

Kluber shaky as Tribe drops Game 1 to Astros

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

HOUSTON -- As the walls of Minute Maid Park trembled amid the chaos on Friday afternoon, Indians pitching coach Carl Willis jogged out to the mound. Anything to try to calm the calamitous atmosphere in the fifth inning, while also giving Cleveland's bullpen time to prepare for duty.

Jose Altuve had just finished circling the bases after sending one of Corey Kluber's sinkers to the front of the Crawford Boxes in left field. That was the second straight home run for the reigning World Series champions, who brought Kluber's past postseason problems back to the forefront in the Tribe's 7-2 defeat in Game 1 of the American League Division Series.

"Last year has nothing to do with today," Indians manager Terry Francona said. "They're a good team. He made a couple of mistakes. They made him pay for it."

Cleveland now faces an uphill battle in its quest to bring the franchise its first World Series triumph since 1948. In the history of five-game series with the 2-2-1 format, teams that have won Game 1 at home have gone on to win the series 75 percent (27 of 36) of the time.

For the first three innings, Kluber and Astros ace Justin Verlander locked horns and quieted both lineups. Verlander kept on cruising, while Kluber's outing began to fall apart at the seams in the fourth. That is when Alex Bregman jolted the Houston crowd with a scorched leadoff shot off the Indians' two-time AL Cy Young Award winner.

"Once Bregman homered," Astros outfielder Josh Reddick said, "that was a little bit of a game-changer for not only them, but for us."

Bregman's blast surely summoned flashbacks of last year's ALDS against the Yankees in the minds of Tribe fans. In two starts against New York last October, Kluber looked human after wrapping up his second career Cy Young Award-winning campaign. The ace worked 6 1/3 innings combined, allowing nine runs, including three via a pair of homers to Didi Gregorius in the decisive Game 5 loss in Cleveland.

That was, however, nearly a calendar year ago. In Kluber's mind, mentioning those outings in the same sentence as Friday's rough start is wasted breath.

"I don't think they're related," Kluber said. "Every start -- whether it's a good string of starts or a bad string of starts -- is individual to itself. I think I said [recently], good or bad, I don't dwell on the last outing for very long. I kind of put my head down and get to work to get ready for the next one."

Over the remainder of the fourth inning on Friday, Kluber faced six more batters, relinquishing an RBI single to Reddick before escaping further harm. In the fifth, the deficit grew, along with the ballpark's decibel level. First, George Springer crushed a full-count cutter deep to left field for a homer, while the train horn blared from above.

Altuve then shot a 1-0 sinker into the left-field seats, eliciting the eruption that prompted Willis' visit to the mound. Kluber's pitch velocity (91.5-mph average on his sinker, per Statcast™) was north of where it sat in September (90.7 mph), but the right-hander's signature command was noticeably off. Fastballs found the middle of the zone, rather than zipping to the edges.

"Really, I just left the balls elevated," Kluber said, "over and out, the middle of the plate, for the home runs. The wrong three guys to do that to. You've got to be able to keep the ball in the ballpark in these games."

The Astros' offensive attack continued after Kluber's 4 2/3 innings, in which he gave up four runs on six hits with two strikeouts, two walks and two hit batsmen. In the seventh, Martin Maldonado launched an elevated fastball from Cody Allen out to left, and Bregman later added a run-scoring single off Trevor Bauer. Reddick contributed an RBI single off Indians reliever Dan Otero in the eighth to further set Cleveland back.

The four homers by the Astros were the most for any team against Cleveland in the postseason since Oct. 10, 1999 (a 23-7 loss in Game 4 of the ALDS against the Red Sox).

Complicating matters was the lineup's inability to do much against Verlander, who pieced together five no-hit innings before giving up a single to Yan Gomes in the sixth. The Indians, who hit just .171 with a .550 OPS in five ALDS games a year ago, did not break through until Verlander's departure, and neither run came via a hit.

"He was just coming right at us," Gomes said. "He's back to throwing 95-plus [mph] and he's living in the top of the zone. At first, we weren't able to get that many good swings on him. We were trying to put good at-bats together, but he was just getting ahead. With a guy like that, when he's throwing strikes and using the top of the zone, it's kind of hard to get comfortable."

The paltry showing by the offense (3-for-30 overall) did not help, but Kluber now finds himself under the microscope.

Kluber's first five career outings in the playoffs were nothing short of brilliant. He turned in a 0.89 ERA with 35 strikeouts and only one homer surrendered across 30 1/3 innings, while helping a depleted Cleveland staff reach the World Series in 2016. Dating back to Game 7 of that Fall Classic, though, Kluber has given up 17 earned runs with 12 strikeouts and nine homers allowed in 15 innings over his past four postseason performances.

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Sticking with Kluber: Kluber needed only 33 pitches to breeze through the first three innings, but he labored through a 35-pitch fourth, which featured Bregman's home run. Francona sent Kluber back to the mound for the fifth inning, and Houston kept its foot on the gas. Springer and Altuve connected for consecutive home runs to begin the inning, and Kluber was out of the game after facing three more hitters.

Francona said he did not consider pulling Kluber after the fourth.

"No, because once you go, you're committed," Francona said. "We've got a game tomorrow. Once we were behind, I wanted to try to keep it where it was -- not have the guys pitch too much, but also get them in and maybe take some of the rust off."

Astros limit damage: After Verlander walked Michael Brantley to load the bases with one out in the sixth, Astros manager AJ Hinch emerged from the home dugout. With a 4-0 lead and slugger Jose Ramirez looming, Houston opted to hand the ball to reliever Ryan Pressly. A wild pitch brought in the Tribe's first run and Ramirez plated another with a groundout, but Edwin Encarnacion struck out against Pressly to halt the Indians' rally.

"That inning was spiraling a little bit," Hinch said. "[Verlander] ran out of gas a little bit against Brantley. And all we asked Pressly to do was come in against Ramirez and Encarnacion -- 60-plus homers, almost 70 homers with those guys. He can really spin the ball, which in that part of the order we liked."

Bauer's bullpen debut: Francona hinted that Bauer could be used as a multi-inning leverage arm in this series, but the goal on Friday quickly became to halt Houston's momentum. With a runner on first and the Astros holding a 5-2 lead in the seventh, Bauer took over for Allen. Bauer only worked one inning and gave up two hits, including an RBI single to Bregman.

"He needed to [pitch] regardless," Francona said. "I mean, we're not even thinking about Game 4. Our sights are set on Game 2. But I thought it was important for him to get in and pitch. With Trevor, he could probably pitch every game. ... Getting in was important for him."

HE SAID IT

"The Yankees were down 0-2 against us. They came back and beat us [in the 2017 ALDS]. The Cubs were down 1-3, came back and beat us [in the '16 World Series]. I know how it feels being up and losing the series. It doesn't matter. One game is one game." -- Francisco Lindor

"We have a lot of respect for him. Sometimes when you're facing a guy like him, the only thing you can do to control him is swing the bat, and that was our mindset. We were pretty aggressive swinging at the first pitch and good things happened." -- Altuve, on Kluber

SOUND SMART

Dating back to last year's World Series, Springer has homered in five consecutive postseason games for the Astros. He joins Carlos Beltran (five straight with Houston in 2004) and Daniel Murphy (six in a row for the Mets in '16) as the only players to accomplish that feat in MLB history.

UP NEXT

For Game 2 of the ALDS today, Indians righty Carlos Carrasco (17-10, 3.38 ERA) will pitch opposite Astros righty Gerrit Cole (15-5, 2.88 ERA) at 4:37 p.m. ET at Minute Maid Park. Carrasco spun 5 2/3 shutout innings in a Game 3 ALDS outing vs. the Yankees last October. The big right-hander ended the year with a 2.64 ERA and 158 strikeouts against 24 walks in 116 innings across his final 20 appearances.

Tito, Hinch handle bullpens differently in Game 1

By Anthony Castrovince MLB.com @castrovince

HOUSTON -- Indians manager Terry Francona admitted the statement wasn't particularly profound. And when you read it in plain type here, it doesn't necessarily convey the intended inference. But this is what Francona said prior to Game 1 of the American League Division Series between his Indians and the Astros:

"When you go to the bullpen, you're in your bullpen."

For Francona, the residual effects of that first move -- especially when it involves two horses of the ilk of Justin Verlander and Corey Kluber -- are considerable. Make the hook and you're on the hook for whatever unscripted, potentially extra-innings craziness is yet to come. Even in the amplified aggression of this postseason stage, it's a decision that can't be made without clear conviction.

So it was fascinating to watch how Francona and Astros skipper AJ Hinch handled those delicate decisions in Houston's eventual 7-2 win on Friday afternoon at Minute Maid Park.

Kluber's end of the proposed pitching duel between two of the game's most assured aces unraveled in the fourth, but Francona stuck with him -- arguably a beat too long.

Hinch, meanwhile, yanked Verlander at the very first sign of fatigue, which, fortunately for all involved with the Astros, didn't arrive until after five no-hit innings.

So while it's true, obviously, that a 12-3 hit differential in favor of Houston was a big difference in this ballgame, it's also conceivable that the game could have taken on a different dimension -- perhaps even with a different result -- had those decisions been handled differently.

Let's dig into them.

Save for a couple "hit by pitches" that were actually button-brushes brought about by Marwin Gonzalez's loose jersey and Tyler White's belly, Kluber hung with Verlander for his initial trip through the Astros' order, breezing through the first three innings on just 33 pitches. Then came the fourth. Alex Bregman hit a 107.1-mph rocket to the Crawford Boxes for the game's first hit. Yuli Gurriel walked. Two outs later, White and Josh Reddick strung together consecutive singles, the latter of which made it 2-0. Kluber struck out Martin Maldonado to escape the inning, but he had thrown 35 pitches to get to that point.

Was Kluber gassed? Is Kluber gassed? It didn't affect him much in a few starts against lineups employed by the White Sox and Royals, but Kluber's average sinker velocity in the month of September was down slightly from the first five months of the year, and this start was an

extension of that. That doesn't matter much if you have command. But beginning in the fourth, Kluber did not. And the Astros' lineup, which you might have noticed runs deeper than those of the Royals and White Sox, began to pounce.

That's one bit of context to consider. The other is that the Indians entered this postseason with the idea that they are going to employ their best pitchers as often as possible, which explains why Trevor Bauer, a onetime 2018 AL Cy Young Award candidate who only recently returned from a stress fracture in his right ankle, was in the bullpen for Game 1 and not mentally preparing to start in a Game 4 that may or may not even happen.

In other words, if the Indians were going to apply Bauer as some sort of midgame piggybacker capable of putting a pause on whatever Houston run total was up on the scoreboard, the start of the fifth inning would have been a reasonably interesting -- possibly ideal -- time to do so.

Francona did not. He rode his horse, and the horse buckled. George Springer and Jose Altuve both went deep to open the inning, 2-0 became 4-0, and the rest of the afternoon was uphill all the way for the Indians.

Was Tito tempted to make an earlier hook of his ace?

No.

"Once you go, you're committed," Francona repeated. "If you win, [you need] five innings [from your bullpen], and four if you lose. We've got a game [Saturday]. Once we were behind, I wanted to try to keep it where it was, not have the guys pitch too much."

Fair enough. And there's no doubt that Hinch had, by far, the easier decision with Verlander in the sixth, when the innings calculus is inherently less of an issue.

Still, it took a good deal of faith in the bullpen to pull Verlander when Hinch did. Dominant for five innings, Verlander finally wavered by allowing hits to Yan Gomes and Francisco Lindor and a walk to Michael Brantley to load 'em up with one out in the sixth. The third time through the order penalty (and the Indians had the heart of their order due up) is very real in baseball, but so is the temptation to ride your horse through hell or high water.

Hinch? He opted for Ryan Pressly.

"That inning was spiraling a little bit," Hinch explained. "J.V. really only made one bad pitch the entire game. I think the Lindor single, he would take back and do it a little different. Ran out of gas a little bit against Brantley. And all we asked Pressly to do was come in against [Jose] Ramirez and [Edwin] Encarnacion -- 60-plus homers, almost 70 homers with those guys."

Pressly has been a revelation in 2018 and particularly since his July arrival from the Twins. The Astros have taken advantage of the elite spin rate on both his curveball and four-seamer, and they have implored him to be more aggressive up in the zone. It resulted in a bonkers 10.7 strikeout-to-walk ratio in 23 1/3 innings with Houston.

In other words, Pressly was a worthy replacement for Verlander. And though that spin got the best of him with a wild pitch that allowed the Indians to score their first run, he got Ramirez to ground out (another run came home on the play to make it 4-2) and Encarnacion to strike out. Pressly was perfect in the seventh.

The eighth went to Lance McCullers Jr., the ninth to Roberto Osuna, and that was pretty much that. By the time Francona went to Bauer in relief of a shaky Cody Allen in the seventh, with the score now 5-2, the air was out of the experience. And Bauer wasn't at his sharpest, either.

This underscores a potentially pivotal plot point in this series: The Indians have a bullpen high on upside and intrigue, with Bauer involved and with Andrew Miller (who has battled health woes) and Allen (who has battled mechanical woes) trying to reclaim the dominance they displayed in the 2016 run to the pennant.

The Astros, on the other hand, have a bullpen high on... reality. It is, unquestionably, a present, potent force that had the best relief ERA in the Majors in the last two months of the season by more than half a run. Heck, you could probably put together a solid postseason bullpen with the guys Houston left off its postseason roster, beginning with Hector Rondon and Joe Smith.

That's why it's easier for Hinch to confidently make that no-going-back call to the bullpen than it is for Francona. And that's one big reason why the Astros are up 1-0.

Indians-Astros G2: Lineups, matchups, FAQs

By Jordan Bastian and Brian McTaggart MLB.com

HOUSTON -- Having blasted four homers to beat the Indians on Friday afternoon in Game 1, the Astros will try to take control of the American League Division Series when they send Gerrit Cole to the mound in Game 2 on Saturday afternoon against Indians right-hander Carlos Carrasco at Minute Maid Park.

This isn't a must-win game for the Indians, but they would put themselves in a huge hole if they lose Saturday and fall behind 0-2 heading back to Cleveland. In the history of five-game series with the 2-2-1 format, teams that have won Game 1 at home have gone on to take the series 27 of 36 times (75 percent).

The Astros, who have won nine of their past 10 home games at Minute Maid Park, have to feel confident behind Cole. Meanwhile, Carrasco will be tasked with shutting down a Houston lineup that banged out 12 hits in Game 1 and looked every bit of the potent offensive club that won the World Series last year.

What might the starting lineups look like?

Indians: Stability has been a staple for the Tribe's offense, so don't expect much to change for the Game 2 order. The performance in Game 1 was troubling (3-for-30 overall), especially given the backdrop of last year's ALDS struggles. A year ago against the Yankees, the Indians hit .171 with a .550 OPS as a team en route to an early exit:

1. Francisco Lindor, SS
2. Michael Brantley, LF
3. Jose Ramirez, 2B
4. Edwin Encarnacion, DH
5. Josh Donaldson, 3B
6. Yonder Alonso, 1B
7. Melky Cabrera, RF
8. Yan Gomes, C
9. Jason Kipnis, CF

the same lineup two games in a row, but he has only two lefties on the bench, one of whom (catcher Brian McCann) will start Game 3:

1. George Springer, CF
2. Jose Altuve, 2B
3. Alex Bregman, 3B
4. Carlos Correa, SS
5. Yuli Gurriel, 1B
6. Tyler White, DH
7. Marwin Gonzalez, LF
8. Martin Maldonado, C
9. Josh Reddick, RF

Astros: Expect Astros manager AJ Hinch to go with the same lineup in Game 2 against Carrasco as he did in Game 1 against Corey Kluber, also a right-hander. It's rare for Hinch to stick with

Who are the starting pitchers?

Indians: A year ago, Carrasco (17-10, 3.38 ERA this season) was the Game 3 starter in the ALDS against the Yankees. The big righty was sharp over 5 2/3 scoreless innings, but Cleveland lost, 1-0, in New York. Now the Tribe is trusting Carrasco with the Game 2 assignment against the reigning World Series champions.

Carrasco finished the season strong, turning in a 2.64 ERA with 158 strikeouts vs. 24 walks in 116 innings over his final 20 appearances (18 starts). The right-hander has a track record of performing better on the road, and that held true in 2018. In 17 road outings, Carrasco turned in a 2.96 ERA for Cleveland.

Astros: Cole (15-5, 2.88 ERA) revamped himself in his first year with Houston, finishing second to teammate Justin Verlander in the AL in strikeouts with 276 and leading the Majors with 12.4 strikeouts per nine innings. He'll get the ball in Game 2 against the Indians.

Cole will get his first start in the postseason since the 2015 National League Wild Card game for the Pirates, during which he gave up four runs in five innings as Pittsburgh fell to the Cubs at PNC Park. He also made two starts in the '13 NLDS against the Cardinals and is 1-2 with a 3.94 ERA in three postseason outings.

How will the bullpens line up after the starter?

Indians: Friday's ALDS opener offered a glimpse of how Cleveland plans to use its arms. Righty Trevor Bauer entered in the seventh in an effort to halt Houston's momentum. Cody Allen, who typically works late in games, started that frame. Adam Cimber was used as a righty specialist and Dan Otero finished the game.

The Tribe was able to avoid overextending its other arms, as late-inning relievers Andrew Miller and Brad Hand were not used. Expect the Indians' full staff to be at the ready for Game 2 behind Carrasco.

Astros: If Cole's start is short, Houston has a fully rested Josh James and Collin McHugh ready to go. Will Harris and lefty Tony Sipp also didn't pitch in Game 1.

Ryan Pressly threw 22 pitches in 1 2/3 innings in Game 1, which doesn't necessarily rule him out for Game 2. Lance McCullers Jr. (11 pitches) and Roberto Osuna (15 pitches) could certainly pitch Saturday since the teams are off on Sunday to travel.

Who is hot and who is not?

Indians: The best at-bats in Game 1 were by Gomes, who saw 19 pitches in his two meetings with Verlander and came through with a single. From Aug. 1 through the end of the regular season, the Tribe's starting catcher hit .320 with an .856 OPS in 35 games. The middle of Cleveland's lineup (Ramirez, Encarnacion and Donaldson) was held to an 0-for-11 showing in Game 1.

Astros: Springer, Bregman, White and Reddick each had two hits in Game 1, with Springer, Bregman, Altuve and Maldonado hitting homers. Correa's struggles continued, going 0-for-4 with a long flyout to right field in the fourth inning.

16 Walk-Off Thoughts on the Indians finding themselves in a new position trailing in a series, Corey Kluber's complicated postseason case and Trevor Bauer getting a tune-up

Ryan Lewis

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Here are 16 Walk-Off Thoughts after the Indians' 7-2 loss to the Houston Astros in Game 1 of the ALDS Friday afternoon.

1. For the first time under manager Terry Francona, the Indians are playing catch-up in a series. The Indians had previously won Game 1 of every series—the 2013 Wild Card Game notwithstanding—leading up to Friday. In 2016, the Indians swept the Red Sox in the ALDS, took care of the Blue Jays in five games in the ALCS and led the Cubs 3-1 in the World Series. Last year, the Indians led 2-0 over the Yankees.

2. The Indians now will try to win a series in a way that they haven't in more than a decade, coming back following a tough loss on the road, and they'll have to do it against one of the most talented rosters to be assembled in some time. The mood from the clubhouse was as expected. The message, meanwhile, was to not make a difficult situation any worse with self-inflicted wounds.
3. "I don't know if urgency is the word. I think that it's the playoffs, so I think every game is amplified," Kluber said. "They're all important. If you start putting more pressure on yourself because you're behind in a series, you're just kind of digging the hole even deeper. We'll continue to do what we've done to this point of the year and approach each game as its own and we'll come out tomorrow and do our best to win."
4. When asked about any sense of urgency, Francisco Lindor's response was, in effect, to look at what happened to them last year. The Indians won Game 1 against the Yankees with Trevor Bauer on the mound, then won Game 2 despite Corey Kluber being roughed up, then nearly swept the Yankees by winning Game 3 had it not been for the 6-foot-7 Aaron Judge. To this day, as Francona noted the other day, if Judge is only 6-foot-1, the Indians very well might have swept the series and played these Astros in the ALCS. Instead, the Yankees won three in a row and knocked the Indians out of the playoffs. The Indians don't see this as any different in terms of a sense of urgency because, well, they've lived the other side of it. But, it doesn't mean the Indians aren't in a precarious position in this series.
5. "The Yankees were down 0-2 against us. They came back and beat us," Lindor said. "The Cubs were down 1-3. Came back and beat us. I know how it feels being up and losing the series. It doesn't matter. One game is one game. At the end of the day, we have to go out there and play our best, whether we're up or down 0-2. We have to play the game the right way, no matter what the series is like."
6. Corey Kluber was cruising on Friday, matching Justin Verlander step for step. What followed were a few mistake pitches and three balls that were crushed to left field. Leading off the fourth, Kluber left a sinker over the middle of the plate for Alex Bregman—no doubter. In the fifth, George Springer was offered a cutter over the middle of the plate—no doubter. Jose Altuve then rifled a sinker that stayed up in the zone for another solo shot.
7. "[I] really just left the balls elevated, over and out the middle of the plate for the home runs," Kluber said. "The wrong three guys to do that to. Gotta be able to keep the ball in the ballpark in these games. ... Just didn't execute them. Not going to go through an entire game executing every pitch, as much as you'd like to. I happened to make mistakes to the wrong guys in the wrong spot."
8. Which brings us to the case of Corey Kluber in the postseason. It's a rather black-and-white case. Kluber in his first six postseason starts, which encompasses the 2016 ALDS, ALCS and Games 1 and 4 of the World Series, was nothing short of dominant. He posted a 0.89 ERA and struck out 35 hitters in 30 1/3 innings, shouldering the load for a depleted Indians pitching staff and putting together one of the best Octobers in history. Since that time? Four starts, a 10.20 ERA, nine home runs allowed in 15 innings in a time that covers Games 7 of the World Series (in which he was pitching on short rest for the second consecutive game), last year's ALDS and Friday.
9. "I don't think they're related," Kluber said. "I think every start, whether it's a good string of starts or a bad string of starts, is individual to itself. I think I said yesterday, good or bad, I don't dwell on the last outing for very long and I kind of put my head down and get to work to get ready for the next one. I don't think any starts last postseason had any bearing on today. I made a few mistakes to the wrong guys."
10. The Indians won't be running away from Kluber anytime soon, as long as he's healthy—which Francona said Friday night is the case. He's the anchor of the staff, and that sample size won't be enough to deter Francona from getting overly creative or over-thinking a situation. The Indians have applauded Kluber for years on his work ethic, routines and consistency. His leash will be about as long as anyone's.
11. On Friday, that leash might have cost the Indians. Kluber came out for the fifth inning with Adam Cimber warming in the bullpen and the top of the Astros order coming up for the third time. That would have felt like a quick hook for Kluber, but it was an option, already trailing 2-0 with Justin Verlander cruising. The Indians stuck with Kluber, and the Astros quickly built a 4-0 lead and sent Minute Maid Park into bedlam.
12. Francona talked prior to the game about how, once you're in your bullpen, you're in your bullpen. He joked that that was a profound statement. But the point was that once committed to the bullpen, it sets in motion the chain of decisions that could also affect Game 2 in terms of reliever usage. That means Cody Allen, Cimber, even Bauer. Down 2-0, Francona made the call to try to let Kluber get through the fifth—and if does that, perhaps the sixth. It's a difficult balance between trying to win tonight without costing yourself tomorrow. After the game, Francona said there was no temptation to going to Bauer in the fifth.
13. "No, because like you say, once you go, you're committed—if you win, five innings, and four if you lose," he said. "We've got a game tomorrow. Once we were behind, I wanted to try to keep it where it was, not have the guys pitch too much, but also get them in and maybe take some of the rust off."
14. Bauer's usage is one of the storylines to watch this series. He threw 16 pitches on Friday and gave up an RBI single, although it wasn't on hard contact. With the Indians trailing and not wanting to go to Andrew Miller or Brad Hand, the game script offered an opportunity to get Bauer into the game, which was one of the hopes regardless. Bauer hasn't pitched much since returning from the disabled list and now has the extended layoff after the last four off days. He's still a potential option to start Game 4, and he should be available if needed in Game 2.
15. "He needed to [pitch] regardless," Francona said. "I mean, we're not even thinking about Game 4. Our sights are set on Game 2. But I thought it was important for him to get in and pitch. With Trevor, he could probably pitch every game. If he doesn't, getting in was important for him. We didn't want him to go ten days without pitching."
16. Bauer mentioned that his work Friday was less than what he'd normally do for a side session anyway. Prior to the series, Francona mentioned that if the Indians get to where they want to go, Bauer's going to have to play a major part in all of that. Though, first, the Indians need to hope Carlos Carrasco can best Gerrit Cole on Saturday in Game 2. Otherwise, Game 4 might be rendered moot.

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Astros blast four home runs, rough up Corey Kluber

Ryan Lewis

HOUSTON — Justin Verlander was his familiar, Cy Young-level self.

Corey Kluber wasn't.

The Houston Astros launched four home runs — three of them off Kluber — in a 7-2 win over the Indians in Game 1 of the American League Division Series on Friday afternoon at Minute Maid Park. It was the most home runs the Indians have allowed in a single postseason game since Game 4 of the 1999 ALDS against the Boston Red Sox.

The Indians, who now must win three of four games in the best-of-five series against the defending champion Astros, had never before lost a playoff series opener under manager Terry Francona.

After needing only 33 pitches to get through the first three innings, Kluber needed 35 to get through the fourth. The inning began with Kluber delivering a sinker right down the middle to Most Valuable Player candidate Alex Bregman, who crushed it for a solo home run and a 1-0 lead. A walk and two singles set up Josh Reddick, who singled to right field with two outs to make it a two-run inning.

The Indians stayed with Kluber in the top of the fifth with Adam Cimber warming in the bullpen and the top of the Astros lineup due up to face Kluber a third time. George Springer and Jose Altuve belted back-to-back solo home runs, widening the Indians' deficit to 4-0 against a cruising Verlander.

"[I] really just left the balls elevated, out and over the middle of the plate for the home runs," Kluber said. "The wrong three guys to do that to. Gotta be able to keep the ball in the ballpark in these games."

In Kluber's first six postseason starts, which encompassed most of his dominant October in 2016, he posted a 0.89 ERA with 35 strikeouts. In the four postseason starts since, starting with Game 7 of the 2016 World Series, he's been hit for a 10.20 ERA and nine home runs.

He allowed four runs on six hits with two strikeouts and two walks against the Astros. He also hit two batters.

"I don't think they're related," Kluber said of his recent string of poor postseason performances. "I think every start, whether it's a good string of starts or a bad string of starts, is individual to itself. ... I don't think any starts last postseason had any bearing on today. I made a few mistakes to the wrong guys."

Verlander, who cruised through five no-hit innings and looked as dominant as ever, made the four-run deficit feel that much more insurmountable.

"He's tremendous," Francona said of Verlander, who allowed just two hits with seven strikeouts and two walks in 5½ innings. "I mean, their whole staff is very good. He had power. He had a breaking ball. When you're throwing 96, 97, and you can throw a 3-2 breaking ball, he presented a lot of challenges for our hitters."

It took until the sixth inning for the Indians, who were out 12-3, to get anything going. Yan Gomes and Francisco Lindor singled and Michael Brantley walked with one out to load the bases and bring up MVP candidate Jose Ramirez as the potential tying run.

Astros manager A.J. Hinch decided not to take any chances and took out Verlander in favor of Ryan Pressly, one of the game's best young relievers. Pressly's first pitch was wild, allowing Gomes to score from third. Ramirez then grounded out to first base to bring home another run, cutting the Astros' lead to 4-2, before Pressly struck out Edwin Encarnacion to end the inning.

The Astros added some insurance runs in the seventh. Catcher Martin Maldonado launched a solo home run off Cody Allen on a high fastball. After Allen allowed a single to Springer, the Indians turned to Trevor Bauer out of the bullpen. With two outs, Bregman singled to left to bring home Springer and Brantley's throw to home plate — which might have been in time to get Springer — was cut off by Josh Donaldson. Donaldson threw to second, where Ramirez tagged out Bregman.

Bauer pitched one inning and threw 16 pitches. Bauer was said to be available out of the bullpen early in the series, as well as an option to start Game 4. He said after the game he could pitch again on Saturday. In the eighth, Dan Otero allowed an RBI single by Reddick that made it 7-2.

Indians right-hander Carlos Carrasco and Astros right-hander Gerrit Cole are the scheduled starters for Saturday's Game 2 before the series turns to Cleveland for Game 3 on Monday.

Indians trail in a series after Game 1 for the first time under manager Terry Francona

Ryan Lewis Oct 5, 2018 at 7:58 PM

HOUSTON — The Indians now find themselves in a precarious and unfamiliar position — trailing in a series after the first game.

Under manager Terry Francona, the Indians had won every Game 1 until Friday, including all three series in 2016 during their run to the World Series and last year's American League Division Series against the New York Yankees. In both seasons, the Indians lost three games in a row to be knocked out, but they never trailed 1-0 as they do now.

After their 7-2 loss at the hands of the Houston Astros, they now must try to win Game 2 on the road to avoid a situation of having to win three in a row against the defending World Series champions.

The plan? Continue their course of action without putting any additional stress on an already pressure-packed situation.

"I don't know if urgency is the word. I think that it's the playoffs, so I think every game is amplified," said Corey Kluber, who was roughed up in the Game 1 loss. "They're all important. If you start putting more pressure on yourself because you're behind in a series, you're just kind of digging the hole even deeper. We'll continue to do what we've done to this point of the year and approach each game as its own and we'll come out tomorrow and do our best to win."

Francisco Lindor's response when asked about being down in the series was simple. In effect, it was to look at what happened to them one year ago.

"The Yankees were down 0-2 against us. They came back and beat us," Lindor said. "The Cubs were down 1-3. Came back and beat us. I know how it feels being up and losing the series. It doesn't matter. One game is one game. At the end of the day, we have to go out there and play our best, whether we're up or down 0-2. We have to play the game the right way, no matter what the series is like."

Up early

The night before a postseason series can be a restless one.

Francona talked this week about how the multitude of team meetings the team holds allow him to feel at least a little more settled. But, it doesn't calm all the nerves.

Francona said he was up at 4 on Friday morning and watched the news before coming to the ballpark. Thursday night, he and third base coach Mike Sarbaugh took in the Houston Rockets game to try to do something besides simply waiting for Friday. All the meetings and scouting reports were completed, so only the wait was left.

"Just because I knew I probably wouldn't be able to relax as much as I wanted," Francona said. "So, we went to the basketball game just to get out of the hotel. ... You know what? I mean, there's a balance of anxiety, nervousness, excitement, but I think the excitement outweighs the other ones, just because I feel like we're prepared. I wish we were playing Houston's Triple-A team, because they've got a really good team. But, it helps that our guys did a really good job."

The Indians take part in a series of meetings throughout the week prior to the beginning of the postseason. This year, they were able to narrow their potential playoff opponents earlier than normal, so the meetings have been going on for weeks. It might not allow the manager to feel entirely at ease, but it helps.

"I know I've mentioned this a few times, but like the advance meetings, they did a really good job," Francona said. "[Special assistant] Dave Malpass was kind of the lead guy. He's really good. When I say I go to him, we go to him on so many things during the year."

Done deal

The Indians and Toronto Blue Jays officially completed the Josh Donaldson deal on Friday.

The Indians will be sending right-handed pitcher Julian Merryweather to the Blue Jays as the player to be named later in exchange for Donaldson. Merryweather missed the 2018 season after needing Tommy John surgery this past spring.

Last year, Merryweather posted a 3.38 ERA in 50 2/3 innings with the RubberDucks.

Game time

The series between the New York Yankees and Boston Red Sox was awarded all of the prime time spots by Major League Baseball on Thursday, leaving the Indians and Astros with all day games unless the Yankees and Red Sox series ends earlier.

Francona doesn't mind. After all, he was up at 4 a.m.

"You know what? I don't think it matters," he said. "I just know like, for the first game, I know a couple years ago, man, we were like 8 o'clock or something and I was going crazy. And I think probably everybody feels the same way. Having it where you don't sit around is probably good."

Akron Beacon Journal LOADED: 10.06.2018

Diehard Indians fans brave rain and cold at Akron's Lock 3 to watch game on a big screen

Craig Webb

By the time the first pitch rolled around, there were enough Indians fans gathered at Lock 3 Park in downtown Akron to field a team, have a designated hitter and a player to spare.

Chilly temperatures and threatening skies were enough to scare off most from an outdoor watch party at the park for the first game of the American League Division Series taking place in Houston.

By the time the skies opened up an inning or two later — most retreated to the comfy confines of nearby bars or to their cars to listen to Tom Hamilton on the radio.

Jeff Kelbach, a worker at FirstEnergy Corp., settled in on a stool under the cover of the awning of the new food truck that Lock 3 has opened along South Main Street.

Kelbach said he got off work and decided to head downtown to meet up with a friend to watch the game.

"I hate sitting in a dark and dingy bar," said the University of Akron graduate. "It is nice to be outside to see the game."

Don Crosier rode his bike a little over 4 miles from his West Akron home to watch the game and sip on a beer and have a hot dog from the food truck.

"I love this," he said as Corey Kluber held his own in the early innings before the rain picked up and the Astros' runs poured down. "With all the construction in downtown Akron, it's great to have something like this."

The idea for the outdoor viewing party was sort of a spur-of-the-moment thing.

"We thought this would be a good way to get folks out of the office and enjoy the game; then the rain came," said Chris Griffith, coordinator of Lock 3.

He said the city is always looking for ways to engage downtown workers and attract others to the city center. And the new Lock 3 food truck is part of that effort.

"We just want folks to come out and enjoy the public space we have in downtown Akron," Griffith said.

The large mobile screen and hot dogs certainly made an impression on one of the city's newest families.

Caroline Florom, who was watching the game with her sons Adrian, 12, and Ashton, 11, said they recently moved to Akron from South Florida and have already fallen in love with the city.

"The people here are so friendly," she said.

As for the Indians ... that's a work in progress.

"We love baseball," she said. "We're trying to become Indians fans."

"How did TBS do with its ALDS Game 1 Indians-Astros broadcast?"

By Marc Bona,

CLEVELAND, Ohio - The storyline for Game 1 of the American League Division Series between the Cleveland Indians and Houston Astros clearly surrounded the starting pitching: Aces Corey Kluber (20-7) vs. Justin Verlander (16-9). The two had combined for more than 500 strikeouts this season.

In-game

TBS has the series, with Don Orsillo (play by play), Dennis Eckersley (analyst) and Hazel Mae (field reporter).

Overall

Pretty low key and serious with little banter or fill-the-time, yuck-yuck moments from Orsillo and Eckersley. Knowing that Eckersley is a former pitcher, you can expect his focus to be on the mound. But overall, the broadcast was devoid of overt bias.

Shots and stats

* Early on, we learn Astros pitchers accounted for 1,687 strikeouts this season, a MLB record. They got 10 Friday in the 7-2 win.

Corey Kluber's 1st 6 postseason starts:

30.1 IP, 22 H, 3 ER, 35 K, 1 HR, 0.89 ERA

Last 4 postseason starts (counting today):

15 IP, 22 H, 17 ER, 9 HR, 10.20 ERA!#Indians #Astros #ALDS

-- Jayson Stark (@jaysonst) October 5, 2018

* On the second-inning challenge, cameras showed six replays of Kluber's pitch to Marwin Gonzalez. After both announcers saying no way was he hit, they changed their tune on the fourth angle as the ball was shown grazing Gonzalez' jersey. They were quick to come up with this stat, though: Kluber hit only three batters all year. That became even more salient when, in the same inning, he plunked Josh Reddick.

* Statcast continues to break down percentages, speeds and distances to further degrees. A player's hitting tendencies across the field show why managers put shifts on.

* In the bottom of the fourth, a trio of Hall of Famers was shown in the stands: Former Astros Craig Biggio, Nolan Ryan and Jeff Bagwell.

* Also in the fourth, cameras caught a sign in the stands: "Reddick-ulous." We also saw more than a few giant foam-rubber cowboy hats. C'mon, Houston you can do better.

Eckersley's eyes

Eckersley, who as a former hurler is quick in identifying pitches, alternates between keen observations and obvious points. Eckersley spent the first three of his 24 big-league seasons in Cleveland. He won 40 games in 1975-77.

He notes Michael Brantley has "quiet hands" - often applied to a deft catcher but in this case meaning a batter who can keep his wrists steady at the plate and limit movement. To casual fans, a quick explainer is helpful.

"If you can play shortstop you can play anywhere." It's called the Little League rule, Dennis.

On Verlander early in the game: "You talk about conviction with a curveball." True. Verlander was on his game, taking a no-hitter into the sixth.

He was quick to note Yan Gomes had a good block on a Trevor Bauer pitch in the seventh against Gonzalez. But when Gomes smacked the Indians' first hit of the game in the sixth inning Eckersley remarked: "Here we go, here we go." Which is more of a fan comment than an analytical observation.

Bench time

As the top of the fifth inning began, the announcers noted that Verlander had sat for 20 minutes during the bottom of the fourth. He wound up lasting five and a third.

Roberto Osuna warms for the Astros.

National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800[?]799[?]7233

-- Today in MLB (@TodayintheMLB) October 5, 2018

On Osuna

Kudos to Orsillo, who didn't shy from talking about the controversy surrounding the Astros signing Roberto Osuna. Orsuna, who entered the game in the top of the ninth, had been arrested on an assault charge when he was with Toronto this season. (Orsillo also noted the pitcher was teammates with Josh Donaldson, who he faced with two outs in the ninth inning, when both played for the Blue Jays.)

Obvious statement du jour

"This is not what the Indians wanted today from Kluber." - Orsillo.

Quotes of the game

* "He's just not sharp. He's trying to paint ... Usually he attacks the zone. That's what he does. Just a little off. ... To me he's just trying to paint, he's not real confident in his stuff." - Eckersley on Kluber, in the bottom of the fourth, after Alex Bregman homered.

* "This is a strange place" - Eckersley, moments before first pitch, about the nuances and nooks of Minute Maid Park. But they really didn't elaborate much.

* "It's been 17 seasons without a repeat World Series champion." - Orsillo. (Houston defeated Los Angeles, 4 games to 3, in the 2017 series.)

* "Used to be so easy watching a game, a catcher with nobody on would give signs, and I know what they're throwing. Now it's terrible. I don't know what they're throwing. He's giving him five signs. Things have changed today, haven't they?" - Eckersley in the eighth with Gomes up and Houston catcher Martin Maldonado flashing multiple signs to Astros reliever Lance McCullers Jr.

Next up

Game 2 is 4:30 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 6, at Minute Park.

For Game 3 in Cleveland on Monday, Oct. 8, the Indians announced several pregame festivities.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 10.06.2018

Corey Kluber collapses, Cleveland Indians look flat: Terry Pluto

By Terry Pluto,

HOUSTON -- For the Indians, here's the problem . . .

The team can make a bold move to add three-time All-Star Josh Donaldson to the roster in September.

They can trade for All-Star closer Brad Hand at midseason.

They can put Trevor Bauer in the bullpen, the "wild card" as Manager Terry Francona called it.

But if Corey Kluber is going to pitch like this . . .

That's what I was thinking as Kluber left the mound, head down and a blank stare on his face. He was shelled for four runs, including three solo homers, in 4 2/3 innings.

If Kluber can't be Kluber, the Indians are in huge trouble in this best-of-five American League Division Series.

That's the painful lesson from the Indians' 7-2 loss to Houston in Friday's opener.

In the first six games of his post-season career (all in 2016), Kluber was 4-1 with an 0.89 ERA.

Starting with Game 7 of the 2016 World Series, Kluber is 0-2 with a 10.20 ERA in four starts. He's been pounded for nine homers in 15 innings. Those numbers came from Jayson Stark of the The Athletic.

WHAT'S WITH KLUBER?

But the hard, cold stats don't reveal the impact of Kluber's collapse has on the team in a short-series. When your 20-game winner gives up four runs so quickly in a game of this magnitude, it's discouraging for the entire team.

The Indians were behind 4-0 in the fifth inning.

The Astros are the defending World Series champs. They had a 103-59 record this season, second best in the Majors.

To ambush them, the Indians needed Kluber to put zeros up on the scoreboard.

But he looked like the same Kluber who was knocked around twice by the Yankees in the 2017 ALDS.

His fastball wasn't much above 91 mph. He was throwing a lot of breaking pitches, trying to hit the corners.

Kluber's velocity was down a bit in September, in the 90-mph range.

Before the game, Manager Terry Francona said, "I look more at movement. It could be 91, but look like 100 mph."

But Kluber's pitches were flat. He seemed to throwing more sidearm than normal.

In the second inning, he hit two batters. All season, Kluber hit only three batters.

Something was wrong. During the All-Star break, he took an injection in his knee to deal with some inflammation.

He's supposed be healthy. Francona said as much after the game.

As for the post-season struggles, Francona said, "That was last year, it had nothing to do with today."

I don't have any answers for Kluber's highly questionable performance.

I just know he wasn't the same confident Kluber who has been so steely strong for the Tribe for so long.

"I made some mistakes to the wrong guys," said Kluber.

A couple of times, he mentioned making a few bad pitches.

"I don't want to beat a dead horse, but that was it," he said.

As usual, a "dead horse" reference tends to end most interviews.

DEALING WITH PRESSURE

Houston starter Justin Verlander came into the game knowing the Indians have tormented him over the years.

The future Hall of Famer had a 2-8 record and 5.76 ERA against the Tribe in the previous four years.

"He circled this date on his calendar," Houston Manager A.J. Hinch said Thursday.

Verlander wanted to open against the Tribe because he long to change his personal history.

Verlander opened with five hitless innings. By the time he took the mound in the sixth, Houston had a 4-0 lead.

Verlander got only one more out, but gave his team what it needed -- five dominating innings.

Then the Astros bullpen went to work.

If Kluber had been better, I'd be dwelling more on how the Tribe hitters looked so overwhelmed. They had only three hits and never put any pressure on Houston.

But the story of the day was Kluber, and it was a depressing one.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 10.06.2018

Houston Astros pound Corey Kluber, Cleveland Indians in Game 1 of ALDS, 7-2

By Paul Hoynes,

HOUSTON - Last year the Indians went the distance in the ALDS before going home for the winter. They may not make it that far this time around.

The Astros buried Corey Kluber and the Indians under the weight of four home runs and 12 hits, while Justin Verlander held them hitless for five innings, in a 7-2 victory on Friday in Game 1 of the ALDS at Minute Maid Park.

This does not bode well for the Tribe. Since the Division Series went to a 2-2-1 format, the team that has won the first game of the best-of-five series has advanced to the League Championship Series 75 percent of the time.

Of course, there are exceptions. Last year the Indians won the first two games of the ALDS against the Yankees and still managed to lose the series.

There were no hits through the first three innings, but Alex Bregman changed that in a hurry. He started the fourth by hitting a 2-1 pitch from Kluber over the wall in left. The ball left Bregman's bat at 107.1 mph, according to Statcast.

The Astros made it 2-0 as Yuli Gurriel followed Bregman's homer with a walk and came around to score on two-out singles by Tyler White and Josh Reddick. Kluber came out for the fifth, but it was clear he was laboring after facing seven batters in the fourth.

George Springer turned a 3-2 cut fastball over the left center wall to open the inning. Jose Altuve followed with another homer two pitches later. In the span of 10 batters, Kluber allowed four runs and five hits, with three home runs.

The next two Astros went down on ground outs, but when Marwin Gonzalez singled, Kluber was done for the day. He allowed four runs on six hits with two walks and two strikeouts.

"The fourth inning was a really tough inning," said manager Terry Francona. "I think they made him throw 33 to 35 pitches. It just seemed that when he left his two-seam fastball up, they made him pay. I think they did that with the whole staff."

The homer has proved troublesome for Kluber at this stage of his career. He allowed a career-high 25 during the regular season. In nine postseason starts, covering 45 1/3 innings, he's allowed 10. Seven have come in Kluber's last three postseason starts - four against the Yankees last year and three on Friday.

"Last year has nothing to do with this year," said Francona, regarding Kluber's performance in the ALDS. "They're a good team. He made a couple of mistakes. They made him pay for it."

The Indians finally managed to reach Verlander in the sixth. Yan Gomes opened the inning with a single. It was the Indians' first hit of the game and just their second baserunner.

Verlander struck out Jason Kipnis in a nine-pitch at-bat, but Francisco Lindor singled and Michael Brantley walked to load the bases. Ryan Pressley relieved and threw a wild pitch to score Gomes as Lindor and Brantley advanced. Jose Ramirez delivered Lindor with a weak ground ball to first to make it 4-2. Pressley ended the inning by striking out Edwin Encarnacion with Brantley on third.

The 35-year-old Verlander has found a second career with the Astros. Since the Tigers traded him in August of 2017, he's 26-10 with Houston, including the postseason. Verlander allowed two runs on two hits in 5 1/3 innings on Friday.

The win was Verlander's seventh in the postseason, tying John Smoltz and Andy Pettitte for MLB record.

"I've always enjoyed the moment," said Verlander, referring to the postseason. "I think it's something you don't take for granted. The more I've been in the playoffs, the more I understand how important it is."

Houston, the defending World Series champion, took swift action after the Tribe's mini rally.

After Cody Allen relieved Cimber to end the sixth, he came out for the seventh and promptly allowed a leadoff homer to No. 9 hitter Martin Maldonado. Springer, who has homered in five straight postseason games, followed with a bloop single over Jose Ramirez in shallow right.

Trevor Bauer relieved. He retired Altuve on a grounder to third as Springer moved to second. Bregman followed with a single to left. Michael Brantley made a strong throw toward the plate, but Josh Donaldson cut the ball off. Bregman was tagged out in the ensuing rundown, but Springer scored for a 6-2 lead.

Reddick made it 7-2 with a single off Dan Otero in the eighth.

Verlander and three relievers held the Indians to two runs on three hits. They didn't even drive in a run.

What it means

How different are the regular season and the postseason? This season Kluber faced the Astros twice, going 1-0 with a 1.35 ERA. He struck out 17, didn't walk a batter and allowed two earned runs in 13 1/3 innings.

In Game 1 of the ALDS, he struggled. Kluber hit two batters as well. In 215 innings during the regular season, he hit three batters.

The pitches

Kluber threw 87 pitches, 53 (61 percent) for strikes. Verlander threw 102 pitches, 70 (69 percent) for strikes.

Thanks for coming

The Indians and Astros drew a sellout crowd of 43,514 to Minute Maid Park. First pitch was at 2:07 p.m. with a temperature of 73 degrees inside and 89 degrees outside.

Next

Right-hander Carlos Carrasco (17-10, 3.38) will face Houston right-hander Gerrit Cole (15-5, 2.88) on Saturday in Game 2 of the ALDS at 4:37 p.m. TBS, WTAM and WMMS will carry the game.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 10.06.2018

ALDS Game 2 pitching matchup: Cleveland Indians' Carlos Carrasco vs. Houston's Gerrit Cole

By Paul Hoynes,

HOUSTON a This version of the ALDS is not a series in which there will be much talk about "openers" when it comes to pitching. The Indians and Astros have the two best starting rotations in the league, pitchers with the reputations of working deep into games, so an opener probably won't be needed.

It was the case in Game 1 on Friday when Corey Kluber faced Houston's Justin Verlander and the situation will be the same in Game 2 Saturday when the Indians will start Carlos Carrasco against Gerrit Cole.

Carrasco (17-10, 3.38) will be making the second appearance of his postseason career. Last year he threw 5 2/3 scoreless innings against the Yankees in Game 3 of the ALDS. The Indians lost that game, 1-0.

Cole (15-5, 2.88), acquired from the Pirates before the start of the season, will be making his fourth postseason start. He started the Pirates' 2015 wild-card game against the Cubs. In 2013, he made two starts in the NLDS for Pittsburgh against St. Louis.

Carrasco has a good array of pitches, relying mostly on a four-seam fastball that's slightly above the MLB average at 93.6 mph. His pitch breakdown, according to Fangraphs.com, is 52.8 percent fastballs, 18.7 percent sliders, 16.5 percent changeups and 12 percent curveballs. His changeup can be a wipeout pitch.

In his last seven appearances, including six starts, Carrasco went 2-3 with a 2.80 ERA. He struck out 64 in 45 innings.

The Astros are hitting .283 (15-for-53) with three homers and seven RBI against Carrasco this season in two starts. Jose Altuve leads the way with a .714 (5-for-7) batting average with one homer and two RBI.

Cole throws harder than Carrasco. His four-seam fastball, according to Statcast.com, averages 96.5 mph. The breakdown of his pitches, according to fangraphs.com, is 56.3 percent fastballs, 19.9 percent slider, 19.9 percent curveballs and 4.5 percent changeups.

In his last seven appearances this year, Cole went 4-0 with a 3.57 ERA. The Indians are hitting .185 (5-for-27) against Cole in one start this season.

Carrasco went on the disabled list on June 16 after being hit on the right elbow by a Joe Mauer line drive. He returned on July 6 and went 7-1 in his next nine starts.

"Carlos has always been good, but it seemed like his ERA probably dropped a full point after he came off the DL," said manager Terry Francona. "He's been good the last three months."

Cole went 10-2 with a 2.52 ERA in the first half and 5-3 with a 3.50 ERA in the second half. He struck out 272 batters, second in the AL to teammate Justin Verlander's 290. He also held left-handed hitters to a .162 (56-for-346) batting average.

"Gerrit was a perfect fit for us," said Houston manager A.J. Hinch, "and certainly one of the best additions imaginable for our team. I'm just so impressed with how he goes about it. ... He has the mind of someone who wants to be perfect with his pitches."

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 10.06.2018

Cleveland Indians pregame festivities set for ALDS at Progressive Field

By Marc Bona,

CLEVELAND, Ohio - The Cleveland Indians are asking fans to wear red in Progressive Field during the American League Division Series.

Fans will receive a red #RallyTogether towel at ALDS games in Cleveland. The #RockYourRed campaign will continue throughout the series.

Game 3 is 1:30 p.m. Monday, Oct. 8, while Game 4 - if necessary - is 4:30 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 9. Gates will open two hours before first pitch.

The winner of the best-of-five Cleveland-Houston series will play the Boston-New York winner. First pitch for Game 1 of that series is 7:30 p.m. Friday, Oct. 5.

Pregame festivities for ALDS games in Cleveland:

ALDS Game 3

Ceremonial first pitch: Former Indian Travis Hafner.

Gateway Plaza band: Tricky Dick & the Cover-Ups.

National Anthem singer: Jim Toncar.

"God Bless America" singer: Danielle Danburg.

Color Guard: All branches.

Monday will be busy downtown. The Cavs host the Indiana Pacers in a preseason game at the Q at 7 p.m. Fans are encouraged to arrive downtown early and to consider using RTA via bus, trolley or Rapid rail lines.

Lyft's dedicated pickup and drop-off area is at Erie Court across from the stadium. New Lyft users can use the code NEWTRIBE for \$5 off their first two rides when they download the Lyft app.

ALDS Game 4 (if needed)

Ceremonial first pitch: Former Indian Ellis Burks.

Gateway Plaza band: We Are The Radio.

National Anthem singer: Don Irvin.

Color Guard: Navy.

As in the past few postseasons, security is stepped up. Gateway Plaza adjacent to Progressive Field will begin security activation about five hours before first pitch. No vehicles will be allowed, and anyone entering must go through one of the following checkpoints:

* Ontario Street / Eagle Avenue

* Huron Road / East 6th Street

* Gateway East Parking Garage (exit to plaza)

* East 9th Street / Eagle Avenue

Fans do not need tickets to enter Gateway Plaza. Here is a list of what is allowed and restricted.

The first two games of the Cleveland-Houston series are at Minute Maid Park in Houston. Game 1 is 2 p.m. Friday, Oct. 5, with Game 2 at 4:30 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 6. Game 5, if necessary, would be 4 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 11, in Houston.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 10.06.2018

Cleveland Indians Playoff Scribbles: Jose Ramirez, Josh Donaldson, a prediction -- Terry Pluto

By Terry Pluto,

HOUSTON, Texas -- Scribbles in my Cleveland Indians notebook as they open the playoffs against Houston:

1. I'm writing these notes about 24 hours before the Tribe faces the Astros in the best-of-5 American League Division Series. I'm sitting in the press box at Minute Maid Stadium, watching the Astros take batting practice. The ballpark is nearly empty. I'm excited and anxious about this series, because the stakes are so high for both teams.

2. Tribe fans know the Indians story. Losing in Game 7 of the 2016 World Series after having a 3-1 lead over the Cubs. In 2017, they won 102 games, but blew a 2-0 lead to the Yankees in these same ALDS playoffs. In 2016, the Indians were not supposed to get out of the first round because of all their injured starting pitchers. In 2017, the Tribe was supposed to roll into the World Series.

3. So no one knows anything, at least about the Tribe and the playoffs. The Indians desperately want to make a strong postseason run, partly to erase what happened in 2017.

4. And the Astros? They are the World Series champions. They won 103 games this season, the second most in the majors (Boston was 108-54). The Indians were 91-71, easily winning the dismal Central Division. For the Astros, being upset by the Tribe would be a shock and a downer.

5. Houston Manager A.J. Hinch said: "We've been there (winning the World Series), so I think that helps...But that team across the way has been there, too. They didn't get to experience the parade like we did, but they got to experience the seventh game of the World Series."

6. Hinch talked about the Indians having "four guys (starting pitchers) with 200 strikeouts, we have three." He talked about the need to "make contact" and avoid strikeouts.

7. "We're a good contact team, so are they," explained Hinch. "So you have two good contact teams against two good pitching staffs that are the best at getting swings and misses. Someone is going to continue that trend, and someone is not."

8. It may be hard to believe because most fans (including myself) just pay attention to your favorite team. But Tribe hitters had the fewest strikeouts in the American League (1,189). Houston was next (1,197). This is a game where everyone strikes out seemingly all the time.

Terry Pluto talks about Cleveland Indians' Corey Kluber vs. Houston Astros' Justin Verlander in Game

9. Who gets hot? That can swing a 5-game series in either team's favor. A year ago, Jose Ramirez and Francisco Lindor were 4-for-38 vs. the Yankees. They struck out 13 times. They had one extra-base hit, a Lindor homer. If that happens again, the Indians lose.

10. Ramirez batted only .203 after Aug. 1 and .218 since the All-Star break. The Indians try to say they're not concerned, but they have to be concerned. Nonetheless, Ramirez is an All-Star. He batted .270 (.939 OPS) with 39 HR, 105 RBI and 34 stolen bases for the season.

11. Manager Terry Francona on Ramirez: "Unless your name is Ted Williams, everyone has a spot in the season where they have some troubles. He got a little out of whack mechanically. I don't think it's ever just one thing. We believe in Jose a lot."

12. The slump is surprising. Once Ramirez gained confidence and became a starter in 2016, he was one of the Tribe's most consistent hitters for 2-1/2 seasons. From opening day on 2016 until the 2018 All-Star Game, he was a .319 hitter with lots of other good stats. The Indians simply have to hope he tightens up his swing and goes back to that form.

13. Ramirez is a career .407 hitter (11-for-27, 2 HR, 5 RBI) vs. Houston starter Justin Verlander. Maybe that will help him. Lindor has batted .345 (1-for-29) vs. Verlander. Josh Donaldson (.333) has been successful against the future Hall of Famer. But Edwin Encanacion has had a miserable time with Verlander, batting .114 (4-for-35, 2 HR).

14. So glad Francona kept Yandy Diaz on the roster. It was a mistake to take him off the 2017 playoff roster. Diaz is a potent bat who can be effective as a pinch hitter. He could have taken over at DH in 2017 after Edwin Encarnacion sprained his ankle in Game 2 of the Yankee series.

15. Francona spent a lot of time talking a bit in circles about Trevor Bauer in the bullpen. The manager realized it, then said: "My guess is Trevor is going to be used a ton."

16. Houston's bullpen is so talented, former Tribe reliever Joe Smith didn't make the playoff roster. Smith had a solid year (5-1, 3.71 ERA). He signed a 2-year, \$15 million deal with Houston before the season. The Astros did keep another former Indians, lefty Tony Sipp, who was 3-1 with a 1.86 ERA.

17. MLB.com had a chart with playoff teams vs. teams with above .500 records in the regular season. The Indians were the worst in the postseason at 23-31. What about 2017? The Tribe was the best (27-22) vs. regular season teams above .500. And the Tribe lost in the first round.

18. It comes down to who is playing well right now, in October. Depth also isn't as much of a factor as the teams never play more than two days in a row. It's also why the Tribe traded for Josh Donaldson, a career .292 hitter in the postseason. Dealing with calf injuries for most of the season, Donaldson admitted: "There was a period of time when I didn't know if I'd come back at all." He said he had a "grade 3 sprain, which is a tear of the tendon."

19. Donaldson has looked healthy since joining the Tribe in September. He batted .280 (.920 OPS) with three HR and seven RBI in 16 games. He also looked good at third base.

20. PREDICTION: Indians in four games! Why not? I'm in a great mood when the Tribe is in the playoffs. And the Indians do have the pitching to shut down Houston. If it does happen, the Indians need to do it three or four games. The longer the series, the more it favors the more talented team.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 10.06.2018

Cleveland Indians Scribbles: No matter what they say, this is a HUGE game: Terry Pluto

By Terry Pluto,

HOUSTON -- Scribbles in my notebook after the Indians lost 7-2 in Houston. They are down 0-1 in the best-of-five American League Division Series:

1. After the game, the Tribe's Francisco Lindor talked about how the Indians were up 2-0 on the Yankees in last year's ALDS...and lost the series in five games. He mentioned the Indians being up 3-1 in the 2016 World Series...and losing the next three games to the Cubs. His point was no reason to panic when down 0-1 in a best-of-five series.
2. OK, we'll go with that. But the Indians better win Saturday's Game 2 in Houston. If the defending World Series champion Astros come to Cleveland with a 2-0 lead, you can imagine the pressure the players will be feeling.
3. The problem with Lindor's discussion of how a series can change is that the Indians were on the wrong side of both of those examples.
4. I know, if the Indians win Game 2, what happened in the opener loses its sting for the Tribe and the fans. But the poor performance by Corey Kluber is a concern. Catcher Yan Gomes and Kluber both insisted the problem was getting a pitches up in the strike zone that turned into three solo home runs.
5. Houston star Alex Bregman was one of three Astros who homered off Kluber: "He's had a dominant career. He lives on the edges of the plate...we were able to hit some pitches over the middle of the plate...some mistakes...and you don't get a lot of mistakes."
6. Houston Manager A.J. Hinch added: "I can't say enough positive things about our at bats against Kluber and others. We had great at bats...and a great game plan going in."
7. All of that may be true, but when Kluber is the two-time Cy Young winning Kluber, no game plan is very effective against him. Houston starter Justin Verlander out-pitched Kluber, and that set the tone. Verlander held the Tribe to a pair of runs in 5 1/3 innings.
8. Kluber insisted his struggles in last season's playoffs (12.79 ERA) had nothing to no impact when facing the Astros: "It had no bearing on today." Manager Terry Francona gave almost the same answer after the game.
9. If I'm Francona and Kluber, I'm making the same kind of statements. I don't want to make pitching in the post-season even harder by adding the burden of history. But Francona and Kluber both know the last four post-season starts have been poor -- a 10.20 ERA.
10. This was Yonder Alonso first appearance in the post-season and he was almost helpless at the plate. Three at bats, three strikeouts. There were a lot of slow, upper-cut swings.
11. Jose Ramirez hit two soft grounders to first base. He is seeing breaking ball after breaking ball, with changeups in-between. That is what happened after the All-Star break. For a long time, Ramirez was savaging fastballs. But he also a short-sweet swing that helped him hit the ball more to center field. He came into the game batting .407 against Verlander, but he didn't have a good swing all day and went 0-for-3.
12. The Indians had only three hits. Keep in mind, most playoff games tend to be low-scoring. Playoff teams usually have strong pitching staff, and you see the best of those staffs in these games.
13. The Indians were 3-for-30. All the hits were singles: Michael Brantley, Lindor and Gomes. Lindor had the ball hard two other times. But it was a lame showing at the plate.
14. Francona said he wanted to get Trevor Bauer into the game "to get some rust off." He added Bauer "could probably pitch every game" if needed.

15. Carlos Carrasco starts for the Tribe in Game 2. He is 4-2 with a 3.45 ERA in his career vs. Houston. Carrascio usually is very good, but occasionally has a stinker for a start. That can't happen Saturday.

16. Cody Allen pitched in relief, and he gave up a homer. That was his 12th of the season. Jayson Stark of the Athletic tweeted that only Neil Ramirez (13) has allowed more HR this season among relievers. Ramirez also is with the Tribe, but not on the playoff roster.

17. The struggles of Allen (4-6, 4.70 ERA) and Andrew Miller (2-4, 4.24) are why Bauer is in the bullpen for this series. But the starters need to pitch well enough so that strategy matters.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 10.06.2018

If the Cleveland Indians don't play better than they did Friday, this could be a quick ALDS

By Paul Hoynes,

HOUSTON - It's hard to imagine a team playing worse than the Indians did on Friday in the Game 1 of the ALDS against Houston.

Twenty-game winner Corey Kluber allowed three homers and didn't make it through the fifth inning. The offense managed three hits against Justin Verlander and the Astros' bullpen. Francisco Lindor and Jose Ramirez gave a sneak peek at what they did last year in the ALDS against the Yankees. If you remember, they were a combined 4-for-38.

Cody Allen allowed another home run at the wrong time. And Trevor Bauer, who was going to be a weapon in leverage situations, was used in the seventh inning just to get some work.

What the Indians looked like in losing 7-2 to the Astros is what they looked like for large stretches of the season. The difference being that they weren't playing the rebuilding Tigers, White Sox or Royals. The team in the other dugout was the defending World Series champion and they played like it.

The Indians are down 0-1 in best-of-five series. If Carlos Carrasco doesn't pitch better Saturday than Kluber did Friday, and his teammates don't raise their level of play against Gerrit Cole, the Indians are going to be bounced from the postseason quicker than they were last year.

This team was supposedly geared toward Friday's postseason opener. They worked all month with that goal in mind. They rested players and concentrated on getting the injured healthy. Josh Donaldson was worked into the lineup at third base, while Ramirez and Jason Kipnis adjusted to their new positions at second and center field. Kluber was skipped a start and positioned so he could start Game 1 on the proper amount of rest. Starters Bauer and Shane Bieber were put in the bullpen to give the Indians protection.

Francisco Lindor on ALDS loss to Astros: "They played better than us"

But all those plans didn't mean much on Friday because the Astros kept hitting the ball out of the park. Alex Bregman, George Springer and Jose Altuve took Kluber deep. The three homers came in a span of three outs and 10 batters.

"I happened to make mistakes to the wrong guys in the wrong spot," said Kluber.

Kluber is 0-2 with a 10.63 ERA (13 earned runs in 11 innings) in his last three postseason starts. He's allowed 16 hits, including seven homers, with five walks.

"I don't think they're related," said Kluber. "I think every start, whether it's in a good string of starts or in a bad string or starts, is individual to itself. I said on Thursday, good or bad, I don't dwell on the last outing very long. I put my head down and get to work to get ready for the next one."

When a team doesn't hit, when they don't get on base, they look lifeless. The Indians looked like they had no pulse on Friday.

Kipnis said sometimes looks are deceiving.

"The want to is there. The drive is there, but I think we need to relax a little and have some fun," said Kipnis. "I think we're just trying too hard. Baseball is about having fun."

Edwin Encarnacion said the same thing. Asked if this team felt a sense of urgency after losing the first game, Encarnacion said, "We don't think like that. This was the first game. It's in the past. Now we'll show up and focus on tomorrow's game.

"We just need to focus on every pitch and keep it simple. Don't try to do too much."

Lindor had one of the Tribe's three hits and scored its final run. He went 1-for-4. Ramirez brought Lindor home with a groundout to first. He went 0-for-3 with a walk. They are off to a 1-for-7 start in the ALDS.

The Tribe's offense is built around Lindor and Ramirez and if they don't hit and get on base at the top of the order, things stagnate. Ramirez ended the season hitting .203 (37-for-182) from Aug. 2 through the end of the season. Lindor hit .233 in September (27-for-116). So if this trend continues, it shouldn't come as a big surprise.

Lindor was asked if he was worried about losing the first game of a series.

"The Yankees were down 0-2 against us," he said. "They came back and beat us. The Cubs were down 1-3 (2016 World Series). They came back and beat us. I know how it feels going up and losing a series.

"One game is one game. At the end of the day, we have go out and play our best whether we're up 2-0 or down 0-2. We have to play the game the right way, no matter what the series is like."

Indians fans probably cringed when Lindor used his own team's failures as an example that postseason comebacks are possible. But facts are facts. So is this - if the Indians don't play better than they did Friday, this is going to be a short ALDS.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 10.06.2018

Bauer to be a 'wild card' for Tribe out of 'pen

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

HOUSTON -- Indians manager Terry Francona has never been afraid to be creative with his bullpen use on the October stage, but he still usually prefers to have an end point. Cody Allen, Cleveland's all-time saves leader, has typically filled that role.

Things will be different this postseason. Not only does Francona not have one pitcher locked in as the main closer, but the manager also has dubbed pitcher Trevor Bauer a "wild card" for the relief corps. Between Andrew Miller, Brad Hand, Allen and Bauer, the Indians have the ability to go in a variety of directions to cover late-inning situations.

"I don't know that I want to say what we're going to do," Francona said prior to Game 1 of the American League Division Series against the Astros on Friday. "I mean, we've used our bullpen like that all year, where when we think it's right for guys to pitch, we pitch them."

In a best-of-five series, Francona's priority was to maximize his pitching staff. That meant making Bauer available as a multi-inning relief option for the early games of the series. Depending on the right-hander's use in the first couple of games, either he or rookie Shane Bieber would be named the starter for Game 4 (if necessary).

In Friday's 7-2 loss to the Astros in Game 1, Bauer came on in the seventh and allowed an inherited runner to score. He allowed two hits and struck out one while throwing 16 pitches over one inning.

Bauer returned from the disabled list on Sept. 21 -- following a six-week rehab period for a stress fracture in his right fibula -- with the goal of being ready for the ALDS rotation. Bauer finished off his career year, in which he posted a 2.21 ERA with 221 strikeouts against 57 walks in 175 1/3 innings, with three strong outings down the stretch.

Francona said once he better explained his rationale for moving Bauer to the bullpen for the start of the ALDS, the pitcher bought into the concept.

"I don't think I did a real good job the first time we talked about explaining it," Francona said. "But I think as we went back and forth a few times, yeah, I think we got to a really good place. And I think part of that was on me. I'm not sure I did exactly [what I intended at first]."

"So I think it took a couple [conversations], but I think we got there and I think we're both in a good place."

Worth noting

- Two years ago, Michael Brantley could not participate in the Tribe's run to the World Series due to a right shoulder injury. Last postseason, Brantley made the ALDS roster, but he was still dealing with a right ankle issue and went 1-for-11 against the Yankees. Needless to say, Francona is thrilled to have Brantley healthy and entrenched in the lineup for the team's current playoff run.

"I'm always proud of him, because of the way he carries himself," Francona said. "But on a personal level, I'm just so happy for him that he can be a part of this. Because, again, I saw what he went through. When everybody's getting announced during the World Series and all the excitement, he was back there [in the training room]. He never missed a day."

- The Indians announced Friday that they completed the Aug. 31 trade with the Blue Jays that brought slugger Josh Donaldson and cash to Cleveland for a player to be named. Minor League righty Julian Merryweather (currently recovering from Tommy John surgery on his right elbow) has been dealt to Toronto to finalize the deal.

- Francona said he was not sure when or how backup catcher Roberto Perez would be utilized during this ALDS. As things currently stand, Yan Gomes (the starter for Game 1) is in the plans to start behind the plate in Game 2 (Saturday) and Game 3 (Monday).

An unsightly Game 1 loss begs the question: Which Cleveland Indians can be trusted?HOUSTON — Terry Francona's eyes opened at 4 a.m. Friday. He turned on the news and spent his morning considering the nation's current events.

There were no last-minute preparations to complete, no cram sessions to attend. Francona and third-base coach Mike Sarbaugh spent part of Thursday night at the Toyota Center, taking in the Houston Rockets and Indiana Pacers. (Watch out for Pacers big man Myles Turner, the manager cautions.) The Indians had devoted the entire week to studying the Astros, and had even scouted their opponent before the defending champions actually captured another AL West crown.

A lot can change in an afternoon in October, especially in a mood-swing-inducing five-game series. The Indians emerged victorious in Game 1 of the 2016 ALDS, 2016 ALCS, 2016 World Series and 2017 ALDS. That simplifies the path, even if the Indians failed to cross the ultimate finish line in both years.

Now, they have an uphill climb to conquer. And the journey seems even more daunting when considering the following question:

Whom on the team can the Indians actually trust?

Corey Kluber

At the top of Corey Kluber's back is a tattoo of a baseball wrapped in a waving Texas flag. Kluber grew up in Texas before he ventured east to attend Stetson University. He received a Bronx cheer from the crowd in his home state as he sauntered off the field in the fifth inning Friday, another dissatisfying outing in the books.

Francona has stressed that Kluber is healthy. Kluber's velocity dropped in August and September, but the manager contended that isn't a concern.

"I don't think that extra tick means nearly as much as late movement with him," Francona said. "Late movement, whether it's his breaking ball or his two-seamer, is what makes him really effective. Because, I've seen him throw some 91s that seem like they look like 100."

Kluber will never resort to excuses. We'll discover Tupac's true whereabouts before we learn precisely how healthy Kluber was last October. Kluber instead simply notes when he didn't execute certain pitches. That was his sales pitch after Game 1, after the top three hitters in Houston's otherwise pedestrian lineup took him deep. The Astros ranked 11th in the majors in position player WAR, but All-Stars George Springer, Jose Altuve and Alex Bregman accounted for 62 percent of that total.

That top three, however, is as dangerous as any. So when Kluber misfired with his sinkers and cutters, the baseball ended up in the Crawford Boxes beyond left field.

The issue was command, he stressed, not velocity. After all he plunked* two batters in a span of three minutes in the second inning, after only registering multiple HBPs in three of his 201 big-league outings.

*scraped a few jersey threads

Kluber — and the bullpen — carried the Indians to within one timely run of a long-awaited championship in 2016. He continuously pitched on short rest and, until Game 7, did so impressively. So, we can throw that year into the "Made for October" column. But his three starts in the last calendar year have left plenty to be desired.

Kluber's past three playoff starts: 11 innings, 16 hits, 13 earned runs, seven home runs, five walks, 12 strikeouts

"Last year has nothing to do with today," Francona said.

Kluber likely wouldn't pitch again until a Game 5 scenario, and at that point, it would be reasonable to feel a bit uneasy. A team should be able to trust its ace more than the Indians can trust Kluber right now.

Trevor Bauer

Carl Willis called down to the Indians' bullpen at the start of the seventh. Bauer was told to notify Scott Atchison when he was ready.

"It took me two or three minutes and I was good," Bauer said.

It was a peculiar time to summon Bauer. Francona often preaches he wants guys to have clean innings, especially when his starters pitch in relief. Yet, Cody Allen started the seventh, and he promptly served up a homer to No. 9 hitter Martin Maldonado and a single to Springer. So, Bauer entered with the Indians facing a 5-2 deficit and a runner on base.

It might have made more sense for Bauer to start the fifth in relief of Kluber, but hindsight is undefeated in playoff games. Bauer said he is fresh enough to pitch Saturday, the least shocking revelation this side of a grocery store checkout line magazine rack.

Bauer threw 110 pitches the Sunday before the All-Star Game, yet he still pleaded with AL manager AJ Hinch for an inning in the annual exhibition.

"He was essentially begging for an inning," Hinch said. "If that doesn't tell you he has a resilient arm and he can probably throw in the first three games and still pitch Game 4 — I mean, that would be extreme — but I expect them to use him aggressively if they have the lead and they have an opportunity to win the game."

Cody Allen

It's critical for teams to have their best pitchers log the most innings in October. Allen posted a 6.39 ERA in his final 33 appearances of the regular season, and he surrendered two runs Friday. In that 12-week stretch, opponents recorded an .857 OPS against Allen. Essentially, he turned every hitter into Francisco Lindor. At this point, he should be pretty far down in the pecking order when it comes to high-leverage situations.

Yonder Alonso

The Indians didn't break through against Justin Verlander until the sixth. They didn't scratch across their first hit until the fifth.

Here's how Alonso's three trips to the plate went:

First at-bat: called strike, swinging strike, swinging strike (three-pitch strikeout)

Second at-bat: foul, foul, ball, foul, swinging strike (five-pitch strikeout)

Third at-bat: swinging strike, swinging strike, foul, swinging strike (four-pitch strikeout)

Yandy Díaz started to steal some of Alonso's plate appearances against lefties in September, and rightfully so. Alonso has long struggled against southpaws. But he has scuffled at the plate for the past two months, regardless of the opposing hurler's handedness.

Last 50 games: .222/.283/.322

Last 50 games, vs. RHP: .227/.293/.364

Last 50 games, vs. LHP: .208/.255/.208

Alonso has one home run against a lefty since late April.

Yan Gomes and Jason Kipnis offered the best at-bats against Verlander in the early going. Gomes saw 19 pitches in his first two trips to the batter's box, and he ended Verlander's no-hit bid. Both players made Verlander throw nine pitches in their battles to start the sixth, which set the stage for the Indians' only offensive production.

In all, the lineup — which featured nine players who each had at least one All-Star nod to their name — went 3-for-30 against Houston's arms.

That's not the sort of formula that will allow Francona to sleep well Friday night, even if he was up at 4 a.m.

The Athletic LOADED: 10.06.2018

Final Thoughts: What's wrong with Corey Kluber?

By Jason Lloyd 6h ago 9

HOUSTON — Twenty-seven thoughts for 27 outs in Friday's 7-2 loss to the Houston Astros in Game 1 of the ALDS ...

1. Through the first five postseason starts of his career, Corey Kluber had the sixth-lowest ERA of any pitcher in playoff history (minimum 30 innings). Two of the guys ahead of him were named Mariano Rivera and Babe Ruth.

2. Despite pitching on short rest more than once, Kluber was artfully dominant in 2016. He was 4-1 with a 0.89 ERA and 35 strikeouts in 30 innings. Teams were hitting .200 against him, and he allowed just one home run.

3. It's difficult to explain what has happened to him since, but any debate about his current struggles first needs to begin with a reminder of how filthy he once was in the postseason. The idea that Kluber suddenly can't handle playoff pressure or that he has forgotten how to pitch in big games is ridiculous.

4. Nevertheless, his performance in his past four playoff starts has been ghastly: 0-2 with a 10.20 ERA. He has allowed nine home runs in 15 innings. The Indians, not surprisingly, lost three of the four games. It goes without saying that this team will not go very far with Kluber pitching this way. How can a two-time Cy Young winner with terrific command suddenly unravel in the postseason time and again?

5. "Last year has nothing to do with today," Terry Francona scoffed. "They're a good team. He made a couple of mistakes. They made him pay for it."

6. Kluber struggled with his command all game Friday, just as he did last year in two playoff appearances against the Yankees. His subpar performance in Game 7 of the World Series can be dismissed to exhaustion for carrying an unrealistic load. Last year rumors of back issues persisted. Now? Hard to say.

7. He was hammered for three home runs Friday in just 4 2/3 innings. That's as many as he allowed in all of September. He hit two batters in the final four months this season, then hit two in a span of three batters Friday.

8. Although Kluber dealt with a sore right knee that needed an injection this summer, Francona insisted after the game that he is healthy. It's worth noting, however, that his release point has steadily declined as the season has progressed, and he acknowledged around the All-Star break that the knee was causing his release point to drop because he couldn't remain as upright and drive off his back leg properly.

Corey Kluber's declining release point since the start of the season.

Corey Kluber's release point throughout his career. September was a career low.

Corey Kluber's release point during his dominant 2016 postseason.

9. Data for his release point from Friday's start wasn't immediately available, but it stands to reason it was at least as low as it has been throughout September — which was the lowest of his career. Of course, he has managed to remain effective despite the lower release point throughout the second half of this season, but he didn't face many potent offenses in that stretch.

10. Half of Kluber's 16 starts from July through September came against teams ranked in the bottom 10 in runs scored. In two starts against the Yankees and Red Sox, the top two scoring teams in the league, he had a 5.92 ERA. (Kluber dominated the Astros — ranked sixth in runs scored — in two starts this year, but he hadn't faced them since May.)

11. If it's a matter of the knee still bothering him, Kluber will never reveal that now. It's worth at least considering that he might have been good enough to get by against weaker opponents throughout the second half, but powerful lineups like Houston's will punish his mistakes.

12. The home runs he allowed Friday to Alex Bregman (sinker) and George Springer (cutter) were in nearly the exact location out over the middle of the plate. The home run Jose Altuve hit was off another sinker that was up in the zone.

13. "Really just left balls elevated and over the plate," Kluber said. "Wrong three guys to do that to."

14. When Kluber was dominating powerful offenses like Boston, Toronto and Chicago in 2016, his release point was significantly higher than it is now, and he was throwing harder. Francona believes late movement is more important for Kluber than velocity, but it stands to reason that the lower release point now makes it more difficult to command his sinker and breaking balls and keep them down in the zone.

15. "I don't think that starts last postseason had any bearing on today," Kluber said. "Like I said, I just made a few mistakes to the wrong guys."

16. Maybe he's right, maybe that's all it is. But the arm angle, the drop in velocity and the stiffer competition in the postseason are all causes for concern more than the idea he suddenly can't handle postseason pressure. Regardless, it could leave Francona with an agonizing decision to make for Game 5 if this series gets that far — stick with Kluber or turn to Trevor Bauer. How these next few games play out, of course, will help determine that decision.

17. Bauer entered, as expected, as a reliever in the seventh. The timing was curious because he followed Cody Allen, who has dealt with his own struggles this season. Bauer allowed an inherited runner to score but otherwise was pleased with the outing. He threw only 16 pitches, which he said was less than what would've been a side session. He'll be ready to pitch again Saturday if necessary.

18. "I thought I threw the ball well," Bauer said. "The two hits were quality pitches."

19. Speaking of skeptical decisions, the fact Kluber was allowed to go back out for the fifth was questionable after he labored through the fourth. But Francona said before the team left Cleveland he's hesitant sometimes to go to the bullpen because then there's no going back. He reiterated that after Game 1.

20. "We've got a game tomorrow," Francona said. "Once we were behind, I wanted to try to keep it where it was, not have the guys pitch too much, but also get them in and maybe take some of the rust off."

21. He accomplished that. No reliever who entered threw more than 17 pitches, meaning all should be available again for Game 2, which suddenly has a much more important feel in a best-of-five series down 0-1.

22. "They're all important," Kluber said. "You start putting more pressure on yourself because you're behind in a series, you're just kind of digging your hole even deeper."

23. After the Indians went through a workout Thursday with the roof open, Major League Baseball chose to close it for Game 1 as temperatures neared 90 degrees. But a couple of players remarked that the dome didn't enhance the crowd noise as expected. In fact, the crowd all day seemed rather relaxed for an opening playoff game.

24. "I didn't think it was loud. I didn't have a problem with them closing the roof. Noise wasn't anything we haven't experienced," Jason Kipnis said. "The ball carried well here no matter what, closed or not. I think it just takes the sun and a little bit of the humidity out of it."

25. Former Cavs player Mike Miller always told me that after a playoff win, guys feel like they'll never lose again. After a playoff loss, all hope seems shattered and winning a series feels impossible. Kipnis said that applies to baseball, too.

26. "It's why when you get a lead in the series you get a lot of momentum and guys can relax a little bit because there's not the pressure of, 'Hey we haven't done anything yet,' " he said. "But if we split here I think we'll be pretty happy about that."

27. Game 2 is Saturday at Minute Maid Park. Carlos Carrasco against Gerrit Cole. Talk to you then.

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Astros erupt for 4 HRs to take ALDS opener vs. Indians

Chandler Rome , Houston Chronicle Oct. 5, 2018 Updated: Oct. 5, 2018 5:27 p.m.

For a moment, the sound of the left field locomotive faded. Three times before, orange wheels lugged a trunk of fruit across the short porch where the first blow in the American League Division Series was struck.

Terry Francona emerged from the visiting dugout to save his battered ace. Corey Kluber gave up the baseball, hung his head and shuffled his feet from the field on which he combusted.

The four-run deficit he created felt insurmountable. Two hours later, perception met reality. The Astros finished off a 7-2 win against the Indians in Game 1 of the American League Division Series, executing an assault upon the Indians' ace.

The Astros hit four home runs, falling one shy of a franchise record for a postseason game. Each of their first three hitters — George Springer, Alex Bregman and Jose Altuve — struck one against Kluber during his dismal outing.

Kluber lasted 4 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings. His command was wretched. Bregman blasted the hardest home run of his three-year major league career against him in the fourth. Springer and Altuve deposited back-to-back solo shots into the Crawford Boxes to begin the fifth, sealing his fate.

Opposing Justin Verlander affords a miniscule margin for error. Kluber crushed whatever one was present. Verlander and three relievers teamed to hold the Indians to three hits. The 35-year-old righthander worked the sixth inning with a four-run lead and no-hitter intact.

After Jose Ramirez coaxed a five-pitch, first-inning walk, the righthander retired 13 consecutive Indians.

Harnessing his curveball was mandatory. Verlander more often prefers a slider, against which the Indians had ample regular season success. They are a fine fastball hitting club, too. Verlander paid that tendency little mind.

Sixty-three of his 102 pitches were four-seam fastballs. Five of the seven strikeouts Verlander accrued ended on it. Cleveland worked five three-ball counts against him in five fruitless innings. They entered the sixth without a hit. Verlander sat safely at 75 pitches. The Astros' bullpen was vacant. Yan Gomes walked to the plate.

Cleveland's catcher confronted Verlander admirably. He saw 10 pitches in the third inning before striking out. In the sixth, he saw nine more. Verlander's no-hitter disappeared on the ninth, a four-seam fastball Gomes blooped to right field for a single.

Ninne-hole hitter Jason Kipnis promptly struck out. Verlander required nine pitches to do so. His pitch count augmented as Ryan Pressly loosened in the bullpen. Never in his six-year major league career had Pressly pitched a playoff game.

His debut arrived in a mess. Verlander exited with the bases loaded. One man was out and the Astros clung to the four-run lead Kluber served them. Pressly's first pitch was wild, allowing Gomes home. Jose Ramirez bounced out to first base, scoring Francisco Lindor.

A strikeout of Edwin Encarnacion ended the uprising. In the next three innings, one Indian reached base. The Astros scored thrice more thereafter, cushioning the lead obtained against Kluber

Curiosity surrounded Kluber's command. His low 90s velocity does not excite, certainly when pitted against Verlander's diesel.

Kluber instead requires precise location of his five-pitch arsenal. Manager A.J. Hinch surmised Kluber would fixate in on his righthanded heavy lineup. The Astros feast on the outer half. Combating them inside seemed advantageous. Arm-side command for the righthander was vital. He did not possess it, or much of anything else.

Two Astros drew walks in the 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ innings he worked. In 33 starts, Kluber had walked more than two once.. He hit only three batters in 215 regular season innings.

In the second inning on Friday, he plunked two. Grazing the jerseys of Marwin Gonzalez and Tyler White proved harmless. Josh Reddick rolled into a double play, extracting Kluber from the predicament. The feeling could not be replicated.

After a first-pitch strike to Bregman in the fourth, Kluber missed twice away. He returned with a sinker. It halved home plate. Bregman bludgeoned it to begin a barrage. Josh Reddick pulled a two-out RBI single before Kluber ended the inning.

His afternoon concluded only a short time later. Springer saw five pitches to begin the fifth. All sailed away, almost into the other batter's box. Kluber came back with a full-count cutter. It grooved inside. Springer sent it out.

To Altuve, Kluber threw twice. His second sinker was fatal. Altuve lifted it out to left field, where the train began another journey down the tracks.

Creech: Astros don't waste any time

Jenny Dial Creech Oct. 5, 2018

It took a few innings on Friday for the postseason feel to take over at Minute Maid, but when it did, it was obvious -- the Astros are just as dangerous as advertised as they embark on their quest to repeat as World Series Champs.

Justin Verlander pitched lights out for five innings.

The Astros offense got going and gave Cleveland fits.

The team's depth -- from guys like Josh Reddick and Martin Maldonado in the bottom of the order to the bullpen stepping up in the sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth innings -- seemed never ending.

Needless to say, if Friday's 7-2 win over Cleveland is any indication, the Astros look like the team to beat again this season.

By the fourth inning, the bats came alive and the Astros looked like, well, the Astros.

That same inning, Josh Reddick (who left a lot to be desired offensively in last season's playoff run) came through with an RBI single.

In the fifth inning, the Astros made it 4-0 when George Springer and Jose Altuve hit back-to-back home runs.

Cleveland eventually put up a couple of runs, but it wouldn't matter. Not when the Astros look like this. The Astros weren't perfect. There are things to pick apart. But overall, their offense was present and their defense was efficient. They didn't look nervous or anxious or rusty.

Before any postseason series, you have to wonder how each team will look when it all gets going.

The Astros haven't skipped a beat.

That's bad news for Cleveland, which looks like it will be making an early exit from the postseason.

The Astros -- and their fans -- are ready for more.

The playoffs are back and the Astros look sharp.

They are back at it tomorrow at 3:37 p.m. and will likely head to Cleveland 2-0.

It's one game and there is a lot of baseball left. But if the Astros play the way they did Friday, they will be well on their way back to the World Series.

Houston Chronicle LOADED: 10.06.2018

Astros rattle the unflappable Corey Kluber

Hunter Atkins , Houston Chronicle Oct. 5, 2018 Updated: Oct. 5, 2018 5:02 p.m.

Game 1 was supposed to be a pitcher's duel between Houston's Justin Verlander and Cleveland's Corey Kluber.

Neither gunslinger would get through his final inning, but the Astros made Kluber the first casualty on the American League side of the Division Series, riddled him with bullets in the form of three home runs, and saddled him with a loss before he could survive halfway through the 7-2 beating the Astros delivered the Indians on Friday afternoon at Minute Maid Park.

Kluber, a two-time Cy Young Award winner, had pitched poorly in his last three playoff starts, dating back to a losing effort in Game 7 of the 2016 World Series, but his 20-7 record and 2.89 ERA this season added to a dominant stretch of baffling hitters hundreds of times in hundreds of innings for five consecutive years.

He was stingy for three innings against the Astros. He deployed pitches that came out of his hand looking the same until they veered in opposite directions. He rarely threw to the center of the strike zone.

Then his pitches betrayed him. They flattened. They slowed. They landed in the wheelhouses of Houston's most dangerous bats, and he wound up back in a postseason ditch.

The Astros made the righthander look mortal at best and overwhelmed at worst. They teed off for four runs and six hits in 4 2/3 innings. They drained him of 35 pitches in the fourth. Only once this season had Kluber needed more pitches to get through any one of his 215 innings pitched.

Kluber is known for staring out with eyes that never change their expression. He often appears more than unflappable. He looks emotionless.

Solo home runs by Alex Bregman, George Springer and Jose Altuve -- Houston's Goodfellas -- bled the seemingly bloodless Cyborg until he was as unrecognizable as Billy Batts in the trunk. The three-homer clobbering in four-plus innings was a pummeling the likes of which Kluber had suffered just three times in 204 previous starts in his career.

Verlander exited in the sixth with the bases loaded, but the Astros' bullpen mitigated the damage. Cleveland, however, continued its search for relief. After chasing Kluber, the Astros scored three more runs against four relievers, including Trevor Bauer, who might have spent some of the gas needed for him to start a potential Game 4.

Houston Chronicle LOADED: 10.06.2018

Covering the Bases: ALDS Game 1 by Jordan Bastian

FIRST: Corey Kluber finished fastening the buttons on his white dress shirt, walked into the throng of reporters and cameras waiting in the middle of the visitors' clubhouse and took two long chugs from a bottle of water.

Kluber knew the question was coming. And, following an inquiry about a fourth-inning gone awry, and a couple more on a pitch count piling up and flattened fastballs, there it was:

"This is now the fourth start for you that has not gone so well. In a career that's been really, really good, what do you think it is about the postseason?"

Kluber's monotonous tone didn't change, just as his expression remains stoic through outings good and bad. And Kluber's response, at least for anyone who has followed his career and heard his postgame thoughts, was a predictable one.

"I don't think they're related," Kluber said. "I think every start—whether it's a good string of starts or a bad string of starts—is individual to itself. I think I said yesterday, good or bad, I don't dwell on the last outing for very long. I kind of put my head down and get to work to get ready for the next one.

"I don't think any starts last postseason had any bearing on today. I made a few mistakes to the wrong guys."

Kluber is, of course, correct.

Last year, Kluber wasn't right, but he was "good enough to pitch" against the Yankees in the ALDS. The result was nine runs in 6.1 innings between his two starts. In 2016, Kluber was brilliant throughout the postseason, hoisting Cleveland's staff on his back en route to the World Series. Then, in Game 7 of the World Series, when Kluber was making his third start in the Fall Classic, not to mention his franchise-record sixth postseason start, fatigue finally caught up with the ace's right arm.

Four bad outings stretched over three years—with two offseasons and two regular seasons mixed between them—are not related. That does not make what took place on Friday night any less disconcerting for a fan base that is in its seventh consecutive decade of waiting for another World Series parade.

Over 4.2 innings, Kluber allowed four runs on six hits, including a home run apiece to Alex Bregman, George Springer and Jose Altuve. The righty walked two, hit two batters and struck out two. After needing just 33 pitches to get through three no-hit innings, Kluber toiled through 54 over his last 1.2 frames.

"The first time through we were aggressive," Astros outfielder Josh Reddick said. "I think it showed that we were a little off-balance and getting away from our approach. But, the [next] time through we really made a good adjustment."

The biggest culprit was Kluber's sinker, which had a tendency to miss or tail over the zone, rather than hitting the edges as consistently as usual. Eight of the balls put in play were sinkers, including the homers by Bregman and Altuve.

Down the stretch this season, Kluber's velocity was noticeably down, but command seemed to be the bigger problem against Houston. His average sinker velo of 91.5 mph against the Astros wasn't far off his season rate of 91.9 mph (though it's worth noting that Kluber's peak-month average was 92.4 mph in June).

In September, Kluber's four-seamer and sinker each dipped below 91 mph on average in his final two outings. The four-seam was 90.5 mph on Sept. 24 and 90.6 on Sept. 29, while the sinker clocked in at 90.9 on Sept. 24 and 90.7 mph on Sept. 29.

Indians manager Terry Francona addressed that prior to Game 1.

"I'd say it's probably mechanical," Francona said. "I think with Kluber, with his velocity, I think when he's in his mechanics and he's comfortable and he's confident, is when you see that last tick normally. Again, and I don't have stats to base it on, but from watching him, as he gets into a game and you can tell he's starting to feel it, that's when you see his best velocity.

"I don't think that extra tick means nearly as much as like late movement with him. Late movement, whether it's his breaking ball or his two-seamer is what makes him really effective."

Whether you think the outings are related or not, when you combine Kluber's last four postseason games, he has yielded 17 earned runs on 22 hits (nine homers) with 12 strikeouts and five walks in 15 innings. In his previous five playoff outings, Kluber had a 0.89 ERA (three earned runs in 30.1 innings) with 35 strikeouts, 22 hits, eight walks and one homer allowed.

"Last year has nothing to do with today," Francona said. "They're a good team. He made a couple of mistakes. They made him pay for it."

SECOND: Prior to Game 1, Francona described Trevor Bauer as a "wild card" in the Tribe bullpen for the first few games of this ALDS. Houston's offensive outburst eliminated that card from the deck.

Instead, Francona had to weigh the value of getting Bauer work, or risk having the pitcher go eight days between appearances. Bauer pitched on Sunday and could return as the Game 4 starter, if the series gets that far. Giving him an inning in Game 1 would help keep his arm fresh.

"He needed to [pitch] regardless," Francona said. "I mean, we're not even thinking about Game 4. Our sights are set on Game 2. But, I thought it was important for him to get in and pitch. With Trevor, he could probably pitch every game. If he doesn't, getting in was important for him. We didn't want him to go 10 days without pitching."

Bauer took over for Cody Allen in the sixth, when Houston had a 5–2 lead and a runner on first. Bauer faced four batters, allowing two hits, including an RBI single to Bregman.

"I thought I threw the ball well. I executed a lot of pitches," Bauer said. "The two hits were quality pitches, so credit to them on taking good swings. They're good hitters."

Bauer said he is fine to pitch in Game 2, if needed.

"Yeah, for sure," said the righty, who logged 16 pitches (nine strike) in the loss. "That's less than my side session. I didn't really feel taxed at all, so yeah, I'm good to go."

THIRD: Justin Verlander is no stranger to the Tribe, given his long history of facing the Cleveland in the AL Central during his Detroit days.

For the most part, the Indians have done well against Verlander, who has gone 20–24 with a 4.71 ERA in 52 career regular-season outings against the club. During Thursday's workout, Francisco Lindor was asked if that familiarity might be an advantage for the Tribe's hitters.

"I wouldn't say an advantage," Lindor said. "I know what he likes to do. I know the way he likes to pitch. We've just got to go out there and execute, continue to stay within our approach. And if we don't have success the first at-bat, second at-bat, you continue making a constant adjustment."

Verlander came out firing, using his fastball for 13 of the 16 pitches he threw in the first inning. That set the tone for the afternoon, as the veteran right-hander mowed through Cleveland's lineup for five no-hit innings, leaning hard on his four-seamer. Cleveland's goal with Verlander is always to make him work for everything he gets. Yan Gomes was the most successful, getting Verlander to throw 19 pitches in two plate appearances. The second ended in a Gomes' single, snapping the Tribe's 0-for-15 start to the game.

"It felt like he was throwing a lot more heaters," Gomes said. "He was just coming right at us. He's back to throwing 95-plus and he's living in the top of the zone. At first, we weren't able to get that many good swings on him. We were trying to put good at-bats together, but he was just getting ahead. With a guy like that, when he's throwing strikes and using the top of the zone, it's kind of hard to get comfortable."

HOME: Overall, the Indians went 3-for-30 in the batter's box in the loss. The team's only two runs came via a wild pitch and a groundout. Like Kluber's outing, it was a showing that brought back nightmares of the 2017 ALDS for Tribe fans. In that five-game October exit, Cleveland hit .171 (.550 OPS).

Lindor was asked if there was a lesson to be learned from Friday's showing.

"Stick with our plan. Our plan is good enough," he said. "The times we hit the ball hard, they didn't go through. They played better than us today. It's plain and simple, they played better than us. Hats off to them. Tomorrow is another day. Come back stronger."

Tito's ALDS Game 1 minutiae by Jordan Bastian

Highlights from Indians manager Terry Francona's pregame discussion with Cleveland writers on Friday prior to Game 1 of the ALDS against the Astros.

Q: You really switched things up with your lineup...

TF: (laughs) "We unveiled it. Been waiting to do that all year."

Q: Corey Kluber's velocity was down in September. Do you have a theory on why that was the case?

TF: "I'd say it's probably mechanical. I think with Kluber, with his velocity, I think when he's in his mechanics and he's comfortable and he's confident, is when you see that last tick normally. Again, and I don't have stats to base it on, but from watching him, as he gets into a game and you can tell he's starting to feel it, that's when you see his best velocity. I don't think that extra tick means nearly as much as like late movement with him. Late movement, whether it's his breaking ball or his two-seamer is what makes him really effective. Because, I've seen him throw some 91s

Donaldson, Encarnacion look to take care of unfinished October business

Marly RiveraESPN Writer

Josh Donaldson and Edwin Encarnacion might seem like an unlikely duo to have become friends.

One of them is flamboyant and boisterous, the other one is discreet and introverted. One hails from Alabama (via nearby Pensacola) and was a standout All-American with the Auburn Tigers. The other moved to Puerto Rico at age 14 from his childhood home in the Dominican Republic, which at the time did not have the impressive farm systems we know today, to pursue his dream of playing major league baseball.

Donaldson would go on to have a standout career that saw him dealt from the Oakland Athletics to the Toronto Blue Jays after the 2014 season, a year before he was crowned American League MVP. And much like his personality, Encarnación flew mostly under the radar with the Cincinnati Reds, right up until he was picked off waivers by the Blue Jays in 2010 and went on to establish himself as one of the best and most consistent power-hitters in the game.

When Donaldson arrived in the Blue Jays' clubhouse, he came armed with the Athletics way, reaching across the proverbial Latino players' aisle in trying to establish a winning clubhouse culture that he believes in to this day. Encarnación was skeptical at first, but eventually grew to trust and believe in the good intentions of that brash, quirky kid.

"When I came in to Toronto you had Jose Reyes, Jose Bautista, Navi [Dioner Navarro] and Edwin, a pretty big Latin culture. I always want to talk to everybody, so I made it a point that I was trying to communicate with everybody, so I let them know," said Donaldson, laughing.

"I played in the Dominican and I know what it feels like to be part of a smaller group," he said. "So I made it a point to let them know I was interested in them and wanted to show that I am here to help you guys win. So we started building a relationship. And yes, some people wonder how, but some of my best friends have been more of the quiet type."

"When I first met him in Toronto, you could tell right away what kind of guy he is. Yes, we are completely different. But that doesn't matter; everyone has their own way. He does things his way and I do things my way, but that didn't stop us from becoming good friends," Encarnación said. "It's all based on respect towards each other. That's the main thing between us. The respect and trust we have developed in each other. He trusts and believes in me and I trust and believe in him. We have a close relationship on and off the field."

Alongside José Bautista, they became not only good friends, but one of the best power-hitting trios in baseball, combining for 221 home runs between them in 2015 and 2016. That Blue Jays team would go on to make back-to-back American League Championship Series in those two seasons, winning the AL East the first year and earning a wild card in the second while making the playoffs for the first time since winning the World Series in 1992 and 1993.

That means both Donaldson and Encarnación have some unfinished business in October, having gotten to the ALCS but no further than that. And while neither would openly admit it, there is a chip on both of their shoulders to show the Blue Jays what they could have accomplished with some more time together.

Encarnación has always taken the high road in his comments after his departure as a free agent from Toronto, but it is unclear how hard the Blue Jays tried to re-sign him before he decided to head to Cleveland in the winter of 2015.

Donaldson's departure from Toronto was messy, with plenty of reports of the mishandling of his most recent calf injury and contract negotiations. The 32-year-old had been limited to just 36 games for Toronto, and no one knew when or if he'd play again in 2018.

The Blue Jays ended up getting a paltry return for the 2015 AL MVP, with his trade value diminished by his injury and pending free agency.

After he was traded to Cleveland he proved he was healthy enough to contribute, hitting .280/.400/.420 with three home runs in the season's final month to secure a spot in the Indians American League Division Series lineup.

"In Toronto, it was one of those situations where it definitely wasn't the way I wanted it to end," Donaldson said. "I wish it could have been different just as far as me being on the DL and not being able to actually play. I didn't want it to end that way. I was working my ass off to get back as quick as possible because I knew at some point something was going to happen."

Getting back in action, and doing something in the time he has wherever he's playing, has become Donaldson's biggest priority.

"The free agent stuff, I didn't care," Donaldson said. "That's going to take care of itself. My focus has never really been about [free agency], my focus has been, 'Hey how can I help my team win?' And when I am not on the field, I obviously, I can't really do that. I've made enough money. It's about winning for me."

Now Donaldson and Encarnación find themselves together in the postseason again, this time as part of the Indians' winning culture, surrounded by competitive athletes who have already proven a lot on the big stage of playoff baseball.

"Eddie and I, we have very good memories of playing with each other. And this is another opportunity. And if you look around the room, many of us have had similar experiences," Donaldson said.

"You know, Eddie was kind of bouncing back and forth and then really made a name for himself in Toronto," Donaldson said. "Yan Gomes, kind of the same thing, bouncing around, they were making him a utility guy and then kind of finds his way here. I was up and down five times with the A's. Look what happened with Melky [Cabrera]. So you have some guys who've been tested and failed. [Corey] Kluber I remember when he first came up he was kind of fringy and then turns out to be a Cy Young Award-winner. And I just think it's the characteristic of the guys and the people that are in the locker room make the organization."

"It hurt. We were so close and it hurt," Encarnación said. "It hurt because all we dreamt about [with that Blue Jays team] was making it to the World Series and winning that ring. And now we are back here together, and we have to keep moving forward and hope to God that we are healthy so we can accomplish great things, all of us Indians together."

"Things didn't go the way we wanted before, but that's baseball," Encarnación added. "And personal accomplishments don't mean as much as what you can do together, like winning a World Series championship. That's what we all strive for. It's not easy; not easy at all. But it's not impossible. And we find ourselves on the playoff stage again and anything can happen."

And for Donaldson in particular, sharing the playoff stage with his friend Edwin could be a way of closing a chapter of his life that he still feels remains very much open-ended.

"You try not to get too far ahead of yourself, but sitting here talking about it, I mean, I think it would be cool," Donaldson said. "We made some really good memories, and I have a lot of good memories of Edwin in the postseason. For us to continue to build that, it would be like a little bit of some unsettled business that we had started. We've gotten close before. And if I was able to come here then help out, and obviously Edwin is doing his thing, maybe we'll be able to achieve something that we always strived to do."

Kluber's playoff woes return, Indians ace tagged by Astros

The Associated Press Oct 5, 2018, 7:52 PM

HOUSTON (AP) -- Cleveland Indians ace Corey Kluber insisted Friday's loss had nothing to do with his playoff woes last season.

It just looked that way, a lot.

A year after he was hit hard in a pair of postseason starts, it happened all over. The Houston Astros tagged him for three home runs and roughed up the Indians 7-2 in Game 1 of the AL Division Series.

"I don't think they're related," Kluber said. "I don't think that the starts from last postseason had any bearing on today. I just made a few mistakes to the wrong guys."

Kluber's performance followed a strong regular season in which he won a career-best 20 games, posting a 2.89 ERA across an AL-leading 215 innings.

Last season, Kluber went 18-4 with an MLB-best 2.25 ERA in the regular season to earn his second AL Cy Young Award. In the playoffs, however, Kluber's ERA jumped to 12.79 in two starts after he allowed nine runs and four homers in two ALDS tries against the New York Yankees.

Kluber has enjoyed success at this time of year, too, nearly pitching the Indians to the 2016 championship. Cleveland hasn't won the World Series since 1948, and was counting on Kluber to take them far.

Like the right-hander, Indians manager Terry Francona also said Kluber's 2017 postseason was unrelated to his 2018 playoff debut.

"Last year has nothing to do with today," Francona said. "They're a good team. He made a couple mistakes. They made him pay for it."

When asked if he believes Kluber is healthy, Francona - seemingly surprised by the question - replied: "Kluber? Oh, yeah."

Kluber struggled with his location early, hitting two batters after plunking only three in the regular season. But he didn't allow a hit until the fourth inning when Alex Bregman homered. After walking Yuli Gurriel, Kluber gave up two-out singles to Tyler White and Josh Reddick that produced another run.

George Springer led off the fifth inning with a 402-foot homer. Two pitches later, Jose Altuve also connected, sending a drive a drive to the Crawford Boxes in left field that put Houston up 4-0.

"I really just left the ball elevated over the plate and picked the wrong three guys to do that to," Kluber said. "You've got to be able to keep the ball in the ballpark in these games."

Marwin Gonzalez chased Kluber with a single in the fifth inning. In 4 2/3 innings, Kluber allowed four runs on six hits and two walks with two strikeouts.

Kluber faced the Astros twice this season, both in May. In the first start in Houston, Kluber gave up two runs and six hits and struck out 10 in seven innings of a 5-4 win. Six days later, he held the Astros scoreless in 6 1/3 innings in an 11-2 loss.

"We have a lot of respect for him and we all know how good he is," Altuve said. "We all were aware of that. Sometimes when you're facing a guy like him, the only thing you can control is to swing the bat. That was our mindset. We were pretty good since the first pitch and good things happened today."

Astros manager AJ Hinch said finding success against Kluber meant staying patient and capitalizing on mistakes.

"He's not an easy guy to center up, so you've got to be disciplined about what side of the plate you're going to pick and which of his pitches that move all over the place that you're going to focus on," Hinch said. "And don't miss the one or two or three mistakes he might make from time to time."

Astros rake against Kluber as the champs pick up where they left off

Michael C. Wright ESPN Staff Writer

HOUSTON -- Astros orange packed the hot, sticky city streets, eventually filling the seats at Minute Maid Park with 43,514 fans hoping for another dose of H-town magic.

Seven decades after Cleveland's last World Series title in 1948, skipper Terry Francona says, "We have been pushed around a lot, but now, we are pushing back."

After all, 342 days had passed since the defending champion Houston Astros last played a home postseason outing, when they prevailed over the Los Angeles Dodgers in Game 5 of a World Series slugfest. This time around, the Astros simply picked up right where they left off in leaning on timely contributions from Justin Verlander, Alex Bregman, George Springer and Jose Altuve to secure a 7-2 win over the Cleveland Indians in Friday's Game 1 of their American League Division Series.

"This is what it's all about," Bregman said. "Everybody in that clubhouse is living and dying on every pitch. It's fun to play these types of games. All the fans were unbelievable today. They were in every pitch, loud."

They certainly had reason.

With Verlander carrying a no-hitter into the sixth inning after retiring 13 consecutive batters through the fifth, Houston's bats had sprung to life in the bottom of the fourth, when Bregman crushed a home run to left field for the game's first hit. The ball jumped off Bregman's bat with an exit velocity of 107.1 mph, according to Statcast; that registers as the hardest home run hit by the third baseman in his career, including the postseason.

Josh Reddick added to that with the first of his two RBIs on a single to right field that scored Yuli Gurriel.

That quick sequence more or less silenced all of the pregame talk about the expected pitchers' duel between Verlander and Cleveland's Corey Kluber, who walked two batters and hit two more over the first four innings.

Kluber had hit two batters in a single game just three times in his career entering Friday's matchup. He only compounded matters by surrendering three additional home runs, one each to Springer, Altuve and Martin Maldonado -- who tacked on an insurance bomb in the seventh on a 2-2 pitch.

The Springer and Altuve homers came on consecutive at-bats.

"I don't know if 'expected' is the right word," said Astros manager A.J. Hinch, when asked whether he anticipated such an offensive explosion against a strong ace such as Kluber. "I'm proud of our guys. It's a good group of pitchers we faced today. Obviously, it's got to continue for the rest of the series, but we kind of expect our guys to put up really good at-bats, yeah.

"As much as I've heard different opinions about our offense, it's pretty long, it's pretty good, it's pretty potent. Case in point, today."

Kluber's performance marked the first time in his postseason career he has allowed three home runs or more in a game; and he has allowed three home runs or more in a game on just four occasions throughout his regular-season career. In fact, Kluber became the fifth pitcher in Indians postseason history to give up three or more home runs in a game. Kluber has now surrendered 10 home runs in his postseason career, which ranks as the second most in Indians franchise history, behind Charles Nagy (14).

"The fourth inning was a really tough inning," Indians manager Terry Francona said. "I think they made him throw 33, 35 pitches. Just seemed like with his two-seamer, when he left it up, they made him pay."

Perhaps Kluber can blame rapper J. Cole for the rough outing as Altuve and Springer each tied the Astros record for career postseason home runs (eight). As Bregman tells it, "some of the guys were" repeating a lyric to the J. Cole song "Fire Squad" in which the line is uttered: "History repeats itself, and that's just how it goes."

"And then all of a sudden, Altuve homers and Springer homers," Bregman said. "It felt like last year when we had the ALDS at home; just trying to get a good pitch to hit. Got one over the middle. Kluber's tough, man. That whole pitching staff over there is very good. So, just fortunate enough to get a good swing on it."

The Astros celebrate the home run of Alex Bregman, center, in Game 1. Bob Levey/Getty Images

As for Verlander, the ace put together the second-longest no-hit bid of his postseason career, before finally surrendering a hit in the sixth inning off Yan Gomes, who earlier in the day tested the hurler with a 10-pitch at-bat. As a member of the Astros, Verlander had never faced the Indians. But on four occasions in 2017 with the Detroit Tigers, Verlander was 1-3 against the Indians, with an 8.14 ERA.

Verlander pitched 5½ innings, throwing 70 strikes on 102 pitches on Friday, while his Cleveland counterpart gave up six hits with two walks and two strikeouts in 4½ innings before giving way to Adam Cimber.

"We have a lot of respect for him; we all know how good he is," Altuve said of Kluber. "We're all aware of that. Sometimes when you're facing a guy like him, the only thing you can control is to swing the bat. That was our mindset. We were pretty aggressive, swinging since the first pitch, and good things happened today. We started the same way last year, you know, we won the first one. It creates a little bit of momentum.

"Today's game was awesome. Of course, the MVP [Bregman] had the first homer the team had, Josh Reddick with the big hit, Springer with the big homer, Maldonado, everybody did something to help the team win today."

The hope in the Houston clubhouse is it continues, but perhaps just as important is that the Astros continue to have fun doing it.

"Our clubhouse is not like any other clubhouse I've ever seen," Springer explained. "It's fun to come to the park. It's fun to play with each other. All 25-plus guys in there are cheering for the other guy to succeed. For guys who step in or get traded over here, get called up, I think that they get to see that. Having guys like Brian McCann, Jose Altuve to at least set the tone of, 'You know what, go out, have fun, enjoy the day. Because at the end of the day, we're in the big leagues and we're playing in front of a great crowd, a great city. So go out and kind of enjoy it.'"

"I think for us it's all about having fun, and I think in the clubhouse is now starting to spread out onto the field."

The teams face off again on Saturday at 3:37 p.m. ET in Houston with Gerrit Cole on the hill for the Astros.

choosing to try to eat as much as possible."

Corey Kluber, Justin Verlander ready for Friday's ALDS opener between Cleveland Indians-Houston

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

HOUSTON - Corey Kluber says the easiest way to get past a bad start is to flush it and move on. He said he did that a long time ago regarding his starts in Game 2 and Game 5 of the 2017 ALDS against the Yankees.

This season he definitely pitched like man who was looking forward instead of backward. Kluber won 20 games for the first time in his career, topping 200 innings and 200 strikeouts for the fifth straight season.

On Friday he will plunge into the ALDS again, this time against the defending World Series champion Houston Astros and Justin Verlander. Last year Kluber was not 100 percent, a point that quickly became evident as he allowed first-inning homers to Gary Sanchez in Game 2 and Didi Gregorius in Game 5.

In 33 starts during the regular season this year, Kluber allowed six of his career-high 25 homers in the first inning. So just how important is it for Kluber to get through the first inning on Friday with limited or no damage?

"You want to get through every inning without damage," said Kluber on Thursday at Minute Maid Park. "Whether a team scores a run in the first inning, ninth inning or seventh inning it's how many you add up at the end.

"I think a lot of times guys can maybe give up runs early on and they start trying to make up for it and it adds up to a few runs quicker than it should. But I think each inning is separate from the others one. It's only an inning and you're trying to get three outs as fast as you can, hopefully without anyone scoring, and then you try to do it again."

We meet again: Verlander will be facing the Indians on Friday for the first time since the Tigers traded him to Houston in August of 2017. Before that Verlander and the Indians couldn't get away from each other.

He made his big-league debut against them on July 4, 2005. In his career, he's made more starts (52) against the Tribe than any team in the big leagues. He's 20-24 with a 4.71 ERA against them.

"It's been over a year (since I've faced them)," said Verlander. "I've changed a lot. Their lineup has changed. I will be interesting to see what happens."

Verlander said he's thrown a lot more four-seam fastballs since he joined the Astros.

"I think just overall, the adaptation of myself and how I use my stuff has changed," said Verlander. "Some of that is analytics. Some of that's just personal feel and knowing what works and kind of sticking to my guns a little bit."

Houston manager A.J. Hinch say Verlander just keeps evolving.

"He's had this start circled for a while now," said Hinch. "He's got a long history with the Indians. He's going to come up with ways to combat the successes or failures that he's had and he does that on a start by start basis.

"He has the mindset and the ability to evolve as the game around him gets younger and he gets older. When people think his stuff is going to decline, he throws harder. When guys start to hit his breaking ball, he comes up with a cutter. He's always doing something to evolve."

Need for speed: Outfielder Rajai Davis, the last man to make the Tribe's ALDS roster, was asked how important speed can be in the postseason.

"It's going to be huge," said Davis, who stole 21 bases during the regular season. "It plays a factor in how guys pitch to the next guy at the plate. When you know a guy is quick or can steal bag. . .no one wants to give up 90 feet. If that effects the pitcher, the way he thinks, the way he delivers his pitches, and helps our hitter get better pitches to hit, it only benefits the team."

Asked what his role will be in the ALDS, Davis said, "I don't know what that is. I can't name it, but I'm going to claim it."

Good for Yandy: Last year Yandy Diaz didn't make the Tribe's postseason roster. This year he did.

"Yandy gives us protection from them bringing in a lefty," said Francona. "It's another guy who can play the infield, but it's a guy that really swings the bat well against lefties. That's basically why he's here."

The Astros have just one lefty in the bullpen, Tony Sipp. Dallas Keuchel, scheduled to start Game 3 on Monday, is a lefty as well. Diaz hit .289 (13-for-45) against lefties and .328 (21-for-64) against righties.

Finally: Catcher Yan Gomes, recovering from a lacerated and bruised right thumb, went through Thursday's workout without a problem. He's scheduled to catch Kluber on Friday.

"Once I found out that it wasn't broken, I was already very optimistic," said Gomes. "Today we took all the bandages off and tried to throw. It felt normal. It's just like a swollen thumb, like I got jammed or something like that."

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Why Will Harris made the Astros' ALDS roster over Héctor Rondón

By Jake Kaplan

In the end, the Astros' decision-makers weren't lying in their stated intent to tailor their postseason bullpens to their opponent.

Even if it meant leaving off one of their most valuable relievers from the regular season.

Héctor Rondón's omission and Will Harris' inclusion in the seven-man bullpen the Astros will carry in their ALDS against the Indians was by far the biggest surprise of the decisions manager A.J. Hinch revealed Thursday at Minute Maid Park on the eve of Game 1. A struggle-filled September marred Rondón's otherwise great season, but there had previously been no indication it would cost the hard-throwing right-hander his spot in October.

"He had a tough month," Hinch said. "September [was] really his only bad month. He wasn't great in the second half as a whole, but most of that is weighted into September. And honestly, this is a very difficult offense to match up with, and some of the things that he does and some of his execution that he does didn't match up very well with very many areas of the lineup with the Indians."

Astros ALDS bullpen

RHP Roberto Osuna

RHP Ryan Pressly

RHP Collin McHugh

RHP Lance McCullers

RHP Will Harris

LHP Tony Sipp

RHP Josh James

Conversely, the Astros like how Harris' cutter-curveball combination matches up against the Indians, who feature a bevy of left-handed and switch-hitters. Though his numbers didn't reflect it this season, Harris has traditionally been more effective against left-handed hitters than right-handed hitters.

Harris with Houston	Opponents' OPS vs. RHB	Opponents' OPS vs. LHB
2015	.586	.455
2016	.603	.513
2017	.619	.606
2018	.506	.672

Harris also quietly finished the season strong after working his way out of leverage earlier in the year. His final 13 appearances, dating to Aug. 15, were scoreless — a 13 1/3-inning span in which he limited lefties to three hits (all singles) and two walks in 22 plate appearances: a .150/.227/.150 batting line.

Overall, Harris finished the regular season with a 3.49 ERA but a 2.44 FIP that suggests some bad luck over his 56 2/3 innings. Rondón, the Astros' closer from early June to mid-August, finished with a 3.20 ERA and a 2.79 FIP in 59 innings.

2018 season	G	IP	ERA	FIP	WHIP	BB/9	K/9
Héctor Rondón	63	59.0	3.20	2.79	1.322	3.1	10.2
Will Harris	61	56.2	3.49	2.44	1.094	2.2	10.2

"I kind of just kept my head down and realized that the stuff I was doing in April and May and June was who I've been my whole career and eventually the tides would turn," Harris said. "They did there toward the end of the year. It was basically a lot of the same stuff. I just was able to have better fortune here and there."

As far as this year's righty-lefty splits, Harris chalked it up to the randomness that comes with the relatively small sample size of a reliever's season. "I'd be willing to bet the lefties were a bunch of singles and righties were hitting balls at people," he said. "It's just kind of the way it works out. That's the way relievers are. You only get 50 to 60, 65 innings, so sometimes the numbers can be a little bit misleading." (Indeed, 23 of the 28 hits Harris allowed to left-handed hitters were singles.)

"When you look at Harris's weapons and his curveball and how it typically performs against lefties and what his repertoire looks like against the particular players in the Indians' lineup, it became a pretty clear answer for us that Harris needed to be a weapon that A.J. could rely on," Astros president of baseball operations Jeff Luhnow said.

Harris doesn't have a substantial sample size of experience against any of the Indians' hitters save for ex-Athletic Yonder Alonso, whom he's held to a .154/.154/.385 in 13 plate appearances. Alonso and those likely to bat after him — Melky Cabrera, Yan Gomes and Jason Kipnis — probably represent the pocket of hitters Harris could face.

The odds of Hinch deploying Rondón, the Astros clearly concluded, had reduced in recent weeks as his performance dropped out. His chances would've been better against a more right-handed heavy opponent like the Yankees. Ditto for sidearm Joe Smith, who's had a lot of success against New York's right-handed hitters.

Smith missed the cut largely because of the emergence of Josh James, the flamethrowing rookie the Astros decided to carry because his ability to bridge multiple innings serves as protection for their two pitchers who only recently returned from injury: Charlie Morton and Lance McCullers Jr. Smith would have been a right-handed specialist and an option for only one inning at most.

"We sat down, we talked, [Hinch] explained everything and it all makes sense," said Smith, the ex-Indian. "Obviously we all want to play, and with as deep as this team is it's just not possible. And obviously I want to play against them for a lot of reasons. But the roster we're running out there is really good, and it gives us the best chance to win."

Other takeaways from Thursday's workout:

— Hinch indicated the Astros won't have Morton available in their bullpen for Games 1 and 2 despite him not being lined up to start until a potential Game 4 on Tuesday in Cleveland. He cited Morton's recent injury-related layoffs and the presence of relievers who can pitch multiple innings (McHugh and James) as reasons.

"Given he's thrown only a few innings in the recent weeks, he's not somebody that I would feel comfortable using in the first couple games and then bringing back for Game 4," Hinch said of Morton. "So I'd expect to see him in Game 4."

— Myles Straw's elite speed and the threat of him stealing a key base outweighed the insurance Max Stassi would have signified as a third catcher behind Martín Maldonado and Brian McCann.

"He is so fast he forced a third catcher off the roster," Hinch said of Straw, whose story The Athletic detailed last month. Carrying Straw will allow Hinch to insert Jake Marisnick as a defensive replacement without worrying about losing his best pinch-run specialist. He can also use Tony Kemp as strictly a pinch-hitter in a pivotal spot against a right-hander.

"He's a virtual upgrade [as a runner] on every single player on our offense," Hinch said. "I won't run for [José] Altuve. I likely won't run for [Alex] Bregman or [George] Springer, but he's probably faster, and that type of weapon in these type of games can pay huge."

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