



CHICAGO CUBS DAILY CLIPS

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- The Athletic, **The good, the bad and the complicated in the Cubs' minors early this season**
<https://theathletic.com/350451/2018/05/14/the-good-the-bad-and-the-complicated-in-the-cubs-minors-early-this-season/>
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- Cubs.com, **Schwarber throws out Freeman on bizarre play**
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The Athletic

The good, the bad and the complicated in the Cubs' minors early this season

By Rob Huff

Despite the high rate of prospect turnover, Cubs fans can take solace in appreciating that the front office has identified and the minor league instructors have developed a bunch of major league talent. Eloy Jiménez is knocking on the door. Jeimer Candelario has starred in Detroit. Isaac Paredes has morphed into a premium prospect. And while Pedro Araujo is serving up gopher balls for the Orioles — it seems that two innings above High-A didn't adequately prepare him to evade major league power — he's also striking out over 11 batters per nine through 13 major league appearances.

So even if you don't recognize the names below as premium talents, there's a pretty good chance that the Cubs' player development system is going to turn a few of these prospects into real players. Below is a look at the Cubs' minor leagues through the first quarter of the season (May 10).

The good

While David Bote or even Jeffrey Baez earned their fair share of recognition, one player stood above the rest — Kutztown University product and 19th-round draft pick (2016) Matt Swarmer. The 6-foot-5 righty is already 24 and just at High-A with a clunky delivery where his leg kick reaches near his shoulder height and an arsenal that fails to stand out (low-90s straight fastball, low-80s curve and a new low-80s changeup). But after keeping his walk rate below two per nine last year and his strikeout rate north of nine per nine, his first 27 1/3 innings at High-A have featured elite per nine rates: 10.87 strikeouts, 0.99 walks, and no homers, yielding a 1.32 ERA supported fully by a 1.49 FIP.

Some other impressive early-season performances from the farm:

Aforementioned outfielder Jeffrey Baez consistently produced with the bat in the lower levels of the minors from 2011-2015, showing above-average power and solid on-base skills, but that production vanished in 2016-17 as he combined below-average offense with below-average defense. But so far, Baez has clicked at Double-A. Despite an elevated 28.3 percent strikeout rate, Baez has smashed his way to a .337/.408/.593 line, complete with four homers and a truly impressive nine stolen bases.

Third baseman David Bote made his way to Chicago already on the heels of a scorching start at Iowa, where his 89 plate appearances produced a .333/.393/.605 line with strong outcomes when he didn't put the ball in play (9 percent walk rate, 18 percent strikeout rate) and more over-the-fence power than he has previously shown (five homers). His emergence continues to be one of the great storylines on the farm, fueled further by the appearance that he belongs during his brief stints in Chicago.

Triple-A outfielder Mark Zagunis continues to own each plate appearance, as evidenced by his .298/.412/.436 line over 115 plate appearances, including a ludicrous 14.8 percent walk rate against a 15.7 percent strikeout rate. He's done developing offensively in the minors.

After floundering at Double-A for nearly 200 innings as a result of numerous walks, former second-rounder Duane Underwood has reemerged at Triple-A, earning a 3.10 FIP over 27 2/3 innings thanks to 8.78 strikeouts per nine against just 1.30 walks. If Underwood has really turned a corner with regard to his free passes, he's going to find his way to the majors soon.

To be noticed as a Double-A reliever, something really needs to stand out. For Craig Brooks, 22 strikeouts in 15 innings has done the trick.

A trio of recent high, but not elite, starting pitching draft picks have ridden high-strikeout/low-walk starts to success thus far. Tyson Miller (fourth round, 2016) has succeeded at High-A over 32 innings with 9.28 strikeouts per nine and 2.53 walks, and in spite of a hilariously low 23.5 percent ground ball rate, Miller's 3.38 ERA looks good. Tyler Thomas (seventh round, 2017) has a similar profile at South Bend — 9.00 strikeouts per nine and 1.93 walks over 28 innings — to yield a 3.39 FIP. And the arm with the strongest profile, Cory Abbott (67th overall in 2017) has the lowest walk rate of the trio, walking just 1.78 per nine over 25 1/3 innings while striking out 9.24 per nine to fuel his 3.20 ERA despite some trouble with the long ball.

The bad

Top prospect, right-hander Jose Albertos, has not only struggled at South Bend, but has barely been able to record any outs, retiring just 26 batters over four starts and two relief appearances. His strong strikeout rate, 10.38 strikeouts per nine, masks a complete inability to throw strikes: Albertos has a whopping 20.77 per nine walk rate. His matching 20.77 ERA makes plenty of sense in that context. Albertos still has the arsenal of a major league starter, but he looks much further from that future now than he did a year or two ago.

Albertos wasn't the only prospect with name recognition to struggle in the opening month-plus:

After his bat disappeared in 2017, the Cubs had to hope that a return to Triple-A for Chesny Young would reignite his hit tool. Thus far, that couldn't be further from the truth. Young's dreadful .221/.269/.267 start includes a confounding 31.9 percent strikeout rate after posting a 14.7 percent rate in a full season at Triple-A last year.

Also returning to Triple-A after a cup of coffee with the Mariners last year, outfielder Jacob Hannemann is sitting at .200/.273/.250 over 89 plate appearances. He still has five steals, but hitting .200 with no power won't work.

Righty Jen-Ho Tseng got another spot start for the Cubs in which he allowed three runs while recording six outs before heading back to Triple-A. When he got back, he had an 8.04 ERA waiting for him, and 3.73 walks and 1.72 homers per nine won't work for Tseng as it directly contradicts his recipe for success at the lower levels of the minors. He's still just 23, but he needs a strong stretch to get back on track.

The young left side of the infield at High-A Myrtle Beach has struggled in similar ways. Shortstop Aramis Ademan's strikeout rate has soared over 10 points from last year up to 27.4 percent. Unsurprisingly, his .228/.314/.315 batting line has underwhelmed. Joining him is third baseman Wladimir Galindo, who's seen his strikeout rate climb 11 points to 33.7 percent, along with a poor .221/.284/.337 line for the bat-first corner infielder. Both players need to find more contact going forward, though both are young enough to have time to adjust.

Last year's first-round pick lefty Brendon Little has seen his professional career continue its rocky start — over 18 innings at South Bend, Little has issued 10 walks and allowed three homers, resulting in an unsightly 6.50 ERA. He could be more of a project than previously anticipated.

The complicated

While every player is an incomplete project, this group features players who have really stood out without fitting snugly into one of the groups above.

There's no better place to start than with 2016 10th-round pick, right-handed reliever Dakota Mekkes. In 13 1/3 innings, Mekkes has allowed just two hits, struck out 17, and hasn't surrendered a homer. But his eight walks are a concern. Nobody can hit Mekkes, but he has to be able to cut down his walks to continue progressing.

After just 32 2/3 innings at Double-A last year, the club aggressively promoted top prospect Adbert Alzolay to Triple-A. Thus far, Alzolay's performance has been solid (3.94 FIP, 2.91 walks per nine) but unspectacular (just 7.06 strikeouts per nine). Plenty of eyes will be on Alzolay throughout the year, especially if there's an opening in the Chicago rotation.

After disappearing from the prospect radar a few years ago, reliever Dillon Maples zoomed back to relevance in 2017 on the strength of a ton of strikeouts despite more walks. For his encore, Maples' 10 1/3 innings have featured an astonishing number of strikeouts (20) and walks (10).

Infielder Zack Short posted an excellent .427 on-base percentage in his first half-season of professional baseball in 2016, but he garnered more attention last season when he kicked up his isolated power from .082 to .169 despite climbing two levels. In 2018, Short has further pushed his ISO to .233. However, his 18 percent strikeout rate from 2016 has ballooned to 30.2 percent this year. Short keeps drawing walks at an elite clip (16.7 percent), but the strikeouts are preventing him from making a huge leap.

After a rough 2017, righty Trevor Clifton is repeating Double-A with very similar strikeout (7.39 per nine) and walk (4.55 per nine) rates as last year. But he has surrendered just 19 hits in 31 2/3 innings, so it's working for now. Clifton needs to cut the walks and pick up more strikeouts to really move.

South Bend catcher Miguel Amaya — the recipient of a \$1.25 million bonus in 2015 — is showing game power in full-season ball as a 19-year-old. His four homers and .214 ISO over 108 plate appearances stand out, especially considering that his first 486 career plate appearances yielded just four homers. His .296 on-base percentage needs to climb, but baby steps are OK with teenagers in the Midwest League.

Despite having missed time each year due to injury, outfielder D.J. Wilson took the step to High-A this year. Wilson's 20.8 percent walk rate and .404 on-base percentage help balance out his 30.2 percent strikeout rate, .244 batting average and .317 slugging percentage. Wilson hasn't found a way to harness his solid raw power or plus-plus speed with enough in-game consistency to be considered a plus prospect, but he does continue to show in-game skills, when he's healthy.

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Cubs.com

Cubs score two in 9th to steal win in Atlanta

By Aimee Sachs

ATLANTA -- The Cubs got to Braves closer Arodys Vizcaino for two runs in the top of the ninth in Tuesday's 3-2 win at SunTrust Park, with Ben Zobrist providing the go-ahead single.

With the Cubs down, 2-1, after Ronald Acuna Jr.'s solo homer in the bottom of the eighth, Albert Almora Jr. and Addison Russell hit back-to-back one-out doubles to tie the game at 2 and set the stage for Zobrist's two-out single to center that scored Russell.

"It was pretty nice in the fashion that we did it, too," Russell said. "I feel like there were opportunities there that it could have gone either way, but we capitalized. It was huge tonight."

Yu Darvish, who was activated from the disabled list earlier in the day, threw 61 pitches over four innings, giving up one run on three hits -- one of which was Ender Inciarte's solo homer to right -- with five strikeouts and two walks. He exited the game with cramping in his right calf.

"He came up and talked to me and wanted to go back out, but I said, 'No, I don't think that's wise,'" Cubs manager Joe Maddon said. "And that's why I went and talked to the umpire to grab more time for [reliever Mike] Montgomery. I had to get Monty up quickly because of that, because I anticipated him going back out, but the guy, having been ill recently ... He did a great job today, and that's why I did what I did."

Darvish has only made it past the fifth inning in two of his seven starts this season.

"This year, especially, the fifth inning has been the most challenging thing, so I think it's really important to go out there and throw through the fifth inning," Darvish said, through an interpreter.

The Cubs scored first in the top of the fourth when Willson Contreras, who led off the frame with a double, came around to score on Braves catcher Kurt Suzuki's error on a throw to first following a wild-pitch strikeout of Russell.

"Really interesting, we scored that first run on a very awkward play," Maddon said. "We'll take it. They get two homers, and then we scratch it out at the end."

MOMENT THAT MATTERED

Schwarber throws out Freddie: The Cubs got a key out at the plate when Kyle Schwarber threw out Freddie Freeman there in the first inning. Freeman stole second with two outs, and was hit by Contreras' throw. The ball caromed into left field, and Freeman was rounding third before Schwarber could get to it. But the Chicago left fielder picked it up and threw out Freeman at the plate to keep the game scoreless.

SOUND SMART

Over the last 19 games, Cubs starting pitchers are 7-6 with a 2.92 ERA, with opposing batters hitting just .219 against them in that span.

MITEL REPLAY OF THE DAY

With Montgomery pitching the bottom of the fifth, the Cubs were in a bind when Javier Baez's errant throw to second on Charlie Culberson's fielder's-choice grounder allowed Johan Camargo to advance to third. A wild pitch to Ozzie Albies looked like trouble, but catcher Contreras recovered to throw Camargo out at the plate. The Braves challenged the call, which was upheld after a two-minute replay review.

UP NEXT

Tyler Chatwood will make his eighth start of the season on Wednesday at 6:35 p.m. CT and his sixth career start (eighth appearance) against the Braves; he's 2-2 with a 5.60 ERA against Atlanta. Veteran right-hander Brandon McCarthy will get the start for the Braves.

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Cubs.com

Darvish exits with calf cramp after 4 innings

By Aimee Sachs

ATLANTA -- After being activated from the disabled list Tuesday, Yu Darvish threw four innings of one-run ball in the Cubs' 3-2 win over the Braves at SunTrust Park. He left after the fourth with cramping in his right calf.

"He came up and talked to me and wanted to go back out, but I said, 'No, I don't think that's wise,'" Cubs manager Joe Maddon said. "And that's why I went and talked to the umpire to grab more time for [reliever Mike] Montgomery. I had to get Monty up quickly because of that, because I anticipated him going back out, but the guy, having been ill recently ... He did a great job today, and that's why I did what I did."

Darvish, who was on the 10-day DL for flu-like symptoms, threw just 61 pitches Tuesday night, striking out five and walking two while scattering three hits, one of which was a solo homer by Ender Inciarte in the bottom of the fourth to tie the game at 1.

Darvish lost his previous start against the Braves on April 13, when he allowed four runs on nine hits with four strikeouts and four walks in 4 2/3 innings.

To make room for Darvish, the Cubs optioned outfielder Mark Zagunis to Triple-A Iowa. A third-round pick in the 2014 Draft, Zagunis was called up May 9. The 25-year-old got his first career hit against Marlins righty Merandy Gonzalez after he was hitless in 14 at-bats during his brief stint in the Majors last season and went 2-for-5 with a double and an RBI.

Zobrist batting leadoff

For Tuesday's matchup against hard-throwing Braves righty Mike Foltynewicz, Maddon placed Ben Zobrist in the leadoff spot. The switch-hitter went 1-for-4 with a walk and the go-ahead single in the top of the ninth.

"I want to preserve him," Maddon said of Zobrist before Tuesday's game. "It's been working out really well, the matchups, when I've chosen not to play him, have been good for either Albert [Almora Jr.] or,

like yesterday, was a good matchup for Tommy [La Stella]. So it's just worked out well. I do want to be frugal regarding using Zo' too often. He's just too valuable to beat up early. He gets it. He stays ready as well as anybody I've ever been around."

Zobrist is the seventh Cub used in the leadoff spot this season after Maddon used 11 different players there last season.

"It's always going to be in a state of flux," Maddon said. "It's just the way we're built. We're built to be versatile, that's who we are."

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Cubs.com

Schwarber throws out Freeman on bizarre play

By Tori McElhaney

ATLANTA -- It was a game of mere centimeters on Tuesday night when the Cubs faced the Braves at SunTrust Park. And those tiny margins cost Atlanta at least two runs.

In the first and fifth, the Cubs threw out a total of three Braves baserunners on close plays -- two at home, one at third base. The Cubs went on to win the game, 3-2.

During the first inning, the Braves threatened to capitalize on stolen bases to strike first, but Kyle Schwarber's arm had different plans. The Cubs' left fielder had a short window to throw out Freddie Freeman at the plate as the first baseman attempted to score from first following a steal of second base and a throwing error by catcher Willson Contreras.

Freeman, who drew a walk in his first at-bat of the night, stole second on a 3-2 count with Nick Markakis at the plate. Contreras' throw ricocheted into shallow left field, and Freeman popped up and headed for third. Before Schwarber could pick up the ball in left field, Freeman was waved home.

Schwarber's throw to the plate was precise, landing in Contreras' glove right as Freeman slid into home. Contreras tipped Freeman's foot before it touch the plate to keep the game scoreless.

"I don't think with any of the baserunning plays I'd want the guys to do anything different than what they did," Braves manager Brian Snitker said. "It took perfect throws."

By the fifth, the close calls came more frequently. Braves shortstop Johan Camargo led off with a single to left field. Charlie Culberson followed with what would have been an easy double-play ground ball to Javier Baez at second, but a bad throw sent the ball to shallow left field. The error allowed Camargo to advance to third.

With runners threatening on the corners with no outs, a pitch got past Contreras. The ball hit the backstop and bounced back to Contreras as Camargo scurried home. Cubs pitcher Mike Montgomery received Contreras' toss and tagged Camargo on the shoulder as he slid head first into home. Camargo was called out, but the Braves challenged the play.

After the review, the call stood and the game remained tied at 1-1.

"Usually the explanation is what you see on the board," Snitker said. "There wasn't enough evidence to overturn it, I guess."

In the same at-bat, a few pitches later, another ball got the best of Contreras as the pitch bounced away from his grasp. Culberson, who was on second after stealing in the previous endeavor with Camargo, attempted to steal third.

Again, a Braves baserunner was called out on an attempted steal for the third time on Tuesday night. However, upon review, it seemed as if Culberson's foot touched the base before the tag was applied by Cubs third baseman Kris Bryant. But the Braves could not challenge the ruling on the field since a challenge had already been made on the play at home a few pitches before, albeit unsuccessfully. A team cannot challenge a play after losing a previous challenge in the same inning.

"Everybody says he was safe. That happens all the time. It would be nice to have a couple of those challenges," Snitker said.

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ESPNChicago.com

Cubs' Yu Darvish leaves start in 4th inning with right leg cramp

By Jesse Rogers

ATLANTA -- The Chicago Cubs will have to wait at least five more days to find out if starter Yu Darvish is past his fifth-inning woes as the righty was pulled after four innings on Tuesday due to cramping in his right calf.

Darvish, 31, is off to a rocky start with his new team but pitched well against the Atlanta Braves until the cramping issue popped up. After informing the training staff of the ailment, as well as manager Joe Maddon, he was taken out in favor of long man Mike Montgomery.

"I was expecting him to go back out there," Maddon said after the Cubs' 3-2 win. "The trainers came up to me and told me he felt (some) cramping issues in the fourth (inning). Yu wanted to go back out but I said 'No, I don't think that's wise.' Having been ill recently it just doesn't make any sense."

Darvish had just come off the 10-day disabled list on Tuesday after missing a start due to a flu-like illness. He claims he was unable to stay in top condition while sick.

"Definitely the worst I've ever experienced," Darvish said through his interpreter. "Even after 10 days. I was coughing and even going upstairs made me tired ... I thought I was 100 percent coming in. Once I started pitching I wasn't 100 percent. Next four days I'll eat a lot, train a lot and become 100 percent again."

Darvish was pitching well before he was pulled, giving up just a solo home run to Ender Inciarte in the bottom of the fourth. Darvish said some recent mechanical changes have helped. He struck out five on Tuesday but never got the chance to lower his mammoth fifth-inning ERA which still stands at 31.50.

"It was really important that I go out there and throw the fifth inning," Darvish said. "I was expecting to go out there. I wanted to let Joe know of my calf just in case."

Maddon took the safer route by pulling Darvish, though it probably won't help alleviate questions about him. He had a 6.00 ERA coming into the game.

"Dehydration is such a nasty little thing," Maddon stated. "A lot of times it's not given enough credit. People say 'Eh, it's not a big deal.' But it is. It was something I didn't want to press or push and it worked out well."

The Cubs won the game with a two-run ninth inning, but it's the steps that Darvish takes that are the most important. The first objective is to keep him healthy. He missed some time in spring training with a stomach ailment, then felt some arm cramping in his Cubs debut in Miami in late March before falling ill recently. He blames the calf issue strictly on the illness.

"It was more like fatigue because I was out for so long," he said. "I haven't been able to train for the past 10 days. My weight has gone down as well as endurance and stamina."

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NBC Sports Chicago

Yu Darvish returns in win, but questions still remain with Cubs pitcher
By Tony Andracki

By the time Javy Baez collected the final out and fired it to Anthony Rizzo Tuesday night in the Cubs' 3-2 victory, Yu Darvish had already been out of the game for nearly two hours.

Darvish returned from the disabled list Tuesday and looked sharp overall, giving up only a run on a solo homer to go along with 2 other hits and a pair of walks with 5 strikeouts.

Yet he couldn't even get into the 5th inning.

Joe Maddon pulled Darvish from the game after 4 innings and only 61 pitches, opting to go with Mike Montgomery in the 5th and 6th innings:

After the game, Maddon said Darvish had leg cramps and the Cubs unsurprisingly didn't want to push it with their pitcher fresh off the DL after a bout with the flu. He has only made it past the 5th inning twice in the first 7 weeks of the 2018 season.

Darvish didn't even get the opportunity to prove he was past the 5th inning woes that have dragged him down all season to date, so we'll have to wait until his next start to see if he can take that next step and show why the Cubs invested \$126 million in him.

Regardless, the Cubs halted their losing streak in thrilling fashion, collecting half their hits in the top of the 9th inning to reverse a 2-1 deficit into a 3-2 lead.

Despite throwing the fewest innings of any pitcher in the rotation and the stint on the disabled list, Darvish still leads the team in strikeouts (42) and he lowered his season ERA to 5.56 and WHIP to 1.53 pitching for the first time in two weeks.

Cubs fans will get another look at Darvish Sunday, as he's on track to throw the final game of the series in Cincinnati, though rain may mess with the schedule before then.

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Chicago Tribune

Yu Darvish pulled after 4 innings with leg cramp but Cubs rally in 9th for 3-2 win over Braves

By Mark Gonzales

Yu Darvish knows he'll feel even better during some games than he did Tuesday night in his first start back from the 10-day disabled list after a bout with a flu-like illness.

The way Darvish felt — and pitched — against the Braves gave the Cubs plenty of encouragement. However, a right leg cramp ended his night after 61 pitches in four innings in his first start since May 2. The Cubs scored two runs in the ninth inning for a 3-2 win that snapped a two-game losing streak.

"In the next four days, I'll eat a lot, train a lot and prepare to become 100 percent again," Darvish said.

Cubs manager Joe Maddon made the call to remove Darvish, who allowed three hits and showed the talent that persuaded the Cubs to sign him to a six-year, \$126 million contract in February. Darvish attacked hitters with a 96 mph fastball while mixing in a sweeping slider and an 81 mph curve.

But Darvish will have to wait until his next scheduled start Sunday against the Reds to prove he can overcome his fifth-inning blues. Maddon was made aware by the training staff that Darvish felt discomfort in the fourth inning. Darvish told Maddon he wanted to continue to pitch, but Maddon didn't want to risk injury.

"I was not disappointed at all," said Maddon, who spoke with home plate umpire Jim Wolf in the top of the fifth to allow left-hander Mike Montgomery to warm up in the bullpen. "My concern always has been the health and safety of the guys.

"It was something I did not want to press or push, and it worked out well."

Montgomery threw 20 pitches in two innings and remains the leading candidate to start one of the two games Saturday at Cincinnati.

Darvish's only blemish was a high fastball that Ender Inciarte smacked for a tying home run in the fourth. But this marked the fifth time in seven starts Darvish has failed to pitch at least five innings. He seems eager to correct that soon.

"This year the fifth inning has been the most challenging, so it's important to throw through the fifth," Darvish said through a translator.

Darvish was booed during his last start after allowing three Rockies home runs in 4 1/3 innings on May 2.

But Darvish contends he's been received well by the Wrigley fans and media, so "he feels like he could be criticized even more, so he's willing to accept more criticism if there is any," Darvish's translator said.

Darvish thought the fans in his last start were "Yu-ing."

Braves rookie sensation Ronald Acuna Jr. looked to send the Cubs to their third consecutive loss, breaking a 1-1 tie with a home run against Carl Edwards Jr. with two outs in the eighth.

But Albert Almora Jr. and Addison Russell answered with back-to-back doubles with one out in the ninth that tied the score against former Cubs reliever Arodys Vizcaino. Ben Zobrist gave the Cubs the lead with a two-out single that scored Russell.

Almora displayed his astute base running skills on his double. He never hesitated going for second after hitting a ball down the left-field line, a dash reminiscent of when he tagged from first base on a deep fly to center field that set up the go-ahead run in the 10th inning of Game 7 of the 2016 World Series.

“Albert stayed on the breaking ball,” Maddon observed. “He’s got to think (double) the moment he hits it, with the outfielders playing deep with the ball hit down the line. You definitely go for two.”

The Cubs escaped a wild fifth inning without allowing a run. Montgomery allowed a single to Johan Camargo before second baseman Javier Baez committed a throwing error on a potential double play grounder.

Montgomery and Baez were bailed out when Camargo was thrown out at home trying to score on a wild pitch. The Braves unsuccessfully challenged the call and were left without a challenge on another close play when Charlie Culberson was thrown out trying to advance to third on a pitch that bounced a few feet from catcher Willson Contreras.

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Chicago Tribune

Cubs' Ben Zobrist 'optimistic' MLB will make right call on shoes

By Mark Gonzales

Cubs veteran Ben Zobrist wasn't able to communicate Tuesday with Chief Baseball Officer Joe Torre regarding his desire to continue wearing black cleats despite Major League Baseball's threat of a penalty for not abiding by the league's attire rules.

But Zobrist seems hopeful MLB would loosen its rules stating the color of a player's shoe should be at least 51 percent of the team's dominant color.

“I'm not optimistic that I'm going to get all the information that I'd like to know, but I'm optimistic eventually baseball will make the right call and allow baseball players to have more flexibility over this,” Zobrist said Tuesday.

Zobrist did place a message to the Major League Baseball Players Association to see if any officials spoke with Torre before attempting to call him.

“Eventually everyone will see this is something the fans would like to see and enjoy as part of the game,” Zobrist said.

Zobrist hopes he can get some clarity on the subject before the Cubs' next homestand starts May 22.

In an earlier exchange via text, Zobrist said he was told by the MLBPA that “it's up to you. do what you want.”

“They're not ever telling us what to do,” Zobrist said. “But they were basically trying to give us the back story – here's the rule, here's when it came into play.”

“I got a little bit of history. But I’m still waiting to have a phone conversation.”

Zobrist wouldn’t speculate on whether MLB’s threat of a penalty was the latest ploy in escalating tensions with the MLBPA after a slow-developing free-agent winter.

“I think there are probably a lot of people who feel that way, but none of us really know,” Zobrist said. “That’s why I’m hoping to have a conversation with them and see if they can give me some information. I don’t know if that’s going to happen.

“It’s all about fans. Like, how do players do something that fans can relate to on the field? And part of that is our shoes. And we have some freedom there, but we’re being told we don’t. We don’t have the freedom we’d like to have.”

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Chicago Tribune

Addison Russell's game-tying double against Braves provides emotional release

By Mark Gonzales

As Addison Russell reached second base Tuesday night, the Cubs’ shortstop allowed himself to release some emotions.

For Russell, his game-tying double in the ninth inning provided a mixture of relief and satisfaction as the Cubs rallied for a 3-2 win over the Braves to snap a two-game losing streak.

“You see his emotion on second base?” manager Joe Maddon said. “We haven’t seen that because he just hasn’t been in that situation. That was wonderful to see.”

After his batting average dipped as low as .215 on April 29, Russell has shown some signs of breaking out of his rut, but the biggest measuring stick will be his run production.

His double resulted in only his ninth RBI of the season and only his 11th extra base hit. His double missed clearing the center field fence by only a few feet, but five of his extra-base hits have occurred in his last eight games.

“I want to believe that’s going to help him right there because he needed to click a ball like that,” Maddon said.

Russell, 24, admitted the double lifted his spirits.

“It’s just baseball,” said Russell, whose batting average has hovered around the .250 mark for the last seven games. “You got to keep your confidence high and just have that energy.

“Hitting that double, it definitely lifted my confidence, for sure.”

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Chicago Tribune

Joe Maddon says Mike Montgomery has 'earned' right to start Saturday

By Mark Gonzales

Cubs prospect watchers may have to wait at least the next few days to see whether Adbert Alzolay will make his major-league debut Saturday.

That's because manager Joe Maddon said left-hander Mike Montgomery remains the top choice to start in one of the games of a doubleheader against the Reds in Cincinnati.

"Monty has earned the right to do this," Maddon said Tuesday. "He has been throwing the ball as well as I've seen him. So we're going to play it straight and see what happens."

Maddon confirmed that Alzolay, 23, is in the mix and is lined up to pitch Saturday after pitching Monday for Triple-A Iowa. But Maddon wants to see how the next few games unfold to determine how Montgomery is used.

"The plan is to hopefully get Montgomery stretched out to (start)," Maddon said. "We're not going to not use Montgomery in a game we need to for that to happen. I'm aware of trying to get him stretched. If he gets stretched, then I can back him out the next couple of days and save him for Saturday."

Montgomery, who was 5-5 with a 4.15 ERA in 14 starts in 2017, reiterated his desire to start to Maddon. Montgomery hasn't thrown more than three innings in a game this season but has looked sharper after not pitching for a week at the end of April.

"I'm just getting my timing and really feel powerful out there without sacrificing command," Montgomery said.

Hold on Heyward: Maddon said "it's not impossible" that outfielder Jason Heyward could be activated from the seven-day concussion disabled list by this weekend.

Heyward performed some defensive drills Tuesday and made an over-the-shoulder catch of a ball thrown by strength/conditioning coordinator Tim Buss.

"He's feeling much better, but he still has to go through normal (concussion) protocol," Maddon said.

Extra innings: Montgomery was "shocked" to learn of an 80-game suspension for former Mariners teammate Robinson Cano for testing positive for a banned substance. "I came in as a rookie when he was there, and he treated me well," Montgomery said. "He had some good talks with me about trying to give me encouragement or advice." ... Outfielder Mark Zagunis was optioned to Iowa to make room for pitcher Yu Darvish to come off the disabled list for Tuesday night's start against the Braves.

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Chicago Tribune

Cubs' Joe Maddon relishes Skype session with St. Rita baseball team
By Mark Gonzales

From the comforts of his Buckhead hotel room, Cubs manager Joe Maddon enjoyed engaging in a Skype session Tuesday morning with members of the St. Rita High School baseball team.

"Players came up to the camera, wearing a white shirt and tie, and asked questions," Maddon said. "We had a great time."

Maddon was aware St. Rita has produced former White Sox pitcher and current announcer Ed Farmer, pitchers Scipio Spinks and Jim Clancy, as well as former Doors keyboardist Ray Manzarek. Former Cubs infielder and current radio analyst Ron Coomer also attended St. Rita.

Maddon said he has another class lined up for Thursday as well as later this season with a journalism class from Georgetown University.

A session with the Institute of Politics at the University of Chicago under the supervision of David Axelrod, former senior adviser to President Barack Obama, is in the planning stages, Maddon said.

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Chicago Sun-Times

This time leg cramp ends short start for Yu Darvish in Cubs' 3-2 win over Braves

By Gordon Wittenmyer

ATLANTA — Yu Darvish said he doesn't get upset about all the questions and perceptions about his toughness after his first several weeks of pitching for the Cubs.

"It doesn't bother me at all," the Cubs' \$126 million enigma said through a translator Tuesday night after pitching just four innings in his return to the rotation after a bout of flu put him on the disabled list.

This time it was a cramp in his right calf that caused manager Joe Maddon to pull him in an abbreviated start. Well, "not necessarily a cramp, but the point I felt it in my calf," Darvish said.

Good thing he's not bothered by those outside perceptions, because as good as he looked through much of his four innings, this start didn't do anything to rehab the first impression he has made since signing a six-year deal in February.

The Cubs wound up beating the Braves 3-2 with a dramatic ninth-inning comeback at SunTrust Park. And Darvish might yet average seven innings per start the rest of the year and pitch himself into Cy Young contention.

But for now, he's a very expensive, winless starting pitcher who hasn't made it through five innings in five of his seven starts — and who was booed off the mound the last time he pitched at home.

"I thought that was 'Yu'-ing," he deadpanned.

Darvish has unraveled in the fifth following a balk in one start and a two-out walk to the starting pitcher in another. Another non-cramp (in his forearm) caused him to falter in another start.

"It's really important that I go out there and pitch in the fifth," said Darvish, who told Maddon during Tuesday's game that he wanted to return to the mound. "I was expecting to go out there. I just wanted to let Joe know of the calf situation, just in case.

"But this year, especially the fifth inning has been the most challenging thing, so I think it's really important to go out there and throw through the fifth inning."

Darvish said the flu bug was "the worst I've ever experienced" and that even after 10 days, he got fatigued climbing stairs.

In his first start in 13 days, he got through just 61 pitches, allowing three hits and one run — Ender Inciarte's two-out homer in the fourth. He gave up two walks and struck out five.

"I was expecting him to go back out, and the trainers came up to me and told me he felt somewhat of a cramping issue in the fourth," Maddon said. "Yu came up and wanted to go back out, and I said pretty much, 'No, I don't think that's wise.' A guy having been ill recently, it just doesn't make any sense. He did a great job today, and that's why I did what I did."

Darvish vowed to "eat a lot and train a lot" to be "100 percent again" for his next start Sunday in Cincinnati.

Until then, he can take solace in lowering his ERA to 5.56 and throwing five different pitches effectively until his sudden departure.

"I was not disappointed at all," Maddon said. "My concern is always the health and safety of our guys, especially when somebody's coming off of being ill. Dehydration is such a nasty little thing, and I think a lot of times it's not given enough credit, where people think it's no big deal. But it is."

Darvish, 31, has the promise of maybe 180 more starts on his contract to help put the early perceptions to rest. Those perceptions followed him, by the way, from 5½ years in Texas through a pair of World Series starts last fall for the Dodgers in which he didn't pitch out of the second inning either time.

As he said Tuesday, "I feel like I could be criticized even more. So I'm willing to accept more criticism, if there is any."

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Chicago Sun-Times

Cubs' Mike Montgomery first option for Saturday start; top prospect in wings
By Gordon Wittenmyer

ATLANTA — Left-hander Mike Montgomery has "earned" the right to start when the Cubs need a sixth starter for Saturday's doubleheader in Cincinnati, manager Joe Maddon said.

But top-prospect Adbert Alzolay, whose spot in AAA Iowa's rotation falls on Saturday, is waiting in the wings for a possible major-league debut if the Montgomery plans fall through because of a need to use him out of the bullpen Thursday or Friday.

"It is a natural," Maddon said of Alzolay (2-2, 4.10 ERA at Iowa). "The first part is getting Monty set up, and if we can't, then we've got to go to a backup."

To that end, Montgomery pitched two scoreless innings in relief of Yu Darvish Tuesday in Atlanta, two days after pitching 1 1/3 innings at home against the White Sox. That could stretch him enough to have him ready for Saturday.

"Monty's earned the right to do this also," Maddon added. "He's throwing the ball as well as I've seen him. We're just going to play it straight and see what happens."

Montgomery, in his third season as a relief-starting swingman for the Cubs, expressed displeasure during the off-season over the Cubs essentially pulling his chance to battle for a starting job in camp by signing established starters to multi-year deals.

The well-liked Montgomery has kept his focus on his bullpen role this season but made his feelings clear about Saturday when talking with Maddon.

“I told him I want to start,” he said. “He basically said we’ll see how the next week goes and how much I pitch in these next two games. But I told him I’m feeling good, ready to go.”

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Chicago Sun-Times

Cubs’ Jason Heyward ‘better’ but not likely to return from concussion in Atlanta

By Gordon Wittenmyer

ATLANTA – Cubs right-fielder Jason Heyward, who was eligible to return from the 7-day concussion disabled list Monday, has shown improvement in recent days, but Maddon doesn’t expect him to be activated before Friday’s opener of the Cubs’ series in Cincinnati.

“He’s feeling much better,” Maddon said after Heyward worked out a few hours before the game Tuesday. “He’s just got to go through the normal protocol, but he’s doing good.

“He came in, and we spoke, and he actually came in bright-eyed, and more normal stuff,” Maddon added. “It’s good to see.”

Heyward was injured when he hit his head on the right-field wall trying to catch Dexter Fowler’s walk-off home run May 6 in St. Louis.

Roster move

Outfielder Mark Zagunis, who went 2-for-5 during his six days in the majors over the past week, was optioned back to Class AAA Iowa to make room on the roster Tuesday for pitcher Yu Darvish to return from the DL.

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Chicago Sun-Times

Cubs manager Joe Maddon is ‘Putting the Art Back Into THEE Game’

By Annie Costabile

It was 1995, and Joe Maddon was a young coach in the majors with the Angels, and at 1 a.m. — after suffering a tough loss — the vision came to him deep inside Anaheim Stadium.

“I wanted to know, what are the major leagues all about,” Maddon said this week. “That’s when I thought about the five levels of being a professional.”

The five levels according to Maddon go like this:

Level 1: “I’m happy to be here.”

Level 2: “Survival, I like this and I want to stay here.”

Level 3: “I belong here, I can do this.”

Level 4: "I want to make as much money as I possibly can."

Level 5: "All I want to do is win."

Fast-forward 23 years, those five levels are now a staple in his "Putting the Art Back Into THEE Game" project.

It has been an idea of Maddon's for years. He has always believed baseball players are artists, the field is their canvas and the glove, bat and ball their brushes. He wanted to incorporate art and the game in a way to inspire players and young fans to view the game in a more creative way — an artistic way.

He pitched his idea as a marketing campaign for Major League Baseball, but when none of the organizations he was part of bought in he decided "I'll do it on my own."

The project came to life this offseason one January afternoon in Tampa, Florida, while he was shopping at one of his favorite clothing stores.

At this time, Maddon was reading Leonardo da Vinci's biography by Walter Isaacson. He recalled details in the book that discussed the Mona Lisa and the revolutionary techniques da Vinci used when creating this masterpiece.

As Maddon walked into the store, Milano Exchange, he immediately noticed a parody of the Mona Lisa by local artist Jason Skeldon.

"That's it," Maddon said.

It was his vision brought to life.

Maddon and Skeldon teamed to create pieces that would become the theme of the Cubs' 2018 season, a way to promote the arts in Chicago and beyond, and to raise money for Maddon's foundation, Respect 90.

The first creation by the pair was Maddon's centerpiece of the project — the Mona Lisa.

It is the classic painting with Maddon's singular spin on it.

"On that particular painting, there's a lot of little baseball concepts," Maddon said. "She was about putting the art back into the game."

The painting features Mona Lisa gripping a beaming yellow baseball bat and wearing eye black. All across the canvas are notes, concepts and symbolic messages in vibrant hues written by Maddon.

The piece sold for \$50,000, with all the proceeds going to charity.

The next piece sold was Michelangelo's David. In Maddon's version, David is standing on the mound at Wrigley Field with the center-field scoreboard looming in the background.

One more thing, David is wearing a jockstrap.

The piece was auctioned off last week at Anthony Rizzo's sixth annual Cook-Off for Cancer for \$25,000.

Maddon has four more pieces along with the Mona Lisa and David. He has one featuring Uncle Sam, Albert Einstein, Salvador Dali and finally his favorite, the one that features Muhammad Ali and his vision from Anaheim. Within the coming months, he will have eight total as two more pieces are being created.

The next piece to be released will be Mad(don) Magazine, which features a cell phone being blown up because "I just really dislike cell phones," Maddon said.

Along with the cell phone, Maddon is blowing up 10 negative concepts.

"We're blowing up apathy, we're blowing up redundancy, we're blowing up 'my bad,' " Maddon said. "Basically we are blowing up 10 ideas that have no place in baseball."

Each painting is scrawled with powerful messages that hold weight on the diamond but possibly even more among the youth Maddon hopes to inspire.

For example, his Uncle Sam piece reads: "We want you to be yourself."

As the project grows, Maddon's goals for it mirrors that growth. He has plans to have his pieces online and available for purchase in various forms, with all the proceeds going to his foundation. He wants to sell them on hoodies, as paintings, on posters and he even wants to shrink-wrap cars.

Maddon's never been shy about his desire for his players to maintain their unique personalities and always be unabashedly themselves. His message is the same for kids in Chicago and across the country.

"To withhold anything about yourself is the worst possible feeling," Maddon said. "We'll never know who you are if you choose to do that based on pressures coming from outside."

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Chicago Sun-Times

Cubs' Ben Zobrist 'optimistic' MLB will make right call about shoe issue
By Gordon Wittenmyer

ATLANTA — Cubs utilityman Ben Zobrist didn't get a chance to talk about his outlawed footwear with Joe Torre, Major League Baseball's top game-discipline official, on Monday night. But he left a message with the players' union and said he hopes to talk with Torre sometime after hearing back from the union.

"I'm not optimistic that I'm going to get all the information I would like to know, but I think I'm optimistic that eventually baseball will make the right call and allow players to have more flexibility in regard to this," Zobrist said of letters that went out to some players threatening fines for uniform infractions — including Zobrist's use of all-black throwback shoes during home day games.

Zobrist wouldn't speculate on whether the sudden crackdown on longstanding individual practices has anything to do with growing labor tension, which festered during the winter when the free-agent market slowed down.

Ben Zobrist's illegal shoes, during Friday's game.

Three Cubs wore all-black shoes Monday, including Zobrist, but they were exempt from the rule because the Cubs-Braves game was part of a rescheduled Jackie Robinson Day at Wrigley.

Zobrist said he talked previously with the union about the issue, but only to get the definition of the rule and background.

“They said it’s up to you — you can do what you want,” he said. “They’re not ever telling us what to do.”

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