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Tuesday, September 4, 2018**

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Gibson's effort in Houston lacking support

Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | September 3, 2018

HOUSTON -- After looking a bit shaky early, right-hander Kyle Gibson settled down to register a quality start against a potent Astros lineup.

Gibson surrendered four runs (two earned) on four hits and a walk over seven innings, but it wasn't enough for the Twins in a 4-1 loss on Monday afternoon at Minute Maid Park. Gibson bounced back after running into trouble early, retiring 15 of the final 17 batters he faced.

"I felt pretty good," Gibson said. "It was a good bounce back. I had kind of struggled the last couple months or so with command and executing pitches. Out there in the second inning, I found something mechanical and was able to execute that glove-side fastball better."

Gibson gave up a run in the first on a homer from Alex Bregman on a 2-1 four-seam fastball that caught too much of the plate. In the second, the Twins were hurt by an error from shortstop Jorge Polanco. Gibson allowed a leadoff bloop single to Tyler White and then induced a grounder from Yuli Gurriel with White running on the play. Polanco booted the ball, killing any chance for an out or a potential double play. After the error, Brian McCann plated a run with a single and a run scored on a double-play grounder hit by Evan Gattis.

"I just kind of stopped when I was going to get the ball, and I misfielded it," Polanco said through an interpreter. "It was a bad hop, but I think because I stopped between hops, it bounced again."

It was Polanco's 10th error in 52 games at shortstop this year, including his fourth over his last five games. Polanco worked on his defense during his 80-game suspension, but he's had trouble with his fundamentals since returning.

"I'm not overly concerned about today's play," Twins manager Paul Molitor said. "The ball was hit really sharply. There still was the potential of still trying to turn two where you might have peeked ahead. It looked like it came up on him a little bit and he was unable to corral it."

Gibson also served up a solo shot to Gurriel in the fourth, on a first-pitch curveball, but finished his outing by getting 11 consecutive outs, including the final two on strikeouts to give him five on the afternoon.

"I was hurt by the 2-1 heater by Bregman and executed a poor breaking ball 0-0 to Gurriel," Gibson said. "Other than that, it was pretty good."

Lefty Dallas Keuchel kept Minnesota's offense in check, permitting only an unearned run over six frames with six strikeouts. The Twins scored

their only run against him in the sixth on an RBI single from Miguel Sano after Mitch Garver singled and Robbie Grossman reached on an error by shortstop Carlos Correa.

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Strikeout ends it: Polanco represented the go-ahead run with the bases loaded and two outs in the ninth, but right-hander Brad Peacock ultimately struck him out on a high fastball to end the game.

"Good at-bat," Molitor said. "Pulled a couple balls foul. Fastball first, then a curveball, before the elevated pitch got him. It was just one of those things. He's the right guy you want up in those situations. He put a couple good swings on them but got a little quick."

HE SAID IT

"I was trying to make good contact, put the ball in play. Those two fouls, I opened up and they were fouls. And then I tried to swing at that last pitch. It looked good. -- Polanco, on the final at-bat

UP NEXT

The Twins are going to use an "opener" for the second time this season when they face the Astros in the second game of the series on Tuesday at 7:10 p.m. CT. Right-handed reliever Trevor May will open the game, while Houston native Kohl Stewart (0-1, 6.61 ERA) is likely to serve as the primary pitcher once May departs. Veteran ace Justin Verlander (13-9, 2.78) starts for the Astros.

Twins bolster roster with trio from Triple-A **Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | September 3, 2018**

HOUSTON -- With Triple-A Rochester's season coming to an end on Monday, the Twins announced their second wave of September callups, as right-handers Chase De Jong and John Curtiss will be recalled and infielder Gregorio Petit will have his contract selected on Tuesday.

Additionally, the Twins moved designated hitter Logan Morrison to the 60-day disabled list to clear a spot on the 40-man roster. Minnesota has added eight players since rosters expanded on Saturday, and more callups or activations could come over the next few days.

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De Jong, acquired in the trade that sent Zach Duke to Seattle on July 31, posted a 3.41 ERA in 34 1/3 innings with Rochester after the trade, striking out 27 and walking 11 in six appearances (four starts). The 24-year-old had a 6.35 ERA in 28 1/3 innings with the Mariners last year.

"He'll get a chance to pitch," Twins manager Paul Molitor said. "We talked about different people that will be in the mix in the six-man [rotation], whether he gets a chance to come in as a primary or piggyback somewhere along the line with somebody. We have a couple things we are looking at on how we want to get him into games."

Curtiss, 25, will join the Twins for a second time this year after giving up three runs while recording two outs in two appearances. He recorded a 2.48 ERA with 59 strikeouts and 31 walks in 54 1/3 innings at Triple-A. He is ranked as the Twins' No. 26 prospect by MLB Pipeline.

Petit, 33, also saw time with Minnesota earlier this year, hitting .308/.400/.308 in 12 games in May and June. He batted .268/.313/.327 in 79 games with Rochester while seeing time at first, second, short and third.

Worth noting

The Twins are not expected to add right-handed relievers Jake Reed or Nick Anderson to the 40-man roster. Reed, 25, had a 1.89 ERA with 50 strikeouts in 47 2/3 innings at Rochester, while the 28-year-old Anderson posted a 3.30 ERA with 88 strikeouts in 60 innings. Both will have to be added to the 40-man roster this offseason or be eligible to be taken in the Rule 5 Draft.

"There were some other pitching people we talked about," Molitor said. "It was like, how far do you want to take it, in terms of having too many people. We're pretty well protected from the right side out there. Those guys have done well, they have had good years."

One wish for all 30 teams entering final month **Richard Justice | MLB.com | September 2, 2018**

While some teams are already planning for postseason baseball, others are scratching and clawing to get that far. Still, others are looking to the offseason and beyond.

Regardless, this final month of the regular season is important for all of them, whether it's about wins and losses, player development or an opportunity to make better evaluations. On this Labor Day weekend, let's give all 30 teams a September wish list.

Twins: Joe Mauer enjoying a healthy, productive and happy final month. If this is the end of his career with the Twins --- he's unsigned and won't

discuss 2019 -- let it remind all of us how much he means to the the Twin Cities and to baseball.

Twins brass has dropped the ball in handling of Byron Buxton
Chip Scoggins | Star Tribune | September 4, 2018

The Twins front office essentially conceded the remainder of the 2018 season at the trade deadline, leaving the organization two — and only two — issues of vital importance.

Miguel Sano and Byron Buxton.

That's it. Nothing else about this miserable season mattered, except Buxton and Sano and making sure those two cornerstone pieces salvaged something positive from their own lost seasons. The organization needed to gain better insight as to whether Buxton/Sano still can be viewed as cornerstone pieces in trying to build a contender.

The answer on Buxton remains very much uncertain and yet the team's braintrust of Derek Falvey and Thad Levine seems more concerned about Buxton becoming a star by 2022 than him becoming a serviceable player in 2019.

That makes no sense.

The Falvine regime opted not to call up Buxton from Class AAA Rochester for the remainder of the season. Levine listed several reasons in explaining their decision, but let's not be naive, there's only one real reason.

This decision was driven by service time and preventing Buxton from reaching free agency in 2021, which would happen if he spent two more weeks in the majors this season. By telling Buxton to hit the road, he won't become a free agent until 2022.

Not only is this bad optics that reinforces a negative view about the organization's perceived cheapness, they are making a fairly large assumption that seems iffy at best right now.

Buxton hasn't shown that he can hit major league pitching. He ultimately might be viewed as a colossal bust. But yet the team is worried about his free-agency timeline? The organization might not even want Buxton in 2020 if he doesn't learn to hit.

He needs instruction. He needs big-league at-bats. He needs confidence. The Twins need to do everything possible to give him the best chance to succeed. Instead, they alienated and angered him.

Buxton reportedly packed up his stuff and left Rochester two days before Monday's season finale. No one should be surprised if his agent files a grievance.

Was this their goal?

Levine told reporters that the organization views Buxton as a starting center fielder but that they didn't envision him getting at-bats during a call-up. That's weird logic.

On Monday, the Twins started an outfield of Robbie Grossman, Jake Cave and Johnny Field. But, sure, Buxton can't crack the lineup.

One opposing argument is that Buxton doesn't deserve a call-up because he hasn't earned it. Nobody is arguing for kid-glove treatment. This is about trying to fix a player who has been hailed as an organizational savior and generational talent.

Why not bring him up to work with the big-league coaching staff? Why not let him work on his swing mechanics in no-pressure September games? Sitting at home accomplishes nothing productive that will help his development.

Buxton played with a broken toe this season because he wanted to help his team. The Twins allowed that to happen and later admitted that his injury affected his swing. Then he injured his wrist in the minors and returned to play. And now they tell him to go home.

Maybe the front office is trying to send Buxton a message, as misguided as that would be. There's no guarantee Buxton will respond favorably, as Brian Dozier did to a September snub early in his career.

Remember, Buxton tried to help his team by playing injured and messed up his swing even more in the process. He didn't pout or give the impression that he is beyond reproach. Nobody inside the organization has criticized his work ethic or attitude. In fact, just the opposite.

If — and this is a major if — Buxton eventually becomes a star, Falvine's decision might look savvy because the team will have one more season

of control. But if Buxton ever fulfills his potential, the team should be ecstatic to give him a massive contract. That's the cost of doing business.

The Twins should be focused on the present. Buxton isn't a star because he hasn't proven he can hit major league pitching. He needs all the playing time and instruction he can get. And now he's probably feeling resentful.

How can they think this is a smart plan?

Twins see rules evolving as more relievers start games
La Velle E. Neal III | Star Tribune | September 3, 2018

HOUSTON – The Twins on Tuesday will send righthander Trevor May to the mound for one or two innings before the primary pitcher — using the Twins' term — takes over and pitches into the final innings. At least that is the plan.

May wasn't announced until after the game, as manager Paul Molitor waited to see how Monday's game vs. Houston played out. The Twins public relations staff members notified their counterparts with Houston of the decision.

And the Twins don't see any reason why they should announce who will follow May — although, in this case, it's Kohl Stewart's day to pitch. Why should a team reveal its first two pitchers?

But as baseball heads into the era of the "opener," what's in place to stop shenanigans when it comes to letting opponents know who is the opener? The Twins, including Tuesday, might use an opener in three of their next four games.

"Giving your opposing team your starting pitcher has been part of the game for a long time," Molitor said. "Now with this new concept it kind of put things in flux in terms of how things are communicated and how people are going to respond to it."

This new concept threatens to blur the line between sportsmanship and gamesmanship. And that is where the league might have to grab the wheel.

"You can't expect guys who are trying to get a competitive advantage to create their own rules," said former Twins pitcher LaTroy Hawkins, who has been working for Fox Sports North as an analyst during the team's six-game Texas swing. "You're already telling the team who is going to be the opener."

"I'm one of those guys who feel you shouldn't have to tell them who's pitching anyway. If you're looking for an advantage, why tell them who's pitching?"

The Twins, Rays, Athletics, Rangers and Dodgers have used "openers" and followed them with their primary pitcher for that game. As more clubs look into moving into this unregulated land — September could be the proving ground for such a strategy — there could be times when teams hide the identity of their "opener" until the last minute. Or the opponent could make a lineup change after the opener is identified.

Teams will always look for advantages, and the era of the opener creates new possibilities.

"We talked earlier about how if there is going to have to be some sort of protocol put into place into how this information is exchanged and who has the right to change things right up to game time if they think it is necessary to give themselves a better chance," Molitor said. "I like the avenue of respect more than anything, but obviously there are going to be times when you don't have all the answers."

Molitor was asked if he would have to craft more than one lineup before a game, based on who might start ... err, open. Some have joked that a team could bat its top hitters in the middle or the bottom of the order to thwart the opener, but that threatens to reduce the potential plate appearances of the best hitters in a game.

See all the questions that arise because of this?

"It's one of those things where it's hard for me to imagine not putting your best hitters atop the lineup," Molitor said. "I think some teams are very set whether it's left or right and some teams have more flexibility. It might be the same hitters but in different orders. All those things you might look at. It's just going to have to be about creating your best lineup to give you the best chance on that day, with only limited information on how teams use their pitchers."

Twins' Kyle Gibson makes a few but costly mistakes in 4-1 loss to Astros
La Velle E. Neal III | Star Tribune | September 4, 2018

HOUSTON – Mitch Garver set up for fastball on the four spot — down and away — in the first inning Monday. But Kyle Gibson left it over the middle of the plate for Alex Bregman to bash into the seats in left.

A first-pitch curveball to Yuli Gurriel hung over the middle of the plate in the fourth inning. That one, too, was blasted out to left for a another solo home run.

Those were two big mistakes by Gibson and a reason why the Twins were Labor Day losers to the Astros, falling 4-1 for their eighth loss in 11 games. But there was far more good to Gibson's performance than bad. Houston did score two runs off him in the second, but one was fueled by a Jorge Polanco error on a ball that came up on the shortstop a little bit.

For the most part, Gibson was crisp, getting 12 ground-ball outs and retiring the last 11 Houston hitters he faced after Gurriel's home run — striking out the final two hitters in the seventh inning to finish his outing with authority.

"I thought Gibby had a good day," Twins manager Paul Molitor said. "A couple homers, we didn't field the ball cleanly on a tough play."

Gibson now has pitched at least seven innings 10 times this season, second on the team only to Jose Berrios, who has 12. It was only the second time a Twins starter had pitched six innings, let alone seven, over their past 16 games.

Gibson gave up four runs, two earned, on four hits and one walk while striking out five Monday. He falls to 7-12 on the season, but that record doesn't reflect how he has thrown the ball for most of 2018.

"Garv and I were on the same page all day, mixing up the sequences and knowing when they were going to be aggressive first-pitch," Gibson said. "But like you said, I was hurt by the 2-1 heater by Bregman and executed a poor breaking ball 0-0 to Gurriel. Other than that, it was pretty good."

Unfortunately for the Twins, falling behind early — with the lineup they had Monday — was too much to overcome. Houston lefthander Dallas Keuchel held the Twins to one unearned run on five hits and two walks over six innings before handing off to the bullpen. Collin McHugh struck out five batters over the next two innings. With 13 strikeouts Monday, the Twins have reached double digits in strikeouts 47 times this season — 13 or more eight times.

The Twins loaded the bases in the ninth. With a chance to atone for his error, Polanco struck out swinging against Brad Peacock to end the game.

The final callups

The Twins called up righthanders Chase De Jong and John Curtiss and infielder Gregorio Petit from Class AAA Rochester to complete their list of September promotions. The Twins waited until the Red Wings completed their season before summoning the trio.

De Jong was acquired from Seattle as part of the Zach Duke trade on July 30. Petit, who played 12 games for the Twins earlier this season, returned to the 40-man roster, with the Twins moving Logan Morrison to the 60-day disabled list to make room for him.

The Twins looked at other pitchers, such as Nick Anderson, from Brainerd High School, and Jake Reed. Molitor said he felt the team had enough righthanders.

Will appeal

Reliever Matt Belisle said he plans to appeal any fine by the league after being ejected Sunday for allegedly hitting Texas' Adrian Beltre on purpose.

Belisle was tossed in the sixth inning of an 18-4 loss to the Rangers. It was his first game since being activated from the disabled list. While he recovered, he worked on a different arm slot to add movement to his pitches.

He told the home plate umpire that his arm angle dropped and the ball ran away from him.

"I can't believe that happened," Belisle said, "but it happened."

Pro-style obsession: Video game sensation Fortnite attracts young Minnesota athletes
Megan Ryan | Star Tribune | September 3, 2018

In a windowless room under the stairs in his house, new Wild winger J.T. Brown leaned forward in a high-backed, green-trimmed chair, three computer monitors and a microphone in front of him.

Headphones on, right hand curved around a mouse, left-clicking away on a keyboard, Brown studied the screens, seemingly rambling to himself.

“There’s no mushrooms here. Did they take them out?”

“I got high ground. I just don’t know where they’re coming from. You got eyes?”

“I just got Boogie-Bombed.”

That last statement, uttered with disgust, came while a cartoon man who looks like the night sky — complete with shooting star revolving around his head — danced a disco for five seconds across the middle screen before taking a bullet and dying.

This online video game — Fortnite — has swept Brown and other young male professional athletes into a new level of obsession along with an estimated 125 million players worldwide.

As Brown played this past week in his own personal batcave — complete with noise-canceling foam on the walls so he doesn’t disrupt his pregnant wife and young daughter — a framed poster from the Fortnite Celebrity Pro-Am, in which Brown competed, looked down on him. A purple Fortnite towel rested folded next to his keyboard.

Pro athletes are some of the most recognizable consumers in Fortnite’s worldwide popularity. Sports have featured Fortnite-themed celebrations, from France’s Antoine Griezmann performing a dance from the game after scoring in the World Cup final to Houston Astros outfielders putting on their own in-game displays. The Twins will even host a “Fortday” on Sept. 9 when pitcher Trevor May will play popular YouTube gamer BasicallyIDoWrk on the Target Field video board.

All five professional men’s teams in the Twin Cities, plus the Gophers football team, have at least one avid Fortnite player. The Lynx have at least one team member who plays video games but not Fortnite. They play for relaxation, team bonding, connecting with fans or just the familiar pursuit of being No. 1.

“The big addiction of it is 100 people on a map, and it’s just the last man standing,” Vikings linebacker Kentrell Brothers said. “Just an addicting game. I love it.”

Ready?

Last year, developer Epic Games initially released a different version of Fortnite called Save the World. Popularity ramped up when Battle Royale came out in September. Twin Cities athletes caught the craze as friends started playing, and it began trending on social media.

May said he’s logged 1,000 hours in the game, while Brown said he plays about four times a week for a couple of hours each time. Some teammates, coaches or significant others might call that excessive. But playing the game isn’t necessarily the distraction it sounds like.

“Especially with athletes, on our off time, we can’t go out and be active doing a lot of things because we want to get off our feet and get some rest,” Vikings safety Harrison Smith said. “It’s just a way for guys to relax.”

The kick-back time also has some side benefits. Many Vikings players will play together in squads of four. It’s the same for soccer team Minnesota United, which has two TVs on opposite walls of its players’ lounge so teammates can play in duos. Several players also take their Nintendo Switch handheld devices on road trips to play at the airport or in the team hotel.

“Otherwise, I’d probably just be sitting by myself watching Netflix in my hotel room,” United defender Michael Boxall said. “The more time you’re spending with your teammates, the more you want to work for them on the training pitch and on the field on a game day.”

Fortnite has already made more than \$1 billion, according to SuperData Research. It’s similar to the popular book and movie franchise “The Hunger Games,” with 100 players dropped onto a map to duke it out and be the final one alive. A storm circle pushes players toward a certain area of the map as the game progresses to encourage conflict.

Fortnite also combines a bit of Minecraft, as players collect materials and build defensive shelters or higher ground. Players also search for objects such as weapons and healing potions to aid them during battle. And instead of just shooting opponents, they can also set traps to kill in sneakier ways.

J.T. Brown, a 28-year-old forward for the Wild, has an elaborate gaming station in the basement of his home in Woodbury. He said he plays about four times a week.

“It’s never going to be the same game,” Brown said, adding his previous favorite game, Call of Duty, became tedious because he would run the same route every time. “In this game, the circle dictates where you go. What kind of loot do you get randomly dictates what you’re going to do

next. So even if you drop in the same location every single game, the game is going to be different for you each time.”

For some like Timberwolves guard Josh Okogie, the “corny stuff” keeps him entertained.

Unlike more gritty, realistic video games, Fortnite is cartoony. Players can choose avatars like a mustachioed tomato-headed man and accessorize with stop sign pickaxes or old-school boomboxes. A flying school “Battle Bus” drops players into the environment, and they float to the ground in funky decorated gliders. Avatars can even do popular dance moves like the dab or flossing. Players can force opponents to dance for their lives with the Boogie Bomb that killed Brown.

New items update every few weeks. While the game is free to download, some of those fun extras, which don’t actually improve chances of winning, will cost a couple hundred V-Bucks, which cost a couple of real dollars.

“I’m not proud of how much money I spend on it,” Okogie said. “To get an outfit, you’ve got to get the 5,000 V-Buck package, and nobody wants to pay \$24.99. So you get the \$5.99, but you realize how many times you do it, you’re like, ‘I should have just gotten the \$24.99.’ It’s just, it’s crazy. But they definitely got me.”

David Whittinghill, a professor and director of the game studies concentration at Purdue Polytechnic Institute, said Fortnite captured the three aspects of a great video game: beautiful art, solid programming and a fun design. And culturally, he said, the game came at the right time.

“This is very light, very colorful,” Whittinghill said. “The tone is not very serious, and I think that makes it just a pleasant place to spend time.”

Matchmaking ...

Brown, a 28-year-old Burnsville native, fits the majority demographic of video game players. A Pew Research Center study from last year found that 72 percent of American men under the age of 30 play. The hockey player is so into it, he had a specialty Xbox made for travel during the NHL season, though he’ll now just bring his laptop since he’s switched to playing on a PC.

“I mean, you could be at the bar, you could be [anywhere],” Brown said of travel shenanigans. “But me, I’m sitting in my hotel room playing video games. There’s no trouble involved there.”

Fortnite and video games in general have also become a way for pro athletes to stay in touch with long-distance friends. Smith said he’s unlikely to call his pals for a chat, but he’d squad-up with them in Fortnite for 30 minutes and catch up during the game.

“There’s guys that are still my buddies, but who I haven’t really talked to or I talk to every couple of months,” Vikings tight end David Morgan said. “Now I literally will play with them a couple times a week and just talk to them and hang out.”

For some athletes, the connection goes beyond teammates and friends. Both Brown and May livestream their games on Twitch.tv for charity and have developed friendships with pro gamers, celebrities and random fans.

“It turns into a community. Like, we have regulars that will show up every day, every stream. It doesn’t really matter what time I start or what time I finish, they’ll be there,” Brown said. “You kind of build that relationship even though you may only know them as their screen name. ... It was just another cool way to get fans to be able to see what you’re like beyond your social media account or after a game if you’re out signing autographs.”

And no matter the player’s celeb status, Fortnite is the great equalizer, since any normal person could end up in a 100-person game with a star.

“To think that we’re just playing against some, like, little 8-year-olds, it just makes me laugh,” Morgan said. “These guys have no idea they’re playing against Harrison and Anthony [Barr], All-Pro guys.”

While being an elite athlete doesn’t necessarily correlate to being an elite gamer, there are some similarities emotionally. Brown said he’ll replay a bad Fortnite loss in his head before bed just like for hockey. May said his first solo victory felt the same as putting away a crucial out on the mound.

That might be the underlying reason Fortnite has so entranced some athletes: The competition is reminiscent of what they do for a living.

“Maybe we professional athletes have a little bit more kid in them,” United midfielder Collen Warner said, “because we’re playing a game.”

Monday's Twins-Houston game recap
La Velle E. Neal III | Star Tribune | September 3, 2018

IMPACT PLAYER

Dallas Keuchel, Houston

The 2015 AL Cy Young Award winner gave up one unearned run over six innings and improved to 11-10 on the season.

BY THE NUMBERS

4 Times the Twins have lost despite holding the opponent to four or fewer hits.

10 Times Kyle Gibson has pitched at least seven innings this season, second on the Twins only to Jose Berrios.

13 Times the Twins have scored one or fewer runs for Gibson.

39-26 The Twins' all-time record on Labor Day.

ON DECK

Trevor May will "open" for the Twins on Tuesday, and fellow righthander Kohl Stewart is expected to follow and pitch as long as he's effective. Stewart, from nearby Tomball, Texas, will have a large cheering section.

Twins, 10 errors in past four games, fall 4-1 to Houston Astros
Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | September 3, 2018

HOUSTON — Nearly five months ago, the Twins took two of three from the reigning World Series champions in a frigid April series at Target Field that left the Houston Astros grumbling about the schedulers' cruel sense of humor.

"A distant memory," Twins manager Paul Molitor called that series on Labor Day morning.

Monday afternoon's 4-1 loss to the division-leading Astros at Minute Maid Park brought things up to date.

Alex Bregman and Yuli Gurriel hit solo homers off Kyle Gibson, and Jorge Polanco's fielding error in the second let in two unearned runs. It was the eighth loss in the past 10 games for the Twins, who fell 11 games below .500 for the first time since July 6.

Polanco, who let Gurriel's double-play grounder roll up his left arm for his fourth error in the past five games, has committed 10 errors overall since returning from suspension on July 2.

"I just kind of stopped when I was going to get the ball and I (mishandled) it," Polanco said through a translator. "It was a bad hop, but I think because I stopped between hops, when it bounced again that's what happened."

The Twins loaded the bases in the ninth off three Astros relievers, but Polanco struck out against Brad Peacock after pulling a pair of line drives just foul down the right-field line.

"He's the right guy you want up in those situations," Molitor said. "He put a couple good swings on them but got a little quick."

The Twins finished 2 for 12 with runners in scoring position, which is how you lose despite giving up just four hits. Molitor lamented the missed opportunities and noted the recent spate of 10 errors in the past four games and 13 through the first seven games of this three-city road trip.

"We have made too many errors here as of late," Molitor said. "Some have been maybe (due to) focus or distraction or whatever you might say. In some ways they are part of the game, and other times you are trying to tighten up the best way that you can."

Slumping Miguel Sano poked a run-scoring single to right off left-hander Dallas Keuchel in the sixth to get the Twins on the board with an unearned run after Carlos Correa's throwing error. Sano, who also struck out twice, is 4 for 46 (.087) with 19 strikeouts in his past 54 trips (35.2 percent).

Two of those hits have left the yard.

Gibson (7-12) lasted seven innings for the 10th time while turning in his 16th quality start out of 28 tries (57 percent). Now at 171 innings on the year, Gibson lowered his ERA to 3.74 as he piled up a dozen groundball outs before exiting at 98 pitches.

“That’s one thing I definitely look at,” Gibson said. “When you’re ahead in the count, you can expand with that sinker and changeup and get groundballs. When you see more fly balls is when I have to execute pitches in the middle of the zone and I’m trying to get back in counts and they put a better swing on it.”

Gibson retired the last 11 batters he faced while throwing first-pitch strikes to 19 of 26 batters overall.

Joe Mauer, who came in 1 for 8 career off Keuchel, opened with a pair of singles, including his eighth infield hit of the year. That moved Mauer past Garry Templeton and placed him one hit behind Brian Downing (2,099) for 232nd all-time.

Among those Mauer recently passed on the career hit list: Alfonso Soriano, Harvey Kuenn, Alvin Dark, Cedar Cedeno and Hall of Famers Gary Carter and Harmon Killebrew.

Byron Buxton’s season ends at Triple-A as he awaits Paul Molitor’s call

Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | September 3, 2018

HOUSTON — Twins manager Paul Molitor hadn’t spoken to Byron Buxton as of midday Monday but still planned to call him at some point.

“I’m going to have a nice conversation with him and share my perspective,” Molitor said Sunday in Arlington, Texas. “We’ll try to get to where the understanding and the respect remains. I don’t think it’s going to be a problem between Byron and (me).”

Buxton, who last played on Aug. 31 and will not be recalled by the Twins, missed a third straight game for Triple-A Rochester as the Red Wings finished their season on Monday. Buxton, sent home from the ballpark on Sunday, was not on site Monday at Frontier Field.

There was initially some confusion over whether Buxton had left the park without permission on Sunday, but that was later remedied and no discipline was meted out, according to a person with direct knowledge.

In 35 games at Triple-A this season, starting on June 19, Buxton finished with a .272 batting average, .331 on-base percentage and .456 slugging percentage. He also hit four home runs but struck out 42 times in 136 at-bats, a rate of 29 percent.

His career strikeout rate in the majors is 31.7 percent in 1,074 plate appearances.

“I know there are a lot of questions surrounding this entire issue,” Molitor said. “Sometimes I think time is a really good ally for everybody involved. Ultimately it’s still going to be about him and his career and his performance and his health, all those things moving forward.”

PRESSLY THRIVES

Ryan Pressly gave up a home run to the first batter he faced after being traded — Rougned Odor of the Texas Rangers — but since that July 28 debut for the Houston Astros the former Twins setup man has been outstanding.

Entering Monday’s series opener against his former club, Pressly had yet to walk a batter in 15 outings while piling up 19 strikeouts in 14 2/3 innings. Working anywhere from the sixth to the eighth innings, he had given up a pair of doubles and hit a batter.

“He’s throwing well,” Molitor said. “I know every time I see his pitching line, it seems to be that he’s pitching effectively. He’s just been a part of the mix as far as I can tell.”

The 29-year-old Pressly, making \$1.6 million this year and under club control via arbitration in 2019, walked 19 in 47 2/3 innings with the Twins this year and had a career walk rate of 2.9 per nine innings from 2013-18.

“We sent a lot of players in a lot of directions,” Molitor said. “We’re seeing another one here. I’m sure he’s been pleased coming back here to Texas. Having a chance to be part of this has got to be special for him.”

GIMENEZ APOLOGIZES

Asked how many knuckleballs he threw in Sunday’s 29-pitch inning, Chris Gimenez shook his head sadly.

“I didn’t throw any,” the 35-year-old utility catcher said. “I was going to, but then I got out there and I got scared. I know I let a lot of people down. I didn’t want to hit anybody and get thrown out.”

That comment was aimed at plate umpire Alan Porter, who tossed Matt Belisle for hitting Adrian Beltre and later ran Addison Reed as well.

Gimenez, who gave up two homers in his five-run inning and later hit a two-run homer of his own, noted that his career ERA took a hit. It jumped from 9.90 to 13.09 with his 11th career mound appearance, seven of them for the Twins.

“I saw 56 (mph) on the board one time, and I was like, ‘Holy Cow!’ “ Gimenez said. “The slower the better. They were sitting on 66.”

What about the knuckler that Twins bullpen coach Eddie Guardado taught him late last season?

“I promise you the next time I pitch I’m busting it out,” Gimenez said.

STEWART’S HOMECOMING

Rookie right-hander Kohl Stewart, a two-sport star in high school at Houston’s St. Pius X, will make his homecoming appearance in front of family and friends on Tuesday night against Astros ace Justin Verlander.

The Twins will use an Opener for the second time ever but it won’t be lefty Gabriel Moya, who gave up a two-run homer in the first inning on Sunday. Instead, right-hander Trevor May will get the assignment after posting a 1.35 ERA and 21 strikeouts in his past 13 1/3 innings of relief.

May was the inaugural Opener at Rochester back on July 22.

Stewart had two chances to work in a primary role at Rochester, both on the road at Indianapolis (July 25) and Pawtucket (Aug. 4). He posted a 5.06 ERA in 10 2/3 combined innings, allowing 15 hits and four walks while fanning five.

BRIEFLY

Right-handers Chase De Jong and John Curtiss will be recalled on Tuesday, and infielder Gregorio Petit will have his contract selected with Logan Morrison being moved to the 60-day disabled list. De Jong, who came over from the Seattle Mariners in the Zach Duke trade, posted a 3.41 ERA in six outings (four starts) for Rochester.

Eddie Rosario (strained right quad) did some light running on the field and took a few swings in the cage in his first baseball activity since suffering the injury on Aug. 30. He hopes to hit on the field as soon as Tuesday.

Belisle plans to appeal if he is fined by Major League Baseball for Sunday’s ejection. He figures having Beltre already exonerate him should help his case.

Gibson solid in seven innings, but Twins fall 4-1 **Associated Press | Fox Sports North | September 3, 2018**

HOUSTON — Alex Bregman might be having the best season by any Houston Astros player this year. Only don’t try telling him that.

“I have a lot of room to improve and I’m definitely not satisfied ... I think I need to get a lot better,” the All-Star third baseman said.

Bregman homered for the third straight game and Yuli Gurriel also connected as the Astros won their third in a row, 4-1 over the Minnesota Twins on Monday.

Dallas Keuchel (11-10) scattered five hits over six innings and allowed one unearned run. Brad Peacock allowed a single with two outs in the ninth to load the bases, but struck out Jorge Polanco to escape the jam and get his third save.

Kyle Gibson (7-12) yielded four hits and four runs — two earned — with five strikeouts in seven innings for his third straight loss.

“I kind of struggled the last month or so with a little bit of command and executing pitches ... other than a tough couple plays in the second it was pretty good,” Gibson said.

There were two outs in the first inning when Bregman hit his 28th home to give Houston a 1-0 lead. He has reached base safely in 31 straight games, the longest active streak in the majors. He has 13 hits, including four homers and three doubles, and 10 RBIs in his last eight games.

“This is the best I’ve seen him play in a short career,” manager A.J. Hinch said. “He’s just very locked in ... he’s very under control. He’s very locked in. He knows a ball from a strike. He’s hunting the right pitches. He’s laying off the right pitches. He’s a pretty elite performer.”

Bregman has set a career high for home runs and leads the Astros in that category. He ranks first on the team with 89 RBIs and 43 doubles. He also has a triple this year to give him 72 extra-base hits, the most by an Astros player since Lance Berkman had 79 in 2008.

“This season has definitely been the best so far personally,” Bregman said. “But I think that’s strictly due to the fact that I’m just trying to go up there and trying to put together a good at-bat and trying to help this team win games.”

Tyler White singled to start the Houston second before Gurriel reached on an error by Polanco at shortstop. Brian McCann followed with an RBI single and Evan Gattis then grounded into a double play that allowed another run to score for a 3-0 lead.

Gurriel homered off Gibson in the fourth.

Keuchel had retired seven straight when Mitch Garver singled with one out in the sixth. An error by shortstop Carlos Correa, who overthrew first base, allowed Robbie Grossman to reach before the Twins cut the lead to 4-1 on an RBI single by Miguel Sano. But Keuchel struck out Jake Cave and Tyler Austin to end the inning and leave the runners stranded.

Gibson settled down after the homer to Gurriel and retired the last 11 batters he faced before Matt Magill took over for the eighth.

TRAINER’S ROOM

Astros: RHP Hector Rondon left the game after deflecting a ball hit by Cave off his right hand in the ninth inning. Rondon’s hand was swollen after the game but he said X-rays were negative and he thinks he’ll be OK after a couple of days. ... Houston INF Marwin Gonzalez left after the first inning because of discomfort in his right oblique. ... RHP Charlie Morton (shoulder discomfort) played catch for the second straight day and is scheduled to throw a bullpen session in the next couple of days. Hinch said if that goes well he’ll come off the disabled list to start against Boston on Saturday. If he can’t go the Astros will start rookie Josh James, who made his major league debut on Saturday.

THEY SAID IT

Hinch on the ball that hit Rondon: “He’s lucky he put his arm up. If you look at the replay it probably saved his face. I think it even got a little bit of flesh and not so much the bone. Very scary.”

UP NEXT

Justin Verlander (13-9, 2.78 ERA) will start for Houston against Trevor May (3-0, 1.88) when the series continues on Tuesday night. Verlander ranks second in the American League behind teammate Gerrit Cole with 240 strikeouts this season.

Astros continue series against transitioning Twins **The Sports Xchange | Fox Sports North | September 4, 2018**

HOUSTON — On the heels of playing five consecutive series against American League West rivals, the Astros on Monday opened a three-game set against a club finishing out the string.

The Minnesota Twins, unexpected postseason participants a season ago, entered the series 10 games under .500 and planning to use the final month of the season to evaluate. Their non-contender status represents a change of pace for the Astros (85-53), who claimed a 4-1 win and are striving to maintain a laser-sharp focus with the division title still hanging in the balance.

When the clubs met April 9-11, the Twins were an optimistic lot and claimed the final two games of that series at Target Field. Plenty has changed since, including the Twins’ motivations.

“We haven’t seen them in a long time and then you start to factor in the September call-ups and some of the trades and they look like a completely different team,” Astros manager A.J. Hinch said of the Twins. “They’re in a different place than they were back then. They’re going to play a matchup-friendly game. They’re going to want to use as many guys as they can. They’re still very talented; you have to play well to beat them.

“In situations like this where you’re playing against a team that’s transitioning into finishing the rest of the season, looking at some prospects, looking at different guys at finishing their season that know they’re not going to be in the playoffs, it’s important to try to play from ahead. You have to throw the first punch and be able to get out in front of them and play from ahead. That way you can control the game. They’re all trying to impress, they’re all trying to play well to finish their season. When they get ahead it puts a lot of pressure on you to have to always come from behind.”

Right-hander Justin Verlander (13-9, 2.78 ERA) will make his 30th start of the season on Tuesday for the Astros against the Twins. It will mark the 12th time that Verlander has started at least 30 games in a season.

He twirled seven shutout innings against the Twins on April 9, allowing four hits and one walk with nine strikeouts in a 2-0 victory at Target Field. Verlander is 18-9 with a 3.06 ERA over 35 career starts against the Twins, his fourth-most wins against any team.

Right-hander Trevor May (3-0, 1.88 ERA) will make his first start of the season for the Twins on Tuesday. May has made 13 relief appearances for Minnesota (63-74) this season and 76 consecutive appearances out of the bullpen, having last started for the Twins on Aug. 14, 2015.

He worked 1 1/3 innings on Aug. 31 at Texas, recording four strikeouts over the scoreless outing. This will mark the second time in three games that the Twins employ the opener strategy. Minnesota did so in its series finale at the Rangers on Sunday, falling 18-4 in Arlington.

May is 0-1 with an 11.57 ERA over five career appearances against the Astros.

Twins GM admits service time played a role into why Byron Buxton was kept in the minors

Mike Axisa | CBS Sports | September 2, 2018

Saturday was Sept. 1, which means teams are now allowed to expand their active roster from 25 players all the way up to 40 players, if they choose. Every team calls up reinforcements in September, even if they're only a few extra relievers and bench players.

Among the players not getting called up this month: Twins center fielder Byron Buxton. It has been a brutal season for Buxton, who hit .156/.183/.200 in 28 big-league games around toe and wrist injuries, and .264/.322/.443 in 36 Triple-A games after being demoted. All told, Buxton has only 246 plate appearances in 2018.

Rather than call him up and get him more at-bats in September, the Twins will send Buxton home after the Triple-A season ends Monday. According to Mike Berardino of the St. Paul Pioneer Press, Twins GM Thad Levine listed three reasons for Buxton not being called up in September:

The wrist injury is "still lingering."

His Triple-A performance hasn't been good enough beyond the raw stats.

There's not enough playing time available in the big leagues.

Buxton's strikeout rate (28.4 percent), swing-and-miss rate (15.0 percent), and pull rate (59.8 percent) in his 152 Triple-A plate appearances are all much higher than you'd like, which is presumably what Levine was referring to when he said Buxton's minor league performance wasn't as good as the triple-slash line would lead you to believe.

If the wrist injury is still lingering, it's not bad enough to send Buxton for more tests, according to Berardino. And as for playing time, well teams can always create playing time for young outfielders. Eddie Rosario went down with a quad injury recently, plus Robbie Grossman and waiver claim Johnny Field have started games in the outfield recently. If the Twins wanted to make playing time for Buxton, they could, for sure.

Levine's reasons for keeping Buxton down are just plausible enough to hide the team's true intention: Service time manipulation. Not giving Buxton a September call-up delays his free agency from the 2021-22 offseason to the 2022-23 offseason. The Twins would be gaining control of Buxton's age 28 season in 2022, which very well might be a peak year. Buxton has had an up-and-down career to date, no doubt, but he is supremely talented and could be an All-Star caliber performer in 2022.

As poorly as this season has gone, Buxton was a 5 WAR player last year, and he hit .300/.347/.546 in what appeared to be a breakout second half. He also played hurt through the toe injury earlier this year when the Twins were short on outfielders. Now he's not getting a September call-up and his free agency is being delayed. Understandably, Buxton and his agent are not happy. From Berardino:

"Needless to say, neither the agent nor the player were happy to hear this information, and I think for all the right reasons," Levine said. "We totally respect and understand their position in these instances."

...

"I think part of our jobs is we're supposed to be responsible to factoring service time into every decision we make," Levine said. "I still feel pretty resolute in saying that the other three factors were more present for us in this decision-making process than that. We wouldn't be doing our jobs if we weren't at least aware of service-time impacts on decisions we make."

...

"Their recourse has not been laid out to us," Levine said. "They're certainly entitled to whatever they think is in the best interest of Byron Buxton. From this day forward, I think we recognize a responsibility to make amends and that we're going to need to invest in the relationship with Byron Buxton. We understand this is a blow to the player, a potential blow to the relationship."

That is about as close as a team executive will get to admitting the team is manipulating a player's service time. Buxton can file a grievance claiming service time manipulation, and, if he were to win, he would be retroactively credited with service time for September, thus moving his free agency back up to the 2021-22 offseason.

Other teams decline to call up players in September for service time reasons -- White Sox outfielder Eloy Jimenez and Blue Jays third baseman Vladimir Guerrero Jr., arguably the two best prospects in the minors, aren't being called up this month for service time reasons -- but it's not often a player like Buxton winds up back in Triple-A during the summer and doesn't get a September call-up. This reeks of service time manipulation. The baseball reasons laid out don't seem to pass the sniff test.

This has no doubt been a disappointing season for both Buxton and the Twins. He's been hurt and ineffective and the team is 63-72, bad enough that they traded away some veterans at the deadline. Rather than give Buxton as many at-bats as possible in September to make up for lost time, the team will not call him up so they can gain control of his 2022 season, four years down the road. Don't be surprised if the Twins and Buxton wind up in front of a mediator this offseason.

The Shame of MLB's Anti-Labor, Anti-Competitive "Service Time" Rules

Jon Taylor | Sports Illustrated | September 3, 2018

The first of September has come and gone, and with it, a wave of minor leaguers up to the majors as teams expand their rosters to 40 players for the month. Top prospects and career backups alike either have made (or will make) the trek to cities across the country to write a new chapter in their careers or, in many happy cases, make their debuts.

But as notable as the names popping up by the dozens on MLB's transaction logs are those that remain absent—in particular, Eloy Jimenez, Vladimir Guerrero, Jr., and Byron Buxton, not one of whom will be called up by their respective teams this September. That's despite terrific performances all season by Jimenez and Guerrero, both of whom are the top prospects in their systems, or the need to evaluate for next year amid a lost 2018. Instead, they'll head home or to the Arizona Fall League, denied a chance to earn major league money or begin what promises to be a superstar career.

So why are all three of those players not getting the call? Simply put: money. By leaving Jimenez, Guerrero and Buxton in the minors, the White Sox, Blue Jays and Twins gain additional service time on their contracts and delay their free agency. By holding back Jimenez and Guerrero, Chicago and Toronto can keep them in their organizations for longer and cheaper. Minnesota, meanwhile, will get an extra year of control over Buxton by keeping him out of the majors, as his injury-interrupted campaign has left him two weeks shy of a full season of MLB service time.

This kind of chicanery is nothing new. In 2015, the Cubs sent Kris Bryant to Triple A to start the season, ostensibly for him to work on his defense, but two weeks later, he was promoted. That delay probably didn't do much for his glove work, but it did gain Chicago an extra year of team control on Bryant's contract. Earlier this year, the Braves pulled the same stunt with Ronald Acuña Jr., who hit .344/.393/.548 in Triple A the season prior as a 19-year-old and did equally ridiculous things in spring training but didn't make the Opening Day roster. "We just want him to get into the flow, keep doing what he was doing and he'll find his way back here, hopefully very soon," said Atlanta general manager Alex Anthopoulos in an empty attempt to justify Acuña's demotion. By the end of that month—despite hitting a meager .211/.297/.267 in Triple A—Acuña was up, presumably enough in the flow for the Braves' liking, and with one more year between him and free agency.

So it's been for Jimenez and Guerrero, who have shown from day one of the season that they have nothing left to learn in the minors. Jimenez slashed a scorching .317/.368/.556 in Double A to begin the year, got the bump to Triple A in late June, and hit .355/.399/.597 there at 21 years old. Guerrero was even better: a preposterous .402/.449/.671 in Double A, then .340/.419/.566 the next level up after missing a month with a knee injury—and all that at the age of 19.

There's no performance reason for Jimenez and Guerrero to be where they are. But all year, the White Sox and Jays have delayed the inevitable despite trudging through losing seasons and using lesser players. Toronto has preached a need for Guerrero to work on his defense at third base, as he's presumably not up to the team's standards there. Yet at the major league level, the Jays have slotted declining veteran catcher Russell Martin at the hot corner repeatedly and given the majority of the starts there to the iron-gloved Yangervis Solarte. It's hard to imagine Guerrero being any worse than those two, and that's before you factor in offense.

Jimenez and Guerrero staying down is all about service time manipulation, but neither team will say that openly. Doing so would be an admission of bad faith on the team's part—of artificial suppression of a career solely for financial gain. Bryant filed a grievance against the Cubs over his delayed callup; Jimenez's agents say they're considering one. These grievances are almost impossible to prove without concrete evidence; as such, MLB GMs skirt around the issue with bland comments on defense and readiness instead of admitting the obvious.

But when the Twins chose to leave Buxton off their roster, Minnesota GM Thad Levine surprisingly told reporters that service time did play a part in that decision. “I think part of our jobs is we’re supposed to be responsible for factoring service time into every decision we make,” he said. It’s a curious admission: Should Buxton and his agency want to file a grievance, they’ll have Levine’s comments front and center in their case. It also signals just how strong a position the teams hold: Yes, service time matters, but what are the players going to do about it? The rules on it are locked in through the current CBA, and that won’t be up for debate again until 2021.

It makes all the financial sense in the world for teams to do this. That extra year of control is valuable, and MLB teams are always looking to exploit every last advantage. This business has been cheered on, too, by a small yet vocal segment of media and fans. They’ll support keeping Jimenez and Guerrero down if it means they’ll be around one year longer or allow a team to save money. Process trumps everything, and service time manipulation is part of that.

But what fun is that, to lose what could’ve been special seasons from Jimenez or Guerrero solely to save billionaires some money? What message does it send if a team essentially announces that it’s too cheap to field a better product? It’s cruel to force players to spend chunks of their finite careers wasting away in the minors, denying them opportunities to earn more money or put up stats that will enrich them down the road. It’s anti-labor—and more than that, it’s anti-competitive. Fans should get to watch the best players, not have to count down the days until owners deem it financially appropriate to be good. For those defending their teams for keeping players down: What does it matter to you if, six years down the line, Jerry Reinsdorf or Rogers Communications has to spend more of their millions to keep them? Shouldn’t spending money on good players be the goal anyway?

Lost amid service time manipulation and teams openly tanking and front offices refusing to sign free agents is that baseball is supposed to be about the on-field product, not the ledger books. The people who own these franchises are richer than you and I will ever be; even the biggest player contracts are rounding errors amid their vast wealth. But owners will do whatever they can to save a dollar, and in the end, it’s the players and fans that end up footing that bill.

Jimenez, Guerrero and Buxton deserve to be up. So have several other minor leaguers in the past, and so will countless more in the future. And the fans deserve to see them play when they’re ready, not when it’s financially convenient. Service time is a trap, and one that, come 2021, the MLB Players Association should be ready to fight and fix. It’ll be too late for Jimenez, Guerrero and Buxton by then, but it’s patently unfair to let this continue.