

Miller, Allen hope to regain form in postseason

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- As Andrew Miller jogged to the mound on a recent September night, Josh Donaldson was at the far end of the Indians' dugout alongside manager Terry Francona. Images of Miller's devastating pitches during the American League Championship Series two years ago flooded Donaldson's mind.

The Indians' new third baseman turned to Francona.

"I was like, 'You know, I still have flashbacks of Miller punching me out with that slider,'" Donaldson said with a shake of his head. "It's not pretty."

Miller was a monster during that postseason in 2016, when he picked up Most Valuable Player Award honors in the ALCS against the Blue Jays and hoisted Cleveland's injury-ravaged pitching staff on his back for a climb to the World Series. The big lefty chewed up hitters and spit out multi-inning outings, and then closer Cody Allen would enter to slam the door on defeated lineups.

The Cubs got in the way of World Series glory, but there was no denying how critical Miller and Allen were in helping the Indians get close enough to even imagine a parade along E. 9th St. Two years later, the duo remains important for the Tribe's chances in October, but both Miller and Allen have endured trials throughout a turbulent season in the Cleveland bullpen.

"I don't think we ever really put it all together this year," Miller said. "The idea is to put it together at the right time, and I think we're capable of it. It's just one of those things that, on my own shoulders, I'm looking forward to it. I think I'm ready for it, and I think if I pitch like I'm capable of and like I've done lately, I can be an important part of this."

That is the hope, but the Indians are building some contingency plans into their roster for the AL Division Series against the Astros. Miller and Allen will remain a focal point in the bullpen, but Cleveland can also lean on All-Star lefty Brad Hand. For the first couple of games, the Indians also plan on having right-hander Trevor Bauer -- an AL Cy Young Award contender for most of this regular season -- available as a multi-inning leverage arm.

Bauer and rookie starter Shane Bieber will both be on call as relievers early in the series, and then they will be the options to start Game 4 (if necessary). Should the series go the distance, Carlos Carrasco (starting Game 2 on Saturday) might also be made available as a late-inning leverage arm.

"We're trying to make our bullpen thicker, bigger," Francona said.

Over the past two postseasons combined, Francona has leaned on his relievers for 91 1/3 innings, compared to 89 2/3 innings from starting pitchers. Cleveland's bullpen has posted a 2.07 ERA in those innings, which include 43 1/3 out of Miller and Allen. In the 2016 postseason, that duo combined to allow only three earned runs in 33 innings, piling 54 strikeouts against 10 walks.

Miller set single-postseason records for consecutive multi-inning outings (10), strikeouts (30) and innings pitched (19 1/3). Allen spun 13 2/3 innings that October with zero runs allowed.

"I remember facing them in the playoffs," said Donaldson, who was with the Blue Jays in 2016. "I know what they're capable of doing. I know how dominant they can be."

- Donaldson to 'showcase' his progress in playoffs

This season has been a struggle for the pair of relievers, though.

The 33-year-old Miller had three separate stints on the disabled list for hamstring, knee and shoulder issues. His 4.24 ERA was his highest in a season since 2011, and the 34 innings were his fewest since 2013. Also, his fastball on the year dipped to an average velocity of 93 mph (down from 94.1 mph in '17, per Statcast™).

Throughout the campaign, Cleveland's goal was to gear Miller up for October. In his first nine appearances off the DL in September, he looked sharp, striking out 11, walking two and turning in a 2.89 ERA over 9 1/3 innings. During his final appearance of the regular season on Sept. 29, however, Miller was charged with four runs on five hits in two-thirds of an inning.

"It's been, for me personally, a little bit of a grind this year," Miller said. "But, I feel like everything's kind of heading in the right direction."

Allen has been the picture of consistency in his tenure with the Tribe, averaging 72 games and 69 innings across the 2013-17 seasons, during which he posted a 2.59 ERA. This year, the 29-year-old closer set the franchise's all-time saves record for a career (149), but he did so while posting a career-worst ERA (4.70), walk rate (4.4 per nine innings) and strikeout rate (10.7 per nine).

Like Miller, Allen had a promising showing down the stretch (10 1/3 scoreless innings between Aug. 30-Sept. 26) derailed in his final outings of the year. In his last two regular-season appearances combined, he was charged with six runs on five hits and two walks over two-thirds of an inning.

"Each season has its own challenges," Allen said. "I know in the past I've had a bad month here, a bad month here, a bad couple weeks here, but I've been able to right the ship for the majority of the season. This year's the first time that hasn't really happened. It's just kind of been turbulence, a little bit of issues, and then just sometimes it's just bad luck. Stuff happens."

For Miller and Allen, October presents a clean slate of sorts, a chance to show they can still be the overpowering arms who intimidated hitters in playoffs past.

"The postseason is a completely different animal," Allen said. "It doesn't go on the back of your baseball card. So, you just go pitch."

Donaldson to 'showcase' his progress in playoffs

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- Consider the past month a kind of Spring Training for Josh Donaldson. Following an extended layoff, Donaldson went through a workout, moved on to some Minor League games, transitioned to the Major League side and then saw his workload go from a strict schedule to everyday duty.

Now, consider October Donaldson's Opening Day.

"It definitely gives me an opportunity to come out and showcase myself and where I'm at," Donaldson said Wednesday. "My entire focus has been -- in order to get healthy, be able to come and compete each and every day that I've been here -- I'm preparing as if it's my last game. So, you have that mentality. You have that mindset. You don't let things build up.

"It's kind of, 'Here. Here's what's on your plate today. You either eat it or you don't.' And I'm choosing to try to eat as much as possible."

Come Friday, when the Indians open the American League Division Series against the Astros at Minute Maid Park, Donaldson will be looking to chew on some pitching out of the fifth spot in Cleveland's lineup. The Indians acquired the third baseman from the Blue Jays prior to the Aug. 31 deadline for postseason eligibility and then worked with him to develop a plan for a return to full strength.

Donaldson, who missed roughly three months with a left calf injury, has looked more and more like himself with each game played in a Cleveland uniform. In 16 games in September, the former AL Most Valuable Player Award winner turned in a .280/.400/.520 slash line with three homers, three doubles, seven RBIs, eight runs scored and as many walks (10) as strikeouts.

"We appreciated how he handled things," Indians manager Terry Francona said. "And then, when he got on the field, he wanted to play every inning of every game, which I respect a lot. But we kind of held him back, and he handled everything very respectfully. And he's been fun to get to know. He's a baseball player. He wants to play, and he wants to beat you."

Donaldson is more than ready to put his regular-season trials in the rear-view mirror.

"I feel good. Ready to go," he said. "I'm excited to get back out there and hopefully make this an exciting postseason run."

Worth noting

- Francona revealed his planned 11-man pitching staff during Wednesday's workout. Behind starters Corey Kluber (Game 1 on Friday), Carlos Carrasco (Game 2 on Saturday) and Mike Clevinger (Game 3 on Monday), the remainder of the staff will feature lefties Andrew Miller, Brad Hand and Oliver Perez, along with righties Trevor Bauer, Shane Bieber, Cody Allen, Adam Cimber and Dan Otero.

- Putting past behind, Kluber ready for redemption

As Francona detailed on Tuesday, Bauer and Bieber will be on call as relievers in the early games of the ALDS. Depending on how they are used, if at all, one of them would then start Game 4 (on Tuesday at Progressive Field), if necessary.

- Tribe could use Bauer in relief vs. Astros

- Besides backup catcher Roberto Perez, outfielders Greg Allen and Brandon Guyer, plus corner infielder Yandy Diaz, are in the plans for the ALDS roster. That leaves one bench spot available, and the Indians' decision-makers are currently debating between carrying outfielder Rajai Davis (speed and defense) or utility man Erik Gonzalez (their only true backup shortstop on the roster).

"It's between Raj and Gonzie," Francona said. "Gonzie gives you a little bit of a safety net if something happens to somebody. Raj gives you the ability to maybe influence the game with his legs, as we've seen. So, we're all just trying to figure out what's the right thing to do."

- The players who do not make the ALDS roster will travel with the Indians to Houston for the first two games of the ALDS.

Said Francona: "The vast majority of the guys that are going with us are guys that are going to be guys that are with us next year. I think it's important for them to be a part of what we're doing."

Who has edge? Astros-Tribe position by position

By Anthony Castrovine MLB.com @castrovine

The winner of the American League Division Series between the Astros and Indians that starts Friday afternoon in Houston won't directly go to the World Series, of course.

But the nagging feeling here is that whoever escapes this day-game-laden struggle between two legitimately well-built ballclubs will, indeed, go on to become the AL pennant winner.

This opinion is not meant as a knock on the 108-win Red Sox or the Yankees they'll face in the ALDS. It's meant more as affirmation of the idea that being built for the regular season and being built for the postseason are two very different things. And with clearly the two best rotations in the Majors, two bullpens loaded with impact arms and the two lineups with the lowest strikeout percentages in the sport (contact is king come October), the AL's last two World Series representatives both have what it takes to get back to the Fall Classic in 2018.

So who will prevail in this best-of-five? Let's dig in, position by position, and try to find out.

CATCHER

Yan Gomes cut and bruised his thumb on the final weekend of the season on a freak play but is expected to be good to go. Gomes was a first-time All-Star this season, and his .762 OPS was the fifth highest in the Majors among catchers with at least 400 plate appearances. He's an adept defender with a 36 caught-stealing percentage over the last three seasons. You have to give him the edge over the Astros' in-season trade acquisition, Martin Maldonado (.655 OPS).

That said, Maldonado's cannon could have a role in this series, given that the Indians rate as one of the better baserunning teams in the game.

Edge: Indians

FIRST BASE

After beginning the season suspended and hurt (left hand surgery), Yuli Gurriel saw overall offensive regression from his 2017 output, with an OPS+ that dropped from 21 percent above league average to 8 percent. But he had a .356/.379/.567 slash in the final month of the season.

Yonder Alonso has logged 23 homers and 19 doubles. But his OPS and Weighted Runs Created Plus (wRC+) marks are both below the league average, and his 21.4-percent strikeout rate is well north of Gurriel's 11.0 mark.

Edge: Astros

SECOND BASE

What they lack in physical stature (combined listed height: 135 inches), Jose Ramirez and Jose Altuve more than make up for in plate presence. Ramirez just wrapped a remarkable season in which he had 39 homers, 38 doubles and 34 steals. His overall impact was, well, 2017 Altuve-like (the total WAR marks are almost identical), and Altuve won the MVP Award last year.

Alas, Altuve nursed a right knee injury this year and didn't come through with his usual 200-hit campaign. Ramirez is the winner here this year, though the difference right now might be negligible. Ramirez went into a massive slump the last month-plus of the season and is still adjusting to second base after making the move to accommodate the Indians' acquisition of Josh Donaldson.

Edge: Indians

SHORTSTOP

As former first-round Draft picks with Puerto Rico roots, similar big league callup dates and a 1-2 finish in the 2015 Rookie of the Year Award voting, the stories of Carlos Correa and Francisco Lindor have been naturally intertwined for years.

But in this particular season, there is a clear line of demarcation between the two. Lindor's name will appear on MVP Award ballots after he became just the fourth player in history with at least 25 steals, 35 homers, 40 doubles and 125 runs in a season, and his defense was back up to an elite level. Correa, on the other hand, has played through back and oblique issues and simply hasn't been his All-Star self.

Edge: Indians

THIRD BASE

Donaldson is going to be a fascinating figure here. Calf and shoulder issues limited him to 36 games with the Blue Jays. In 16 September games with the Tribe, he showed flashes of the explosiveness and athleticism that make him one of the best total packages in the Majors.

But Alex Bregman made The Leap this season. His .926 OPS, 31 homers and Major League-leading 51 doubles were affirmation of his ability to be every bit the star Altuve and Correa have been for this loaded Astros squad. He was also one of the Majors' most clutch players, with a Major League-best 5.65 Win Probability Added mark.

Edge: Astros

LEFT FIELD

Tony Kemp could get some opportunities here for the Astros, but Marwin Gonzalez sees the most time in left. He was such an essential element to the Astros' success in 2017, but this year the offensive numbers regressed back to his career norm (.733 OPS, 103 OPS+). The edge goes to Michael Brantley. The Indians took a calculated gamble when they picked up his 2018 option after he played just 101 games from 2016-17, but he has had his healthiest and most productive season in three years (.832 OPS, 123 OPS+), with a Major League-best contact percentage (90.9).

Edge: Indians

CENTER FIELD

The Indians are taking a defensive gamble with Jason Kipnis in center as part of the Donaldson shakeup, and his bat, which produced just a .704 OPS overall but a .905 mark with runners in scoring position, has to hold up its end of the deal.

The Astros are more settled with reigning World Series MVP Award winner George Springer manning center. But Springer has had a trying season of his own, recently dealing with a nagging thumb injury. Springer did have a .315/.386/.454 slash over the last two months.

Edge: Astros

RIGHT FIELD

Hard to believe Melky Cabrera, who couldn't find a job this offseason and was actually designated for assignment by the Indians in June before latching back on with the club in July, is not only the projected starter in right field for a postseason series but may actually be the most reliable right fielder on either team.

While Cabrera slashed .302/.363/.458 since his July 21 return to the Tribe, Josh Reddick has had an inconsistent campaign that stands in stark contrast to the production he provided a year ago (130 OPS+ then, 99 now).

Slight edge: Indians

DESIGNATED HITTER

Tyler White had a .347 average and 1.151 OPS from July 14 to Aug. 31, but his batted-ball profile caught up to him in September (19-for-84). We'll see how Astros manager AJ Hinch doles out the duties between White and Evan Gattis (25 homers but a 101 OPS+).

Edwin Encarnacion is the more known quantity, coming off his seventh straight 30-homer campaign, with a respectable, albeit not rousing, 115OPS+.

Slight edge: Indians

ROTATION

This is an impossible choice. The Indians' starting staff had the 18th-highest FanGraphs-calculated Wins Above Replacement mark (22.9) in history, but the Astros' mark (22.5) ranks 22nd. Seven of the top 10 adjusted ERA+ marks for qualified AL pitchers in 2018 are represented in these two rotations. Crazy.

It's Justin Verlander (second in the AL in innings, third in ERA) vs. Corey Kluber (first in innings, fifth in ERA) in Game 1. It's Gerrit Cole (fifth in innings, fourth in ERA) vs. Carlos Carrasco (ninth in innings, eighth in ERA) in Game 2. It's Dallas Keuchel (third in innings, 15th in ERA) vs. Mike Clevinger (sixth in innings, sixth in ERA) in Game 3.

Again, impossible choice. But right now, we don't know if the Indians will use Trevor Bauer (a Cy Young Award candidate before a comebacker fractured his right leg in August) or rookie Shane Bieber opposite Charlie Morton in Game 4. Bauer could pitch out of the bullpen in Games 1-3. So for now, the teensiest, tiniest of edges to the Astros.

Teensiest, tiniest edge: Astros

BULLPEN

The rubber-armed Bauer is this series' biggest X-factor, and there's a very good chance you see him in relief sometime in the first three games of this series. Andrew Miller finally looks healthy, Brad Hand is on board and Cody Allen may have turned a corner in working through mechanical issues. The Indians feel they have a better handle on what has been a moving target in the bullpen.

But the Astros' relief corps has fewer unanswered questions right now. The addition of Roberto Osuna at the tail end of his domestic violence suspension was roundly and rightly criticized, but the end result of adding him and Ryan Pressly is a deep and versatile bullpen in which rookie Josh James could potentially bring an added dose of gas, if rostered. In August and September, the Astros had the Majors' best bullpen ERA by more than half a run.

Edge: Astros

Who will win? This has all the makings of a closely contested series. That doesn't mean it will go five games, but it does mean small edges could have a huge impact.

The Indians' roster earned the edge in six of our 11 presented categories and has become utterly intriguing in the late stages of the season with the Donaldson acquisition and Miller and Bauer returns. That said, it's really hard to know how all those parts come together in games that count, especially on a club that played so few meaningful games because of its weak division.

The Astros open at home and have the more reliable bullpen right now, and it says here that will be enough for them to win a series that arguably features the AL's two most dangerous teams.

Putting past behind, Kluber ready for redemption

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

CLEVELAND -- Corey Kluber stood atop a small wood box, allowing the pack of reporters to circle around him inside the funereal interview room across the hall from the Indians' quiet clubhouse. Questions broke through the awkward silence, which was then replaced by Kluber's mumbled, monotone replies.

The sting of an abrupt October exit had yet to fully sink in for Kluber, whose struggles in the American League Division Series defeat to the Yankees last year were under the media microscope. If there was something ailing Kluber, the leader of Cleveland's rotation was not about to fire it into the microphones as an excuse.

"I don't think I need to get into details about it," Kluber said after the Game 5 loss to New York last year. "I was healthy enough to go out there and try to pitch."

Last spring, when Kluber had four months to let the frustration dissipate, the pitcher repeated a variation of the same response.

"I was good enough to pitch," he said. "I just didn't get the job done."

Now, as the Indians prepare for the upcoming ALDS against the Astros, with Kluber coming off yet another brilliant campaign as Cleveland's ace, there is still no further information about what precisely was hindering the right-hander last October. If there was something minor healthwise hindering his mechanics, Kluber is still not tipping his hand.

"And he never will," said Josh Tomlin, whose locker is a couple down from Kluber's at Progressive Field. "That's what you want in a guy, right? You want a guy to be able to take the ball no matter what the issue is and go compete. That's what he did. Whether he was 100 percent, whether he was 50 percent, if he thought he was good enough to go out there and get the job done, you give him the ball." This October could be viewed as a chance at redemption for Kluber.

Kluber will take the ball for the Indians opposite Justin Verlander in Game 1 of the ALDS on Friday at Minute Maid Park. Cleveland's two-time AL Cy Young Award winner shouldered a heavy load in a remarkable 2016 postseason showing, but he could not get the job done against the Cubs in Game 7 of the World Series. Kluber started twice in the ALDS last year against the Yankees, but it is known that something was not right with the pitcher.

As Kluber compartmentalizes all the information at hand for the ALDS ahead, those other playoffs experiences, including the missteps, are stuffed away in "the past" file in his mind. He has scouting reports on Houston hitters to worry about. He has a game plan to assemble with his catcher and pitching coach Carl Willis.

"I don't want this to come off the wrong way," Kluber said. "But I think fans tend to dwell on things like that a little more than we do as players. Obviously, when we were eliminated last year, there was disappointment. Just like when we lost Game 7 of the World Series, there was disappointment. Part of preparing yourself for the next year is putting that behind you and getting ready for the next Spring Training, the next season, the next postseason.

"It's always having that mentality of looking forward. There's enough to worry about without having to try to make up for last year."

All Kluber did this year -- following up his AL Cy Young Award showing in 2017 -- was go 20-7 with a 2.89 ERA in 33 starts, ending with 222 strikeouts against 34 walks in an AL-leading 215 innings. The right-hander became the first pitcher in Indians history to log at least 200 innings and 200 strikeouts in five consecutive seasons, and he became the first 20-game winner for the Tribe since 2008.

Over the past three years combined, Kluber has gone 56-20 with a 2.77 ERA, posting 10.1 strikeouts per nine innings to go with a 5.6 strikeout-to-walk ratio. For all the success, though, Kluber would be the first to say that he would happily trade in his personal trophies for a World Series ring.

"He's ready to go. He's ready to accept the challenge of anchoring our staff," Indians manager Terry Francona said. "I can't think of anybody better."

Kluber set a franchise record for starts (six) in the 2016 postseason, when he fashioned a 1.83 ERA in 34 1/3 innings before running out of gas for Cleveland's depleted pitching staff in Game 7 of the World Series. He started Game 2 of the ALDS last year and allowed six runs in 2 2/3 innings, but the Tribe made a stirring comeback and beat New York, 9-8, in 13 innings.

In Game 5, Kluber looked better -- he generated 15 swinging strikes in 3 2/3 innings -- but two mistakes to Didi Gregorius led to an early exit. Gregorius hit a solo homer in the first, a two-run homer in the third and the Yankees dealt Cleveland a 5-2 loss to send the club into an early winter.

"It was terrible. It was terrible," Tomlin said. "I didn't know if it was worse in '16 or last year, just the simple fact of we knew what we had last year and we knew we had a chance to win the World Series. Next thing you know, you're at home."

Kluber has done his best to wipe that from his memory.

"Those situations didn't play out the way I would've liked them to," Kluber said. "But it's no different than if you have a bad start during the season. The best way to cope with that is to flush it. If you sit and dwell on it, those things start to eat away at you and you start carrying a weight around that makes doing things that are already difficult even more difficult.

"Whether it's a pitcher pitching poorly or a hitter in a slump, guys have experience of pushing that aside. You keep looking forward and you focus on the task at hand."

MLB playoffs | Indians trying to keep edge during off days

By Ryan Lewis

CLEVELAND — Four consecutive off days in baseball can be a killer.

The regular season ends, and for those who don't have to tangle with the wild-card game, 96-plus hours without any meaningful baseball leaves some time for rest. But it also creates a large window of time for mechanics to be thrown off, hot streaks to turn cold or trust routines to be altered, all leading up to a hyper-intense, crucially important Game 1 of a postseason series.

It's difficult to just flip a switch within a sport that is based so extensively on timing and rhythm.

There's no blueprint that any player or team can follow to ensure they're ready for Game 1. The Indians open the American League Division Series on Friday at the Houston Astros.

"I don't know that there's a magic recipe and I don't think anybody's got it figured out," Indians reliever Andrew Miller said on Wednesday. "If there was, word would have gotten out and we'd all have the same schedule and plan of attack. It can be tough.

"Four days in baseball feels like an eternity. A lot of times, guys don't handle one day off very well."

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Last season, Jose Ramirez and Francisco Lindor each got into October and struggled at the plate. Corey Kluber wasn't himself. Having those four days can be therapeutic for a player who was either struggling at the end of the season or battling a nagging injury. But for those playing their best at what most would call the right time to be doing so, it can halt that positive momentum and render it meaningless.

For example, Carlos Carrasco has been one of baseball's best pitchers since the All-Star break, but it won't mean anything if he struggles in Game 2 in Houston. Carrasco will now have additional off days beyond what's normal before he takes the mound in that atmosphere. It isn't to say the four off days had a great effect on last year's ALDS, but it creates a situation with additional variables and unknowns.

Jason Kipnis said the Indians have been "anxious for months," all looking forward to Friday's Game 1. After a season that didn't warrant much sense of urgency, it's difficult to just turn it on when the Astros' Justin Verlander fires the first pitch on Friday. Kipnis tries to ramp up leading up to the game, resting the first day and increasing the workload heading into Game 1.

"It requires a balance," Kipnis said of the four off days. "You want to get a rest. You want to get a workout in. You don't want to get rusty. You want to keep swinging."

Manager Terry Francona and the Indians' coaching staff are aware of the randomness four days can bring just before a five-game series. To try to combat the lengthy layoff, the Indians on Tuesday participated in an intrasquad scrimmage, playing about five innings while crowd noise was pumped through the PA system.

The Indians, like any team, don't want a short series to slip through their fingers because it took time to get back to their top level again. The rest isn't always best.

"In our sport, because it's rhythm and timing, sometimes that can create some anxiety for coaches and managers," Francona said. "I was really pleased with how our guys played that game yesterday. ... In football, you give guys rest and man they can run over the middle and block and that's not what our sport is. It's more rhythm and timing and having the reps is so important."

Indians notebook: Indians announce ALDS bullpen; roster down to last spot

By Ryan Lewis

CLEVELAND — The Indians have figured out 24 of the allotted 25 spots for their American League Division Series roster, with only one more decision looming before Game 1 against the Astros in Houston Friday afternoon.

The Indians will carry 11 pitchers, with six relievers and two pitchers who could take on different roles. The right-handed relievers include Cody Allen, Adam Cimber and Dan Otero. The three left-handers are Andrew Miller, Brad Hand and Oliver Perez. Those six join Games 1-3 starters Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco and Mike Clevinger as well as Trevor Bauer and Shane Bieber, who are available out of the bullpen early in the series. One of those final two will then start Game 4, if needed.

"We're trying to make our bullpen thicker, bigger early," Indians manager Terry Francona said. "And maybe do the same with Carrasco late [in the series]. Some of it depends on how he pitches. But that's the idea."

The Astros feature some of the best right-handed hitters in the game, including Jose Altuve, Carlos Correa, Alex Bregman and George Springer. Cimber is expected to act as a matchup pitcher, only facing a hitter or two. Otero is likely down the list in terms of who could be called upon in a high-leverage situation.

Cimber hasn't been as sharp as he was before being acquired from the San Diego Padres but could play a key role in this series. He held right-handers to a .239 average and .610 OPS compared to .329 and 1.062 against lefties this season.

"He's always one pitch from a double play," Francona said. "Especially with the right-handers. And we saw that so many times where even sometimes balls weren't hit hard enough to get double plays but he can keep the ball hopefully in the infield against tougher right-handed hitters."

Only needing 11 pitchers allows the Indians to carry an extra player on the bench. That 25th spot is the only remaining question mark.

Ryan Lewis previews the ALDS with Rob Oller of the Columbus Dispatch.

Francona announced on Wednesday that, barring something unforeseen, that final spot will go to either outfielder Rajai Davis or utility infielder Erik Gonzalez. Davis gives the Indians a veteran, speed option to pinch run late in games. Gonzalez, who was recently cleared from the concussion protocol, would add insurance in the event of an injury to an infielder, though if needed the Indians could shift players already on the roster.

"We're all just trying to figure out what's the right thing to do," Francona said. "Is it play it safe, which might be the right thing because if [Francisco Lindor] went down and he didn't go down enough to be a DL, it's kind of an issue? But do we gamble a little bit and think that Raj might be able to change a game with his legs? We're going back and forth."

In all likelihood, the bench will also include catcher Roberto Perez, outfielders Greg Allen and Brandon Guyer and infielder Yandy Diaz. Guyer is expected to be ready for Game 1 but has been dealing with a shoulder issue, so his place on the roster is assuming he is healthy.

All of it means that several players — like Josh Tomlin, Tyler Olson and others — have already received the bad news they won't be on the ALDS roster.

"That's the one hard thing, and probably the last couple days of the season, you want to be excited about the playoffs, but I know there were a couple of nights where I was wearing it," Francona said. "Because you're telling guys stuff that you really care about, but you're telling them

something they don't want to hear. So that's a hard one. Tried just like always to be as honest as we can. I wish you could take more on the roster. They don't let you."

But on the roster or not, the Indians will still be taking everybody with them to Houston.

"Some guys were going to go to Arizona, some were going to stay here, but the more we talked about it, I just think the vast majority of the guys that are going with us are guys that are going to be guys that are with us next year," Francona said. "I think it's important for them to be a part of what we're doing."

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Cleveland Indians' last ALDS roster decision pits speed vs. security blanket

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

CLEVELAND, Ohio - The Indians are taking their entire September roster to Houston for the ALDS, but the 25 players who will actually face the Astros on the Friday in the best-of-five series are all but set.

Manager Terry Francona said the lone decision that has yet to be made concerns the last spot on the bench - outfielder Rajai Davis or utility man Erik Gonzalez.

Francona says it's a matter of playing it safe with Gonzalez or taking a gamble and going with Davis in the hope that he could come off the bench and help the Indians win a game with his speed.

"We're debating the last spot," said Francona before Wednesday's workout at Progressive Field. "Gonzo gives you a little bit of a safety net if something happens to somebody. Raja gives you the ability to maybe influence the game with his legs as we've seen.

"We're all just trying to figure out what's the right thing to do. Is it play it safe, which might be the right thing to do. If Frankie (Lindor) goes down and wasn't hurt enough to go on the disabled list, that would be an issue. But do we gamble a little bit and see if Raja can change a game with his legs? So that's where we're going back to forth."

Gonzalez, just out of MLB concussion protocol, is hitting .246 (36-for-136) with one home and 16 RBI. He's stolen three bases.

Davis is hitting .224 (44-for-196) with one homer, six RBI and 21 steals in 28 attempts. He's scored 33 runs compared to 17 by Gonzalez.

With the exception of Davis and Gonzalez, here's what the unofficial roster looks like:

Starting pitchers (three): Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco and Mike Clevinger.

Bullpen (eight): Trevor Bauer, Shane Bieber, Cody Allen, Otero, Cimber, Andrew Miller, Oliver Perez and Brad Hand.

Infield (six): Francisco Lindor, Jose Ramirez, Yonder Alonso, Josh Donaldson, Yandy Diaz and Edwin Encarnacion.

Outfield (five): Greg Allen, Brandon Guyer, Jason Kipnis, Michael Brantley, Melky Cabrera.

Catchers (two): Yan Gomes and Roberto Perez.

Francona said the choice of Cimber and Otero in the bullpen were based on Houston's predominantly right-handed hitting lineup. Francona's other right-handed choices were Josh Tomlin, Adam Plutko and Neil Ramirez.

On Tuesday, Francona said starters Bauer and Bieber would open in the bullpen. On Wednesday, he announced the rest of the bullpen. He said the choice of Cimber and Otero was based on Houston's predominantly right-handed hitting lineup. Francona's other right-handed choices were Josh Tomlin, Adam Plutko and Neil Ramirez.

"We're trying to make our bullpen thicker or bigger early (in the series) and we may use Carlos Carrasco later in the series," said Francona. "It depends on how much he pitches."

Kluber will start Game 1 on Friday followed by Carrasco in Game 2 on Saturday. Clevinger will pitch Game 3 on Monday at Progressive Field.

The Indians acquired Cimber and Hand in July from San Diego. Hand has done a good job in the closer's role, but Cimber, a submarining right-hander, has not pitched as well as he did with the Padres. Cimber went 0-3 with a 4.05 ERA in 28 games for the Tribe. He struck out seven and walked seven in 20 innings. In San Diego, he went 3-5 with a 3.17 ERA in 42 games. He struck out 51 and walked 10 in 48 1/3 innings.

"In San Diego he was pitching full innings," said Francona. "When he came here, he didn't finish innings because we had so many lefties. I think that hurt him at times.

"He's always one pitch from a double play, especially against the right-handers. Hopefully, he can keep the ball in the infield against Houston's tough right-handed hitters."

Right-handers are hitting .239 (44-for-184) with three homers against Cimber. Lefties are hitting .329 (24-for-73) with two homers.

Otero (2-1, 5.22, one save), like Cimber, has had an inconsistent season. He did post a 2.89 ERA in September. Right-handers are hitting .259 (38-for-147) and lefties .337 (31-for-92) against him. Last year Otero had a better season but didn't make the ALDS roster.

Five Indians players will be making their first postseason appearance - Hand, Cimber, Bieber, Alonso and Diaz. Last year the Indians considered adding Diaz to the ALDS roster but didn't do it. The decision backfired when Edwin Encarnacion twisted his right ankle in Game 2 and didn't play again until Game 5.

Diaz hit .312 (34-for-109) with five doubles, two triples, one homer and 15 RBI in 39 games for the Indians this year. He posted a .797 OPS after spending most of the season at Class AAA Columbus.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 10.04.2018

Cleveland Indians' final ALDS roster spot down to Rajai Davis or Erik Gonzalez

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

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The Indians 25-man roster for the ALDS against Houston is all but set. Manager Terry Francona said the last roster spot to be determined is between outfielder Rajai Davis and utility man Erik Gonzalez.

Francona said Wednesday that right-handers Dan Otero and Adam Cimber had made the bullpen. The Indians have until 10 a.m. Friday to turn in their roster for the best-of-five series.

Here's what the unofficial roster looks like:

Starting pitchers (three): Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco and Mike Clevinger.

Bullpen (eight): Trevor Bauer, Shane Bieber, Cody Allen, Otero, Cimber, Andrew Miller, Oliver Perez and Brad Hand.

Infield (six): Francisco Lindor, Jose Ramirez, Yonder Alonso, Josh Donaldson, Yandy Diaz and Edwin Encarnacion.

Outfield (five): Greg Allen, Brandon Guyer, Jason Kipnis, Michael Brantley, Melky Cabrera.

Catchers (two): Yan Gomes and Roberto Perez.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 10.04.2018

Cleveland Indians' Jason Kipnis hits the reset button, ready for a fresh start in the ALDS

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio - Jason Kipnis, in his attempt to forget the 2018 season, found a way to salvage it and reach his goal at the same time.

Kipnis thought of one thing for long parts of the just-completed regular season. He wanted to end it and hit the reset button to start the second season as soon as possible. The second season that could make the 2018 Indians a team Cleveland never forgets.

The Indians have been in business since 1901. They've won World Series twice in all that time: 1920 and 1948. The weight of the years has covered those teams in cobwebs and dust, but ask any serious Indians fans and they still recognize the names of Tris Speaker, Ray Chapman, Stanley Coveleski, Bill Veeck, Gene Bearden, Lou Boudreau and Larry Doby.

They've reached the World Series four times since 1948. They were swept in 1954, lost in six games in 1995 and in seven in 1997 and 2016. Kipnis was on the 2016 team that lost Game 7 to the Cubs at Progressive Field in 10 innings.

He knows what a World Series championship would mean. As for he and his teammates becoming heroes for life on the shores of Lake Erie, well, that doesn't sound like a bad gig either.

After all, there has to be some kind of incentive to end 70 years of waiting.

"You're aware of it," said Kipnis. "You don't really need extra motivation when you get to this level and get into the playoffs. I know how big a deal it was in 2016 when it was (the teams) with the two longest World Series droughts going after it.

"So, clearly, now we're the longest one. That would just be the icing on the cake to end that drought in addition to winning it for the fans in this city that are hungry right now and that have been here the whole year."

Jason Kipnis believes the Indians are well-equipped for the postseason journey that awaits the Cl...

Those are big thoughts, probably too big for the moment which the Indians find themselves. Their team psychologists and mental health coaches preach short-term goals. They want players to stay in the moment and trust the process. If you look too far down the road, you can't see the bad hop about to hit you in the kisser in two seconds.

Kipnis knows that as well. It is the way he tried to navigate around one of the toughest seasons of his career.

This season he stopped looking at the scoreboard when he came to the plate. The batting average, hovering between bad and awful, drove him to distraction. So he took manager Terry Francona's advice and just started over from whatever point of the season he was at. It didn't work right away, but eventually Kipnis started hitting like Kipnis again.

The batting average was beyond repair, but he ended the season with 18 homers, 74 RBI and a .704 OPS. The 18 homers were his second highest total ever. The 75 RBI matched his average for a 162-game season, according to baseball-reference.com.

Still, there were consequences. The Indians acquired third baseman Josh Donaldson on Aug. 31 and in the shuffle of bodies Kipnis vacated second base and moved to center field for the second straight year. At the time, he blamed himself, saying if he'd hit like he normally does, the Indians wouldn't have had to make the move.

As for center field, it's been smoother the second time around.

"It was just easier this time just because I had the last year to kind of build off of," said Kipnis.

The reset button has been pushed just in time for the Indians to open the ALDS against Houston on Friday at 2:05 p.m. at Minute Maid Park.

"The reset button has been my light at the end of the tunnel," said Kipnis. "Just keep your head up, keep pushing. Gain some momentum going into October because when it gets to there it's a reset button for everyone. Everyone is at the same number."

Kipnis says it's a strange feeling. After chasing almost every hitter in the the big leagues for 162 games, he's dead even with everyone in postseason -- where only one statistic matters.

"Now it's just wins," said Kipnis. "That's the only thing that really matters. You kind of trick yourself into thinking 'just get there and everything will be OK again.' Now it's just the number of wins. That's the only focus. I don't care if it's still another 0-for-4 or a sac bunt. If it gets the job done for a win, then that's all that matters."

Eleven wins. That's what the Indians need to win it all. The Astros did it last year and that's who the Indians have drawn in the first round.

"They have an outstanding ball club," said Kipnis. "They really have from top to bottom maybe the most athletic lineup (in the big leagues). I think it's going to be one of the most evenly matched series in the first round.

"In terms of pitching staffs, we line up with them. In terms of lineup we line up with them. It's going to be a lot of fun."

Terry Francona, Cleveland Indians not fazed by shorter division series format

By Joe Noga, cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Is it more challenging for a big-league manager to prepare for a best-of-five divisional round playoff series rather than a traditional seven-game league championship or World Series?

"It's two less than seven, I know that," Indians manager Terry Francona said Wednesday before his team worked out at Progressive Field.

Francona is preparing to manage in the divisional round for the eighth time since 2004. He is 4-3 in previous LDS appearances, 1-1 with Cleveland. Francona said he recognizes that after every game there is going to be a storyline. Usually they follow a familiar pattern, and if you know what's coming, you can set yourself up to handle it appropriately.

"The first game everyone is even, and after the first game everybody is like 'they gotta win this (next) one,'" Francona said. "What you need to do is as a team block out the noise because that's really what it is, and focus on winning the game that's right in front of you. When you do that, things have a way of working out."

Francona has also learned how to manage around the long four-day layoff between the end of the regular season and the divisional round opener.

"The idea is to make (the four days) beneficial," Francona said. "In our sport, because it's rhythm and timing, sometimes that can create some anxiety for coaches and managers."

Francona said he was pleased with the way players acquitted themselves during Tuesday's intrasquad game at Progressive Field. Each starter got two at-bats and the pitchers that needed work were able to throw appropriately. The scrimmage helped break up the off days in a way that allowed players to maintain their rhythm and timing.

"In football, you give guys rest and man they can run over the middle and block and that's not what our sport is," Francona said. "It's more rhythm and timing, and having the reps is so important."

Guyer back to good: Outfielder Brandon Guyer should be good to go when Friday's playoff opener arrives at Minute Maid Park. He's been dealing with a sore shoulder that caused him to miss the final three regular season games at Kansas City.

Guyer appeared in the intrasquad game on Tuesday, laying down a bunt in the second inning against Cody Allen. He took batting practice with the Indians on Wednesday under Francona's watchful eye.

"I think he's going to be fine," Francona said.

Bullpen strategy under wraps: Francona was asked whether or not he has any tricks up his sleeve when it comes to his bullpen. The skipper joked that he could reveal his plans, but "I'd have to kill ya."

In 2016, Francona sparked a "bullpenning" trend in baseball when he used Andrew Miller much earlier in playoff games than he had during the regular season. Looking back on the strategy, Francona said he was just trying to do what he thought would put his team in the best position to win.

"Sometimes you don't even know that," he said. "Like with Andrew, so many times we'll bring him into the game and if he has an easy inning, we leave him in the game. It's not like there's a design. If he comes in and throws eight pitches, why take him out?"

Part of the strategy is to make sure you've done your homework. Francona said the Indians always try to have a plan in place ahead of time, and that starts by having good meetings between the coaching staff and the scouts.

"While we were out playing, we had a lot of scouts and a lot of guys upstairs attacking different things on the Astros," Francona said. "It makes you feel good to know that they've been doing that. Then we had two pretty lengthy meetings Monday and Tuesday and it helps alleviate some of the anxiety because you feel like you're prepared. Our guys did a really good job."

Firsthand account: Josh Donaldson has seen firsthand what Francona's bullpen strategy can do to a team in the playoffs. He went 1-for-5 with a single and two strikeouts against Miller and Allen in the 2016 ALCS with Toronto.

Donaldson said confidence is the key for any reliever in the postseason.

"I know what they're capable of doing and I know how dominant they can be," Donaldson said. "Going into this postseason on a note that they felt comfortable with is important. But guess what, when that first game starts, all the stats get thrown out. It doesn't matter anymore.

"So it doesn't matter if you feel like you had a good year, felt like you had a bad year, you get a chance to go out and take advantage of an opportunity that not a lot of teams have. Now it's up to each individual to take care of their own business."

Bieber believer: Could rookie right-hander Shane Bieber be the ace up Francona's sleeve in the bullpen?

Bieber, who will be available in both games in Houston, pitched his way to an 11-5 record and a 4.55 ERA in 19 starts. He struck out 118 and walked just 23 in 114 2/3 innings and has exactly the kind of makeup that could play well as a long reliever.

"The way he's competed, he's earned our trust," Francona said. "It gets exciting when you start thinking about his future, but as far as winning a playoff game, believe me, we wouldn't have put him on (the roster) if we didn't think he was going to help us."

Awards season: Major League Baseball announced the 30 finalists (one from each team) for the Hank Aaron Award, which recognizes the most outstanding offensive performer in each league. Infielder Jose Ramirez is the Indians' nominee.

Ramirez, named to his second AL All-Star Team this season, batted .270 with career highs in home runs (39) and RBI (105). He finished third in the AL in fWAR (8.1) and tops in the league in the Baseball Reference Power-Speed # rankings (36.3).

Fans can vote online for the winners in each league. A distinguished panel of ex-major leaguers led by Aaron will combine with the fan vote.

Finally: Former Indians farmhand Tony Wolters sent Colorado into the National League Division Series against Milwaukee with an RBI single in the 13th inning of the NL Wild Card game against the Cubs.

Francona was asked if he was happy to see the ex-Akron Rubberducks infielder come through for Bud Black's Rockies in the wee hours of the morning on Wednesday.

"I fell asleep, so I found out this morning," Francona said. "That was pretty cool."

Ready for redemption, Indians eyeing title this October

By Jeff Schudel JSchudel@News-Herald.com @JSPProInsider on Twitter 16 hrs ago Comments

Indigestion keeps Indians manager Terry Francona up at night if he eats too many of his favorite hot dogs. But it was deciding whom to put in the bullpen and consequently who would not make the playoff roster that made him uncomfortable the last few days.

Francona on Oct. 3 reached a decision about which relievers he wants for the ALDS with the Astros starting Oct. 5 in Houston. Left-handers Brad Hand, Andrew Miller and Oliver Perez will be joined by right-handers Adam Cimber, Cody Allen and Dan Otero, Francona announced at Progressive Field.

Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco and Mike Clevinger will start the first three games.

Shane Bieber and Trevor Bauer will be in the bullpen at the beginning of the series. One of them will be the Game 4 starter Oct. 9 at Progressive Field if one team doesn't sweep the best-of-five series.

Josh Tomlin, Neil Ramirez, Tyler Olson and Adam Plutko are not on the playoff roster.

"That's the one hard thing," Francona said. "Probably the last couple days of the season, you want to be excited about the playoffs, but I know there were a couple of nights where I was wearing it. Because you're telling guys that you really care about something they don't want to hear.

"But we tell the guys from Day One, we're always going to do what we think is best for our team. Some conversations are harder than others, and that one (Tomlin) definitely was hard."

The starters will carry the Indians as deep as they can, but it is the bullpen of both teams that could ultimately decide who advances to the American League Championship Series.

"We're trying to make our bullpen thicker, bigger early," Francona said. "And maybe do the same with Carrasco late. Some of it depends on how he pitches (in Game 2). But that's the idea."

It would be fascinating to sit in on meetings with Francona, the advance scouts, the coaches and everyone else involved in figuring out how the plan for playing the Astros.

The Cleveland-Houston first-round match has been a forgone conclusion for at least eight weeks. The Astros won the regular-season series, 4-3, but they haven't met since May 27.

"You try to have a plan in place," Francona said. "We had really good meetings. That helps a ton. While we were out playing, we had a lot of scouts and a lot of guys upstairs attacking different things on the Astros. It makes you feel good to know that they've been doing that.

"Then we had two pretty lengthy meetings Monday and Tuesday and it helps alleviate some of the anxiety because you feel like you're prepared. Our guys did a really good job."

Francona changed the way managers use relievers when he successfully used Miller in the middle innings in the 2016 postseason. The strategy helped the Indians get to Game 7 of the World Series before losing to the Cubs in the 10th inning.

Bauer could be the X-factor in the playoffs this year. He might prefer to start, but he won't complain about a bullpen stint.

"I say this all the time," Bauer said recently. "I pitch when they tell me to pitch, whether that's in the starting rotation, in the bullpen, or not at all. That's their decision."

Bauer finished 2018 with a 12-6 record. He struck out 221 batters and walked 57 in 175 1/3 innings. He was a Cy Young Award candidate until a stress fracture in his right leg caused by a being hit with a line drive sidelined him for nearly six weeks.

Francona wants his eccentric pitcher to know he will not be a forgotten man in the ALDS.

"I can see, if we get where we want to go, Trevor having a bigger hand in it than he realizes right now," Francona said. "Having him as a starter can be really important. We wouldn't use him (in relief) without a leverage (important) situation. But if we got some leverage, that's where we're going to try to figure it out.

"The other thing, too, is I don't know if I'd want him to go that long without pitching, so an inning or two wouldn't hurt him anyway."

Bauer pitched one inning of an intrasquad game on Oct. 2. Prior to that, he threw 51 pitches in four shutout innings against the Royals in the final game of the regular season on Sept. 30.

Commentary: Bullpen is Tribe's biggest weakness when ALDS opens Friday
Jim Ingraham | The Chronicle-Telegram Published on Oct. 4, 2018 | Updated 7:35 a. m.
The elephant in the room is the lack of an elephant in the bullpen.

If you're looking for something to be nervous about as the Indians prepare to face Houston in the Division Series, this is it.

The bullpen.

The Indians' biggest strength from 2016-17 is their biggest weakness in 2018. Their timing couldn't be worse. The Astros have statistically the best bullpen in the American League, and the Indians have arguably the worst.

Is this any way to make it to the ALCS? We're about to find out. Indians manager Terry Francona, one of the great bullpen maestros in the game, is sufficiently concerned about his orchestra of relievers that Trevor Bauer, who might have won the Cy Young Award had he not gotten hurt, and whose 1.93 ERA in three late-September appearances indicates he's ready for a return to the rotation, is instead being sent to the bullpen for the first two games of the Division Series.

Bauer, the ultimate gunslinger, is a willing and sublime slinger in any role, but Francona's decision to use him in the bullpen, at least initially, hints at the manager's unease with the depth in the pen.

Only two relievers from the postseason roster last year, when the Indians had the best bullpen in the American League, are on the Division Series roster this year: Cody Allen and Andrew Miller.

Both are coming off the worst regular seasons of their careers. The other relievers on the Division Series roster are Brad Hand, Oliver Perez, Adam Cimber, Dan Otero, and wildcard Shane Bieber.

Hand, fortuitously acquired in a midseason trade with San Diego, has been outstanding since coming to Cleveland, and not a blown save too soon, as he appears to have replaced the shaky Allen as the closer. Perez has been almost untouchable in 51 situational appearances.

Cimber and Otero are a box of chocolates, particularly Otero, whose presence on the postseason roster speaks to the flotsam and jetsam that are the unchosen bullpen candidates.

A dependable and underrated bullpen piece in the last two years when he pitched to ERA's of 1.53 in 62 appearances in 2016 and 2.85 in 52 games last year, Otero's combustible 5.22 ERA this year — he allowed more home runs (12) in 58 innings than Bauer did in 175 (nine) — shouldn't even have been a consideration for the postseason roster this year. But there he is.

Of primary concern, however, is the uncertain status of Miller and Allen, the winged warriors who were the primary chess pieces Francona adroitly maneuvered around the board in 2016, when Tito redefined how bullpens are viewed and used.

Miller has been physically hurt for much of this season — three separate trips to the disabled list — and his unsightly 4.24 ERA reflects as much. Allen appears to be psychologically wounded, unable to get on a roll, much less maintain it. In 46 appearances since June 1 he has five losses, four blown saves and a 5.65 ERA.

So what Francona has here is a bullpen with question marks everywhere, including, and especially the closer's role. Hand has been great, but he's never thrown a single pitch in a postseason game in his career.

How does he handle facing George Springer, Jose Altuve and Alex Bregman with a one-run lead in the bottom of the ninth?

Now you know why Bauer is starting in the bullpen. He could be in the role Miller filled in 2016: a break glass in case of emergency closer-at-large, for use by Francona anytime he smells smoke during the game.

If you're looking for some solace, be confident in the fact that Francona has a Ph.D. in bullpen usage. He invented the art of creative postseason bullpen deployment, and those skills may be tested immediately, and to the extreme, against the defending world champs.

On paper, the bullpen matchup is a mismatch. In bullpen ERA, Houston is first and the Indians are third from the bottom in the American League. Houston's relievers have the lowest opponents' batting average, the Indians are eighth. Astros relievers have given up the fewest home runs, while Indians relievers have given up the fifth most.

There are many more ugly numbers, but you get the idea.

So Bauer starts in the bullpen. The best-case scenario for the Indians would be they win one or both of the first two games, without having to use Bauer. That would allow Francona to unleash his pitching machine as the starter in Game 4.

The Indians' worst-case scenario? You don't want to know.

The Indians' safety net could be their elite starting rotation. If the starters can pitch deep into games, it would minimize the Indians' bullpen shortcomings.

Or, who knows? Maybe Allen and Miller suddenly recapture the rapture, pitch like they did in 2016 — and shoo the elephant out of the room.

Indians' ALDS roster nearly set; Tomlin doesn't make the cut, Davis not assured of spot

Tom Withers | The Associated PressPublished on Oct. 4, 2018 | Updated 7:36 a. m.

CLEVELAND — Rajai Davis has his name cemented in October baseball lore.

But it might not be on Cleveland's playoff roster this year.

Indians manager Terry Francona has one spot left on his 25-man roster for the AL Division Series against the Houston Astros and it will go to either Davis or utility infielder Erik Gonzalez.

"We're debating the last spot," Francona said Wednesday. "We're going back and forth."

The Indians will open the ALDS in Houston on Friday and Francona must submit his roster to Major League Baseball by 10 a.m. that morning for the best-of-five series.

Many of the other tough decisions were made days ago, and now Francona and his coaching staff have to decide whether to keep Davis as the club's sixth outfielder or go with Gonzalez, who can play anywhere in the infield.

"Gonzie gives you a little bit of a safety net if something happens to somebody," Francona said. "Raj gives you the ability to maybe influence the game with his legs, as we've seen. So, we're all just trying to figure out what's the right thing to do."

Davis has also shown he can influence a game — and maybe a season — with his bat.

The veteran is best known for hitting a tying, two-run home run in the eighth inning of Game 7 of the 2016 World Series against the Chicago Cubs. Davis' dramatic, line-drive homer off closer Aroldis Chapman pulled the Indians even before they eventually lost in 10 innings as the Cubs ended their 106-year Series title drought.

Davis spent last season with Oakland and Boston before re-signing with Cleveland as a free agent in February. He batted .224 with 21 stolen bases in a reserve role.

Gonzalez has been cleared from concussion protocol after he was struck in the helmet with a pitch last week in Chicago. The 27-year-old played in 81 games for the Indians and batted .265 with one homer and 16 RBIs.

Francona's decision could come down to whether it's more important to have an extra infielder if either All-Star Francisco Lindor or Jose Ramirez gets hurt. Gonzalez can play shortstop or second base.

"If Frankie went down and he didn't go down enough to be a DL, it's kind of an issue," Francona said. "But do we gamble a little bit and think that Raj might be able to change a game with his legs?"

Francona will carry 11 pitchers — three left-handers — as the Indians try to dethrone the defending World Series champions, who went 4-3 this season against Cleveland.

He'll use a three-man rotation of Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco and Mike Clevinger, who will start Game 3 in Cleveland. Starters Trevor Bauer and Shane Bieber will be in the bullpen for Games 1 and 2 in Houston, and depending on if they are used in the first two games, one will start Game 4 — if the series goes that long.

Cleveland's other relievers: Cody Allen, Dan Otero, Adam Cimber, Andrew Miller, Oliver Perez and Brad Hand.

Francona said one of the toughest decisions was to leave off veteran right-hander Josh Tomlin, the club's longest-tenured player.

"He's one of the best teammates I've ever seen in my whole career, and that doesn't change," Francona said. "But we tell the guys day one that we're going to do what is best for our team. Some conversations are harder than others, and that one was definitely hard, but we also don't claim to be right 100 percent of the time. What we try to do is be respectful, do our homework and be honest.

"Sometimes that's the best you can do because some of the conversations are hard."

"He's earned our trust." On Shane Bieber's swift rise to the Tribe's postseason roster by Jordan Bastian

Shane Bieber was in the early portion of his offseason, following a whirlwind summer.

In June, the pitcher was selected in the fourth round of the MLB Draft by the Indians, and then helped UC Santa Barbara make a run to the College World Series. After joining short-season Mahoning Valley, Bieber posted a 0.38 ERA across his first nine professional appearances.

Now, Bieber was at home in California, watching the Indians take on the Cubs in a World Series that began in October and ended in November.

“That was crazy. I was going nuts,” Bieber said on Wednesday. “That was the year I just got drafted. [The Majors] seemed really far away, but it was an exciting time. I was pulling for them. That was a crazy experience, but it didn’t seem that close.”

Two years later, Bieber is two days away from hearing his name announced on the October stage. The righty will begin in the bullpen for the American League Division Series against the Astros, but will be in the mix for a Game 4 start (if necessary), depending on how Cleveland utilizes its pitching in the first few games.

It has not taken the right-hander long to climb from the College World Series tournament to the actual World Series tournament. Bieber has excelled at each stop up the Minor League ladder—to the point that, as manager Terry Francona jokes, the pitcher was hidden from Tito’s view.

Francona had heard about this Bieber kid, but the righty never made the trip from Minors camp to the big league side during Spring Training prior to this season. The manager said that was intentional on the part of Chris Antonetti, the team’s president of baseball operations.

“Chris didn’t bring him to Spring Training,” Francona said, “because he knew I was going to keep him. So, he’s been on [the radar] pretty heavily. Chris and those guys thought he would impact us this year. And he thought if he brought him to Spring Training, we were going to want to keep him. I think they wanted to let him pitch a little bit more.”

Pitch, Bieber did.

The 23-year-old righty started this season with 28 strikeouts and zero walks in his first four starts with Double-A Akron, posting a 1.04 ERA in 26 innings. That followed a 2017 showing in which Bieber went 10–5 with a 2.86 ERA and 162 strikeouts vs. just 10 walks in 173.1 innings.

After five stellar starts at Akron in April, Bieber was promoted to Triple-A Columbus in May. In his first five outings with the Clippers, he had 31 strikeouts, two walks and a 1.05 ERA in 34.1 innings. On May 31, Bieber was called up to the Indians for a spot start against the Twins.

For Bieber, it was not only exciting to join a club that was in the middle of a sustained period of contending at the big league level. It was also eye-opening to see the way the organization grooms its pitchers in the Minor Leagues, and then does not hesitate to reward success. And, as Bieber looks around Cleveland’s clubhouse, he also sees examples of organizational patience.

“Seeing how developmental they are right away,” Bieber said, “from the second I got drafted and signed, and going to Mahoning and seeing how much they value their farmhands, how much of an emphasis on developing guys, because they have to, that meant a lot to me.

“To see this team and how everybody has come up—obviously, there’s been some trades and some free agents and all that stuff—but the majority of this club is homegrown. It’s pretty cool getting drafted by a team that’s a contender that knows how to do things right and develop their guys from the bottom to the top.”

Overall in the Majors this season, Bieber has gone 11–5 with a 4.55 ERA in 20 games (19 starts). Across 114.2 innings, the right-hander has piled up 118 strikeouts compared to 23 walks. He blends the type of precision featured by Josh Tomlin, but adds multiple ticks of velocity (Bieber’s four-seamer was 93 mph on average this year, per Statcast) to the equation.

There have been bumps in the road—mostly stemming from turning MLB lineups over multiple times. Opponents turned in a .269 OBP and .412 SLG against Bieber the first time through, but those marks rise to .333/.414 the second time through and .346/.563 the third time.

Tomlin is no stranger to that issue and offers a resource only a few lockers away. The veteran carved out a career through pinpoint command, but needed to rely on sequencing to turn lineups over. Tomlin has also mentioned the merits of finding moments to intentionally throw a ball in order to set up other pitches.

“When a guy throws that many strikes,” Tomlin said, “hitters can kind of get comfortable, especially the second and third time through, where you’ve pounded them with strikes. Maybe you’re not moving their feet, maybe you’re not moving their eye levels a little bit. But, you’re good enough to command the strike zone for a long period of time.

“Once you start getting 50, 60, 70 pitches and you’re still trying to throw strikes, maybe those strikes that were more on the edges and more in the middle now, instead of painted or just a tad bit off. I think he could benefit from that, maybe throwing a ball out of the zone—just a tick out of the zone.

“You don’t want to throw a non-competitive pitch where it doesn’t matter, but maybe throwing his little two-seamer that’s just off the plate and then kind of come back to the hitter or tunnel something off that, maybe would be very beneficial for him, for sure.”

Over the course of his Minor League career, Bieber has 260 strikeouts against 19 walks. That equates to an incredible 13.68 strikeout-to-walk ratio. If you look at some of the great strike-throwers in history, it’s difficult to find anyone near Bieber’s paltry walk rate of 0.6 per nine innings as a Minor Leaguer.

Here’s a sample of the Minor League walk rates of some all-time great strike-throwing pitchers:

Cliff Lee: 4.1

Corey Kluber: 3.6

Clayton Kershaw: 3.5

David Price: 3.2

Curt Schilling: 3.0
Roy Halladay: 3.0
Greg Maddux: 2.7
Roger Clemens: 2.3
Mike Mussina: 2.0

Tomlin, whose career 1.3 BB/9 ranks 23rd all-time among MLB pitchers with at least 800 innings in the big leagues, had a 1.8 walk rate as a Minor Leaguer. Bieber's 5.13 strikeout-to-walk ratio is a club record for a rookie with at least 10 starts. It's seventh all-time in MLB history among rookie starters (min. 10 starts) since 1900.

Mussina is an interesting name on that list in relation to Bieber. They are both righties with similar builds. Bieber reached The Show at 23, Mussina at 22.

In his Minor League career, Mussina had a 2.38 ERA in 189 innings with 8.4 K/9, 2.0 BB/9, 7.5 H/9, 0.6 HR/9 and a 1.06 WHIP. Bieber: 2.24 ERA, 277 innings, 8.4 K/9, 0.6 BB/9, 8.2 H/9, 0.4 HR/9 and a 0.98 WHIP. Mussina is arguably a Hall of Famer. Maybe Cleveland has something here.

That comparison and conversation can be re-evaluated in, oh, 15–20 years or so. For now, the Indians are just happy to have found another piece to their rotation puzzle, and an arm the team feels it can trust to stay poised and throw strikes under the pressure of the October lights.

"He deserves it," Francona said of having Bieber on the postseason roster. "He has all the things we've talked about all year long. The way he's competed. He's earned our trust. I think it gets exciting when you start thinking about his future."

With the playoffs looming, Bieber took the mound Tuesday during the team's intrasquad game. The Indians cranked up the sound system at Progressive Field, pumping in crowd noise to fill the empty ballpark. The rookie toed the rubber against Jose Ramirez, who is in the conversation for the AL MVP Award for his dynamic showing this season.

Bieber, who recently defeated Ramirez in Mario Kart, slipped into a 3–0 count against the slugger.

"I'm like, 'Man, he's 100 percent swinging here,'" Bieber said with a laugh. "I was like, 'It's a scrimmage. I'm not going to walk him on a 3–0 curveball or something like that.' So, I was like, 'Here it is.'"

And there it went, crashing into the empty right-field seats.

Unofficially, that was Ramirez's 40th homer of the season.

"I'm glad I could be a part of it," Bieber quipped.

Having Bieber be a part of this is precisely what the Indians want.

"As far as winning a playoff game," Francona said, "believe me, we wouldn't have put him on if we didn't think he was going to help us."

October hero Davis not assured spot on Indians' ALDS roster

The Associated Press

CLEVELAND (AP) -- Rajai Davis has his name cemented in October baseball lore.

But it might not be on Cleveland's playoff roster this year.

Indians manager Terry Francona has one spot left on his 25-man roster for the AL Division Series against the Houston Astros and it will go to either Davis or utility infielder Erik Gonzalez.

"We're debating the last spot," Francona said Wednesday. "We're going back and forth."

The Indians will open the ALDS in Houston on Friday and Francona must submit his roster to Major League Baseball by 10 a.m. that morning for the best-of-five series.

Many of the other tough decisions were made days ago, and now Francona and his coaching staff have to decide whether to keep Davis as the club's sixth outfielder or go with Gonzalez, who can play anywhere in the infield.

"Gonzie gives you a little bit of a safety net if something happens to somebody," Francona said. "Raj gives you the ability to maybe influence the game with his legs, as we've seen. So, we're all just trying to figure out what's the right thing to do."

Davis has also shown he can influence a game - and maybe a season - with his bat.

The veteran is best known for hitting a tying, two-run home run in the eighth inning of Game 7 of the 2016 World Series against the Chicago Cubs. Davis' dramatic, line-drive homer off closer Aroldis Chapman pulled the Indians even before they eventually lost in 10 innings as the Cubs ended their 106-year Series title drought.

Davis spent last season with Oakland and Boston before re-signing with Cleveland as a free agent in February. He batted .224 with 21 stolen bases in a reserve role.

Gonzalez has been cleared from concussion protocol after he was struck in the helmet with a pitch last week in Chicago. The 27-year-old played in 81 games for the Indians and batted .265 with one homer and 16 RBIs.

Francona's decision could come down to whether it's more important to have an extra infielder if either All-Star Francisco Lindor or Jose Ramirez gets hurt. Gonzalez can play shortstop or second base.

"If Frankie went down and he didn't go down enough to be a DL, it's kind of an issue," Francona said. "But do we gamble a little bit and think that Raj might be able to change a game with his legs?"

Francona will carry 11 pitchers - three left-handers - as the Indians try to dethrone the defending World Series champions, who went 4-3 this season against Cleveland.

He'll use a three-man rotation of Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco and Mike Clevinger, who will start Game 3 in Cleveland. Starters Trevor Bauer and Shane Bieber will be in the bullpen for Games 1 and 2 in Houston, and depending on if they are used in the first two games, one will start Game 4 - if the series goes that long.

Cleveland's other relievers: Cody Allen, Dan Otero, Adam Cimber, Andrew Miller, Oliver Perez and Brad Hand.

Francona said one of the toughest decisions was to leave off veteran right-hander Josh Tomlin, the club's longest-tenured player.

"He's one of the best teammates I've ever seen in my whole career, and that doesn't change," Francona said. "But we tell the guys day one that we're going to do what is best for our team. Some conversations are harder than others, and that one was definitely hard, but we also don't claim to be right 100 percent of the time. What we try to do is be respectful, do our homework and be honest.

"Sometimes that's the best you can do because some of the conversations are hard."

Make-up game: Indians stars try to erase October '17 failure

The Associated Press TOM WITHERS (AP Sports Writer)

CLEVELAND (AP) -- October's immense pressure can breed stars or break them. Last year, it cracked Francisco Lindor and Jose Ramirez.

Dynamic from April until September, Cleveland's All-Star duo was dreadful in the postseason.

"It was surprising to me," Indians center fielder Jason Kipnis said as the club prepared to face Houston in the AL Division Series. "Only because of how consistently good they are."

After posting offensive statistics not recorded by teammates in decades, Lindor and Ramirez both fell into prolonged postseason slumps at the same time - the worst time for Cleveland. The pair batted a combined .105 (4 for 38) with 13 strikeouts, and their ineptitude was one of the main reasons why the Indians coughed up a 2-0 series lead and were eliminated in five games by the New York Yankees.

The end was stunning. So was watching Lindor and Ramirez flail at pitches.

It can't happen again, not if the Indians have any plans of unseating the defending World Series champion Astros or ending their own 70-year Series title drought.

Make no mistake, Lindor and Ramirez make the Indians go. They're the pistons to an offensive engine that has sputtered at times this season. Both possess surprising power and speed and are as capable of working a walk as driving a ball into the gap for a double.

Ramirez led the Indians with 39 homers, Lindor connected for 38 and the infielders became the first switch-hitting teammates in history to reach 30 homers in the same season. Tack on their other numbers from last season, and Ramirez and Lindor are the first teammates to get at least 80 extra-base hits in consecutive years since 1936-37.

The first? Only Hall of Famers Lou Gehrig and Joe DiMaggio. And Lindor, 24, and Ramirez, 26, may just be getting started.

But while they've put together remarkable regular seasons, the postseason is when greats are judged, and Lindor and Ramirez didn't measure up last October.

Lindor's grand slam in Game 2 helped the Indians rally for a 9-8 win in 13 innings, but he got just one more hit in the series and finished 2 of 18 (.111) with six strikeouts. Ramirez was as bad, going 2 of 20 (.100) and fanned seven times.

They shrunk, and the Indians withered with them.

"We started to uncharacteristically chase (pitches) down and up," manager Terry Francona said. "The hope is you don't chase anywhere, but if you're going to chase, maybe just have it be one, not both. Then when both of them kind of struggled together it was such a big part of our offense, it hurt us."

Cleveland's lineup is deeper this time around. Starting with Lindor leading off to Kipnis in the No. 9 hole, the Indians have power from top to bottom. Also, the recent addition of former MVP Josh Donaldson gives Francona another player capable of changing the game with one swing.

Lindor and Ramirez aren't alone.

"I don't think these guys are feeling any more pressure to do more than they're capable of doing," said Donaldson, who came over in August from Toronto. "At the same time, it takes a total team effort. You watched the wild-card game last night. It took a guy that comes in the 13th inning, gets a base-hit up the middle. The guy hit .170 all year. The playoffs I've been in, a lot of the times the guys that are having the success aren't probably the guys you're looking at to have it.

"So it's important for everybody to be sharp, be ready."

It all starts with Lindor and Ramirez, and Francona is confident they can handle that burden.

"They've been through so much already at a young point in their careers that these games aren't going to be too big for 'em," he said. "We don't have a crystal ball, you don't know how anybody's going to do. But I don't think it's going to be because of the magnitude of the game."

There is some concern, though. Ramirez struggled over the final six weeks, batting just .185 and his slump probably cost him any chance of winning league MVP honors. But he showed signs of putting things together during the final series in Kansas City, where he admitted that chasing some personal milestones may have affected his swing.

Ramirez ended September looking much more like himself.

However, now is when appearances matter, and Kipnis said it's vital all the Indians step up.

"In October, you just need stuff to go your way and Jose is starting to get some better swings here of late and Frankie has been locked in for, oh, about 24 months, it seems like," Kipnis said. "So we're excited. I think the best thing we can do is have good at-bats around those guys and make it easier on them.

"If we get a guy on third with less than two outs for Frankie and he rolls over, instead of thinking 'I'm 0 for 1.' He's got an RBI and that's how you make it easier, by changing his mindset. And that's how we can make it easier on everyone - if we can share the weight of the load and just pass the baton down the lineup."

Diamond Dialogue: Debating 9 burning questions the Indians must answer in October

T.J. Zuppe Oct 3, 2018 6

CLEVELAND — It must be maddening.

Teams do everything they can to prepare for the postseason. They go over scouting reports. They think of plans and contingencies.

They spend countless hours constructing a roster, attempt to give their guys necessary rest down the stretch and try to maintain some momentum as the 162-game ride ends and the wild ups and downs of five- and seven-game series begin. And once those battles commence, all hell breaks loose.

A game predicated on large samples and winning the war of attrition comes down to a handful of outcomes, moments that can swing emotions in either direction.

A defensive miscue here. A missed pitch location there.

Or, perhaps, one big swing of the bat.

It's beautiful. It's horrific.

It's October.

"I know I say it all the time," Francona said, "we don't have a crystal ball. You don't know how anybody's going to do."

That's why the Indians manager doesn't spend much time fretting over the unknown. He takes comfort in the team's preparation in the week leading up to their playoff opener in Houston. He tries to account for every scenario. But at some point, he has to feel comfortable about the group they've assembled, allowing for games to play out as they will.

After all, the last thing he wants to do is frequently challenge the thin line between "being dumb and smart" by stressing over the randomness of it all.

"I think I always felt that way," Francona said. "I don't know if maybe people realized I felt that way. But I did. And again, I think it all started with the preparation of the series, where I was like, 'Damn, I feel pretty comfortable here.' And had never been there before. But we had prepared so well that it really kind of gives you a little bit of ease."

With that in mind, Zack, let's discuss some of the biggest themes that will determine where the Indians end up this October, shall we?

1. How reliable is their bullpen entering the postseason?

TJ: It was easier to take a positive stance on this before Cody Allen and Andrew Miller had a tough weekend in Kansas City, wasn't it?

Down the stretch, both were used in ways they wouldn't typically be deployed. The hope is that usage — things like appearing in blowout games or being called upon in specific back-to-back scenarios — will put them in the best position to get outs this month. We'll see.

Brad Hand has never appeared in the postseason, but he still enters October with the highest degree of faith attached to him (and keep in mind, the bullpen owned a 5.28 ERA before he arrived via trade and a 3.75 ERA after he was inserted).

And with Trevor Bauer available in the early games and Carlos Carrasco available later in the series, they're protecting themselves and appear to be focusing more on winning each day as opposed to planning too far ahead. I like that. I think that element was missing last year.

But the postseason, more than ever, has become a relief-heavy game. I don't know if they can plan on leaning on Allen and Miller like they did in 2016 — that duo logged 33 innings over three series — but if either struggles, that could be mighty tough to overcome.

The Astros are also full of tough right-handed hitters. That puts even more emphasis on the right-handed relievers they carry, guys like Allen, Adam Cimber and Dan Otero.

But how about we get more far specific with a bit of a different question ...

2. It's the bottom of the ninth, the Indians are clinging to a one-run lead and the top of the Astros' order is coming up. Which Tribe pitcher do you want on the mound?

Zack Meisel: How about ... Trevor Bauer? Look, we haven't yet seen the Miller-Allen-Hand law firm turned loose, so we don't know exactly how Terry Francona will deploy all three relievers when they're all healthy and the game actually carries some significance.

For a real answer, I suppose I'll say Hand, although it's possible that the most recent, all-too-vidid memories of Miller and Allen can't escape my head. Both guys struggled mightily in Kansas City. Miller surrendered five hits in an outing for the first time since September 2011, when he was a starting pitcher for the Red Sox.

But Miller and Allen combined to allow only one run during the entire 2016 postseason run, when Francona leaned heavily on his bullpen. The pressure shouldn't spook them. This will be Hand's first playoff rodeo. His numbers with the Indians sparkle, aside from a slightly boosted walk rate.

Overall, there's great potential for the Tribe bullpen. There are also a ton of question marks.

3. Will their outfield defense come back to bite them?

TJ: Their plan here is simple — attempt to grab an early lead, get through six innings unscathed, bring in the defensive replacements, particularly for Jason Kipnis in center field, then cross your fingers and hope for the best.

Kipnis hasn't made any critical mistakes in the outfield since the position switch (and I give him credit for handling a difficult change for a second time), but we did see him need every ounce of effort and sprint speed over the weekend to record a pair of fly balls MLB Statcast deemed to be relatively routine. We also saw Melky Cabrera misjudge a liner that cost Corey Kluber a pair of runs Saturday. And the defensive metrics have never been kind to Michael Brantley.

Of course, the overall decline of contact in baseball reduces the impact of outfield defense to an extent, but the Astros do own the majors' second-lowest strikeout percentage (only the Indians have struck out fewer times this season). They also own baseball's sixth-highest fly ball percentage. There's more risk in not prioritizing defense against a team that can put the ball in play. The Tribe will hope that the offense Kipnis and Cabrera provide outweighs the balls they might not run down.

Personally, I've wondered if it might make more sense to just start Greg Allen in center — he's been 14 percent above average in run creation in the second half — but if Kipnis puts a couple of balls over the fence at the right time, the gamble will be more than worth it.

4. Does it matter that the Indians have spent so much time feasting on the AL Central, unlike their potential playoff opponents?

Zack: I've never bought into teams' regular-season records against playoff teams. The Indians and Astros played all seven of their meetings in May. That means nada now.

That said, it will be strange for the Indians, who have seemingly been sleepwalking since their series in Boston in late August, to suddenly have an adrenaline boost.

As Kipnis put it: "When you get to playoff baseball, that's all you really want to play anymore. It's not like you just walk through the regular season, but there's less of a thrill to it just because you know what the games could feel like. I know a bunch of these guys have kind of been biting their tongues and waiting for these games, too, and we had our division locked up for a while and it's basically don't get hurt and feel good and be healthy and be ready for October and I know guys have been waiting for this for a while."

Still, the stakes are amplified for both sides. No matter how many quality opponents you play in the regular season, none of those battles matches a playoff level.

5. If Melky Cabrera hits a game-winning homer in Game 7 of the World Series, will you admit you were wrong about him?

TJ: Yes, in this very specific scenario, I will happily admit my concerns over Cabrera serving as their regular right fielder in the playoffs weren't warranted.

Actually, if we're being completely honest, Cabrera finishing with a 102 wRC+ and slightly above average OPS of .755 has already exceeded my expectations. He's been 22 percent better than the league average in the second half (.302/.363/.458) and has provided some needed punch against left-handed pitching, posting an .841 OPS.

The defense is still a larger concern, but if we're just focusing on Cabrera, the hitter, I think I'm already willing to admit a degree of wrong about his ability.

6. How will Mike Clevinger handle his first postseason start?

Zack: Two years ago, Francona noted how Clevinger treated a spring training start as if he were about to pitch in Game 7 of the World Series. He was pacing back and forth, fidgeting, sweating. He learned how to harness his adrenaline and his emotions, and that helped him on his way to logging 200 innings this season.

Over the weekend, though, I asked Clevinger if he would be pacing around like a madman before Game 3 of the ALDS (which he'll start). He paused for a second and then replied: "It's going to be pretty intense."

"That's what I've been trying to do the last five starts, is really normalize things, really try to focus in on each pitch," Clevinger said. "I think that's why I had a pretty good last month, is more so I wasn't thinking about tomorrow. I wasn't thinking about the next week. I wasn't thinking about if I'm going to help this or that. It's, this pitch, this out, and then wiped clean. I've even looked back at outings where I had good outings, but then I'd give up a two-run home run and lose my mind, and next thing you know I'd give up another run that inning or something. Lately, it's been really easy to clean the slate and know that, like, 'Hey, I've got the stuff that I'm going to get the next 20 guys out. If he got a two-run jimmy, I have the ability to go 15 hitless or 15 batters hitless right now.' It's just that kind of calm and collected and stay within the moment, not let it overtake you."

Last September, the Indians kicked Clevinger to the bullpen. He wasn't thrilled. So, he's been anticipating this opportunity for more than a year.

Clevinger has somehow flown under the radar this year, despite a 3.02 ERA, 200 innings and 207 strikeouts in what's really his first full season in the majors. He's one of 13 pitchers with 200 innings. He's one of 16 pitchers with 200 strikeouts. He's one of eight pitchers to reach both marks.

If not for the other three horses on staff, he'd probably receive more attention. But he's been as reliable and productive as the rest. (Also, he got a spur-of-the-moment tattoo Monday, of the nine planets and the sun, on the side of his forearm, wrist and left pinkie. It looks pretty cool.)

7. Is Josh Donaldson still capable of being a difference-maker?

TJ: They wouldn't have made the trade for Donaldson if they didn't feel good about that to some degree — GM Mike Chernoff discussed that in a recent Q&A with *The Athletic* — but I think we've seen enough following the late-August deal to believe he's capable of changing a game.

He posted a .920 OPS in 16 games with the Indians in September, and I was equally as impressed with his defense and arm strength. His average exit velocity in September was up from earlier in the season, his walk rate was more in line with the past few seasons and we saw his chase rate drop. Perhaps most important, his calf was tested a handful of times on the bases and he came away unscathed.

"It's a bat that can hit good pitching," Francona said, "and he's always got that one swing from being able to change a game."

He might not be the same player who won the AL MVP in 2015, but there's enough there to understand why they took on the risk of moving players around so late in the season.

Plus, how can you not dig what he said this week?

"Each and every day that I've been here, I'm preparing as if it's my last game," Donaldson explained. "When you have that mentality and you have that mindset, you don't let things build up. It's kind of, 'Here, this is what's on your plate.' And either you eat it or you don't. And I choose to eat as much as possible."

8. Does Corey Kluber need October redemption?

Zack: Don't ask Kluber, of course. He'll say that isn't how he's approaching this postseason. Many will say yes, though, and it's hard to argue otherwise.

If Kluber pitched like his normal self in Game 5 of the ALDS last year, who knows how long the Indians' postseason run would've lasted?

He'll start Game 1 on Friday afternoon and, if there's a Game 5, he'll take the hill again. The Indians need him to be himself. It would simplify the rest of the series and the pitching situation, and it would certainly comfort everyone's minds.

Kluber said over the weekend that he flushed last year's ALDS performance shortly after the Yankees dispatched the Tribe in five games. If it were still on his mind, he said, that would eat up some of the brainpower he could devote toward studying the Astros.

Even if he won't oblige, though, Kluber needs some redemption. Playoff performances have a way of lingering in everyone's memories. He has the chance to plant new ones in our heads. And for the Indians to advance, they're going to need their ace pitching like an ace.

9. Can the Indians advance if José Ramírez continues to slump?

TJ: We saw Ramírez take Shane Bieber deep in their intrasquad scrimmage Tuesday afternoon — a little payback for some recent “Mario Kart” losses to Bieber in the clubhouse — but that isn’t enough to erase his woeful September from our minds (.667 OPS, 83 wRC+).

Last year, outside of Lindor’s memorable grand slam in Game 2 of the ALDS, the Tribe’s dynamic duo all but disappeared — they went 4-for-38 in the five-game series — and that was noticeable over the final three games that sent the Indians to an early offseason.

So, I guess the answer is yes — but only if Lindor, Donaldson, Edwin Encarnacion and the rest of the offense carry the load. The beauty of these small sample sizes in the postseason is anyone is capable of leaving their fingerprints on a game.

But wouldn’t it just be easier if Ramírez’s bat heated to near nuclear levels again?

With all of that said, maybe Donaldson put it best: “That first game starts and all the stats get thrown out. It doesn’t matter anymore. It doesn’t matter if you felt like you had a good year or you felt like you had a bad year, you get a chance to go out and take advantage of an opportunity a lot of teams don’t have. And it’s up to each individual to take care of their own business.”

Being Trevor Bauer: From wanting to quit baseball to wanting a mantel full of Cy Young awards

Zack Meisel 3h ago 3

HOUSTON — At the Texas Baseball Ranch, in between morning workouts and afternoon throwing sessions, they relaxed at lunch and played Risk.

And yes, even on the app, the stalemates between Trevor Bauer’s contingent and Eric Binder’s Red Army consumed hours of their daily itinerary. In their spare time, Bauer and Binder compiled notes about lower-half pitching mechanics, preparing for a presentation they would deliver to an audience of about 150 people at the ranch.

That was Bauer in his element: studying the science of pitching, challenging his eternally hungry mind and interacting with others who similarly craved that sort of knowledge.

But that was also Bauer during a fragile stretch in his life. See, what makes Bauer so capable on the mound also tends to stand in his way. In November 2012, when Bauer and Binder presented their findings, Bauer’s career was at a crossroads. His toxic relationship with the Arizona Diamondbacks had reached a crescendo.

He contemplated quitting baseball.

The guy who, last winter, devoted part of his weeklong vacation in Iceland to working on his new slider, ceased his throwing regimen once the 2012 season expired. He eliminated baseball from his routine. He deflected thoughts about the sport, his career, his team, his personal goals and his future. For nearly two months, he morphed into a version of himself few would recognize today.

Those long-term visions of collecting Cy Young awards, influencing change in the industry and basking in World Series glory had vanished.

Six years later, only a José Abreu comebacker could spoil Bauer’s dream season. He had worked his way into the Cy Young conversation before he suffered a stress fracture in his fibula in mid-August in Chicago. (Bauer contends he would have won the award had he avoided the disabled list.)

He’s relieved with how everything has unfolded, and that includes the bumps in the road that surfaced after his split with Arizona.

After all, Bauer considered retiring in 2016.

This season has altered the trajectory of his career, though. His results on the mound have validated his process, have overshadowed those heated conversations with coaches, have answered all of those questions about whether his methods and his personality would translate to the majors.

“I feel like I’m just now scratching the surface,” Bauer told The Athletic.

Roberto Pérez would crouch behind the plate and flash a finger.

Nope.

Two fingers.

Nope.

Four fingers?

Nope.

Pérez often felt as though he couldn’t make a pitch suggestion that appealed to Bauer.

"I'd get offended by him shaking me off," the catcher told The Athletic. "It was hard. I used to ask everyone, like, 'What can I do with this guy?'"

As time passed, the process eased. Pérez has served as Bauer's personal backstop for much of the last few seasons. They know each other's tendencies, know the league better, know what works at the right time.

"He still does it," Pérez said, laughing, "but not as much. Now I know what he likes to do. It took me a while, but I stuck with him."

That's all Bauer has ever needed. A couple of weeks after the presentation at the Ranch, the Diamondbacks traded the right-hander to the Indians. Bauer stepped outside of Chipotle to take the call from his agent, and then returned to his seat and gobbled up the rest of his monumental burrito.

For Bauer, ditching the Arizona desert was essential. His relationship with the Diamondbacks rapidly disintegrated in the year and a half after the franchise selected him with the third overall pick in the 2011 amateur draft. During Class AAA Reno's playoff run in 2012, Bauer's manager requested a meeting in his hotel room, which he deemed to be an atypical demand. After consulting with his agent, Bauer declined. That about sealed his fate.

"It was so toxic there," Bauer said. "I wanted to quit baseball. I didn't want to play anymore."

Bauer noted there was "fault on both sides."

"I don't want to ever portray that I'm completely in the right," he said. "I recognize that I've done things wrong as well."

He said it's his tendency to sever ties when he's uncomfortable or displeased with his surroundings. If a friend strikes his final nerve, he cuts them out completely.

Bauer was confident he could build a life outside of baseball. He had an engineering background. He was driven. So, for nearly two months, he escaped his customary baseball-'round-the-clock habits.

"At that point, I was like, 'If this is how pro ball is, then I'm just done. I don't need this,'" he said.

And then, he landed in Cleveland.

"I was actually invigorated again to play and to work and to train," he said.

The top few buttons on Bauer's uniform have remained untethered during his recent outings on the mound. The fashion decision reveals his undershirt, which features his personal logo: a silhouette of him holding his patented shoulder tube, which he uses before starts to activate the necessary muscles.

In Kansas City last weekend, he asked an Indians media relations staffer about flaunting his logo during his postseason appearances. He knows the league rules, but he wanted the conversation on the record to protect the employee. He joked that the brand exposure would be worth a fine.

For the first time in his career, Bauer finally feels comfortable with his surroundings. He and Mike Clevinger wage competitive wars as if they're brothers. He has helped Shane Bieber navigate his way through his rookie year. When the club acquired Adam Cimber, Bauer sat down with the reliever and chatted at length about his submarine-style delivery.

Bauer is no longer afraid to impart his expertise, something he says wasn't always encouraged. It helps that the Indians have built an organization on an idea-sharing premise, from the president of baseball operations in the corner office to the intern in the cubicle.

About six weeks after the Indians traded for Bauer, they hired Binder as an advance scouting intern. Not only did Bauer receive a sorely needed change of scenery, but he had a familiar face in his new front office. The Indians appreciated Binder's background, with an education at Northwestern, some minor-league pitching experience and his work at the Ranch.

As for Bauer's reaction upon learning of Binder's hire?

"I was disappointed," he said. "He turned into a suit. I wear him out for it all the time."

Bauer was sad to see his buddy call it a playing career, but, really, he was thrilled that the Indians valued Binder's skill set, and he was intrigued with Binder's potential as an executive.

"I was like, 'He's going to be a GM by the time he's 40,'" Bauer said. "Probably not even 40. Probably, like, 35."

Binder, 32, has ascended to the role of director of baseball operations. Bauer has blossomed into one of the better pitchers in baseball.

For Bauer, it wasn't the smoothest path. He concedes it takes him a few years to settle into his surroundings, to develop rapport with his teammates and coaches. He endured similar growing pains in high school and college. He says he'll have issues everywhere he goes, because he's "a disruptor," because he craves new information and doesn't often follow tradition. He's shrewd, but he's stubborn, and that leads to debate and dissension from time to time.

"He's not afraid to push the envelope," Binder said. "He's not afraid to try things differently."

He dedicated his 2013 season to overhauling his delivery. The few years after that, he regularly flashed potential, but struggled to piece together that one, well-rounded season that plants a pitcher on everyone's radar. Josh Tomlin can recall watching Bauer throw upper-90s fastballs in the later innings during a start at Class AAA Columbus early in 2014.

"I'm watching this guy, like, 'How come you can't sustain that?' " Tomlin said. "He can now."

Along the way, Bauer battled his superiors, including a sometimes-detrimental relationship with Mickey Callaway. It boiled over at the start of the 2016 season, when Bauer was relegated to the bullpen. He planned to finish out the year, "out of respect to my teammates," but that was it.

"I was firmly committed," he said.

He imagines he would have spent a year or two doing something else, but that he would have tried to come back and pitch. He could only stay away for so long. After all, this is the guy who threw a bullpen session in Arizona a mere 36 hours after the Indians' 2017 season crumbled, a guy who was studying other hurlers' sliders and changeups before the Progressive Field grounds crew removed the postseason logos from the grass, a guy whose offseason work ethic prompted Pérez to call him "a freak."

Bauer didn't stay in the bullpen for long, though. His flirtation with abandoning his primary passion quickly dissipated thereafter.

"He was hardheaded," Pérez said, smiling. "He still is."

That's all in the past now. Bauer feels as though his words carry more weight when he converses with teammates or coaches about training methods or pitching approaches. In the winter, he crafted a new slider and changeup for his repertoire, additions that have aided his progress on the mound.

He wants to alter the industry, influence how teams develop pitchers. To do that, it certainly helps to have tangible results that illustrate how his methods work on the diamond.

Bauer ranked third among American League pitchers in WAR, despite missing six weeks because of Abreu's comebacker. He posted career-best marks in ERA (2.21), FIP (2.44), home-run rate (0.5 per nine innings), walk rate (2.9 per nine) and strikeout rate (11.3 per nine), and he earned his first All-Star nod.

"A lot of the goals that I have — career goals, changing the industry — have been accelerated," Bauer said. "It's an exciting time."

A capsule look at the Indians-Astros playoff series

The Associated Press Oct 3, 2018, 8:30 PM

A capsule look at the Indians-Astros playoff series [View photos](#)

Houston Astros' Tony Kemp douses teammate Jake Marisnick as Marisnick and Jose Altuve, right, participate in a television interview after the second baseball game of a doubleheader against the Baltimore Orioles, Saturday, Sept. 29, 2018, in Baltimore. Houston won 5-2. (AP Photo/Patrick Semansky)

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A look at the best-of-five American League Division Series between the Cleveland Indians and Houston Astros:

Schedule: (All times EDT) Game 1, Friday, at Houston, 2:05 p.m.; Game 2, Saturday, at Houston, 4:37 p.m.; Game 3, Monday, Oct. 8, at Cleveland, TBA; x-Game 4, Tuesday, Oct. 9, at Cleveland, TBA; x-Game 5, Thursday, Oct. 11, at Houston, TBA. (All games on TBS).

x-if necessary.

Season Series: Astros won 4-3.

Projected Lineups:

Indians: SS Francisco Lindor (.277, 38 HRs, 92 RBIs, 42 2Bs, 25 SBs), LF Michael Brantley (.309, 17, 76), 2B Jose Ramirez (.272, 39, 106, 34 SBs), DH Edwin Encarnacion (.246, 32, 107), 3B Josh Donaldson (.246, 8, 23 with Blue Jays and Indians), 1B Yonder Alonso (.250, 23, 83), RF Melky Cabrera (.280, 6, 39 in 78 games), C Yan Gomes (.266, 16, 48), CF Jason Kipnis (.230, 18, 75).

Astros: CF George Springer (.265, 22, 71), 2B Jose Altuve (.315, 13, 61), 3B Alex Bregman (.286, 31, 103, AL-best 51 doubles, 84 walks, 82 Ks), SS Carlos Correa (.239, 15, 65), 1B Yuli Gurriel (.291, 13, 85), DH Evan Gattis (.226, 25, 78), LF Marwin Gonzalez (.247, 16, 68), RF Josh Reddick (.242, 17, 47), C Martin Maldonado (.225, 9, 44 for Angels and Astros) or Brian McCann (.212, 7, 23 in 63 games).

Starting Pitchers:

Indians: RH Corey Kluber (20-7, 2.89 ERA, 222 Ks in league-leading 215 IP), RH Carlos Carrasco (17-10, 3.38, career-high 231 Ks), RH Mike Clevinger (13-8, 3.02, career-high 200 IP, 207 Ks), RH Trevor Bauer (12-6, 2.21, 221 Ks in 175 1/3 IP).

Astros: RH Justin Verlander (16-9, 2.52, AL-high 290 Ks and only 37 walks in 214 IP), RH Gerrit Cole (15-5, 2.88, 2nd in AL with 276 Ks in 200 1/3 IP), LH Dallas Keuchel (12-11, 3.74), RH Charlie Morton (15-3, 3.13).

Relievers:

Indians: RH Cody Allen (4-6, 4.70, 27/32 saves), LH Brad Hand (2-5, 2.75, 32/39 saves with Padres and Indians), LH Andrew Miller (2-4, 4.24, 37 appearances, fewest since 2013), RH Shane Bieber (11-5, 4.55 in 19 starts), LH Oliver Perez (1-1, 1.39 in 51 appearances), LH Adam Cimber (3-8, 3.42 in 70 games for Padres and Indians).

Astros: RH Roberto Osuna (2-2, 2.37, 21/22 saves for Blue Jays and Astros), RH Ryan Pressly (2-1, 2.54, 2 saves for Twins and Astros), RH Hector Rondon (2-5, 3.20, 15 saves), LH Tony Sipp (3-1, 1.86, 54 appearances), RH Collin McHugh (6-2, 1.99, 58 appearances), RH Will Harris (5-3, 3.49, 61 appearances), RH Josh James (2-0, 2.35), RH Brad Peacock (3-5, 3.46, 61 appearances), RH Joe Smith (5-1, 3.74, 56 appearances), RH Lance McCullers (10-6, 3.86 in 25 games, 22 starts).

Matchups:

First postseason meeting between these teams. ... Indians faced Astros twice in May, losing two of three games at Minute Maid Park before splitting four-game series with defending World Series champions in Cleveland. Indians were outscored 45-29 in those seven games. ... Cleveland won 8-6 and 10-9 slugfests over Houston in final two games, taking the finale on Greg Allen's walk-off homer in 14th inning. ... Indians batted just .229 against Houston pitchers. ... Lindor had major issues against the Astros, batting only .097 (3 for 31) and striking out seven times. His career average is just .201 vs. Houston. ... One bright spot for Cleveland's offense was Encarnacion, who batted .346 (9 for 26) with two homers, five RBIs and scored seven runs. He was only Indians regular to hit over .300. ... Kluber dominated in two starts, going 1-0 with 1.35 ERA and 17 strikeouts. ... Indians bench coach Brad Mills was Astros manager from 2010-12. ... Cleveland is 10-6 at Houston since 2014. ... Houston outscored Cleveland 45-29 during regular season. ... Indians ranked second in MLB with .259 batting average and Astros were seventh at .255. ... Astros led majors with 3.11 ERA and Indians were ninth at 3.77. ... Encarnacion batted .417 with two homers and four RBIs in 2016 ALDS for Toronto against Texas. ... Bauer, who recently returned from broken leg, might start Game 4 for Cleveland - but could be used out of the bullpen in the first three games. He missed more than a month late in season but looked good in nine innings over three appearances in September and should be ready. He ended the season ranked second in AL in ERA.

Big Picture:

Indians: Cleveland (91-71) waltzed to third straight AL Central title with sights set on October and possibly ending World Series championship drought dating to 1948 - longest current streak in majors. ... Indians failed to return to Series last year, blowing 2-0 lead in Division Series and losing to Yankees. ... Cleveland might be better prepared than ever for postseason with a superb starting rotation anchored by Kluber and a lineup strengthened by the late-season acquisition of Donaldson, the 2015 AL MVP. ... Lindor and Ramirez have been a dynamic duo again this season, combining for 77 homers, 198 RBIs and 59 steals. They're the first teammates to each get 80 extra-base hits in consecutive seasons since Yankees Hall of Famers Joe DiMaggio and Lou Gehrig in 1936-37. ... Indians are first team in major league history to have four pitchers reach at least 200 strikeouts. ... Bullpen was up and down all season, but Miller seems to be close to pitching like an All-Star again following three trips to disabled list. Cleveland manager Terry Francona might be able to mix and match in late innings with Miller, Hand and Allen. ... Donaldson's arrival pushed Ramirez from third base to second and strengthened infield defense. ... Kipnis had more time to adjust to playing the outfield after Ramirez's switch.

Astros: AL West champions for second straight year. Houston (103-59) set franchise record for wins and reached postseason for third time in four years under manager AJ Hinch. Astros are in playoffs for 12th time. ... Houston went 64-35 in first half but cooled off in second half (39-24). ... Verlander, Keuchel and Cole all finished in top 5 in AL in innings pitched. Astros became sixth team to do that and first since 1970 Orioles, who won World Series. ... Team acquired Osuna and Pressly before July 31 trade deadline to bolster bullpen. ... Hinch signed four-year extension in August to keep him under contract with club through 2022. ... Astros had better record on road (57-24) than at home (46-35). ... Altuve was on disabled list this season for first time in career, sitting out from July 26 to Aug. 21 with knee injury. ... Verlander led AL with 0.90 WHIP and was third with .200 opponents' batting average. His 2.52 ERA ranked third in AL and was his lowest since 2.40 mark in 2011 with Detroit when he won AL MVP and Cy Young Award. ... Bregman led offense with Correa and Altuve not performing as well as they have in past. The 24-year-old Bregman set career highs for homers, RBIs and doubles.

Watch For:

- Dynamite or Duds? Lindor and Ramirez make the Indians' offense go - or stop. The pair didn't show any flaws last season until October, when they went a combined 4 for 38 and struck out 13 times against the Yankees.

- Correa's Back. The top overall pick in the 2012 draft hit .268 with 13 homers and 49 RBIs in the first half this season but struggled with a back injury for most of the second half. He missed about six weeks and hit just .180 with two homers and 16 RBIs in 37 games after the All-Star break. He said he's feeling better now and hopes he can get back on track in the postseason.

- Bauer Power. The right-hander's ability to pitch multiple innings on short rest gives Francona a valuable weapon he won't hesitate to use against the Astros. Bauer will come out of the bullpen if either Kluber or Carrasco struggles in the first two games, and there's a chance Bauer could be used as either the closer or a bridge to the back of the bullpen.

- Morton's Shoulder. The right-hander spent time on the DL late in season with shoulder discomfort but made two appearances during the last week and appeared to have regained his velocity. He looked ready for the playoffs.

- Big Stage. Donaldson battled injuries before Toronto decided to trade him on Aug. 31 and get something in return before he hit free agency. The deal rankled other American League contenders, and now Donaldson has a chance in October to show he's still one of baseball's most dangerous hitters and perhaps create a lucrative market for himself this winter. He looked good in limited action at the end of the season, batting .280 with three homers and seven RBIs in 16 games. In five career postseasons, Donaldson has hit .292 with four homers and 13 RBIs.

For trio of Astros relievers, ALDS matchup with Indians brings familiar foes

By Jake Kaplan

Tony Sipp's purpose on the Houston Astros' ALDS roster is clear. As the lone left-hander in their seven-man bullpen, his assignments will most likely consist of entering to face one of two Cleveland Indians left-handed hitters: Michael Brantley and Jason Kipnis.

In a twist of baseball fate, it just so happens Brantley and Kipnis are two of Sipp's closest friends from his tenure with the Indians. And though Brantley usually maintains a serious expression when he faces Sipp, Kipnis has been known to break character as he steps in the box against him.

"He always tries to take my focus off," Sipp said, smiling. "If you notice every time I face him, he'll do my shimmy that I do on the mound to try to make me laugh."

Sipp has had success against both ex-teammates, albeit in a limited sample. He's gotten the better of Brantley, his Triple-A roommate, in all five of their career matchups and has limited Kipnis to two singles in eight plate appearances. But those battles will pale in importance to the ones that loom in the best-of-five series that begins Friday afternoon at Minute Maid Park.

Sipp, a 2004 Indians draftee, isn't alone in his level of familiarity with the Astros' first-round opponent. Depending on who wins their final bullpen spot, as many as three of their seven ALDS relievers could be former Indians. Joe Smith, who's on the roster bubble, and Héctor Rondón, a roster lock, also spent significant portions of their careers with the Cleveland organization.

Smith pitched for the Indians for five seasons (2009-2013), the first four of which he shared a bullpen with Sipp. For three spring trainings, both shared a clubhouse with Rondón, then an injury-plagued minor league starter. Smith, an Ohio native and resident, returned to the team at last year's trade deadline and said he found 13 or 14 familiar faces from his previous stint.

"I know last year, being on that side, we wanted to play Houston because we thought we were the two best teams in baseball. Obviously, we didn't make it past the Yankees and these guys ended up winning the World Series," said Smith, who signed a two-year, \$15 million deal with the Astros in December. "And this year, I feel like you can make an argument we're still the two best teams in baseball. I think we're the best team in baseball. But I know that with wanting to play [Houston] last year, they're going to be ready to play us and we're looking forward to playing them."

Sipp and Smith established themselves as major leaguers while members of the Indians. For part of their first stint as teammates, they roomed together in an apartment near downtown Cleveland. Brantley lived next door, and Kipnis stayed on another floor of the same complex. Daily card games on the team's road trips usually featured Sipp, Smith, Brantley and Josh Tomlin.

"[Brantley] bet me way back in the day that I wouldn't get 10 years of service time. And this is my ninth. I've just got to get another contract," said Sipp, who will be a free agent at postseason's end. "So, it'll be the inside joke, like he could very well be the reason I don't get this 10."

Rondón never made it to the majors with the Indians but spent eight years in their minor league system. They gave him his start as a 16-year-old from Venezuela and he made it to Triple A before two serious arm injuries stalled his ascent. Tommy John surgery in 2010 and a broken elbow in 2011 cost him almost three full seasons. When he became a minor league free agent in 2012, he quickly re-signed with the Indians. Days later, the Chicago Cubs selected him in the Rule 5 Draft.

"It's weird," said Rondón, who faced the Indians in the 2016 World Series as a Cub. When you sign with a team, he explained, you envision yourself pitching on the sport's biggest stage for that team. So, the Cubs-Indians series was "a dream come true but like [in] reverse. It's fun. It's fun to get that experience against those guys."

Smith was also on that '16 Cubs team but was left off all three of their postseason rosters.

"It was weird, man. It just hurt," he said. "I think any time since you're a little kid you're dreaming of pitching in the World Series. To be able to be on a team that actually reached the World Series but then not make that roster was tough. Because that's all you want to do. You just want to play in the postseason. That's when it's fun. That's what everybody dreams about. Ultimately, it's going to happen to some guys here. And it's going to be tough. All you can do is get ready in case something were to happen ... But it's hard. You just want to play. You just want to help the team win. And I know everybody in this clubhouse thinks they can help the team win in some aspect. But the depth of this team is absolutely crazy."

That depth — and specifically the emergence of Josh James — could leave the veteran Smith on the outside looking in against the Indians for another October. If included on the Astros' 25-man ALDS roster, the sidearmer would serve as a right-handed specialist to face righties Edwin Encarnación and Josh Donaldson, two more former teammates.

Sipp's spot is much more secure, and he knows the left-handed hitters in the Indians' lineup could be keys to the series. He said with a laugh he'd probably send Brantley a text before Friday to "tell him I'm coming for him."

"It's going to be fun. Because I know both [Brantley and Kipnis] are really good hitters, and you've got to bring your 'A' game," Sipp said. "But it'll be a little more than just a game going on. Like we both know we're getting text messages after the game if something good happened one way or the other."

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