

Indians erupt for 7 in 5th, hang on for win

By Aaron Rose MLB.com

TORONTO -- The Indians' offense broke out in the fifth inning, providing its pitching staff with a cushion it would badly need.

Cleveland plated seven runs in a two-homer, bat-around fifth inning that gave the Indians a lead they never surrendered in a 9-8 victory over the Blue Jays on Saturday afternoon at Rogers Centre.

Roberto Perez started the inning by taking a high fastball a projected 401 feet over the center-field wall -- according to Statcast™ -- for his second home run of the season. Three batters later, Michael Brantley crushed another high fastball to right-center field for a two-run go-ahead homer.

"That was good for him," Indians manager Terry Francona said. "It's been a struggle for him at the plate at times, but you look up on the scoreboard during the games he catches, I think we're 12 or 13 games over .500. That says a lot about him."

After Jose Ramirez popped out for the second out of the inning, Toronto's pitchers seemed to lose the strike zone. Three straight walks brought to the plate Jason Kipnis, who never took the bat off his shoulder and recorded an RBI walk. Then Perez smacked a bases-clearing double to center field. The inning came to an end when Greg Allen flied out to right field, but only after the Indians took an 8-3 lead.

"It's nice to contribute to the team. Sometimes when you're not performing well you feel like you're not part of the team, but it takes time," Perez said.

It was the second time in the series that the Indians scored nine runs against the Blue Jays and the sixth time this season they've scored seven runs or more in an inning, the most in the Majors.

The Indians' pitching staff needed every bit of the offense on a day when Adam Plutko and the bullpen didn't have their best stuff. Plutko surrendered five runs on nine hits over 4 2/3 innings. His afternoon came to an end after back-to-back homers by Randal Grichuk and Rowdy Tellez in the fifth inning.

"There were two shutdown-inning opportunities that I didn't capitalize on," Plutko said. "I felt like I could have put the game away right there if I could have thrown up a zero in the fifth. That didn't work out and that's why I think they hung around."

It was the fourth consecutive game in which Plutko was unable to record a quality start, and the outing raised his ERA to 5.35 on the season.

"When he misses his spots he really pays for it," Francona said. "When you don't have the velocity that maybe a Carlos Carrasco or Corey Kluber have, he's got to live on the outside of the plate and throw strikes. There's just a lot of deep counts."

Dan Otero didn't fare well either. After relieving Plutko in the fifth, he gave up a double to Kevin Pillar before ending the inning. He came back in the sixth, but after two quick outs, he walked Billy McKinney, then surrendered a double to Lourdes Gurriel Jr. and a two-run single to Kendrys Morales. After allowing one more hit, Francona decided he had seen enough.

Tyler Olson followed, but he loaded the bases by walking the only batter he faced. Neil Ramirez came in and ended the threat by forcing Pillar to fly out to center.

Ramirez returned in the seventh, but gave up a leadoff double that later came around to score to pull the Blue Jays to within one.

"I put them in a tough spot only going 4 2/3," Plutko said. "We can't do things the way we want to later in the game, so I put them in a tough spot early in the game."

Oliver Perez stabilized the bullpen, allowing just one hit over one inning pitched. He was followed by Josh Tomlin who recorded two outs and was awarded the win.

In the ninth, Cody Allen came in to protect the one-run lead. He surrendered a one-out double to bring the game-winning run to the plate, but he got the next two Blue Jays batters to fly out. It was Allen's 26th save of the season.

"He came in and made some really good pitches," Francona said. "There's obviously no wiggle room to make a mistake and he looked crisp, he threw his breaking ball, that was fun to watch."

Blue Jays starter Sean Reid-Foley was roughed up for six runs over 4 2/3 innings. He allowed five hits and five walks on 106 pitches.

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Plutko gets out of early trouble: Francisco Lindor couldn't handle a grounder to open the game, allowing McKinney to reach on an infield single. After a bunt single and a fielder's choice moved McKinney to third with just one out, Plutko forced Grichuk to hit a shallow fly ball to right that couldn't score the go-ahead run, then Plutko got Tellez swinging to end the threat.

"We started out the game pretty sloppy," Francona said. "We put him in a tough spot, and he pitched out of that first inning."

Allen's catch saves Indians' lead: With the game-tying run in scoring position, Morales crushed a ball from Oliver Perez to deep center field. The ball came off Morales' bat at 103.1 mph and had an 87 percent hit probability, according to Statcast™, but Allen tracked it down, sprinting back to the ball to make the catch and preserve the Indians' one-run lead.

"He hit that ball pretty good, I left that ball right in the middle I think. He looked like he was ready for that pitch," Oliver Perez said. "That was a really good catch for us."

SOUND SMART

The Indians won the game despite allowing 18 hits for the first time since Aug. 23, 2006. They are now 18-48 in games in which they are out hit.

UP NEXT

Mike Clevinger (11-7, 3.11 ERA) makes his second start against the Blue Jays this season at 1:07 p.m. ET on Sunday at Rogers Centre. The 27-year-old right-hander went just four innings allowing four runs against Toronto on April 13. He's pitched to a 1.82 ERA over his last five starts. Toronto sends rookie left-hander Thomas Pannone (1-1, 4.58) to the mound. Pannone has bounced between the rotation and the bullpen this season and has a 6.10 ERA in his two Major League starts.

Miller has another 'pen session, says he's ready

By Aaron Rose MLB.com

TORONTO -- Andrew Miller thinks he's over his left shoulder injury and ready to get into some Major League games.

Miller threw 33 pitches off the bullpen mound Saturday afternoon and tried simulating a game setting. The 33-year-old threw a bullpen session on Thursday, and Indians officials said at the time they would continue to evaluate him. Miller been out since Aug. 29 and was eligible to come off the 10-day disabled list on Saturday.

"I think the next step is to get used in a game and handle that adrenalin again," Miller said. "I don't know exactly what we'll do. It hasn't been that much time. I think I'd like to get into some games, I'd love to pitch here."

The Indians wrap up their series with the Blue Jays at 1:07 p.m. ET on Sunday.

Donaldson almost ready

The Indians are expecting to activate Josh Donaldson for their upcoming series in St. Petersburg vs. the Rays. The 32-year-old third baseman will play one more rehab game in Double-A with the Akron RubberDucks on Saturday afternoon before joining the team.

"He's going to go back to Cleveland, then fly down to Tampa and work out down there at a place he goes to," Indians manager Terry Francona said. "Then he'll join us down there. I think we can activate him on Tuesday."

Brantley back in lineup

Michael Brantley batted second and played left field on Saturday afternoon for the Indians. It was the 31-year-old's first start since sustaining a left foot injury during Wednesday afternoon's win in Kansas City.

The adjustment that has given Mike Clevinger's fastball increased life and the mentality behind it

T.J. Zuppe 2h ago 2

Mike Clevinger glanced in for the sign and agreed on an inside heater. Pleased with the pitch choice, the long-haired righty started into his jerky-jerky delivery, kicked his left leg high, then rocked into his motion. The ball exploded out of his hands and darted in toward the left-handed hitter, almost grazing the Reds batter.

Moments later, the ballpark scoreboard posted the pitch speed ... 97 mph.

"Whoa! Where did that come from?" Clevinger said to himself in amazement. It wasn't so much the speed that surprised him, but more so the ease with which he achieved it.

"Shit, that was pretty hard. That was cool. I've got to be able to find this consistently."

It might not have been apparent during Clevinger's six-walk performance at Great American Ballpark last month, but the 27-year-old hurler was making some important strides. Sure, nothing about his performance this season has ever suggested a complete delivery overhaul was necessary — former pitching coach Micky Callaway used to stress if it's not broke, don't fix it — but Clevinger felt some subtle changes would help unlock more of his full ability.

"I was pitching to the slope instead of using my mechanics down the slope (of the mound)," Clevinger told The Athletic. "Instead of carrying my mechanics down the slope, my mechanics were following the slope. I was just kind of diving forward. I wasn't using all the power and leverage I had."

As he dove toward the hitters, his arm was lagging behind. And to achieve the type of velocity he prefers, it required closer to maximum effort.

"I wasn't using the right muscles," Clevinger said. "I was taxing my body really, really fast, because I was throwing with all arm muscles. Once those got tired — and that happens fast because you're just using that — it was like my velocity dipped."

Clevinger wasn't pleased with how he struggled to maintain speeds in the later innings.

"I set myself up to get seen better," he said. "But that's why I thought it was something that needed to be changed. I definitely thought I had the strength and durability to go 94-97 (mph) for 110 pitches. It was just finding how to do that, finding how to get my body to do that."

A quick check of his average fastball velocity confirmed Clevinger's thoughts — by the time hitters were facing him a third time, his average heater had dipped by over one full tick (per Brooks Baseball).

Times Through the Order (through Aug. 1)

1: 94.61 mph

2: 94.09 mph

3+: 93.45 mph

Not everyone can keep their stuff as long as Clevinger's teammate, Trevor Bauer, but if Bauer had any tips, he was eager to hear them. Clevinger indicated the two had discussed some possible mechanical changes as far back as last season, but midway through this year, the righty began to implement them.

"There's a lot more in there than I was producing," Clevinger said. "I've even had that in the past. I was just losing it because I wasn't using my body to throw."

Clevinger focused on using the full strength his body created, putting an emphasis on using his right hip correctly and maintaining a better balance through his delivery. He began seeking an increased extension on his pitches — essentially, releasing the ball slightly closer to home plate — and "getting through the ball" instead of sagging behind.

But it's hard enough to make those sorts of adjustments in the offseason. Clevinger, who was already pitching well, was attempting to do it on the fly. And just as he began to introduce those changes, his command deserted him against the Reds.

"That was like the scary part," Clevinger said. "We knew what I needed to change, but after that first time changing it, I walked six. I was like kind of concerned a little bit. But then I had to keep looking at the positives. I went back and looked. I was like at 2.4 more inches of release point, I was getting through my hips better. And my spray chart was good. It was like I was missing by a tick besides a few I pulled almost to their dugout. And I was like, 'Got to stick with the plan and find the positives,' because the velo was up consistently throughout the game."

According to Statcast, that Aug. 13 win over the Reds featured his second-highest average fastball velocity of the season. Five of his top-nine average velocity games of the season have come since he implemented those adjustments.

On top of the added heat, he's posted a 1.72 ERA over his past six starts, and his velocity has been more stable later in games.

Times Through the Order (since Aug. 13)

1: 95.18 mph

2: 94.63 mph

3+: 94.52 mph

"It worked fast," Clevinger said. "But, it was still scary. You still have that doubt like, 'I need this to click now,' because I don't have time to have three starts with six walks like I had. I don't have time to do that. This has to click now."

The extension he hoped to achieve on his pitches can be partially read through perceived velocity, a metric available through Statcast that attempts to measure how fast a pitch appears by factoring in the velocity and release point.

By releasing the ball closer to the hitter and limiting reaction time, the ball might seem faster than it actually is. The data appear to indicate he's made some strides in gaining more extension on his offerings.

Prior to Aug. 13

Actual FB velocity: 93.3 mph

Perceived FB velocity: 94.01 mph

Since Aug. 13

Actual FB velocity: 94.3 mph

Perceived FB velocity: 95.24 mph

The righty appears to be more balanced through his delivery, not diving toward the hitter as his arm lagged behind. Those purposeful changes to his pitching motion have helped fuel an even better version of himself.

Positioned with a 3.11 ERA, 3.44 FIP, baseball's 12th-highest fWAR and 25th-best strikeout-minus-walk rate, Clevinger is just 23 2/3 innings away from his 200-inning goal and appears to be getting stronger. That reality paints a pleasant picture for the starts ahead, reducing any fear he once felt, transforming it into a more positive emotion.

"Now, it's almost like second nature in what we were trying to do," Clevinger said. "We're accomplishing it and seeing the results, and I'm able to pitch more. I can just stay solid and just keep a competitive nature versus thinking internally."

"I still think we're a little ways away from getting there, but we're taking huge steps."

Perez homers and has 4 RBIs, Indians outslug Blue Jays 9-8

The Associated Press

TORONTO (AP) -- In one productive inning, Cleveland catcher Roberto Perez snapped the longest homer drought of his career and boosted his season RBI total by 50 percent.

Perez hit his first home run since April 10 and drove in a career-high four, Michael Brantley had a two-run shot and the Indians outslugged the Toronto Blue Jays 9-8 on Saturday, helping Cleveland inch closer to clinching a playoff berth.

The Indians dropped their magic number to five for a third straight AL Central title.

All of Perez's RBIs came in Cleveland's seven-run fifth inning. He began the outburst with a leadoff drive off right-hander Sean Reid-Foley, snapping a 50-game drought. Three batters later, Brantley connected, his 15th. Blue Jays pitchers issued five walks in the inning, including four straight at one stretch, the last of which was a bases-loaded walk to Jason Kipnis. Perez followed with a three-run double.

"It feels good," Perez said. "I've been working hard every day, coming in and doing my routine, and it's paying off. It was just a matter of time. It's been a long season. Hopefully I turn it on from now on."

Perez raised his average from .148 to .157 and increased his RBI total from eight to 12.

"He put together one heck of a day," Indians right-hander Adam Plutko said. "Even behind the dish, he stopped a few balls late in the game. He did a great job today."

Brantley returned to the lineup after missing the previous two games because of a sore left foot and went 2 for 4 with two walks.

"We knew he was OK but it's always nice to have him," manager Terry Francona said.

Josh Tomlin (1-5) got two outs for the win and Cody Allen, Cleveland's seventh pitcher of the game, pitched around a one-out double in the ninth to earn his 26th save.

Randal Grichuk homered twice for the Blue Jays, his fourth career multihomer game, and Rowdy Tellez hit his first career homer. The Blue Jays lost despite outhitting the Indians 18-11.

"A little bit of a crazy game," Francona said.

Reid-Foley (1-3) made his fourth career start and allowed six runs and five hits in 4 2/3 innings. He walked a season-high five and struck out three.

"If I have to trip on a couple of curbs and learn from it, I still have to keep my head up and have fun," Reid-Foley said.

Justin Shafer relieved and threw 10 consecutive balls. Perez's bases-clearing double came on Shafer's 12th pitch.

Grichuk connected off Adam Plutko in the third, and he and Tellez chased Plutko by going back-to-back in the fifth. Grichuk's homers were his 20th and 21st.

The home run was Tellez's seventh extra-base hit, the most by any player over his first four games since 1913.

"It's one of those surreal moments that you just dream about," Tellez said. "It was pretty cool to do it here in front of the home fans."

Plutko matched his career worst by allowing five runs and gave up a career-high nine hits in 4 2/3 innings.

Aledmys Diaz had four hits for Toronto, including three doubles.

18 ISN'T ENOUGH

The Blue Jays lost a game in which they had 18 or more hits for the first time since a 10-inning road defeat to the Yankees on Sept. 22, 2007. The Indians won when allowing 18 or more hits for the first time since Aug. 23, 2006.

SEVEN UP

Cleveland has had six seven-run innings this season, including three against Toronto.

CRAZY EIGHT

Tellez is the first Blue Jays player with eight hits in his first four games. Danny Ainge, Aaron Hill, Lloyd Moseby and Travis Snider each had seven.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Indians: Josh Donaldson (left calf) made his second straight start at third base for Double-A Akron and went 1 for 3 in five innings. Donaldson will work out with the Indians in Tampa Bay on Monday and could be activated off the disabled list Tuesday.

UP NEXT

Indians RHP Mike Clevinger (10-7, 3.17) faces Blue Jays LHP Thomas Pannone (1-1, 4.58) in Sunday's series finale. Clevinger has won four straight decisions and is unbeaten since July 28 at Detroit. Pannone, a former Indians minor leaguer, will make his third major league start in place of injured RHP Marcus Stroman (blister).

Indians' Jose Ramirez in thick of AL MVP race

By Jeff Schudel, The News-Herald & The Morning Journal

One of the best races in the American League this season is the one for Most Valuable Player, and Indians third baseman Jose Ramirez is right in the thick of it.

Heading into games played Sept. 8, Ramirez had 37 home runs, 97 RBI, a .285 batting average, 95 runs scored, 29 stolen bases, 94 walks, 67 strikeouts and a .982 OPS in 138 games played.

OPS is a combined measure of a player's on-base percentage and slugging percentage.

Here are the numbers for other A.L. MVP candidates:

- J.D. Martinez, Boston Red Sox: 133 games, 39 home runs, 117 RBI, .335 batting average, 103 runs scored, five stolen bases, 61 walks, 134 strikeouts and a 1.046 OPS.
- Mookie Betts, Boston Red Sox: 122 games, 29 home runs, 71 RBI, .339 batting average, 112 runs scored, 27 stolen bases, 70 walks, 77 strikeouts and a 1.056 OPS.
- Mike Trout, Los Angeles Angels: 121 games, 31 home runs, 63 RBI, .306 batting average, 89 runs scored, 22 stolen bases, 111 walks, 109 strikeouts and a 1.064 OPS.
- Francisco Lindor, Cleveland Indians, 139 games, 33 home runs, 84 RBI, .285 batting average, 117 runs scored, 23 stolen bases, 62 walks, 97 strikeouts and a .891 OPS.
- Jose Altuve, Houston Astros: 119 games, 10 home runs, 52 RBI, .317 batting average, 72 runs scored, 15 stolen bases, 47 walks, 71 strikeouts and a .832 OPS.

Altuve was the A.L. MVP last year. Trout won the award in 2014 and 2016. Ramirez was third in MVP voting last season.

"I hope I have a chance to win it, but the numbers I have, I don't think I'll win the MVP," Ramirez said in the Indians clubhouse through an interpreter before the Tribe left for Toronto. "Last year I hit .320."

Among the numbers that stand out for Ramirez is his walk to strikeout ratio — 94 walks and 67 strikeouts. None of the others has walked more than he has struck out with the exception of Trout, and at 111/109 he isn't showing the discipline Ramirez is.

Terry Francona became the Indians manager in 2013. Ramirez played 15 games with the Indians that season after playing 113 games at Akron.

Ramirez split time between Columbus and Cleveland in 2014. He played 40 games in Columbus and 97 with the Indians in 2015. He did not become a full-time player with the Indians until 2016. To be in the MVP conversation his second and third full seasons in the Majors is a testimony to how valuable Ramirez is to the Indians even if he falls short again.

Francona was asked about how Ramirez has improved as a baseball player. He was not asked whether Ramirez should win the MVP race.

"When he first came up he was a very daring baserunner, which we loved," Francona said. "Now he's turned into one of the better baserunners in the league.

"He's grown into power while not sacrificing speed. You don't see that very often. He's a really good defender. He just sees the field so well. All the big things he does, he does all the little things, too. When there's a throw back from first, he always backs up. He's just always playing the game."

Ramirez will move from third base to second base when Josh Donaldson is activated, possibly as soon as Sept. 11. Francona says Ramirez is even better at second than he is at third.

Las Vegas has made Betts an overwhelming favorite to win the MVP race at minus-235, meaning one would have to bet \$235 to win \$100. Trout is plus-450, meaning someone betting \$100 would win \$450 if Trout is MVP. Ramirez and Martinez are each plus-500. Altuve is plus-1,000.

Indians report: Greg Allen's two key swing changes have led to improved second half

Ryan Lewis

CLEVELAND: The events that have shaped the outfield construction have gone against the Indians' blueprint all season.

Plan A was thrown out the window a long time ago, and the Indians are running out of letters.

Leonys Martin, acquired before the trade deadline from the Detroit Tigers to add stability to center field, is out for the 2018 season because of a bacterial infection that at one point was life threatening. Bradley Zimmer had a largely disappointing season that ended in July with arthroscopic shoulder surgery, which will have him sidelined until next year.

Lonnie Chisenhall is on the 60-day DL with a left calf strain, and his chances of returning in time to be ready for the postseason push are only dwindling. Tyler Naquin, likewise, was recently transferred to the 60-day disabled list with a right hip injury.

And on top of all of that, Jason Kipnis has now entered the outfield fold after a trade for Josh Donaldson shook up the Indians' infield. Kipnis was told that he must show that he's the best option in center field, and that the position won't be automatically his.

All of it has left Greg Allen in potentially a key role in the outfield with an opportunity for playing time but no guarantees. According to manager Terry Francona, Allen was told the same thing as Kipnis: earn the position.

"[They told me] just to keep playing," Allen said. "It's [Francona's] job to put the best nine guys out there to try to compete and win every day. So it was just to keep playing and see how things fall when it does happen."

To Allen's credit, he's finally put together the kind of stretch that can show a young player he belongs in the big leagues. In this particular case, he's at least given himself a chance even though it took a rocky path to reach his destination.

Bad month of June

Allen had an abysmal June, going 3-for-36 for an .083 average before being optioned to Triple-A Columbus. He was recalled on July 3 with a couple of clear goals in mind in relation to his mechanics. And since that time, he's been a productive hitter at the bottom of the Indians lineup and helped to fill the hole in center field left in the wake of an injury-riddled group of outfielders.

After hitting .209 in the first half of the season, Allen has hit .293 in the second half, raising his wRC+ from 40 to 87 — still not a great figure, but a significant improvement. He also dropped his K% from 24 percent in the first half to 13.1 percent between July and August, and his soft-hit percentage dropped from 17.8 percent to 10 percent.

"I'm telling you, he came up, I think the kid has shown some trust since then," hitting coach Victor Rodriguez said. "His confidence, going up and down and being in the major leagues and having success and then going down and coming back up and continuing to have success has helped him a lot. I think it's been the key for what he's done the last couple weeks."

It took two mechanical adjustments for Allen to find the kind of success he has over the last two months.

The first was eliminating his proclivity to abandon his lower half during his swing. Allen at times ran into a rut stemming from a problem of coming up during his swing, lifting his arms and shoulders and essentially swinging entirely with his upper half. Already not a hitter with a lot of power, it left him with too many light swings.

"Oftentimes, and especially when I struggle, the lower half really wasn't working," Allen said. "It was really kind of dead as far as utilizing it throughout my swing. Whether that's coming up out of my legs or using more of my upper half than the lower half, it's just keeping that in mind and trying to let my lower half be the driver when it comes to my swing."

A matter of trust

Allen had so many ups and downs that he began to have trust issues. He showed some promise early on this season and then suffered through one of the worst slumps of his baseball career.

"You get into spots where you feel like you're not seeing it well, so all of a sudden instead of allowing your body to allow those parts to work as they should and need to to have a good swing, you start trying to isolate and allow things down and really become a little more tentative than you normally would, which can cause you to do things like coming out of your legs and not using all the parts of your swing," Allen said.

But that was only part of Allen's personal renaissance at the plate. He also needed to shorten his swing, so he went through round after round of one-handed drills aimed at manufacturing a more compact swing.

It was only then that it all came together.

"He's a kid that needs to get on base and he needs to hit ground balls," Rodriguez said. "He's worked at it, and you have to give him credit."

Allen knew there were too many pitches — both in Cleveland and Columbus — that he wasn't getting to that he should. There were too many balls just fouled off instead of lined into the gap. For a contact hitter with speed, it was weighing him down.

"You tend to foul off balls or you're just kind of shaving off balls that you feel like you should be getting to, especially if they're mistakes or pitches in the middle part of the zone that you'd like to do damage on and you're just not getting to them," Allen said.

"All of that points to those little inefficiencies that guys can have in their swing. With a more compact swing, now you're taking advantage of them."

Allen now finds himself in something of a showdown with Kipnis to determine how playing time in the postseason might be divided up between them. At the very least, Allen must show that he can handle a platoon situation, finding his way into the lineup against left-handers.

To this point, he's made the proper swing adjustments to at least keep his name in the conversation

Akron Beacon Journal LOADED: 09.09.2018

Cleveland Indians' magic number falls to 5 as Kansas City's Jorge Lopez flirts with a perfect game in Minnesota

Joe Noga

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Kansas City right-hander Jorge Lopez retired the first 24 batters he faced Saturday in a 4-1 victory against the Minnesota Twins at Target Field. He carried a perfect game into the ninth inning before giving up a walk to Max Kepler and a base hit to Robbie Grossman.

Lopez fell short of recording the first perfect game in franchise history for Kansas City, but he did succeed in dropping the Twins to 16 1/2 games behind the Cleveland Indians and reducing the Tribe's magic number to clinch the American League Central Division to 5.

Any combination of Indians wins or losses by the second-place Twins that is greater than or equal to 5 will clinch a third consecutive division title and postseason appearance for Cleveland.

The Indians (81-61) continue their series against the Blue Jays on Sunday at 1:07 as Mike Clevinger faces lefty Thomas Pannone. Minnesota continues its series at home against Kansas City at 2:10 p.m.

You can calculate the first-place Tribe's magic number by starting with 162 (games in a season) and adding one, then subtracting the number of Indians wins and subtracting the number of losses by the second-place team.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 09.09.2018

Roberto Perez comes out of the shadows to lead Cleveland Indians to 9-8 win over Toronto

Paul Hoynes

TORONTO - Late in a lost season, Roberto Perez found a sliver of salvation on Saturday afternoon at Rogers Centre.

Perez started a seven-run fifth inning with a leadoff homer and ended it with a three-run double as the Indians hung on to beat Toronto, 9-8, and reduce their magic number to clinch the AL Central to five.

This season has not gone the way Perez planned. He spent much of the winter in Cleveland training to challenge Yan Gomes for the starting job at catcher. But Gomes has put together a strong year, leaving Perez in the shadows of the backup role.

Perez entered Saturday's game with one homer and eight RBI in 155 at-bats this season. In two at-bats in the fifth inning, he homered, doubled and drove in four runs.

"I've never had a game like that in the big leagues," said Perez. "I don't think I ever had one in the minors."

The Indians entered the fifth trailing rookie right-hander Sean Reid-Foley and the rebuilding Blue Jays, 3-1. Perez, who came into the game hitting .148, shocked the crowd by sending the first pitch he saw over the wall in left field. It was his first homer since April 10 against the Tigers.

Greg Allen followed Perez with a walk and Michael Brantley, back in the lineup after missing two games with a bruised foot, homered for a 4-3 lead. Reid-Foley, with two out, lost the strike zone and walked Edwin Encarnacion and Yonder Alonso, and was pulled.

Justin Shafer, another rookie, relieved and lost the zone entirely. He walked Melky Cabrera and Jason Kipnis on eight straight pitches to force home a run and make it 5-3. Perez followed with his double to the fence in center to clear the bases for an 8-3 lead.

"He led off with the home run, had the double for three more runs so that was good to see," said manager Terry Francona. "It's been a struggle for him at the plate at times this year, but I saw on the scoreboard today that we're 12 or 13 games over .500 in games he catches. That says a lot about him."

As the fifth inning rolled on, Perez was like a kid at Christmas thinking he may get one more at-bat.

"Of course, once you see those good results, you start getting that confidence," said Perez. "You already have that home run, then you have the three-run double. You want to keep driving guys in."

The big lead did not last because rookie Adam Plutko, for his second straight start, couldn't keep the ball in the park. He allowed consecutive two-out homers to Randal Grichuk and rookie Rowdy Tellez in the fifth as Toronto made it an 8-5 game and forced manager Francona to go to his shaky middle relievers.

Plutko, in his last two starts, has allowed six homers in 11 2/3 innings. "Bad counts and fastballs up," was Plutko's way of explaining the spree of homers.

Dan Otero relieved Plutko and got out of the fifth. The Indians stretched the lead to 9-5 in the sixth when Jose Ramirez scored from third on a wild pitch, but Toronto kept coming. Kendrys Morales, with two out, burned Otero for a two-run single in the sixth to make it 9-7.

Toronto made it 9-8 in the seventh on a double by Aledmys Diaz off Neil Ramirez. Oliver Perez relieved and got out of the inning thanks to a lead-saving catch by Greg Allen. Morales, with two on and two out, sent a drive to center that Allen caught at the fence.

"That was a big catch for us," said Perez, the man that threw the pitch.

Perez and Josh Tomlin worked their way through the eighth and Cody Allen came on in the ninth. Allen, working to a 3.00 ERA over his last 21 games, allowed a one-out double to Diaz, but retired next two batters for his 26th save.

"It's been all about being on time," said Allen. "Getting the ball out of my glove as fast as possible and finishing my pitches. It's really helped my curveball."

What it means

The Indians entered Saturday's game trailing Houston by eight games for the right to host the ALDS on Oct. 5. The Astros maintained that lead as they beat Boston, 5-3, on Saturday for their seventh straight win.

The pitches

Reid-Foley threw 106 pitches, 59 (56 percent) for strikes. Plutko threw 95 pitches, 62 (65 percent) for strikes.

Thanks for coming

The Indians and Blue Jays drew 35,353 to Rogers Centre on Saturday afternoon. First pitch was at 4:07 p.m. with a temperature of 61 degrees. The roof was open.

Next

The Indians end their season series against the Blue Jays on Sunday when Mike Clevinger (11-7, 3.11) faces Toronto left-hander Thomas Pannone (1-1, 4.58) at 1:07 p.m. SportsTime Ohio, WTAM and WMMS will carry the game.

Clevinger beat the Royals for his 11th win in his last start. He struck out 10 and allowed one run on three hits in six innings. His 2.32 ERA since the All-Star break is the fourth lowest in the league.

Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 09.09.2018

Nick Cafardo / SUNDAY BASEBALL NOTES / A Red Sox-Cubs World Series would be the perfect end to the season

By Nick Cafardo

Let's get way ahead of ourselves: Could this finally be the year of a long-awaited Red Sox-Cubs World Series?

The teams appear to be on a collision course toward that end. It would be the Theo Epstein/Jed Hoyer/Jason McLeod/Jon Lester/Brian Butterfield/Chili Davis Cubs against the Red Sox, where the aforementioned once worked.

The Cubs are likely the best team in the National League. The Red Sox are the best team in the American League. Everyone would love to see this matchup, including the national networks.

Davis, who oversaw the development of most of the Red Sox core hitters, is rooting for the matchup.

"It would be nice to experience a Red Sox-Cubs World Series," said Davis. "I follow those guys and enjoy watching them play. They've all grown into quality major league players. It would have been nice to have the additions that they made to the offense — J.D. Martinez and Ian Kinsler — in 2017 after we lost our big bomber, David Ortiz, to retirement. But even though we didn't I'm still very proud of the way they went about their days and finished first in a very strong 2017 AL East division.

Everything baseball every Monday-Friday during baseball season, and weekly in the offseason.

"They're a great group of players and a very professional group," Davis added. "I love them and wish them the very best. Not only the hitters but the pitching staff as well. Quality people."

Davis now oversees some impressive Cubs hitters, including MVP candidate Javier Baez.

"We have a fun, quality group. I couldn't have landed in a better place," Davis said.

Lester has commented he'd like nothing more than to face the Red Sox in the World Series. Lester has been gone from Boston since 2014, a Cub for four seasons.

He remembers fondly his rise in the Red Sox organization, the 2007 and 2013 championships he was a part of, and the Cubs winning their first championship in 108 years.

"I don't care who we play. But that would be fun," Lester told reporters at the All-Star Game. "Any time you have two storied franchises playing in the World Series, it makes it even that much more exciting.

"That would add a different dynamic for me personally. But just to be there again would be good."

The Lester/Cole Hamels tandem certainly rivals the Chris Sale/David Price duo in Boston. Epstein and Hoyer, in needing to replace the injured Yu Darvish, took a big risk in trading for Hamels, who had been struggling for more than a month with the Rangers. As bad as he was with the Rangers, he's been that good with the Cubs.

Baez has become the centerpiece of the Cubs. "He's the best second baseman I've ever seen and I played a lot of years with Dustin Pedroia," said Lester.

Lester was a teammate of Red Sox manager Alex Cora in Boston, so there'd be all kinds of links.

The Cubs, trying to hold off the Brewers for the NL Central title, have won 11 of their last 15 games.

Former Nationals second baseman Daniel Murphy, another key acquisition by Epstein, has played 13 games for the Cubs, and they are 11-2 in those games. Murphy is batting .316 (18 for 57) with four homers since the trade deadline deal.

In the last 20 games, Cubs starting pitchers are 9-4 with a 2.36 ERA. They've allowed just two homers in 114 $\frac{1}{3}$ innings. Chicago's closer, Brandon Morrow, 34, has been on the disabled list since July 18 with biceps inflammation. He may not be back this season. Pedro Strop is 10 for 12 in save opportunities

The Cubs may have to go into the postseason without a true closer after having Aroldis Chapman during their championship run and Wade Davis last season.

Falmouth's Steve Chisek, lefty Justin Wilson, Carl Edwards Jr., and Jesse Chavez could all get save chances based on matchups.

Tale of the tape Through Friday's games Red Sox Cubs

Record	97-45	83-57
Batting average	.268	.263
Home runs	183	152
Team ERA	3.64	3.68
Home runs allowed	149	136

SOURCE: MLB

Both teams are high-character and have high-character managers in Joe Maddon and Cora. Both are player-oriented managers who utilize platoons and analytics in making out lineups.

The Red Sox and Cubs are 1-2 in the majors in team batting average, but the Red Sox have scored almost 100 more runs. The Red Sox have the best OPS (.793), while the Cubs are fourth. In team ERA, the Red Sox are fourth overall and the Cubs seventh. The Red Sox and Cubs are fifth and sixth in relievers' ERA, and sixth and 11th in starters' ERA. The Sox are eighth in home runs, the Cubs 19th, so Boston has the power advantage.

We can go on and on. There's Fenway vs. Wrigley. The Green Monster vs. the ivy.

Two iconic teams that have broken their respective curses.

Lester vs. Sale in Game 7.

Wouldn't it be nice?

PERSONNEL FILE

Playoff roster will be a difficult call

A good model for how the Red Sox might handle their postseason roster is looking at what the Astros did last season. No question Alex Cora has adopted many of the Astros' ways in roster management, and why not? The Astros won it all. Of course the personnel is different, but in some ways similar.

The Astros used 11 pitchers, three catchers, six infielders, and five outfielders in a five-game Division Series against the Red Sox. Once they advanced to the ALCS against the Yankees in a seven-game series, they went with 12 pitchers and 13 position players. The Astros added pitcher Collin McHugh, whom they had left off the ALDS roster. The Astros kept the same roster for the World Series.

Whether to keep three catchers on the roster, as the Astros did, will be a dilemma for Cora and president of baseball operations Dave Dombrowski. Christian Vazquez has gotten some time behind the plate lately, so does that mean the Red Sox will go with three?

If the Red Sox go with 11 pitchers, let's speculate who they would be. Assuming there are four starters — Chris Sale, David Price, Rick Porcello, and Eduardo Rodriguez — would Craig Kimbrel, Joe Kelly, Matt Barnes, Heath Hembree, Ryan Brasier, Nathan Eovaldi, and Steven Wright be a likely bullpen?

Are we then looking at Hector Velazquez, Brian Johnson, Brandon Workman, and Drew Pomeranz being the odd men out? Eovaldi is an interesting subject in that his presence in the bullpen could knock Workman out of the postseason picture.

The reason I chose Wright is that Cora seems to love him in the middle relief role, offering a different look from the hard throwers in the bullpen. In my scenario, there is no lefty, which might strengthen the cause for Pomeranz or Johnson. Then again, maybe the Sox stray from the norm and go with 12 pitchers and a lefty makes it.

As for the position players, the starters would be Mitch Moreland, Ian Kinsler, Xander Bogaerts, Eduardo Nunez, Sandy Leon, Mookie Betts, Andrew Benintendi, Jackie Bradley Jr., and J.D. Martinez. The subs: Steve Pearce, Brock Holt, Blake Swihart, Rafael Devers, and Vazquez? If the Sox don't go with three catchers and Swihart is left out, does Brandon Phillips have a chance to sneak on the roster? Perhaps you go with Phillips over Devers because of experience?

Do you have to keep Vazquez because he catches Rodriguez? Is Swihart's versatility too valuable to keep off, or is he a luxury during the regular season but not imperative in the postseason? Cora would have to ask himself whether Swihart is good enough defensively that he could start a postseason game behind the plate. If not, Swihart could be a roster victim.

Apropos of nothing

1. The Blue Jays were rightly called out by the Players' Association for not recalling Vladimir Guerrero Jr. to the major league team because it would have started his arbitration clock. The Blue Jays have had a poor season and the many thousands of fans who attend their games were looking forward to seeing a glimpse of their future on the field. But the Jays, owned by the Rogers Corporation (one of the top three or four wealthiest ownerships in baseball), denied their fans that opportunity. Despite their poor season, the Jays have drawn just under 30,000 per game and are fifth in the AL, just behind the Red Sox. President Mark Shapiro said it was not a financial decision but a baseball decision in that he felt Guerrero's development was best served in the Arizona Fall League.
2. The new Worcester stadium that will house the Triple A Red Sox should be spectacular for the players and scouts who come to watch. There will be an apartment complex within steps of the stadium as well as two hotels that can house the visiting team and scouts. Loved the suggestion of MassLive's Chris Smith for the naming of the ballpark — the Polar Grounds. The ballpark will be called Polar Park. The naming rights went to the beverage company.
3. Lou Schwechheimer, who was the longtime general manager and co-owner of the Pawtucket Red Sox, is moving his New Orleans Babycakes to Wichita. Schwechheimer bought the New Orleans team and the Single A Port Charlotte team three years ago. Wichita is planning to build a new stadium.
4. It was revealed Friday that Dustin Pedroia had an arthroscopic procedure in July to clear up scar tissue that was kept hidden from the media. It would have explained a few things at the time. Pedroia thinks he'll be the Pedroia of old when 2019 rolls around. It'll be interesting to see whether the team tries to re-sign Ian Kinsler or Brandon Phillips as protection.
5. Who would have thought that the three managers who were hired as on an interim basis would be retained for 2019? The Cardinals' Mike Shildt already has received a three-year extension. Atlanta's Brian Snitker will surely return and Cincinnati's Jim Riggleman is expected to remain the Reds' manager.
6. Wonder if a team — oh, say the Rays — decides it's going to employ 12 or 13 relievers on a staff rather than the traditional five starters. Is it coming to that?

Updates on nine

1. Scott Sharp, assistant GM, Royals — He is the latest name to have surfaced for the Mets GM job. So many names have been thrown out there in speculation. Here's the list: Mark Shapiro, Ben Cherington, and Tony LaCava from the Blue Jays; Mike Chernoff (Indians); Jed Hoyer, Jason McLeod (Cubs); Jarrod Porter (Diamondbacks); Kenny Williams (White Sox); Dan Duquette (Orioles); and former Dodgers GM Ned Colletti.

Manny Machado, SS/3B, Dodgers — He wants to stay at shortstop so his return to the Dodgers on a multiyear deal next season is somewhat in doubt with Kyle Seager returning from his absence after Tommy John surgery. That is, unless Seager moves to third. The Phillies are seen as likely major competitors for Machado. Some have speculated the Indians, but with Francisco Lindor firmly entrenched at shortstop, Machado would have to play third.

3. Shohei Ohtani, RHP/DH, Angels — He needs Tommy John surgery, so while he's still a young man (24), are we at the point where the two-way experiment is over? Angels GM Billy Eppler says no. Obviously, the two-way deal will be on hold for awhile as he recuperates from Tommy

John in 2019, the feeling being he might be able to be used as a DH. Ohtani has produced a .946 OPS as a hitter. If Ohtani, a strong contender for AL Rookie of the Year, hangs up the pitching he could be a right fielder or center fielder with his arm strength and athleticism.

4. Nick Markakis, RF, Braves — He has reached the end of his Braves contract, which begs the question: Do the Braves re-sign their team leader who has had an excellent season or let him walk and allocate their resources toward someone like Bryce Harper? It'll be an interesting decision for the Braves, who have the resources to pursue someone of Harper's stature.

5. Greg Holland, RHP, Nationals — Released by the Cardinals, he was out there for everybody to go get, and the Nationals got lucky and signed him. With the Nationals, Holland has thrown 13 innings and allowed one run (0.69 ERA) with 14 strikeouts.

6. Andrew Miller, LHP, Indians — The repair of the Indians' bullpen is taking place starting with good news on Miller, who threw a successful bullpen session on Thursday. Miller received a cortisone shot in his shoulder after going on the DL for the third time this season on Aug. 29 (left shoulder impingement). Miller believes he could return as early as the Indians' next series against the Rays in St. Pete. Wonder if Miller will be a Red Sox target this offseason?

7. Arnie Beyeler, former manager, New Orleans — The former Red Sox first base coach and Pawtucket manager was fired in the latest purge of Marlins personnel by director of player development and scouting Gary Denbo, who has simply decided to wield an ax all over the organization — including firing good baseball people such as Beyeler and Double A manager Randy Ready.

8. Dave Dombrowski, president of baseball operations, Red Sox — If he wins a World Series title with the Red Sox, which would give him one in each league (Marlins, 1997), he will likely find himself in Cooperstown. It's interesting but sad to hear Dombrowski talk about the '97 Marlins and how loaded they were, and then finding out a month after winning the World Series that owner Wayne Huizenga wanted to dismantle the team and pare payroll. To this day, Dombrowski thinks that team could have repeated and had many successful seasons. It was one of the toughest things Dombrowski had to do in his career, disassembling a team that had Gary Sheffield, Jeff Conine, Bobby Bonilla, Moises Alou, Devon White, a young Cliff Floyd, and a staff that included Alex Fernandez, Kevin Brown, Al Leiter, and top closer Robb Nen.

9. Carlos Santana, 1B, Phillies — The Phillies tried him at third base recently, but he had a failed experiment with the Indians in spring training a few years back when they were trying to find a position for him after realizing he wasn't going to be a big league catcher. The Indians tried Santana in the outfield and then third base, before he finally settled at first base and became a solid defender.

Blue Jays lose slugfest with Indians

ROSIE DIMANNO

Pinch him.

Wait no, don't. It might hurt. It might offend the cosmos, kind of a reverse head rub for luck.

Blue Jay Rowdy Tellez celebrates his first MLB home run, a solo shot in the fifth inning of Saturday's loss to Cleveland.

Blue Jay Rowdy Tellez celebrates his first MLB home run, a solo shot in the fifth inning of Saturday's loss to Cleveland. (FRANK GUNN / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

Though Rowdy Tellez makes it quite clear he doesn't truck with that stuff. "I'm not superstitious one bit."

Spiritual, perhaps, fast-beating heart an echo for the heart that was stilled just over a fortnight ago, mom Lori losing her two-year battle with brain cancer.

So there's this huge empty space there and an ache and a raw tenderness and you feel for the young Blue Jay, with his round, open face and his cuddly dimensions.

A space, however, that Tellez has been filling with hits at a remarkable pace since his major league debut Wednesday, going down in the annals of baseball mentioned in the same breath as Joe-frigging-DiMaggio, tying on Friday his American League record of six doubles over a three-game span.

"I wouldn't have done it," he says of being yoked in the sport's chronicles with Joltin' Joe, even saying the thing out loud. "He's one of the icons of this game and forever will be. To have someone say that, bring that up, is pretty humbling."

Saturday, Tellez just kept right on rolling.

His first major league home run, with pops Greg in the stands.

First major league player since 1913 to record seven extra-base hits in his first four career games.

Then, a pretty impressive single in the eighth, poking a slider from Cleveland reliever Oliver Perez — lefty on lefty — into shallow left. First single of his big league career, which actually earned a loud cheer from the Rogers Centre — though, hah, "I was hoping for a home run," Tellez said later.

Yeah, well, had one of those already, back-to-back jacks with Randal Grichuk — who went yard twice on the day, Nos. 20 & 21.

Along with other neat rally flashes on the day — 18 hits! — Toronto still ended up on the 9-8 losing end to the Indians, albeit hugely entertaining in these waning days of summer. (Suddenly cold, with the lid open.)

"I knew it was going to go out," said Tellez of his blast to straightaway centre, 423 feet, sending Adam Plutko to the showers in the fifth.

"Another one of those surreal moments that you dream about growing up. It was pretty cool to do it here in front of the home fans. Hopefully I've got more in the tank."

The 23-year-old doesn't appear to lack for motor oil. But sheesh, this dizzying debut has hardly sunk in yet.

"I wouldn't say a dream." Although, actually, he has said that. "It's been bittersweet, no having my mom here to be physically with us."

The call-up, so soon on the heels of loss, was bewildering if deeply thrilling. "It didn't really set in until I took my first at-bat." A pinch hit. A double.

"I'm just trying to be as comfortable as I can without feeling out of place or doing something that's really immature."

After his maiden dinger, of course, greeted by look-away silence in the dugout. But his 'mates couldn't hold it for long. Soon they were all jumping up and down, slapping, giving noogies.

He smiles.

"I still got my high-fives."

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Tellez's first homer, 18 hits not enough as Reid-Foley, Jays fall to Indians

Ryan Wolstat

Eighteen wasn't enough.

Control issues hampered the first two Blue Jays pitchers of the day, wasting an 18-hit attack by the team's batters in a 9-8 loss to the Cleveland Indians.

Sean Reid-Foley got off to a nice start, surrendering only a single run through the first four innings before things went awry in the fifth, with Cleveland putting up a seven-spot in the frame to erase a 3-1 Toronto lead.

Reid-Foley surrendered a first-pitch home run to Cleveland catcher Roberto Perez, then after an out and a walk, Michael Brantley caught him for a two-run blast to give Cleveland its first lead of the game, 4-3.

After a pair of two-out walks, Blue Jays manager John Gibbons removed Reid-Foley and brought in Justin Shafer from the bullpen for his fifth appearance of the season. It wasn't pretty. Shafer walked former Jay Melky Cabrera, and then walked in a run by throwing four straight balls to Jason Kipnis.

Shafer then threw two straight balls to Perez. After Shafer finally got a strike across, Perez drilled a double that Kevin Pillar could not track down, scoring three and propelling Cleveland to an 8-3 lead.

That closed the books on an ugly line for Reid-Foley: 4.2 innings, five hits, five walks, six earned runs and three strikeouts. Reid-Foley had control issues, throwing 59 strikes and 47 balls, but deserved better.

The positives for the Jays in this one were the latest chapter in the unfolding Rowdy Tellez story and a pair of home runs by Randal Grichuk.

Tellez homered in the bottom of the fifth after Grichuk's second of the game, giving the first baseman seven extra-base hits (six of them doubles) in his first four games, the most by any player since 1913. He later added a single.

"Yeah, he just keeps doing it," Gibbons said of Tellez after the game.

"What really impressed me is the base hit he got off (Cleveland's Oliver) Perez, who really owns left-handed batters this year (1.04 ERA overall). Rowdy, he's a big, strong guy, he'll hit his share of home runs, but he's a hitter too. He's just starting, who knows where it ends up, but he looks like he's been at this for a while up here."

No. 9 hitter Aledmys Diaz hit three doubles, including one in the bottom of the ninth, but the Jays could not complete the comeback. Diaz, Tellez and Luke Maile have each had three-double games this month. The club record is four, shared by three players (Alex Rios, Shannon Stewart, and Damaso Garcia). The club record for hits in a game is 25, set in 1999.

BIG ARM IN RIGHT

While Grichuk's future might well be as a centre fielder, he has shown a big arm in right field on many occasions this season.

On Friday he made a nice pivot and throw to hold a runner to a single, and in the second inning of this one, Grichuk tracked down a ball hit by Yonder Alonso and fired a throw to second that felt like it beat Alonso to the bag by 30 seconds. Alonso didn't even bother sliding.

As for his bat, with three hits in five at-bats on Saturday, Grichuk's up to .298 at the plate since the all-star break and is a scorching .383 over the past 15 days. Of his 21 home runs, 15 have come at the Rogers Centre.

RUSS WILL REST

Don't expect to see a lot of Russell Martin the rest of the way this season.

Martin, both the oldest and highest-paid (tied with Troy Tulowitzki) player on the roster, has hit a career-low .194 in 90 games this season, one fewer than he played in 2017.

"He's not going to play much. I talked to Russ, he understands that," Gibbons explained before the game.

With highly-touted Danny Jansen (23 years old and Toronto's third-ranked prospect behind Vladimir Guerrero Jr. and Bo Bichette) on the scene now, along with Reese McGuire (also 23 and a former first-round draft pick) and Maile, there is only so much time behind the plate to go around (and with a glut of infielders now up with the big club too, there isn't much point in Martin playing at third base like he has in the past).

"I couldn't tell you (how often each week Martin would play)," Gibbons said.

"We want to give those guys a good opportunity to play definitely because they're the future."

AROUND THE BASES

Reid-Foley went 5-0 with a 2.03 ERA at double-A New Hampshire this season, then 7-5, 3.90 at triple-A Buffalo before being called up ... If only every Jays game could go to extra innings like the one Friday, which featured a Pillar walk-off homer in the 11th. Toronto is 10-6 in extra-inning games this season ... Gibbons said Yangervis Solarte potentially could return to action Sunday, or if not that game, sometime soon.

Solarte has been out since August 11 ... Gibbons was less sure about the status of Brandon Drury, who with Billy McKinney was acquired in the J.A. Happ trade. Gibbons said Drury's fractured hand might keep him out the rest of the season, or if not, he might return "right at the end."

McKinney singled in the first inning to extend his on-base streak as a Jay to each of his first 17 games ... Legendary former Sun Jays beat man Mike Rutsey made a rare appearance at the ball park and, like old times, sat in on Gibbons' pre-game media sessions. Somehow, the question arose as to who Gibbons hit his lone Major League home run off of. "Michael Jackson ... the pitcher," Gibbons said. Rutsey, always quick with a quip, replied: "Did you moonwalk around the bases?"

Tyler Kepner / An A's Castoff Becomes a Rays Catalyst

By Tyler Kepner

Joey Wendle, cast aside by the Athletics, has become a stealth rookie of the year candidate for the Rays. Credit Dan Hamilton/USA Today Sports, via Reuters

Joey Wendle had managed just three singles in his last 32 at-bats as the calendar flipped to October in 2016. A newcomer to the Oakland Athletics, Wendle would be batting ninth against the Seattle Mariners in the next-to-last game of the season. The A's were out of the pennant race, but Seattle was still alive.

"It wasn't a particularly meaningful game for us — other than the fact that it was a meaningful game for them," Wendle said by phone the other day. "It was probably the biggest crowd at that point that I had played in front of. I thought it was cool."

The Mariners would disagree. Wendle went 4 for 5 that night with a go-ahead double in the 10th inning off Edwin Diaz, capping a 9-8 A's victory that eliminated Seattle from playoff contention. He went into the off-season full of confidence, but the A's did not share it.

After playing in just eight major league games last season, Wendle, a second baseman, was designated for assignment in December. The A's had an established veteran, Jed Lowrie, at second base, and a top prospect, Franklin Barreto, behind him. To remove Wendle from the 40-man roster, they traded him to the Tampa Bay Rays for a Class A catcher.

"I came into this season without a ton of expectations," Wendle said. "A lot of times you see that guy who gets designated, and he kind of falls into limbo where he's the 40th man on everybody's roster. I was prepared for that, but at the same time, I was prepared to compete for a spot and hopefully have an impact on the team."

He has done that for the Rays, becoming a stealth candidate for the American League Rookie of the Year Award, hitting .297 through Thursday while playing stellar defense at second base, shortstop, third base and the outfield. The Rays entered a weekend series with Baltimore having won 13 of 16 games, but they still need help from Wendle's old team to seriously contend for the playoffs.

At 75-64, the Rays were eight games behind the A's for the second A.L. wild-card spot.

"Obviously the odds are against us, and we need Oakland to start losing some games every once in a while," Wendle said. "I texted those guys, 'Hey, don't be scared to lose a game every once in a while and let us creep back into this thing.' But we're having fun as a team, we're enjoying each other, and it's fun to see some of the pieces get put into place. Regardless of how the season ends, we'll walk away feeling good about how things are going to go next year."

The Rays have one emerging superstar — pitcher Blake Snell, who is 18-5 with a 2.06 earned run average — and have commanded attention for pioneering the use of relievers as starters. But they have also revamped their offense, shedding several power hitters and giving chances to players like Wendle, Matt Duffy and Mallex Smith, who are all hitting around .300. The Rays had 25 victories through Wednesday without a home run, the most in the majors.

"You look on paper, and I know there were a ton of people who had us being 100-game losers this year," Wendle said. "But what stands out to me, particularly in the second half, is that we've just found ways to win the tighter games. It starts with our pitching staff, there's no way around it, and there's not a ton of egos. Everybody's buying into their pitching roles, and the position players are buying into the fact that, 'Hey, today I might play left field; tomorrow I might play second base.'"

Wendle has succeeded at the plate, he said, by making adjustments more quickly, recognizing the need to keep his back elbow up and maintain a tall posture in the batter's box. And his defensive skill has helped him compile a strong 3.5 wins above replacement, as calculated by baseball-reference.com, through Thursday.

That matched the WAR figure for the Los Angeles Angels' two-way star Shohei Ohtani, who needs Tommy John surgery on his pitching elbow but continues to shine as a designated hitter. Wendle also has more WAR than Yankees infielders Gleyber Torres and Miguel Andujar, who have combined for 45 home runs to Wendle's seven. The metrics penalize Andujar, in particular, for his defense.

The Rays have had three rookies of the year — Evan Longoria, Jeremy Hellickson and Wil Myers — but Wendle will not campaign to be the fourth.

"For starters, I'm 28 years old, those guys are way younger than me, so I feel like I maybe have a little bit of an advantage because of that," he said. "I had like a half-year of service time before this year started; I guess I was still a rookie, officially speaking, but I've had parts of two years. Those guys are all making their first splashes, they've had fantastic seasons. Andujar and Torres are on a playoff team, and Ohtani rakes and he's one of the best pitchers in the game. To even be in that conversation is just fun for me."

National Malaise

Two weeks ago, after his team's third consecutive shutout defeat, Washington Nationals Manager Dave Martinez vowed to finish strong.

"I told them the other day, 'We've got five weeks of fury,'" Martinez said then, in the visiting manager's office at Citi Field. "That's what I call it. Go out there and play hard. Anything can happen."

Maybe, but so far, nothing much has changed. In their first 10 games after that declaration, the Nationals went 5-5, typical of a season defined by mediocrity. After winning four of the last six National League East titles, Washington was 69-72 as of Thursday, after the first game of a four-game series with the Chicago Cubs, and could finish below .500 for the first time since 2011, the year before Bryce Harper's debut.

The Atlanta Braves and the Philadelphia Phillies, two flawed teams emerging from several years of struggles, are contending for the division crown.

"We thought all along we had a chance to catch those teams," Nationals General Manager Mike Rizzo said the other day. "If we played the way we were supposed to be playing, we'd have an opportunity to make this a race, and it's frustrating that we haven't put anything together."

After mostly standing pat at the July 31 nonwaiver trading deadline, the Nationals conceded in August, sending Daniel Murphy, Gio Gonzalez and Ryan Madson to contenders. Injuries undermined the team's chances early on, and Martinez could not steer the team to the pennant race.

If the Nationals retain Martinez — he has two years left on a discount three-year, \$2.8 million contract — they would be applying a different standard from the one they had for his predecessor, Dusty Baker, who was fired after consecutive defeats in the division series.

Asked if Martinez would return in 2019, Rizzo said, "I haven't considered any other scenario." Rizzo later praised Martinez for the team's "exuberance and energy," and for guiding the players through a turbulent season.

Martinez is not the Nationals' only off-season consideration. Harper can become a free agent, of course, and the team has holes at second base, catcher, the rotation and the bullpen.

But the Nationals will shed several high salaries, giving them flexibility to pursue free agents. With starters Max Scherzer, Stephen Strasburg and Tanner Roark, closer Sean Doolittle, infielders Anthony Rendon, Trea Turner and Ryan Zimmerman and outfielders Adam Eaton, Victor Robles and Juan Soto still on board, the Nationals expect to contend next season.

"When you can run out there five position players that have a lot of ability, three starters and back-of-the-bullpen guys you have a lot of confidence in, I think you build around the fringes of that roster — a lot different than building the core of that roster," Rizzo said. "I think the core is in place to have a championship-caliber club. We've shown here in the past that we're capable of putting together a championship-caliber club, and I think we'll do so this off-season."

A Traveling Man Settles In

Jesse Chavez has pitched for nine teams in his 11-year career, and has learned to pick up plenty of tricks along the way. For one thing, he hangs around the hitting coach to learn how opponents approach him.

"As a pitching coach and a pitcher, you're going to click anyway," Chavez said recently in the Chicago Cubs' clubhouse. "I spend a lot of time in the cage, talking to the hitting coach, honestly, more than the pitching coach. You tend to get more of a hitter's sense."

The hitting coach for Chavez's new team, Chili Davis, is a familiar face, as so many are in baseball. Davis coached for Oakland when Chavez pitched for his primary team, the Athletics, who purchased him from the Toronto Blue Jays in 2012. Chavez has also been traded seven times, signed as a free agent twice and claimed off waivers once. But he has never appeared in the postseason.

Now, at 35, Chavez seems headed there as a versatile and valuable member of the Cubs. While the Cubs acquired two stars in deals this summer — starter Cole Hamels and second baseman Daniel Murphy — their deal for Chavez has had a big effect on a bullpen whose closer, Brandon Morrow, has not pitched in the second half because of biceps inflammation.

The Cubs traded a Class A pitcher, Tyler Thomas, to the Texas Rangers for Chavez on July 19. In his first 22 games with Chicago, through Thursday, Chavez had a 1.67 earned run average with 33 strikeouts and three walks in 27 innings — one of the best stretches of his 11-year, nine-team career.

"Going back to May when I lowered my arm slot a little bit, it helped me keep my front side closed better and stay on my pitches a lot more consistently to both sides of the plate," Chavez said recently. "That's been the one thing that I've seen from the hitters' reaction, just from April to now."

Chavez, a former starter, has frequently been deployed for more than one inning at a time. With the Angels last season, he learned stretching routines and recovery tips from Yusmeiro Petit, another veteran right-hander who often pitches multiple innings. Petit, who is now with the A's, won three postseason games for the San Francisco Giants in 2014, all with at least three innings of scoreless relief.

"I've been a big fan of his for a long time, and it helped a lot to see how he goes about his business," Chavez said. "That was awesome to be able to play with him last year, because he's one of the most professional pitchers I've ever come across. He just does everything right to be ready, and you feed off of that, because you want to show the next guy how to do it."

To that end, Chavez left a parting gift for some teammates in Texas: customized Rangers robes, embroidered with name and number, for every member of the bullpen.

When Al Oliver became the first player to wear No. 0, for the Texas Rangers in 1978, he did it for a purpose.

"Zero is a starting point, and I wanted to start all over again," Oliver said last year, recalling his trade from Pittsburgh to Texas. "A lot of people thought it was 'O,' for Oliver, which makes sense, too. But rather than it being an 'O,' it was zero."

Brandon Phillips, a 17-year veteran second baseman, is starting all over again, too, as a September call-up for the Boston Red Sox. His usual number, 4, is retired in honor of Joe Cronin, and the other numbers he liked — 7 and 44 — were unavailable. So Phillips asked the Red Sox to assign him something weird, and they chose 0, making him the first player in team history to wear it.

According to Baseball Reference, 10 franchises have never had a player wear No. 0 — Baltimore, the Yankees, Detroit, Oakland, Seattle, Atlanta, Miami, Arizona, Cincinnati and the Chicago Cubs. (Oliver wore No. 0 for the Montreal Expos, the ancestors of the Washington Nationals.)

Phillips looked comfortable in his new digit, slamming a two-out, go-ahead homer in his Red Sox debut Wednesday afternoon in Atlanta. That also happened to be the 299,999th home run in major league history, dating to 1876 (also according to Baseball Reference), setting up the first homer in that night's action to be No. 300,000.

Two players connected in the top of the first inning that night: Jose Peraza of the Reds and Matt Adams of the Cardinals, both in the Eastern Time zone, and both on the sixth pitch of their game. But the Cardinals' game in Washington started a minute before the Reds' game in Pittsburgh, making the Adams home run — by our guess — the unofficial 300,000th.

Adams, by his locker after the game, was happy to take credit for the round-number blast, though he thought 300,000 seemed a bit low.

"I would have thought there'd been way more — especially all the years when McGwire and Sosa went at it," Adams said, smiling, recalling Mark McGwire, a predecessor as Cardinals first baseman, and Sammy Sosa. "But no, that's cool, that's real cool. Dang, that's crazy."

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