bat on ball Tuesday night. He may have been the only one inside Tropicana Field who was.

Jason Kipnis was standing in center field wearing Austin Jackson's glove and wondering if a fly ball would come his way.

Rookie Shane Bieber was on the mound. Before the game, fellow rookie Aaron Plukto told him, "Do you know that everyone in our starting lineup has played in at least one All-Star Game? Everyone that is except you." It was the first time that's happened with the Indians since Oct. 2, 1999 (Kenny Lofton, Omar Vizquel, Roberto Alomar, Manny Ramirez, Jim Thome, Harold Baines, David Justice, Travis Fryman and Sandy Alomar Jr.).

Manager Terry Francona sat in the dugout doing the math in his head. Chris Antonetti, president of baseball operations, was sitting in the seats adding and subtracting the same numbers.

There are 17 games left in the regular season. Andrew Miller came back Monday. Josh Donaldson was activated Tuesday. Trevor Bauer is going to throw a bullpen on Wednesday.

Could this roster, after a season of stops and starts, finally be getting healthy? If so, are 17 games enough to change it from a talented, but sluggish entity that hasn't been pushed all season into a sharper, more competitive instrument? One ready to face the defending World Series champion in the first round of the postseason?

The consensus was yes following the Indians' 2-0 win over the Rays. While the support wasn't full throated, there was at least the feeling that the Indians are in a better spot than they were last year when Michael Brantley and Lonnie Chisenhall limped into the ALDS after missing most of the second half and were immediately exposed by the Yankees' pitching staff.

To say nothing of Corey Kluber's performance in Games 2 and 5. Last year at this time Kluber was on the way to being named AL Pitcher of the Month for September as he reeled off win after win. The finishing kick resulted in a second Cy Young award, but Kluber was not the same pitcher in the ALDS. He contends that he was good enough to pitch, but something was wrong.

Francona told reporters before Tuesday night's game that Kluber will skip a start this weekend against Detroit so they can align him to start Game 1 of the ALDS on Oct. 5. The extra rest should come in handy as well.

Tuesday night in the sixth inning, Tyler Glasnow, Tampa Bay's talented 6-8 right-hander, had one out with Encarnacion at the plate. He threw a 95 mph first-pitch fastball to Encarnacion. It left Encarnacion's bat at 107.7 mph, according to Statcast, and landed in the second section of seats behind the left field wall.

How loud was the meeting between bat and ball? It sounded like there was a microphone inside Encarnacion's bat attached to a Marshall amp cranked to max volume. There were only 10,599 people at the Trop so there was plenty of reverb and echo as well.

Asked if the sound hurt his ears, Encarnacion smiled and said, "No, I was ready for that one."

It was his 30th home run and 96th RBI of the season. He is the only player to hit 30 or more homers in each of the last seven years. The last player to do that was Detroit's Miguel Cabrera from 2007-13.

"It's unbelievable, man," said Encarnacion. "I never expected to have a season like the one I've been having. Seven straight years of 30 homers or more. ... I'm very proud about what I've been doing."

Put Encarnacion down as a yes vote to the question of whether there is enough time to incorporate Donaldson, his old Toronto teammate, into the lineup and make it effective and dangerous.

"All the players we have here know what they have to do," said Encarnacion. "Donaldson is a veteran guy. All the young players know what they have to do. There are a lot of games left for us to get everything together like the way we've been doing. I think it's something we're going to enjoy."

Donaldson's arrival pushed Jose Ramirez from third to second and Kipnis from second to center field. It's the second straight year Kipnis has made a September move to center field. This time his hamstrings are sound and he can appreciate the tranquility of the outfield.

"It's definitely a change," said Kipnis, who did not have one ball hit to him. "A lot of adrenaline, someone else's glove. It's weird - in the infield, you're involved in every single play, even the ones that are hit to the outfield, you're the relay guy or the cut guy."

"Now it's kind of nice. You watch a ground ball hit, and you're just backing up, just standing there a little bit."

Kipnis never ordered an outfielder's glove after last season because the Indians told him he'd be staying at second base. So he's been using an old glove that Jackson gave him last year. He's been prowling the clubhouse looking for a spare, but he doesn't know if he'll have enough time to break it in.

As Kipnis was explaining that to reporters, Josh Tomlin walked by and told him, "Hey, I still have my red glove at home if you need it." Said Kipnis, "I hear you baby. I might need it," referring to another glove he experimented with last year.

Bieber struck out a career-high 11 batters. His career in the big leagues consists of 17 starts and he's won 10. He's the third Indians' pitcher, according to the data available in Baseball Reference, which goes back to 1908, with 10 or more wins in the first 17 games of his career. The others are Vean Gregg (11 wins) and Tomlin (10 wins).

"It's exciting to be a part of this team right now," said Bieber, 6-0 with a 3.92 ERA in 10 starts on the road.

Francona and Antonetti are in the business of asking and answering questions. They've been able to answer a few pressing ones lately, but there are always more to come.

"It's going to take some time now to get guys where they're function at the maximum of what they can do," said Francona. "But for the first time probably all year, we're getting close to where we have our team. Hopefully, nothing else happens and we can work toward becoming a team that could be a factor."

It certainly isn't an ideal situation.

"It's probably a little unique to be doing it as this time of year," said Francona. "But I'd rather be doing it now than days before the playoffs. Last year we were so unsettled going in. If you have a lot of question marks, sometimes the answer is going to be no. So you can't have too many."

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Cleveland Indians wishing, hoping and praying that Jose Ramirez will make the fans sing again

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. - It was not the greatest of trips for Jose Ramirez and the Indians.

Yes, he prevented the Indians from being no-hit and shut out in Wednesday's 3-1 loss to the Tampa Bay Rays. On Sunday in Toronto, he stole second base in the first inning to become the third 30-30 man in team history along with Joe Carter and Grady Sizemore.

Besides that, it has been almost a month of silence from the man who has been the American League's starting All-Star third baseman for the last two years.

Ramirez's homer off Blake Snell in the seventh inning Wednesday ended Snell's bid for a no-hitter and gave Ramirez his 38th homer of the season. Not that 38 homers isn't something worth celebrating - his career high until this year was 29 - but it was Ramirez's first long ball in 88 at-bats. He hit No. 37 off Baltimore's David Hess in the first inning on Aug. 17. Not to mention that it was his first homer off a lefty since he went deep against Martin Perez of Texas on July 20.

So the Indians are hopeful that Wednesday's homer can help Ramirez get back to the hitter who went into the All-Star break batting .302 (108-for-358) with 29 homers, 70 RBI and a 1.029 OPS. Since the break, however, he's hitting .235 (40-for-170) with nine homers and 29 RBI.

"We've all seen it," said manager Terry Francona. "You know it's there and you know he's going to get hot. Especially (hitting a home run) off a guy like Snell, that will do him some good."

Snell is a 19-game winner and a strong AL Cy Young candidate.

Ramirez's average has plunged from .305 on Aug. 14 to .280 after Wednesday's loss. In that stretch, he's hitting .168 (16-for-95) with two homers and 10 RBI. His OPS has dropped from 1.054 to .967.

Despite Ramirez's slide, he is the first player to combine this much power and speed in one year (32 steals and 38 homers) since Matt Kemp hit 39 homers and stole 40 bases for the Dodgers in 2011. The last American Leaguer to put up similar numbers was New York's Alfonso Soriano (38 homers, 35 steals) in 2003. The only other switch-hitter to do it was Carlos Beltran, who hit 38 homers and stole 42 bases for Kansas City and Houston in 2004.

"He's extremely intelligent about how teams are pitching him," said Francona, "and what they're trying to do to him. He's just in a little bit of a lull here, but he'll get going again. He can hit any pitch. It's not like he can't hit a certain pitch or he can't get to a fastball. He'll be fine."

The Indians went 3-4 on this seven-game trip against the rebuilding Blue Jays and the Rays. The Blue Jays have been eliminated from the postseason and the Rays nearly so, but it's fair to say that the Indians were out-hustled and out-enthused by both teams.

Don't be a stranger: The Indians, with just three games left against Boston, are 14-17 against the AL East. Baltimore is the only team they've posted a winning record against.

Toronto and the Rays went 4-3 against the Tribe, while the Yankees were 5-2. The Indians and Red Sox have split four games.

Tough opponent: Remember when Carlos Carrasco seemed to flirt with a no-hitter every time he took the mound? The year was 2015 and the closest he came to a no-hitter was against the Rays on July 1. There were two outs in the ninth when Joey Butler lined a two-strike single into right field to ruin Carrasco's date with history.

This year, however, the Rays have been hard on him. He's 0-2 with 5.40 ERA against the Rays in the second half. When he's not facing Tampa, Carrasco is 5-2 with a 1.80 ERA since the break.

Finally: The Indians were held to one hit Wednesday for the second time this season and the first time since April 3 against the Angels. ... Andrew Miller relieved Carrasco and pitched a scoreless eighth inning. It was his second scoreless inning in the last three days.

"He commanded all his pitches," said Francona. "His breaking ball is just almost devastating. And he's throwing his fastball through the glove better -- certainly better than he did before. And it'll continue to get better." The Indians brought Miller off the disabled list on Monday.

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Eastern League Championship/Fisher Cats 6, RubberDucks 1: Loss leaves Ducks with backs against the wall

by ABJ/Ohio.com correspondent

Sometimes, it's just one of those games.

It was Wednesday for the RubberDucks against the New Hampshire Fisher Cats.

Playing decent baseball early against the Fisher Cats in Game 2 of the Eastern League Championship Series at Canal Park, the Ducks did a lot of things right, but lost 6-1.

The problem was they did just a few things wrong, and the Eastern Division champion Fisher Cats pounced to take a 2-0 lead in the best-of-five series.

"It's tough, especially against a team like this," RubberDucks manager Tony Mansolino said. "You're looking at what we just faced. They're two first-rounders. In two games, their two starters limited us to two runs total, plus they have a strong bullpen. ... They didn't make any mistakes. You have to tip your cap to them."

That's what you get, however, when you're facing a team that features the league Most Valuable Player and Rookie of the Year (Cavan Biggio), runner-up Rookie of the Year (Bo Bichette) and league batting champion (Harold Ramirez).

The line for Kyle Dowdy looked average, but it really was better than it appeared.

Dowdy went 5 1/3 innings and gave up four runs — three earned — on five hits with two walks and eight strikeouts.

It's how the Fisher Cats scored that shows just how crazy the game was at the onset.

Four consecutive singles brought in three runs in the third.

In the sixth, Nellie Rodriguez fielded a ball at first and ran right at Ramirez, who was breaking from third.

He put Ramirez in a pickle, but when the throw went to third to get the designated hitter out, it hit Ramirez in the right hand.

Third baseman Sam Haggerty threw wildly to Daniel Salters at home and Ramirez scored easily.

The Fisher Cats scored two more times in the eighth, but such is the life in the Eastern League where sometimes it doesn't take much to gain an advantage, especially against a team where the margin of error is so small.

"It's unbelievably slim" Dowdy said. "Our entire theory is that we're OK with groundball hits. We're doing our job and getting groundballs like we want. It's just one of those things where it happened really quick. It was unfortunate, but there's not much you can do there. You just keep pitching your game."

The early uprising let Jon Harris relax and play pitch and catch.

The first-round draft pick from the 2015 draft went 6 1/3 innings of five-hit ball. He gave up an earned run, struck out seven and didn't walk anyone.

"He had a good fastball going for him and was working off that," Ducks outfielder Andrew Calica said. "He was getting in pitcher advantage counts early on and was getting us in trouble. He's a good pitcher. He put up some good pitches. Bats and balls didn't go our way there."

The onus now falls on the RubberDucks, who must sweep the Fisher Cats at home.

The closest anyone has come to sweeping a series from the Fisher Cats at home came July 4-8 when the Reading Fightin' Phils took four out of five.

"Could we win three in a row at their place?" Mansolino said. "Absolutely, man. Their park is a lot smaller. Some of the balls we hit up in the air have a chance to get out. The good thing is for the next two days we don't have to see [T.J.] Zeuch or Harris. We'll get two other guys that are solid, but not to the level we just saw. If you can win one game, you put pressure on them and then go from there."

After a day off, Game 3 begins at 6:35 p.m. Friday at Northeast Delta Dental Stadium. Ducks right-hander Zach Plesac (0-0, 4.15) and Fisher Cats right-hander Jordan Romano (1-0, 0.00) are the scheduled starters.

The Indians' lineup, with All-Stars top to bottom, is gearing up for October

Zack Meisel Sep 12, 2018 13

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — Before Shane Bieber authored the best start of his brief big-league career, Adam Plutko knocked him down a peg.

In a lighthearted manner, Plutko informed his fellow hurler that he was the only member of the Indians' starting squad Tuesday night not to have an All-Star nod to his name.

Terry Francona trotted out a lineup featuring nine past or present participants in the Midsummer Classic. It marked the first time a Tribe team has been that All-Star-heavy since Oct. 2, 1999.

On that Saturday afternoon, Kenny Lofton, Omar Vizquel, Roberto Alomar, Manny Ramirez, Jim Thome, Harold Baines, David Justice, Travis Fryman and Sandy Alomar Jr. steered the ship that scored 1,009 runs over the course of the season.

The Indians' current batting order isn't as well-oiled of a machine, but the group has three weeks to locate some WD-40. At last, the lineup is whole, no longer waiting for someone to return from injury, for the front office to swing a trade, for a knight in shining armor — or in an elbow pad, helmet and spikes — to rescue the offense.

It starts with (1) Francisco Lindor (All-Star appearances: 2016, 2017, 2018). The shortstop ranks fifth in the majors in WAR, sixth in home runs, fourth in doubles and first in runs scored. He's the catalyst for an offense that ranks third in the majors in runs, behind the Red Sox and Yankees. And he often sets the table for a guy he regularly credits for helping to shape him as a hitter ...

(2) Michael Brantley (2014, 2017, 2018) keeps quietly plugging away. He boasts a 123 wRC+, with a microscopic strikeout rate of 8.7 percent. He has walked 44 times and struck out 50 times. He has recorded multiple hits in 14 of his last 31 starts. His even-keeled, left-handed stick fits well between the club's slugging switch-hitters. Speaking of ...

A monthlong slump has shifted (3) José Ramírez's (2017, 2018) numbers from "otherworldly" to "gaudy." A .281/.394/.571 slash line sure seems impressive, especially when considering Ramírez has posted a .165 average over his last 25 games. He remains in the conversation for MVP finalists, but others have created some separation. Ramírez has tallied 95 walks, compared with 69 strikeouts, and he leads the league with 32 stolen bases. The Indians certainly need him to revert to form before the calendar flips to October, though. He's been stuck on 37 home runs since Aug. 17.

He and Lindor are the charter members of the club's 30-homer club. They welcomed a newcomer Tuesday night ...

(4) Edwin Encarnacion (2013, 2014, 2016) is the sport's only player with 30 or more homers in each of the last seven seasons. Encarnacion received the poor baseball, which he smacked beyond the first cluster of seats in left-center at Tropicana Field.

"It's something I never expected," Encarnacion said. "I always try to get 30 and 100 RBIs. That's my goal every year."

When he returned to his catching position the ensuing inning, Yan Gomes mentioned Encarnacion's 30-homer streak to the home-plate umpire.

"I don't even know how that feels," Gomes said. "It takes me two, three years to hit 30."

The Indians have three players with 30-plus homers for the fifth time in franchise history.

2018: Francisco Lindor, José Ramírez, Edwin Encarnacion

1999: Manny Ramírez, Richie Sexson, Jim Thome

1997: David Justice, Jim Thome, Matt Williams

1996: Albert Belle, Manny Ramirez, Jim Thome

1987: Joe Carter, Brook Jacoby, Cory Snyder

After Encarnacion crossed the plate, he slapped hands with Josh Donaldson, before each player placed an index finger on his lips.

"It feels great to have him back in the same lineup together," Encarnacion said.

(5) Donaldson (2014, 2015, 2016) hit the ball to the warning track in each of his first two trips to the plate with the Indians. The first flyout left his bat at 97.5 mph, the second at 103.7 mph.

"He took some ferocious swings and he's on so many pitches," Francona said. "He squared up a couple, but he didn't have anything to show for it. But, he's got time."

As they sat in the bullpen Tuesday night, Josh Tomlin and Dan Otero shared their relief that they won't have to pitch to Donaldson the rest of this year.

"It was fun to watch Donaldson take those swings and make those plays on our side," Tomlin said. "It makes you cringe at night when you're facing him."

Donaldson spent a few minutes Wednesday morning watching MLB Network in the Indians' clubhouse, as the channel highlighted his first action in an Indians uniform.

"That's a huge bat in that lineup," Gomes said. "It definitely lengthens our lineup a lot and deepens our bench."

That helps, since (6) Yonder Alonso (2017) has struggled since the All-Star break. He has compiled a .199/.261/.380 slash line, and it looks even worse when examining only the last month: .182/.245/.273.

Alonso has lost a bit of playing time to Yandy Díaz against lefties; it'll be interesting to see whether that platoon persists into October. Alonso owns a .750 OPS against righties this season and a .609 OPS against southpaws. On the other hand ...

(7) Melky Cabrera (2012) remains one of the Indians' most productive hitters since the break. He boasts a .306/.375/.486 slash line in his second tour with the Tribe. Chris Antonetti told The Athletic that Encarnacion insisted Cabrera could provide the offense with a lift. His scouting report has paid dividends, as the Indians have a reliable switch-hitter to separate a couple of lefties in the lineup. As for that other lefty ...

(8) Jason Kipnis (2013, 2015) now has a new position to relearn. Kipnis has fared better at the plate over the last month (.813 OPS), but his overall numbers leave plenty to be desired. And now he's using Austin Jackson's old backup glove as he shifts to center field for the duration of the season. He didn't get any action in his new domain Tuesday night.

"I thought Kip played a clean center field," Francona quipped. "He looked good throwing the ball in between innings."

Kipnis has spent the entirety of the season searching for answers to his profound hitting woes. Now he has three weeks to study the best routes to take while pursuing fly balls, his fellow outfielders' tendencies and the dynamics and dimensions of the different ballparks. He spent about a week taking fly balls in the outfield during batting practice before Francona penciled him into his new spot.

"It's definitely a change — a lot of adrenaline, someone else's glove, just kind of winging it, at best," Kipnis said. "It's weird — in the infield, you're involved in every single play. Even the ones that are hit to the outfield, you're the relay guy, the cut guy. Now, it's kind of nice. You watch a ground ball get hit, and you're just backing up, just standing there a little bit. It's going to take some time. It's good to get day one underneath the belt."

That leaves the ninth spot for (9) Yan Gomes (2018), who was named to his first All-Star team this year. Gomes broke a scoreless tie Tuesday with his 14th homer, matching his total from last season. Over the last month, he has posted a .329/.346/.500 slash line. Among AL catchers with at least 300 plate appearances, Gomes ranks first with a .740 OPS.

It's a batting order stocked with All-Stars. Now the Indians have three weeks to gear up for October so that, when it matters most, they perform like All-Stars.

"We have a good lineup," Kipnis said. "I don't think anyone wants to face us."

Rays' Snell no-hit bid into 7th, 19th win tops Indians 3-1 **The Associated Press**

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. (AP) -- Blake Snell is locked in on the Tampa Bay Rays' longshot postseason hopes, not thinking about winning the AL Cy Young Award.

Snell took a no-hit bid into the seventh inning and got his major league-leading 19th win, leading the Rays over the Cleveland Indians 3-1 on Wednesday.

"I know that we're winning and that's the most important thing," Snell said. "That's what I'm focused on, that's what we're focused on. All the individual stuff I'll look at later."

Snell (19-5) lost his bid when Jose Ramirez led off the seventh with his 38th homer. Snell won his team-record seventh straight start, striking out nine and walking two in seven innings. He has allowed two earned runs or fewer in 16 consecutive home starts.

Chaz Roe and Jose Alvarado each got three outs, completing a one-hitter. Alvarado earned his eighth save in 11 chances.

The Rays are 8 1/2 games behind Oakland for the second AL wild card with 17 left. The Athletics routed Baltimore on Wednesday night and open a three-game series at Tampa Bay on Friday night.

Snell's ERA dropped to 2.03, second in the AL behind Boston's Chris Sale at 1.96. Snell's 1.24 ERA at home is best in the majors.

"He's got the whole package," Indians manager Terry Francona said. "He's got velocity, breaking ball, changeup, and seeing how much he's improved from one year to the next, that's pretty special stuff."

Cleveland's magic number to clinch a third consecutive AL Central title remained at three.

Ji-Man Choi hit a two-run homer in the first off Carlos Carrasco (16-9), then took a well-inside pitch from Carrasco in the sixth and briefly stared at the mound. Choi hit a winning homer off Brad Hand in the ninth inning on Monday night.

"Every at-bat I can hit a home run you feel great, especially today helping to contribute to a win for Snell," Choi said through a translator.

Cleveland's Edwin Encarnacion stared and shook his head after a high and inside pitch from Snell in the fourth.

"It was nothing," Encarnacion said. "No hard feelings. He tried to go inside. No problem."

Carrasco (16-9) gave up three runs and six hits in seven innings.

Josh Donaldson, acquired by Cleveland from Toronto on Aug. 31, hit into a double play as a pinch-hitter in the eighth. He went 0 for 4 Tuesday in his Cleveland debut, his first big league game since May 28.

Cleveland center fielder Jason Kipnis, left fielder Michael Brantley, catcher Yan Gomes and first baseman Yonder Alonso were also rested.

Tommy Pham extended his career-best hitting streak to 16 games with a two-out infield single in the first and scored on Choi's drive to center field.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Indians: Donaldson is to start at third base on Friday.

Rays: CF Kevin Kiermaier didn't provide details for what the team called a "general illness" that kept him out the lineup the previous two games. "Time to rest really helped," said Kiermaier, who had a fourth-inning sacrifice fly and tripled during the sixth.

NUMBERS

Ramirez's homer was his first since Aug. 17, ending an 88 at-bat drought. ... Tampa Bay OF Mallex Smith stole two bases and has 33 overall. ... The game was played in 2 hours, 20 minutes.

UP NEXT

Indians: RHP Mike Tomlin (1-5) is to face Detroit LHP Matthew Boyd (9-12) on Friday night.

Rays: RHP Diego Castillo (3-2) will start a bullpen game for Tampa Bay Friday night against Oakland RHP Edwin Jackson (5-3). The Rays took three of four from the Athletics in Oakland from May 28-31.

Why this AL race is the best MVP race ever

David Schoenfield

Here's the hypothesis: The American League MVP race is arguably the greatest MVP race ever.

Here's the evidence: We already have six position players with a WAR of 7.0 or higher, plus a seventh candidate who is merely chasing a Triple Crown. To have so many players performing at such a high level is nearly unprecedented, which makes this MVP race so intriguing.

The narrative is even more interesting because the national consensus seems to favor Mookie Betts, the league leader in WAR, but when I was in Boston last weekend the local take from the beat writers and Red Sox players is that it's not clear Betts is even the MVP of his own team.

David Price summed it up best when he described Betts as the MVP of the league, but J.D. Martinez as the MVP of the Red Sox. In other words, there's no denying Betts' all-around brilliance at the plate, in the field and on the bases, but if you go beyond WAR and give Martinez credit for making his teammates better -- oh, along with his monster production in the batter's box -- then he has been even more instrumental in leading Boston to its first 100-win season since 1946.

Shohei Ohtani's status set off more "Is it time to trade Trout?" questions. The Halos aren't dealing the best player in baseball, but can they keep him beyond 2020?

We all know the background behind Martinez's signing. In 2016, with David Ortiz leading the way, the Red Sox were an offensive powerhouse, leading the league with 878 runs and hitting 208 home runs. Betts hit .318/.363/.534. With Ortiz having retired in 2017, the Red Sox scored 785 runs and hit 168 home runs, even as home runs skyrocketed across the league. Betts hit .264/.344/.459. With Martinez signed to anchor the lineup, the Red Sox already have scored 786 runs and have hit 186 home runs. Betts is hitting .340/.433/.627.

The Red Sox rave not just about Martinez's presence, but laud him for being like another hitting coach on staff. He has helped Betts with his swing path. Price talked about how Martinez helps teammates during games, with their approach on how to face certain guys. I remember in

spring training talking to Tigers manager Ron Gardenhire, a coach last season with the Diamondbacks when Martinez tore it up. He talked about how he has never seen somebody work so much at hitting as Martinez, with all the work he does behind the scenes.

Should Martinez get extra credit for all this? Maybe not. Maybe the MVP race is really just about the numbers put up between the lines -- and Mookie's numbers belong to him, not Martinez.

Meanwhile, the other major narrative seems to surround Alex Bregman, who is making a strong push down the stretch. In Houston's win on Wednesday, he reached 50 doubles and 100 RBIs, and became the first third basemen with 50 doubles and 30 home runs. With injuries at various points to Carlos Correa, George Springer and Jose Altuve -- and Correa and Springer well below their 2017 level of production -- Bregman has clearly been the key cog in the Houston lineup, missing just three games while hitting .296/.398/.556 and walking more than he strikes out.

He also has been lethal in crunch time. He leads the majors in OPS with runners in scoring position, hitting an insane .390/.480/.732 -- although Betts, Mike Trout (another of our MVP candidates) and Martinez rank 2-3-4 in the majors in that category. Bregman also is hitting .333/.440/.510 in high-leverage situations. Against the A's, the team the Astros are battling for the AL West title, he has hit .362/.470/.724 with 19 RBIs in 18 games. WAR doesn't factor in any of that stuff.

Astros manager A.J. Hinch has appreciated what Bregman has done up close. "These major awards, at the end of the year, really are about splitting hairs between elite performers," he said over the weekend in Boston. "Certainly, Alex has put himself right up there with anybody you want to name. His performance, his durability, playing on both sides of the ball ... you can't really say anything against other players when they're doing elite things, but our guy is making a strong case. He loves the big moment, loves it."

So it feels like a three-man race, but we shouldn't ignore Trout, who leads the AL in OPS while playing an up-the-middle position, unlike Betts, Martinez or Bregman. We shouldn't ignore Indians teammates Jose Ramirez (who slugged his 38th home run on Wednesday, his first since Aug. 17, but is already in the 30-homer, 30-stolen base club) and Francisco Lindor (who plays a great shortstop, leads the majors in runs and has cracked 34 home runs). And definitely don't ignore A's third basemen Matt Chapman, maybe the best defensive player in the majors this season and, oh by the way, he ranks second in the AL to Trout in OPS on the road.

Here's that WAR leaderboard, via Baseball-Reference.com:

Betts: 9.8

Trout: 9.0

Chapman: 8.0

Ramirez: 7.5

Lindor: 7.1

Bregman: 7.0

Andrelton Simmons: 5.8

Martinez: 5.7

Bregman, by the way, leads the AL in win probability added, which factors in offensive production based on the score and inning in the game. He has loved the big moment. (Martinez is second and Betts third.)

Anyway, back to that original premise. Only four leagues have ever had seven position players reach 7.0 WAR in a single season:

2011 American League (8)

Jacoby Ellsbury: 8.3

Jose Bautista: 8.3

Dustin Pedroia: 8.0

Miguel Cabrera: 7.6

Ben Zobrist: 7.6

Alex Gordon: 7.3

Evan Longoria: 7.2

Ian Kinsler: 7.0

Similar to Betts and Chapman this season, five of those players had huge defensive ratings, with Pedroia, Zobrist, Gordon, Longoria and Kinsler each being credited with at least 17 defensive runs saved. This group wasn't the offensive force that our 2018 group is, however. Only Bautista, Cabrera and Ellsbury ranked in the top 10 in the AL in OPS. Our 2018 guys rank 1-2-3-4-5-6-9.

The MVP went to Justin Verlander, who received 13 of 28 first-place votes to beat out Ellsbury and Bautista.

2004 National League (7)

Barry Bonds: 10.6

Adrian Beltre: 9.6

Scott Rolen: 9.2

Albert Pujols: 8.5

Todd Helton: 8.3

J.D. Drew: 8.3

Jim Edmonds: 7.2

OK, these guys were impressive. I mean, Bonds had a .612 OBP! He slugged .812. Those are Little League numbers. That was Beltre's monster 48-homer season with the Dodgers. Pujols, Edmonds and Rolen were Cardinals teammates and each posted an OPS over 1.000. Somehow they got swept in the World Series.

Because of Bonds' surreal season, the MVP vote wasn't close. He received 24 first-place votes, Beltre six, and Pujols and Rolen one each.

1998 National League (7)

Barry Bonds: 8.1

John Olerud: 7.6

Mark McGwire: 7.5

Vladimir Guerrero: 7.4

Andruw Jones: 7.1

Chipper Jones: 7.1

Brian Jordan: 7.0

Bonds hit .303/.438/.609 with 37 home runs, 122 RBIs, 120 runs and 28 steals -- and nobody noticed because McGwire and Sammy Sosa waged a home run war. Bonds would finish eighth in the MVP voting. Sosa, who is credited with 6.5 WAR, beat out McGwire by collecting 30 of 32 first-place votes. The Cubs made the playoffs and the Cardinals didn't, which was the decisive factor.

1996 National League (7)

Barry Bonds: 9.7

Bernard Gilkey: 8.1

Ellis Burks: 7.9

Ken Caminiti: 7.6

Jeff Bagwell: 7.5

Barry Larkin: 7.2

Lance Johnson: 7.2

Yeah, Bonds again. He hit .308/.461/.615 with 42 home runs, 40 steals and 129 RBIs -- and finished fifth in the MVP voting. You have to love the insane numbers of this era. Gilkey? Yeah, he hit .317 with 30 home runs for the Mets in his one huge season and was credited with 23 runs saved in the field. He finished 14th in the MVP voting. The unanimous MVP was Caminiti, who hit 40 home runs -- by the way, 17 major leaguers hit at least 40 homers in 1996, the most ever -- and led the Padres to a division title.

So, that's what I mean when I suggest this is may be the greatest MVP race ever. We could end up with six 8-WAR players, matching the 2004 NL total. Even if the vote doesn't end up close -- Betts would have my vote and I predict that he'll win -- it has been an incredible season for superstar-level performances.