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Chicago Tribune

Cubs go up 2-0 in City Series with 8-4 victory over White Sox

By Teddy Greenstein

Gray skies over Wrigley Field. Cool afternoon temps. The Cubs jump out to a 5-0 lead. Willson Contreras hits a bomb off Chris Beck. The Cubs win in a laughter.

It all happened Friday. It all happened again Saturday.

This final score was 8-4 as the Cubs further established a chasm between the two teams. The Cubs (21-15) won their fifth straight, unbothered by a 2-hour, 15-minute rain delay. The Sox (a major-league worst 9-27) lost for the seventh time in a row.

Contreras had another big day, going 3-for-5 with three RBIs. After driving in nine runs in his first 30 games this season, the Cubs' star catcher has 10 RBIs in his last two.

Javier Baez also thrived Saturday, smacking James Shields' first pitch down the right-field line for a triple in his first game of the season batting leadoff. He later beat out a grounder to first, sprinting to the bag before Shields could collect Jose Abreu's toss. And Baez contorted his body to avoid a Tim Anderson tag on a stolen base.

Anthony Rizzo hit a three-run bomb in the first, his sixth of the season. David Bote also had a nice game as a fill-in starter at second base; he went 2-for-3 with a walk.

Jon Lester (5 2/3 innings, 1 earned run, 4 hits, 3 walks, 5 strikeouts) pitched well enough to improve to 3-1.

Shields steadied the ship after allowing five early run but still fell to 1-4.

Beck and Aaron Bummer, who issued a four-pitch walk with the bases loaded, allowed the Cubs to extend their lead to 8-1.

Not many fans remained when Matt Davidson finally gave Sox fans something to smile about — a three-run homer off Carl Edwards Jr. It was Davidson's 10th.

The Cubs were closing in on an easy victory in the ninth when Trayce Thompson lined one to right field that Kris Bryant let glance off his glove for an error.

Manager Joe Maddon summoned closer Brandon Morrow, and he delivered by striking out Yolmer Sanchez and Daniel Palka. After walking Tim Anderson to load the bases, he induced a groundout from potential tying run Jose Abreu to end the game.

Composite score from the two games: 19-6. Varsity versus JV.

The Cubs will go for the sweep Sunday by sending Kyle Hendricks (3-2, 3.02) to the hill against Lucas Giolito (1-4, 7.25).

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Chicago Tribune

Column: Manny Machado deal would be costly for Cubs — but worth the price for a superstar

By David Haugh

By hitting two home runs — including a grand slam — and achieving a personal milestone Friday, the player who quietly loomed large over the City Series thrust himself into every baseball conversation in town.

Manny Machado, that is.

Machado matched Cubs catcher Willson Contreras with a pair of homers himself, the second making him the youngest Oriole to reach 150 in his career. He's 25, six months younger than Kris Bryant, who just celebrated his 100th major-league home run Wednesday. What Bryant is to the Cubs, Machado is to the Orioles.

Think about that before nodding too quickly in agreement after Cubs President Theo Epstein all but ruled out pursuing a player such as Machado, who becomes a free agent after the season. He entered Saturday's games leading the American League in batting average (.354) and RBIs (35) to go with 12 home runs. Any list of baseball's top-five position players includes Machado.

The White Sox need Machado even more than the Cubs and easily could justify the exorbitant fee — imagine Manny in the middle of a lineup including Yoan Moncada, Eloy Jimenez and Jose Abreu. Move

shortstop Tim Anderson to the outfield or third base and let Machado play wherever he wants. But the rebuilding Sox can afford to wait until free agency to dive in so they can protect their prized pitching prospects.

The Cubs, on the other hand, face the urgency of expectations. They can win the World Series without Machado, sure. But they would give themselves a better shot at doing so in 2018 than in the subsequent years they're trying to preserve by acquiring the superstar player while the Orioles seek a trade partner before losing him for nothing. Even if Machado still tests free agency, the team would get five months to show him how prosperous life as a Cub can be.

Shortstop Addison Russell represents the Cubs' most expendable position player who's young and accomplished enough to interest the Orioles as the centerpiece. File this under coincidence or coercion: A struggling Russell responded to the growing Machado buzz by going 5-for-14 with two doubles and a home run in four games last week. Russell, affordably under team control through 2021, gives the Cubs contract certainty, but how often does a team get a chance to upgrade with one of baseball's biggest stars?

Would a trade proposal of Russell, left-hander Mike Montgomery and Triple-A right-hander Adbert Alzolay, the organization's top prospect, get the Orioles' attention? Would it require including either Ian Happ or another top minor-leaguer? Is that a fair price for a pending free agent with the ability to put the Cubs over the top?

"As a rule, we will not be paying premiums for rentals," Epstein said in an interview on WSCR-AM 670. "We just won't. It's hard to build an organization that way."

Epstein came to the Cubs almost seven years ago with two World Series rings and the benefit of the doubt he still deserves. A third championship altered the identity of the Cubs organization and alerted Cooperstown. It's as fun as it is fascinating trying to follow Epstein's mindset on his quest toward a fourth title, and it's fair to assess his position on this.

Calmly, Epstein acknowledged the significant investments the Cubs already made in this team and espoused the importance of considering "what's going to happen after 2021." Carefully, he chose words that left open the slim possibility of a deal if Machado's price continues to drop every day the Orioles wait to deal him, meaning the Cubs could include established players more than future assets. Everything Epstein said sounded logical, and the only thing unclear was whether his target audience was Cubs fans looking for clues or Orioles officials gauging the market.

"We can't be sacrificing all of our future assets in drafting guys exclusively to trade them," Epstein said. "We have to build the farm system. It's been used quite a bit to support this group, and we need to start growing the farm back as well."

Several factors make this tricky. Giving up promising shortstop Gleyber Torres to the Yankees for closer Aroldis Chapman — who left after three months — helped the Cubs win the 2016 World Series. Trading top prospects Jimenez and pitcher Dylan Cease to the Sox for lefty Jose Quintana helped turn around the 2017 season that ended in the National League Championship Series. But sacrificing another highly regarded minor-leaguer such as Alzolay or Double-A pitcher Oscar De La Cruz in a third consecutive go-for-it deal understandably gives Epstein pause. Sustaining success becomes more challenging by annually raiding the minor-league system to acquire difference-making major-league talent.

But if the Cubs don't, another National League contender could. Reports mention the Cardinals, Brewers and Dodgers as other teams with heavy interest in Machado, and the Cubs can't ignore those rumors.

An unknown factor involves what the Cubs suspect about Nationals star Bryce Harper, a good friend of Bryant's from Las Vegas. Rumors persist that Harper likes the idea of playing for the Cubs, and there is nothing not to like about the possibility of Harper entering his prime in Chicago. But if the Cubs trade for Machado and sign him to an extension, conventional wisdom says it virtually eliminates the option of signing Harper, also a pending free agent.

Bryant, Javier Baez and Kyle Schwarber eventually will need new, large deals. So will Kyle Hendricks and Contreras. Dynasties are expensive, and the Cubs want to build one. Both Machado and Harper could be \$300 million players, making it unrealistic even for a team like the Cubs, with a \$184 million payroll, to afford more than one franchise player.

An opportunity to get a player like Machado doesn't come around often. This is one the Cubs should seize.

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Chicago Tribune

Cubs catcher Willson Contreras continues to feast on White Sox pitching

By Paul Sullivan

Willson Contreras is making up for lost time this weekend, getting back in his groove and making White Sox pitcher Chris Beck his own personal pinata.

After a slow start to the season, the Cubs catcher has hit three home runs in the first two games of the City Series, including two off Beck, while driving in 10 runs.

"That's what I thought he looked like before he got hurt last year," said manager Joe Maddon, referencing Contreras' strained hamstring in August. "It's no big surprise to me. I think that's who he is.

"When he's right, he hits better pitching hard. He puts balls in gaps and over walls. ... That's what I'm seeing, and on top of that his catching was very good today."

Starting pitcher Jon Lester said Contreras wasn't having a bad year, he just wasn't hitting for power.

"I think it was just a matter of time," Lester said. "You never want anybody on your team to struggle, but since (Anthony Rizzo) was struggling a little bit, I think Willy could kind of hide in the weeds and just work on his stuff and nobody was really paying attention to him.

"And Willy wasn't really struggling; he just wasn't hitting homers. When he gets going, (we've) got that protection for 'Riz' and it just lengthens our lineup."

Rain king: Lester earned his third win against one loss, allowing one run in 5 2/3 innings and reducing his ERA to 2.66.

It wasn't vintage Lester, and Maddon pulled him after 92 pitches. It was Lester's third straight start of between five and six innings despite allowing no more than two runs in that span. He prides himself on taking the ball for six or seven innings at least, but Maddon has pulled Lester earlier than usual.

"I think he's going to get better, actually, during the season," Maddon said.

The start of the game was delayed for 2 hours, 15 minutes despite no rain for the first hour-plus of the delay.

The Cubs didn't want Lester to pitch a few innings and then have to stop because of a rain delay and potentially lose him for the rest of the game. He had to get up and down during two rain delays last Sunday in St. Louis.

Lester was thankful for the courtesy delay, even as fans and the media grouched at having to sit through a long delay without any actual rain.

"Today was nice, even though it didn't rain at first," he said. "Finally the shower came through and we were able to play the game dry, so that was good. I'm sure in Atlanta it will rain again and we'll have another delay, so it'll be three in a row."

Extra innings: The Cubs bullpen pitched well with the exception of the usually reliable Carl Edwards Jr., who served up a three-run home run to Matt Davidson in the seventh. "Big deal," Maddon said. "That's going to happen." ... The Cubs are 11-2 in their last 13 home games. ... After a miserable opening month, Rizzo is hitting .341 in May with five home runs and 14 RBIs.

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Chicago Tribune

After MLB threatens Ben Zobrist with fine for wearing black spikes, he wears them again
By Paul Sullivan

The fashion police caught up with Ben Zobrist on Friday.

Major League Baseball threatened the Cubs veteran with a fine and discipline for wearing black spikes, a violation of uniform regulations. Zobrist on Saturday posted a response to MLB on his Instagram account and went rogue again, wearing black cleats when he entered as a defensive replacement in the ninth inning against the White Sox.

Zobrist declined to talk about his protest after the Cubs' 8-4 victory — their fifth straight — saying he would discuss the issue with the players union and MLB. Asked if he would wear the black shoes again Sunday, he laughed and reminded the media he's wearing pink shoes for Mother's Day.

Zobrist clearly was unhappy with MLB's letter threatening disciplinary action should he wear the shoes again, calling it ridiculous in his Instagram post, which included photos of the spikes and the MLB letter.

"For the last two years I have worn black spikes exclusively at Wrigley Field for day games to pay homage to the history of our great game, and now I am being told I will be fined and disciplined if I continue to wear them," Zobrist said in the post.

The letter from MLB, dated May 11, pointed to a May 2 game in which Zobrist wore the spikes, violating the regulations because they were not 51 percent blue, the Cubs' designated color.

Zobrist wrote that he was inspired by the old black spikes worn by Ernie Banks and Stan Musial, and New Balance shoes "made a kid's dream come true by making some all black spikes with the special tongue, as well as the 'Benny the Jet' @pf_flyers cleats.

“Am curious as to why @mlb is spending time and money enforcing this now when they haven’t done it previously in the last year and beyond.”

Manager Joe Maddon backed Zobrist and said “the reason he gave is outstanding. And you know him. If that’s coming out of his mouth, that’s legit.”

Maddon pointed to the variety of shoes being worn and said Zobrist’s message was good for the promotion of baseball.

“That’s the kind of things kids are looking for, and I’m right on board,” he said.

Zobrist wasn’t the only one being hassled by MLB over uniform violations.

Indians starter Mike Clevinger tweeted a similar letter from MLB stating “various illustrations were visible on your shoes” during a May 1 game. Athletics infielder Jed Lowrie recently received a letter for wearing green cleats instead of white and told the San Francisco Chronicle: “Major League Baseball decided to start enforcing the rule they hadn’t really enforced the last few years.”

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Chicago Tribune

Javier Baez makes Cubs manager Joe Maddon’s leadoff experiment look good

By Paul Sullivan

It’s good to be Javier Baez these days.

The all-purpose infielder had a ball Saturday during the Cubs’ rain-delayed 8-4 win against the White Sox in Game 2 of the City Series, igniting the offense from the leadoff spot, stealing a base with his sneaky swim move, and posing for his teammates after catching a foul popup near the dugout.

The only thing Baez seemingly didn’t do was hand out hand warmers to the crowd of 41,099 on another cold, ugly day for baseball at Wrigley Field.

Cold or not, the streaking Cubs have now won five straight after a five-game losing streak that followed a five-game win streak.

Baez began the fun with a leadoff triple, and he scored on Anthony Rizzo’s three-run home run. The Cubs’ four-run first against James Shields was nearly a carbon copy of the five-run first from Friday’s 11-2 win.

Baez reached again on an infield hit in the second, grounding toward second and beating Jose Abreu’s throw to Shields with a headfirst slide.

Sox catcher Welington Castillo appeared to throw out Baez at second on a steal attempt, but Baez pulled back his left hand at the last second and reached around to tag the base with his right, looking like he was playing Twister on a multidimensional level.

“I guess they did their homework,” he said. “They had my plan or whatever. I don’t know how to explain it. When (shortstop Tim Anderson) caught the ball, everything slowed down for me. That’s how I see it.

"I just went around the tag. I don't know how I did it. I don't know how I reacted to it. I just got it in my mind and the ball beat me, so I just went for it."

Baez has pulled off the swim move before, but even when the Sox knew it was coming they couldn't stop it.

"Rizzo today was like 'You're going to get tagged pretty hard in your face when they don't find your hands,'" Baez said. "I was like, 'As long as I'm safe, it doesn't matter.'"

Willson Contreras had another big day for the Cubs, going 3-for-5 with 3 RBIs, including another two-run home run against Chris Beck. Contreras has three homers and 10 RBIs in his last two games after entering the series with one homer and nine RBIs in his first 30 games. In the last three games, the catcher is 10-for-15 with three doubles, two triples, three homers and 11 RBIs while raising his batting average from .230 to .281.

The Cubs' offense appears to be back on track after a lengthy lull, and Maddon contributed to Saturday's success by putting Baez in the leadoff spot for the first time this season and seventh in his career.

It was another unconventional move by Maddon, who laughs loudly at the idea he's not allowed to experiment with his lineups.

In Baez's six previous starts leading off, he hit .320 (8-for-25) with two home runs, five RBIs, five runs and five strikeouts.

"Just trying to fill in the blanks, and I thought it would be a good way to go," Maddon said, noting Ben Zobrist will be the regular leadoff hitter against right-handers.

Baez is still a notorious free-swinger and went into Saturday's game with the fourth-highest swinging-strike rate (17.8 percent) of any player with 100 or more plate appearances. Ian Happ, who started the season as the Cubs' leadoff hitter, is worst at 22.3 percent.

A swing-and-miss guy isn't always a logical choice to ignite the lineup, but Maddon likes the energy Baez brings and said he gradually is getting better at avoiding swinging at pitches out of the zone.

"He can almost hit anywhere," Maddon said. "I have been using him at the bottom because he swings and misses a lot. But he's cut down on that.

"But a swing-and-miss guy like that with power, you don't want him in front of your better guys, but he can clean stuff up. His RBIs to me are the residue of that, although he's done some really good work in the two hole, too. We're still figuring the whole thing out. The sky is the limit."

Baez said he doesn't care where he bats and will be the same player wherever. Either way, Maddon's experiment paid off, and he won't hesitate to go back to the well.

"Go ahead and do it if you want, Javy," he said. "I pay attention to everything with all of our guys. I'm looking for the little tectonic shifts regarding how they're getting better in different areas.

"And it's happening, but you still have to have patience. It's just not going to happen overnight."

Chicago Sun-Times

Javy Baez sparks streaking Cubs to early lead, 8-4 victory against White Sox
By Gordon Wittenmyer

Energy.

As much as it has been in short supply during the first two cold, wet days of this Crosstown Showdown, it's one of the traits Cubs manager Joe Maddon looks for most when deciding on a leadoff man.

Mostly, that's because he doesn't have Dexter Fowler anymore. Or anyone else with the kind of classic speed/on-base mix to justify the assignment every day. And because he can't play Ben Zobrist every day.

So Saturday it was Javy Baez and his "El Mago" energy at the top of the lineup for the first time this season. And by the end of the second inning, Baez — the National League leader in RBI — had a triple, an infield single, a tag-eluding, swim-move slide for an unlikely stolen base and two runs scored.

Baez jump-started the Cubs' rain-delayed 8-4 victory — their fifth in a row — against the White Sox that was only that close because of Matt Davidson's three-run home run in the eighth.

"I'm experimenting," said Maddon, who already has used six players in the leadoff spot this season after using 11 there last season. "It was a great first at-bat. It got things rolling for us [in a four-run first]." There's no way Baez will stay in the leadoff spot for any significant length of time. He might not bat there again this season. But his energy Saturday and that of Albert Almora Jr., Willson Contreras and others in recent weeks has ignited enough from the lineup to suggest an end to the local punditry about the Cubs' so-called leadoff problem.

The Cubs have scored 50 runs during their five-game winning streak against the tanking Marlins and tanking Sox.

Contreras — the hero Friday — added three hits, including his third homer in two days. He's 10-for-15 with three homers, two triples and three doubles in his last three games.

But Baez, in particular, has been a bolt of energy for most of the season, no matter where he has batted (every spot but fifth and ninth) or whether he has played second base, shortstop or third base, as he did Saturday.

"He's an exciting point guard," said Maddon, who has compared Baez at times to Roberto Alomar in the field, Willie Mays on the bases and Manny Ramirez at the plate. "He's Tiny Archibald, Norm Van Lier. You've got to watch him.

"He can have impact anywhere — in the box, running the bases, making the tag, making the play, catching a pop-up in the dugout and smiling for the cameras."

That happened on Trayce Thompson's foul pop in the seventh, with Baez pausing for a beat to pose.

"He's just on cue all the time," Maddon said.

He also just missed a homer when he crushed a Bob Seger drive to left in the fourth — against the wind.

“People always want to give these guys superstar status,” said Cubs starter Jon Lester (3-1), who used former Red Sox teammate David Ortiz as a point of comparison. “David was a superstar, and there was a reason why he was.

“Javy can be there one day. I think he has the flair. He knows the game better than a lot of guys give him credit for. He’s just so smart. And he’s so athletic that he can make up for mistakes, and that’s where you see like the swim move today and running the bases.”

Baez, who called batting leadoff “weird” but said he is fine with it, couldn’t explain how he was able to elude the tag, even when shortstop Tim Anderson was waiting at the bag with the ball when he arrived.

“When he catches the ball, everything slows down for me,” Baez said. “I just went around the tag; I don’t know how I do it. The ball beat me, so I just went for it.”

Said Lester: “The game just looks easy to him when he’s out there. He definitely has the potential to be that guy.”

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Chicago Sun-Times

Shoe-horned: Cubs’ Ben Zobrist irked at MLB threat of fine over all-black cleats

By Gordon Wittenmyer

Major League Baseball appears to be taking a page from the NFL by cracking down on violations of uniform rules, specifically shoe color.

And the Cubs’ Ben Zobrist isn’t happy about it, calling it “ridiculous.”

On his Instagram account Saturday, Zobrist posted a copy of a warning letter he received about the all-black shoes he has worn for the last two years during home day games without comment from MLB.

Alongside the letter, which threatened fines for continued violations, he wrote an appeal to MLB that began: “Dear @mlb, I still like you, but this is ridiculous.”

The rule cited in the letter stipulates that at least 51 percent of the shoe color be the team’s designated color — in this case, blue.

Zobrist wrote he wore the black shoes “to pay homage to the history of our great game,” describing the way he was inspired as a kid by highlights of greats such as Ernie Banks and Stan Musial with their “old uniforms and all-black cleats with flaps.”

“I am curious as to why @mlb is spending time and money enforcing this now when they haven’t done it previously in the last year and beyond,” he said.

Zobrist said he didn’t want to discuss the matter with reporters until he gets more information about the subject. But the letter didn’t stop him from wearing the black shoes when he entered the game against the White Sox on a double switch in the ninth inning.

“I’m going to talk to the union and MLB about it to find out more,” said Zobrist, who won’t have the issue Sunday because of MLB’s pink shoes and bats for Mother’s Day.

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Javy Baez sparks streaking Cubs to early lead, 8-4 victory against White Sox
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Indians pitcher Mike Clevinger received a similar warning for "non-conforming shoes" and Friday tweeted an excerpt from the letter and his comments: "Make baseball fun again, they said, it would be fun, they said."

When contacted for comment, MLB issued a statement citing the shoe regulations in the collective bargaining agreement.

"If players have complaints about the regulations, they should contact their union, which negotiated them," the statement reads. "We have informed the union that we are prepared to negotiate rules providing players with more flexibility, and that issue is currently being discussed as part of a larger discussion about apparel and equipment."

Cubs manager Joe Maddon, who once had to appeal to MLB to be allowed to wear a hoodie in the dugout, has Zobrist's back.

"I love the shoes that he's wearing, and the reason that he gave was outstanding," Maddon said. "I'm right on board with it, absolutely."

Workload watch

The Cubs are two games into a stretch of 11 games in 10 days, including a doubleheader next Saturday in Cincinnati. That makes the 7 1/3 innings the bullpen has worked the last two days a factor as Kyle Hendricks starts the series finale Sunday against the Sox.

Hendricks has made a habit in his career of making deep starts after heavy bullpen use, including pitching eight innings in his last start after back-to-back extra-inning games.

"You have it in the back of your mind, for sure," Hendricks said of those starts.

"If players have complaints about the regulations, they should contact their union which negotiated them," the statement reads. "We have informed the union that we are prepared to negotiate rules providing players with more flexibility, and that issue is currently being discussed as part of a larger discussion about apparel and equipment."

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Daily Herald

Chicago Cubs' Zobrist has issue with MLB's issue
By Bruce Miles

Chicago Cubs infielder-outfielder Ben Zobrist every now and then sports one of the most old-school looks in baseball when he wears stirrup socks and black spikes.

But Major League Baseball doesn't think it's so cool, and it has threatened to fine Zobrist because the shoes are not in keeping with the primary color of the team's shoe, which is expected to be 51 percent blue.

Zobrist took to his Instagram account to protest, beginning with: "Dear @mlb, I still like you but this is ridiculous."

The 36-year-old veteran, the MVP of the 2016 World Series, went on to write: "For the last two years I have worn black spikes exclusively at Wrigley Field for day games to pay homage to the history of our great game, and now I am being told I will be fined and disciplined if I continue to wear them."

ESPN reported that MLB responded to it with a statement saying: "We have shoe regulations that were negotiated with the union in the last round of bargaining. If players have complaints about the regulations, they should contact their union which negotiated them. We have informed the union that we are prepared to negotiate rules providing players with more flexibility, and that issue is currently being discussed as part of a larger discussion about apparel and equipment."

After the Cubs beat the White Sox 8-4 on Saturday, Zobrist greeted reporters but said he didn't want to discuss the issue until he talks with the players association and with Major League Baseball.

He is hot:

Catcher Willson Contreras hit his third home run in two games, a 2-run shot in the seventh inning. He has homered in consecutive games for the sixth time in his career. He is 10-for-15 with 3 doubles, 2 triples, 3 homers, 11 RBI and 5 runs scored in his last three games.

Not looking like a rookie:

Rookie David Bote started at second base and had his first career multihit game, going 2-for-3 with a walk, a stolen base and an RBI.

"He just seemed to handle himself extremely well, and he was not in a hurry," manager Joe Maddon said. "I like when guys are confident and not in a hurry, and that's what I saw with him, too."

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Daily Herald

Another lineup change pays off for Cubs

By Bruce Miles

Joe Maddon made another leap of faith with his lineup Saturday and wound up landing in a pile of gold.

This time, the Cubs manager put free-swinging Javier Baez into the leadoff spot, and right from the get-go, the move paid dividends.

Baez tripled to right field in the bottom of the first inning, sparking a 4-run outburst as the Cubs eventually held on to beat the White Sox 8-4 at Wrigley Field in a game delayed 2 hours, 15 minutes at the start by rain.

Anthony Rizzo hit a 3-run homer in the first. After that, Baez had a second-inning single and used his hand-deke movement to steal second base. Playing third base, he also made a nice catch of a popup at the dugout, right in front of the TV cameras.

This guy is show time in all phases of the game, in whatever sport it may be.

"He's an exciting point guard," said Maddon, whose team won its fifth in a row to improve to 21-15.

"You got to keep your eye on him. He's Tiny Archibald, Norm Van Lier. You got to watch him. He could

have that impact anywhere -- in the box, running the bases, making a tag, making a play, catching a popup in the dugout and smiling for the cameras.

"He does it. I saw all of that. He's just on cue all the time."

Even so, Baez sounded like a reluctant leading man. He has batted low in the order this year and as high as second but not first in 2018.

"Um, I don't mind it," he said with some hesitation. "It feels weird, but I see more pitches. I get a lot more ABs. Yeah, sure, I don't mind it."

For the second day in a row, the Cubs jumped on the White Sox early. They scored 5 in the first inning Friday and put up 4 against veteran James Shields to begin Saturday's ballgame. Rizzo's 3-run homer was his sixth of the season and his fifth in May. The Cubs batted around, with rookie No. 8 hitter David Bote adding an RBI single.

Starting pitcher Jon Lester fell one out short of qualifying for a quality start, as he lasted 5⅓ innings. But he did earn the win to improve to 3-1 with a 2.66 ERA.

Lester also knows a little about showmen, so he has some perspective when it comes to rating players like Baez, exciting as he may be.

"You forget I played with David Ortiz," Lester said, referring to his former Boston Red Sox teammate. "He's Big Papi for a reason. But Javy's up there. Javy obviously plays a position. David didn't have the flair in the infield, nor did we want him there, but I've never seen a stadium stop as much as I have when David would come on deck.

"People always want to give these guys this superstar status. David was a superstar, and there was a reason why he was. Javy, I think, can be there one day. I think he has the flair. He knows the game better than a lot of guys give him credit for. He's just so smart, and he's so athletic that he can make up for mistakes, and I think that's where you see the swim move (stealing the base), running the bases. The game just looks easy to him when he's out there. I think he has definitely that potential to be that guy."

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Daily Herald

Rozner: Cubs, Sox series far from a crosstown classic

By Barry Rozner

The Cubs and White Sox each played their 36th game of the season Saturday.

After a weather delay of 2:15, they actually played the game, much as they did Friday in awful weather.

That's the entirety of the significance of this matchup.

They got the game in at Wrigley Field and that matters because the schedule simply provides so little space for more makeups after the brutal early-season conditions forced so many cancellations.

Other than that, these are merely regular-season games that the Cubs need to win against a bad team, and games the Sox have to play because they're on the schedule.

So we can stop pretending there's some importance beyond that.

"We're just trying to win a game," said Sox third baseman Matt Davidson, after they lost their seventh straight. "It doesn't matter who it's against."

There's no rivalry here when one team is terrible and one team is trying to win the World Series, and neither team tried very hard to sell it as something else this weekend.

Not even fans can manufacture hatred when there's nothing special going on, and it doesn't help that it's cold and raining, and sitting outside for terrible games isn't a whole bunch of fun.

It's not a secret that the Sox are trying to develop young players while preparing for another big draft, and the Cubs are going about the business of getting their act together after an ugly first month of baseball.

It's really an unfair fight, the Cubs crushing the Sox Friday and again on Saturday, the Sox looking much like the Cubs did a few years ago during their rebuild, and the Cubs getting fat on a horrible pitching staff.

The crosstown games haven't had much meaning -- beyond the standings -- in 10 years, which was the last time both teams were good and could muster up some intensity.

Any suggestion to the contrary is insulting to the fans' intelligence and the players' integrity. They have zero interest in pretending that there's something big happening here, especially when it's so tough for the South Siders.

By the time Saturday's festivities concluded at 6:55 p.m., only a couple thousand frozen fans remained and they could barely locate enough energy to sing their favorite song, which was of no interest to the visiting players.

"We are not just sitting here thinking, 'Oh well, next year is going to be better,' " Davidson said. "We're trying. We're not enjoying it. We want to go out and win.

"Hopefully everything turns and we get the ball rolling."

Yeah, that's not going to happen. The Sox (9-27) have the worst record in baseball and are on pace for a 41-121 record, not quite the 1962 Mets (40-120), but awfully close so far.

Meanwhile, the Cubs have properly taken advantage of the Marlins and White Sox to get fat at home before four games with the Braves, who went into Saturday night in first place in the N.L. East.

The Cubs have shown they can beat up on some bad teams and now at least for a few days they'll get a test with a very good and young Atlanta team before a series at Cincinnati.

There will be some buzz in Atlanta for a set that matters to both clubs, unlike what's taking place at Wrigley Field right now.

And that's OK.

It's a long season and not every series is going to feel like the Red Sox and Yankees did last week.

There's also no reason to pretend otherwise.

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Daily Herald

Cubs start fast again, hold on to beat White Sox

By Bruce Miles

For the second day in a row, the Chicago Cubs struck quickly and went on to beat the Chicago White Sox.

The Cubs scored 4 runs in the first inning Saturday and went on to beat the Sox 8-4 at Wrigley Field. The victory was the Cubs' fifth in a row, and it improved their record to 21-15. The White Sox dropped their seventh straight, falling to 9-27. The game was delayed 2 hours, 15 minutes by rain at the start.

Just as they did in Friday's 11-2 victory, the Cubs enjoyed a big first inning. After scoring 5 runs in the first on Friday, the Cubs got 4 in the first Saturday, with Anthony Rizzo hitting a 3-run homer.

Jon Lester started for the Cubs and worked 5⅔ innings, giving up 4 hits and 1 run.

James Shields worked for the Sox and gave up 7 hits and 5 runs in 6 innings.

Cubs catcher Willson Contreras homered in the seventh, giving him 3 homers in two days. Matt Davidson hit a 3-run homer for the Sox in the eighth against Cubs reliever Carl Edwards Jr.

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The Athletic

The race against Father Time continues for old foes Jon Lester and James Shields

By Sahadev Sharma

From young bucks igniting a new rivalry between AL East foes to wily vets battling in an intra-city matchup, Jon Lester and James Shields have seen a lot in their combined 26 years in the big leagues. They continue into their 13th season in a race against Father Time.

Cubs manager Joe Maddon watched as Shields emerged as the leader of a Tampa Bay Rays pitching staff that helped surprise the baseball world as they went from the butt of jokes — much like these Chicago Cubs — to a World Series appearance in 2008.

“The thing that defines him is his competitive nature,” Maddon said. “He’s a tough guy. He’s the guy that taught the Rays starting pitchers how to work.”

Shields was the leader of that staff, and when he was traded to Kansas City prior to the 2013 season, he helped usher in a new culture with the Royals as they made the World Series in 2014 and ultimately won it after his departure in 2015.

But Shields isn’t close to the pitcher he was back then. No longer is he the leader of a playoff staff or garnering Cy Young and down-ballot MVP votes. As Maddon pointed out, “he’s kind of re-invented himself,” going with a bit of a side-arm delivery. He’s switching up how often he uses each pitch, but in the end, the results have been much of the same for Shields over the past two-plus seasons — his 5.44 ERA, and his 13.5 percent strikeout rate and 10.6 percent walk rate, show he’s not fooling too many batters.

The Cubs bats took advantage of those weaknesses on Saturday as they got to Shields early and the White Sox bullpen late, taking the second game of the series 8-4 at Wrigley Field. As Shields plays out the end of his career on a bad White Sox team, Lester continues to shine for a Cubs team with a realistic shot at their second World Series win in three years.

After years of intense matchups with the Rays and Red Sox, Shields and Lester are still going at it.

“We’ve had a few battles along the way,” Lester said. “It’s just cool to face somebody that’s the same age as you instead of dealing with our team all the time. We’ve gone at it a few times back in the day. I guess it’s nice to face him. But I’m just glad we won. I don’t really care who we faced.”

Like Shields, Lester hardly looks like the Cy Young caliber pitcher he was when he arrived in Chicago. But as he allows others around him to get the headlines — Kris Bryant, Willson Contreras, Javy Báez — the veteran continues to age gracefully. And he continues to show the baseball world exactly why Theo Epstein and company were so willing to invest six years and \$155 million in his left arm.

As he enters his mid-30s, Lester’s velocity on his four-seam fastball continues to dip. After sitting at 93.1 mph in 2016 (when he finished second in Cy Young voting), it fell to 91.8 mph last season (one of the worst years of his career) and this season, entering Saturday, he was averaging 91.4 mph on his four-seamer. Against the White Sox, Lester averaged 90.7 mph on the pitch. But still, he remained effective.

He uses his two-seamer less, goes to his changeup a bit more often, but for the most part, he sticks with his four-seam, cutter and curveball like he has for much of his career — on Saturday, 84 of his 92 pitches came from those three primary offerings.

With his 5 2/3 innings of one-run ball, Lester’s ERA dropped to a strong 2.66 on the season. His five strikeouts actually increased his strikeout rate to 19.1 percent this year (the league average is 22.7 percent) and the three walks bumped his walk rate to 10.6 percent, which would be his highest since becoming a full-time starter in 2008. Needless to say, the peripherals don’t match the ERA.

But part of becoming a so-called wily veteran is being better than what the peripheral numbers may suggest. Lester has never overpowered opponents, and perhaps what’s happening now quickly fades and he begins to struggle to get away with the semi-frequent walks and low strikeout rate.

But like Shields did in Tampa, Kansas City and even now on the South Side, Lester brings a little more than just an on-field presence. He’s helped Kyle Hendricks emerge as a legitimate option to open the playoffs for the Cubs. José Quintana is a Lester clone, a half dozen years younger, and can certainly learn from how the vet goes about his business on and off the field. Perhaps he can even guide Yu Darvish and Tyler Chatwood as they attempt to navigate struggles in a new frontier on the North Side. Even Maddon has made a point of mentioning how Lester has emerged as a more vocal leader in the clubhouse.

Those things all matter, of course. But Lester still being a productive part of the rotation even as he enters the second-half of his megadeal with the Cubs is what’s most important. Epstein envisioned an Andy Pettitte-like ending for Lester, one in which he may not be Cy Young caliber, but certainly still effective and efficient. And while some may wait for the other shoe to drop, Maddon only expects the crafty lefty to improve as the season goes on.

“He knows what he’s doing,” Maddon said. “He just knows what he’s doing out there. Even when he’s missing, he’s not missing by a lot. Jonny’s been really good. It’s a nice body of work moving forward. I think he’s going to get better actually during the season.”

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The Athletic

Why Kris Bryant is the perfect player for modern Major League Baseball

By Patrick Mooney

Brian Butterfield studied video of Kris Bryant last year, preparing scouting reports as a Boston Red Sox coach before three April games hyped as a potential World Series preview at Fenway Park.

Butterfield's late father, Jack, had been a vice president of scouting and player development for the New York Yankees. The son made his mark in pinstripes with a young Derek Jeter, drilling the shortstop after a 56-error season in the minors. The Cubs wanted that experience, energy and attention to detail when they hired Butterfield as the new third base coach in charge of infield and base-running instruction.

What Butterfield has seen up close at Wrigley Field only reinforces what the Red Sox noticed about Bryant.

"We told all of our infielders, you better make sure that you get the ball in the air, because he's going to give you a great effort down the line," Butterfield said. "Also, he's going to take advantage. He's a great two-base runner and a great three-base runner, so be ready. When you start singing the praises of a player in this league about his effort, his anticipation, that's always a high mark, because there's not enough of it going on."

In so many ways, Bryant is the perfect player for modern Major League Baseball.

It's not just living up to manager Joe Maddon's "Respect 90" philosophy. It's being able to play third base, move to the other side of the infield for defensive shifts, back up first baseman Anthony Rizzo and cover all three outfield spots. It's being so far ahead of the curve with the fly-ball revolution. It's showing some personality in commercials and viral videos at a time when the game struggles to connect to a younger generation and move beyond its regional footprints.

"The sky's the limit," Maddon said. "The guy's dedicated, motivated, athletic. He takes care of himself. Multiple positions, MVP winner who does not care where you put him in the lineup, whether it's offensively or defensively. He's kind of the manager's dream."

A White Sox weekend at Wrigley Field is a good time to remember that the renovation might look completely different if the Houston Astros took Bryant instead of pitcher Mark Appel with the No. 1 overall pick in the 2013 draft.

In so many ways, Bryant is a freak, getting covered and marketed like a franchise savior from the moment he got drafted out of the University of San Diego. Prospects are written about with a never-before-seen intensity and Bryant came up in an organization that hadn't won a World Series since 1908 and desperately needed him to develop into an All-Star player, sooner rather than later.

And then Bryant struck out three times against James Shields and the San Diego Padres in his big-league debut on April 17, 2015. This market is not for the faint of heart – especially when your shoe sponsor put up a "WORTH THE WAIT" billboard near the Wrigley Field marquee. Fast forward through the rain delay that lasted 2 hours and 15 minutes on Saturday afternoon and the Cubs jumped Shields during an 8-4 victory, extending their winning streak to five games and showing how far the White Sox still have to go in their rebuild.

“Our fans are riding the rollercoaster with us,” Bryant said. “The highs can be a lot more exaggerated, and the lows the same thing. Just as baseball players, we’re always taught to kind of level those out as much as possible.

“But I know for fans, not really having a control over the game, they’re not in there playing, so it’s very understandable why when we’re not doing so well, they’re down in the dumps, too. We totally get it.”

Since his service-time delay, Bryant has played in 95 percent of the team’s regular-season games and every inning in all 36 playoff games during the Maddon Era. Front offices now build rosters with flexibility and matchups in mind, trying to maximize performance through data, rest and recovery. When Jason Heyward goes onto the seven-day concussion disabled list, Bryant can seamlessly replace a five-time Gold Glove winner after getting minimal work in right field during spring training.

“Where Joe is not afraid to move guys around, he gives us great versatility in our lineup,” Butterfield said. “To be able to move a player of his magnitude in a bunch of different positions just makes you that much better.”

Bryant has a simple explanation for his versatility that does not involve defensive metrics or market inefficiencies or sports science.

“You can’t always bat third and play short when you’re the coach’s kid,” Bryant said, “so I moved literally all around the field. I caught. I played left, right, second base. It really makes me feel like a kid again, so I really do enjoy that. It always puts a smile on my face.”

On some level, the player Butterfield analyzed on video last year can be traced back to Fenway Park and what Bryant’s father, Mike, learned from Ted Williams as a hitter in Boston’s farm system in the early 1980s. Growing up in Las Vegas – in a world without Statcast – Bryant learned all about launch angle from his dad in their batting cage.

“I don’t think he called it that,” Maddon said. “I think he just told him to hit the ball in the air. Mr. Williams talked about how he always liked a little bit of an uppercut to the swing.

“Again, the fact that Kris has done it so long – and that’s who he is – that’s why it works. Take Kris right now – had he not been doing that and all of a sudden tried to teach him to do that – I think it would be very difficult.”

As the Cubs rework their offensive philosophy again – de-emphasizing launch angle to a certain degree and talking up mental approach – it has become clear that Bryant essentially serves as his own hitting coach.

The same hitter who led the National League with 199 strikeouts as a rookie – and finished top 10 in that category in 2016 – has sliced his strikeout percentage almost 15 points since 2015 (down to roughly 16 percent). A recent power surge boosted Bryant to the top of the NL leaderboard in OPS (1.047) on Saturday and made him the fastest Cub to 100 career home runs.

“He’s not missing his pitch,” Maddon said. “Period. He’s seeing it right now.”

Add it all up and this is why president of baseball operations Theo Epstein saw it as a no-brainer decision to start Bryant’s 2015 season at Triple-A Iowa. Whatever your franchise needs, super-agent Scott Boras

can sell Bryant at four corner positions after the 2021 season, three years after Bryce Harper might reset the market for an elite middle-of-the-order hitter.

As front offices changed the way they viewed free agents, Heyward got \$184 million guaranteed for his youth and defensive excellence. Ben Zobrist got \$56 million guaranteed through his age-38 season for his versatility and clutch hitting. Jon Lester got \$155 million guaranteed from a last-place team for his durability and big-game experience.

At the age of 26, Bryant already checks all those boxes and comes with no off-the-field questions marks plus the willingness to be a face of the franchise.

Just look at how hard Bryant runs to first base.

"There's some guys that carry the torch pretty well, but he does an outstanding job," Butterfield said. "Whether he is going real well or he's struggling, he's still going to give you great effort on the bases. That's a great character gauge when you see the way a guy treats baserunning. And he treats it with so much respect that it's a high character mark for me."

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Cubs.com

Cubs, Contreras power way to 5th straight win

By Carrie Muskat

CHICAGO -- Cubs manager Joe Maddon isn't surprised at how well Willson Contreras is playing these days. Maddon saw it last year right after the All-Star break. What's been nice is that Contreras' teammates are joining in.

Contreras drove in three runs, including a pair on his third homer of the series, and Anthony Rizzo continued his May surge with a three-run homer to back Jon Lester and lead the Cubs to an 8-4 Interleague victory over the crosstown-rival White Sox on Saturday at Wrigley Field. The North Siders have now won five in a row and outscored their opponents, 50-15, in that stretch.

Contreras has provided a spark.

"It's no surprise to me -- I think that's who he is," Maddon said of Contreras, who is 10-for-15 with three doubles, two triples, three homers and 11 RBIs in his last three games. "When he's right, he hits better pitching, he hits better pitching hard, he puts balls in gaps and over walls. He'll move the baseball with two strikes. That's what I'm seeing, and on top of that, his catching is very good, too."

White Sox manager Rick Renteria also sees it.

"He's certainly in a zone," Renteria said. "Anything that's out over the plate, he's not missing. ... He's locked in right now. There's no doubt he's feeling good. He's a guy you try to be careful with, but he seems to still be able to put the bat on the ball and do some pretty good damage."

Lester appreciates what his catcher is doing. Now, if the rain would just cooperate, Lester will be fine. His last outing on Sunday against the Cardinals was interrupted twice by the weather, and the start of Saturday's game was delayed 2 hours, 15 minutes because of rain. The lefty scattered four hits over 5 2/3 innings, striking out five, and he has a 1.82 ERA over his last five starts.

"Can we just not get any rain one time?" Lester said. "I'm sure in Atlanta [when he makes his next start] it'll rain again, and we'll have another delay, and it'll be three in a row."

Javier Baez, leading off for the first time this season, tripled, singled, stole a base and scored two runs, deftly avoiding tags. He showed off his Twister-like moves in the second, when he stole second, somehow reaching around the bag to avoid shortstop Tim Anderson's tag. Baez also dashed home on Contreras' single later that frame and dodged a tag at home.

"He's just so smart and so athletic that he can make up for mistakes," Lester said. "That's where you see the swim move [at second] today and running the bases. The game just looks easy to him. He has the potential to be that guy."

Rizzo, who batted .149 with one home run in March and April combined, hit his fifth homer this month in the first inning off White Sox starter James Shields. He's now batting .342 with 14 RBIs in May.

"It's just a matter of time," Maddon said of Rizzo.

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Four-run first: Baez tripled to right to start the Cubs' first. Kris Bryant then walked and Rizzo followed with his sixth home run, launching the first pitch he saw from Shields 380 feet and into the bleachers in left-center. One out later, Kyle Schwarber walked and Addison Russell singled, and one out later, David Bote hit an RBI single to open a 4-0 lead. Shields needed 36 pitches to get through the first. Baez was the sixth player to lead off for the Cubs this season.

"I don't mind it," Baez said about leading off. "It feels weird. I see more pitches. I get at least one more [at-bat]. For sure, I don't mind it."

SOUND SMART

Contreras, who turns 26 on Sunday, has been on fire. He has 10 RBIs in the series, which is tied for the second most in the National League for a single series, with one game left to play. He's had at least three hits in three straight games for the first time in his career, and he is the first Cubs player to do that since Bryant did so on Aug. 11-13, 2017.

HE SAID IT

"Just how dynamic it is throughout their lineup. One through nine, they execute. You know they're aggressive, they take pitches when they need to and they get on base when they need to. So, it's a tough lineup." -- Shields, on the Cubs

UP NEXT

Kyle Hendricks will close the series against the White Sox. Hendricks has gone at least seven innings in his last three starts, including a season-high eight innings against the Marlins in his last outing. He is 0-1 with a 3.98 ERA in four career starts against the White Sox. First pitch is scheduled for 1:20 p.m. CT at Wrigley Field, and the Sox will counter with right-hander Lucas Giolito.

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Cubs.com

New spot, same Javy: Baez brings leadoff flair
By Carrie Muskat

CHICAGO -- Javier Baez can't explain how he makes that swim move when he slides into second base to avoid a tag. It's part of the magic of Javy.

Baez became the sixth player to lead off this season for the Cubs, and he provided a spark with a leadoff triple on Saturday in an 8-4 victory over the White Sox at Wrigley Field.

Baez also showed off his moves in the second. He reached on an infield single to open the inning, and one out later, he stole second, somehow reaching around the bag to avoid White Sox shortstop Tim Anderson's tag.

"I was surprised [catcher Wellington Castillo] saw me," Baez said. "I went on delay, and they usually don't see me until it's too late. I guess they did their homework. They have my plan.

"I don't know how to explain it. When [Anderson] caught the ball, everything slowed down for me. That's how I see it. I just went around the tag. I don't know how I do it, I don't know how I react to it. I just have it in my mind."

After Anthony Rizzo walked, Baez then tallied on Willson Contreras' single to center while also avoiding a tag at home plate.

Cubs pitcher Jon Lester has seen plenty of Baez highlights.

"David [Ortiz] was a superstar, and there was a reason why he was," Lester said. "Javy, I think, can be there one day. He has the flair, he knows the game better than a lot of guys give him credit for. He's just so smart and so athletic that he can make up for mistakes. That's where you see the swim move today and running the bases. The game just looks easy to him. He has the potential to be that guy."

Cubs manager Joe Maddon likes to compare Baez to an NBA point guard.

"You've got to keep your eye on him," Maddon said. "He's Tiny Archibald, Norm Van Lier. You've got to watch [Baez]. He could have that impact anywhere -- in the box, running the bases, making a tag, making a play, catching a popup in the dugout and smiling for the cameras, he does it. He's just on cue all the time."

Maddon admits Baez isn't a prototypical player for the leadoff spot. Rizzo and Contreras also have been inserted there this season. Has the concept changed?

"I think it has something to do with the lack of leadoff hitters -- the prototypical guy who really runs well, gets on base a lot and has a little bit of pop," Maddon said Saturday. "We had it with Dexter [Fowler]. Dex provided all that. But you look around and there aren't a lot of those guys out there, that scary first guy."

Maddon is looking for energy as well as the ability to get on base from the No. 1 batter.

"You're looking for a guy who, even when he's not hitting well, can still get on base somehow," Maddon said. "That doesn't happen as often. Barry Bonds would be a perfect leadoff hitter, because they used to walk him all the time anyway. He'd be the perfect example of somebody where you would hit the pitcher eighth and get somebody ahead of him who gets on base. The attitudes have changed."

Ben Zobrist will likely wind up with the most at-bats at the top of the order, Maddon said.

"In a perfect world for us, when Zo's available and I want to play him, and he's hitting left-handed, I think he's the right guy," Maddon said.

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Cubs.com

What a year it's been: Happ reflects on callup
By Carrie Muskat

CHICAGO -- Sunday marks the one-year anniversary of Ian Happ's first callup to the Cubs, and he'll be able to celebrate that as well as Mother's Day.

How different has it been for Happ? Now, he's playing golf with Jon Lester and joking with Anthony Rizzo. A year ago, he couldn't imagine that.

"It is crazy to think it was a year ago," Happ said Saturday. "I was sitting down with the family -- Mom's in town for Mother's Day, and we were sitting down [Friday] and thinking that was a year ago in Salt Lake [with the Triple-A Iowa team]. It's a pretty big change, and cool to reflect on the last year and how special it's been."

His pink bats didn't get to the ballpark in time for his debut, so he couldn't celebrate Mother's Day that way last year. He did get his pink bats this year as well as some pink shoes, which is all part of Major League Baseball's "Going to Bat Against Breast Cancer" initiative.

Happ, who hit 24 home runs -- including a homer in his Major League debut -- and batted .253 in 115 games last season, said he felt like one of the guys as soon as he joined the Cubs in St. Louis in May 2017.

"To be a part of this thing and feel like you belong here is cool," Happ said. "A year ago, I came up and was just trying to help for a few days, and I ended up staying. Coming to camp this year and being part of the team, and now on the team and with these guys, it's pretty cool."

Bote's versatility appeals to Maddon

David Bote, 25, was an 18th-round pick in the 2012 Draft, and he got Maddon's attention this spring with his versatile play.

"He's probably one of those guys the gaggle of scouts wasn't talking about," Maddon said. "When the gaggle gets together, they anoint people to be the next whatever."

"I like him, I really think he's a good player, and I think the way he's gotten here is going to speak well for him. Also, I like guys from Colorado. They don't play a lot growing up. The weather's bad to the point where the season is normally shorter, and guys like that really blossom later if they're good. I think he might be one of those guys."

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ESPNChicago.com

Ben Zobrist asks MLB for leniency on rule for shoe color
By Jesse Rogers

CHICAGO -- Chicago Cubs veteran Ben Zobrist is publicly asking Major League Baseball to lighten the restrictions regarding the color of his spikes after he received a letter of warning from the league.

Zobrist took to Instagram to plead his case:

The league claims Zobrist is violating the rule that requires at least 51 percent "of the exterior of each player's shoes be the club's designated primary shoe color." The letter claims Zobrist broke that rule on May 2 in a game against the Colorado Rockies.

In his Instagram post, Zobrist says he was inspired by great players such as Ernie Banks and Stan Musial and was "captured" by the uniforms and "all black cleats with flaps."

Zobrist included a picture of his cleats as well as the letter sent to him by the league. He signed his post, "Sincerely, Ben Zobrist."

"We have shoe regulations that were negotiated with the union in the last round of bargaining," MLB said in a statement to ESPN. "If players have complaints about the regulations, they should contact their union which negotiated them. We have informed the union that we are prepared to negotiate rules providing players with more flexibility, and that issue is currently being discussed as part of a larger discussion about apparel and equipment."

Zobrist would not address the shoe issue after Saturday's game, saying he wants to talk with the league and players' union first.

Manager Joe Maddon backed Zobrist and recalled his own hoodie hoopla when he was managing Tampa Bay. MLB told Maddon that he wasn't allowed to use the hoodie that he often would wear on cold days at the ballpark, and ruled he and other managers and coaches could wear only approved jerseys and outerwear. A few days later, baseball reversed the ruling.

Maddon then got a Patriots hoodie with "J.M." on the front in the mail from none other than Bill Belichick. As for Zobrist's cleats?

"I love the shoes that he's wearing, and the reason that he gave is outstanding," Maddon said. "You know him. If that's coming out of his mouth, it's legit. He was doing that to bring back the history of the game. Hopefully, kids are watching. Those are the kind of things your kids are looking for, and I'm right on board with it -- absolutely."

In addition to Zobrist, Cleveland Indians pitcher Mike Clevinger recently got a letter from MLB warning him that his tie-dyed cleats also violate the rule.

Information from The Associated Press was used in this report.

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NBC Sports Chicago

Javy of all trades: Baez's offensive versatility gives Cubs a new dimension

By Tony Andracki

Javy Baez can hit anywhere in the Cubs lineup.

Literally.

In Saturday's game against the White Sox, Baez found himself leading off against James Shields, giving him an at-bat in every slot in the batting order 1-through-9. (He hasn't drawn a start in the 5-hole or No. 9 spot, but has entered there as a pinch-hitter or part of a double switch.)

Baez immediately provided that "energy" Joe Maddon loves to see from him atop the order, lining the second pitch of the game into the right field corner and hustling in for a leadoff triple, never hesitating despite a clean pickup from White Sox right fielder Trayce Thompson.

Seven pitches later, Baez scored the game's first run on Anthony Rizzo's dinger as the Cubs unloaded on a White Sox starter in the first inning for the second straight day.

Baez led off the second inning, too, this time hitting a tapper to the right side of the infield and beating Shields to the bag with a headfirst dive.

"El Mago" later swiped second base on a delayed steal and swim move...

...and scored on Willson Contreras' groundball single, sliding past Sox catcher Welington Castillo with another acrobatic maneuver.

Just another way Baez can help the Cubs pickup wins on top of his gamechanging defense, mind-bending tags and ability to hit any pitch — even those outside of the strike zone — into the bleachers at any time.

"Eventually, he can almost hit anywhere," Maddon said. "I've had to use him at the bottom [of the lineup] because he swings and misses a lot, but he's cut down on that. A swing-and-miss guy like that with power, you don't want him in front of your better guys because he can clean stuff up.

"A lot of his RBIs, to me, are the residue of that. Although he's done some really good work in the 2-hole, also. But yeah, we're still figuring the whole thing out."

The reason Maddon opted to go with Baez as the leadoff hitter Saturday was he believed it was a good matchup against Shields, who actually is tougher on left-handed hitters than righties so far in 2018.

Baez has also, surprisingly, fared much better against righties this year, coming into the game with a .305 average and 1.011 OPS vs. RHP compared to a .211 AVG and .742 OPS vs. southpaws.

From 2015-17, Baez sported a .257 AVG and .712 OPS vs. righties compared to a .321 AVG and .906 OPS vs. lefties.

That step forward in his development has been a big reason why Baez woke up Saturday morning leading the National League in RBI.

In Friday's series opener with the Sox, Baez had one of his patented wild, out-of-control swings where he actually dropped to one knee. But he came right back on the next pitch, shortened his stroke, stayed under control and lined a two-strike offering into center for a sacrifice fly to bring home a run. Before 2018, that at-bat almost assuredly would've ended in another strikeout for Baez's total and instead turned into an RBI.

Baez still doesn't walk much — his season 4.2 walk percentage is below his career mark (5 percent) and it's buoyed by 4 intentional walks — but his strikeouts are down to a career-low 20.4 percent.

It's been a calendar month since Baez last walked (April 11) and he has only drawn two unintentional free passes all year.

"It's just a matter of the on-base thing. Just accepting your walks," Maddon said. "That's the one item I'd like to see him get better at. He's never going to be the poster child for that. He's not going to be that, so I'm not anticipating that.

"But just continue to work the good at-bat, move the ball, stay in your strike zone. Because when he does make contact, something good normally happens.

"He's still ascending. He's still got things to learn. The power is there, you can see that. He's been really good with runners in scoring position, you can see that. ... The sky is the limit."

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NBC Sports Chicago

Ben Zobrist takes to Instagram to put MLB on blast

By Tony Andracki

Joe Maddon once said he knows an umpire really made a mistake if Ben Zobrist is arguing...especially on a Sunday.

Maddon was mostly joking, but he's also seen a whole lot of the veteran utility player over the last decade and knows the religious, mild-mannered Zobrist is not one to create conflict often.

Which is part of the reason why Saturday's Instagram post is so shocking.

Well, that and the fact that it sure seems like Major League Baseball has a silly policy dictating dress code, so it's easy to side with Zobrist here.

The Cubs second baseman/outfielder put the MLB on blast a couple hours before Saturday's game against the White Sox and then entered the game in the ninth inning as a defensive replacement still wearing the black shoes.

It reads:

Dear @mlb, I still like you but this is ridiculous. For the last two years, I have worn black spikes exclusively at Wrigley Field for Day games to pay homage to the history of our great game, and now I am being told I will be fined and disciplined if I continue to wear them. When I was a kid, I was inspired by highlights of the greats such as Ernie Banks and Stan Musial in the 1950s-60s and was captured by the old uniforms and all black cleats with flaps. @newbalancebaseball made a kid's dream come true by making some all black spikes with the special tongue as well as the "Benny the Jet" @pf_flyers cleats. I am curious as to why @mlb is spending time and money enforcing this now when they haven't done it previously in the last year and beyond. I have heard nothing but compliments from fans that enjoy the "old school" look. Maybe there is some kid out there that will be inspired to look more into the history of the game by the "flexibility" that I prefer in the color of my shoes. Sincerely,
Ben Zobrist

Zobrist enjoys paying tribute to the history of the game and he may know more about Cubs lore than any other player in the clubhouse given he grew up in Central Illinois.

Zobrist often rides his bike to games and sports P.F. Flyers and stirrups and other apparel that make fans think about "the good ole days" at Wrigley Field and the movie "Sandlot."

MLB responded with a statement:

"We have shoe regulations that were negotiated with the union in the last round of bargaining. If players have complaints about the regulations, they should contact their union which negotiated them. We have informed the union that we are prepared to negotiate rules providing players with more flexibility, and that issue is currently being discussed as part of a larger discussion about apparel and equipment."

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