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Mauer doubles, catches in potential farewell win

Jarrid Denney | MLB.com | September 30, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS -- When Joe Mauer stepped to the plate for the first time on Sunday, White Sox starter Dylan Covey stood off to the side of the mound. Home plate umpire Jim Reynolds stepped away from the home plate. Both made sure there was ample time for the Target Field crowd of 30,144 to give a well-deserved farewell.

Mauer, who may have played his last MLB game as he heads into the offseason contemplating retirement, received a standing ovation each time he came to the plate on Sunday during Minnesota's season finale, a 5-4 win over the White Sox. His longtime walk-up song, T.I.'s "What You Know," was barely audible as Twins fans gave an emotional outpouring to the player who has become a franchise icon over the past 15 years.

With his whole family in attendance, the St. Paul native finished 1-for-4. In his final plate appearance, he delivered a vintage Mauer at-bat and worked a full count before cracking a hustle double to left field in the seventh inning. After he slid in under the tag, the crowd stayed on its feet and gave him another long ovation as he tipped his cap.

"It's just been an emotional roller coaster," Mauer said. "I'm not 100 percent sure [about retiring or not], and like I said, I want to make sure I have time just to take a deep breath and really be behind that decision. But I couldn't have asked for a better last day of the 2018 season, and I'm looking forward to just taking a breath and spending some time with my girls, my family, and we'll go from there. But with the emotions running right now, I don't want to say either way."

In the top of the ninth inning, Mauer emerged from the dugout wearing catcher's gear, and the crowd erupted as it realized the moment. He spent the prime years of his career as a catcher, but had not caught a game since suffering a career-altering concussion on a foul tip on Aug. 19, 2013.

Mauer stood on the field by himself and tearfully waved to the crowd. He caught the first pitch of the inning from Matt Belisle, then bounced out of his crouch, ran out to the mound and gave Belisle a hug. That was the end of his day. Mauer was replaced by Chris Gimenez and was showered with cheers once more as he exited the game.

"Players pass through and they make an impact," Minnesota manager Paul Molitor said. "From Joe's girls early on in the game to every time he stepped up the steps into the on-deck circle, it was tough to contain your feeling. I just tried to soak it all in the best that I could. It meant a lot to me to be in that position managing Joe the way I have and to share that today.

"I don't know where I rank it with other things. I was in the on-deck circle when Robin Yount got his 3,000th hit, and that was really hard for me to watch video of him and try to prepare to hit. It was just one of those things where Joe held it together. I was glad we saw the emotion. Sometimes we lose touch with the people side of the athlete that we cheer. I think the person side of Joe was on full display today."

About a month ago, Mauer's father had mentioned to his wife, Maddie, that it would be special to see his son go out and catch one more pitch. Mauer was hesitant to follow through with the idea initially, but as the weeks went on, Minnesota's staff began to talk him into it.

"Maddie kind of sat on it a little bit, and then a few people throughout the organization were kind of mentioning something like that," Mauer said. "Then not until Friday, [traveling secretary] Mike Herman caught me right when I walked in and was trying to get me to do something like that. I said, 'No, Mike, I can't do it. I can't do it.' Then Nate Dammann, our bullpen catcher [and] one of my closest friends, and [Twins bench coach] Derek Shelton, they pulled me into [equipment manager Rod McCormick's] office and asked about the possibility of making it happen.

"In hearing what they had to say, about how much it would mean ... to me and other people, I think they convinced me that it would be OK. ... After that conversation, I just had to go find a room and just be alone, because I started welling up. I was just trying to hold those emotions in."

When Mauer was forced to give up his catching duties in 2013, he had stashed away his catcher's gear away and planned to put it on display at home. But that never happened, and the bag remained unopened for over five years -- until Saturday night.

"I knew exactly where it was and just never opened it. So, I picked it up last night for the first time and put it on over my clothes, and I started getting emotional. ... I was able to put on the gear at my locker, and that's kind of when it all came out."

When it came time to choose who would throw the pitch to him, Mauer realized that starter Kyle Gibson was the only pitcher still on Minnesota's roster that he had caught. While Gibson, who made his final start of the season on Saturday, wasn't an option, Mauer knew immediately who he wanted. He and Belisle have forged a close bond in the short time in which they've played together, and Mauer wanted him to share the moment.

"Very emotional," Belisle said. "When he approached me about this a few days ago, it was something where I was just really blown away with humility to have an honor bestowed on me in that regard. I just wanted to do my best to make it about him and have it as special as it could be. I'm at loss for words on the idea that he came to me and said, 'I wouldn't have anybody other than you throw it.'"

If this proves to be the end of Mauer's career, he will step away as one of the all-time great Twins. With six All-Star appearances, three batting titles and the 2009 American League MVP award under his belt, Mauer's .388 career on-base percentage is the sixth-best in franchise history. He also reached base safely more times than any player in Minnesota history, and reached several milestones this season, including 2,000 career hits and 1,000 career runs.

Mauer got plenty of backing on his special day. Jake Cave crushed a solo homer in the fourth inning, and Max Kepler hit his 20th longball of the year, a two-run shot in the sixth, to pace Minnesota's offense.

SOUND SMART

Cave entered Sunday with an average distance of 419 feet on his home runs this season. That's the fourth-best mark in the Majors: Colorado's Trevor Story leads the big leagues at 421 feet per-blast. Cave's fourth-inning long ball traveled an estimated 420 feet, according to Statcast™.

HE SAID IT

"I can't imagine what it's like to be him. I've said that a lot, I think, in my life. But in this specific instance, you could tell he had a little bit of an 'I can't believe this is happening' moment. And he's not a guy who gets like that. It was really crazy to see. ... It went completely how you would hope it would, which is like anything with Joe in Minneapolis. It's like the stars are aligned. Just like him getting a hit the way he did. It was a hustle double. Coming out of the box, you could just tell he was going to go for two. It's like Jeter hitting a walk-off." -- Twins reliever Trevor May, on watching Mauer's final standing ovation in the ninth inning.

Five questions the Twins face this offseason
Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | September 30, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS -- After a disappointing season that saw the club out of contention by early July, the Twins are ready put 2018 behind them and focus on building a consistent winner going forward.

Minnesota failed to build on its surprise run to the AL Wild Card Game in 2017, instead taking a step backwards for a variety of reasons, including the health and ineffectiveness of key players such as Miguel Sano, Byron Buxton and Ervin Santana.

The Twins still have a young core built around Jose Berrios, Eddie Rosario, Jorge Polanco, Max Kepler, Buxton and Sano, but there are question marks about Buxton, Sano and Kepler. There are several holes to fill on a roster that saw veterans such as Brian Dozier and Eduardo Escobar traded, and Joe Mauer has yet to decide whether to retire or return for 2019. It's going to be an important offseason for the Twins, so here's a look at five questions they're facing.

Can the Twins compete in 2019?

Twins chief baseball officer Derek Falvey and general manager Thad Levine must determine if they believe the club has the pieces to contend next season. The division doesn't figure to get much better next year with the White Sox, Tigers and Royals all rebuilding, but the Twins seemingly have a long way to go to reach the talent level of clubs like the Indians, Red Sox, Astros or Yankees. The Twins, however, finished with a .500 record after the Trade Deadline and do have payroll flexibility with Mauer and Santana both having their contracts coming off the books. They could look to add significant pieces to quickly get back to contention or aim to spend more of that money next offseason.

How aggressive will the Twins be in free agency?

The Twins have only roughly \$30 million in guaranteed contracts for next season, and while up to 10 players could be eligible for arbitration raises this winter, there is plenty of money available to spend, considering their Opening Day payroll was \$128 million in 2018. The front office will have to determine when to spend that money, as they have more talent on the way in the form of top prospects such as Royce Lewis, Alex Kirilloff and Brusdar Graterol. There are going to be some premium free agents available including Manny Machado and Bryce Harper as well as top starting pitchers such as Dallas Keuchel, Patrick Corbin and Charlie Morton, while Clayton Kershaw and David Price can opt out of their contracts. Given their history, it's unlikely they sign a player to a mega-deal, but they were interested in Yu Darvish last offseason and have the payroll flexibility to make it happen.

Which positions will the Twins target via free agency or trade?

If Mauer decides to retire, Minnesota could be looking to add a first baseman/designated hitter as well as middle infield help after the departures of Escobar and Dozier. Bringing back Escobar isn't out of the question, and the Twins also haven't ruled out moving Polanco to second if they sign a capable shortstop. They have infielder Nick Gordon nearly ready for the Majors, but he had a rough second half at Triple-A. They're not likely to sign any outfielders and could have interest in the catching market, but will have Jason Castro, Mitch Garver and Willians Astudillo on the roster. Starting pitching and finding a closer will be a priority.

How much more starting pitching does Minnesota need?

The Twins bring back Kyle Gibson, Berrios and Jake Odorizzi next year, while Michael Pineda will be ready after rehabbing this year after Tommy John surgery. Adalberto Mejia was solid before suffering a nerve injury in his left wrist, while the Twins also tried out a plethora of rookie starters such as Fernando Romero, Kohl Stewart, Zack Littell, Stephen Gonsalves and Chase De Jong to various degrees of success. But adding a veteran starter would help stabilize the rotation, which still has question marks despite the depth of options. It appears revamping the bullpen will be more of an emphasis.

What will the bullpen look like next year?

After trading closer Fernando Rodney to the A's in early August, the Twins don't have an experienced closer on their roster. The bullpen figures to include Taylor Rogers, Trevor May and Trevor Hildenberger, but the Twins are likely to try to find a veteran or two for the back end. Top relievers who will be free agents include Craig Kimbrel, Sergio Romo, Jeurys Familia, David Robertson, Andrew Miller and Adam Ottavino, but they also could look to the trade market. Expect a new closer in Minnesota in 2019.

2019 Draft order set: O's, KC, White Sox go 1-2-3

Jim Callis | MLB.com | September 30, 2018

Unlike in 2017, when the race for the No. 1 overall pick in the next year's Draft came down to a walk-off homer on the final day of the season, there was no such drama this summer. The Orioles, whose 115 losses were the fourth-most in modern big league history, clinched the top choice in 2019 with nine games remaining.

Baltimore owned the first selection only once in the previous 54 Drafts, choosing Ben McDonald in 1989. The Orioles haven't had a top-five pick since having six straight from 2007-12, when they grabbed Matt Wieters (fifth in 2007), Brian Matusz (fourth in 2008), Matt Hobgood (fifth in 2009), Manny Machado (third in 2010), Dylan Bundy (fourth in 2011) and Kevin Gausman (fourth in 2012).

Assigned pick values rise each year based on MLB's revenue growth, so Baltimore will be allocated more than the \$8,096,300 assigned to the No. 1 pick in 2018. The Tigers, who gained that choice when Pablo Sandoval's ninth-inning homer in the Giants' last game of 2017 dropped San Francisco to the No. 2 slot, signed Casey Mize for \$7.5 million, setting a record for the Draft's bonus-pool era. Mize's bonus tied those of Bubba Starling and Stephen Strasburg for the second-highest in Draft history, trailing only Gerrit Cole's \$8 million.

Oregon State catcher Adley Rutschman, the Most Outstanding Player at the 2018 College World Series, and Colleyville (Texas) Heritage High shortstop Bobby Witt Jr., the son of the 16-year big leaguer and No. 3 overall selection in the 1985 Draft, are the leading candidates to go No. 1 overall at this point.

Like the Orioles, the Royals locked up the second choice well before season's end, securing it when they suffered their 102nd loss last Saturday. Kansas City has picked that high three times before, taking Alex Gordon at No. 2 in 2005, Luke Hochevar at No. 1 in 2006 and Mike Moustakas at No. 2 in 2007.

The White Sox (No. 3 overall), Marlins (No. 4) and Tigers (No. 5) round out the first five selections. Detroit, which took Mize at No. 1, and Chicago, which popped Nick Madrigal at No. 4, had top-five choices this year. Miami hasn't picked that early since 2014, when it used the No. 2 choice on Tyler Kolek.

The first-round order won't be finalized until the two divisional tiebreaker games are settled on Monday. The Brewers and Cubs will play for the National League Central title and the Nos. 27 and 28 picks, while the Dodgers and Rockies will battle for the NL West crown and the Nos. 23 and 25 choices.

Three teams have multiple first-round selections because they received compensation choices when they couldn't sign 2018 first-rounders. The Braves pick ninth and 21st, the D-backs 16th and 26th, and the Dodgers either 23rd or 25th along with 31st.

Because each team's highest first-round pick is exempt from forfeiture, the only way the first-round order could change would be if a team that doesn't receive revenue sharing and exceeded the luxury tax this season has two first-round picks and signs a free agent who rejects a qualifying offer, in which case it would lose its second-highest first-rounder.

2019 First-Round Draft Order

Draft order is based on the reverse order of 2018 regular-season standings, with 2017 records used to break ties.

1. Orioles (47-115)
2. Royals (58-104)
3. White Sox (62-100)
4. Marlins (63-98)
5. Tigers (64-98)
6. Padres (66-96)
7. Reds (67-95)
8. Rangers (67-95)
9. Braves (compensation for unsigned 2018 first-rounder Carter Stewart)
10. Giants (73-89)
11. Blue Jays (73-89)
12. Mets (77-85)
13. Twins (78-84)
14. Phillies (80-82)
15. Angels (80-82)
16. D-backs (82-80)
17. Nationals (82-80)
18. Pirates (82-79)
19. Cardinals (88-74)
20. Mariners (89-73)
21. Braves (90-72)
22. Rays (90-72)
23. Dodgers/Rockies Monday loser (91-72)
24. Indians (91-71)
25. Dodgers/Rockies Monday winner (92-71)

26. D-backs (compensation for unsigned 2018 first-rounder Matt McLain)
27. Brewers/Cubs Monday loser (95-68)
28. Brewers/Cubs Monday winner (96-67)
29. Athletics (97-65)
30. Yankees (100-62)
31. Dodgers (compensation for unsigned 2018 first-rounder J.T. Ginn)
32. Astros (103-59)
33. Red Sox (108-54)

Twins honor two Minor Leaguers in system

Jarrid Denney | MLB.com | September 30, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS -- As the Twins' season draws to a close, two of the club's top prospects were tabbed as the best in Minnesota's system for the 2018 season.

Minnesota announced on Sunday that 20-year-old outfielder Alex Kirilloff was named the 2018 Sherry Robertson Award winner as the Twins Minor League Player of the Year. Lewis Thorpe, a 22-year-old left-handed pitcher, was awarded the Jim Rantz Award as the Twins Minor League Pitcher of the Year.

It was a breakout year for Kirilloff, who not only climbed up a spot in Minnesota's top prospects list, but also shot up to No. 30 on MLB Pipeline's Top 100 Prospects. Kirilloff hit .348 in 512 at-bats while splitting time between Class A Cedar Rapids and Class A Advanced Fort Myers. He racked up 44 doubles, seven triples, 20 homers and 101 RBIs in 130 games. The 6-foot-2, 195-pound outfielder led all qualified Minor Leaguers in doubles and tallied the seventh-most RBIs. During the Major League All-Star break, he played in the SiriusXM Futures Game for Team USA.

Kirilloff was able to emerge as one of the top prospects in baseball despite missing the 2017 season as he recovered from Tommy John surgery.

Thorpe also made a leap for the Twins and found success while adjusting to his first stint of Triple-A ball. He spent time at Double-A Chattanooga and Triple-A Rochester, posting an 8-7 record and 3.54 ERA over 129 2/3 innings across the two teams. He struck out 157 batters while walking 36 and held opponents to a .250 batting average.

Thorpe, a Melbourne, Australia native who pitched for the World Team at the Futures Game, missed all of 2015 and 2016 while recovering from Tommy John surgery. In four starts at Rochester this season, he posted a 3.32 ERA and struck out 26 batters over 21 2/3 innings.

Past recipients of Minnesota's Minor League awards include Joe Mauer (2003), Max Kepler (2015) and Jose Berrios (2014, 2015).

Santana set to play winter ball

For the first time since 2009, Ervin Santana will play in the Dominican Winter League in hopes of bouncing back from a rocky 2018 season.

Santana last played in the league during the 2008-09 campaign while he was still a member of the Angels. He missed much of this season due to a finger injury on his throwing hand, but said that the hand is starting to feel better and that he will pitch for Tigres del Licey -- the same club he pitched for in 2008-09.

In five starts this season, Santana went 0-1 with an 8.03 ERA. On Sept. 8, the Twins shut him down for the season after his finger continued to bother him. This season was the last in Santana's four-year, \$55 million contract that he signed with the Twins in 2015. He has a \$14 million club option for the 2019 season, which the Twins are not expected to pick up.

Joe Mauer makes an emotional appearance as Twins catcher in final game of season

Phil Miller | Star Tribune | October 1, 2018

When his twin 5-year-old daughters surprised him by joining Dad at first base for the national anthem Sunday, Joe Mauer and a ballpark full of fans shared a farewell moment that couldn't be topped. But he did.

And when Mauer acted out the iconic batting-champ at-bat, patiently working the count, waiting for his pitch, and then lining a vintage opposite-field screaming line drive, even stretching it to a double on sheer hustle, he granted the wishes of thousands of Twins fans for one last baseball memory that he could never be improved upon. But he did.

Finally, as an announced 30,144 stood in noisy anticipation around an empty baseball diamond, Joe Mauer touched them all with a gesture so

poignant, fans were openly weeping in Target Field — all that simply by wearing a chest protector. As Mauer climbed the steps out of the Twins dugout, the crowd realized he was wearing catcher's gear once more, for the first time since concussions forced him away from the position that made him a Minnesota icon and an AL MVP.

"I've got a lot of emotions going on today, and I don't think it could have gone any better," Mauer said after the Twins closed their season — and he closed his 15-year major league career, perhaps — with a 5-4 victory over the Chicago White Sox. "You guys saw how important that moment was to me, just to have a chance to put the gear back on."

It felt important to everybody. With the cooperation of the White Sox and the umpiring crew, the field was emptied after the final out of the eighth, and the Twins lined the top step of the dugout. After a pause while Mauer put his equipment on in the clubhouse, he emerged from the dugout and walked to home plate, seemingly buoyed by the supersonic roar of the crowd. He hadn't worn the catcher's gear since Aug. 19, 2013, the day one final concussion ended his catching career.

The ovation lasted for nearly five minutes, with Mauer wiping away tears and pointing to his heart as the crowd cheered. He walked toward the pitcher's mound, then back to the plate, emotional but also uncomfortable in the spotlight alone. Finally, the rest of the Twins took the field, reliever (and close friend) Matt Belisle jogged in from the bullpen, and Mauer crouched behind the plate.

"I was just overwhelmed with joy to have an opportunity like that," said Belisle, who had grown close to Mauer over the past two seasons. "I wanted to give the due diligence to wait as long as I possibly could. And just let it soak up."

After Belisle threw a ball outside to Chicago second baseman Yoan Moncada, who had agreed not to swing, Mauer went to the mound and bearhugged Belisle as Chris Gimenez took his spot behind the plate. Mauer hugged his manager, Paul Molitor, coaches and teammates as he left the field, walking into Minnesota Twins history.

"It's a one-run ballgame, and being a competitor, I wanted to respect the game," Mauer said. "But I had an opportunity to do that and I didn't think that was going to be a possibility ever. I'm glad I took that opportunity."

So were his teammates.

"It was a great moment, and nobody deserves it more," said pitcher Jake Odorizzi. "I can safely say there's nobody I respect more in the game than Joe. It's been a real pleasure."

"It was emotional. It reflects what a lot of people feel regarding Joe," Molitor said. "Gosh, he looks good in that gear. So it was good to see. ... We pulled it off, and I thought it was beautiful."

Mauer insists he hasn't made up his mind about returning for a 16th season, that he will take at least a couple of weeks to let the emotions and the weariness of the season die down — "I'll be driving [Emily and Maren] to kindergarten, starting tomorrow," he said with a smile — but the final day of the 2018 season sure felt like goodbye.

"Either way, it's a good decision, you know?" he said. "I can either play, or go home and be with my girls. I don't think there's a wrong decision there."

VideoVideo (01:54): As he talked about the emotions he felt during Sunday's game, Joe Mauer still wasn't saying whether he would retire. Mauer's record eight-year, \$184 million contract has now expired, and the St. Paul native has to judge whether his desire to keep playing, through injury and endless hours of preparation and travel, has too.

Just in case, then, the Twins staged one of the most sentimental sendoffs possible. As the Twins took the field, with season ticket-holders waiting to greet them at each position, Mauer found his twin girls bouncing around first base, "bribed," their father said, by their mother's promise of a postgame gift.

Mauer received a long standing ovation as he came to bat in the first inning, and plate umpire Jim Reynolds stopped him to shake hands. Mauer grounded out to second in the first, to shortstop in the third, and flew out to left-center — on the first pitch, no less — in the fifth.

Batting with tears in your eyes isn't easy, after all.

"There were some tough at-bats today, just with the emotions and trying to gather myself with everything that's going on and the crowd. You probably saw me taking deep breaths; that's kind of my mechanism to kind of lock myself in a bit, calm myself down," Mauer said. "But to go back up there, that [final] at bat, I felt like I was locked in."

He watched a 95-mph pitch from Juan Minaya sail wide of the plate. He fouled off one that Minaya tried to sneak inside, then waited some more. Finally, on 3-2, Minaya tried to hit the outside corner with one more fastball. Mauer whipped his bat at it and drove it, at more than 102 mph, into left-center field, a vintage Mauer line drive. He stretched the hit to a double, sliding into the bag a split second before the throw, then waved his helmet to the roaring fans.

“His at-bats were good as always, and it came down to that last at-bat. Patient,” Molitor said. “Take a borderline pitch and hit it the way he did, and hit a hustle double. Those are tough to script, and it was a moment that was meant to be.”

But what if he comes back next year? Will there be another farewell game?

“Next year at this time,” Molitor said resolutely and optimistically, “we’ll be preparing for our next game.”

Joe Mauer stars in the perfect script
Jim Souhan | MLB.com | October 1, 2018

Joe Mauer insists he has not decided whether he will retire. Now he has no choice.

You don’t rewrite the ending to “Casablanca.” You can’t improve on perfection. Sunday afternoon, in what may have been his last game, Mauer and his friends authored the best baseball screenplay since “The Natural,” turning the last three innings of the Twins’ season finale into a one-man, two-act play commemorating one of the great careers in franchise history.

Mauer could come back, could play a role, but he will never play one as poignant as the one he helped write Sunday, when the Twins did everything they could, short of adding curtains, to turn Target Field into a stage.

Before the first pitch of the Twins’ 5-4 victory over the White Sox at Target Field on Sunday, Mauer’s daughters ran to first base, wearing miniature replicas of his jersey. Photographers formed a semicircle around the Minnesota Twin and his Minnesota twins, turning the moment into a poster, or an heirloom.

There was applause, some of it coming from the dugout, where Mauer’s teammates waited, unsure whether they should interrupt. Mauer looked their way, made a face and then a motion for them to take the field. When they hesitated, he twirled his right index finger faster, spurring them onto the diamond. A stoic turned sentimental, Mauer wanted to enjoy the moment, yet didn’t want it to last too long.

Before, during and after what might have been his last game as a Minnesota Twin, Mauer gave similarly conflicting signals. He behaved as if he plans to retire while insisting he has not made a final decision.

He talked at length at his locker before the game, mentioning the many family members who would be in attendance, including those who rarely attended. His manager, Paul Molitor, batted him leadoff, so when Mauer walked toward the plate the crowd would have time to cheer.

Mauer held his helmet aloft, acknowledging the crowd, and the catcher and home plate umpire stood back from the plate while he approached. He shook their hands, then grounded to second.

His four at-bats proved historically accurate. He grounded to second in the first inning, providing a reminder of his most common out. In the third, he hit a grounder up the middle that was foiled by the shortstop’s positioning, a reminder that defensive shifts have cost him perhaps hundreds of base hits. In the fifth, he flew to left-center, a reminder that he owns one of the game’s best inside-out swings.

When Mauer came to bat in the bottom of the seventh, the time for quaint remembrances was over. Mauer was about to remind us who he was, at his best.

He worked the count full, then lined a shot deep to left-center, the Mauer Alley, and beat the throw to second by the length of a cleat, slapping his hands as he popped to his feet. A few Twins employees had hoped before the game that Mauer would hit a home run in his last at-bat, but his signature hit was always the opposite-field double, and his final at-bat would prove as symbolically fitting as was the milestone of another Cretin-Derham Hall alum.

JERRY HOLT, STAR TRIBUNE

Joe Mauer slid into second base when he doubled in the seventh inning.

When Molitor produced his 3,000th hit, it was an opposite-field triple that ended with a belly slide. “Hey,” Molitor said later, “we were taught that you’ve always got to run the bases right.”

Mauer’s career should be broken into three segments. From 2005 through 2010, he was one of the greatest catchers, and maybe the greatest-hitting catcher, ever to play the game. From his mystery-injury season of 2011 through 2013 he remained an All-Star player even as injuries limited him.

From the time he caught his last game, in August 2013, through Sunday, Mauer became a light-hitting first baseman whose skills — taking quality at-bats and fielding the position well — did not measure up to the largest contract in franchise history.

Sunday, Mauer’s allies didn’t stop at showing videos of his prime. They took us back in time.

His father had wondered about Mauer catching one more time, and his wife had agreed, as long as he didn’t have to take a foul ball and risk triggering the concussion symptoms that have plagued him.

Molitor, Twins equipment manager Rod McCormick, traveling secretary Mike Herman and bullpen catcher Nate Dammann, among others, worked on a plan to allow Mauer to catch. Just one pitch.

Molitor asked White Sox manager Rick Renteria if he would have the first hitter in the top of the ninth take one pitch. Molitor promised it would be a ball.

Max Kepler made the last out in the bottom of the eighth and began jogging toward right field. His teammates called him back. After a long pause, Mauer emerged from the dugout, the only player on the field, and held his helmet aloft and patted his chest while the crowd stood and cheered.

Mauer caught one pitch, walked to the mound to embrace Belisle, and headed to the dugout.

He had kept his old equipment bag around the house, while he pondered framing his gear. McCormick told him that his kids had taken Mauer’s old, white-framed helmet home and played with it, scarring the paint. “I told him it might have some mold and mildew, but it wasn’t too bad,” McCormick said with a smile.

Mauer wore the tools of reminiscence one more time. “I don’t know who wrote up this day,” he said. “Actually I know who wrote up the day. But I’m just very thankful for it.”

Mauer conducted a news conference after the game, which was shown, tape-delayed, in the Twins clubhouse. All of the players sat in front of his locker, watching, and when Mauer returned they burst into applause.

Don’t try to top this, Joe. Don’t try to top the perfect ending.

Joe Mauer’s surprise catching appearance came together quickly

Phil Miller | Star Tribune | October 1, 2018

Joe Mauer called Twins equipment manager Rod McCormick on Saturday morning with an urgent and unexpected request: I’m going to catch again, but I don’t have a helmet anymore.

He was in luck. Mostly.

“I said, ‘I know exactly where your old white helmet is. It’s in my garage. My kids play with it,’ ” McCormick said. “It’s a little beat up. It’s bounced on our driveway a few times. But it still fits.”

And with that dinged-up detail taken care of, Mauer gave the go-ahead for one of most memorable farewells — perhaps — in Twins history. Mauer’s symbolic return, for one emotional pitch, to the position that made him one of the franchise’s greatest players was months in the making but came together in just a day.

“It kind of stemmed from Joe and I sitting on the bench one day earlier this season, having a conversation about stuff he would still like to do, and

catching came up,” said Twins bench coach Derek Shelton, who believed it was a wish that the Twins, playing out their schedule far from playoff contention, could grant. He discussed the idea with longtime bullpen catcher Nate Dammann, “because I knew he and Joe are pretty tight,” Shelton said. “But we didn’t really know how Joe would react.”

They found out Friday. Shelton pulled Mauer into McCormick’s office and described the scenario. “It’s funny, Nate happened to walk in two minutes later. And Nate’s perspective was really good,” Shelton said. “They’re both from [the Twin Cities]. Joe’s such a humble guy, but Nate pointed out how much it would mean to other people, too, in addition to Joe.”

His reaction? “I think he was in shock,” Dammann said. “He didn’t say much. He kind of stared at us.”

Turns out, though, that Shelton wasn’t the only one who had longed to see Mauer wear the equipment again. Mauer’s father, Jake, had made the suggestion to his daughter-in-law earlier in September. “But I said, ‘You probably shouldn’t say anything to Joe,’ ” Jake Mauer said.

She did, though, but Mauer didn’t follow through — until Shelton and Dammann made their case. The thought of delighting his father on such a big day swayed him.

“I wanted it to be a surprise for my dad,” Mauer said. “So just a few people knew.”

One was Matt Belisle, his teammate for the past two seasons, whom Mauer asked to throw the pitch.

“When he approached me about this a few days ago, I was just really blown away with humility, to have an honor bestowed on me in that regard. So of course I told him, ‘If you want to do this, I’m in your corner like cast iron, I’ll do whatever you want,’ ” Belisle said. “I just wanted to do my best to make it about him and have it as special as it can be.”

Twins manager Paul Molitor contacted his counterpart, Rick Renteria, to make sure the White Sox were OK with the idea, and Mauer made sure his wife, Maddie, had no objections.

“As long as the White Sox player did not swing,” Maddie Mauer said, “I was on board with it.”

Mauer knew right where to find his old chest protector and shin guards. He kept them in a bag in his basement, planning to someday turn it into a shadowbox exhibit in his home. “I haven’t opened that bag since 2013,” he said, the last time he was a catcher.

And once McCormick dug Mauer’s mask and helmet out of a bucket in the garage, everything was set for Mauer’s big surprise.

“I had no idea it was coming,” Jake Mauer said. “But when there was a delay, I put two and two together and thought, ‘He’s putting on the catching gear, I know he is.’ ”

Mauer strode up the steps and into the loudest ovation of a day full of them. “The moment that that idea became was way cooler than I could have imagined,” Shelton said. “In terms of sentimental moments, how could you top that?”

Just one problem: The helmet isn’t the Twins’ standard anymore. Technically, Mauer broke the MLB uniform rules.

“He’s probably OK, though,” McCormick said. “Usually, you get a warning for a first offense.”

Can Twins replace Joe Mauer as the face of the franchise?

Michael Rand | Star Tribune | October 1, 2018

From the moment he was drafted No. 1 overall in 2001 to the time he made his Twins debut in 2004 through what quite possibly was his last major league at-bat Sunday, Joe Mauer has filled an undeniable role as a face — often the face — of the Twins organization.

That role might have diminished in recent years as Mauer’s production waned and new Twins players tried to fill the void, but in looking ahead to a potentially Mauer-less 2019 season this much is obvious: The Twins do not have someone ready to take his place in that face-of-the-franchise role.

Brian Dozier was starting to grow into that territory, but he was traded at the deadline. Miguel Sano and Byron Buxton have been pushed by Twins marketers into that area, but the regression of both in a disastrous 2018 season means neither can be counted on for such a thing in 2019.

Eddie Rosario is a viable candidate, but on a great team he'd be in a supporting role instead of a starring role. Jose Berrios? Same as Rosario.

“Face of a franchise” might be a slightly overrated and abstract concept, but it becomes more noticeable in its absence. It speaks to a team's identity, and as anonymous as this 2018 Twins team felt, it could be even more so without Mauer in 2019.

- As Jimmy Butler continues to sit out while awaiting a trade from the Timberwolves and Justin Patton remains sidelined by more foot problems, this observation from e-mailer Jim is apt: The Wolves had nothing to show, at least on the court, from last summer's blockbuster Butler trade when they defeated the Warriors in their preseason opener Saturday night.

The Wolves shipped Zach LaVine, Kris Dunn and the No. 7 pick (Lauri Markkanen) to the Bulls for Butler and the pick that became Patton. Those are a lot of missing resources.

- Stop me if you've heard this one before: The Wild opens the season Thursday as a fringe playoff team but not one of the favorites in the Western Conference.

The consistency of making the playoffs beats the alternative — just ask the Timberwolves, who had eight years in a row in the playoffs, including seven straight first-round losses, and then a 13-year absence — but it's hard to envision a different postseason outcome for the Wild even if they make it back.

- A common refrain after the Vikings laid an egg against the Bills last weekend (and trotted out again when they lost Thursday to the Rams) was that any concerns might be mitigated by a relatively easy division.

The Bears had started 2-1 but didn't look impressive on offense in the process. The Packers looked discombobulated in losing to Washington last weekend and are still nursing Aaron Rodgers back to health.

Those of us who bought (or even sold) that idea are backpedaling a little after Sunday's outcomes. The Mitchell Trubisky-led Bears put up 48 points in a rout of Tampa Bay, while the Packers did what the Vikings should have done and shut out the Bills. The Lions lost, but the Vikings are still third in a division that might offer more resistance than it seemed.

- Speaking of the Bears, new linebacker Khalil Mack had another sack and forced fumble against the Buccaneers — the fourth straight game he's done that. You think that might be an issue when he faces fumble-prone Vikings QB Kirk Cousins twice later this season?

- Cousins' fumbling problem is troubling, but it could be worse. The Vikings could have put their faith (and money) in Sam Bradford, who not only has already been benched by the Cardinals after three games but was demoted to third string and was inactive against the Seahawks on Sunday.

Twins fans cheer, mourn as Mauer hints at retirement

Erin Adler and Mara Klecker | Star Tribune | October 1, 2018

Twins fans watched Joe Mauer walk out in his catcher's gear with a combination of sadness, pride and a hope that maybe this really wasn't farewell.

In the top of the ninth inning Sunday at Target Field, Mauer crouched behind the plate, catching a single pitch before running to the mound and hugging pitcher Matt Belisle. That action earned Mauer, who wiped away tears, a five-minute standing ovation from fans.

“That was absolutely fantastic,” said Tom O'Connell, who said he had watched Mauer play since Little League and attended what is now Cretin-Derham Hall as Mauer did. His brother Dick O'Connell said the pair wanted Mauer to come back for another year.

The Twins won Sunday's season-ending game against the White Sox 5-4, but Mauer stole the show. During the game, highlights from his 15-year, 1,858-game career played on the giant TV screens. His pint-size twin daughters joined him at first base for the national anthem.

Mauer shook hands with the plate umpire Jim Reynolds before his first at bat, and he received a standing ovation each time he stepped up to the plate.

Joan Gilbertson said she texted her son, a college student who also attended Cretin-Derham Hall, throughout the game, sending him photos and updates.

For her son, Mauer is “an idol,” and he felt the night’s significance from hundreds of miles away. “It was emotional. There was definitely a sense that this could be the end,” -Gilbertson said.

Several fans mentioned Mauer’s local roots and humility when asked about their attachment to him.

Pam Novak and her family drove in from South Dakota to watch the game. Mauer seems “down-to-earth,” she said: “He doesn’t have a big head because he’s a celebrity.”

At a bar near the Twins stadium after the game, Jon Higgins joked that Mauer would be back next year.

In actuality, though, “Everything pointed to the fact that he’s done,” Higgins said. “Everyone could sense it. ... It was a good send-off for him.”

Higgins and friend Andrew Smith wore matching No. 7 jerseys — Mauer’s uniform number — to the game.

“He’s definitely been one of my favorite players,” Higgins said. “Figured it might be the last time I could wear it.”

Jake Cave has solidified future with Twins **Phil Miller | Star Tribune | October 1, 2018**

When he was designated for assignment by the Yankees in March, Jake Cave wasn’t sure where his career was headed. Now he can’t wait to find out.

Cave ended a strong rookie season Sunday with his 13th home run, another 420-footer to straightaway center field that helped carry the Twins to their sixth consecutive victory, 5-4 over the White Sox.

“It was awesome to be able to run the bases in a game like that, the last game of the year,” Cave said. “With everything going on with Joe [Mauer], and to be able to contribute to a win like that, it really meant a ton.”

Max Kepler also homered, a two-run sixth-inning shot that gave him 20 on the season. And Logan Forsythe delivered a two-run single, helping the Twins finish off a sweep.

Taylor Rogers extended his scoreless streak to 26 innings, fifth-longest in Twins history, while Trevor May, with the tying run in scoring position, struck out two batters in the ninth to earn his third save in the season’s final 10 days.

Cave said he looks forward to rest after a long season — but part of him wishes he could continue establishing himself as a bona fide big-leaguer.

“It was a shock to be [designated for assignment] by the Yankees. It’s hard not to take that as rejection, to wonder if [an MLB career] is going to happen,” said the outfielder. “But it couldn’t have worked out better. I couldn’t be happier to be here, playing well.”

Santana says goodbyes

Ervin Santana was his usual smiling self, saying goodbye to teammates he knows probably won’t be his teammates much longer. Santana, his season ruined by calcium deposits in his right middle finger that required surgery in February, becomes a free agent once the Twins decline a \$14 million option on his contract for 2019.

Coming off a season in which he pitched only 24⅓ major league innings, Santana, who turns 36 on Dec. 12, knows he has to rebuild his value in order to attract new contract offers. “It’s a lot better now,” Santana said of his sore finger, which prevented him from from throwing his fastball harder than 90 mph or so. “Everything is going to be OK.”

Just to make sure, though, Santana plans to play winter ball for the first time since 2009. He signed on with the Licey Tigers, last year’s Dominican Winter League runner-up, beginning in December.

Minor honorees

For mashing 71 extra-base hits and driving in 101 runs in 130 Class A games, 2016 first-round draft pick Alex Kirilloff has been named the

winner of the Sherry Robertson Award as the Twins minor league player of the year. And Lewis Thorpe, a lefthanded starter who struck out 157 batters in 129 innings at Class AA and AAA, was chosen as the Jim Rantz Award winner as their top minor league pitcher.

The pair will receive their trophies at the annual Diamond Awards in January.

Thorpe, 22, is an Australian who missed the 2015 and '16 seasons after having elbow ligament surgery. Kirilloff, 20, also lost a season, 2017, to Tommy John surgery, but he has been a ferocious hitter ever since.

Sunday's Twins-Chicago White Sox game recap

Phil Miller | Star Tribune | September 30, 2018

GAME RECAP

IMPACT PLAYER

Joe Mauer, Twins

Baseball doesn't usually provide moments as perfectly scripted as Mauer's opposite-field double and return to his old position.

BY THE NUMBERS

6 Consecutive victories to close the season, their longest winning streak of the year

20 Home runs by Max Kepler, setting a new career high

26 Consecutive scoreless innings by Taylor Rogers, fifth-longest streak in Twins history

UP NEXT

The Twins open the 2019 season at home, at 3:10 p.m. March 28 against the Indians.

Career highlights of Joe Mauer, the hometown Twin

Staff Writer | Star Tribune | September 30, 2018

JOE MAUER THE HOMETOWN TWIN

Age: 35. Born April 19, 1983 in St. Paul.

Family: wife Maddie; twin daughters Maren and Emily, 5. The Mauers are expecting in November.

High school: Cretin-Derham Hall. He was the Gatorade national baseball and football (quarterback) player of the year, and was also a two-time all-state basketball player.

Drafted: first overall, 2001. He turned down a football scholarship at Florida State to sign with the Twins.

Major league seasons: 15, six All-Star selections.

Position: played catcher until 2014, when he moved to first base because of concern over concussions.

Batting titles: 3, a major league record for a catcher.

Best season: 2009, American League MVP. Led majors in hitting (.365) with 28 home runs and 96 RBI in only 134 games and won a Gold Glove.

Playoffs: The Twins made the postseason five times during Mauer's career. He was injured and missed the playoffs in 2004. In his four postseason appearances, he hit .275 but the Twins lost all 10 games.

Final game of 2018: Mauer was 1-for-4, doubling in his final at-bat and finishing the game playing catcher for the first time since Aug. 19, 2013.

Will he retire? "I'm not 100 percent sure," Mauer said. "I want to make sure I have some time to take a deep breath and be behind that decision."

Twins coaching staff shuffle isn't out of the question **La Velle E. Neal III | Star Tribune | September 29, 2018**

It might not take long for the Twins to start making moves with 2019 in mind.

Early next week, the front office is expected to meet with manager Paul Molitor about the soon-to-be completed season and discuss the future of his coaching staff. Given that the club failed to build on last year's run to an AL wild-card berth, changes are not out of the question.

"Typically, in the first week of the offseason you get everything, generally, cleaned up relative to what you think you are going to do moving forward," Twins Chief Baseball Officer Derek Falvey said in an interview Wednesday. "Those are conversations that are going to happen internally with our group, with Paul and we will go from there."

And will those meetings also might focus on Molitor's status for next season. During an interview Wednesday, Twins owner Jim Pohlad would not give Molitor a vote of confidence, preferring to wait until he meets with Falvey and General Manager Thad Levine once the season ends.

"I have no idea what they are going to come with," Pohlad said. "No matter if we win the World Series or have a disappointing season like this, they are going to come with recommendations. Some of those recommendations could be personnel changes, some could be methodology changes. I don't know but I look forward to that."

Molitor, who is under contract for next season, has said that he wants to return. Saturday, he expressed optimism that he will have the same staff to work with next season.

"I haven't talked about it much," Molitor said when asked if he thought all his coaches would return next season. "In my mind, when I have my exit meetings with our front office people this week, I'm sure we'll discuss all those things. I don't even know the status for who is locked in [contractually]- next year. I think they're on different schedules."

"I'm optimistic about us being able to stay together."

The Twins entered Saturday having scored 725 runs, a drop offensively from the 815 runs they scored a season ago — which was the most since 2009. Their team OPS (on base-plus-slugging percentage) last season was ninth overall in baseball, at .768. This year the Twins were 20th at .722. Injuries to Miguel Sano and Byron Buxton and the 80-suspension handed to Jorge Polanco for performance-enhancing drugs definitely hurt run production. And the enigma that is Buxton's hitting will be at the top of list of challenges for hitting coach James Rowson if he returns next season.

The pitching staff posted a 4.59 ERA in 2017, and the group entered Saturday with a 4.52 ERA. But the group showed some encouraging signs in Garvin Alston's first season as pitching coach. Twins pitchers entered Saturday with 1,353 strikeouts, a jump from 1,166 last season, and the 198 home runs were 26 fewer than a year ago.

Defensively, the Twins were middle of the pack in defensive runs saved. They were among the better AL teams in defense at first base and right field, a tip of the cap to Joe Mauer and Max Kepler, respectively. But Twins shortstops ranked near the bottom.

Ultimately, the front office will have to decide if they need more from their coaching staff to get the most out of their players next season — and if they need to change things up to achieve that. In addition to Alston and Rowson, Jeff Pickler, coordinator of major league development, and bench coach Derek Shelton have been brought in by Falvey and Levine. Third base coach Gene Glynn, assistant hitting coach Rudy Hernandez and bullpen coach Eddie Guardado were appointed by Molitor before the 2015 season. First base coach Jeff Smith was brought up from the minors before the 2017 season.

Will Falvey and Levine decide that more new blood is needed? Falvey would not drop any hints about what his plans are — although the Twins have made changes to their coaching staff in three of their past four offseasons.

“At this point, I’m not going to speculate on it,” Falvey said. “Until we have those conversations, I don’t think it is fair to put anyone in that position right now, and we have not had those conversations yet.”

Game No. 1,858 feels a little special for Joe Mauer as he considers future
Phil Miller | Star Tribune | September 30, 2018

Joe Mauer says he plans to play all nine innings today, but we’ll see if Paul Molitor agrees. Mauer is at first base for the first time since Thursday, and atop the lineup as usual, for his 1,858th — and perhaps last — Twins game.

“I’m just excited, excited to go out there and play,” Mauer said in an unusual impromptu press conference in front of his corner locker. “This week has been a lot of fun, there’s been some good crowds, some nice moments, and we’ve been playing well, which is a great thing, too.”

Mauer said he doesn’t generally get emotional on the field, but conceded that, “maybe this year. ... The last couple of days have been a little emotional, but it’s been fun. Just the interactions I’ve had with people here. Just having conversations on personal levels, with people inside, fans, teammates, all sorts of people.”

He won’t make a decision about 2019 for at least a few weeks, he said, but Mauer sounds at peace with whatever he decides.

“Either way, it’s a good decision, you know?” he said. “I can either play, or go home and be with my girls. I don’t think there’s a wrong decision there.”

The game with the White Sox, like all MLB games today, will begin shortly after 2 p.m. Here are the lineups for what should be a memorable afternoon:

WHITE SOX

Sanchez 3B

L. Garcia SS

Palka RF

A. Garcia DH

Davidson 1B

Delmonico LF

Castillo C

Moncada 2B

Cordell CF

Covey RHP

TWINS

Mauer 1B

Polanco SS

Cave CF

Grossman LF

Garver DH

Kepler RF

Forsythe 2B

Astudillo 3B

Graterol C

Littell RHP

Twins reliever Matt Belisle 'at loss for words' about his role in Joe Mauer's farewell

John Shipley | Pioneer Press | September 30, 2018

When Joe Mauer learned he would be catching a pitch in Sunday's season finale, he wanted to catch one from someone he had caught before. But that was five years ago, and only one current teammate fit the bill — starter Kyle Gibson.

So, Mauer chose reliever Matt Belisle.

"Playing with Matt the last couple of years, and the amount of respect that I have for him, how he goes about his business, and the player and person he is, I wanted him to share that moment with me," he said.

After the pitch, the two met at the mound and embraced. Asked how he kept it together, Belisle said, "I'm not sure I did."

"When he approached me about this a few days ago, it was something where I was just really blown away with humility to have an honor bestowed on me in that regard," Belisle said. "I told him, 'You wanna do this, I'm in your corner like cast iron and I'll do whatever you want. It doesn't matter, and that's for life.'"

Belisle gave up a leadoff double to Moncada, which might be understandable. Trevor May cleaned up for his third save in the Twins' 5-4 victory.

"I didn't know how it would play as far as out there, with the length of time or giving the hugs and all that," Belisle said. "But I just wanted to do my best to make it about him and have it as special as it could be. I'm at loss for words on the idea that he came to me and said, 'I wouldn't have anybody other than you throw it.' I don't know what to say about that."

Max Kepler and Logan Forsythe each drove in two runs, and Jake Cave hit a solo home run 420 feet to center field as the Twins swept a four-game series from the White Sox and finished with a season-high six-game winning streak.

Rookie Andrew Vasquez (1-0) earned the victory with one inning of relief, a perfect fifth in which he struck out the side.

'HUGE COMPONENTS'

The Twins' starting lineup featured four rookies and two other players who weren't on the Opening Day roster, which said as much about what happened in Minnesota this season as it did about MLB's expanded September rosters.

Expected to make a run in the Central Division after breaking into the playoffs with a wild-card berth last season, the Twins instead stumbled out of the gate and never recovered — in part because of injuries, trades and bad seasons from players on whom they were depending.

“I’m disappointed,” manager Paul Molitor said. “I don’t get wrapped up in the automatic ‘next year will be better and we’ll pick up where we left off and take the next step,’ but you do think those things, and you imagine that it could happen.

“I don’t make any excuses for where we are; we have to claim that. There have been things that have been good and things that we need to get better at, but I think my biggest reaction to the entire year is we’re not where we want to be.”

Noticeably absent as the season wound down were center fielder Byron Buxton and third baseman Miguel Sano, formerly among the top prospects in all of baseball.

Sano was limited to 71 games because of injuries to his left leg. He was an all-star in 2017 after hitting .264 with 28 homers and 77 runs batted in but managed only a .199 batting average with 115 strikeouts this season, which also included a nearly two-month rehab/conditioning stint with Class A Fort Myers.

Sano, 25, lost 25 to 30 pounds but never found his swing upon returning and was lost for the season after suffering a lower-leg injury on an awkward slide Sept. 12 in Houston.

Buxton, 24, was spent much of the season on the disabled list because of migraines, a broken toe and strained wrist and was passed over when rosters expanded Sept. 1. Arguably baseball’s best defensive outfielder, he hit .156 with a .183 on-base percentage and fanned 28 times in 90 at-bats.

“I think they’re still huge components to what we want to do and what our identity will be about,” Molitor said. “With each year that passes, the obvious questions maybe come up about, ‘OK, we’ve been hearing this for a long time.’ Some people are going to wonder if and when that’s going to happen. Our job is to try to draw the most out of those two people that we can.

“They’re both on board in terms of understanding where they’re at in terms of junctures in their careers, and let’s hope the leap forward begins with next spring.”

BRIEFLY

Outfielder Alex Kirilloff was named the Twins’ minor league player of the year and left-hander Lewis Thorpe minor league pitcher of the year, the team announced.

If Twins’ Joe Mauer just went out, he went out in style

John Shipley | Pioneer Press | September 30, 2018

It might not have been the end of Joe Mauer’s baseball career but, boy, it sure looked like it.

The St. Paul boy wonder, now a graying 35, had a sendoff for the ages on Sunday, doubling in his final at-bat and donning his catcher’s gear for the first time in five years to potentially end his career the way he started it, behind the plate, in a 5-4 victory over the Chicago White Sox at Target Field.

Mauer gave up catching in 2013 after taking a foul tip off the facemask that resulted in a concussion that forced him to miss half the season, and lingered long after, and when he emerged from the dugout for the ninth inning in full catcher’s gear, the announced crowd of 30,144 erupted in a spontaneous standing ovation.

“I didn’t think that was going to be a possibility — ever — and I’m glad I took that opportunity,” Mauer said.

The White Sox and Mauer’s teammates remained in their dugouts, and Mauer went to the mound to doff the trademark red-and-white-and-blue batting helmet he wore while catching for many of his nine seasons behind the plate, it was one of several instances Sunday of Mauer holding back tears.

“I have a lot of emotions going on right now, and today I don’t think could have gone any better to script,” Mauer said.

He went 1 for 4 with a double, the team-record 428th of his career, and finished the season with a .282 batting average. He now will use the next couple of weeks to decide what his future holds. He and his wife, Maddie, are parents to twin girls and are expecting their third child in mid-

November.

Mauer has insisted since spring training he was unsure of his future beyond this season, but the six-time all-star and 2009 American League MVP seemed to start tipping his hand as he answered questions over the last month of his 15th major league season.

On Sunday, it sounded as if he already has decided to retire and just needs to be at peace with the decision.

“I’m not a hundred percent sure, and like I said, I want to make sure I have time just to take a deep breath and really be behind that decision,” he said. “But I couldn’t have asked for a better last day of the 2018 season, and I’m looking forward to just taking a breath and spending some time with my girls, my family, and we’ll go from there.”

“But with the emotions running right now, I don’t want to say either way.”

In the seventh inning, Mauer doubled to the gap in left-center on a 3-2 pitch and rounded first aggressively, determined to make it his 428th double. When he slid safely beneath a late tag from White Sox second baseman Yoan Moncada, Mauer stood on the bag and removed his batting gloves to a standing ovation from raucous fans who came to Target Field on a chilly day to see what might be the last game for the latest in a long line of St. Paul baseball royalty.

If catching one pitch from teammate Matt Belisle was a perfect ending in the field, the double was a perfect last at-bat, an opposite-field liner that he hustled into a double. The decision, he said, was purely reflexive.

“I guess that’s just how I play the game,” Mauer said. “I saw that (left fielder Nicky Delomonico) was moving a little to his left, and in a one-run game I’m trying to get into scoring position. So, keep playing the game.”

What meant most to Mauer, however, was catching just one pitch. He was for a time the best catcher in baseball, and on the way to becoming the best of all time. The first catcher in major league baseball to win three batting titles (2006, 2008 and 2009), Mauer had maybe the best season a catcher has ever had in 2009.

Playing in the Twins’ last season at the Metrodome, Mauer hit an astonishing .365, hit 28 home runs, drove in 96 runs and won a Gold Glove. The performance earned him the 2009 American League MVP Award.

On Sunday, he brought his catching gear from home, where it had been sitting in an equipment bag since 2013. He had plans to put it in a shadow box, he said, and display it but “for one reason or another just never got around to it.”

Maybe Sunday was why.

After learning that the Twins and White Sox had agreed to the plan, which included the batter — in this case Moncada — taking a pitch, Mauer found the bag on Saturday night.

“I knew exactly where it was and just never opened it,” he said. “So I picked it up last night for the first time and put it on over my clothes and I started getting emotional.”

Manager Paul Molitor, one of three St. Paul natives to be inducted into the Pro Baseball Hall of Fame — Dave Winfield and Jack Morris are the others — got the OK from White Sox manager Rick Renteria to accommodate Mauer.

“We pulled it off, and I thought it was beautiful,” Molitor said.

Twins’ Mauer doubles, catches in emotional season finale **Associated Press | Fox Sports North | September 30, 2018**

MINNEAPOLIS — Joe Mauer isn’t sure if Sunday marked the end of his time with the Minnesota Twins. Just in case, though, the regular season finale turned into a farewell befitting his remarkable career with his hometown team.

Mauer doubled in his final at-bat, received one more pitch as catcher, and then walked off to an extended ovation as Minnesota likely said goodbye to the longtime face of its franchise during an emotional 5-4 win over the Chicago White Sox.

The 35-year-old Mauer was playing the final game of an eight-year, \$184 million contract. So far, he's been noncommittal regarding his plans for next year and beyond.

"It's been an emotional rollercoaster. I'm not 100 percent sure," he said. "I want to make sure I have some time just to take a deep breath and really be behind that decision."

There certainly were plenty of touches that made Sunday's game feel like a final appearance, none more dramatic than Mauer's surprise appearance behind the plate in the ninth.

Mauer emerged from the dugout in his catching gear, the first time he'd worn it since late 2013, when a series of concussions forced him to move to first base. He stood alone at home plate as fans, teammates and opponents showered him with applause.

The 2009 AL MVP caught one pitch from Matt Belisle. Then, with the theme music from "The Natural" playing over the speakers, he walked off to a final standing ovation and was replaced by Chris Gimenez.

"We had an opportunity to do that, and I didn't think that was going to be a possibility ever," Mauer said. "I'm glad I took that opportunity."

Twins manager Paul Molitor said he'd worked out the logistics of the moment with White Sox manager Rick Renteria before the game.

"Rick was fantastic. I told him I didn't want to disrespect the game or the integrity of winning or losing," Molitor said. "(I said) it would be a one-pitch scenario and we assured him that we would try to throw a ball as best as we could. And it worked out."

White Sox second baseman Yoan Moncada was the batter at the time and said he was more than happy to do his part.

"When I went to home plate, he said, 'Hey, can you take the first pitch?'" Moncada said. "It was very exciting, and an emotional moment. I was just glad to be part of that."

Mauer is a three-time AL batting champ and six-time All-Star over 15 major league seasons, all with Minnesota. A three-sport star from St. Paul's Cretin-Derham Hall High School, Mauer was the No. 1 overall pick in the 2001 draft and made his debut with the Twins in 2004.

Even his final plate appearance was classic Mauer. He sent a line drive into the left-center gap off Juan Minaya, then hustled to second, sliding in just ahead of left fielder Nicky Delmonico's throw.

When asked if he thought about playing it safe to avoid getting thrown out in potentially his last at-bat, Mauer shrugged and said, "That's just how I play the game. I saw that (Delmonico) was moving a little to his left, and in a one-run game I'm going to try to get into scoring position. You've got to keep playing the game."

Max Kepler and Jake Cave homered for the Twins, and reliever Andrew Vasquez (1-0) earned his first major league victory with one perfect inning of relief. Trevor May replaced Belisle and got three straight outs with the tying run on second in the ninth to earn his third save.

Dylan Covey (5-14) gave up five runs over six innings.

MAUER MOMENTS

The day was filled with memorable moments for Mauer, who started at first base and batted leadoff. For Sunday home games, each Twins player is joined at his position by a young fan for the national anthem. On Sunday, Mauer's 5-year-old twin daughters, Emily and Maren, surprised him by running out to meet him at first base.

"I thought I had it going pretty good, holding it together, and then my two girls ran out on the field and I lost it there for a moment.

The crowd of 30,144 gave Mauer an extended standing ovation before his first at-bat. He then shook hands with umpire Jim Reynolds and White Sox catcher Wellington Castillo before facing Covey.

BY THE NUMBERS

If Mauer retires after this season, he will finish second in Twins history in games played, third in runs scored, second in hits, first in doubles, and

second in walks. He broke the Twins' career record for times on base earlier in the homestand.

UNHAPPY ENDINGS

The White Sox lost their 100th game of the year, the first time they've done so since 1970.

"As far as the numbers, they are what they are," Renteria said. "I think I have to reflect on how we got to that point and some of the things we have to do to correct it, and move on."

Meanwhile, the Twins won their sixth straight game to end the season, giving them 78 victories — seven fewer than last year, when they were the AL's second wild card.

But Molitor clearly feels bullish about the team's chances to return to the playoffs in 2019. When asked if the organization would give Mauer another memorable departure if he returned to play next year, the Twins manager replied, "Next year at this time, we'll be planning for our next game, so I don't think the situation will be the same."

WHIFF WATCH

Moncada struck out once, giving him a major league-leading 217. That's just six behind the record of 223, set by Mark Reynolds of the Rockies in 2009.

IN THE STANDS

The Twins announced an official home attendance of 1,959,197, which included two "home" games played in Puerto Rico in April. That total is their lowest since 2004, when they still played at the Metrodome.

The last hurrah? Joe Mauer (almost certainly) ends career with appearance behind the plate **Judd Zulgad | ESPN 1500 | September 30, 2018**

MINNEAPOLIS — Joe Mauer hasn't announced his retirement, but every indication is that he's playing in his last big-league game Sunday after a 15-year career.

If you didn't believe that before Sunday, you will when you read through this running thread of all signs pointing to Mauer hanging it up following the Twins' 2018 finale.

Pregame

As is usually the case on Sundays, the Twins had kids take the various positions around the diamond at Target Field before the players joined them on the field. Only this time, first base was left unoccupied. The public address announced pointed this out and then Mauer's twin daughters ran to the position before they were joined by their dad.

Multiple photographers took pictures as Mauer hugged his kids and stood at first base with them. His teammates finally came out to take their positions.

After the White Sox scored twice in the top of the inning, the Twins showed a package of Mauer highlights on the scoreboard as he stood in the on-deck circle to lead off. Mauer was then announced to what became a standing ovation from the crowd.

Plate umpire Jim Reynolds and White Sox catcher Wellington Castillo stood back as Mauer acknowledged the applause. Reynolds then shook Mauer's hand as did Castillo.

Mauer grounded to second.

Third inning

Mauer's second at-bat of the day drew another (mostly) standing ovation. Hitting with two outs and Willians Astudillo on second base, Mauer hit

a 1-1 pitch to shortstop Leury Garcia and was easily thrown out.

Fifth inning

The Twins show the commercial that Joe Mauer and Joe Nathan did as part of a long-ago season-ticket campaign and then show Mauer's first big-league hit, which came on April 5, 2004. Mauer came up second in the inning with one out and gets a third standing ovation. He then flies to center on the first pitch.

Seventh inning

As Trevor Hildenberger is replaced by Taylor Rogers in the top of the inning, the Twins show the Mauer commercial that was taken from the old Mean Joe Greene ad for Pepsi where he gives his jersey to a young boy. Mauer, however, acts like he's going to throw his jersey to a young fan before taking off his sideburns and putting them on the kid.

Mauer comes up with one out in the bottom of the inning to another standing ovation. With his teammates standing on the top step of the dugout and the announced crowd of 30,144 standing, Mauer hits a 3-2 fastball from Juan Minaya to left field and legs out a double. With the applause continuing, Mauer tips his cap to the crowd.

Ninth inning

Max Kepler made the final out of the top of the ninth inning. The Twins then stayed in their dugout, and Kepler was told to come off the field instead of jogging to right field.

Mauer finally emerged from the Twins dugout in catching gear to thunderous applause. Mauer stood on the field — with his teammates still in the dugout — acknowledging the cheers. The Twins finally took the field and reliever Matt Belisle came in to pitch. It was Mauer's first catching appearance since Aug. 19, 2013 against the Mets.

With the fans standing, a chorus of "Thank You, Joe," filled the stadium. Belisle delivered ball one to Yoan Moncada and Mauer went to the mound to hug Belisle. Mauer then walked off the field to one last round of applause and hugged teammates in the dugout as Chris Gimenez replaced him behind the plate.

After reliever Trevor May got the final out in the Twins' 5-4 victory, Mauer emerged from the dugout in his catching gear and gave a hug to each teammate as they went through the handshake line.

Mauer said in a postgame interview with Fox Sports North that he still hasn't decided if he's finished playing.

Zulgad: In the end, Mauer finally let us see that he was No Ordinary Joe

Judd Zulgad | ESPN 1500 | September 30, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS — In what was likely his last day as a major-league player, Joe Mauer finally let us in. He gave us a glimpse of what made him tick and the fact there was far more there than what most of us had seen over the past 15 years.

As Mauer sat at a table designed for one inside the Twins' press conference room in Target Field, talking about the emotions of the past few days and how much being able to go behind the plate to catch one ninth-inning pitch on Sunday against the White Sox meant to him, there was one thought that kept coming to mind.

Why didn't Mauer show this side of himself more often?

In talking about what almost certainly was his final game as a Twin, he smiled and nearly cried. The tears had come earlier but you could tell they weren't done. He went into a detailed story about how the idea to have him catch one pitch had originated with his father, Jake. But Jake didn't want to tell Joe and so he told Joe's wife, Maddie, and from there that set things in motion.

Mauer gave details, he provided insight, he was, for him, an open book. There have been many Twins players who have said the media and public don't know the real Mauer and on Sunday it became clear we were seeing that person.

There are some athletes who are complete jerks and have such a distrust of the media that they don't let their guard down. The 35-year-old catcher-turned-first baseman has never been that guy. Mauer always has seemed like a pleasant enough person who had little interest in showing us if he had a personality.

It always has been the feeling here that being such a private person has hurt Mauer with Minnesota fans. Yes, he's a St. Paul native and former multi-sport standout at Cretin-Derham Hall, but those things haven't been able to overcome the fact that Mauer is considered bland and boring.

Mauer is one of the greatest Twins' hitters of all-time — he's the only catcher in American League history to win a batting title and he did it three times — but the fact he didn't hit for more power has and always will be used against him.

The biggest strike against Mauer, as unfair as it might have been, is that he had the audacity to sign an eight-year, \$184 million contract extension in March 2010. Mauer had been playing on a reasonable four-year, \$33 million contract before that, but the fact he was making \$23 million per year through this season forever will be held against him.

It only got worse in April 2011 when Mauer was placed on the disabled list with what the Twins termed bilateral leg weakness. Rumors spread about what actually might have been wrong with Mauer and he attempted to refute reports that he was dealing with some type of disease.

One has to wonder what would have happened if Mauer had displayed just a bit more personality and defiance. If just once he had shown some emotion and told the critics what they could do with their thoughts on his lack of power or his contract. If he had held a press conference and said that terming his issue as bilateral leg weakness was incredibly stupid and that he didn't approve.

We Minnesota sports fans are an interesting bunch. We like stoic-types but we have no respect if we consider you to be a pushover. We ended up putting Mauer in the latter category and thus he spent much of his career not being as popular as he should have been.

If you were to describe an athlete of Mauer's ability, playing in this town, his hometown, you would be tempted to say he owned the Twin Cities. But that was never close to being the case. Plenty of people liked Mauer but it didn't go much beyond that.

That might have been different if the Mauer we saw on Sunday had been the Mauer we saw on a regular basis.

This was a guy willing to show us that he wasn't afraid to cry when he saw his twin daughters waiting for him at first base before the game. This was a guy who didn't mind talking about how catching one more time was a great surprise to give his father. This was a guy who wasn't afraid to say he didn't know what was coming next.

This was a guy we should have seen long ago. If we had, he would have been beloved in his hometown instead of tolerated.

Here's the pitch: Mauer's return behind the plate is brief and unforgettable
Judd Zulgad | ESPN 1500 | September 30, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS — If this was Joe Mauer's last game in the big leagues, and it seemed that way amidst the standing ovations and video tributes on the scoreboard at Target Field, it appeared to be capped off perfectly Sunday afternoon with one out in the bottom of the seventh inning.

Having gone 0-for-3, Mauer came to the plate to face White Sox righthanded reliever Juan Minaya. Mauer worked the count full before slicing the ball to left field for what appeared to be a perfect Mauer opposite-field base hit. Only the veteran then used his baserunning savvy and slid into second base ahead of the tag from Chicago second baseman Yoan Moncada.

The hit, the baserunning. It was classic Mauer.

The announced crowd of 30,144 stood and cheered, as did Mauer's teammates, and it was at that point Twins manager Paul Molitor started to hear some fans near the team's dugout call for him to put in a pinch-runner so Mauer could leave the field to a thunderous ovation.

"We had other plans in mind," Molitor said.

Indeed, they did.

Mauer remained in the game at his normal position of first base in the top of the eighth inning. After the Twins went down in order in the bottom of the inning, there were some who thought that Mauer might jog out to first base for the top of the ninth and then get pulled by Molitor before a pitch was thrown. Minnesota was leading 5-4.

But after Max Kepler grounded to short to end the eighth everything seemed to stop. Kepler started to run out to right field but first base coach Jeff Smith hollered for him to head to the dugout. The playing field was empty and, yet, there was a half-inning to play.

It was at that point the focus went to the Twins' dugout and the brief delay ended with someone in catching gear jogging up the steps and toward home plate.

A father's wish

Aug. 19, 2013.

That was the date on which Mauer last served as the Twins' catcher. The Twins were playing a makeup game that afternoon against the New York Mets, when the St. Paul native took a foul ball off his mask and suffered a concussion.

In retrospect, it almost certainly was one of many concussions he had sustained during his career as a catcher. Nonetheless, he had done the unheard of by winning three American League batting titles while catching — no other AL catcher has won a hitting crown — but Mauer would be impacted for months and maybe years by this concussion. In November of 2013, the Twins announced Mauer would make the full-time move to first base.

Mauer has played first base or served as a designated hitter since the 2014 season. The 35-year-old told the Star Tribune in recent weeks that he has been considering retirement and, thus, it was Joe's father, Jake, who made the suggestion to Joe's wife, Maddie, about having his son catch one more pitch behind the plate. Jake didn't want to broach the subject with his son, but the idea spread to a small but influential group of people.

Mike Herman, the Twins' director of team travel, talked to Mauer about catching one pitch in Sunday's finale before the team's doubleheader against the White Sox on Friday. "I was like, 'No, Mike, I can't do it, I can't do it,'" Mauer said.

But Herman wasn't the only one in on the plan, he was simply the first one to talk to Mauer. The next bit of convincing was done by Twins bullpen catcher Nate Dammann, one of Mauer's best friends in the organization, and bench coach Derek Shelton.

"(They) pulled me into Hot Rod's office," Mauer said, referring to Twins equipment manager Rod McCormick, "and asked about the possibility of making it happen and hearing what they had to say, and how much it would mean. ... I think they knew how much it would mean (not only) to me but to other people. They convinced (me) that it would be OK."

The convincing part was important.

Mauer had another concussion-related issue in May when he fell chasing a foul ball against the Angels in Anaheim while playing first base. Mauer had loved being a catcher but he decided to give it up because of the dangers and taking any chance at all now seemed unwise. He has twin daughters and another child on the way.

The agreement would have to be that whoever came to the plate for the White Sox would agree not to swing at the pitch Mauer was going to catch.

"I said, 'My wife might kill me if I go back there and they swing,'" Mauer said. "That's the thing and she was so behind it and I was so thankful for that. But that was my first question to Derek and Nate, I said, 'If I'm going to do this, (the White Sox) have got to be on board and take.' That's a risk that I made a decision five years ago (to avoid). I wanted to honor that for my family and myself, too."

The wheels were now fully in motion for Mauer to catch one last pitch. There were a few details left to iron out but getting Mauer to agree to this, a minor miracle when you consider how much he tries to stay away from drawing attention to himself, was the key.

An emotional moment

Mauer had signed off on the idea to have him catch before the Twins' doubleheader against the White Sox. While he played in both games of the day-night affair, he had to get his emotions in check before he could take the field.

Not only was this a man dealing with his potential retirement — he still says he's not 100 percent sure, but it's difficult to believe he will return — but now he was faced with going back to do something he loved but had taken from him.

"I just had to go find a room and just be alone and start welling up and try to hold those emotions in," said Mauer, who has rarely shown any public emotion during his career.

Mauer's trip down memory lane had only begun and few knew what was to come. Mauer wanted to make sure his dad was surprised — even though it had originally been his father's idea — so only a select few were brought into the loop.

On Saturday night, Mauer went home after the Twins' victory over the White Sox and found the bag with his catching gear in it.

"I haven't opened that bag since 2013," Mauer said. "I had the idea when I was done that I was going to put (the gear) in a shadow box, put it at home, display it somehow. For whatever reason that just didn't happen. I knew exactly where it was, and I just never opened it. Last night, I opened it for the first time and put it on over my clothes and started getting emotional. I put it in my (car) trunk and I told Hot Rod about it. He knew before he went out there and grabbed it sometime during the game."

Where's Joe?

McCormick brought the gear into the Twins' clubhouse during the game and placed it at Mauer's locker. Mauer made his way to the home clubhouse in the bottom of the eighth inning and did what he had done so many times before.

He put on the catching gear. Only this time there were tears in his eyes. "That's kind of when it all came out," Mauer said of his emotions.

Molitor, meanwhile, had talked to Rick Renteria about Mauer catching one pitch and the White Sox manager agreed to assist in the plan. Both the Twins and White Sox were long ago eliminated from playoff contention. So with Minnesota finishing a 78-84 season and the White Sox coming in at 62-100, there was no concern about any type of negative impact.

"Rick was fantastic," Molitor said. "I told him that I didn't want to disrespect the game or the integrity of winning or losing. I talked about the concept, uncertain of whether it was going to be the seventh, eighth or ninth (inning), depending on how things unfolded. But it would be a one-pitch scenario and we were going to try to throw a ball as best we could."

Mauer had been consulted on whom he wanted on the mound and picked veteran reliever Matt Belisle. Kyle Gibson is the only Twins' pitcher whom Mauer had caught — Gibson started Mauer's last game behind the plate five years ago — but the veteran wasn't going to be brought in for the ninth.

"Playing with Matt the last couple of years, and the amount of respect that I have for him and how he goes about his business, the player he is and the person he is, I wanted him to share that moment with me," Mauer said. "We've become pretty close."

The moment arrives

The curiosity of the moment turned to roars as Mauer made his way down the tunnel from the Twins clubhouse, jogged up the dugout stairs and onto the field clad in catcher's gear. The cheers continued as Belisle took his time in the bullpen. On the last day of his eight-year, \$23 million per season contract that had once made him the object of near constant criticism from many Twins fans, Mauer's salary no longer mattered.

Mauer acknowledged the crowd that had applauded his every move all day, as well turning to the White Sox dugout to say thanks and the Twins dugout to show his appreciation to teammates. Mauer appeared on the verge of tears at one point, but that soon turned to an aw-shucks smile as he soaked in the moment.

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Finally, as Belisle still stood in the bullpen, Mauer waved his arm in circular motion as if to say, "OK, that's enough, let's go." Belisle jogged in and took the mound as "Back in the Saddle Again" played over the Target Field sound system. Mauer appeared to miss a Belisle warm-up pitch and the crowd laughed.

Moncada finally got into the batter's box and Belisle delivered ball one. Belisle said afterward that he actually did want to throw a strike but failed to do so. "I was just instructed to have fun and let it eat," Belisle said of the pitch. "(Mauer said), 'Hey, let's just sit down the middle and let it go.' I said, 'You bet.' We knew they weren't going to swing."

And then it was done. Mauer went to the mound and he and Belisle hugged.

“(I was) very emotional,” Belisle said. “When (Mauer) approached me about this a few days ago, it was something that I was just really blown away with humility to have an honor bestowed on me in that regard. I told him, ‘You want to do this, I’m in your corner like cast iron. I’ll do whatever you want. It doesn’t matter and that’s for life.’ Then he came to me yesterday and said, ‘We’re going to do it,’ and I said, ‘Let’s roll.’ I didn’t know how it would play as far as out there with the length or given the hugs and all that. I just wanted to do my best to make it about him and have it as special as it could be.”

Molitor was among those who felt it worked out perfectly, a fitting ending to a career, even if Mauer isn’t ready to officially say he’s done.

“It was special,” Molitor said. “I think everyone knows that. I don’t know if there’s a correct word. It was emotional. It was an emotional day for me, which isn’t that important, but I think reflects what a lot of people feel about watching Joe. ... The way the day took shape, conversations the last few days about seeing if we could make something happen that would allow him something that will always be a memory.

“I know we talked about the fact about where we allowed him to have the comfortableness to do that. But it wasn’t about Joe. It was what he wanted for his family. I know he talked a lot about his dad, and he honestly looks good in that (catcher’s) gear so it was good to see. All of us that tried to help orchestrate it, it came off — I was a little bit concerned how it was going to play — and talked to Rick Renteria this morning to make sure we had all of our bases covered. We pulled it off and I thought it was beautiful.”

Wetmore: Sunday’s send-off had the unmistakable feel of Goodbye to Joe Mauer
Derek Wetmore | ESPN 1500 | September 30, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS – Maren and Emily Mauer, twin daughters of Joe Mauer, ran onto the field for the pregame ceremony Sunday at Target Field. They surprised the Twins’ first baseman with that special moment in front of a home crowd that came, mostly, to see him. Sundays at the Twins’ ballpark always are family day, but this one was unmistakably different.

This Sunday the twin sisters might have watched their dad play his final game as a Major Leaguer.

Given how the rest of the afternoon played out, with Joe Mauer adding the finishing touches to what seemed like the perfect bow for the audience, it’s hard to even imagine a press conference a few weeks from now announcing that he’s returning to play another season.

Sunday had a sense of finality.

Derek Wetmore
@DerekWetmore

Catches an outside fastball, walks out to the mound to give Matt Belisle a hug, and that’s that. Mauer walks off the field to another ovation from the crowd at Target Field. This Joe Mauer Day really couldn’t have been scripted any better.

Among the other great moments from Sunday, two stood out. The first was the double he sliced to the left-center field gap on a 3-2 pitch. Vintage Joe Mauer. And the second, of course, was the wonderful moment when he emerged to an empty field in the top of the 9th inning wearing his old catching gear – to the elation of the home crowd – and could not contain his tears. It was an overwhelming moment for Mauer, and it meant a lot to his family, including his dad.

“I think you guys saw how important that moment was for me, just to be able to have a chance to put the gear back on,” Mauer said afterward, as chatty as ever.

When asked if the near perfect day would have any impact on his decision, he simply said: “I’ve got a lot of emotions going right now and today I don’t think today could have gone any better to script,” Mauer said.

How could anything possibly top that moment as a goodbye to the game?

That “goodbye” part is not determined, of course. Joe Mauer hasn’t out and out said that this is it for him. He’s been noncommittal whenever anyone in the press asks him about his plans for the future. But it is the final year of his contract and he has talked openly about the looming decision that awaits him later this fall. To play another year, or call it a career?

If Sunday's events are any indication, though, we've seen the last of Mauer in a Twins uniform. Sunday's proceedings didn't have the feeling of the kind of things you do just in case it's the final big league game that you'll ever play.

From his daughters wrapping him in a pregame hug, to the full-count double to the left-center gap in his final plate appearance, to the WWE-style entrance in catcher's gear to begin the 9th inning, the Twins really couldn't have scripted a more fitting send-off to Number 7.

"I thought I had it going pretty good, you know, holding it together," Mauer said during his postgame press conference in a special room down the hall from the Twins' clubhouse. "But then my two daughters ran out on the field and I kind of lost it there for a moment."

"I don't know who wrote up this day – well, actually I know who wrote it up, but I'm definitely very thankful for it," he said.

He'll take some time to decompress from a long season, he said, and weigh his options. Just gauging the tune of things at Target Field, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that this is probably it for Mauer.

Consider:

He's famously shy – or modest, or some combination of the two. And even Mauer has taken a lot of moments lately to thank the fans at Target Field and acknowledge their applause. He pauses a little longer as he soaks one moment or another. As his manager Paul Molitor knows well, you try to take a mental snapshot in those brief instants that are at remarkable and fleeting.

"In doing this job, the rewarding part is being around the people and relationships," Molitor said. "But Joe, you think about who he was coming off the sandlots in St. Paul, and what he's done at this level, and being the same guy — the consistency, the humility — sometimes people don't understand just how competitive he is, his desire to win. There's a lot of things that make managing him a pleasure."

His humility and his aw-shucks attitude made him the rare superstar that feels uniquely Minnesotan.

Fellow St. Paul-native and Hall of Famer Paul Molitor added: "I think just the way he goes about his job, the way he handles his relationships with his teammates, the way he gives back to the community, you just couldn't ask for a more complete package of integrity."

It's complicated with great players at the end of their careers. David Wright with the Mets comes to mind, or Adrian Beltre in Texas. It's complicated in Mauer's case, too. Does he want to put his body through another marathon season or more? Does the fact that he had another concussion this summer change the math? The first concussion forced him out from behind the plate and turned him into a first baseman. The second one, which he's believed to have sustained while diving for a foul ball during a game in Anaheim earlier this summer, will undoubtedly make this decision process trickier. Then there's the other full-time job worth careful consideration: dad.

If this is it for Mauer with the Twins – and who among us could imagine him playing for another franchise? – he'd retire as the team's all-time leader at getting on base.

| Player | Hits | Walks | HBP | Times On Base |
|------------------|-------|-------|-----|---------------|
| Joe Mauer | 2,123 | 939 | 25 | 3,087 |
| Harmon Killebrew | 1,713 | 1,321 | 38 | 3,072 |
| Kirby Puckett | 2,304 | 450 | 56 | 2,810 |
| Rod Carew | 2,085 | 613 | 20 | 2,718 |
| Tony Oliva | 1,917 | 448 | 59 | 2,424 |

Source: Baseball-Reference.com

The other guys on that list were great players and Twins legends. All have their numbers retired. That's the company that Mauer keeps.

His career batting line of .306/.388/.439 looks great. And given his excellent stretch as a catcher at the top of the sport, he'll get Hall of Fame consideration. He might even get into that exclusive club on the merits of his credentials from his days behind the plate.

That's a question for another day. Now, he wants to take some time to think things over and "really be behind" his decision on his own future.

"That's just why I want to give myself some time to decompress and really make a good decision. Like I said, this last month, when I started kind of thinking about it and getting the questions, emotions are all over the place. So I just wanted to kind of allow myself to kind of just step away for

a second and take a breath and really think about things,” he said.

“Either way, it’s a good decision. You can either play or go home and be with my girls. I don’t think there’s a wrong decision there but I want to make sure I take the time to make that decision,” he said.

“Today I’m going to enjoy today. And I’m going to start with that.”

And That Happened: Sunday’s Scores and Highlights

Craig Calcaterra | NBC Sports | October 1, 2018

Twins 5, White Sox 4: Joe Mauer hasn’t announced that he’s retiring either but he most likely is. To that end, the Twins gave him an unofficial goodbye, and it was a good one. They let him catch one last time:

This is what I was talking about above, by the way. This will matter not a bit come 1PM today, let alone a couple of weeks from now when we’re entering the stomach-turning portion of the postseason and everything is on the line. Here, though, a moment happened. A moment that will not change Joe Mauer’s legacy and will not change the history of baseball or even that of the Twins. But it was a moment that could be appreciated as it occurred and can be appreciated as we think of it now before it drifts away. And the moment was beautiful. Beautiful for what it was. Beautiful simply because it happened.

Joe Mauer is every sports-loving Minnesota kid’s dream, in real life

Zack Pierce | The Athletic | September 29, 2018

When it comes to Joe Mauer, I’m a liar.

For years I told people about how, one time back in high school, I assisted on a tackle of the former standout quarterback at Cretin-Derham Hall.

Neat little story, right? Well, it’s completely false. It never happened. Not even close. The truth is that I was a slow wide receiver (soft hands, though, and kinda tall; tremendous grit) who barely played varsity, never played defense, and my team never even faced his while we were in school. The closest I came to tackling Joe Mauer on the football field was heckling him on the basketball court during the 2001 state tournament semifinals — I was a fan in the stands; he, naturally, was playing.

Still, it was a good lie, as lies go. It hurt no one. I told it only to people on one American coast or the other, people who couldn’t know the truth. It was impossible to fact check, high school sports box scores being not so readily available back then. And it was modest enough to be believable — notice the expert use of the word “assisted.”

The only problem with it? It was as useless as it was harmless. You might be surprised to hear that no one in New Jersey or California cared too much that I allegedly once helped wrestle to the ground a former Minnesota high school quarterback who now plays baseball. I made exactly zero new friends on account of the lie, earned exactly zero dates. And yet, I kept repeating it, time after time, as if by reflex. I never understood why.

All these years later, the reason finally seems pretty obvious. I had spent my childhood chasing my own baseball dream, effectively trying to be exactly what Joe Mauer has become — the local kid who grew up to be a star for the Minnesota Twins. That lie was my dumb, futile last gasp to keep up with the chase.

Or, if you’re the type that likes labels, I suppose the word is jealousy.

There is a decent chance that Sunday will be Joe Mauer’s final game for the Twins, or anyone. His eight-year, \$184 million contract is ending, he’s 35 years old and he’s had his share of injuries — including concussions, the scary aftereffects of which are increasingly on the public conscience. He’s certainly savoring the weekend, just in case.

Between his money and his age and his health and the Twins’ disappointing step back in 2018, it’s not shocking that he has stated he will consider retirement this offseason. That smooth swing may still have production in it, but the Twins aren’t likely to contend in the immediate future, and the reserved Mauer doesn’t seem the type to want a distraction-filled, victory-lap season full of cheesy gifts from opposing teams. Leaving Minnesota to join a contender seems unappealing in its own way — it would provide a chance to win, yes, but not a guarantee, and it would come at the expense of leaving the only organization he’s ever known in the state he’s called home basically his whole life, where his two (and soon to

be three) kids are growing up. Plus, he'd have to miss the State Fair.

Still, it's equally shocking to think about this being the end.

"Living the dream" is a phrase tossed around for just about anybody who achieves fame and fortune, but I can think of no more direct way to put it here. For the generation of us that grew up in Minnesota just in time to watch and remember the 1987 or 1991 Twins, this was quite literally the dream — play baseball, get drafted by the Twins, make a bunch of money, follow in Kirby Puckett's footsteps and be the next Minnesota sports icon.

Joe Mauer

In 2001, Joe Mauer — rocking the haircut of the era — realized the dream of hordes of Minnesota kids when he was selected No. 1 overall by his hometown Twins. (Photo: Minnesota Twins / MLB Photos via Getty Images)

And we were so sure we'd make it. We were sure when we were making parents' jaws drop with our diving catches in T-ball (not to brag). We were sure when we started hitting homers against coaches' sons in our suburban summer leagues (couple real bombs, I might add). And we were sure when we kept getting named to the All-Star teams in those summer leagues. We didn't think about how there are only 1,200 40-man roster spots in all of Major League Baseball, making the odds astronomically bad that even one of us would make it. Our imaginations didn't have time for math.

But then came the newspaper articles and the TV features on this kid from St. Paul. While we were playing three months a year, he was being engineered year-round into a baseball Terminator. While he was getting national media attention for striking out all of one time total in high school, we were struggling to put the ball in play on the JV team. As he went on laying waste to our opinions of ourselves as baseball players, Mauer was also offered a full ride to play quarterback at Florida State — a solid Plan B which also makes the fact that I once assisted on a tackle of him in high school even more amazing.

And in the post-graduation summer of 2001, when the Twins made him the No. 1 overall pick in the MLB Draft — while at the same time we were debating whether or not to try intramural pingpong in college (it wasn't for me) — it became painfully clear that Joe Mauer had never even been on the same level as us. Hasta la vista.

Now the rest of us are working real jobs, our sporting glory limited to softball fields and shuffleboard tables, while he approaches the part of the dream we never really thought much about — the end. In the dream, there was no retirement. You just played forever.

That childhood dream, of course, peaked with us, the little kids, winning the World Series. Probably hitting the game-winning home run, too. We sent the ball flying onto a third-floor patio just off the grass rectangle outside the apartment building we lived in, we threw the foam bat in the air, we ran around the household knickknacks we were using as bases, fans (angry neighbors) stared at us from their windows. We were the cleanup hitter for the Minnesota Twins, and it was our moment (apologies to Kent Hrbek, whose existence we usurped for the purposes of this dream sequence).

It's the one piece missing from the Joe Mauer story. He's top-10 in Twins history in most offensive categories. Six All-Star Games. Three batting titles. An MVP award in 2009. Among active position players league-wide, he ranks 10th in career wins above replacement. He's fifth in on-base percentage, sixth in batting average, ninth in hits, eighth in doubles, and fifth in walks. Yes, those numbers are propped up by his pre-mega-contract stats, but his .290 average since 2011 is still 11th among players with at least as many plate appearances as him in that span, and his .372 OBP is tied for seventh. His strikeout rate is 12th-lowest and his walk rate 13th-best — making him one of just three players in the top 13 in each. And here in the year 2018, his 15th season of big-league baseball, Mauer is the most reliable hitter in all the land with runners in scoring position, leading the league with a .412 average this season.

Joe Mauer

It felt like just the beginning back in 2009, but that year turned out to be Peak Mauer. He hit career highs in homers (28) and batting average (.365) and won the AL MVP award. (Photo: Jamie Squire / Getty Images)

But no World Series. Not even a sniff. Somehow Mauer hasn't even seen a single playoff victory in his career. Three first-round sweeps and last year's wild-card loss to the Yankees make the Twins 0-10 in the postseason with Mauer in the lineup. That's far from his fault, but maybe it's a reason to play again. Maybe it's worth it to come back on a reduced salary, possibly even just as a DH, to see if all this supposed Twins potential comes together sooner rather than later. Or maybe that World Series push happens on a team more equipped to make a run at it in 2019. Or maybe it's just time to go.

His three-pronged decision, in some ways, mirrors the pulse of the fans. Some of you have been counting down the days until that \$184 million deal is off the books, frustrated by the injuries and the drop in production that came with it. Some of you love him unconditionally for being a true homegrown star and would pay him another \$184 million to stay. Some of you are increasingly indifferent as the Twins' future becomes increasingly less about the guy who was once the cornerstone of it.

Whatever happens next for Mauer and however you feel about it, he's lived somewhere around 95 percent of the dream so many of us had as kids.

And now, kids on the grass fields are pretending to be him, starting the cycle anew.

It's a career to celebrate. We should all be so lucky.