



SF Giants Press Clips Sunday, April 1, 2018

San Francisco Chronicle

Giants' Cory Gerrin doing hairy job of late relief much faster now

Henry Schulman

LOS ANGELES — That was not an orthodox rabbi pitching for the Giants in the seventh inning of Thursday's season opener. It was **Cory Gerrin**, who is going for the GEICO caveman look. Growing a beard is a deliberate process. The only thing slower used to be the time it took Gerrin to throw a pitch once he came to the set position.

Before the Giants went home for the winter, manager **Bruce Bochy** told Gerrin he needed to work on his "tempo" because infielders can stand on the balls of their feet only so long. Gerrin complied and is pitching faster.

"I'm still going to hold. I'm still going to take my time," Gerrin said Saturday. "I feel like it's to our advantage messing up the hitters' timing. I also wanted to work on the other extreme, work quicker, something **Johnny (Cueto)** really does well."

Gerrin has gotten so quick at times, infielders told him during spring training he surprised them by throwing a pitch. On Thursday, he was called for a balk for not stopping. The balk was nullified when **Chase Utley** swung at the pitch and singled.

Naturally, Gerrin was curious to hear how a proposed pitch clock might have affected him.

Turns out it would not have been an issue. The league is more concerned with shortening the time between the catcher's throw back to the mound and the pitcher getting set. Gerrin does

not waste time doing that.

Players have been fined for slow play even without new speedup rules. Gearrin is the Giants' union rep, so he knows, and said one pitcher racked up \$30,000 in fines last year. Gearrin merely got one warning that had nothing to do with his operatic-length staredowns with hitters.

"I tied my shoe and I guess it took too long," Gearrin said. "Of all the things people give me a hard time about, being one of the more deliberate pitchers, that's what I got the warning for."

Shark work: Jeff Samardzija (strained pectoral muscle) seems hell-bent on rejoining the rotation as quickly as possible. Bochy said the Shark was "letting it go pretty good" Saturday. Samardzija will throw another bullpen session Tuesday and could be pitching in the minors by next weekend. Bochy is not keen on Samardzija rejoining the rotation April 10, when they will need a fifth starter for the first time. The Giants will have to promote a starter for that game against Arizona, most likely **Tyler Beede** or **Andrew Suarez**, but Samardzija could be ready when that slot comes around again April 15 at San Diego.

Bochy feat: Friday night's victory made Bochy the first opposing manager to win 100 games at Dodger Stadium, a feat that comes with longevity.

"I did not know that. Somebody texted that to me," Bochy said. "I don't know what it means, other than obviously doing this a long time. I know I've been in the division a long time."

Bochy cites the Padres' 2-0 victory on Sept. 29, 1996, as his most important win in Los Angeles. San Diego swept the Dodgers to win the National League West.

Briefly: Rule 5 reliever **Julian Fernandez** will have Tommy John surgery in Arizona on Thursday, performed by Dr. **Gary Waslewski**. He already was placed on the 60-day disabled list. ... The Dodger are giving out National League pennant rings before Saturday's game. Giants reliever **Tony Watson** expects to get one but is not sure if he will get it during the on-field ceremony. "Getting a Dodgers ring in a Giants uniform. That would be something, huh?" Watson said.

San Francisco Chronicle
Giants follow two 1-0 wins with a stinker of a loss
Henry Schulman

LOS ANGELES -- Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose and sometimes your second baseman does not hit a home run.

The Giants' third game provided an unpleasant reminder that baseball is a team sport that requires more than Joe Panik trotting around the bases.

It requires hitting, pitching and defense, none of which the Giants did well Saturday night in their first loss of the year, 5-0 to the Dodgers.

By the grace of two well-timed Panik swings and some excellent pitching by Ty Blach, Johnny Cueto and the bullpen, the Giants still have a shot to take their season-opening series.

"It's three games in. We've got two runs, but we've got two wins as well," right fielder Andrew McCutchen said.

Asked about an offense that has produced zilch aside from Panik's homers in two 1-0 wins, McCutchen said, "We're going to get going. Things will start moving. Nobody's stressing over here."

Stressing is a prerequisite for fandom, and nothing creates more heebie-jeebies than an offense that is supposed to score more runs doing exactly the opposite in the season's first series.

The two big offensive acquisitions have had the roughest starts. McCutchen is 1-for-12 and third baseman Evan Longoria 0-for-11. But they are not alone.

Brandon Belt is 2-for-10 with five strikeouts and Brandon Crawford 2-for-11. Buster Posey was hitless in seven at-bats before he singled and doubled Saturday.

Over the past two games the Giants have not had a runner reach third base, aside from Panik on Friday's home run trot. They also have struck out 27 times in 27 innings, 10 in five innings

Saturday against Kenta Maeda.

The Giants had nine hits but were 0-for-10 with runners in scoring position. That stat and manager Bruce Bochy's subsequent quote sounded awfully familiar.

"Nine hits and nothing to show for it," Bochy said. "Right now it's a matter of getting a key hit. We haven't gotten hits with runners in scoring position. That's not going to work. We have guys with a history of doing it. They just haven't done it yet."

The Giants played a stinker all the way around.

Derek Holland allowed five runs (three earned) over five innings in his Giants debut. The Dodgers had just three hits against the left-hander, but all three of his walks scored.

One Dodgers run followed McCutchen's do-or-die dive in the third inning that turned a Chris Taylor bloop hit from a single into a triple when the ball rolled past.

The bigger play happened an inning later. With two outs and two on, Kyle Farmer hit a slicing flyball to right-center. McCutchen and Blanco both called for the ball but did not hear one another. McCutchen kept on charging until he backed away at the last second. Blanco, distracted, dropped the ball and two runs scored.

That play signaled the biggest adjustment McCutchen must make moving from center field to right. He is no longer the outfield quarterback.

"The mentality is 'catch every ball,'" he said. "At the same time I've got to understand that the guy in center is the leader out there and he's the one, when he calls for it, it's his ball.

"You would hope something like that would happen in spring, not in the regular season, but you've just got to learn from it."

Holland made a point of patting McCutchen on the back and telling him to stay aggressive.

"That's what I care about," Holland said. "When I'm out there pitching they've got my back and I can see it."

Bochy used the lopsided game to get his bench and previously unused relievers work. Pierce Johnson, Sam Dyson and Reyes Moronta were impressive over three innings, Moronta hitting 98 mph in a perfect eighth inning against Yasiel Puig, Matt Kemp and Cody Bellinger.

San Francisco Chronicle
Giants pregame
Henry Schulman

LOS ANGELES - Somebody had some fun at the Dodgers' expense Friday night and altered their Wikipedia page. Under owner, it read, "Joe Panik."

By now you know that Panik homered in back-to-back 1-0 victories at Dodger Stadium, a major-league first.

Meanwhile, here is the complete list of players who have homered against Clayton Kershaw and Kenley Jansen in the same season:

Paul Goldschmidt (2013)

Alex Bregman (2017)

Joe Panik (2018)

Bregman did it in the World Series last year, although his homer against Jansen. Goldschmidt's feat was impressive because he did it in the same game, on May 8, accounting for all three runs in a 3-2 Arizona win.

Panik was asked which of his homers was bigger. He picked Friday's game-winner and said, "The ninth inning. It doesn't get much better than that."

Some other feats as noted by the Giants in Saturday's game notes:

- Before this, the Giants had never won consecutive 1-0 road games against the same team. In 1908, they did do against the Cubs then Dodgers. The last time they won consecutive 1-0 home games against the same team was in 1960 (Phillies).

- The last time the Giants pitched consecutive shutouts to start the season was 1994 against the Pirates (8-0 and 2-0).

- The Giants did not win a 1-0 game last year and were 0-34 when scoring fewer than two runs.

As for Saturday's game, the Giants will try to start 3-0 for the first time since they won their first four games of 2010.

It's not clear whether Gregor Blanco and Austin Jackson will have a straight platoon in center field, but in their first game against a right-hander Jackson will sit and Blanco plays.

Panik moves to leadoff, as expected against right-handed pitching.

Derek Holland makes his Giants debut against Kenta Maeda.

Here are your lineups:

GIANTS (vs. RH Kenta Maeda)

Panik 2B

Belt 1B

McCutchen RF

Posey C (Still seeking his first hit)

Longoria 3B (See Posey)

Crawford SS

Pence LF

Blanco CF

Holland P

DODGERS (vs. LHP Derek Holland)

Taylor CF

Hernandez SS

Puig RF (seeking his first hit)

Kemp LF

Bellinger 1B (see Puig referencing Longoria based on Posey)

Forsythe 2B

Barnes C

Farmer 3B

Maeda P

MLB.com

Giants scuffle, sending Holland to loss vs. LA
Ken Gurnick

LOS ANGELES -- After a pregame ring ceremony marking their first pennant in 29 years, the Dodgers checked more mundane overdue boxes Saturday night: first run of the season, first extra-base hit and first victory, 5-0, over the Giants at Dodger Stadium.

Enrique Hernandez's double keyed a two-run first inning that snapped an 18-inning run drought and included **Matt Kemp's** first Dodgers RBI since 2014. Hernandez's sacrifice fly in the third cashed in a **Chris Taylor** triple. The Giants assisted with three errors, including a **Kyle Farmer** routine fly ball dropped by center fielder **Gregor Blanco** for two runs in the fourth.

View Full Game Coverage

Dodgers starter **Kenta Maeda** was the beneficiary of the scoring windfall, following unsupported masterpieces by **Clayton Kershaw** and **Alex Wood**. Attacking hitters early, Maeda struck out 10 despite allowing five hits and a walk and was removed after five scoreless innings and 90 pitches. It was Maeda's second Major League game with at least 10 strikeouts.

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

No easy feat: Taylor's ball sprayed near the right-field line went for a triple as **Andrew McCutchen** came up empty on a do-or-die dive, but there was only a 7 percent catch probability according to **Statcast™**. McCutchen would have needed to cover 70 feet in 3.9 seconds of opportunity time and nearly did, reaching 29.2 feet/second sprint speed. Meanwhile, Taylor was even faster, running the bases at 29.3 feet/second sprint speed.

Making amends: **Logan Forsythe**, who committed three errors Friday night starting at third base in place of the injured **Justin Turner**, took the early lead for best defensive play of the year in the seventh inning to preserve the shutout. With two out, runners on first and second and playing second base, Forsythe ranged up the middle, threw across his body and retired McCutchen at first base.

MLB.com

Shark throws off mound, nearing Minors game

Chris Haft

LOS ANGELES -- Giants right-hander **Jeff Samardzija** could be recovered enough from his strained right pectoral muscle to allow him to pitch next weekend in a Minor League game.

Giants manager Bruce Bochy made this announcement Saturday, shortly after Samardzija threw 20 pitches off a bullpen mound.

View Full Game Coverage

Bochy called it "a stretch" to suggest Samardzija could be physically ready in time to re-enter San Francisco's starting rotation by April 10, the date when the Giants need a fifth starter for the first time.

Samardzija hasn't pitched since March 21, when he lasted 3 1/3 innings in a Minor League game against the Cubs' Triple-A affiliate. He yielded three runs and seven hits, including two home runs.

As the only pitcher in the Majors besides Washington's **Max Scherzer** to pitch 200 innings or more for five consecutive years, Samardzija is a key figure in the Giants' pitching plans.

Bochy reaches Chavez century mark

With the Giants' 1-0 victory Friday night, Bochy became the first visiting manager to steer his teams to 100 wins at Dodger Stadium.

Bochy is 49-54 at Dodger Stadium with the Giants and was 51-43 with the Padres, with whom he began his Major League managerial career in 1996.

"That was news to me," Bochy said. "I don't know what it means, except I've been able to do this a long time."

The Athletic

The man with the weird beard: Giants reliever Cory Gerrin is unrecognizable to his friends and family

Andrew Baggarly

LOS ANGELES — The phone that blew up the loudest after the Giants' season-opening 1-0 victory at Dodger Stadium on Thursday did not belong to Joe Panik, who hit the home run.

It did not belong to starting pitcher Ty Blach, who proved handier in an emergency than Randolph Mantooth.

It belonged to Cory Gerrin, the Giants' slider-slinging right-handed setup man, who stranded two runners in the seventh inning.

At least, his friends and family back home scattered around Chattanooga and North Georgia are pretty sure that was Gerrin. His face was so engulfed by an impossibly bushy beard that they had to trust the name on the back of his jersey.

Gerrin and his wife, Maddi, moved to Arizona over the winter. His buddies and extended family hadn't seen him in seven or eight months. And misplaced though it might be in the seventh inning of a major league baseball game, who doesn't love one of those dramatic TV makeover reveals?

"So, a national televised game, yeah," Gerrin said. "I got a ton of text messages. Most of it was, 'Dude, that look is ... unbelievable.' A lot of people are just impressed. I think the reaction was positive for the most part, but most people were like, wow.

"Wow, for the most part, was the overall response."

Gerrin said he always wanted a beard the size of a chinchilla on his face, but the Atlanta Braves had a strict shaving policy when he played for them. In 2016, he grew out his hair and had a solid flow going in the second half, but cut it short along with the rest of the Giants bullpen when the team hit the skids.

"At the time I was like, 'I've got to sacrifice something to get us over the hump,'" Gerrin said. "It got us into the playoffs, but after the season was over, I was like, man, I really miss it. I immediately regretted it."

His neck felt naked. And so did the rest of his face, apparently. When last season ended, he decided to stop shaving or trimming and see just how hairy the situation could become.

Does his beard have a spirit animal? Another player he's emulating, perhaps?

"You know, um, Tom Hanks in 'Castaway,'" he said. "And the Geico caveman. I'm kind of going for that."

A clean-shaven Gerrin and Maddi got married last May on a day off in a civil ceremony at San Francisco's City Hall. There was a second commitment ceremony for the beard one week after reporting to spring training in February. If the beard made it through photo day, when players

take the mugshots that end up on the stadium video boards, then Gearrin told himself he'd be faithful to his face fur for the season.

"Oh, we talk about it in the bullpen all the time," Gearrin said. "A guy will have a whole different look on the video screen. We'll be, like, 'What happened, man?' I wasn't going to be that guy."

Brandon Belt also arrived in Scottsdale with a beard that would do Rutherford B. Hayes proud. He took hedge trimmers to it before photo day. He also regrets his decision.

"As soon as I did it, I realized I made a huge mistake," Belt said. "It's coming back."

Gearrin is lobbying the rest of his teammates to join him in going full-on hobo. He acknowledges with some apology that he has an impossible head start.

"Just out of the chute, that's what I said," Gearrin laughed. "Let's just start out with the playoff beard, and then by the time the playoffs get here, it'll be epic."

Being the keeper of enough facial hair to nest starlings comes with certain drawbacks. He and Sheldon, his barber back in San Francisco, have hunkered down for deep strategy sessions on how to shape the beard so he can continue to grow it longer. There are certain combing and conditioning needs that take time. He's got a few gray strands in there, too, which messes with his vanity. But he knows that dyeing it shoe-polish black would be so 2010.

And then there is soup.

"Oh my gosh," he said. "Soup is such a nightmare."

Story time, kids.

"This is funny, like, my first bad soup story: when (Evan) Longoria got traded over here, he lives in Arizona, so one day after working out at the complex we went golfing," Gearrin said. "We went to his home course and it's really nice. They've got great food. So we get to the turn and we go up and he's like, 'Man, they've got amazing clam chowder here. You've got to try it.' So me, I'm like, 'Yeah, I love clam chowder. Let's do it.' So I get it and it's like, in a cup and I'm eating it and we, like, take off to go to hole 10 and I look over and he's looking at me with this, like, look of disgust on his face. He's, 'Bro, you've got, like, chowder all in your beard.' And I'm ... dangit. You're out there on the course. I just had to wear it.

"So, OK. I try to avoid soup. Ice cream cones are a no-go. I mean, I'll still eat them. Just not, you know, around people."

Is a life without soup and ice cream really worth living?

"It's true, it's mostly great things you've got to be careful with," Gearrin said. "It's a sacrifice. It's what you do. It's what you do."

Gearrin is an interesting dude. He is hyper-interested in government and has interned on a couple of congressional and gubernatorial campaigns. He took flying lessons. He rivals Hunter Pence in his appreciation for the nuances of a well-crafted cup of single-origin, natural process

Ethiopian coffee. He might look unsophisticated on the mound, but how many cavemen travel with a portable grinder and Aeropress?

What Gearrin does for the Giants is knock out right-handed batters. He might have made the most stressful pitch of Thursday's victory, when he threw a 3-2 slider that froze Chris Turner and stranded two runners in scoring position.

Earlier in the inning, after Gearrin had given up a single to Chase Utley, the third base umpire called over and told him something. Only Longoria heard it, and later relayed the message: if not for the hit, Gearrin would have been called for a balk.

If Gearrin were a golfer, let's just say he would have a lengthy and elaborate pre-shot waggle. He takes his time. The league is asking pitchers to speed it up, and as executive vice president Brian Sabean said last month, "Gearrin needs to speed it up, anyway."

Gearrin insists his refined delivery is meant to mess with a hitter's timing, and to get a better handle on the running game, not to comply with any league mandates. Nevertheless, it's a work in progress. Utley, who will turn 40 before Christmas, stole second base on him.

But hey. This isn't something that will sprout overnight.

And what if the beard serves as it's own distraction to the hitter?

"Anything that distracts, I'll take," Gearrin said. "It's not necessarily why I did it. But if it works once, it's worth it."

NBCsportsbayarea.com

McCutchen has adventurous night in right as in Giants loss

Alex Pavlovic

LOS ANGELES — AT&T Park is supposed to be the ballpark that tests Andrew McCutchen's move to right field, but on Saturday, the tricky plays came flying at McCutchen early and often. Some tests were passed with flying colors. Others proved to be learning experiences.

The standout was a fly ball to medium right-center that had McCutchen and center fielder Gregor Blanco calling each other off. At the last second, McCutchen peeled behind Blanco, who dropped the ball, costing the Giants a pair of two-out runs in a 5-0 loss to the Dodgers.

"We were both calling for it," McCutchen said. "I don't think we heard each other because we were both screaming. It's one of those crazy plays that happened."

McCutchen is getting used to life as a full-time right fielder after a career spent in the middle, and he didn't play with Blanco often this spring. It didn't help that they converged in the middle of perhaps the loudest stadium in the National League. McCutchen conceded that there will be an adjustment to no longer being the captain of the outfield.

“Your mentality is the catch everything,” he said. “For me, that’s what I try to do, catch every ball. That mentality is to catch every ball but at the same time I have to understand that the guy in center is the leader.”

The rest of the night was a mixed bag. McCutchen showed his speed by getting back to the wall on Enrique Hernandez’s liner in the first, but his leap came up inches short. He later made a diving attempt at a Chris Taylor bloop and again came up inches short. That led to a triple and a run, but it also had starter Derek Holland approaching McCutchen in the dugout after the inning. Holland told McCutchen to keep going after balls that way.

The night evened out in the late innings when McCutchen made a pair of sliding catches. It has been a slow start for the offseason additions, but he was happy to take those two plays to heart.

“I made two other good catches today that I’m not going to forget about,” he said. “That’s my mentality.”

That was Holland’s mentality, too. He was charged with three earned in five innings of his Giants debut but was happy with the way he threw.

“I thought it was a lot better than the way it looked,” he said.

The Giants had a sloppy night behind Holland, committing three errors, but he said the effort was there. The defense wasn't what bothered him.

“You can’t defend a walk,” he said after issuing three, with all three batters scoring. “If anybody is at fault today, it’s me for sure.”

That’s not quite true. For the third consecutive day, the offense came up short. Through three games the Giants have just two Joe Panik homers. They have yet to get a hit with a runner in scoring position, but it’s hard to make a big judgement one way or the other. Some of the bats look slow. Evan Longoria is hitless in 11 at-bats and Brandon Belt has five strikeouts in 10 at-bats.

At the same time, it’s been 27 innings and the Giants have faced three good pitchers in Clayton Kershaw, Alex Wood and Kenta Maeda. Bruce Bochy was not ready to worry. McCutchen wasn't, either.

“Clearly we’ve got to get hits when we get guys on base,” he said. “We haven’t been able to do that. We’re going to get going, get moving. We’ve got too good a team for it not to. But nobody is stressing over here. It’s game three.”

NBCsportsbayarea.com

**Bochy hits milestone with Friday's win at Dodger Stadium: 'That was news to me'
Alex Pavlovic**

LOS ANGELES — Joe Panik wasn't the only one hitting milestones on Friday night. With the 1-0 victory over the Dodgers, manager Bruce Bochy became the first visiting manager to win 100 games at Dodger Stadium.

Bochy, who has spent 24 years in the National League West, is the runaway leader for victories here by a visiting manager. Longtime Braves manager Bobby Cox is second with 68 victories. Bochy said he didn't realize he had hit 100 until he got a text message after Friday's game.

"That was news to me," he said. "I don't know what it means, except I've been able to do this a long time."

Bochy is 49-54 at Dodger Stadium with the Giants and he was 51-43 here with the Padres. Asked if he has a favorite in those 100, he smiled. Sorry, Joe, it's not Friday night's game.

"The number one game here is from 1996, the last game of the year," Bochy said. "(The Padres) finished a sweep here to win the division."

— Julian Fernandez, the hard-throwing Rule 5 draft pick, will have Tommy John surgery on Thursday. Fernandez felt pain while making his final appearance of the spring and two doctors confirmed the diagnosis.

The Giants cannot waive Fernandez and they can't offer him back to the Rockies because he's hurt, so they'll oversee his rehab process. The good news is they get to keep a guy who throws 100 mph. The bad news is they're on the hook for the MLB minimum salary (\$545,000), and that could be a minor factor if they need to add at the deadline and they're up against the tax.

— Jeff Samardzija threw 20 pitches off a bullpen mound Saturday afternoon and will have another session Tuesday. "He was letting it go pretty good," Bochy said. "Samardzija could be in a rehab game by next weekend. It's possible the Giants will need just one start from their No. 5 starter before Samardzija returns to the rotation."

ESPN.com

As Shohei Ohtani takes the mound, what should we expect?

Tim Keown

Shohei Ohtani is doing this, and when Sunday dawns, the magnitude of this moment should not be minimized. Strip away all the angst about his spring training and remember those four words: *He is doing this*. He was the Los Angeles Angels' designated hitter Thursday against the Athletics, and he will be their starting pitcher Sunday. That's nothing short of crazy. As the season wears on, he is expected to hit two or three times a week and be the starting pitcher once a week. In the modern game, it is unprecedented, and yet as the moment approaches, it still somehow feels underappreciated.

Maybe the hype was too strong too early. Maybe the mere *idea* of a two-way player in major league baseball was enough to divert our attention from the sheer amount of talent -- and guts -- it takes for Ohtani to put himself out there and try to do something everyone had forgotten was possible. It was unprecedented six years ago, when the Nippon Ham Fighters decided to give him the chance to do this out of high school. Fighters manager Hideki Kuriyama cut through dissenting voices in the organization when he told Ohtani, "Let's do something nobody else has done." And whatever was behind that decision -- genius or vision or hubris -- led to the moment Sunday at 1:05 p.m. PT, when Ohtani will take the mound at the Oakland Coliseum in the biggest league in the world as the starting pitcher for the Angels. Honestly, and it can't be repeated enough, it's quite a thing.

ADVERTISEMENT

Yes, he had a 27.00 ERA in a few awful innings against big league competition this spring. His command was horrible and his body language worse, and his confidence level somewhere below that. He struggled against the Tijuana Toros, and as poorly as you might think of the Oakland Athletics, we can all agree they don't have 36-year-old Jorge Cantu hitting third. But Opening Day, as the poems tell us, heralds a new season, and Ohtani's first start in the big leagues should reign as a cause for wonder and speculation.

The talent is undeniable, regardless of how any of this turns out. Every single big league team wanted this guy, and they wanted him because he can throw 102 to go along with a wipeout slider and a disappearing splitter and -- oh, yeah -- light-tower power with a bat in his hands. (His batting practice before Opening Day in Oakland included a howling liner that rose above the playing surface, beyond the center-field fence, over the first section of seats and smack into a club-suite window. In keeping with his brand, Ohtani didn't seem to notice or care.) Besides, there's something automatically endearing about a guy who created the most meta moment in the illustrious history of Japanese TV game shows: *Can Ohtani hit Ohtani?* The results were inconclusive.

Ohtani, knowingly or not, is ushering in a newfound acknowledgment of Babe Ruth, which is all fine and good -- tip your cap to the Babe, if you're so inclined -- but the segregated game the Babe played when he pitched and hit in 1918 bears minimal resemblance to the one Ohtani is playing in 2018.

For one, we are three or four years away from entering the second generation of youth-sports specialization in this country. Kids are encouraged -- often by those who stand to profit from it - - to pick one sport early and focus on it. And in baseball, especially with pitchers, there is specialization within the specialization. Many kids who show an aptitude for pitching stop hitting in high school. For some, it's even sooner. Travel-ball coaches who face the daunting task of making sure parents get something for their money -- and don't stuff their inbox or their ears with gripes over playing time -- will DH for their pitchers just to give an extra kid an at-bat (and keep his family happy). If you've got 14 11-year-olds and you can play only 10 every game, life is easier if you tell the pitcher his talent is so unique that he'd be stupid to pick up a bat. Easy money produces unexpected results. Watch the National League; starters who can lay down a bunt are lauded in the way astronauts once were.

It's impossible to predict what might happen when Ohtani takes the mound against the A's, and that's what makes it so riveting. His poor spring might have been the result of a Japanese system that's far more focused on the process. For one, pitchers rarely let loose in spring training. The epic, 300-pitch bullpens are exercises in routine, with pitchers concentrating on repeating their deliveries without concern for velocity or command. It might have been a reliance on routine, or he might have been overwhelmed by the enormity of the task at hand. The mystery will reveal itself in due time.

Ohtani's high school coach taught him to think of his body as a whip, flexible and explosive. (The language, if not the form, is similar to how Tim Lincecum's father taught his son.) This spring, though, Ohtani's form looked more like the path of a long-handled ax: slow and heavy. He struggled to find his release point. He shortened his stride. Without getting too deep into the weeds, there's a long list of reasons for this. The major league ball is slicker and smoother, the Japanese baseball softer with higher seams. Every Japanese pitcher has had to adjust to a mound that is harder and -- they say -- steeper. In Japan, the looseness of the dirt allows pitchers to dig out a landing spot that gives them the confidence to repeat their delivery. Ohtani's ability to get down the mound gave him the downward tilt that made his splitter vicious and his fastball appear to be rising as it approached the plate. This spring, in contrast, his release point varied, leading him to both spike and sail fastballs. It's rare for big league pitchers to bounce fastballs, and Ohtani bounced a ton of them in Arizona. (Start at the 0:20 mark of this video to see how loose and fluid his motion was in Japan. And then watch the fastball that starts at 2:40 here to see the difference.)

Those in Japan who know Ohtani best have noticed a reluctance to stride out as far as he did on the softer mounds. They wonder if he will adjust his mechanics, and how soon. Their worst fear is that he'll hurt an elbow or a shoulder before he figures it out.

And so he takes the mound as a curiosity. He's a 23-year-old trying to tackle two full-time jobs in a new country with a different baseball culture and a tendency to dismiss first and assess later. It would have been fascinating enough without the bad spring, but it's worth remembering he couldn't hit in spring training. On the first pitch of his first at-bat Thursday afternoon, with his parents in the stands and his heart rate up, he pulled a semi-sharp single into right field. It wasn't epic by any means, but it was a start. Now comes another one.