



CHICAGO CUBS DAILY CLIPS

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August 7, 2018

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The Athletic

How Javy Báez turned his night around and carried the Cubs yet again

By Sahadev Sharma

KANSAS CITY — Javier Báez had just struck out twice on two breaking balls way out of the zone. He looked more like the 2014 version of himself who couldn't resist chasing sliders diving away from him, flailing hopelessly at unhittable pitches, rather than the player who has transformed into an MVP candidate in 2018.

"I was so mad, man," Báez said. "You can ask Strop [Pedro Strop] about my attitude when I struck out twice. Not that I just struck out, but it was pitches way out of the zone. I was just trying so hard to make it work in that situation."

With his team in the middle of a rain delay, knotted up at one with the Kansas City Royals, Báez sat shirtless on a couch in the visitor's clubhouse at Kaufman Stadium not looking like himself. Pedro Strop asked him what was wrong and Báez started to talk about how he wasn't happy with his performance thus far. Strop had heard enough.

"I kind of screamed to him," Strop told reporters after the Cubs' 3-1 victory over the Royals Monday night. "'Wake up, man. We got a game to play. You're the man, so in the next two at-bats, watch, you're going to get two base hits. Just let them pitch. Get that ball close to you and just hit it.' That's pretty much what it was."

Báez tried to interject, but Strop was having none of it, reiterating that the dynamic infielder would end the day 2-for-4. Báez then went out and slugged the first pitch he saw in the sixth inning 414 feet to center field to put the Cubs ahead 2-1 and would add a rocket opposite-field RBI double to give them a two-run cushion. With more hard rain mere minutes away in the ninth, Strop, who'd already provided enough of a lift with his motivational moment in the clubhouse, worked a quick ninth to seal his sixth save since closer Brandon Morrow went down with an injury over the All-Star break.

Báez, who played third base on this night, didn't only save his team with his bat. As has become the norm, he also flashed the leather with a brilliant diving stop of a ball that seemed ticketed for the left-field corner, firing a strike to Anthony Rizzo at first to get Jorge Bonifacio by a full step and limited what could have been a big inning.

"How about the play down the third-base line?" manager Joe Maddon asked reporters after the game. "That's going to go unnoticed, but that was very large. That really, probably prevented a two-run inning at least from them when he made that play. Another big night for him."

Báez, as usual, didn't have an explanation for his brilliance — a superhuman feat for most comes natural to him. His stout defense helped back another strong outing from Cole Hamels, who worked six innings, giving up just one run on seven scattered hits while striking out two and walking just one. Hamels recalled that he'd been lucky enough to spend the previous three seasons with Adrián Beltré regularly pulling off impressive defensive gems behind him, and in just a couple weeks with the Cubs, he sees some similarities in Báez.

"Javy's play was outstanding," Hamels said. "I've been fortunate enough to play with a Hall of Famer behind me in Texas. With what Javy's able to do, he's probably right in line with that type of playing ability. Just great to be able to have that."

"You can just tell, he's a baseball player. He's the type of guy who wants to get out there every day. He wants the ball to come to him and he wants to make the play. You can see that and you want to get him the ball. Because you know he's gonna make great plays. It's pretty special to have that type of player behind you, on top of what he's been doing with the bat. He's been outstanding."

Almost as standard as his long home runs and dazzling defense is the fact that Báez routinely gets love from the road crowds. As he stepped to the plate in the first, he was greeted with chants of "Javy! Javy!" He's also getting asked daily about the MVP talk, saying he doesn't have family or friends asking him

about it and his main focus is playing the game the right way and sticking to his plan. But when asked if it ever gets hard to ignore the hype, he admitted that it can be.

“The first AB, I was like, ‘Damn, this is my first time here and they’re really yelling for it,’” Báez said. “I was kind of nervous and really happy.”

Nerves or not, Báez was eventually able to shake them. And it’s a good thing he did, because the rest of the offense is once again in one of those lulls. After praising Báez on both offense and defense, Maddon quietly added, “Otherwise, kind of non-descript.” This after referring to the way his team was playing as “vanilla” 10 days ago in St. Louis.

“We’ve gone back to not using the other side,” Maddon said. “Who used the other side tonight? Javy did. I just think that we gotta get back to that middle-field approach. We’ve gotten away from that, I think. I’d have to look at specific numbers, but when we got really hot offensively, everybody was line to line. Now it seems to be we’re starting to play with the smaller part of the field too much.”

From June 24 to July 15, the Cubs averaged 6.47 runs per game. During that stretch, they pulled the ball in 26.4 percent of their plate appearances, 24th in baseball. Since then, they’ve averaged 4.42 runs a game and have pulled the ball 30.9 percent of the time, second-most in baseball in that span. Maddon may not have looked at the numbers, but what his eyes are telling him is true.

The Cubs are now 3-2 in a stretch against two of the worst teams in baseball. They needed two one-run victories to split with the sputtering San Diego Padres over the weekend and then another superstar performance from their MVP to take the first of three from the struggling Royals.

Over the Cubs’ last 10 games, Báez has driven in over a third of the team’s 38 RBI and slugged six of the team’s 14 homers. Without him, it’s unlikely we’re talking about a team that’s 1 1/2 games up on the Milwaukee Brewers and still clinging to the best record in the NL. People once joked that all the torque from his lightning-quick swing would be what would wrench Báez’s back, but unless his teammates start pulling their weight, it may happen from being forced to carry his team for such a long period of time.

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The Athletic

Why Ben Zobrist sees a little bit of himself in David Bote

By Patrick Mooney

David Bote wore sunglasses, gold chains, a floral T-shirt, tight white jeans and a tan hat tilted to the side as he walked across the Wrigley Field clubhouse. Bote did an exaggerated strut, impersonating Pedro Strop as the Cubs got ready for a themed road trip to Kansas City that became a tribute to the popular relief pitcher.

Bote had notched two more hits on Sunday afternoon to raise his batting average to .328, taking advantage of this opportunity while All-Star third baseman Kris Bryant rests his sore left shoulder. Bote also made a rare rookie mistake, getting picked off second base in the sixth inning of a 10-6 loss to the San Diego Padres. It’s only been 28 games – and the Cubs will need their MVP – but Bote’s certainly acted like he belongs here.

“Bote’s game has been so complete,” manager Joe Maddon said. “His prep is great – his demeanor, the slow heartbeat, everything about him. He’s got the respect of that entire room already.”

That combination of off-the-field maturity and on-field versatility reminds Maddon of a young Ben Zobrist, another self-made player who debuted during his age-25 season and earned respect for his unselfish attitude and baseball IQ. That experience with the 2006 Tampa Bay Devil Rays – a team that would lose 101 games during Maddon’s first season as manager – helped set up the career Zobrist never saw coming when he went undrafted out of Eureka High School in downstate Illinois.

This is what Zobrist sees in Bote right now as an immediate contributor to a World Series contender:

“He’s got a lot more confidence than I had at that age,” Zobrist said. “His ability to not let the moment bother him – that kind of stuff is pretty rare when you’re that young and coming up to a team like this. Right now, he’s more mature as a player in a lot of ways than I was at that age. It’s a tougher league than it was at that time as well. He’s taking it in stride and taken to the role. The role is one of the tougher things for young guys to embrace and he’s embraced the role.

“That’s part of the good thing about not being a (high-profile) prospect for your whole time through the minor leagues because you’re just grateful. You’re grateful for the opportunity. I sense that in him. He’s grateful and he’s eager for every chance he gets – and that’s a good place to be because your expectations aren’t too high to where you’re expecting yourself to do too much.

“He’s just trying to do what he can do. It’s pretty impressive.”

The Cubs selected Bote in the 18th round of the 2012 draft out of Neosho County Community College in Kansas, the same year Albert Almora Jr. became the first player drafted by the Theo Epstein regime.

To get a sense of how hard Bote worked, how much talent this farm system used to warehouse and why the Cubs tried to market him at the July 31 trade deadline as an everyday player in the right situation, look at some of the guys he played with in the minors, beginning in the Arizona rookie league and stretching to affiliates from Boise to Kane County to South Bend to Daytona to Myrtle Beach to Tennessee to Iowa: Almora, Javier Báez, Jorge Soler, Kris Bryant, Kyle Schwarber, Gleyber Torres, Jeimer Candelario, Ian Happ, Victor Caratini and Willson Contreras.

“They’ve been helpful since I got here,” Bote said. “That’s the key, [how] the organization [puts things] in place to be yourself. The fact that you can be yourself, it’s a lot easier to gain respect because they know who I am – and I know who they are – and they know what they’re going to get from me every day.

“There’s no tiptoeing around. They’ve done an unbelievable job of welcoming me since April, and since spring training, too. It’s a great clubhouse. It’s fun to compete with these guys.”

Listen to how Báez – a human highlight reel – talks about Bote: “He’s a great athlete. He’s just here every day to learn something to get better.”

Bote – the son of a longtime high school coach who won multiple state titles in Colorado – hasn’t made a fielding error through 147 innings at third base (14 starts), second base and first base. ESPN recently quoted Bote about his frustrations with rain delays limiting his pregame work: “I love going out there and taking ground balls. It’s one of my favorite things to do.”

“It’s simple, but it’s profound at the same time, because you got to love the little things,” Zobrist said when a reporter relayed Bote’s quote. “You got to embrace the stuff that’s not flashy and nobody cares about. And then when you’re on the field, it shows up. That’s where I think we both have a kindred spirit.”

Zobrist is still genuine, humble and hard-working, even after reinventing the super-utility position, helping the Royals win the 2015 World Series, signing a four-year, \$56 million contract with the Cubs and becoming the 2016 World Series MVP.

Zobrist is now 37 years old and openly admits that hitting is harder than ever, pointing to the explosion of data and video analysis that dictates matchups and defensive shifts as well as the 100-mph relievers that have become standard issue. There is nowhere to hide when everything known about you as a hitter is only one click away on a laptop or an iPad.

Bote is a Cubs Way success story/launch-angle convert who's posted a .927 OPS through his first 74 plate appearances in The Show, putting up five doubles, two homers, 11 RBIs and nine walks. The league will adjust, the inevitable slump is coming and the Cubs obviously want Bryant back in the middle of their lineup. But Zobrist has seen and heard enough to think Bote is the real deal.

"He asks good questions and he does his homework," Zobrist said. "I never did that much homework when I was that age. There wasn't that much information – [especially compared to] now – and he's using it already. That bodes well down the road because you know he's going to grow faster because he's using the information to figure out how it works for him."

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The Athletic

Ben Zobrist has a lasting connection to the Royals; it's his daughter
By Rustin Dodd

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — They still come up to Ben Zobrist with stories. They still want to offer thanks. It doesn't matter that it was nearly three years ago now, or that he spent all of 98 total days as a Royal, or even that he's since won another World Series in Chicago, breaking a 108-year drought in the process. Kansas City fans still walk up to him, he says, always with a singular message.

We miss you. Thank you so much.

"It's a special kindred you have with the fans when you get to be there in the moment that matters most for them ..." Zobrist said. "I'll always have that."

Zobrist, 37, was sitting on a bench inside the visitors' dugout Monday afternoon, his first trip back to Kauffman Stadium since the 2015 World Series.

His Chicago Cubs were preparing to open a three-game series. He spent most of the afternoon studying video inside the clubhouse.

Yet if he needed a reminder of just how long it had been — or why he remains a cult favorite here — he had an important one coming to watch a 3-1 Cubs victory on Monday night.

His youngest daughter, Blaise Royal, was born just days after the Royals defeated the New York Mets in Game 5 of the 2015 World Series. In November, she will turn 3 years old. So on Monday, the Zobrist family brought Blaise to her first game at Kauffman Stadium, returning to the ballpark that offered inspiration for her middle name.

“She was along for the ride, even though she didn’t know it,” Zobrist said. “My wife basically held her in. It was a nerve-wracking time for everybody. We obviously wanted her to arrive safely. But at the same time, we wanted to win a World Series.

“It was the first one I got to win, and it just has a special place in my life.”

The story still inspires smiles inside the Zobrist household. On July 28, 2015, Zobrist was traded from the Oakland A’s to the Royals in a pre-trade-deadline deal that fortified the Kansas City lineup. Three months later, he was heading to his second World Series after homering against Toronto’s David Price in a decisive Game 6 of the ALCS.

The catch, of course, was that his wife, Julianna, was due to give berth to their third child at any moment. One of the greatest moments of their lives was coming at the worst possible time. The Royals responded by adding 20-year-old infielder Raul A. Mondesi to their World Series roster — just in case.

Julianna responded by praying — and making jokes on Twitter.

Julianna Zobrist



@JuliannaZobrist

IF anything were to happen I would just take a selfie of me and the baby and text it to Ben after the game!

Zobrist batted .261 with three walks and four doubles in the World Series, helping the Royals handle the Mets in five games. His daughter’s timing was even better. She waited for the series to conclude; she waited for the championship parade in downtown Kansas City; she waited one extra day for the family to return to their offseason home in Nashville. The thankful parents did the only thing that made sense, putting the name “Royal” on their daughter’s birth certificate.

“We just loved it,” Zobrist said. “We thought it worked for either a boy or a girl. We were excited to put it in there, ‘specially once we won.

“It was just like: ‘You know what? She’ll never remember; she will never know. But we all will. And she was there, even if she doesn’t realize it.’”

His daughter has no knowledge of her place in Royals lore, of course. Neither does she fully understand the wild turn of events that followed. Zobrist, a free agent and Illinois native, signed a four-year, \$56 million contract with the Cubs in the months after the 2015 World Series. He marked his first season in Chicago by winning another world championship, claiming MVP honors as the Cubs won their first World Series since 1908.

“Whirlwind time period,” Zobrist said.

The past two years have offered relative calm. He’s under contract with the Cubs through next season. His family is rooted in Nashville and Chicago. The kids are starting to grow up.

Zobrist remains the same versatile weapon as ever, offering a veteran presence in a talented Cubs lineup. He battled through injuries in 2017, and each day he stares Father Time in the face. Yet he entered Monday batting .310 with a .395 on-base percentage while appearing in 92 games. He has made 35 starts at second base, 23 in right field and another three at first base. On Monday, he started at second base and finished 2 for 5, drawing a standing ovation before his first at-bat.

Cubs manager Joe Maddon has elected to ration Zobrist's playing time in an effort to keep him healthy, fresh and involved. In some ways, it is a return to his roots as a super-utility player who helped glamorize the role during his early years in Tampa Bay.

"He's probably the one that changed that perception a little bit," Royals manager Ned Yost said of the utility role. "[He was] an everyday player, but it was a guy that played every day at a different position."

Zobrist remains a popular player in Chicago for his Midwestern sensibilities and his central role in the club's 2016 World Series championship.

He also retains an emotional connection to Kansas City, even if the time was short.

He spent the first part of his life in Belton, Mo., going to games at then-Royals Stadium while his father attended nearby Calvary Bible College. He viewed his 2015 return as a homecoming of sorts.

"To come back and be a part of the team," Zobrist said, "to help them win a championship was really fun."

In some ways, Zobrist still feels at home when he returns here. He connects with the Midwestern vibe, he said, which is partly why he was attracted to Chicago. He feels a kinship with the people.

It is those same people who approach him in Chicago and elsewhere. It is those same people who walk up to say thanks.

"It's a Midwest team," he said. "So it just feels very home-like to me."

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Cubs.com

Baez sparks Cubs with 25th HR, stellar D

By Carrie Muskat

KANSAS CITY -- Javier Baez had struck out twice when the rain started to fall at Kauffman Stadium, interrupting the Cubs' series opener against the Royals on Monday night. He was lying on one of the couches in the clubhouse, waiting out the 22-minute delay, when teammate Pedro Strop gave him a pep talk.

Cubs fans can probably guess that this rain delay meeting worked, too.

Baez smacked a go-ahead home run leading off the sixth inning, added an RBI double in the eighth and made a stellar defensive play to back starter Cole Hamels in a 3-1 Interleague victory. Chicago is now 9-9 since the All-Star break.

"I was so mad [at my at-bats] plus the rain delay -- you can ask 'Stroppy' about my attitude," Baez said. "I struck out twice, and not that I struck out, but it was pitches way out of the zone. This is the first time I played here so I was really excited to be here. I like the field -- it's really big. I was trying to control my emotions. After the rain delay, I went out there with a different attitude and being patient."

Cue Strop.

"[I told him] 'You've got two more at-bats,'" Strop said. "'We're playing this game, and you've got two more at-bats. I want you to go 2-for-4. Don't tell me anything, you're going 2-for-4.' I was kind of screaming at him. 'Wake up, man. Wake up. We've got a game to play and you're the man. You're going to get two base hits. Watch. Let them pitch. Let the ball get close to you and hit it.' That's pretty much what it was."

Royals starter Jakob Junis fanned eight and escaped jams in the fourth and fifth innings before Kevin McCarthy took over in the sixth. Baez was expecting a first-pitch fastball after all the sliders Junis threw him. Instead, McCarthy threw a curveball and Baez launched it a projected 414 feet to straightaway center, according to Statcast™, for his 25th home run. He's now hit three homers in his last four games.

Baez delivered his RBI double with one out in the eighth off former teammate Jason Hammel. Before every at-bat, Baez was greeted by chants of "M-V-P, M-V-P" from Cubs fans in the crowd. Is it hard not to think about the National League MVP Award?

"Yes it is," Baez said. "The first at-bat, I was like, 'Damn, it's my first time here, and they're already yelling for it.'"

How hot is Baez? He leads the NL with 88 RBIs and is batting .400 (16-for-40) with 12 extra-base hits, including six home runs, and 14 RBIs over his last 10 games.

He's trying hard to ignore the hype.

"I'm trying to deal with it and stay focused with my plan," he said.

Hamel was impressed.

"He's a naturally gifted infielder," he said of Baez. "I think if you wanted to throw him at first base, I'm sure he could do that pretty well, too. You can tell -- he's a baseball player. He's the type of guy who wants to be there every day and he wants the ball to come to him and he wants to make the play, and you can see that and you want to get him the ball. You know he's going to make great plays.

"It's pretty special to have that type of player behind you on top of what he's been doing with the bat. He's been outstanding."

Making his second start since the Cubs acquired him from the Rangers, Hamel scattered seven hits over six innings, striking out two. He also had to wait out the delay that came in the top of the fourth.

"His stuff is still really good and I also believe there is another level or layer of him [regarding] pitch execution," Cubs manager Joe Maddon said. "This guy physically has not lost a thing. I think it's the execution or the selection of the pitch more than anything."

Strop picked up his eighth save with a 1-2-3 ninth on 10 pitches. Good thing he worked quick as rain started again.

"[Bullpen coach Lester Strode] said, 'We've got like 10 minutes before rain,'" Strop said. "I said, 'All right, I've got to do it quick.' We were trying to get out of there."

MOMENT THAT MATTERED

Welcome back: Ben Zobrist, playing in Kansas City for the first time since 2015 when he was part of the World Series championship team, tripled leading off the fourth. Jason Heyward then walked and one out later, Zobrist scored on a wild pitch during Kyle Schwarber's at-bat to tie the game at 1.

SOUND SMART

According to STATS Inc., Baez reached 25 homers in 110 games, the third fastest to do so for a Cubs second baseman since 1900. The others are Hall of Famers Ryne Sandberg in 1990 (92 games) and Rogers Hornsby in 1929 (106 games).

YOU GOTTA SEE THIS

The Royals scored in the second on Alcides Escobar's two-out RBI single. But the highlight of the inning was a defensive play by Baez, who made a diving stop on the third-base line to get Jorge Bonifacio's grounder and was able to get to his feet in time to throw for the out at first. This was Baez's 11th start at third base as the Cubs continue to fill in while Kris Bryant is sidelined with a sore left shoulder.

"That was very large -- that probably prevented a two-run inning at least from them when he made that play," Maddon said.

Hamels appreciated it.

"Javy's play was outstanding," Hamels said. "I've been fortunate enough to play with a Hall of Famer behind me in Texas [third baseman Adrian Beltre] and what Javy's able to do, he's riding the line with that type of playing ability. It's great to be able to have that."

Said Baez: "I just reacted to it. I knew it was going to be fair. I wasn't that far from the line. We try to get double plays, but we're lucky we got one."

HE SAID IT

"He's been 'that guy' the whole time." -- Maddon, when asked about Baez rising to the occasion again

UP NEXT

Cubs left-hander Mike Montgomery will make his 13th start of the season in the second game of this Interleague series against the Royals at 7:15 p.m. CT on Tuesday at Kauffman Stadium. Montgomery changed the grip on his curveball and he was pleased with how it felt in his previous outing against the Padres. He is 2-0 in three games (two starts) against the Royals, including a complete game on June 23, 2015. Kansas City will counter with rookie righty Brad Keller.

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Cubs.com

Maddon confident in Cubs' starting rotation

By Carrie Muskat

KANSAS CITY -- Since the All-Star break, the Cubs' starting rotation had a less than stellar 5.58 ERA entering Monday night's game against the Royals, but manager Joe Maddon isn't concerned about the starters.

"Everybody has to contribute to this," Maddon said of the Cubs' playoff push. "Of course, we're looking for more length from the starters. Observationally and conversationally, they're all in good shape. I don't think anybody's been over-extended, the attitude is great. All that stuff is in good order."

"Moving it forward, I think our guys are really good and I want to believe we'll find that magic potion at some point," he said. "Other than we haven't performed as well as we can, I still believe there's a solid chance we will. ... It's about everybody, it's about scoring points, not making fundamental mistakes. It's a group situation and we are a team. As a group, we all have to do our jobs."

As a group, the Cubs headed into Monday with a 9-9 record since the break and have maintained their lead in the National League Central.

Jon Lester, who was named to the All-Star team after going 12-2 with a 2.58 ERA in the first half, is 0-4 with an 8.53 ERA in four starts since the break. Maddon said Lester's velocity has been consistent.

"Physically, he looked exactly the same for the first couple innings," Maddon said. "Maybe execution of pitches weren't exactly where he wanted, but I saw a couple 92's and 93's. I'm seeing the same guy and not seeing anything different."

Zobrist fond of KC

Monday was a homecoming of sorts for Ben Zobrist, who played for the Royals on their 2015 World Series championship team.

"I love this place," Zobrist said, sitting in the dugout before the series opener at Kauffman Stadium. "There are a lot of fond memories and excitement that we experienced here. It's a special place for me and holds a special place in my heart."

Zobrist saw his first Major League game at the Royals' home ballpark. Another reason is that his wife, Julianna, was carrying their third child, daughter Blaise Royal, and delivered her the day after the championship parade.

"She was along for the ride even though she didn't know it," Zobrist said of his daughter. "My wife basically held her in. It was a nerve-wrecking time for everybody. We wanted her to arrive safely and we wanted to win a World Series."

The Zobrist family was expected at Monday's game, including Blaise, who is now 2 years old.

Injury updates

- Brandon Morrow played catch on Monday and will do the same on Wednesday. He's rehabbing from right biceps inflammation.
- Yu Darvish was scheduled to throw a BP session on Wednesday. He's been out since May because of right triceps tendinitis.
- Kris Bryant was to take grounders at third base, but he has yet to pick up a bat. He's been out since July 24 with left shoulder inflammation.

"There's no finish lines attached," Maddon said of the trio.

Worth noting

- Kyle Schwarber was the designated hitter on Monday, but Maddon may take advantage of these games and insert someone else there to give them a semi day off.

"If somebody needs that, I may do that," Maddon said. "I'll interact with them and see if somebody needs it."

- The Cubs were not happy with a called third strike against Anthony Rizzo that ended Sunday's game against the Padres, but Maddon is not a proponent of robot umpires.

"One of the things I was convinced by a veteran umpire is that pitches that appear to be balls will be called strikes," Maddon said. "I think it's a continual process from MLB regarding umpire training. It's no different than what we do with our players and practice. I think that's the one part I would prefer technology not be involved in the game."

- The Cubs named Class A Advanced Myrtle Beach infielder Jared Young and right-handed pitcher Erick Leal the Minor League player and pitcher of the month for July, respectively.

Young, 23, split the month between Class A South Bend and Myrtle Beach, batting a combined .350 with four doubles, four homers and 17 RBIs in 27 games. It's the second straight month that Young has earned the honor. A 15th-round pick in the 2017 MLB Draft, he has a .292 career batting average.

Leal, 23, did not allow an earned run in 22 2/3 innings in July. The right-hander went 1-0 in seven games, including two starts, and allowed two unearned runs, while striking out 25, walking one and surrendering eight hits. He was named Carolina League Pitcher of the Week for July 23-29 after giving up two hits over 8 1/3 scoreless innings.

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Cubs.com

Maddon's vision transformed for good cause

By Carrie Muskat

KANSAS CITY -- Jason Skeldon admits he wasn't very good at playing baseball as a kid, but the Tampa, Fla., artist has made a big league connection as an adult. Skeldon and Joe Maddon have combined to create unique paintings to present the Cubs manager's message about the game.

Maddon saw one of Skeldon's paintings in a clothing store, and the two met.

"I'm not a huge baseball fan, but I did know Joe Maddon when he was with the Rays," Skeldon said.

What was supposed to be a 20-minute meeting lasted two hours.

"The thing about it that was cool was we clicked," Skeldon, 35, said in a phone interview. "I was very excited about the venture we're in now."

Maddon will write his ideas and send a PDF image to Skeldon via email. For example, Maddon wanted players to know they need to "build relationships" which leads to "trust" which leads to "exchanging ideas," noting that the result is "constructive criticism flows." Skeldon got all of that down in a Banksy-style painting.

In another piece, Skeldon created an image of Salvador Dali wearing a catcher's mask, promoting the "tools of intelligence," and has Mona Lisa wearing eye black and batting gloves and holding a bat. In Maddon's writing, it says "Renaissance chicks dig the leather."

"Joe, to me, besides being a baseball manager, Joe to me is artistic himself," Skeldon said. "It has to do with baseball, but it has to do more than anything with an artistic vision that Joe has. It could be baseball, it could be football, it could be anything. Joe gives me ideas.

"It's kind of funny -- Joe does have to break it down for me a little bit," Skeldon said. "I'll say, 'Who is this person?' He'll say, 'He's an All-Star, a Hall of Famer.' I think at first, Joe kind of chuckled, but now he knows, so he'll tell me right away. Things are very smooth."

The paintings were Maddon's way of "Putting the Art Back Into THEE Game," as he says, and a different way to present his messages.

"He's taking stuff coming out of my mind and making it real," Maddon said of the collaboration with Skeldon. "He's nailed it. All the stuff I've sent him and my thoughts to him, I think he's put out there pretty clearly. Beyond that, his own personal touches, the colors, the way he layers things to me is right on."

Fans will have a chance to purchase the paintings and meet Maddon and Skeldon on Friday at the Chicago Sports Museum, 835 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, from 7-8:30 p.m. CT. One hundred percent of the ticket and art sales will be donated to Maddon's Respect 90 Foundation. Tickets are \$70 each.

Skeldon used to draw his own comic books when he was young. A paramedic for eight years, he returned to painting because it helped him deal with anxiety and depression. Now, Skeldon is not only an artist but also a philanthropist. He most recently sponsored a wedding for a couple in Lakeland, Fla., and has donated thousands of dollars to various causes.

Skeldon and Maddon work well together.

"I like to use everything he gives me, and I think that's why we have a good relationship," Skeldon said of Maddon. "His vision might be a little scrambled in his head, but it's cool ideas. I've done this for years -- people want their dogs with a crown on their head, with a bow tie, sitting on a mountain. I know how to 'collab' everything and get it all together, so that's my strong point and his point is the vision."

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ESPNChicago.com

Cole Hamels poised to give Cubs' rotation much-needed lift

By Jesse Rogers

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- Before Monday night's game against the Kansas City Royals, Chicago Cubs manager Joe Maddon made it clear he didn't want the burdens of the team's much-maligned pitching rotation to fall on the shoulders of recently acquired lefty Cole Hamels.

After all, Hamels is 35 and came to the Cubs from the Texas Rangers with a 4.72 ERA. How much could his new team actually expect from him?

"I want to believe we're going to find that magic potion at some point," Maddon said of his starting staff. "And I don't want to lay this all on Cole. Not at all. He's one-fifth of the rotation right now. It's about everybody."

Fast-forward to after the game, after Hamels gave up one run over six innings and after he made the right pitch, at the right time, over and over again, even though he gave up seven hits and a walk. He wants that burden.

"That's what I'm here for," Hamels said after the 3-1 win. "It's the belief I've always had, every season, to go out there and be a workhorse. To gain momentum or continue winning streaks or stop losing streaks."

It's only two games -- and you can tell Hamels is not exactly the pitcher he was a decade ago -- but perhaps the Cubs can rely on him. Plus, he's confident he can be better. His two-seam fastball is simply not special right now, though he desperately wants it to be. For the moment, he'll have to rely on his variety of off-speed stuff and his understanding of how to pitch. In those ways, he's at the top of his game.

"You can see the hitters are off-balance," teammate Kyle Hendricks said. "That's one of the biggest things I noticed. ... What we do here is helping him already. Just giving him a little bit of our game plan going in there and then he's able to execute it so well."

The Cubs have been searching all season for the spark that would ignite their rotation. A rejuvenated Jon Lester didn't rub off on any other starters during the first half, and now that Lester is slumping, perhaps Hamels will lead the way.

"He is who he is," Javier Baez said. "He's been impressive these last two starts. Hopefully he'll keep it going."

Hamels has given up just one earned run over 11 innings with his new team and he must have mentioned going deeper into games a half dozen times since coming to Chicago. And that's the best takeaway a Cubs fan could ask for: Hamels thinks there is more in the tank. He believes his arm action and the angle of the ball are looking more and more like they did in his best years. The Cubs may have bought low on Hamels at exactly the right time.

"In Texas, we were working on it but things weren't showing," he said.

It's starting to show now. And even when his stuff doesn't have the makings of his 25-year-old self, he has his know-how. The fifth inning on Monday showed what he's capable of. After Hamels loaded the bases with two outs, Hunter Dozier stepped to the plate in a 1-1 game. That's when Hamels' mind went into overdrive.

"Earlier in the year I gave up a big hit to Dozier, with guys on," Hamels explained. "I definitely didn't want to do it again. I made sure we had the right sequence. I was a little bit off on a few, but at least they had a purpose. I wasn't going to throw something out there that just didn't matter. It helped set up the fastball in and I was able to get a jam shot and get out of it."

Dozier grounded softy to first base on a 3-2 pitch and the Cubs never looked back as Baez led off the next inning with his 25th home run.

The Cubs were led in the first half by Baez and Lester. Perhaps the second half will feature Hamels, who has been everything they could have hoped for and more so far.

"That guy knows what he's doing," Hendricks said. "One hundred percent. I like watching him. Every pitch is a plus pitch and they're all out pitches. We got a good one."

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NBC Sports Chicago

More proof Javy Baez is having one of the greatest seasons in Cubs history

By Tony Andracki

The first half of Monday night's Cubs game looked like a flashback to the Javy Baez of old.

He expanded the zone several times over two at-bats, each of which resulted in a strikeout.

But because this is 2018, Baez rebounded in a big way, homering in the sixth inning and doubling home Jason Heyward in the eighth to give the Cubs the lead and an all-important insurance run.

It pushed his season line to 31 doubles, 25 homers and 88 RBI, all career highs.

Oh yeah, and the Cubs still have 50 games left in the season for Baez to add to those totals.

Maybe Pedro Strop should get an assist for Baez's big game Monday night:

Jesse Rogers

✓

@ESPNChiCubs

Strop to Baez during the rain delay: "I screamed to him. 'Wake up, wake up. We have a game to play.'"

El Mago having a season worthy of being in the mix for the National League MVP, but beyond that, Baez is enjoying one of the best seasons ever by a Cubs second baseman:

Stats By STATS

@StatsBySTATS

It took Javier Baez 110 games to reach 25 home runs this season. That's the third fastest by any @Cubs second baseman in the Modern Era (since 1900).

The others: Hall of Famers Ryne Sandberg in 1990 (92 games) and Rogers Hornsby in 1929 (106).#EverybodyIn

Not some bad company to be in.

It's worth pointing out, however, that stat isn't quite the whole story.

In those seasons, Sandberg and Hornsby played ONLY second base. This year, Baez has played MOSTLY second base, but has also started 22 games at shortstop and 11 at third base, along with 13 games where he's entered as a substitute at the other three infield positions.

With another big game Monday, Baez is now on pace for 36 homers, 127 RBI, 103 runs, 45 doubles, 10 triples and 27 stolen bases. He's also hitting .302 with a .929 OPS.

Over the last 10 games, Baez has been carrying the Cubs, smacking 6 homers with 14 RBI. The rest of the team's position players have combined for 8 HR and 23 RBI in that same span.

And it's not just a small sample size. He's been on a tear the last 50 games:

Christopher Kamka

@ckamka

Javier Báez last 50 games:

.366/.403/.683, 36 Runs, 21 Doubles, 2 Triples, 11 Home Runs, 42 RBI#Cubs

10:35 PM - Aug 6, 2018

2,666

741 people are talking about this

Twitter Ads info and privacy

Oh yeah, and he's flashing this kind of leather:

NBC Sports Chicago

✓

@NBCSChicago

Don't worry KB... Javy has third locked down while you're gone.

It's El Mago's world. We're just living in it.

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NBC Sports Chicago

A pair of minor changes has Mike Montgomery excited about his future performance

By Tony Andracki

One of the most common occurrences following a Cubs game this year is a starting pitcher saying he felt good and took a step in the right direction, even if the results weren't great.

On the one hand, what else are they supposed to say?

On the other hand, it makes sense, given the Cubs starting rotation has vastly underperformed in 2018.

Mike Montgomery is no different.

After giving up 7 hits and one run in 5.1 innings Thursday against the Padres, the lanky lefty sat in front of the Chicago media and said he felt like he took a step forward and threw the ball better than his stat line showed.

It doesn't matter that he only struck out 2 hitters or generated 1 swing and miss while facing one of the game's worst lineups. Nor does it matter that he's allowed 19 hits over the last 10.1 innings he's thrown.

Why?

Because Montgomery wasn't just up there talking about luck or blowing smoke. He's made specific changes to his pitch arsenal that he truly believes will lead to better results.

"I changed the grip on my curveball," he said Thursday night. "It played a lot better, so I'm gonna kinda work on that and continue to better that. Also, my cutter/slider was a lot better."

"...I'm gonna still look to get more swings and misses. I'm a groundball pitcher, but I think in today's game, you're gonna need swings and misses, so I'm constantly gauging how I can do that. I think some of the things I did tonight are gonna give me more of those and I was pretty happy about that."

Montgomery said the main focus on his new curveball grip is to get it back to being a weapon the way it was in 2016.

All Cubs fans can attest to how good his curveball was late that season, as the big looping breaking ball he threw to Cleveland's Michael Martinez clinched the first World Series in 108 years for the franchise.

The 29-year-old hasn't liked how his curveball has been for a while, in part because he changed his arm slot slightly before the season.

"It was like, 'OK, I gotta find a way to get my curveball to break more like a couple years ago,'" Montgomery said. "In '16, it was my go-to weapon and it played really the entire season and obviously in the playoffs.

"With some changes in my mechanics, some other things I've done have gotten better. I think [the curveball has] regressed, so to speak, but it's just changed and I didn't think it played as well.

"I recognized what it was doing. It wasn't breaking and generating what I wanted it to be. I'm slowly trying to make a change. ... It got better [Thursday]. When it gets better, you have the confidence to throw it in different counts. And for the way I pitch, having a good curveball makes a big difference."

In 2016, Montgomery's curveball was rated at 7.4 runs above average by FanGraphs. The pitch has been valued at -0.4 runs above average so far in 2018.

He admitted it's difficult to change the grip on a pitch in the middle of a season and incorporate it into a start right away, with only four days in between outings to work on it.

But after throwing a couple curveballs he didn't like early in the game against the Padres, Montgomery figured he had nothing to lose, so he went to that new grip.

"I thought I threw some good ones, so I'm excited about that," he said. "Sometimes change takes a while. I thought [Thursday], I kinda found that confidence in throwing it like I know how just by changing the grip on it."

Montgomery has also tried to incorporate a slider/cutter into his arsenal, as well. He said that's strictly just to try to generate more swings and misses and as a result — strikeouts.

He's an extreme groundball pitcher, keeping opposing hitters in the dirt 53.5 percent of the time. That's not a bad strategy with the Cubs' elite infield defense.

But his strikeouts are at a career low (14.2 percent) at a time when whiffs are way up across the entire league.

A lack of swing-and-miss stuff leaves a lot more to chance for a guy like Montgomery. Even if he executes his pitch well, all that contact eventually can fall in on bloop hits or groundballs through the hole.

Hence why he's refining the slider/cutter.

"To get more swings and misses and to generate weaker contact at the same time," Montgomery said. "It's no secret — I'm not punching out 9 guys per 9 out there. I'm not worried about strikeouts, but I think you're always trying to find a way to get better.

"For me, being able to get more swings and misses will make me better. Especially if I can not dwell on that, but understand — OK, what are people doing in the game to get swings and misses? Right now, I feel like a good slider is the king at getting swings and misses.

"Guys aren't swinging and missing at a lot of fastballs, except up in the zone maybe. It's just utilizing it with my other pitches. I've never really thrown a true slider — it's been a variation of a cutter and it still is.

"I think it was better [Thursday], but it wasn't where I want it to be. It's gonna be a process and just kinda slowly work on it and get better."

Montgomery has been solid in the Cubs rotation this season — 3-3 with a 3.36 ERA and 1.31 WHIP across 12 starts.

But he's still working toward trying to take that next step, even if the Cubs are concerned that he's approaching a career-high in innings and may move him to the bullpen down the stretch.

For now, however, Montgomery is fully entrenched in the rotation and takes the ball Tuesday evening in Kansas City. Catch all the action on NBC Sports Chicago, with coverage beginning at 6:30 p.m.

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Chicago Tribune

Mike Montgomery getting a grip on his curve
By Mark Gonzales

Mike Montgomery's most memorable pitch with the Cubs was a curve that the Indians' Michael Martinez grounded to third for the final out of the 2016 World Series.

Montgomery hopes to make that pitch even more effective Tuesday night when he takes the mound against his original organization — the Royals.

"I changed the grip," Montgomery said. "But, also by looking at film, I'm trying to get my arm angle higher."

The adjustments are designed to help Montgomery get a sharper break on his curve.

"It's middle of the season," he said. "So we won't tinker with it too much. But I stayed on top and saw some good results with it from the last game (against the Padres)."

Montgomery has a lifetime 2-0 record with an 0.55 ERA in three career appearances that include a win at Kaufmann Stadium in which he allowed only one run in 6 1/3 innings on July 10, 2016 — about two weeks before he was dealt from the Mariners to the Cubs.

“(Kaufmann) is a great place to pitch,” said Montgomery, who was dealt from the Royals to the Rays prior to the 2013 season but never pitched in the big leagues for either team. “I like pitching against a former team. It’s cool to be here.”

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Chicago Tribune

After a pep talk from Pedro Strop, Javier Baez hits his 25th HR in the Cubs' 3-1 win

By Mark Gonzales

Pedro Strop earned two saves Monday night.

Strop pitched a perfect ninth inning to preserve the Cubs' 3-1 win over the Royals, and he also gave Javier Baez a pep talk during a 22-minute rain delay after the slugger was upset about his two early strikeouts.

“I was screaming to him,” Strop said. “ ‘Wake up! You got a game to play. You’re the man. The next two at-bats, watch. You’re going to get two hits.’ ”

Baez responded with a tie-breaking home run in the sixth inning against reliever Kevin McCarthy, and he added an RBI double in the eighth.

“After the rain delay, I went out there with a different attitude,” Baez said.

Baez also made a diving stop at third base to rob Jorge Bonifacio of a hit in the second as the Cubs (65-47) extended their lead in the National League Central to 1 1/2 games over the idle Brewers.

Baez’s team-leading 25th homer was his third in four games and the sixth in his last 10. He became one of three Cubs to collect at least 30 doubles, five triples, 25 home runs and 15 stolen bases in a season, joining Ryne Sandberg (1985 and 1992) and Alfonso Soriano (2007).

Baez’s performance provided enough comfort for Hamels, who pitched six innings of seven-hit ball while weaving out of trouble in the first and fifth innings in his second start as a Cub.

“I know I need to pitch deeper into games,” Hamels said.

The Cubs needed a strong start from Hamels after Jon Lester was knocked around in a 10-6 loss Sunday to the Padres that inflated his ERA to 8.53 over his past four starts.

Hamels was furious after he allowed a single in the fifth on an 0-2 pitch to No. 9 batter Drew Butera, who was batting .184 entering Monday’s game.

“I don’t want to lay this all on Cole,” Maddon said before the game. “He’s one-fifth of the rotation now. It’s about everybody. It’s about us scoring points. It’s about catching the ball and playing defense, not making fundamental mistakes out there. It’s a group situation. We are a team. As a group, we have to do our jobs.”

The Cubs struggled to score for most of the night. Willson Contreras was thrown out trying to stretch a single into a double for the second out of the second. The Cubs mustered only one run in the fourth (on a wild pitch by Jakob Junis) after Ben Zobrist led off the inning with a triple and Jason Heyward followed with a walk.

In the fifth, the Cubs loaded the bases with one out but didn't score against Junis.

"We've gotten back to not using the other side of the field," Maddon said. "We got to get back to that middle-of-the-field approach."

As for the rotation, with days off scheduled for Thursday and Aug. 13 and series against the Nationals and Brewers coming up, some minor changes could be in store.

"We're discussing it now," Maddon said. "We haven't decided anything. That was something I was going through. There are a couple different possibilities with two days off."

"The concern would be if you manipulated it too much, you might get guys with too many days off. So it hasn't been decided, but we're talking about it right now."

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Chicago Tribune

Umpire Angel Hernandez admits his game-ending Strike 3 call on Anthony Rizzo was wrong

By Paul Sullivan

Umpire Angel Hernandez said he didn't hear about Anthony Rizzo's postgame rant over the called third strike that ended Sunday's Cubs game against the Padres.

But Hernandez did admit Rizzo was right. The pitch should've been called a ball, and the game should not have ended.

After the Cubs' 10-6 loss, Rizzo complained about the call to reporters for several minutes.

"That call is unacceptable," he said. "Angel told me to look at it. I looked at it, and he's wrong. And I would like for him to confirm that."

Cubs manager Joe Maddon said it was an "egregiously bad" call.

Umpires receive reviews of every game, and Hernandez said he saw a video of the pitch after the game. He confirmed Rizzo's assessment of the call.

"It was a cut fastball, three inches off the plate," Hernandez said. "Rizzo was right."

Rizzo and Hernandez had a moment during the 2016 National League Championship Series when Rizzo apologized to the umpire for showing him up in the previous at-bat. Hernandez brought that up Monday, saying he still has a lot of respect for Rizzo and that he appreciated the apology.

"He's a good person," he said.

Hernandez also said had no problem with Rizzo following him up the line to continue complaining about the call, and that he wasn't "arguing" but stating his case.

Hernandez said he obviously didn't intentionally make the wrong call, and that he would admit to Rizzo that the first baseman was right the next time they speak.

"I'm not perfect," Hernandez said.

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Chicago Tribune

Cole Hamels welcomes more responsibility: 'I do need to pitch deeper into games'

By Mark Gonzales

Joe Maddon assessed an additional 15 pitches to Cole Hamels' pitch count due to a 22-minute rain delay during the top of the fourth inning Monday night, but the newly acquired left-hander pitched well to enough to satisfy the Cubs' manager.

Hamels returned after the delay to throw six innings of one-run ball, enough to propel the Cubs to a 3-1 win over the Royals.

"I thought he did a great job," Maddon said after Hamels improved to 2-0 with the Cubs. "His stuff is still really good. I also believe there's another layer of him regarding some pitch execution."

Hamels scattered seven hits and was able to jam Hunter Dozier on a grounder with the bases loaded to get out of the fifth.

"I think his fastball is his best pitch," said Maddon, adding that his curve and change-up are solid complimentary pitches when his fastball is located properly.

Hamels accepts the challenge of being leaned on more heavily due to an inconsistent rotation.

"That's what I'm here for," Hamels said. "That's the belief I've had every season. To either gain momentum or stop losing streaks. That's the mentality I was taught by some of the best pitchers in the game.

"I know I do need to pitch deeper into games."

Hamels was appreciative of the defensive support, particularly in the second inning when Javier Baez' diving stop at third base robbed Jorge Bonifacio of a hit and thwarted what could have been a big rally.

"I was fortunate to play with a Hall of Famer (Adrian Beltre) behind me in Texas," Hamels said. "With what Javy is able to do, he's probably right in line with that type of playing ability. It's great to be able to have that.

"You can just tell. He's a baseball player. He's the type of guy who want to be out there every day. He wants the ball to come to him, and you can see that. And you want to get him the ball. He's going to make great plays. It's pretty special to have that type of player behind you, on top of what he's doing with the bat."

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Chicago Tribune

Kris Bryant will do 'baseball stuff' this week — but that won't include swinging a bat

By Mark Gonzales

Kris Bryant will begin doing some baseball work, such as fielding grounders, this week while his left shoulder continues to heal.

This marks the first time he will return to the field since July 23.

“It will be good to get him out there doing baseball stuff,” manager Joe Maddon said Monday. “Good for his head, too.”

Bryant has yet to swing a bat because of lingering discomfort.

In other injury news, pitcher Yu Darvish will throw live batting practice before Wednesday night’s game. The session is expected to last two innings.

Closer Brandon Morrow played catch from a distance of 115 feet and is expected to repeat his routine on Wednesday.

“After that, we’ll have something more planned out,” said Morrow, who has yet to pitch in the second half due to right biceps tendinitis.

“Everything is good.”

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Chicago Tribune

Joe Maddon is now against use of robot umpires

By Mark Gonzales

Cubs manager Joe Maddon said Monday he is against using robot umpires to determine balls and strikes.

“One of the things I was convinced by a veteran umpire is that pitches that appear to be balls will be called strikes,” said Maddon, one day after Anthony Rizzo was called out on strikes by a pitch out of the strike zone to conclude a 10-6 loss to the Padres.

“That’s even more troublesome with that kind of technology. There’s something to be said for that. I just think it’s a continual process from MLB regarding umpire training and rehashing. No different than what we do with our players, like more ground balls.

“I think that’s the one part I would prefer technology not being involved in the game.”

That’s a contrast from the view he expressed in an opinion piece published in the New York Post on June 13, 2017, in which he said: “I think the next logical step to that would be balls and strikes being influenced and impacted, technologically speaking. It would be a more homogenized step on a daily basis.”

But more recently, Maddon asked his video department to check a high curve strike he thought resembled a pitch from a slow-pitch softball game.

“They checked, and it hit the (imaginary high strike zone) bar,” Maddon said. “That’s one reason I’m off (using robot umpires). There would be even more arguments.”

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Chicago Tribune

Is the Javier Baez MVP talk real or just local hype?

By Paul Sullivan

Last weekend's "MVP" chants for Javier Baez at Wrigley Field reflect how popular the Cubs star has become since coming up to the majors four years ago.

It's easy to forget Baez was the most hyped member of the original Core Four prospects, only to be bypassed by Kris Bryant, Kyle Schwarber, Addison Russell and others on the hype-o-meter.

"It's completely blown out of proportion," Jake Arrieta told me before Baez's debut on Aug. 5, 2014, in Coors Field. "He's an extremely good player. I would just like to see him come up here and let him play. The outside expectations are going to be elevated because of his status, which the media doesn't care about though it's unfair to him.

"He's going to put up good numbers. He's going to be a good player for us. Just let him go out there and let his ability shine. That's the most important thing."

Baez hit a game-winning solo home run in the 12th inning that night but never found a rhythm, finishing with a .169 average and 95 strikeouts in 213 at-bats. He began 2015 back in the minors, and the tragic death of his sister, Noely, at age 21, and a broken hand early in the season combined to stall his development.

After he was recalled to the Cubs in September, Baez gradually began to improve offensively, having ditched his leg kick and staying more in control in the box. He was still a free-swinging, but had reined it in a bit.

In 2016, Baez had what Theo Epstein called his "coming-out party" in the National League Division Series against the Giants, helping lead the Cubs to the Championship Series, in which he was named co-MVP in the win over the Dodgers. Baez finally had arrived, and there was no turning back.

Now Baez is an All-Star and arguably the biggest star in a clubhouse full of them. He entered Monday's game in Kansas City leading the National League in RBIs (86) while ranking second in extra-base hits (61), third in slugging (.585) and fourth in WAR (4.6). He's also one of the better fielding second basemen, has 19 steals and has made the "swim" move as popular as a Chicago-style hot dog.

But is the MVP talk real, or just local media hype?

According to the gambling site bovada.lv, Baez has the fourth-best odds to win the NL MVP award at 4/1, behind Nolan Arenado (11/4), Freddie Freeman (13/4) and Paul Goldschmidt (7/2). Only a month ago, Baez was off the board, so his quick rise up the charts was unexpected.

But Baez's ultra-aggressive play has its drawbacks. On Sunday he attempted to steal third in the fifth inning with two outs, and though he was called safe the call was overturned on a challenge, ending the inning. Manager Joe Maddon questioned the decision to steal, even as he pointed out Baez beat the throw and was tagged out when he briefly came off the base.

While Baez has downplayed the MVP talk, he can't completely shut it out. So was he trying to do too much in that inning because of the MVP chants and the recent conversation about his chances?

“No,” Maddon said. “I haven’t seen anything different. He’s done that play before. And like I said, he was safe, but technology caught us today. I’m betting he was thinking on that level of the next pitch being in the dirt (and scoring from third). I don’t know that, but that was my thought. I will speak to him about that. But no, Javy just plays one game.”

The Cubs don’t want Baez to change one bit, and neither do fans. Starting pitcher Jon Lester said Baez’s mistakes have to be put in a different context because of all the positive things he makes happen on the field.

“Jav is Jav,” Lester said. “So you’re going to expect a lot out of him. Now we’ve all kind of seen him and what he’s turned into as a baseball player. The expectation now is to see him kind of put us on his back. He’s fun to watch. With all the good things he does, you have to sometimes take the minor, minor bad things he does and move on.

“I’ll always expect being aggressive over passive any day. That’s him as a player and that’s him as a person. So never question what he does on a baseball field.”

Baez is going to make more mistakes, but he’ll also have some eye-popping moments that excite fans and add to his reputation as one of the game’s more electric players. Whether that’s enough to capture the MVP award remains to be seen, but the fact he’s in the conversation says a lot about how far Baez has climbed since being sent back to Iowa in 2015.

“We’ll see in the offseason what I get for this season,” he said Friday.

But for the next 50 games, Baez will remain in the national spotlight, like Arenado, Freeman and Goldschmidt, competing for an award some of the game’s greatest players never achieved — while the Cubs make another bid for October.

Can Javy being Javy lead to an MVP award?

We’re about to find out.

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Chicago Tribune

Durability a source of pride for Cubs catcher Willson Contreras

By Mark Gonzales

With about one-third of the regular season remaining, Willson Contreras is on pace to catch 1,000 innings for the first time in his major-league career as well as lead all major leaguers in innings caught.

“I felt really good about it,” Contreras said last week. “I take a lot of pride in that. The most important thing is that I’ve been able to stay healthy, and it’s helped me catch all those innings and help the team.”

Contreras said he learned his lesson last season, when he suffered a hamstring strain that cost him a month on the 10-day disabled list midway through the second half and limited him to 821 1/3 innings caught.

“At this point, virtually everybody knows what they need to do to take care of their body and be out there as much as they can,” Contreras said. “I learned a lot from my injury last year — that’s what’s helped me this year.”

Contreras leads all major league catchers with 785 innings caught entering play Monday, well ahead of Jonathan Lucroy of the Athletics (745). Contreras said that staying healthy — not catching 1,000 innings — was a goal for this season.

“If I stay healthy, that’s going to allow me to catch as many innings as I possibly can,” Contreras said. “That’s what it comes down to, especially for this position.”

Manager Joe Maddon has been selective in giving backup Victor Caratini a start no later than after Contreras has started three consecutive games.

“I want to really make sure we get to September that Willson is not too tired,” Maddon said. “I don’t think he is.”

Last season, four catchers caught at least 1,000 innings — Martin Maldonado of the Angels (1,146 1/3), Yadier Molina of the Cardinals (1,125 2/3), J.T. Realmuto of the Marlins (1,095 2/3), and Matt Wieters of the Nationals (1,003 2/3).

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Chicago Sun-Times

Cole Hamels shows up for Cubs just in the nick of time

By Gordon Wittenmyer

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Jon Lester carried the Cubs’ starting rotation for half the season without any consistent production from the rest of the vaunted group.

Now it might be Cole Hamels’ turn.

“That’s what I’m here for,” Hamels said after working around traffic for six rain-interrupted innings to beat the Royals 3-1 in the opener of a three-game interleague series Monday night at Kauffman Stadium.

Acquired last week in a trade to address issues with the rotation, Hamels didn’t arrive a moment too soon — with Lester slumping, Yu Darvish still on the disabled list and Tyler Chatwood relegated to the bullpen.

So if the Cubs need to lean on him disproportionately at least for a while to keep their pitching staff functional? That’s what he’s here for.

“That’s always the belief that I’ve always had, every season — it’s to go out there and be a workhorse,” Hamels said. “To gain momentum or to continue winning streaks or to stop losing streaks. That’s the mentality that I was taught by probably some of the best pitchers in the game.”

Hamels, who has had teammates such as Cliff Lee, Jamie Moyer and Roy Halladay in his career, has allowed just one earned run in 11 innings as a Cub in victories over the Pirates and Royals.

“He’s who he is, man,” marveled Javy Baez, who did the rest when he homered for the go-ahead run in the sixth, doubled home an insurance run in the eighth and — playing third base — saved a run in the second with a diving play behind the bag.

While Baez continued his campaign for National League MVP honors, Hamels reminded anybody who could take their eyes off Baez for a moment how the Cubs made their deep playoff runs the last three years — and what it will take to get back to October.

“These five starters need to be prominent for us to really get where we want to get to,” manager Joe Maddon said. “Of course, we’re looking for more length out of the starters.

“If somebody was banged up or throwing too many pitches or innings to this point, I’d have a concern, but they haven’t. So moving forward, I think our guys are really good, and I want to believe we’re going to find that magic potion there at some point.”

For now, that comes in a bottle marked “Hamels.”

The struggling veteran left-hander the team was able to acquire at the trade deadline looks more critical than ever for the Cubs’ hopes of surviving a crowded field of playoff contenders in the NL.

One night after Lester had another rough outing in a loss to the last-place Padres, Hamels didn’t have the same kind of swing-and-miss stuff as he did in his nine-strikeout debut for the Cubs last week.

But he used a familiar pitcher-friendly ballpark and a fastball-curveball combination to manage a seven-single, one-walk start into a victory.

For one night, it helped the Cubs forget about Lester’s 6.42 ERA in his last eight starts — since going 9-2 with a 2.10 ERA in his first 15. And the 4.14 rotation ERA that was the worst among NL teams in playoff position entering the night.

“I don’t want to lay this all on Cole, not at all,” Maddon said. “He’s one-fifth of the rotation right now. It’s about everybody.”

But when it comes to pitching, it might be about Hamels a little more than the rest right now.

“It’s a matter of just going out there and being myself,” Hamels said. “I know I do need to pitch a little bit deeper into the ballgame. That’s obviously the plan.

“And everybody else is going to really fall in line with what they’ve been doing all year.”

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Chicago Sun-Times

Kris Bryant sighting promised but still no timeline for Cub star’s return

By Gordon Wittenmyer

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — The Cubs still have no timeline for when Kris Bryant will start swinging a bat again, much less when he might return from the sore left shoulder that has put him on the disabled list twice in the last six weeks.

Bryant might make his first appearance on the field this week in Kansas City, but only to take grounders.

“It’ll just be good to get him out there doing some baseball stuff,” manager Joe Maddon said. “Good for his head, too.”

Not that it has any bearing on his injury timeline.

Bryant has been shut down from swinging a bat since July 23 against Arizona. He felt discomfort during range of motion work with the trainer last week and “kind of backed off,” Maddon said.

Bryant has missed more games (29) because of the shoulder in two DL stints this season than all other games combined in his career (28).

If there’s an upside it’s that neither Bryant nor the team believes it’s a serious or long-term issue.

And Maddon said he doesn’t think it will take long for Bryant to be ready for games after he’s cleared to take swings again.

“Once he gets to the point where they take the wrappers off and say let’s go, if there are no setbacks, I think it could happen relatively fast,” Maddon said.

Next step for Darvish

Injured right-hander Yu Darvish — last seen Saturday taking a bilingual shot at media critic Alex Rodriguez — played catch again Monday and is expected to throw a live batting practice session Wednesday.

That session is expected to be broken up into two “innings,” and if he fares well into Thursday, a minor-league rehab assignment could be on the radar screen.

Darvish hasn’t pitched since May 20 because of soreness near his elbow, and after a setback in late June he was diagnosed with an impingement in the area and given a cortisone shot.

Rotation gyration?

The Cubs are discussing how they might use off days Thursday and Monday to rearrange the rotation for a key stretch of games against Washington, Milwaukee and Pittsburgh the next two weeks.

If the rotation stays in order, lone right-hander (Kyle Hendricks) would pitch against the Nationals (11-18) and Pirates (13-18) — teams with a combined .400 winning percentage against left-handed starters.

“The concern would be if you manipulate it too much you might get guys with too many days off,” Maddon said.

The Cubs entered the week 9-9 since the All-Star break, with a one-game lead over the second-place Brewers in the NL Central.

This and that

Left-fielder Kyle Schwarber opened the interleague series Monday as the Cubs’ DH, and he could remain there this week unless right-fielder Jason Heyward or another regular could use a day off from the field, Maddon said.

- Closer Brandon Morrow (biceps) increased his distance to “115 feet” while playing catch Monday. If he has another session from that distance on Wednesday he might be ready for a mound appearance since going on the DL at the All-Star break.

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Daily Herald

Chavez making the most of his second chance with Cubs

By Sean Hammond

It took eight major-league ballclubs and 17 years, but Jesse Chavez's career has finally come full circle.

The Chicago Cubs drafted the then-17-year-old Chavez in the 39th round of the 2001 MLB Draft. Chavez remembers watching the first round of the draft in Spanish class at A.B. Miller High School in Fontana, California. Chavez didn't pay any attention after the first round.

Weighing just 130 pounds, he will admit he wasn't physically ready for pro ball then.

"I started looking into it and reading more about it," Chavez said. "I just realized my size was the thing. It wasn't the performance or the stuff."

Chavez turned down the Cubs and attended Riverside Community College for two years. Seventeen years later, the Cubs traded for Chavez on July 19 from the Texas Rangers, and already the right-handed relief pitcher has become a valuable piece.

With so many injuries in the bullpen, and with Mike Montgomery's services needed in the starting rotation, Theo Epstein and the front office knew they needed another reliable arm in the pen.

Including the 30 games he pitched for the Rangers, Chavez has a 3.18 earned run average in 68 innings, with 63 strikeouts and 13 walks. In 8 appearances with the Cubs, Chavez has pitched 11.2 innings, allowing just 2 runs.

Chavez, who has been traded seven times in his career, said a good start with his new club takes a little bit of the pressure off.

"It does internally," Chavez said. "At the same time, if you do what you were doing before and not let the moment get you -- keep it even keel -- I think the transition will be a lot smoother."

Cubs manager Joe Maddon already has used Chavez in the eighth inning or later. It's not inconceivable that Chavez could close games if needed. Closer Brandon Morrow remains on the 10-day disabled list with a biceps injury.

"I have no qualms about (Chavez) playing in the latter part of the game at all," Maddon said. "He's been very interesting already. He's as advertised and so we'll see how it plays out. If we need him early to get out of a jam, we'll put him in there. If we don't, you might see him in the latter part of the game."

Maddon called Chavez a "Swiss army knife" out of the bullpen.

"The fact that he's been as good as he has, he's been throwing strikes and so pitch-efficient, that matters," Maddon said. "He's so upbeat and he's very professional about it. We try to tell him before the game what we may do."

Chavez relies heavily on his fastball and cutter. After passing on the Cubs in 2001, Chavez was drafted again in 2002 by the Rangers. He signed a year later and began his pro career in 2003. He broke into the big leagues in 2008.

Chavez was excited to come to the Cubs and to have a chance to contribute for a postseason contender.

"You want to be a part of this team," Chavez said. "As storied as this franchise is, being able to play for a couple in my career, I cherish every moment."

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Daily Herald

Rozner: Baseball analytics great, but don't exist in vacuum

By Barry Rozner

Joe Maddon began his campaign in spring training, perhaps because of launch angle as much as anything else.

But his desire to get his players thinking more about baseball than analytics has been consistent all season.

"I think in our game today, the way it's run on a lot of levels, it's more about math than people sometimes," Maddon said in February. "I want our guys to understand that we understand the heartbeat around here, so don't forget the heartbeat."

"We're going to do all the other necessary work. We're going to do all the math work. We're going to do all the physical work."

"But at the end of the day ... you compete. You try to beat that guy in the other uniform. Don't forget that."

Maddon has railed against launch angle and the home-run-only approach this year, asking his players to use the entire field and keep the line moving. Maddon must have loved this tweet a few days ago from the father of sabermetrics, Bill James:

"To a certain extent, the modern game has fallen victim to the OPS delusion, the belief that one point of slugging percentage is equal to one point of on-base percentage. It isn't. A good sequential offense is much stronger than a let's-all-hit-homers offense."

And as of late, 13-year veteran Jon Lester has added his voice to those who are tired of being judged entirely by analytics.

The 34-year-old Lester first attacked statistical analysis after a particularly bad outing a few weeks ago, when he was hammered by the Cards. His peripherals suggested that kind of performance might be on the horizon even though Lester was having a great year by old-school statistics.

"All this other nonsense is something for people to talk about," Lester said, pushing back hard. "Everybody wants answers for why guys are pitching well or not pitching well."

"I guess I'm old school when it comes down to ... watch the game."

"At Wrigley where you fall behind a guy with the wind blowing in, am I worried about throwing a ball right down the middle? No."

"I don't care what the exit velocity is. I don't care how far it's supposed to go. Is it an out? Yes. So what does it matter?"

"I think there's people that have nothing better to do than overanalyze things. I'm a big believer in sit back and enjoy the baseball game."

"I've given up my fair share of bloop singles and bloop doubles. It doesn't matter what the exit velocity is. It goes down as a single or a double."

And when Lester bounced back with a strong outing, the crafty left-hander doubled down.

"I think a perfect example is today," said Lester, referring to a flyball off the bat of Arizona's A.J. Pollock that was carried out by the wind. "Forty-two degrees (launch angle) on a home run is supposedly not a home run."

"Baseball's baseball. It's been played for however long, 120 years or whatever, and it's always going to be the same. You rely on your defense as a pitcher, and somehow we get punished for that."

Greg Maddux, in particular, always said he didn't want to strike anyone out. That took too many pitches and he wanted to go 9 innings, but that game doesn't exist anymore.

It's all about max effort early now and hope to get through 5 innings.

"Obviously, strikeouts are great," Lester said. "But at the end of the day, it's about winning the baseball game. And if you're winning the baseball game, that's all that matters."

"I think when guys pitch well, there needs to be a justification for it."

The truth, and this is rather unpopular these days, is that both the old school and new school are necessary, and that's what Maddon has tried to get at this year.

It's something, by the way, that Theo Epstein -- one of baseball's very best analytical minds -- speaks of frequently. He believes in heart and chemistry and momentum and being a good teammate.

The reality is it's not analytics alone that the old-school types dislike so much. They dislike very much the arrogant, unblinking, analytic zealots who don't watch games and believe the only answer resides in the black-and-white world of a spread sheet.

Anyone who dismisses half the equation is foolish. It should all be part of the conversation, but as a society we don't have conversations anymore. You have your position and the person sitting across from you believes the opposite.

Period. There is no discussion.

Lester is tired of the groupthink and this will make the metrics people crazy, insisting there can only be one answer to a question.

It's absurd, of course, as any rational person would tell you.

Analytics have been great for the game, furthering our knowledge and at times helping us understand events that we previously didn't.

But the game is played by humans -- and Joe Maddon will tell you that it can't be played well without some heart.

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