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Wednesday July 4, 2018

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Twins recall lefty Moya to help out bullpen

Stephen Cohn | MLB.com | July 3, 2018

MILWAUKEE -- The Twins continued their search for fresh and reliable bullpen arms by recalling left-hander Gabriel Moya from Triple-A Rochester on Tuesday.

Moya pitched the final two innings for the Twins in their 2-0 loss to the Brewers on Tuesday. He struck out four and did not allow any hits.

Moya has now appeared in six games this season with the Twins, posting a 7.71 ERA and allowing three home runs in seven innings. While he has yet to find his groove in the Majors in 2018, Moya has been sharp in 20 appearances (three starts) with Rochester, with a 1.64 ERA and 38 strikeouts in 33 innings.

"We knew he was throwing the ball well," Molitor said, "and he made it look pretty easy getting the last six outs."

"When I got sent down at the beginning of the season," Moya said, "I went down there and tried to work hard. My mentality is basically to execute all my pitches and that's been working for me."

Manager Paul Molitor expects a different Moya this time around, especially with his slider and curveball, which were issues in his first stint this season.

"I think he kind of has a couple different shapes to it," Molitor said. "There's probably a little separation from the slider and the curve, but he's been trying to use them both a little bit more, trying to get a little more tilt. He's not getting a lot of swings and misses, but he's getting some weaker contact. Everyone is saying that pitch is improving, which is important to have more weapons against lefties which have given him trouble."

To make space for Moya, Minnesota optioned right-hander Zack Littell to Rochester. Littell issued the walk-off walk in a 6-5 loss to the Brewers on Monday night at Miller Park.

Littell was forced into Monday's loss after Fernando Rodney blew a save in the ninth inning and Molitor turned to four other relievers in relief of starter Kyle Gibson, who hurled five frames.

After Littell -- a starter in Triple-A this season -- loaded the bases without recording an out, Molitor visited the mound to implement a five-man

infield, but Littell thought he was being removed from the game in his second career Major League appearance.

"I just had to kind of reset him for a minute, told him what the plan was, and try to give him a thought process that would extend the game," Molitor said. "I think he was probably a little nervous. A young pitcher like that who is accustomed to starting, where if you give up a run in the first inning you've still got a lot of game -- that wasn't the case. It was a tall order."

Dozier, Motter updates

Molitor held Brian Dozier out of the lineup for only the fourth time in 82 games this season on Tuesday, looking to get his All-Star second baseman some rest. Dozier is hitting .172 in 26 games since June 3.

"He's good," Molitor said. "He's a little banged up, but he's doing OK. I talked to him earlier this week about a day [off] somewhere on this trip, without knowing exactly what day it was going to be. It's always tough to sit him. If he had his druthers, he'd play 162 [games] and start them all. So it's just kind of a common-sense decision here with the Chicago experience and these day games here following a night game."

Molitor also said Taylor Motter is progressing. The Twins placed Motter on the 7-day concussion disabled list after he crashed into the right-field wall while attempting to make a running catch last Thursday against the White Sox.

Motter took batting practice Monday and participated in defensive drills Tuesday.

"He's feeling good," Molitor said. "Symptoms have been good the last couple of days as far as pretty much eliminated. He's coming along as well as we could have hoped to this point."

Motter played in seven games for the Twins in June after being claimed off waivers from the Mariners in May.

As the Twins try to fend off the injury bug and recover from a 10-game deficit in the American League Central, Molitor said he isn't thinking too much about the possibility of Minnesota becoming sellers at the non-waiver Trade Deadline.

"Everyone kind of understands this is where we're at, and the time of year we're approaching, some of these things are going to pick up in terms of rumors or things that could potentially happen," Molitor said. "We have a lot of people who fall into those categories where names might be discussed. I'm not going to get too far ahead of that, but just see where the day-to-day takes us."

Minnesota may be seller at Trade Deadline

Jon Paul Morosi | MLB.com | July 3, 2018

The Twins made a surprise American League Wild Card Game appearance last year, then added Lance Lynn and Jake Odorizzi during Spring Training in moves praised by peers within the industry.

But midway through the regular season, they're positioned to be among the most active sellers at the non-waiver Trade Deadline.

- Catch up on the latest Trade Talk

The Twins, who have lost nine of their past 11 games, are open to trading their pending free agents, sources told MLB.com.

That group includes infielders Brian Dozier and Eduardo Escobar, right-handed starter Lynn and left-handed reliever Zach Duke. Former American League MVP Award winner Joe Mauer also is in the final season of his contract, but he has a full no-trade clause, and it's unclear if he'd grant his approval for a move away from his native Twin Cities. Mauer's longtime agent, Ron Shapiro, declined to comment when asked how the six-time All-Star plans to utilize his no-trade protection.

The Dodgers, Cubs, Cardinals, Indians, Red Sox and Brewers are among the teams considering infield upgrades, so Dozier and/or Escobar represent possible trade fits with them. Escobar, though, is mired in a slump, posting a slash line of only .098/.191/.146 in his past 12 games.

Lynn had an encouraging June (2.83 ERA) before a forgettable Sunday start at Wrigley Field, in which he allowed seven earned runs over 1 2/3 innings. Scouts will be tracking him closely in the coming weeks, especially considering the overall shortage of available starting pitching across the Major Leagues.

Duke has been effective this year, with a 1.63 ERA and .623 opponents' OPS over his past 33 outings. The Dodgers are looking to add at least one left-handed reliever, as they did at last year's Trade Deadline with Tony Cingrani and Tony Watson.

One National League team official believes the Twins are open to discussing nearly every player on the roster, even those under control beyond

the 2018 season. Still, it's difficult to imagine Jose Berrios or Eddie Rosario changing teams this summer.

Twins don't record an out at first base vs. Crew

Stephen Cohn | MLB.com | July 3, 2018

MILWAUKEE -- When Gabriel Moya struck out Eric Sogard to conclude the eighth inning in the Twins' 2-0 loss to the Brewers at Miller Park on Tuesday, Joe Mauer trotted off the field doing something that hadn't been done in six years.

Mauer played all eight innings at first base -- and never recorded a putout or assist, making him the first MLB first baseman to go unused since Edwin Encarnacion for the Blue Jays in Baltimore on Aug. 25, 2012. Furthermore, the Twins didn't record a single assist as a team, the first time that has happened since the Yankees accomplished the feat against the Red Sox on September 2, 2014.

It's the sixth time in the past 20 years and the first time in Twins history that there was an entire game in which one of the first basemen had zero putouts and zero assists.

"It's pretty unbelievable to be a part of something like that," Mauer said.

Jake Odorizzi hurled five innings of two-run ball and struck out nine Brewers. He also induced five flyouts. In relief of Odorizzi, Ryan Pressly (three strikeouts in one inning) and Moya (four strikeouts and two flyouts over two innings) also never gave Mauer a chance for a play.

"I was made known of that fact that there wasn't a ground ball, which is a baseball oddity," Twins manager Paul Molitor said. "Can't really explain that, other than the Odorizzi we know is a fly ball guy."

Brewers manager Craig Counsell kept his credit for the oddity to Odorizzi's ability to challenge Brewers hitters for the second time this season. He threw 5 1/3 innings and allowed one run when the teams met in May.

"Jake Odorizzi. Strikeouts and a bunch of fly balls," Brewers manager Craig Counsell said. "There are pitchers in the game right now who have changed where the batted ball is going by where they're pitching in the strike zone. He's challenging hitters up out of the strike zone. We've seen most pitchers [in the past] challenge batters down and below the strike zone. He's a guy who does the opposite and today the results were kind of extreme."

The Brewers are one of the least likely clubs to accomplish the feat. Entering Tuesday's game, the Brewers had the third-lowest fly ball percentage (32.0) in the Majors, the third-highest ground ball percentage (46.9), and the sixth-highest strikeout rate (24.0). Milwaukee usually strikes out or records outs on the ground -- but that wasn't the case against the Twins.

Ironically, Jesus Aguilar didn't have too many opportunities for putouts either at first base for the Brewers. Aguilar's first play was an unassisted putout of Bobby Wilson to end the fourth inning. The Twins only grounded out four more times in the loss.

Odorizzi K's 9, but offense (2 hits) stalls in loss

Stephen Cohn | MLB.com | July 3, 2018

MILWAUKEE -- While the Twins entered Tuesday's game on a four-game losing streak, there was at least a silver lining. Minnesota scored 30 runs over four contests with an average of five per game during the first seven games of its road trip.

But the Twins' losing streak continued Tuesday afternoon as the bats cooled off in a 2-0 loss to the Brewers at Miller Park. Minnesota is 1-7 on its current nine-game road trip.

"You put the right people out there and you know guys can hit," manager Paul Molitor said. "They come in bunches. They can be hot, they can be cold, they can be steady. You've just got to ride the waves and figure it out."

Milwaukee's offense had similar issues early on against Twins right-hander Jake Odorizzi, who had his second strong outing of the season against the Brewers, even with Eric Thames' two-run blast in the fifth inning. Odorizzi allowed one run and fanned a season-high 10 batters over 5 1/3 innings on May 20, and was nearly as good Tuesday. He worked around four walks by stranding six Brewers and striking out nine.

The Twins stranded two runners in the fourth and fifth innings, too, while only recording one hit -- an Eddie Rosario single.

"[Guerra's] a good pitcher," Molitor said. "He's got good numbers. Nice combination, mostly the fastball-split. I think it was just a tough day offensively all around. No excuses, I think the shadows here are a little challenging as far as pitch recognition. But we had a chance right out of

the chute there and couldn't capitalize. A lot of times those come back to bite you."

The Brewers' bullpen, which Twins manager Paul Molitor said was "set up really nicely" before the game, shut down Minnesota's lineup over the final four innings, including three shutout frames from Josh Hader.

Hader, who has a 1.21 ERA and 83 strikeouts in 44 2/3 innings, is among the best relievers in the Major Leagues. The Twins were only able to draw one walk against the left-hander.

"You can ask every team in the league. He's dominating, primarily with one pitch," Molitor said. "I think he's just kind of a combination of being able to hide the ball and good carry on his fastball."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Thames goes deep: Thames' two-run blast in the fifth inning provided all of the scoring Tuesday, and Odorizzi said he just didn't execute on the pitch.

"This is a prime example of when you don't execute, hitters are good," Odorizzi said. "It stinks. Make one better pitch and we could still be playing. It's the reality of it. It's hard to get hung up on one pitch out of the whole outing."

Odorizzi struck out Brad Miller after Nate Orf drew a walk to open the fifth. Then Odorizzi started the left-handed-hitting-Thames' at-bat with an outside fastball that was fouled off to the left side. That's when Odorizzi decided to change it up and use the cutter.

"It was a cutter that didn't get in far enough," Odorizzi said. "Threw it to a few of their lefties, throwing it on their hands. Just didn't execute it, plain and simple. I just stayed behind it too much. Didn't get enough break on it. Right pitch, just bad execution, and turns out to be the deciding factor."

SOUND SMART

First baseman Joe Mauer said he was bored after the game, and for good reason. The Twins became the first team whose first baseman played the entire game and had zero putouts or assists since Edwin Encarnacion manned first for the Blue Jays in Baltimore on Aug. 25, 2012. It's the sixth time in the past 20 years and the first time in Twins history that feat has been accomplished. [More >](#)

HE SAID IT

"As simple as I can state it, it looked like he wasn't going to make the call. Then Jake [Cave] walked away and it looked like he put his arm up after the fact. Jake said he called it right away, and [home-plate umpire Marty Foster] was just choking on his mints or whatever it was." -- Molitor, on Cave walking toward the dugout before Foster signaled strike three in the ninth inning

UP NEXT

The Twins send right-hander Jose Berrios (8-6, 3.52) to the mound in the Independence Day series finale vs. the Brewers on Wednesday at 3:10 p.m. CT at Miller Park. Berrios will look to rebound from a rough outing against the Cubs, when he surrendered a season-high six runs in 4 1/3 innings -- just one start after he hurled seven shutout frames and struck out 12 in Texas. Right-hander Chase Anderson (6-6, 4.18) starts for the Brewers.

Twins' four-man outfield shift could start a trend

North Score Chris Hine | Star Tribune | July 3, 2018

If you've watched enough Twins games this season, you're accustomed to seeing the Twins shift — or Twins opponents shift their defense when hitters such as Logan Morrison step to the plate.

It has become routine, sometimes at the chagrin of baseball purists. The Twins did something related in Monday's loss to the Brewers that isn't as common as the shift, but is a technique a few teams employ from time to time — playing four outfielders.

The Twins had four players spread across the outfield and only three in the infield for one plate appearance from Eric Thames on Monday.

What was the Twins' thinking behind this?

One reason may be that in 145 plate appearances this season, Thames, a lefthanded batter, has hit only two ground balls to the third-base side of the infield, according to his spray chart on Fangraphs.com. But Thames has hit enough line drives and fly balls to left field to make the Twins respect his ability to reach the outfield from there.

In other words, the Twins placed the seven fielders against Thames in the most likely spots he will hit the ball — across the outfield and the right

side of the infield. Thames walked in that appearance.

The Twins haven't deployed the four-outfielder formation that often. The only other hitters who have faced four outfielders against the Twins were the Mariners' Kyle Seager and the Blue Jays' Justin Smoak, according to Statcast.

Per Statcast, only six teams have had four outfielders at various times this season. The Astros have done it just as often as the Twins have, primarily against Rangers pull-hitting slugger Joey Gallo. They even pulled out four outfielders for a few at-bats against Morrison back in April.

Defensive alignments aren't cookie cutter based on who comes to the plate. Several factors play into it. When the Twins decide to shift against someone, the situation of the game comes into play, as does the pitcher and how the hitter may hit his various pitches. The Twins might employ an extreme shift against someone and a partial one the next at bat.

Having four outfielders is a newer wrinkle to baseball that has come about as hitters try to hit more fly balls in the hope of hitting more home runs. Gallo is the poster child of this higher launch angle movement.

MLB has to decide what it wants to do with shifting. Will it ban shifts in the hopes of having more batted balls in play or continue to let teams place fielders wherever they'd like? If the league does ban shifts, will a four-outfielder alignment be one workaround for teams?

It's something the league should consider. For now, four outfielders is a fun quirk of the game, only reserved for the most extreme cases.

But then again, so was the shift once upon a time.

Twins held to two hits in 2-0 loss to Brewers **La Velle E. Neall III | Star Tribune | July 3, 2018**

MILWAUKEE – Brewers righthander Junior Guerra pitched five shutout innings but was lifted for a pinch hitter in the bottom of the inning. As Nate Orf batted, lefthander Josh Hader — one of baseball's best relievers — began to warm up.

Orf walked. Two batters later, Eric Thames launched a Jake Odorizzi cut fastball out to right for the first runs of the game.

It was as if the Brewers knew what was going to happen. Now Hader, his floppy hair and 94-96 mph fastball were in the game to protect a lead.

Hader pitched three dominant innings before handing off to closer Corey Knebel in the ninth to wrap up a 2-0 victory over the Twins at Miller Park. The Twins were held to a season-low two hits.

And Hader lowered his ERA to 1.21 with 83 strikeouts in 44⅓ innings.

"He's dominating, primarily with one pitch," Twins manager Paul Molitor said. "I think he's just kind of a combination of being able to hide the ball and good carry on his fastball. Doesn't seem to get many down in the zone, pretty much plays the top and you either miss it or you foul it or you pop it up. It's just tough to square up."

And, with the loss, the Twins have lost five straight, seven of their past eight and 10 of their last 12. They are 12 games under .500 for the first time since the end of the 2016 season.

Their death march of a road trip concludes Wednesday as they try to avoid getting swept in the three-game series.

Hader fired away, retiring eight straight Twins before walking Eduardo Escobar with two outs in the eighth. Max Kepler dug in as the tying run — and with a .288 batting average against lefties. Hader is not your average lefty, as he got Kepler to pop up a 94 mph fastball to end the inning.

Odorizzi was effective for the second straight outing. In five innings, Odorizzi gave up two runs on four hits and four walks. His nine strikeouts were one shy of his season high.

Twins pitchers struck out 16 Brewers on Tuesday. There were six fly ball outs and two line outs. That means that first baseman Joe Mauer did not record a put-out or an assist the entire game. It was the first time since Toronto's Edwin Encarnacion on Aug. 25, 2012, that a first baseman played an entire game without participating in an out. It has been done just six other times over the past 20 years.

"I was made known of that fact that there wasn't a ground ball, which is a baseball oddity," Molitor said. "Can't really explain that, other than Odorizzi, we know, is a fly ball guy."

More Moya

Lefthander Gabriel Moya is back with a better slider and a better idea of how to be successful in the majors.

“When I got sent down at the beginning of the season, I went down there and tried to work hard,” he said. “My mentality is basically to execute all my pitches, and that’s been working for me.”

After posting a 1.64 ERA over 20 outings for Class AAA Rochester, Moya has been recalled to show if he is, indeed, a different pitcher. He’s been a reverse-split king, holding righthanded hitters to a lower batting average (.227) than lefthanded hitters (.273). That’s where an improved slider could help, and that’s also something Moya has been working on.

He’s also started three games for the Red Wings and is stretched out enough to pitch more than one inning if needed.

“I wouldn’t have any problem trying to get 40-plus pitches off him if I needed to,” Molitor said. “He’s been throwing well.”

Moya proved it with two scoreless innings Tuesday, during which he struck out four batters.

It's almost time to write off the 2018 Twins, but there is a sliver of hope

Jim Souhan | Star Tribune | July 3, 2018

The Twins appeared on a social media site Tuesday, meaning they somehow avoided Facebook’s restrictions on offensive material.

It has been an ugly half-season, combining injuries, a key drug suspension, demotions of vital players and bad timing. This team left spring training with justified optimism and has performed as if trying to revisit contraction.

Or maybe the Twins are just contrarians.

They are managed by one of the greatest baserunners of his generation, yet navigate the diamond as if blindfolded.

They feature accomplished players trying out for big, new contracts, yet who have performed as if they’re afraid of high taxes. Brian Dozier, Logan Morrison, Joe Mauer and Lance Lynn have depressed their value with uncharacteristically unproductive seasons.

For the fourth straight season, the Twins are defying expectations. In the past two odd years, they have been surprisingly good; in the last two even years, they have been shockingly bad.

Last summer, they played their best after their front office gave up on them. This summer, they became one of baseball’s worst teams after their front office committed to winning this year.

Their best prospects and veterans have faltered, and a utility infielder and a lesser prospect have become their two best players.

As they return for what could be a last-chance homestand beginning Thursday, the question is whether they are contrarian enough to turn this seemingly lost season into anything resembling a success.

The front office has every reason to make trades to improve the team’s chances for next year.

This same front office waffled between helping the 2017 team and trading assets away, depending on how the team was performing in July and August.

Their homestand will feature 11 games in 11 days against three beatable teams and will be followed by the four-day All-Star break. If the Twins are going to creep closer to Cleveland, close enough to keep the front office from giving up on the season, they will need to begin making up ground in the next two weeks.

Jorge Polanco has returned from his PED suspension. Ervin Santana, Byron Buxton and Miguel Sano could return from, respectively, injury, injury/slump and slump/irresponsibility, sometime in the next two weeks.

There is still a chance for this team to make a run toward respectability, if not contention, and this franchise has established precedents for such surges.

The 2003 Twins were 7½ games out of first place on July 17 and won the division.

The 2006 Twins were 10½ games behind on Aug. 7 and won the division.

The 2009 Twins were seven games out on Sept. 6 and won the division.

The 2010 Twins were 4½ games out on July 15 and won the division.

What appears to be different about this season is that the pedigree and experience of the division leaders are intimidating, and the chance of qualifying for a wild-card spot is nonexistent.

But this season is different in this way, as well: Perhaps never before has a struggling Twins team welcomed back two potential franchise players, an ace and a player who might have been their second-half MVP the previous season, all in July.

Sano. Buxton. Santana. Polanco. No team will add so much raw talent at the trading deadline.

If the Twins hit the superfecta (a trifecta-plus-one; I Googled it) and all four perform as well as they are capable, this team could still make this an interesting summer.

Are the odds against that? Of course.

The Twins front office might be ready to trade players — perhaps Eduardo Escobar, Kyle Gibson, even Dozier — away. And this time, fans wouldn't have much of a case if they wanted to complain about Derek Falvey and Thad Levine.

This Twins team deserves to be disbanded and has the smallest of windows to prove otherwise.

Twins are ready to be sellers at the MLB trade deadline, sources say

La Velle E. Neall III | Star Tribune | July 3, 2018

uly 4th has arrived. The Twins are 12 games under .500, 11 games out of first place in the American League Central and 18 games out of wild card contention.

Half the season is gone, key players remain in the minors addressing shortcomings while an overall lack of competitiveness has infected the major league club.

Derek Falvey and Thad Levine have no other choice.

The Twins are preparing to trade players to reset for the 2019 season, multiple sources confirmed. There's no question the team has been shorthanded because of injuries and a suspension to Jorge Polanco, but half the season is gone, important players have underperformed and the deficits are too great to make up even with better health, upgrades, hot streaks ... or a combination of all three.

So the Twins are open for business and have been speaking with clubs about potential deals before the July 31 nonwaiver trade deadline.

Manager Paul Molitor was asked if he's thought about what could happen over the next few weeks.

“Everyone kind of understands this is where we're at, and the time of year we're approaching, some of these things are going to pick up in terms of rumors or things that could potentially happen,” Molitor said. “We have a lot of people who fall into those categories where names might be discussed. I'm not going to get too far ahead of that, but just see where the day-to-day takes us.”

Eduardo Escobar, batting .274 with a 12 home runs and a league-leading 34 doubles, is drawing interest from several clubs. And the Yankees had a scout watching Kyle Gibson's start Monday against the Brewers.

The Twins would like to see what their team could do at full strength, but that's unlikely to happen. Polanco returned Monday from an 80-game suspension for PED use, but righthander Ervin Santana, an All-Star last season, has yet to pitch an inning as his return from right finger surgery has taken much longer than expected. No. 1 catcher Jason Castro is out for the season after knee surgery. Both third baseman Miguel Sano and outfielder Byron Buxton have been injured and ineffective and are searching for their swings in the minors — and the club has said both need to produce to get out of the minors.

And a major problem has been subpar performances at the plate from regulars Brian Dozier, Joe Mauer, Logan Morrison and Max Kepler.

The Twins don't feel a major overhaul is necessary, and think they can be a factor next season, so they will look to add players who can help them win next year, not 2020 or later.

Escobar, who can play three infield positions, and Gibson are among the Twins with the most value. Escobar, however, will be a free agent during the offseason, which affects any return the club could get. There's a belief at 1 Twins Way that they could deal Escobar then re-sign him during the offseason — mostly because of how much Escobar likes Minnesota. Gibson, with one more year of arbitration remaining, has positioned himself as a mid-to-back-end rotation option by posting a 3.58 ERA in 17 starts.

Righthander Lance Lynn, signed to a one-year deal as a free agent, has struggled, going 5-7 with a 5.49 ERA, but the three-time 15-game winner could be a trade target for a contending team. Relievers Zach Duke and Fernando Rodney could also help contenders.

Dozier damaged his trade value with a below-average first half, but his penchant for second-half surges could interest someone in the second baseman. And Santana could return and pitch well enough to be a target before the Aug. 31 deadline, provided he clears waivers.

Most of these players have their flaws, so it's not like the Twins expect an eye-popping package of top prospects or productive players in return. In a perfect world, the Twins would get creative enough to move a couple players while getting quality — not potential — in return. That means someone who would help in 2019, not a teenage prospect.

With only about \$31 million in salary commitments for next season, the Twins are in a strong financial position and aren't looking to shed payroll. Several players are in line for arbitration raises, but the Twins plan to be active in free agency for upgrades.

So expect this team will have a different look after July 31.

Fernando Rodney's changeup goes missing again

Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | July 3, 2018

The 41-year-old Twins closer has blown two straight saves after nailing down 15 straight over a two-month span. All three hits against him on Monday night came against his signature pitch, and he struggled to command his changeup last Thursday in Chicago against the White Sox as well.

That's when he hit Tim Anderson with a changeup and couldn't put Charlie Tilson away as the slap-hitting outfielder fouled off three changeups and took another on a full count en route to a 10-pitch walk.

"I didn't have a good feel with all my pitches," said Rodney, who blew the lead despite retiring the first two batters in the ninth on June 28.

Relative inactivity of late has played a role. Monday marked just the fifth outing for Rodney in a span of 17 days.

“For my job, my situation in the game, one day in the week is maybe too much (rest),” he said. “That’s going to happen sometimes. When I’m pitching three, maybe four games in the week, everything you’re going to see is different. When you practice something everyday, you’re going to have success.”

Rodney, 41, said he doesn’t like to throw a few pitches off the mound before games when he’s struggling. Instead, he sticks to his daily routine of playing catch on flat ground.

“That keeps my arm loose,” he said. “That’s what I do.”

The 15 straight save conversions only tied for his sixth-longest streak since the start of 2012, when he nailed down 22 in a row from May 27 to Aug. 13.

GROWING PAINS

When Paul Molitor walked out to the mound with an infielder’s glove for Eddie Rosario in Monday’s 10th inning, he quickly pointed toward left field. That seemed to throw off rookie right-hander Zack Littell, who glumly offered the baseball to his manager before being informed he was staying in the game.

“I don’t know what he thought,” Molitor said. “Obviously he thought he was getting taken out of the game. Just had to kind of reset him for a minute and told him what the plan was and tried to give him a thought process that would extend the game. Just tried to get a positive thought in his head.”

Littell, a 22-year-old making his second career appearance in the majors and his first in relief, got the groundball he was looking for but Jorge Polanco threw wide of home, wrecking the chances of a much-needed double play. Littell walked the next batter, Brad Miller, on four pitches to force in the winning run.

“I think he was probably a little nervous,” Molitor said. “A young pitcher like that who’s accustomed to starting, where if you give up a run in the first inning you still have a lot of game, that wasn’t the case. It was a tall order.”

BIG FUTURES

Selections for the July 15 All-Star Futures Game in Washington, D.C., should be announced this week in conjunction with Baseball America.

Right fielder Alex Kirilloff, who has continued his hot hitting since being promoted last month to Class A Fort Myers, would seem to be a near lock, most likely along with low-A Cedar Rapids shortstop Royce Lewis.

Lewis, slowed briefly by patellar tendinitis in his left knee, has gone on another tear to open the second half. Considering the Twins let Lewis play in the Midwest League all-star game, it seems probable the 19-year-old will be allowed to represent the Twins on the midseason stage.

Vladimir Guerrero Jr. and Bo Bichette were named to the Futures Game last year in Miami at similar stages of their development, and the same held true for outfielder Eloy Jimenez in 2016.

Shortstop Nick Gordon, then playing at Double-A Chattanooga, was the Twins’ sole representative last year in Miami.

Venezuelan right-hander Brusdar Graterol could receive consideration as well, but he struggled a bit in his first start after

being promoted to the Miracle and the 19-year-old's innings total must be monitored closely in his first full season back from Tommy John surgery.

BRIEFLY

Lefty reliever Gabriel Moya was recalled from Triple-A Rochester after Littell was sent down. Moya had a 1.64 ERA in 20 outings after being optioned in April, including a 0.68 ERA in his past eight outings (13 1/3 innings).

Brian Dozier, batting .157 over his past 89 at-bats, was given a breather with rookie Willians Astudillo making his first career start at second base.

Taylor Motter (concussion) hit in the cage again and took grounders at shortstop before the game. He is symptom-free and eligible to come off the 7-day concussion disabled list as soon as Friday.

The Twins still need a starting pitcher for Thursday night's homestand opener against the Baltimore Orioles. Right-hander Aaron Slegers is scheduled to pitch that night for Triple-A Rochester.

Nosediving Twins, scoreless over past 14 innings, fall 2-0 to Brewers

Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | July 3, 2018

MILWAUKEE — Before the Twins went out Tuesday afternoon at Miller Park and lost for the 10th time in their past 12 games, this time 2-0 to the division-leading Milwaukee Brewers, Paul Molitor fielded a question about the inevitable sell-off.

“I think everyone understands where we're at and the time of year we're approaching,” the Twins' fourth-year manager said, “that some of these things are going to pick up in terms of either rumors or things that potentially could happen. We have a lot of people that fall into those categories that their names might be discussed.”

Discussions are one thing. Finding a serious suitor for the slumping likes of Brian Dozier, Lance Lynn, Eduardo Escobar and Fernando Rodney is quite another.

Going back to Robbie Grossman's grand slam in the fifth inning Monday, the Twins have gone 14 innings without scoring. In that span they have managed just four hits in 49 at-bats (.082 average) along with 17 strikeouts.

Tuesday's combined two-hit shutout marked the first time they were shut out since May 14 against Seattle and the first time they were held to two hits or fewer since April 23, 2016, at Washington.

In danger of falling 11 games out of first place, the Twins (35-47) now appear more likely to lose 100 games than make a stirring playoff push. No wonder chief baseball officer Derek Falvey headed back to the Twin Cities after watching the most expensive collection of talent in Minnesota baseball history go 1-5 in Chicago.

<https://youtu.be/GNxBfWord3Q>

Along with general manager Thad Levine, Falvey has been lending his long-distance support to Molitor, even as the losses mount and fans start to clamor for change.

“I feel that they're very intentional in their support, but I think it's kind of a two-way street,” Molitor said of his bosses. “I kind of feel like we're all in this thing together, so we try to pick each other up when we can. We look where we can get better, see the things we're doing right and try to remind each other of the short term as well as long term.”

Such an approach seems wise, especially with Byron Buxton (Triple-A Rochester) and Miguel Sano (Class A Fort Myers) on minor league options as they try to put their games back together.

“We don’t want to get caught up too much being consumed by one day,” Molitor said. “when you’re trying to look at big-picture stuff as well.”

That, perhaps, is how the Twins ended up with rookie Willians Astudillo starting in place of Dozier at second base. Ninety minutes before Tuesday’s game, the Twins’ utility catcher was out taking grounders from third-base coach Gene Glynn and working with fellow utility man Taylor Motter (concussion) on feeds and pivots around the bag.

Not that it necessarily mattered. With Twins pitchers recording 16 strikeouts along with seven flyouts, Joe Mauer went the entire game without a single putout or assist at first base. According to the Elias Sports Bureau, that had happened just seven times in the past 20 years and not since 2012 (Edwin Encarnacion for Toronto).

Twins right-hander Jake Odorizzi (3-6) took the loss despite piling up nine strikeouts in five innings. A misplaced cutter to Eric Thames ended up over the wall in right for a two-run blast in the fifth.

“Right pitch, just bad execution, and that turns out to be the deciding factor,” Odorizzi said after his scoreless streak ended at 10 innings.

Relievers Ryan Pressly and Gabriel Moya worked three perfect innings with seven strikeouts, but the Twins were punchless after loading the bases in the first against hard-throwing right-hander Junior Guerra (5-5). Max Kepler flied to left on the first pitch after two straight walks, Astudillo flied to center, and that was that.

Lefty Josh Hader worked three perfect innings and closer Corey Knebel struck out the side in the ninth for his ninth save. Encroaching shadows made conditions tough for hitters in general, but the Twins’ inconsistency as a lineup remains an issue.

“There’s no real answer to how you (fix that),” Molitor said. “You put the right people out there, and you know guys can hit. They come in bunches. They can be hot, they can be cold, they can be steady. You’ve just got to ride the waves and figure it out.”

StaTuesday: Joe Mauer is clutch

Ryan Lund | Fox Sports North | July 3, 2018

Joe Mauer, the narrative says, is not the man for the job here. The Minnesota Twins and the Chicago Cubs are tied in the second inning, with two on and two out, and Mauer is here to send a ground ball skittering into Ben Zobrist.

Mauer is, according to his detractors, overpaid, unexciting — boring, even — and thus un-clutch. One of the era’s most accomplished hitters of looping singles and the occasional double, Mauer has never, admittedly, been much for power.

Despite his batting titles, Gold Gloves, Silver Sluggers and MVP award, this fact seems to have corrupted Mauer’s mythos in his native Minnesota a bit.

As it turns out, Mauer was exactly the man for the job last Friday, hitting a three-run homer off Cubs starter Mike Montgomery to give the Twins the lead and reignite the old Mauer argument.

And while the home run was a surprise (it was just his second this season), there isn’t much of an argument.

Statistically, Mauer is among the most clutch hitters playing today.

The venerable St. Paul native is hitting .331 over his career with runners in scoring position, good enough for third amongst active players, with a .457 on-base percentage, also third.

Twins' road struggles continue in 2-0 loss at Miller Park

Associated Press | Fox Sports North | July 3, 2018

MILWAUKEE — Eric Thames has a penchant for game-changing home runs this season.

Thames hit a two-run homer that accounted for the game's only runs as the Milwaukee Brewers slipped past the Minnesota Twins 2-0 on Tuesday. Thames has three home runs in the past six games.

"I'd say that's a hot streak," Brewers manager Craig Counsell said.

Milwaukee broke through in the fifth against Minnesota starter Jake Odorizzi (3-6) when pinch-hitter Nate Orf walked and stole second before Thames lined a homer to left that just cleared the right-field fence.

"It was a cutter that didn't get in far enough," Odorizzi said. "I just didn't execute it, plain and simple. I just didn't get enough break on it. Right pitch, just bad execution and it turns out to be the deciding factor."

Thames reached base three times in four at-bats. After the game, he credited Milwaukee's pitching, which held Minnesota to two hits.

"Our bullpen has been the hammer for us," Thames said. "They have been the ones to pick us up, but we need to start scoring more, getting guys on base and driving them in and give them breathing room."

It wasn't just the bullpen on this day.

Milwaukee starter Junior Guerra (5-5) pitched five shutout innings. He gave up two hits while walking three and striking out eight and pitched out of a bases-loaded jam in the first after giving up a double and two walks.

"Being able to put up a zero up there and not let them score was very big," Guerra said through team translator Carlos Brizuela. "Walks are very lethal, especially for a starter."

Josh Hader pitched a season-high three innings in relief for the Brewers and didn't allow a hit. Closer Corey Knebel notched his ninth save in 11 attempts by striking out the side in the ninth.

Both starting pitchers held their opponents in check but struggled with high pitch counts. Guerra threw 89 pitches. Odorizzi gave up two runs and four hits in five innings. He walked four and struck out nine but threw 109 pitches.

The Twins fell to 1-7 on their current nine-game road trip.

INFIELD INACTIVITY

The Twins became the first team whose first baseman, Joe Mauer, played an entire game and had no putouts or assists since Edwin Encarnacion did it with Toronto against Baltimore on Aug. 25, 2012. This has happened just six other times in the past 20 years and never to the Twins.

“There wasn’t a ground ball today, which is a baseball oddity,” Molitor said. “I can’t really explain it other than Odorizzi, we know, is a fly ball guy.”

CHOKED UP

In the ninth, home plate umpire Marty Foster called Jake Cave out on strikes but didn’t raise his arm right away with the signal, prompting an argument from Molitor.

“It looked like, as simply as I can state it, that he wasn’t going to make the call,” Molitor said. “Jake made the mistake of walking away, and it looked like (Foster) put his arm up after the fact. He said that he had called it right away but that he was choking on his Nicorette mints.”

TRAINER’S ROOM

Twins: Recalled LHP Gabriel Moya from Triple-A Rochester and optioned RHP Zack Littell to Rochester. Littell was the losing pitcher in Monday’s 10-inning game. ...2B Brian Dozier didn’t start so he could rest but entered the game in the seventh. “It’s always tough to sit (Dozier),” Molitor said. “I think if he had his druthers, he would play 162 games and start them all.”

Brewers: OF Christian Yelich didn’t start for the fifth consecutive game due to lower back tightness but entered in the ninth as a defensive replacement. ..OF Lorenzo Cain (left groin strain) is eligible to come off the DL on Wednesday, but Brewers manager Craig Counsell said he likely won’t be in the lineup right away. “There’s enough caution there that we’ve got to get over the last hurdle,” Counsell said. “We’re not to 100 percent yet.” ... RHP Zach Davies (right shoulder tightness) is dealing with back soreness and stiffness. “He won’t throw until that’s gone,” Counsell said. “That’s going to set him back.”

UP NEXT

Twins: Jose Berrios (8-6, 3.52 ERA) gets the start in the three-game series finale. Berrios will face the Brewers for the first time in his career.

Brewers: Chase Anderson (6-6, 4.18) has held opponents to a .208 batting average this season.

As the dark reality sets in, Twins brace for changes ahead of trade deadline **Dan Hayes | The Athletic | July 3, 2018**

MILWAUKEE — The grim reality brought on by the upcoming trade deadline is unavoidable, and everyone in the clubhouse knows it. Players have begun to acknowledge that the heart of the Twins’ 25-man roster could be picked apart over the next four weeks by rival general managers looking to augment their rosters in preparation for the postseason.

Twins players and coaches know they can’t be consumed by it because diverting their attention to the aspects out of their control would distract from the field. Yet its clear to all how different this roster could look in four weeks.

The Twins front office didn’t want to be put into a position where it had to make the unpopular move. But, the team’s poor, inconsistent play over the first half of the season has made a roster breakup all but inevitable with the July 31 non-waiver trade deadline now 28 days away.

“Everyone kind of understands this is where we’re at, and the time of year we’re approaching, some of these things are

going to pick up in terms of rumors or things that could potentially happen,” manager Paul Molitor said prior to Tuesday’s game against the Brewers.

“We have a lot of people who fall into those categories where names might be discussed. I’m not going to get too far ahead of that, but just see where the day-to-day takes us.”

Where it could take them may be a spot that’s difficult for some Twins fans to stomach. Chief baseball officer Derek Falvey has suggested he’s unafraid to make an unpopular move if it’s beneficial to the organization. Falvey and general manager Thad Levine currently find themselves in a position where their best assets — Brian Dozier and Eduardo Escobar — are two of the team’s most beloved players.

Dozier is a lifelong Twin who was named an All-Star in 2015 and won a Gold Glove last season. The second baseman has expressed interest in remaining with the team but contract extensions talks between his representatives and the club went nowhere.

Escobar is an asset on the field and off it. He’s one of the team’s most energetic players and is a positive force in the clubhouse. Beyond that, Escobar is following up a breakout season with an All-Star-esque campaign as he leads the majors with 34 doubles.

“Staples, man,” pitcher Kyle Gibson said. “Those are the guys I first was playing with when I got up here. You never want to see those guys go. Everybody would like to play with the same group of guys their entire career. Guys like (Zach) Duke and Lance (Lynn) that we’ve brought in have become really good friends and our families have really gotten along. We want to make this thing last as long as possible.”

It could take a while. As The Athletic’s Ken Rosenthal recently reported, the trade market is flooded. Red Sox baseball ops president Dave Dombrowski recently suggested that plenty of teams already are willing to sell.

While the Twins haven’t made any deals to date and have struggled to stay relevant, they’ve been ready to make a move for some time if the right one came across Falvey or Levine’s desk.

Though they have decent merchandise, it could be a while before that right opportunity presents itself. As one major-league executive recently noted, there’s plenty of fluctuation in the market because younger teams like Atlanta and Philadelphia are still trying to determine what their chances are with division favorite Washington looming and already having made a huge move landing Kelvin Herrera.

Teams like Houston, Cleveland, Boston and the New York Yankees are so well off that they’re simply looking to fine tune their rosters and aren’t in need of depth pieces. Those teams are likelier to be looking for key pieces and in Boston’s case might be done shopping because they’re close to paying a luxury tax. Aside from Escobar and Dozier, the Twins have more depth pieces unless they’re willing to trade players with team control beyond the end of this season.

Here’s a look at some of the Twins’ most easily movable options.

Brian Dozier, 31, second base

The 2017 Gold Glove winner hasn’t been his normal self this season. A catalyst with at least 23 home runs each of the past four seasons, Dozier has struggled to a .221/.309/.394 slash line this season in 359 plate appearances. He still has 12 homers and he’s likely more affordable than Cincinnati’s Scooter Gennett, who isn’t a free agent until 2020.

Eduardo Escobar, 29, utility man

Not only is he hitting the crap out of the ball and well-liked, Escobar is versatile. And similar to Dozier, Lynn, Fernando Rodney, Zach Duke and Joe Mauer, Escobar is a free agent at the end of the season. It’s widely believed that Dozier and

Escobar are the players that would bring back the biggest returns.

Lance Lynn, 31, starting pitcher

The right-hander has had two rough outings in a row after he improved his stock with a six-start stretch in which he posted a 1.73 ERA and struck out 32 batters in 36 1/3 innings. But that only came after a difficult start to the season in which he had a 7.47 ERA after eight starts. Even though he has walked 3.6 batters per nine in his career, a figure that has soared to 5.6 per in 2018, Lynn does have a good history of success and has a lot of postseason experience. But as one major-league analyst stated, Lynn's trade market could play out like his free agency in that teams view him more as a middle-of-the-rotation option versus a frontline ace. If Lynn gets back on track, the Twins could recoup some value, but he's unlikely to fetch a big return because he'll still have part of his \$12 million salary left to cover.

Fernando Rodney, 41, closer

The ageless wonder's price tag would likely be similar to Lynn's. The Twins are unlikely to get much more than an interesting flier-type player in return as Rodney would probably move into a setup role rather than pitch as a contending team's closer. While he's blown his previous two save tries, Rodney was outstanding for the previous two months as he flashed a mid-90 mph fastball and a good complementary changeup.

Zach Duke, 35, reliever

The veteran unquestionably could be traded as a left-handed specialist. Left-handed hitters have produced a .448 OPS against Duke in 46 plate appearances this season. Duke hasn't been as strong against right-handers. But while righties have hit .305 against Duke, they're only slugging .354. The left-hander also has struck out 31 batters in 30 1/3 innings with a 2.97 ERA. Two years ago, despite owing more than \$7 million to Duke, the Chicago White Sox traded him to the St. Louis Cardinals for outfielder Charlie Tilson, who was their No. 10-ranked prospect, according to Baseball America's midseason guide.

Joe Mauer, 35, first base

The real question here is would Mauer ever waive his no-trade clause to go to a contender? Or would the Twins try to make the move knowing what Mauer has meant to the organization and that he wants to finish his career here?

He might not hit for much power, but Mauer is still a formidable bat. He makes pitchers work, has an outstanding approach and in a down season has a .364 on-base percentage. Mauer also plays a fantastic first base.

Other intriguing options would include outfielder Eddie Rosario, who would cost a ton as he's under team control through 2021 and has played like an All-Star.

— Gibson has drastically increased his swings and misses, has a 3.52 ERA and 151 strikeouts in his past 27 starts (158 2/3 IP) and isn't a free agent until 2020.

— Max Kepler, who some teams believe has intriguing potential based on analytical evaluations. Kepler, 25, isn't a free agent until 2023.

— Tuesday's pitcher, Jake Odorizzi, could also serve as a mid-rotation starter. A free agent in 2020, Odorizzi has been inconsistent in his first season with the Twins. But, he also has struck out 97 batters in 90 2/3 innings.

And while you can't rule anything out, dealing Miguel Sanó is highly unlikely given the third baseman's trade value is at an all-time low. Until Sanó shows he can once again do what he does best, there's little chance he's moved short of another team taking a huge risk and paying the Twins off.

"If you're worrying about it then you're probably not worrying about what you should be," Gibson said. "We're just trying to do our best to get back to .500 by the All-Star break and make those decisions tough on the front office."

“That’s something that we’ve talked about. It’s not something we worry about, but everybody kind of knows that it’s happening. Whether it’s in a team meeting or what it is, everybody knows what it could look like and how it’s going to change. We’re trying to turn this around so after the All-Star break we can have the same group together and make a really good push in August and September.”

One pitch costs Odorizzi in loss to Brewers

The mechanical change Jake Odorizzi made prior to his last start seems to be working as the right-hander has been much more effective the past two outings. Odorizzi has 17 strikeouts in 11 innings and has only yielded two runs despite walking seven batters in that span. But Odorizzi was left to lament a cutter that didn’t get in enough on the hands of Milwaukee’s Eric Thames. Instead of being able to focus solely on his gains, Odorizzi was saddled with a tough-luck loss as Thames’ two-run homer in the fifth inning was the difference in the contest.

“I’ve been on just getting back to my old delivery: being more direct to the plate, not coming around the ball, not letting balls leak over the plate,” Odorizzi said. “For the most part, they’ve been pretty true. Misses are up instead of armside, which is a good sign for me. (Pitching coach) Garvin (Alston) and I have been really working hard in the pens, and it’s starting to show. The last two have been much better than the past four or whatever it may have been. I feel like I’m in the right direction. Sometimes the games go like this and you move on from it, but I feel like I’m getting right.

“A little bit of extra care on the fastball helps out everything else. I think we’re making progress. This is a prime example of when you don’t execute, hitters are good. It sucks. Make one better pitch and we could still be playing. It’s the reality of it. It’s hard to get hung out on one pitch out of the whole outing.”

The Twins’ offense was spellbound by Brewers starter Javy Guerra, who lowered his ERA to 2.87 with five scoreless innings. The Twins loaded the bases in the first inning but didn’t score as Max Kepler popped out to shortstop and Willians Astudillo’s fly ball was run down on the warning track. Milwaukee reliever Josh Hader retired nine of the 10 batters he faced and Corey Knebel pitched a perfect ninth to close it out.

The Twins haven’t scored in 14 innings since Robbie Grossman’s fifth-inning grand slam on Monday. The Twins lost Monday’s game in 10 innings.

“We had a chance right out of the chute there and couldn’t capitalize,” Molitor said. “A lot of times those come back to bite you. Jake had to fight a little bit with first and third and nobody out. I think he tried to throw a little cutter to Thames there and it kind of stayed flat. Didn’t really get it where he wanted to get to, and that was the difference in the game.”

Quiet game for Joe Mauer

Twins pitchers recorded 16 strikeouts on the afternoon. The combination of all those strikeouts and Odorizzi, a fly ball pitcher, meant no defensive chances for Joe Mauer. Mauer didn’t make a putout or have an assist, the first time that’s happened since 2012. The feat has only happened six other times in the past 20 years, according to Elias Sports Bureau.

“A baseball oddity,” Molitor said. “Can’t really explain that, other than Odorizzi we know is a fly-ball guy.”

“Fielding percentage stayed straight.”