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Lopez falters, bats unable to overcome Kluber

Young right-hander allows 5 runs in 3rd inning

By Scott Merkin / MLB.com / May 30, 2018

CLEVELAND -- The two starts for Reynaldo Lopez prior to Wednesday afternoon's 9-1 Cleveland victory at Progressive Field arguably were the best of the season for the White Sox right-hander.

In 15 innings combined thrown against the Rangers and Tigers, Lopez allowed two earned runs on seven hits with 11 strikeouts and five walks. Lopez matched that run total allowed in one inning against Cleveland, as the Indians completed a three-game sweep and dropped the White Sox to a Major League-worst 16-37. The 21 games under .500 represents the team's low mark for the 2018 campaign, as they finished their six-game road trip at 1-5.

"I was feeling good. I was feeling strong. I was feeling probably at my best capacity during the whole season today," said Lopez through interpreter Billy Russo. "But sometimes in your better days, the results aren't there. I don't know how to explain it, but I was feeling good and was feeling strong and my pitches were good. Just sometimes you can't explain it."

An argument can be made Lopez didn't pitch quite as poorly as his season-worst seven runs allowed on eight hits in 2 2/3 innings would indicate. According to Statcast™, the average exit velocity among his 73 pitches checked in at 81.8 mph with a maximum of 100.6 mph. The Indians still made more than enough solid contact to give Corey Kluber plenty of run support in this matchup of each team's top starter.

Cleveland put four of its first five hitters on base to start the game. The Indians put five straight on base against Lopez to start a five-run third, including a two-run Melky Cabrera double eluding Daniel Palka's diving effort in right, and Jose Ramirez and Edwin Encarnacion went back-to-back against reliever Chris Volstad in the fourth.

Kluber, who improved to 8-2, worked six scoreless innings over 90 pitches. He fanned 10, yielded singles to Yoan Moncada and Matt Skole and Tim Anderson's fifth-inning double and didn't issue a walk. Yolmer Sanchez's solo home run in the ninth, covering 449 feet to right-center, ruined the Indians' shutout bid.

"Ultimately we didn't do a whole lot of scoring," White Sox manager Rick Renteria said. "Kluber was Kluber. He did a very nice job, Cy Young award winner. Did a great job of keeping us truthfully off the bases."

The White Sox clubhouse was closed for 25 minutes following the team's 13th loss in its last 15 road games. A team meeting took place, although nothing was directly revealed postgame concerning what was discussed.

"About us. We don't like to say what we talk about, but it was about us," Sanchez said. "We talk to each other every day -- we need to do this and that. And try to stay together, that's the most important thing, to stay together and come together because if we win, we win together and if we lose, we lose together."

"It's very frustrating because we know that we have a lot of talent. We have guys with a lot of talent," Lopez said. "For whatever reason, things are not getting to our side. The only thing we can do is keep working hard and sooner rather than later things are going to change, and we are going to be better."

HE SAID IT

"Every day we do our best, no doubt. I know how hard we've been working. If we don't get results, we come the next day and do the best we can and do the little things and figure out how to win."-- Sanchez, on the White Sox

UP NEXT

The big news for Friday at Guaranteed Rate Field is White Sox reliever Danny Farquhar being scheduled to throw out a first pitch prior to the series opener against the Brewers. But there will be Interleague baseball for the White Sox as well, with Hector Santiago getting the call for a 7:10 p.m. CT first pitch. Santiago threw one inning and 13 pitches in relief on Monday against the Indians, but that effort was considered a side day following his Saturday start. Chase Anderson will start for the Brewers.

Toolsy Anderson: 'I can play anywhere'

Shortstop not looking to move, but says outfield wouldn't be difficult

By Scott Merkin / MLB.com / May 30, 2018

CLEVELAND -- Tim Anderson has a career baseball goal already in mind.

"I want to retire here," said Anderson with a broad smile. "I want to retire as a [member of the] White Sox."

At a few weeks short of 25 years old, retirement is not remotely in the picture for the talented White Sox shortstop. But a position switch someday could be possible for Anderson, based not so much on his lack of production up the middle but more so on his high level of athleticism.

Anderson has fiercely defended his hold on shortstop, and anyone who watched him take away a hit from Francisco Lindor with a great defensive play up the middle in the first inning Tuesday, realizes he's very capable at that spot. But even Anderson as a more seasoned Major Leaguer of three seasons understands the talk.

"When you are an athlete, I can play anywhere on the field," Anderson said. "I try to sum it all up and keep it easy. It's an honor to be in any lineup. Whatever they want to do with me, I'm fine with it. As long as I'm in the lineup, that's great.

"I'm going to just keep working at shortstop, and it's going to be hard to move me off there. But you know it is what it is. Like I said, an athlete can play anywhere."

When asked how long it would take to adjust to hypothetical life as a center fielder, Anderson smiled and said it can be done in "one day."

"Having so much God-given ability, I still do things today that I kind of shock myself sometimes," Anderson said. "I feel like it would be easy for me to go out in the outfield and catch some popups. I do it during BP just messing around. I'll catch on pretty quick."

None of this Anderson position-switch talk has come from the White Sox, who seem happy with a strong up-the-middle pairing of Anderson and Yoan Moncada. And while Anderson believes he could handle the outfield, don't think for a second he's looking to move.

"It's going to be a tough decision for them," said Anderson, who joins Mike Trout and Mookie Betts as the only Major Leaguers with at least 10 home runs and 10 stolen bases this season. "I'm going to keep working and getting better."

"His athleticism obviously allows for a lot of different things for him," White Sox manager Rick Renteria said. "It would be a little too quick for us to decide something like that. He's doing really well. He's continuing to scratch what he's going to be able to do."

Rodon moving into the picture

Carlos Rodon threw five scoreless innings and struck out eight over 86 pitches during an injury rehab start for Triple-A Charlotte on Tuesday. The White Sox list Hector Santiago, James Shields and Dylan Covey as this weekend's starters against the Brewers, but Rodon seemingly remains in the picture for Sunday.

"Not at the moment," said Renteria of Rodon. "We're still discussing it.

"Threw well. We're happy with his outing, five innings. We're still discussing how we'll move forward but just a good sign."

Rodon, who had arthroscopic left shoulder surgery last September, has fanned 20, walked two and allowed one run on seven hits over 12 2/3 innings during his three Minor League rehab starts.

Davidson on the mend

Third baseman Matt Davidson is progressing after a small setback this past weekend leading to a disabled list trip for back spasms. Renteria said they won't push him too quickly, but if he feels comfortable, they will continue to move forward.

Sox scout almost quit after giving up on Gagne

By Scott Merkin / MLB.com / May 30, 2018

CHICAGO -- The 1994 White Sox Draft book shows the following on Eric Gagne:

"Liked his fastball projection. Solid mechanics with loose wrist. Raw 18-year-old from Quebec with erratic velocity ranging from 81 to 87 mph. Projected in the 10th round."

• 2018 Draft order | 2018 Draft: June 4-6 | All-time Draft picks

That analysis came from John Tumminia, a scout of 32 years with the White Sox who will be retiring after this season and moving into a consultant role. But that enthusiasm over Gagne not being shared by some of the others involved with that White Sox Draft almost caused a premature end to Tumminia's career.

"I was going to quit over this. Oh, yeah. I was young and I believed in him," said Tumminia of Gagne, who was in his coverage area. "I said, 'Well, maybe I should quit.' I thought maybe I wasn't a good enough scout.

"After the first day, I was distraught. I really, really liked this kid."

Gagne was selected in the 30th round by the White Sox as a draft-and-follow, a process which no longer exists. The right-hander from Montreal ultimately ended up as a pick who got away.

As part of the draft-and-follow process, the White Sox had until the following May to sign Gagne and they didn't. He eventually caught on with the Dodgers as a free agent on July 26, 1995, and became one of the greatest closers in the game for a short period of time.

From 2002-04, Gagne saved a total of 152 games. He saved 84 straight from Aug. 28, 2002, to July 3, 2004, and won the National League Cy Young Award in '03.

"He had three years with the Dodgers that were absolutely phenomenal," said Duane Shaffer, who is currently a Major League scout with the Padres but was running the White Sox Draft when they drafted Gagne. "Probably as reliable as any closer has ever been. When you save 84 straight games, that's amazing. That's a half of a season of saves."

"My whole family knows this story, and they are happy I didn't do amateur stuff after that," Tumminia said with a laugh. "He had everything that the White Sox believed in at the time as far as clean arm action, good mechanics, easy delivery. And he had a little bulldog in him."

According to Tumminia, the White Sox tried to sign the righty, but offered considerably less than Gagne wanted.

"When I was driving up to Canada, I knew I was not going to sign him," Tumminia said.

After working as a starter in 48 of his first 58 games for the Dodgers, Gagne made the seamless transition to closer via 52 saves and a 1.97 ERA over 77 appearances in '02. There's no guarantee Gagne would have developed in the same way or been used in the same manner by the White Sox, but he certainly could have made a difference with the same extraordinary level of closing success.

In '02, for a .500 White Sox team, Keith Foulke, Antonio Osuna and Damaso Marte split the closer's role with a combined 32 saves. Tom Gordon, Marte and Billy Koch produced 34 total saves for an 86-win squad in '03 and it was Koch, Marte and eventually Shingo Takatsu who combined to notch 33 saves for a team with 83 wins in '04.

But Gagne and the White Sox were never meant to be.

"That's one that got away," said Tumminia, adding he later met Gagne, who thanked him for drafting him.

"It's been 24 years now. It was a long time ago, but I know that the guys in the room had interest in him, the guys who saw him, or we would not have taken him in the Draft at all. So there was something there that was good," Shaffer said. "I know we gave it a shot and I'm sure our offer wasn't even close to what he was looking for. When you are in the 30th round and it's a high school kid, you don't have a lot of money sitting there for him."

Wednesday's top prospect performers

By William Boor / MLB.com / May 30, 2018

Here's MLB Pipeline's roundup of the top prospect performances in the Minor Leagues on Wednesday.

A plethora of Twins top prospects, highlighted by Royce Lewis and Jose Miranda, helped lead Class A Cedar Rapids to a 15-4 win over Wisconsin.

Lewis, baseball's No. 19 overall prospect and the Twins' No. 1, went 2-for-4 with two RBIs and a pair of stolen bases, while Miranda (Twins' No. 28) went 3-for-5 with two doubles, a homer and six RBIs.

Additionally, Akil Baddoo (No. 11) and Jacob Pearson (No. 24) also homered.

Lewis, who boosted his average to .312 with the performance, extended his hitting streak to five games and has four hits over his past nine at-bats after back-to-back multi-hit games. The 18-year-old has also driven in 10 runs over the past five games, including at least one in each contest.

Miranda is hitting just .232 on the season, but perhaps the big game was the start of a breakout performance, as he collected a trio of extra-base hits and set a career high for RBIs. The second baseman had RBI doubles in the first and fourth innings and then capped his day with a grand slam in the eighth.

Other top prospect performances from Wednesday's action:

- No. 11 overall prospect Brendan Rodgers (Rockies' No. 1) hit his 11th homer of the season as part of a three-hit night for Double-A Hartford. Rodgers, who finished 3-for-4, also doubled and is hitting .286 through 50 games.
- No. 15 overall prospect Kyle Tucker (Astros' No. 2) needed just two innings to turn in the third two-homer game of his career. Tucker hit a solo blast in the first and then added a two-run shot in the second as part of a 2-for-5 night with Triple-A Fresno. Tucker has seven homers this season and is hitting .279 through 48 games.
- No. 67 overall prospect Dane Dunning (White Sox No. 6) matched his season high with seven strong innings and set a season high with nine strikeouts as he picked up his third win with Double-A Birmingham. Dunning, who threw 69 of his 100 pitches for strikes, didn't issue a walk and gave up one run on five hits.
- No. 74 overall prospect Austin Riley (Braves' No. 8) hit his 10th homer of the season and fourth in 22 games since joining Triple-A Gwinnett. Riley hit a three-run blast that highlighted the Stripers' seven-run second inning and later added a single to finish 2-for-5.
- No. 83 overall prospect Pavin Smith (D-backs' No. 2) drove in the first run of the game with a solo blast, his fourth, for Class A Advanced Visalia. Smith, a first-round pick from the 2017 Draft, finished 2-for-4 in what was just his fifth multihit game of the season.
- Braves No. 30 prospect Huascar Ynoa put together his first scoreless start of the season for Class A Rome. Ynoa had surrendered nine earned runs over his past two starts, but bounced back with six solid innings and a career-high nine strikeouts. The right-hander walked one and gave up four hits.
- Cubs No. 27 prospect Trevor Clifton extended his scoreless streak to 10 frames with his second straight scoreless start for Double-A Tennessee. The 23-year-old right-hander yielded three hits and struck out five over six innings. Clifton, who has 46 strikeouts compared to 20 walks this season, threw 57 of his 87 pitches for strikes but was stuck with a no-decision.
- Mets No. 4 prospect Peter Alonso continued his strong season with his fifth three-hit game for Double-A Binghamton. Alonso came through with a big two-run single in the 11th to help lead the Rumble Ponies to a win. The 23-year-old finished 3-for-6 and is hitting .339 through 51 games.

- Phillies No. 4 prospect Mickey Moniak extended his hitting streak to six games with a 3-for-5 performance for Class A Advanced Clearwater. Moniak got off to a slow start this season and has boosted his average from .219 to .243 during the streak. Not only does the 20-year-old have a hit in six straight games, but he has multiple hits in three straight games.
- Phillies prospects also had good nights on the mound as JoJo Romero (No. 6) and Cole Irvin (No. 23) combined to throw 16 2/3 innings of one-run ball. Romero, pitching for Double-A Reading, gave up one run on five hits over eight innings. Meanwhile, Irvin threw 8 2/3 scoreless frames for Triple-A Lehigh Valley.
- Jonathan Hernandez (Rangers' No. 13 prospect) has been lights out for Class A Advanced and he continued the trend in a win over Buies Creek. The right-hander, who hasn't allowed a run in 15 innings, posted his third straight double-digit strikeout game as he fanned 11 over eight innings of two run ball. Hernandez surrendered one walk and has given up two runs on nine hits with 32 strikeouts over his past three starts (20 innings).
- Tigers No. 29 prospect Spencer Turnbull bounced back from a rough outing to post his third scoreless start of the season with Double-A Erie. After giving up seven runs in 3 2/3 innings in his last start, Turnbull cruised through 5 2/3 innings against Binghamton. The right-hander threw 64 of his 98 pitches for strikes, yielded five hits, walked two and struck out seven.
- Yankees No. 17 prospect Billy McKinney went deep for the second time in as many days for Triple-A Scranton/Wilkes-Barre. The 23-year-old hit a solo shot in the second inning of what turned into a 3-for-4 night. After going through a rough patch where he picked up just one hit in six games (22 at-bats), McKinney appears to have found his rhythm, going 5-for-8 over the past two games.

2018 MLB All-Star Game voting begins Friday

Fans can make their selections for AL, NL starting players

By Manny Randhawa / MLB.com / May 30, 2018

The 2018 Camping World MLB All-Star Ballot launches on Friday, empowering fans all over the world to vote their favorite stars into the Midsummer Classic. The 2018 MLB All-Star Game presented by MasterCard takes place July 17 at Nationals Park in Washington, D.C. By voting exclusively online and on their mobile devices at MLB.com and the 30 club sites, fans have a chance to win a Freedom Elite Motorhome from Camping World.

- See who's on the 2018 Camping World MLB All-Star Ballot (PDF)

Fans can vote for All-Star starters up to 35 times through the All-Star Ballot, including a maximum of five valid ballots cast within any 24-hour period. The ballot will be available in English, Spanish and Japanese, and will feature audio CAPTCHA functionality for visually impaired fans. Banco BHD Leon will once again sponsor online All-Star balloting in the Dominican Republic, making Spanish-language ballots available to fans in the Dominican Republic via LasMayores.com, the official Spanish-language website of Major League Baseball.

The American League All-Star team will have nine elected starters (including a designated hitter) through fan balloting, while the National League All-Star team will have eight fan-elected starters. The pitchers and reserves for both teams -- totaling 23 for the NL and 22 for the AL -- will be determined through a combination of Player Ballot choices and selections made by the Commissioner's Office. The AL squad will be managed by AJ Hinch of the defending World Series-champion Astros, while the NL team will be led by Dave Roberts of the defending NL-champion Dodgers.

Details about the unveiling of the All-Star teams will be available in the coming weeks. Following the announcement of the All-Star rosters, fans will begin voting to select the final player for each league's 32-man roster via the 2018 Camping World MLB All-Star Final Vote. The Final Vote is in its 17th year, with

more than 760 million votes cast over that period. This year, fans will cast their votes from a list of five players from each league, and will be able to do so on MLB.com, the club sites, and on their mobile devices.

The final phase of voting will be conducted during the All-Star Game, when fans will once again have the opportunity to vote for the Ted Williams All-Star Game Most Valuable Player Award presented by Chevrolet. Fans can vote exclusively at MLB.com and the 30 club sites -- online or via their mobile devices -- with the 2018 All-Star Game MLB.com MVP Vote, and their collective voice will represent 20 percent of the vote determining the recipient of the Arch Ward Trophy.

The 89th MLB All-Star Game will be televised nationally by FOX Sports, in Canada by Rogers Sportsnet and RDS, and worldwide by partners in more than 180 countries. FOX Deportes will provide Spanish-language coverage in the United States, while ESPN Radio and ESPN Radio Deportes will provide exclusive national radio coverage of the Midsummer Classic. MLB Network, MLB.com and SiriusXM also will provide comprehensive All-Star Week coverage.

On his climb to the White Sox, Michael Kopech searching for a mental 'flow state'

By Dan Wiederer / Chicago Tribune / May 30, 2018

It's 6:51 on a pleasant spring evening in North Carolina and Michael Kopech is struggling to find his "flow state." His bullpen warm-up before a Triple-A start against the Norfolk Tide has been erratic to this point and Kopech needs a moment to gather himself.

Minutes earlier, his first pitch not only sailed over the head of Charlotte Knights catcher Alfredo Gonzalez, it cleared the temporary screen behind the bullpen.

Now, Gonzalez has become a goalie, backhanding one ball in the dirt, then exploding up and lunging for a Kopech fastball that sails way high and outside the zone.

As Duran Duran's "The Reflex" plays from the speakers at BB&T Ballpark, Kopech steps off the mound, asks for a towel from pitching coach Steve McCatty and wipes his neck, then his cheeks.

Agitation is obvious in Kopech's exhale. He takes a second breath, trying to slow the wheels in his head so they don't go racing off to the NASCAR Speed Street festival set up outside the ballpark.

The ultra-talented White Sox prospect understands not all nights will glide him right into his groove. But that's when his mind must provide steadiness. That's when Kopech's scorching fastball and fiery nature need to be complemented with a yogi's tranquility.

That's when Kopech's devotion to mental skills training must pay dividends.

His search for the "flow state" continues.

"When I get rolling," Kopech says, "that's my flow state. I find a state of mind where I feel like there's nothing I can do wrong. It's almost an out of body experience. I feel like I'm watching myself pitch.

"It's the combination of being mentally confident and physically prepared."

By the end of this Wednesday night, the 22-year-old right hander will throw 100 pitches and leave after five innings. It's the full Michael Kopech experience. Eight strikeouts. Four walks.

Control issues early. Long looks up to the nearby skyline to shake away his annoyance.

But then Kopech also unleashes a flurry of big-league stuff that Tide hitters can't touch. He strikes out four in a row in the second and third innings, two of those ending with well-executed off-speed pitches.

His fourth inning whiff of Sharlon Schoop, meanwhile, comes on a 99 mph heater that sounds like an M-80 when it explodes into Gonzalez's glove.

Still, Kopech gives up the go-ahead run in the fifth when Tide center fielder Mike Yastrzemski walks, takes second on a wild pitch, goes to third on another ball in the dirt and scores on a sacrifice fly.

"Didn't throw enough strikes," Kopech says afterward. "Bottom line. ... My fastball command tonight wasn't where it should have been."

At some point — and conceivably soon — Kopech will be asked to bring his show to the majors, to the South Side of Chicago as the next big piece of the Sox's ongoing rebuild. General manager Rick Hahn has stressed patience with Kopech's call-up timeline and refuses to forecast a date. But Hahn also knows Kopech's development eventually will require major-league tests.

And when that time comes, Kopech will be heralded immediately for his undeniable presence — 6-foot-3, 205 pounds with a rocket arm that often produces triple digits on the radar gun.

A quick scan of Kopech's Instagram feed (@mikop34) provides more than a few examples that he has no aversions to the gym. Yet to realize every last ounce of his potential, Kopech also understands his quest to strengthen his brain may be among the most critical aspects of his development.

Think tank

At BB&T Ballpark, Kopech's sacred space is a black leather couch in the Knights' family room. Against a wall, under a photo of kids running the bases.

This is where Kopech will come approximately an hour before every home start, closing his eyes and seeking serenity.

Ten minutes. Maybe 15.

"I try to take as many breaths as I can without letting a thought come into my mind," he says. "I literally just think of breathing in, breathing out. Without any kind of distraction."

Kopech has become a meditation devotee, one of his primary paths to strengthening his mind. A naturally energetic kid, Kopech never has needed to fire himself up to pitch.

"There are guys who pound four Red Bulls and head-butt a locker before they go out," he says. "That's not me."

Instead, on that black leather couch, he's searching for equilibrium.

Since Kopech was young, he has had an inquisitive mind. When he wasn't playing baseball, he would be drawing in a journal he kept, a hobby that sharpened his focus and "helped my mind fire."

His innate curiosity, he says, went to new levels in the spring of 2016 when he was sidelined with a broken right hand, an injury he suffered during an altercation with his roommate, also a Red Sox prospect.

With his pitching progress derailed, Kopech struck up a tight bond with Justin Su'a and Laz Gutierrez, the mental skills coaches in the Red Sox organization.

Each morning, Kopech arrived at the Red Sox facility early and focused on a new skill. Meditation methods. Breathing techniques. Discussions on how the mind works and what the mind hears.

"It changed my whole perspective on my career and really my outlook on life and how I felt about things."

It became drug-like, pushing Kopech to study the hallmarks of successful mindsets. He became a voracious reader, gravitating toward literature that dealt with fitness or nutrition or, most of all, mental health.

Kopech quickly rattles off a few favorite books that helped him narrow his focus.

There's "The Power of Now" by Eckhart Tolle, a spiritual credo that reminded the pitcher how to stay in the moment.

Kopech believes "Heal Yourself! How to Harness Placebo Power" helped accelerate his comeback from the broken hand.

There's also "The Rise of Superman: Decoding the Science of Ultimate Human Performance," a Steven Kotler piece that Kopech consumed for the third time via audio book recently, still obsessed with the concept of what guides an athlete's mind into the flow state.

"You don't feel like you're having to focus on 'What do I need to do?'" Kopech says. "It just clicks in and goes. It happens for anyone when they're really good at something. They get in that zone and they just flow through it. And what they're doing seems like the easiest thing. It's because of how your mind works coupled with all the work you've put in on your own."

From the beginning

To understand Kopech's wiring fully, perhaps it's best to start at the start. Irvin Park in Daingerfield, Texas. This is where it all began, with a 4-year-old boy discovering his life's passion. Kopech's dad, an attorney in east Texas, had visions of his son following in his footsteps.

"I thought I was going to have a law partner," Big Michael says.

But it became apparent early in Kopech's T-ball days that he had special talents and an equally remarkable eagerness to get better.

Big Michael had the keys to the light box at Irvin Park. And more often than not, after the other kids and families had left, he had his son's pleas to stay just a little longer. To keep hitting. To catch a couple more fly balls.

"It was watching a boy fall in love with the game," Big Michael says. "And it's not an exaggeration for me to say that even then, it looked like that really was his calling."

Like any father, Big Michael had grand visions. He already could picture the Hall of Fame plaque.

But what really struck him was Michael's natural ambition. At a young age, Kopech developed a deep appreciation for the pursuit of excellence.

"It was never really work," Kopech says. "We would go out there and it seemed like from sun up to sun down every chance we got. And it was always fun for me. Whether I was performing well or not. When I wasn't doing well, I wanted to stay out there until I did well. And if I was doing well, I wanted to stay out there because of that."

There was a son's appreciation for his dad's push plus a father's pride in a young boy's drive. The combination became invigorating. And when Kopech's elite talent became obvious, his dad made sure to offer the proper perspective on what it all meant.

"God has given him an incredible gift," Big Michael says. "And he understands that he has an obligation to develop that gift and take it forward to its logical extreme."

Even now, Kopech says, that perspective serves as his reminder to eat well, to embrace competition, to push himself and appreciate every opportunity.

"I feel like it would be sinful or wasteful to not give this everything I had," he says.

What's next?

All throughout the Knights organization in Triple A, praise flows for Kopech's grounded approach. But there's also an acknowledgment that he can become unnerved too easily, that when his pitches veer off course and his mind starts racing, there's a noticeable spike in the perfectionist pressure he puts on himself.

Kopech turned 22 on the final day of April. His old soul periodically gives way to a millennial's need for instant gratification.

"He gets heated," Knights catcher Brett Austin says. "You have to find ways to calm him down and get him back in the moment. You know you don't have to go out there and fire him up. You give him positive vibes. 'Throw a good little strike right here; we'll get you a double play and get you out of that.'"

As Kopech has continued his climb this spring, he has pushed to find the proper balance between his eagerness and patience. If he had his way, he would have been on the Sox's opening day roster. He admits that a few of his rougher outings have stemmed, at least in some small part, from trying to accelerate his ascent.

"I constantly get carried away thinking about going to the big leagues," he says. "I want to be there right now."

But Kopech also understands why the Sox want him adding polish in the minors.

Through his first 10 starts this season, he was 2-2 with a 3.86 ERA, a WHIP of 1.19 and 68 strikeouts in 51 1/3 innings.

He still needs to improve his changeup. He needs to develop more consistent command. He needs to understand that reaching the major leagues is far from the end goal.

With all that, Kopech has fought through his occasional lapses of patience and has impressed teammates and coaches with his ability to stay in the present.

It's no coincidence he wears a watch where the face always shows the same time: "NOW."

McCatty, the Knights pitching coach, has taken note of how gracious and genuine Kopech has been signing autographs and visiting with kids at the ballpark. It's a small thing. But then again, for an elite prospect cruising towards the big leagues, it isn't.

"That's him smelling the roses on the way there," McCatty says.

'A desire to be dominant'

At the start of every season, as Kopech and his dad made their initial treks to practice, Big Michael always would make sure to gauge his son's investment in the process. A new season always meant a new level of commitment. That had to come from within.

Says Big Michael: "I always told him, 'Look, if you don't want to do this, we can go do something else. If you want to play the piano, I'll buy the best grand piano I can find. And we'll put it in the middle of the living room and get teachers to show you how to play.'"

Never once, though, did Kopech opt for that musical route, always reaffirming his passion for baseball. Needless to say, it was the right choice. When Kopech was a senior at Mount Pleasant High School and needed one final elective, he opted to take a piano class.

Why not?

“An unmitigated disaster,” his dad says. “By all accounts.”

“I think I got a little under-the-table 70 (percent),” Kopech adds. “They passed me with a C.”

Pitching was his true calling and remains so as he continues to be the maestro on the Knights staff.

The Red Sox made Kopech a first-round draft pick in 2014 (33rd overall) and soon after he received a \$1.6 million signing bonus. He joined the White Sox organization in December 2016 in the blockbuster trade that sent Chris Sale to Boston.

Kopech understands those lines in his bio are part of what will set the expectation bar for what he should accomplish.

Knights manager Mark Grudzielanek, who spent 15 years in the majors including two in Chicago with the Cubs, knows the stage Kopech is headed for and believes strongly that the right-hander’s makeup will keep him centered.

“Just has that ‘it’ about him,” Grudzielanek says. “The guy is a specimen. He’s a big dude. He’s strong. Full of life. Full of energy. And the competitiveness he has within him, he brings to the table every day with every pitch.”

The call should come soon enough. Certainly sometime this summer. Kopech will board a plane to Chicago and head for the grand stage he always has dreamed of.

Like Kopech’s dad, Sox GM Rick Hahn has Cooperstown visions. Along with that, Hahn has supreme confidence in Kopech’s presence, in the natural comfort he seems to feel with the expectations and spotlight.

“He’s wired like a No. 1,” Hahn says. “And sure, there are 30 guys who start on opening day around baseball. But there aren’t 30 No. 1 starters. It takes a little something different about the competitiveness and drive and attitude that a No. 1 starter presents himself with. Michael has that.

“Michael has a desire to be dominant. Not just get to the big leagues. Get to the big leagues and be special. But he is also self-aware enough to know where he’s at in his development and what he needs to do to reach that.”

Even that, Kopech says, is a mindset thing. He understands what being the ace of a staff entails. And with that, he’s driven to make his mind as strong as his right arm, motivated each week to find something new that will aid that cause.

“It’s living in the present with a focus on the future,” he says.

Kopech chuckles and apologizes for “sounding like some crazy guru.” But he can’t help his growing fascination with learning how to be truly mindful.

“It’s understanding the journey,” he says. “I’m a guy who is going to put everything I have into right now but with attention on where I’m going.

“As long as I know why I’m working and what I’m working for and not just living for the highs and crashing on the lows, I think I’m a few steps ahead of a lot of guys.”

Column: Bright spots hard to find as White Sox get routed on the road again

By Paul Sullivan / Chicago Tribune / May 30, 2018

General manager Rick Hahn recently spoke of the frustration felt throughout the White Sox organization over the team's indefensible record.

"At times it's difficult to find the bright spots," Hahn said. "But on a nightly basis we are trying to find things, and there are things we believe, on most nights, that are positive indicators of where this thing is headed."

But it was difficult to find any bright spots after a 9-1 loss to the Indians on Wednesday. The Sox were swept for the eighth time this season, leaving them 2-13 in their last 15 road games and 16-37 overall.

The Sox kept the media out of the clubhouse for 25 minutes afterward while the players had a meeting about staying together. Manager Rick Renteria said there was no meeting, while third baseman Yolmer Sanchez said there was a meeting that was private.

"What happened in the game happened," Sanchez said. "We're going to enjoy our day off (Thursday) with our family and friends and come back Friday."

"I think today we did our best, no doubt. I know how hard we've been working. ... We'll do the best we can, do the little things and figure out how to win."

Here are a few of the not-so-bright spots:

— Reynaldo Lopez, the team's top starter, was shelled for seven runs in 2 ²/₃ innings in what was supposed to be a battle of aces with Corey Kluber. Lopez fell to 1-4 on the year and watched his earned-run average rise to 3.80.

— Sox hitters struck out 10 times over six shutout innings by Kluber, who scattered three hits and left after 90 pitches. "Ultimately we didn't do a whole lot of scoring," Renteria said. "Kluber was Kluber." The Sox finished with 12 strikeouts. Adam Engel struck out in all three at-bats, giving him 43 strikeouts with only one home run in 140 at-bats.

— Catcher Omar Narvaez went 0-for-3 to finish 1-for-10 on the trip. The two Sox catchers, Narvaez and Alfredo Gonzalez, are hitting a combined .105 (2-for-19) since the start of Welington Castillo's 80-game PED suspension. A roster move to replace Gonzalez should be imminent.

— Daniel Palka, the designated hitter Renteria inserted into right field, made another defensive gaffe to put the game out of reach, diving for a sinking liner and watching it roll past him for a two-run double. "It got away and ended up getting a few more runs in," Renteria said. On Monday, Palka muffed a fly ball for a three-run double, so there was some slight improvement.

All in all, another lost week for the Sox, who are on pace for 113 losses.

Perhaps the only bright spot was the possibility of Carlos Rodon returning to the Sox rotation Sunday against the Brewers. The left-hander threw 86 pitches in five shutout innings for Triple-A Charlotte on Tuesday in his third rehab start.

"We still want him to get up six times, get a little higher (pitch count)," Renteria said before the game. "So we're still discussing it. We'll see where we're at after the discussion."

So he's not in the rotation this weekend?

"Not at the moment," Renteria said. "We're still discussing it."

But it's a possibility?

"We're still discussing it," he repeated.

The Sox later announced Dylan Covey would start Sunday, eliminating that potential bright spot.

With Kluber on the mound and the Indians holding a 7-0 lead after three innings, the only thing left for the Sox to do was wait to get out of town. With the Sox trailing 9-0 in the ninth, Sanchez belted a 449-foot home run to center field to spoil the Indians' shutout bid.

Bright spot?

It'll have to suffice.

James Shields' hot stretch could help White Sox find suitors by trade deadline

By Paul Sullivan / Chicago Tribune / May 30, 2018

White Sox pitcher James Shields hasn't won a game since opening day but ranks 14th among major-league starters in May with a 0.9 WAR, according to fangraphs.com.

That upsurge gives the Sox hope they can deal the veteran by the trade deadline in July, a prospect once considered far-fetched because of Shields' high salary and high earned-run average.

But if Shields can continue pitching as he has in May, the Sox could get a decent prospect in return, depending on how much of Shields' remaining salary they would eat in a deal. While the Sox value the 36-year-old's leadership in the clubhouse, they also would like to reward him with a chance to pitch for a contender.

Being a part of trade rumors would be nothing new for Shields. He knows the drill.

"I'm going to continue to work hard in between starts and do my thing out there," he said Wednesday before the Sox-Indians game. "Right now I feel really good on the mound.

"I'm going to try to stay consistent and not worry about any of that stuff. (I'm) just going to try to win some ballgames and continue to improve every start."

Shields' ERA remains high at 4.54, but he has allowed six earned runs over 21 1/3 innings in his last three starts. He's scheduled to face the visiting Brewers on Saturday.

Though Shields' 2018 salary is \$21 million, the Sox are responsible for only \$10 million with the Padres owing the rest. He was acquired in June 2016 for two prospects, including Fernando Tatis Jr., now considered one of the top prospects in the game.

At the time the Sox felt they had enough talent to contend for a postseason spot, adding Shields to a rotation that included Chris Sale, Jose Quintana and Carlos Rodon. But they finished 78-84, which led to the decision to not renew manager Robin Ventura's contract and begin rebuilding in the offseason.

Sale and Quintana are long gone, but Shields didn't pitch well enough last year for the Sox to move him.

Having been dealt from the Rays to the Royals after the 2012 season, Shields has been the subject of trade rumors a few times in his career. But with Twitter and mltraderumors.com, every rumor gets spread on the internet nowadays.

“Obviously it’s a little different because you hear about it more, but it’s all the same (thing),” he said. “You know those things happen, but as a player we can’t really focus on that. We can just control what we control, and that’s taking the rock every five days and doing our job.”

Extra innings: Jose Abreu fell short of Frank Thomas' club record for doubles in a month. Thomas had 17 in September 1992, while Abreu finished May with 15. ... Reynaldo Lopez is 0-3 with a 6.00 ERA in six road starts and 1-1 with a 1.85 ERA in five home starts. ... The Sox's rotation for the Brewers series is Hector Santiago on Friday, followed by Shields and Dylan Covey. ... The Sox are 2-12 in their last 14 games in Cleveland.

White Sox' Jose Abreu: 'I'm not here to lose games'

By Daryl Van Schouwen / Sun-Times / May 30, 2018

CLEVELAND — If there is any justice, first baseman Jose Abreu will have a strong June and July and represent the White Sox at the All-Star Game in Washington.

Abreu, a model of offensive production and consistency during his five seasons in the majors, hasn't been to the Midsummer Classic since his first season in 2014, when he finished fourth in American League MVP balloting and was voted AL Rookie of the Year.

A career .300 hitter with at least 25 home runs and 100 RBI in each season, Abreu hasn't played on a winning team yet. The Sox were 73-89, 76-86, 78-84 and 67-95 in his first four seasons, and they are a major-league-worst 16-37 after a 9-1 loss Wednesday to the Indians.

A respected leader in the clubhouse who says he wants to stay with the Sox after his contract runs out at the end of next season, Abreu is having another excellent season. Not that the losses, day after day and year after year, aren't getting to him.

“It’s difficult,” Abreu said through a translator. “We are not here to lose games. I’m not here to lose games. I wasn’t born to lose games.”

He said that before the Sox lost to Indians ace Corey Kluber to complete a 1-5 road trip. After the game, the players talked things over while reporters waited 25 minutes for the clubhouse to open. When reporters walked in after meeting with Sox manager Rick Renteria, a somewhat-animated Abreu stood at his locker, talking to about a half-dozen Spanish-speaking players.

“It was about us,” third baseman Yolmer Sanchez, whose 446-foot homer in the ninth prevented the Sox from getting shut out, said of the meeting. “We don’t like to say what we talk about, but it was about us.”

“Try to stay together, that’s the most important thing. Stay together and come together. If we win, we win together; if we lose, we lose together.”

As old as the losing gets, Abreu believes in the Sox' rebuild, so he sucks it up and maintains his place as the hardest-working guy in the clubhouse.

“We understand that we are in a process, and we have faith and conviction in the process,” he said before the game. “We have to be patient. Sooner rather than later, we want to start winning more games.”

“We have to be patient because we’re on the process to be a successful team in a few years. I really believe we will be a really good team in the near future.”

The Sox once again demonstrated the “near future” is a ways away. Shortstop Tim Anderson committed his 10th error and second baseman Yoan Moncada his fifth. Moncada also struck out for the eighth, ninth and 10th times in his last four games.

In the Indians' five-run third, a liner by Melky Cabrera skipped past struggling right fielder Daniel Palka for a two-run double and left fielder Trayce Thompson and center fielder Adam Engel almost collided on a fly ball Thompson caught. Not a good look.

In between, right-hander Reynaldo Lopez — the Sox' best pitcher and a key piece in their rebuild — was lifted after allowing seven runs and eight hits in 2 2/3 innings, his worst start of the season.

"I don't know how to explain it," Lopez said through a translator. "I was feeling good and was feeling strong, and my pitches were good. Just sometimes you can't explain it."

Abreu's sizzling May came to an end with a hitless series. He's batting .298 with nine homers, 19 doubles and 31 RBI.

The All-Star ballots were released Wednesday, with Abreu standing out among the Sox. Designated hitter Matt Davidson, who is injured, and Anderson are having good offensive years, too.

"If I'm representing this team in the All-Star Game, I would be honored," Abreu said. "But it's not my focus right now. My focus is to help this team win games. If you take care of things you can do on the field, those things will take care of themselves."

Rodon in play for possible return to White Sox this weekend
By Daryl Van Schouwen / Sun-Times / May 30, 2018

CLEVELAND — The White Sox waited until Wednesday to announce their probable starters for their home series this weekend against the Brewers, naming left-hander Hector Santiago, right-hander James Shields and right-hander Dylan Covey.

Left-hander Carlos Rodon should not be ruled out for Sunday, though. Rodon threw 86 pitches (58 strikes) in his third minor-league rehab start Tuesday, allowing two hits, striking out eight and walking two in five scoreless innings.

After striking out all six batters he faced before taking a line drive off his head in the third inning of his previous start, Rodon is pushing to return to the majors. He has allowed one run in three rehab starts after having arthroscopic surgery on his left shoulder in September.

"Threw well, threw well," manager Rick Renteria said. "We're happy with his outing, five innings. We're still discussing how we'll move forward. But just a good sign."

Renteria didn't rule out Rodon pitching Sunday, which would be on four days of rest.

"We're still discussing it," Renteria said.

But it's a possibility?

"We're still discussing it," he repeated.

Tim Anderson, center fielder?

Shortstop Tim Anderson's defense has been scrutinized since the Sox drafted him in the first round in 2013, and leading the majors in errors last season did nothing to silence the notion that his speed and athleticism might be better suited for center field.

Anderson committed his 10th error in a 9-1 loss Wednesday to the Indians, but it's too soon to move him from shortstop, Renteria said when asked about the possibility of a switch to center.

“I knew somebody was going to ask me that,” Renteria said. “His athleticism obviously allows for a lot of different things for him. It would be a little too quick for us to decide something like that. I think he’s doing really well. He’s continuing to scratch what he’s going to be able to do.”

Anderson is using his backhand this season instead of coming around on grounders to his right. He is still prone to throwing with his feet moving, but he’s getting set and throwing more often. He also can make great plays, as he showed by going to his right behind second to retire the Indians’ Francisco Lindor on Tuesday.

The Sox like the progress and, knowing his bat (11 homers, 20 RBI, 12 stolen bases) will pack more punch at short than in the outfield, will let Anderson play every day and develop for the rest of the season at short.

“He continues to improve,” Renteria said.

Davidson on mend

Renteria said designated hitter Matt Davidson, who is on the 10-day disabled list with back spasms, won’t be pushed to return too soon. Davidson said he probably pushed it last week and had a setback.

“Without him feeling a sense of having to rush, it might alleviate some of the stress for him,” Renteria said.

“We have [Thursday] off, and we’ll go through the weekend series and see how he’s recovering. Hopefully he’s responding enough to where he can swing comfortably in cages off the tee.”

How catching coordinator John Orton views Zack Collins and Seby Zavala, and his advice for Omar Narváez

By James Fegan / The Athletic / May 30, 2018

CLEVELAND — Minor league catching coordinator John Orton likes when he’s called up to travel with the major league team, and not just because the accommodations are a bit nicer than when his roving work takes him to Low-A Kannapolis. Watching major league catchers work is a reminder of all the little touches needed to stick behind the plate at the big league level, something that can get pushed to the back of his mind as he’s trying to instill the basics for developing minor leaguers.

That’s not precisely why he’s with the team in Cleveland, though. His presence is more a result of Wellington Castillo’s suspension and Kevan Smith’s right ankle forcing the White Sox to call up Alfredo González, who is 25 and a well-regarded framer but also completely absent of any major league experience. Orton is here to provide a much-needed guiding hand to the first-time big leaguer, but given Smith is healthy again and González probably isn’t long for the majors, it’s not the most interesting reason he’s here either.

Omar Narváez, who worked with Orton during his trek through the minors, is leading all of baseball in passed balls and ranks third-from-last in framing. He’s been an enthusiastic participant in extra work sessions with Orton since he arrived. Mostly, Orton just wants him to relax.

“I told him the only way to slow it down is to go back to basics, just relax, trust your hands, as hard as it is to do sometimes, and go from there,” Orton said. “A lot of young guys especially, they’re worried about producing, getting sent down, losing their job. You’re going to put more pressure on yourself and

play tight. He's always — everyone's better when they're loose and just trusting their ability. That's what they need."

That's a lot easier said than done for Narváez, who was in a close battle with Smith for a roster spot in spring training, and is off to a career-worst start with the bat to compound his defensive issues. Considering the Sox signed Castillo to start in front of him last offseason, he's keenly aware that his spot is not guaranteed.

"It's a terrible feeling when you drop a ball or give up a passed ball and then you're [pressing] yourself to keep catching the ball," Narváez said. "That's when you start doing more than you know how to do. It's been a defensive slump but I'm working on it to get out of it."

An element of it that is not entirely unspoken, but neither one wants to lean on too much is that it's a bit difficult to frame or block the pitches of the most walk-ridden pitching staff in the American League. That's not an all-absolving excuse, but it's a factor to consider that makes it hard to give a straight assessment of Narváez purely on his numbers.

"It's different when you know where the ball's going than when you don't know where the ball is going," Narváez said. "Sometimes you just try to stop it, not to catch it really. It's been hard but once I get it, I'm going to be fine."

Orton is still confident in Narváez and Narváez is confident in himself, which is good, because while such a cold stretch isn't great for his odds of fending off Zack Collins and Seby Zavala down the road, his immediate job security is pretty solid. Until Castillo returns, the Sox are back to Narváez-Smith and without anyone else that's major league-ready in the organization.

Now that that's out of the way, let's get back to Collins and Zavala, given their defensive progress is the most important part of their development, and the primary reason to talk to Orton.

"Seemed like this spring and even in the [Arizona] Fall League a little bit last year, some things started to really click for him defensively," Orton said of Zavala. "Receiving-wise, he's always had really good hands, but he kind of quieted it up and is just a real solid receiver right now. Just being around the veteran pitchers of the fall league helped him just go to the next level as far as running a game. He's always been a super smart, super sharp kid, a kid that cares about the pitching staff, which is No. 1, but now he kind of has a really good feel."

Zavala just returned from the disabled list after dealing with a sore wrist, which likely contributed to his batting line sagging to only .256/.358/.519 at Double-A Birmingham. Passed balls still remain an issue, but since his time in the Arizona Fall League, he has seen a noticeable uptick in his caught-stealing rate, throwing out 16 of 38 of runners (42.1) percent since last October.

"He's more efficient with his exchange and footwork," Orton said. "He says his times aren't better but even if your times are just a click, a hundredth of a second or a tenth of a second better and you're accurate, you're going to throw out more guys. I think he's more efficient with everything."

Orton seems particularly pleased with Zavala's receiving, which is the more old-school way coaches typically refer to framing (Orton clarified this is what he meant). He also mentioned that the Sox have been more active in providing Trackman data for him to review the framing progress for Sox catchers in

games, though there is another step forward with the information he would like to see take place eventually.

“This is the first year where I’ve really gotten the printouts of our minor leagues,” Orton said. “I don’t know if they have the Trackman of every stadium yet at the lower levels, but there’s enough data there to show the catchers maybe an area where they can get better. Hopefully we can take it a step further where we can link up video. Let’s say there’s a borderline pitch that we get or we miss, if we can compare the video with that, then we can help the kids see where we’re good or where we need improvement.”

While Zavala, 25, getting a major league look at the end of the year wouldn’t be the most surprising development, Orton made it clear Collins is a longer-term project. That’s not a knock, considering Orton was adamant from the time Collins was drafted that he has the tools to be an everyday catcher in the majors, but he’s preaching patience, especially after a slow start offensively put a lot on Collins’ plate.

“I think Double-A starting off the year was a big jump for him offensively and defensively, so he kind of got off to a slow start offensively, so we kind of left him alone on the defense side because I didn’t want to throw too much at him,” Orton said. “He was kind of, I’m not going to stay struggling, not having the results he wanted offensively. The defensive side of it, it takes a while to kind of catch up. He didn’t have a ton of games at the A-ball level to get him ready for Double-A. He was kind of behind that way, I guess, but definitely seen improvements lately.”

Orton thinks the keys for Collins to become a better game caller are comfort and confidence, and being able to take what he observes and immediately communicate it to pitchers and prompt adjustments. He says that probably would have been easier if Collins stayed in High-A, but that he’s also currently benefitting from the timeshare with Zavala. While many noticed Collins having some struggles receiving low strikes in spring training, Orton says they have been tweaking his setup to get him lower and put him in a better position to receive pitches in a location that should be frequent in a sinker-happy organization.

Even with that, the guy who put himself out there saying Collins could be an everyday catcher behind the plate still has no problems reaffirming that about him and Zavala.

“For sure, yeah,” Orton said. “I definitely think both of them can. One of them might be a little bit better defensively, one of them might be a little bit better offensively at the big league level, but they both have the total package and the ability to play every day in the big leagues behind the plate.”

Best Pitches of 2018: Who has the best curveball in baseball?

By Eno Sarris / The Athletic / May 30, 2018

The yellow hammer. Uncle Charlie. Lord Charles. Public Enemy #1. The Hook. Yakker. Deuce. The Spinner. Does any pitch in baseball have as many nicknames as the curveball? Is there a pitch more compelling than a sizzling, spinning breaking ball that falls off the earth?

I submit that there isn’t. And yet, it’s not always the easiest pitch to use. Batters swing at curveballs less often than any other pitch type, and so the average whiff rate (11 percent) is lower than it is for any other non-fastball. The pitch gets more grounders than any other non-fastball, also, but lord help the pitcher that hangs one trying to steal a strike.

At the same time, it's not so difficult to see what makes a good curveball, at least compared to the fastball.

Curveball velocity stands out as having a tight relationship with outcomes, and drop is also good. That's the stuff. Deception and command, though, will show themselves to be really important to our list of the best curves in baseball right now. Skip the methodology if you just want to see the glorious list.

I used whiffs and grounders for curves because that's what they are generally used for, and the relationship between curve whiff and grounder rates and overall pitcher quality (as judged by ERA, or estimators like SIERA) is strong. I used z-scores — which sum up a number's relative difference from the mean — to add up the pitcher's quality as seen by his curve whiff and grounder rates. I used three times the whiff rate z-score and one times the grounder z-score because of the relative weight of curves whiffs and grounders when using the two to try and predict overall outcomes through multivariable regression. I prefer doing it this way rather than using pitch type values, because that statistic includes ball in play results, which can contain noise.

I'll tell you what our best curveball is not made out of: It's not made out of command.

"I take the grip and then I throw the hell out of it," said Charlie Morton of his curveball (and his four-seamer, for that matter). "Conviction is important."

Morton has below average curveball command by STATS LLC's Command+ statistic, and it sounds like he doesn't care as much about exactly where it goes as by how nasty the movement is. Only Rich Hill and Adam Wainwright have curves with more horizontal movement, and only nine pitchers in baseball have a curve with a higher spin rate.

That nasty movement and velocity are how Morton gets a strike or a ground ball 50 percent of the time that he throws the curve.

Third on the list, though, features both command and stuff. Jordan Lyles has worked hard to revamp his arsenal this year, as Dennis Lin so aptly chronicled. While his added velocity on the fastball and breaking ball has been huge, it was this paragraph from Lin's piece that caught my eye.

"Lyles' curveball has morphed into a formidable out pitch and one of the hardest curves in baseball. He is throwing it more than a quarter of the time. In the bottom of the sixth, nearing the end of his outing, Lyles ripped off an 86.9 mph curveball to Pittsburgh's Corey Dickerson, who flailed at strike three. 'He knows he's throwing his fastball, command-wise, where he wants to and that frees him up with his curveball,' Balsley said. 'He can throw it as hard as he wants to and if it's a ball, it's a ball — who cares.'"

Lyles is currently third in baseball when it comes to commanding his curve — behind Jeremy Hellickson and Noah Syndergaard in Command+ — so that's definitely part of the story. But, with an 84.5 mph average, Lyles currently throws the second-hardest curveball among starters this year.

Since velocity is so important to curveball outcomes, going from 78 on the curve two years ago to 85 is huge. Lyles now does very well if you judge curves by drop and velo instead of outcomes.

Here's that list:

There are your usual suspects: your hard, diving breaking balls. The first and second list share many of the same names — Ross Stripling, Zack Godley, Trevor Bauer, Blake Snell and Lyles all have big, fast curveballs that they use well. But how do you end up on the second list, but not the first?

It's tempting to point to command with Lance McCullers, but it's not curveball command holding him back. By Command+, his curveball command is 17th out of 98. It's his fastball command that keeps him from getting more whiffs on his curveball, maybe: His two-seam Command+ has been 90th out of 96 so far this year. Gotta get ahead to really best use this curve.

Arsenal size also matters. McCullers is throwing his changeup more than ever this year, and that's helped him get more fastball whiffs. Trevor Cahill shows up as having a curveball in the top third by results, and he's always been considered a sinker/change guy.

"If you've got those in your back pocket the curve looks better," his catcher Jonathan Lucroy told me this week. "All works in tandem."

Maybe that's why Alex Cobb shows on the second list but not on the first — his split-finger changeup has never recovered the same drop as it has before his Tommy John surgery, and that leaves him leaning more heavily on the curve than he ever has — and getting worse whiff rates from his yakker.

There's another thing that can be as meaningful as your curve's shape and velocity — your ability to hide it.

"I think deception makes a good curveball," said Oakland outfielder Mark Canha. "Does it come out of the hand looking like a fastball and then have late action?"

At first glance, that seems like something difficult to measure. But talk to another hitter about what makes a good curveball, and different terminology emerges. One possibly linked to a statistic.

"He spins it well, it has a lot of depth, and it usually comes out looking like a fastball," Jed Lowrie said of Blake Snell's curveball. "The release point is similar, and there's no hop, and he doesn't slow his arm down to throw it, the perception of his effort is the same."

Joe Schwarz wrote up Jack Flaherty's struggles with the slider and wrote of a "bunny hop" that gave the slider away. It's not exactly the same pitch we're dissecting today, but watch this GIF that depicts a fastball and slider combination from Flaherty to Brandon Crawford, and you'll know what hop Lowrie was talking about.

From Crawford's view, the breaking ball "hopped" above the fastball and was obvious upon release. Crawford took that slider deep to the deepest part of AT&T park, and Flaherty has one of the best sliders in baseball when judged by overall results. Deception matters.

In this one case, deception is also measurable. Since we're talking about the distance between two pitches, we're talking about how well the two pitches are "tunneled" to each other. Baseball Prospectus has a statistic — PlatePreRatio — which measures the ratio between the distance between two pitches at the plate vs at the decision-making point.

Look back up at the top list and your eyes may settle on James Shields and Kyle Gibson as the most surprising entrants. Maybe it's not surprising, then, to find out that Shields is number one in sinker/curve PPR, and Gibson is number one in four-seam/curve PPR.

When Gibson throws this four-seamer:

... right before this curve:

... he's doing an elite job of keeping them in the same space, so that the batter has a harder time spotting the curveball. No bunny hop here.

Of course, there's still room for plain old stuff. Trevor Bauer and I talked once about the choice that pitchers make between keeping pitches similar for deception, and having tons of movement.

"Is getting the run on the two-seamer and the drop on the curveball more beneficial than having all my fastballs and curveballs look the same coming out?" he wondered back in 2015. "How do you weight those, what's more important? Who knows?"

Since that talk, Bauer has added more run to his sinker and more drop to his curveball, and currently ranks in the bottom 20 percent by PPR, so maybe he's answered that question for himself at least. Maybe deception doesn't matter as much when you're showing the most drop in your career, good for the fourth-best drop in baseball.

Nasty. And, for what it's worth, that curve came right after a first-pitch curve. That Springer swung on and missed. And that's relevant here — Bauer has thrown more and more curveballs every year and gotten better results every year. Even with Springer sitting curve, he had trouble hitting it.

Maybe the nasty hammer is so difficult to pitch that it depends a little less on other pitches. Maybe that realization is part of why baseball keeps throwing more curveballs every year.

I don't have much of a problem with that — I love watching the best curves in baseball. But maybe the hitters are a little annoyed.

Five observations: Lucas Giolito throws strikes, but not to great effect

By James Fegan / The Athletic / May 30, 2018

CLEVELAND — Ideally, Carlos Rodón's rehab start was televised.

It's not that Lucas Giolito was hard to watch as the White Sox (16-36) idled to a 7-3 defeat to the division leaders in Cleveland. But considering the struggling young Sox starter — who has been fending off calls that he be optioned — was swiftly greeted with four straight hits in the bottom of the first, the game was quickly put out of reach for an undermanned offense that was mostly smothered by Mike Clevinger over 6 2/3 innings.

They're rebuilding, they're losing, and a lot of nights, there just isn't much good going on. Daniel Palka hit a home run, though.

"Their guy kept us pretty much off the bases," said Rick Renteria. "I know both clubs turned a couple double plays. They scored more than we did."

1. Can't say he didn't throw strikes

Giolito entered Tuesday night in Cleveland leading the American League in walks and hit by pitches, so that he came in and immediately filled up the strike zone provided a small measure of stability to the affair.

"Absolutely," said Renteria when asked if this was a step in the right direction, while holding out a thumbs up. "He was throwing a lot more strikes. He showed he was getting his breaking ball over a little bit better today. He threw some changeups that were pretty good in hitter's counts that he was able to get some swings and misses on. He ground through what ultimately for him was quite a bit of traffic and still kept it to six innings and five runs. Much better than his previous start for sure."

What was less encouraging is that the Cleveland lineup regularly sprayed his 90-94 mph fastball around the park. He waited until the third inning to get his first swinging strike, but there were some genuine signs of progress near the end of the night: He flashed some good changeups, including a very nice one that got Yonder Alonso whiffing out in front, and used his curveball as much as ever, even getting a swing and miss from Jason Kipnis. Promising solitary elements in a six-inning, five-run night in his 11th start of the year are probably light comfort.

"It definitely felt good being back in the strike zone," Giolito said. "The curve ball felt a lot better, especially. Changeup keeping it down. Just got too much of the plate. Trying to get in on lefties and missing over the middle a lot is kind of what hurt me."

2. Tim Anderson did a thing

With Matt Davidson on the shelf, Anderson has already pulled into a tie with him for the team lead in home runs by cranking his 11th Monday, and he's continued to reel him in for the RBI lead by smacking a run-scoring single off Clevinger in the second. It wasn't the most thrilling highlight in franchise history — though he did add his team-leading 12th stolen base in the same inning — but this is life when the team scores only once before the ninth inning.

3. There's a reason Palka keeps getting starts in the outfield

He's not a patient man at the plate and he's definitely not afraid to swing for the fences, but with six more total bases Tuesday night to raise his season line to .289/.310/.557, including an absolute moonshot over the trees in dead center in the ninth inning, Palka is providing offensive impact for an outfield that is otherwise wholly absent of it. Between José Abreu, Davidson and even Matt Skole, there's really no way he's getting in the lineup consistently without wearing an outfielder's mitt, and his constant early work in the outfield with Daryl Boston shows everyone realizes this.

4. What is Aaron Bummer?

Bummer came in for Giolito in the seventh and promptly allowed four straight ringing hits as Cleveland padded a lead that never seemed to be in any element of danger after the bottom of the first. Then he followed it up by striking out José Ramírez with a wipeout breaking ball that reminded everyone why he is here at this level. His stuff is nasty enough to get anyone in this league out, but harnessing it remains difficult for him. He was in High-A a little over a year ago, so it's not exactly been a long wait for him to figure it out, but it's been one we've all witnessed up close.

5. Skole power

How could the White Sox have buried Skole all year behind [checks notes] Davidson having a turnaround season and Abreu looking as good as ever? All he did was draw a walk Tuesday night, but that means his career OBP is right around .571, and he hasn't done anything yet to make the fanbase turn on him. He's living the dream.

How the White Sox Share Latino Pride While Remaining "One Culture"

By Catherine Garica / La Vida Baseball / May 30, 2018

As you walk into the White Sox's clubhouse, it might take you a moment to find first baseman Jose Abreu's locker stall.

Nestled in the back corner with fellow Cuban infielder Yoan Moncada's locker strategically placed right next to his, Abreu is stationed in his chair.

Abreu can often be found chatting with Moncada and team translator Billy Russo before games. He looks as though he's someone who should not be bothered, but he's open to all his teammates.

"I think that the foundation [for] each culture to be integrated is the respect," Abreu said through the team's translator. "You have to have respect and understand each other's culture and each other's background. I think if you do that, there aren't going to be any divisions. Like you can see here in this clubhouse, we are all integrated, we are all united. Here you [don't] say Latino culture or American culture, we are all just one culture in this clubhouse."

When Abreu says that there is just one culture in the clubhouse, his teammates would certainly agree. However, that isn't to dilute the personalities that each unique player brings.

It only serves to unite them.

“What I like to see is that everybody brings a little bit of their own flair from where they’re from,” said White Sox pitcher Lucas Giolito, a Los Angeles native. “Whether it be (Southern California) guys or guys from the South, guys from Cuba or wherever it may be, we all kind of bring our own personalities. And together we have a great time.”

The awareness of Latino culture in the White Sox clubhouse is highlighted by the strong role that Abreu plays within it. The five-year veteran has seamlessly morphed into his role as a leader on a rebuilding team full of impressionable young minds.

Former White Sox shortstop Alexei Ramirez, who departed from the team in 2015 before the official teardown took place, had a similar leadership role. Abreu has often spoken of the fellow Cuban, characterizing him as a great force for leadership and Latino representation in the clubhouse. Abreu hopes to pass that tradition on during his tenure.

“I think that it’s really important for everybody to be aware of our culture,” Abreu said. “Just being part of the Latino culture is something that means a lot for me. I think for all of the Latinos here especially because we are taking the baton from the people who were here before us, now we have to show the respect. We have to show our appreciation for them, too.”

There’s been so much to learn from the Latino presence within the Sox clubhouse, and it hardly goes unnoticed by the players around it.

“The one thing that’s near and dear to my stomach is the food,” White Sox reliever Nate Jones, a Kentucky native, said. “I love it, especially the Puerto Rican food. The guys are bringing it in a lot. And when we go on the road there’s always a Latin spread, and I mean, it’s delicious every time. But it’s not just the food.

“The emotion that they bring to what they do, it really brings out the fun in the game, the emotion that they play with is contagious.”

Coming from vastly different backgrounds, whether from the South or Cuba, there are always extremely important lessons that players are able to pass along to each other, especially for a team going through the struggles of a rebuild.

“[Seeing] how much they care about their families, you know some of them coming from more rough backgrounds, it’s a hard road for a lot of these guys to get to this point and just how much they enjoy it,” Giolito said. “It’s obviously a job, but especially for some of the Latin guys, it’s just like fun every single day. I think that I can take a page out of that book sometimes myself when I’m going through some hard times.”

One of the major themes that everyone seemed to share is the love of Latino music.

“Mostly the food and music, especially the music,” Moncada said of his favorite thing to share with his teammates. “Because we spend a lot of time in the clubhouse and I like to play music and that’s our connection and our way to express how we are feeling and who we are.”

It’s extremely important for the Latino pride to extend beyond the walls of the White Sox clubhouse and throughout the league. As Giolito noted, many of these players have had extremely rough experiences getting to this level of baseball.

That isn’t just White Sox players. Last season, Abreu made sure to give fellow Cuban Yuli Gurriel a warm welcome to the South side when he arrived with the Houston Astros by sending over a Cuban meal to the clubhouse.

“I would like to do that more often,” Abreu said of the gesture. “Around the league, there are a lot of Latino players who appreciate that. For us, it’s special because we are people with a lot of pride in our culture.

And when you go to a city and you find someone who shares your culture and they take care of you, you feel good. You feel appreciated. That's good. That's part of the human (part) of the sport."

Moncada would like to carry that leadership mantle as well.

"It's important, especially once we make the decision to leave the island," Moncada said. "You know, that's our roots. That's who we are and you don't want to lose sight of that. When you have the opportunity to meet with your countrymen, you want to take time for that.

"You want to show how joyful you are to share that moment with them and to be with them and to share stories about what we used to do in Cuba. That's important for us, because we always have to remind ourselves of where we come from and of our roots."
