



WHITE SOX HEADLINES OF July 8, 2018

Bats show spark, but unable to bail out Shields

By Scott Merkin / MLB.com / July 7, 2018

HOUSTON -- James Shields was not happy following Houston's 12-6 victory over his White Sox on Saturday at Minute Maid Park.

The veteran right-hander allowed a season-high eight earned runs on 10 hits and two walks in falling to 3-10 overall. He made some good pitches that got hit, with Houston taking full advantage of the short-porch Crawford Boxes in left. Yuli Gurriel hit a three-run homer there in the third inning on a pitch Shields said was out of the zone and hit one-handed.

Some of his pitches that missed the mark also got hit, with Alex Bregman's two-run drive in the sixth serving as a prime example. But Shields was really bothered by not working deeper into the game, departing at 5 2/3 innings after lasting at least six innings in 13 of 14 previous starts.

"I felt good," Shields said. "Overall this season, I've felt pretty strong late in the game. If I have to go 120 or 130 pitches, I'm in and ready to go.

"I'm just not happy about not going deep in the game. I'm trying to save this bullpen. These guys are taxed and I really wanted the ball and to be that guy to go deeper into the game."

Omar Narvaez's two-out, three-run double capped a four-run White Sox sixth off of Houston starter Charlie Morton, cutting the Astros' advantage to 6-5. White Sox manager Rick Renteria tried to get one more inning out of Shields, who entered the sixth at 89 pitches, but the right-hander fell one out short when Bregman connected on the 2-0 pitch.

Shields struck out George Springer in the at-bat prior and felt as if he made a good pitch two batters earlier to Marwin Gonzalez, but Gonzalez hooked it down the right-field line for a double.

"The boys came back and scored for me," said Shields, who had a season-high nine strikeouts. "I left a pitch over the middle of the plate to Bregman, and you can't do that to that guy. He's a hot hitter right now."

"We wanted to get him through six and get us what I thought would be an opportunity to give some of these other [bullpen] guys a breath, to be honest," Renteria said. "And then we ended up still using them anyway. It didn't work out the way we had hoped and planned."

Saturday's loss dropped the White Sox to 30-59 and 0-6 against the Astros. They have been outscored, 54-15, by the defending champs, a clear-cut example of the difference between a great team and a team like the White Sox, hoping to get to that level through a rebuild.

"Nobody likes to walk away the way we're walking away right now," Renteria said. "But I'm certainly very optimistic and hopeful that we, as an organization, and the men in that room, are going to gain some knowledge and experience that's going to put them in a better place moving forward.

"It wasn't too long ago that [the Astros] were doing the same thing. But we also have to continue to try and improve and do the best we can do."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Welcome to the show, kid: Kyle Tucker, the No. 8 prospect overall, per MLB Pipeline, made his Major League debut Saturday, but Shields wouldn't allow it to be a completely successful opener for the left-handed hitter. Shields struck out

Tucker looking once, and swinging twice, in his first three at-bats. Tucker picked up his first big league hit in the seventh on a line drive off off Bruce Rondon that deflected off of Matt Davidson's glove at first, and his first RBI in the eighth via a bases-loaded walk.

SOUND SMART

Yoan Moncada's two hits in five at-bats leave him at 10-for-32 for the month of July and give him a six-game hitting streak.

YOU GOTTA SEE THIS

Avisail Garcia homered in the eighth inning, putting him at nine overall, five since Monday and eight in his last 12 games. Those five home runs have covered 1,997 feet, including Saturday's 419-foot blast, per Statcast™.

"I feel good at the plate. I'm making adjustments and I have more experience now," Garcia said. "The more experience you have, the more relaxed you'll be. You have to be patient and be positive. It's a hard game."

HE SAID IT

"You have to be positive. You have to keep working hard every single day to try to play the game right and do the little things the winning teams do. It's going to take time, it's a process. You have to be patient." -- Garcia, on the White Sox

UP NEXT

The White Sox 10-game road trip concludes Sunday with a 1:10 p.m. CT finale against the Astros at Minute Maid Park. Lucas Giolito (5-7, 6.93 ERA) is scheduled to make his 18th start of 2018, ninth on the road and second vs. Houston. He has gone 2-3 with a 7.50 ERA, .289 opponents average, 1.67 WHIP and 27 strikeouts in his last eight starts. Dallas Keuchel takes the mound for the Astros.

Hahn preaches patience with young players

By Scott Merkin / MLB.com/ July 7, 2018

HOUSTON -- Top young White Sox players, such as second baseman Yoan Moncada and right-handed pitchers Lucas Giolito and Carson Fulmer, have produced less-than-stellar or less-than-expected overall individual results during the course of the 2018 season.

But in some ways, this short-term failure and, more important, how these key future components handle said failure becomes a crucial part of the rebuild process.

"Unfortunately this is an extremely difficult game, and there are going to be periods of time where players are going to struggle," White Sox general manager Rick Hahn said. "How they use the tools they are equipped with to pull themselves out of those struggles is every bit as important as the success they might be having over small spurts of times, in terms of putting them in a position to succeed over the long term."

"You want them to go through these struggles, so when you do sense yourself going down a similar road in the future, you've got something to go back to," White Sox director of player development Chris Getz said. "This was the correction I need to do so the valley is not as deep. That's part of this whole process we are going through right now. That's why I feel like it should be more sustainable, because there are so many learning experiences along the way here."

Intense interest placed upon these potential standouts often leads to snap and needless judgements regarding their futures. Moncada struggled for a prolonged 45-game stretch coming off the disabled list, and he's not the player the White Sox thought they were getting in the Chris Sale deal. Moncada has a .296/.321/.556 slash line in July with four extra-base hits and six RBIs, going into Saturday's game against the Astros.

"Listen, there's no perfect player out there," Getz said. "A lot of these players, it's really important for them to go through these struggles, so to speak. When we are at a certain point, it's only going to make them better. It truly is."

Hahn gets the desire for immediate success. But at such an early stage of development, the entire process ultimately is more important than results from game to game or, at times, even week to week.

"There's definitely a roller-coaster element to this as you go through the development of young players," Hahn said. "If you get too caught up on the short term, you could wind up making rash and improper evaluations of guys instead of looking at the body of work over an extended period of time. We try to set up very clear developmental milestones we want to see them reach."

"You have to look at how well they are reaching those milestones and the progress in each of those areas as opposed to a 2-for-20 stretch or a couple of bad outings. We don't get too hung up on a single start or single week of at-bats. We look more at the work and what they are trying to accomplish, what they are knocking off that list. Successful results will follow."

Moncada staying put

White Sox manager Rick Renteria said Moncada isn't going anywhere, except second base for the big league team.

Sending him to the Minors "is not something that we are thinking about right now," Renteria said.

"He has high expectations, he feels a sense of wanting to deal with those, and wants to show everyone what he can do," said Renteria of the 23-year-old, who has a .230 average and 52 extra-base hits through 142 career games. "There are moments where he shows well and moments when he doesn't.

"You have a lot of conversations with the young man to make sure he deals with all aspects of it, whether it be energy level, hustle, whatever the case might be, fielding ground balls. He's working very, very hard."

Cooper has title memories

White Sox pitching coach Don Cooper, head athletic trainer Herm Schneider, assistant athletic trainer Brian Ball and director of conditioning Allen Thomas are the lone remaining members of the on-field staff from the 2005 World Series title sweep over Houston, completed at Minute Maid Park.

Cooper still has many memories of that moment 13 years ago, while working to move this young team to another title.

"I remember the last out. Bobby [Jenks] trying to jump for the ground ball and I remember saying, 'Don't touch it,' and just the relief and the joy of it," Cooper said. "I remember saying 'World champions. World champions.' Not the state, not the district, not the diocese. We were the world champs. That was humbling."

Astros slap down White Sox again in 12-6 win as James Shields, bullpen struggle

By Paul Sullivan/ Chicago Tribune / July 7, 2018

James Shields' time with the White Sox may be nearing an end if they can find a contender in need of a veteran starter for the back end of its rotation.

But Shields will have to pitch better than he did Saturday if he wants to vault from the bottom-feeding Sox into a pennant race.

Shields allowed eight earned runs on 10 hits, both season highs, in a 12-6 loss to the Astros, throwing 99 pitches in 5 2/3 innings.

A three-run homer by Yuli Gurriel in the third and a two-run shot by Alex Bregman in the sixth were the big blows that sent Shields to his 10th loss in 13 decisions.

"I know Shieldsy had a lot of traffic, but I don't think he threw as bad as it might look," manager Rick Renteria said. "I know they hit a couple of balls into the Minute Maid porch over there. ... But you know what? Those are the things you've got to stay away from in this ballpark, fly balls to left. Well ... fly balls in general."

Shields was satisfied with his pitching, if not the results, but admitted he needed to go longer.

"I'm just not happy about not going deep in the game," he said. "I'm trying to save this bullpen. These guys are taxed, and I really wanted the ball and to be that guy to go deeper into the game."

After Shields put the Sox in a 6-1 hole, Omar Narvaez's three-run double in the sixth pulled them within a run.

Shields came out for the sixth but clearly had run out of gas. On his 99th pitch, Bregman cranked the two-run homer to increase the lead to three, and the Astros piled on against the Sox bullpen, just as they did in Friday's 11-4 rout.

"I felt good," Shields said. "Overall this season I've felt pretty strong late in the game. If I have to go 120 or 130 pitches, I'm in and ready to go."

The Sox are 2-7 on the road trip and 0-6 against the Astros heading into Sunday's finale of the season series.

"Nobody likes to walk away the way we're walking away right now," Renteria said. "But I'm certainly very optimistic and hopeful that we as an organization and the men in that room are going to gain some knowledge and experience that's going to put them in a better place moving forward."

"It wasn't too long ago that (the Astros) were doing the same thing. But we also have to continue to try and improve and do the best we can do."

Extra innings: Lucas Giolito, who has the major leagues' highest ERA among qualified starters (6.93), is scheduled to face Astros lefty Dallas Keuchel in the finale. ... During the first three games of the series, the Sox went a combined 1-for-27 with 19 strikeouts and no walks the first time through the order against Justin Verlander, Lance McCullers and Charlie Morton. ... Narvaez is hitting .449 (22-for-49) over his last 16 games. ... First-round pick Nick Madrigal finished his Arizona Rookie League stint Saturday and will report to low Class A Kannapolis on Sunday.

Astros manager A.J. Hinch sees brighter days for White Sox, and Rick Renteria's positivity is a big reason

By Paul Sullivan / Chicago Tribune / July 8, 2018

It's hard to envision the bright side of a rebuild when you're wandering in darkness, but Astros manager A.J. Hinch feels Rick Renteria's pain.

Like the White Sox manager, Hinch took over a team in the midst of a rebuild and now is enjoying the fruits of its labor.

But times like these can dull the senses, and the Sox look hopeless after another dispiriting 12-6 loss to the Astros on Saturday in the climate-controlled comfort of Minute Maid Park.

Hinch knows Renteria well from their days together in San Diego, where Hinch was assistant general manager and Renteria served as bench coach under Padres manager Bud Black.

"Ricky is the best at getting through to players and doing things to make the team better," Hinch said. "The losing and the difficulties are always frustrating and mind-boggling and can drag you down a little bit. Ricky's got a positive attitude that will always bring the best out of people."

"And as he knows — he's done it before, he's been on good teams before — when it flips, and this team will have its opportunity to flip and be better and get better results, it'll make it all worth it."

When the Sox will flip is anyone's guess, but the hope is Renteria can survive long enough to be there when they do.

The Sox dropped to 29 games under .500 with Saturday's loss, their 17th in 23 games, and might not have hit rock bottom yet.

"It's going to take time, it's a process," said Avisail Garcia, who hit his eighth home run in 12 games. "You have to be patient."

It took plenty of patience to wait for Garcia to blossom, but the Sox can't afford to wait as long on Yoan Moncada, the center of their rebuild.

Moncada's up-and-down season exemplifies the struggles. He entered the day with a major-league-leading 124 strikeouts in 322 at-bats, one every 2.6 at-bats, and could be on schedule to break the all-time record of 223 set by Mark Reynolds in 2009.

Reynolds also averaged a strikeout every 2.6 at-bats. Former Sox slugger Adam Dunn was one shy of tying Reynolds' record in 2012, but manager Robin Ventura sat Dunn at the end of the season to prevent him from breaking the dubious mark.

Renteria is trying to keep Moncada's confidence up while refusing to coddle him.

"There are times when he looks really, really good and times he takes a step back," Renteria said. "For the most part he is trying to give in to what we're trying to get him to do."

"Players ultimately are performing and are the ones who have to do what it takes to excel. Right now he's here with us and will continue to be here with us until further notice."

Moncada has been in the eye of the hurricane all season. As Renteria said, he shows glimpses of greatness one day and follows up with an unforced error at second or multiple strikeouts the next.

Some lesser prospects can hide from the media, but Moncada has no choice but to be front and center.

"I don't pay too much attention to that," he said. "That's noise. I think everybody knows that baseball is a lot of ups and downs. I just try to play hard and do my best."

The Sox don't look like they belong in the same league as the Astros, but five years ago the Astros didn't look like they were in the same league as the Royals or the Red Sox.

From Hinch's viewpoint in the opposing dugout, the Sox's future is brighter than their play suggests.

"They're talented, they're athletic," he said. "I think their young arms are going flourish, and I think there are more in the minor leagues that I don't know about that are up and coming. I would tell you one of the most impressive parts of this team is how hard they play for Ricky (because of) how much he demands out of them."

"The growth I've seen in (Tim) Anderson and Moncada ... and it helps to have (Jose) Abreu as a centerpiece on your team. Ricky has done a good job of establishing what's right and how to play the game right. When they put it all together and have better results, Ricky will be a big reason why."

Yoan Moncada's work ethic 'off the charts,' White Sox coach Joe McEwing says **Astros**

By Daryl Van Schouwen / Chicago Sun Times / July 7, 2018

HOUSTON — If it makes you feel better about Yoan Moncada, White Sox bench coach Joe McEwing wants you to know the 23-year-old second baseman is getting after it.

Don't be fooled by body language that would project nonchalance. Moncada cares about his craft, wants to be excellent defensively and is doing what Sox coaches are telling him to help him get there.

ADVERTISING

"His work ethic is off the charts," said McEwing, who works with infielders and has a special project in Moncada. "The perception often is when a player is struggling, they're not working hard. If they're excelling with the same body language, oh, it's fine.

"But not every individual is going to be fiery. Looking from the outside in, you could easily say he's lazy, not getting after it, but that is the farthest from the truth. He works his tail off."

White Sox second baseman Yoan Moncada (Photo by David Banks/Getty Images)

Generally regarded as the No. 1 prospect in baseball when the Sox acquired him from the Red Sox as part of the trade for left-hander Chris Sale in December 2016, Moncada has made 13 errors at second. But he has had a good road trip with the glove (eight errorless games in a row), and he also had two singles Saturday against the Astros to extend his hitting streak to six games.

The success of the Sox' rebuild hinges on many elements, with player development at the major-league level high on the list, and McEwing is encouraged. He says when coaches break down video with Moncada and show him what needs to be corrected — in his case, getting in better position with his feet and hands — he responds.

"He went through a rough patch on plays he should have made," McEwing said. "A lot of the miscues happened when his feet stopped, when he locks himself out. We constantly try to keep him moving, so he doesn't get still and locked out with his body. Lately he's been moving his feet, not getting flat-footed in his pre-pitch [positioning], to get better off the ball."

McEwing also wants Moncada to get lower when fielding the ball, but he said it's not uncommon for Latin players to field grounders while bending at the waist rather than at the knees. Hall of Fame second baseman Roberto Alomar, to name one, was more than good at it.

“That’s kind of my natural style,” Moncada said through a translator. “But Joe says it’s better to lower your body than bend. It’s difficult to adjust from the natural style, but you can progress and add it to the game. It takes work. You have to work more.”

There will be blips. Manager Rick Renteria called Moncada out for a lack of focus and for not going 100 percent from third to home on a play last weekend in Texas. When the Sox were in Boston last month, Moncada was so determined to get behind a ground ball far to his left that he “busted it” getting over, tried to use two hands when he should have used one and didn’t make the play.

At least the intent was there.

“It’s just the process,” McEwing said. “He’s seeing a lot of things happen for the first time.”

The struggle has been rough enough at times that executive vice president Ken Williams and Renteria recently were asked whether they had considered sending Moncada back to Class AAA Charlotte. Williams answered with a “not today,” and Renteria had a similar response. Both said it hasn’t been a consideration, though.

“There are moments where he shows well and moments when he doesn’t,” Renteria said. “You have a lot of conversations with the young man to make sure he deals with all aspects of it, whether it be energy level, hustle, fielding ground balls. He’s working very, very hard.”

James Shields tagged for eight runs in White Sox’ loss to Astros

By Daryl Van Schouwen / Chicago Sun Times / July 7, 2018

HOUSTON — Right-hander James Shields prides himself on going deep into games, but he couldn’t do it Saturday against the defending World Series champion Astros, even after the White Sox scored four runs in the sixth inning to get back into a game they eventually lost 12-6.

After the Sox (30-59) had cut a 6-1 deficit to 6-5, the Astros ushered Shields out of the game with a two-run home run by Alex Bregman into the Crawford Boxes in left field.

The Sox, who fell to 2-7 on their road trip, will try to avoid a four-game sweep Sunday, when struggling right-hander Lucas Giolito opposes Astros left-hander Dallas Keuchel.

Win or lose, they got a good look at how far they have to go to be where they want to be.

“It may not be working out right now, but I think these guys are getting a sense and a feel for what it is and what it takes,” manager Rick Renteria said. “It wasn’t too long ago that [the Astros] were doing the same thing [rebuilding].”

Shields (3-10) left the game after allowing season highs in earned runs (eight) and hits (10) and striking out a season-high nine in 5 2/3 innings. He also served up a three-run homer to Yuli Gurriel in the third.

“I made some good pitches they hit,” Shields said. “Even [Gurriel], he had a one-handed swing on ball probably below the zone.”

Shields entered the game 2-3 with a 2.01 ERA in his last five starts.

“I’m just not happy about not going deep in the game,” he said. “I’m trying to save this bullpen.”

Garcia’s HR tear continues

Right fielder Avisail Garcia homered again, his eighth-inning blast against Ken Giles disappearing 419 feet away into the glassy backdrop beyond left field. It was his fifth homer since Monday and eighth in his last 12 games.

“I’m making adjustments, and I have more experience now,” Garcia said. “The more experience you have, the more relaxed you’ll be. You have to be patient and be positive.”

Garcia had one homer in his first 22 games.

Catchers swinging it

Omar Narvaez's three-run double in the sixth and single in the ninth continued the run of offense the Sox have enjoyed from the catching tandem of him and Kevan Smith.

The Sox have missed Welington Castillo's throwing arm since he was suspended May 24 for violating Major League Baseball's drug policy, but Smith and Narvaez are hitting a combined .358 since June 1.

Through Friday, Narvaez (first, .393) and Smith (second, .324) led all major-league catchers with a minimum of 60 plate appearances in batting average since June 1.

Abreu to learn All-Star fate

Jose Abreu, who will learn Sunday if he's going to the All-Star Game, has maintained a voting lead among American League first basemen despite a rough six weeks.

Abreu, who was 0-for-4 with two strikeouts Saturday, is 1-for-16 in his last six games and is batting .181 with three homers since May 27.

In time of grief, White Sox prospect Michael Kopech still aiming to be the best

By Steve Greenberg / Chicago Sun Times / July 8, 2018

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Michael Kopech was sweating. “Profusely” only begins to cover it.

He and his fellow White Sox Class AAA pitchers were playing long toss before a game in late June at BB&T Ballpark. On a steamy afternoon, damp patches were spreading on the gray T-shirts of Kopech's Charlotte teammates. The No. 1 pitching prospect in the organization, on the other hand, looked like he had fallen into a swimming pool.

“I don't really halfway anything,” Kopech said. “So if I do anything, I'm pretty much going to spark up a big sweat.”

And then some. It isn't exactly a five-alarm flaw, but the 22-year-old Kopech has enough of a sweating problem that he requires a prescription antiperspirant. During a start last weekend with temperatures in the 90s, Kopech experienced familiar trouble with gripping the baseball — and with maintaining his mental grip.

“I let that kind of get in my head for a couple of innings there,” he said after taking the loss.

So what happens when Kopech is on the mound on a blazing late-summer night in the maelstrom of a big-league pennant race a few years down the road? If he is to rise to prominence with the Sox, he'll have to learn to keep his cool no matter the conditions. We all can agree that having a sweaty hand attached to a 100 mph right arm won't ever cut it as an excuse.

“That's something I'll have to deal with for the rest of my career, so I can't let that get in the way of the rest of my outing,” Kopech said. “It's something I have to take control of.”

Kopech is leading the International League in strikeouts with 111, but he also leads it in walks with 56. On Thursday in Charlotte, on a night when his record dropped to 3-7, he walked four batters in the first inning. Control has been hard to find.

Kopech was grieving, but he took the mound anyway June 2 in Buffalo, New York, and had perhaps the worst outing of his professional career: seven earned runs, seven hits and four walks allowed in two innings. Two starts later, he walked eight batters in three innings in Norfolk, Virginia, eliciting this sarcastic tweet from former big-leaguer Mark Mulder:

“But he throws so hard!!”

Kopech's struggles have become a story, pushing back against the narrative that a call-up to the Sox was imminent. What the public doesn't know is that the northeast Texas native's 21-year-old cousin, Hunter Suggitt, was killed June 1 in an automobile accident in Texarkana, Arkansas.

Ten years ago, Suggitt and his older brother moved into the Kopech home after their mother died of cancer.

“He was one of the most wholehearted people I've ever met,” Kopech said. “We grew up together. I looked at him like a brother.”

Kopech received the awful news on the morning of that game in Buffalo.

“I didn’t really tell many people about it,” he said. “We kept it under wraps, for the most part. But it was devastating. My family was devastated. I was trying to handle that through my mom and dad and sister and everything but at the same time not really let it affect me on the field.”

Though he emphasized he isn’t using the tragedy as an excuse for pitching poorly, Kopech still is wrestling with the loss.

“It sounds cliché, but it always seems like the good go young,” he said. “It kind of tore our family up, but we’re working through it, and I know he’s in a better place.”

Kopech is keeping a journal. If that doesn’t seem like the kind of thing a strapping Texan does, oh, well. In mid-May, the 6-3, 205-pounder posted images of his “Goal Book” on Instagram. The entry he shared — covering “what needs to be done,” “how it needs to be done,” “why it needs to be done” and “when it needs to be done” — was only the beginning of the book, rather like a table of contents.

Since then, Kopech has put pen to paper every day to record something positive that happened.

“Threw a good bullpen.”

“In a good mood whole day.”

The book also is sprinkled with important reminders.

“Spread love today.”

“Don’t say ‘can’t.’”

Kopech is a believer in self-help strategies — he reads Eric Thomas, Les Brown and Tony Robbins — and views the book as a self-fulfilling exercise and, at times, a haven in the storm.

“It’s easy to have a negative thought pop up,” he said. “But if you write down everything that you want and it’s all positive, you can go back to it. You look at it, and there’s no negativity. You reread it, and, ‘Yeah, this is what I wanted.’”

The book contains wonderful notions about taking care of his family, setting an example for his nephews and giving back to his parents (far beyond the Lexus he bought mom Tabbetha after being selected by the Red Sox with the 33rd pick in the 2014 draft). Above all else, however, it is about his goals on the field.

“You know you want to be in the big leagues, but it’s not very definitive because you also have this thought running through your mind and that thought running through your mind,” he said. “But when I take the time to write it down, I have to focus in on one thought and be very definitive about it. I take a lot of pride in it. It’s made me home in on my goals rather than just saying, ‘I want to be in the big leagues.’”

The long game

Kopech is waiting. For the winning streak that turns his season around. For the beckoning from the Sox that follows it. For stardom, too. He isn’t afraid to declare that his sights are set on being the best.

“The falling-short thing doesn’t scare me,” he said. “I know if I do everything to my absolute best ability, if I give everything my all, whether it’s my diet and nutrition, my strength and conditioning, my mental-skills practice or just working on pitching itself — whatever it’s going to be about — if I apply everything I have to every single spectrum of what I need to do, then I won’t have any regrets.

“At the end of my career, I know I’ll be the best I could’ve been. If that’s the absolute best there is, if that’s the best ballplayer there ever was, great. If not, I’ll still have been the best version of myself.”

Kopech recognizes how key his dodgy fastball command is to the whole operation. He knows his secondary pitches, including the changeup he’s still just beginning to use, must continue to come along. But what he sees at the heart of it all isn’t mechanics. Rather, it’s “conviction and confidence.” It’s what he so admires in Mike Trout, Bryce Harper, LeBron James and the late, great Muhammad Ali.

“They never have a doubt in themselves, and you can tell,” he said.

"I don't ever think of myself as a lousy player or anything like that. I know I'm a good player. Not to pat myself on the back, but I don't think there are many people who can hit my fastball when I have the velocity I want and the command I want. I think I'm good enough to be in the big leagues right now. But conviction and confidence with everything I throw would be a real difference-maker."

It hasn't been the 2018 season Kopech envisioned or wanted, but it's only a tad more than halfway through. Besides, it's the long game that counts.

Kopech isn't wavering.

How James Shields has sparked a resurgence since he last faced the Astros

By James Fegan/ The Athletic / July 7, 2018

CINCINNATI — Questions about being a mentor to the young pitchers still have a healthy lead, but questions about re-inventing himself by dropping his arm angle are surely catching up in the standings for what James Shields is most frequently deluged by in this, his 13th major league season.

Since Shields last faced the Astros — a miserable April night in Chicago that not only saw him get shelled and raised his ERA to 6.17, but in the same evening Danny Farquhar collapsed in the White Sox dugout — most of the questions have been about unadulterated success. In that time he's covered 90 1/3 innings over 14 starts (more than 6 1/3 per outing), and held opposing hitters to a .207/.269/.363 batting line, lowering his season ERA to 4.12, which is a fair bit lower than the American League average for starting pitchers (4.28). It's also all a sort of victory against the central conceit at the root of his adjustment that he's fighting against.

"The one thing I'm fairly disappointed with in the first half this season is my walks," said Shields, whose 9.4 percent walk rate this season is higher than anything he posted in Tampa Bay or Kansas City. "The tradeoff with throwing with that arm angle is it's a little bit more difficult to pound the strike zone and repeat your delivery. So it is a tradeoff, but again I'm trying to refine that and trying to perfect that."

His walks are actually down from his past two seasons in Chicago, even while managing the wildness, but most importantly, his home run rate has been cut in half, dropping from 2.25 per nine innings from his Sox debut through the end of last season to just 1.03 this season. While he's sacrificed a bit of control and a bit of velocity from switching out of an over-the-top delivery, he spent the offseason honing his two-seamer, hoping the increased life on it would give him something he could challenge hitters with in the zone when he falls behind in the count.

Shields pushed back on the notion that he actually had to rebuild his entire arsenal in the wake of dropping his arm angle, or how he throws all his pitches, even if some of his usage habits have changed in correlation. He's been tinkering with different angles for years, so nothing was brand new when he made the switch, but he did need to work to find the ideal release point on every pitch. That especially affected his changeup, which doesn't work much at all when his release point is out of sync and has only started to return to heavy use in the past month.

As a result, he built up reliance and trust in his two-seamer in the meantime. It hasn't actually boosted his ground-ball rate, but with only 1.83 inches of carry, he's getting more sinking action on the pitch than any point of his career, and it's given him a better tool for inducing contact — ideally, weak contact — than a four-seamer that sits around 90 mph these days.

"I've had a lot more movement on my balls than I've had in the past, and so I'm getting behind in the count," Shields said. "But I'm able to get deeper into games because I'm able to get early outs quicker, and I'm able to be more aggressive with it as much as I possibly can. It definitely helps with getting guys out in less than three pitches."

That's one part of his newly viable game worth watching, but obviously the big, looping curveballs, the harder of which grades out as one of the best pitches in baseball, are another. Shields' arsenal is so wide and varied that pinning him down on a single smoking gun for his resurgence is difficult. It's difficult, at least, if you ignore the obvious straightforward answer he keeps providing: he's healthy.

"Last year was the first year I've ever been on the DL," said Shields, who has noted in the past that there were multiple times earlier in his career when he could've gone on the DL but did not. "Having a torn lat isn't easy to come back from and my body just wasn't responding and I was overcompensating. This year I got my body back in order this offseason, it's been good so far."

The Southern California native and resident has spoken about focusing on flexibility in his workouts this offseason, doing more low-impact stuff like swimming, and his cryotherapy business in San Diego is still running. Aside from the fact that

we all witnessed him endure such grave struggles for two years, Shields possesses a lot of the hallmarks — varied arsenal, the ability to change speeds, willingness to adapt and tremendous conditioning — of a pitcher who should age relatively well. And relative to the number of pitchers who are able to coax out league average seasons at age 36, he might be doing just that.

“I never had any doubt that I was going to feel better,” Shields said. “I worked really hard in between starts and I work really hard in the offseason as far as my workout regimen and my routine, so I trusted that process to be able to get my body back in the shape I needed to and to get my arm strength back. It’s all about recovery. This year I’m recovering a lot quicker. My body is responding to me this year compared to the last couple years and it’s been good.”