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Thursday, April 12, 2018

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Walk-off HR rescues Twins after Astros' rally
Jarrid Denney | MLB.com | April 11, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS -- After watching an 8-1 lead evaporate before his eyes, and watching his closer surrender a two-run lead in the ninth inning, Twins manager Paul Molitor sat in the home dugout at Target Field and tried to map out a plan for extra innings against the Astros.

Then, with one swing of the bat, Max Kepler solved the issue for him.

Kepler blasted a solo walk-off homer off of Astros reliever Brad Peacock to give the Twins a 9-8 win and secure a series win over the defending World Series champions on Wednesday. It was Kepler's second homer of the game and third of the season.

With the Twins down to their last out of the ninth inning, the 25 year-old left-handed hitter took a 3-2 slider from Peacock and deposited it into the right-field bleachers.

"I wasn't really expecting anything," Kepler said when asked if he was looking for a specific pitch. "I was just in battle mode, trying to put the ball in play. I struck out the at-bat before. I hate striking out, so I was just trying to put it in play."

The Twins bats woke up in a big way earlier in the day, when they threw eight runs on the scoreboard in the fourth inning against Astros starter Lance McCullers Jr. Eddie Rosario ripped a three-run triple midway through the frame, and Kepler capped the outburst -- which spanned 11 batters and matched the Twins' run total from their previous three games combined -- with his first home run of the day, a 378-foot two-run blast.

But the Astros answered back immediately against Twins starter Kyle Gibson, who was chased one out into the fifth, as Houston scored four runs on six hits in the inning. The Astros threatened again in the seventh, when they loaded the bases with one out against Twins reliever Zach Duke, but Addison Reed came on to retire Marwin Gonzalez and George Springer in order and end the threat.

Reed's lockdown inning came just hours after he told reporters that he had been unavailable on Tuesday due to strep throat. He also threw a scoreless eighth before handing it over to closer Fernando Rodney.

"Last night, pitching was the last thing on my mind -- I was just trying to go to sleep and get some rest," Reed said. "I woke up this morning and felt fine. ... I kind of warmed up and got loose and told [Molitor] I was good to go and went from there."

Rodney entered the ninth with an 8-6 lead and immediately encountered trouble, surrendering a pair of singles. After he walked Gonzalez to load the bases, Rodney induced a ground ball that could have resulted in a game-ending double play. But Brian Dozier's throw from the second base bag to Rodney at first sailed wide, and two runs scored, knotting the game at 8. Rodney, though, picked up the win despite his blown save.

"I just made a bad throw," Dozier said. "Thank goodness for Kepler bailing me out. It's really a low-percentage play, but I thought I had time to turn it. If I make a better throw, he's out."

Kepler's walk-off homer was the second of his career -- the first came against the Red Sox on June 12, 2016

"I think we've seen a lot of progress the last couple years," Molitor said of Kepler. "We know he has power. It's not the towering home runs, it's more of the line-drive-type swings. They have a lot of carry on them. I think he's more comfortable being here and his place here. And as a result of that, I think he's going to get better."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Rosie's triple: Rosario legged out the Twins' first triple of the season in their eight-run fourth inning, which chased McCullers. Rosario's bases-loaded line drive pushed a one-run Twins lead to 5-1. Kepler's first homer capped the huge frame, but the Twins weren't able to add on until the ninth.

Reed escapes trouble: The Astros rallied in the fifth inning, and they had a chance to draw even in the seventh after Duke walked two batters and hit another one to load the bases. Enter Reed, who bailed the Twins out, fanning Gonzalez swinging and inducing Springer to fly out to left field to leave all three runners stranded.

SOUND SMART WITH YOUR FRIENDS

Jose Altuve's single in the fifth inning extended his hitting streak at Target Field to 17 games. According to the Elias Sports Bureau, that is the longest hitting streak by a visiting player at the stadium.

WHAT'S NEXT

Twins: Minnesota will begin a three-game series with the White Sox at Target Field on Thursday at 7:10 p.m. CT. Jose Berrios will take the mound for Minnesota and attempt to bounce back from his last outing against the Mariners, in which he allowed five run over 4 2/3 innings.

Max Kepler's walkoff home run lifts Twins past Astros 9-8 **Phil Miller | Star Tribune | April 12, 2018**

Fernando Rodney blew his first save with the Twins. It seems only fair to credit Max Kepler with one, though.

The Twins built a seven-run lead Wednesday, then gave it all back, Houston's tying run scoring on a wayward Brian Dozier relay throw that could have been the final out. But just when a faith-shaking loss appeared inevitable, Kepler stepped up and socked a full-count slider from Brad Peacock into the right-field seats, rescuing his team with his second home run of the game for a 9-8 victory over the Astros at Target Field.

"I was battling. Battle mode. Just trying to put the ball in play," Kepler said of his second career walkoff blast. "It was right over the middle, kind of low. I like them low."

Maybe so, but he rockets them high, just as he did to the Twins' sagging spirits. "It's big. They're really good over there," Dozier said of the defending World Series champions. "We let a big lead slip away, but Kepler saved us."

The game could have been a confidence-building blowout, as the Twins combined five hits with three walks against Lance McCullers Jr. in the fourth inning, an eight-run eruption that had three of the most frustrated hitters at its core. Eddie Rosario, Logan Morrison and Kepler, who had stranded a combined total of 29 runners on second or third base by going 2-for-21 with runners in scoring position this season, all came through with run-scoring hits.

Rosario smacked a bases-loaded triple to the wall in right-center, bringing home three runs. Morrison followed with a ringing RBI single.

And two batters later, Kepler blasted a home run just inside the right-field foul pole, putting the Twins up 8-1.

In most cases, an eight-run inning might make for a relaxed, cruise-control afternoon, especially with a pitcher who has not lost since early August on the mound. But not so with the Astros, who had not lost a series to the Twins since 2015. As Houston chipped at the lead, it became difficult to tell which team was winning, Twins manager Paul Molitor said.

"[We're] coming off the field [after the sixth inning, ahead 8-6] and it didn't feel like we're still winning," Molitor said. "I walked up and down

[the dugout] and said, ‘We are winning this game.’ ”

But that didn’t last. While five Houston relievers embarked on a string of 14 consecutive batters retired, Twins pitchers put runners on base all nine innings. And Rodney got into trouble right away, giving up a leadoff single to Evan Gattis. After a strikeout, J.D. Davis singled, and a 3-2 fastball to Marwin Gonzalez missed, loading the bases.

George Springer appeared to bail Rodney out with a double-play grounder to Morrison at first base, and the force at second base was routine.

But Dozier tried to hit a moving target as Rodney scrambled to cover first, and the ball wound up in a camera well, an error that allowed Davis to score the tying run. “I thought it was a good chance at a [double play], but it’s always a tough feed from second to the pitcher,” Morrison said. “[Rodney] is running and looking back at second. It’s not easy.”

Only one who wasn’t buying that explanation: Dozier.

“Shoulda, coulda, woulda. If I make a better throw, the game’s over,” the Gold Glove second baseman said. “Yeah, it’s a tough play, but we’re major league players. I’m supposed to make that throw.”

Maybe he should look on the bright side: This way he got to celebrate a walkoff.

With two outs in the bottom of the inning, Kepler swung at a couple of 94-mph fastballs from Peacock, fouling one off, and took three balls. Kepler then fouled off a slider — and then got another one.

“I wasn’t trying to hit a homer,” said Kepler, whose first career homer, vs. Boston in 2016, also was a walkoff blast.

“I wasn’t really expecting anything, I was just trying to see the ball out of his hand and keep it simple.”

Twins newcomer Addison Reed says pressure situations no bother to him
Phil Miller | Star Tribune | April 12, 2018

Given that Addison Reed was so sick Tuesday that the Twins sent him home, and that Reed had just swept in to extricate his team from a bases-loaded, one-out crisis, Paul Molitor figured he had asked enough Wednesday of an offseason acquisition who is already emerging as his team’s go-to reliever.

Bad idea.

“I don’t even think he liked the fact that we asked him” if he had had enough, the Twins manager said Wednesday. “He knew he was going back out.”

Reed did, and the results were equally superb. He gave up an infield hit, but he then got reigning AL MVP Jose Altuve to fly out and Carlos Correa and Josh Reddick to pop up.

“I wasn’t really thinking about using him for five outs,” Molitor said. “but it’s just kind of the way that inning unfolded.”

They seem to unfold that way a lot with Reed, who has appeared in six of the Twins’ 10 games, leads the bullpen in innings with eight, has given up only one run, and has prevented all five runners he has inherited from scoring. So when Zach Duke walked a couple of batters and hit another in the seventh inning? Reed was relishing the opportunity.

“It’s fun. I like coming into those situations. That’s when I have the most fun out there,” he said. “My slider felt really good. I left a couple up in the zone that they missed, but location was good for the most part, and I got out of it.”

That he was at the ballpark at all was a mild surprise, considering how he looked a day earlier. He said he felt ill Sunday night “and Monday got worse. After the game got checked out, and they told me I had strep. So that was great news,” Reed said sarcastically. He was sent home after taking a couple of bottles of fluid intravenously Tuesday, but “last night, pitching was the last thing on my mind.”

On Wednesday, though, “he came in this morning and you could just tell he had more energy,” Molitor said.

That’s one thing Reed would like to be known for, he said. “That’s what I pride myself on, being ready to go every day. I feel like I’ve prepared myself” for it, he said. “That’s something I’ve always tried to do, and it’s something I still can do.”

Etc.

- The Twins have yet to announce a starting pitcher for Friday, and it's become clear that weather is the reason. With the growing likelihood of a rainout, they could put off the need for a fifth starter until April 24, meaning there is no need to cut short Phil Hughes' rehab assignment before then. The Twins will likely summon a potential starter — Hughes or perhaps Adalberto Mejia, who threw 24 pitches for Class AAA Rochester on Tuesday — just in case but might not activate that pitcher until it becomes clear that the game will be played.
- Given clearance to throw again, Ervin Santana didn't wait long. The righthander, who had surgery to remove a calcium deposit in a right-hand knuckle on Feb. 6, played catch in Fort Myers, Fla., on Wednesday, the first step in a several-week process back to the majors.
- Houston strung together six consecutive hits in the fourth inning to begin a rally from a seven-run deficit, and Altuve contributed an RBI single to the mix. It marked Altuve's 17th consecutive game at Target Field with a hit, breaking a tie with Kansas City's Mike Moustakas for the longest by a visiting player in the ballpark's history. Altuve is batting .440 (33-for-75) during the streak, which began on Aug. 3, 2013. Brian Dozier's 21-game home hitting streak in 2016 is the record for any player.
- By giving up five runs over 4⅓ innings, Kyle Gibson had his worst outing since July — but the outcome was the same as usual. The Twins have won 11 games in a row that Gibson has started, the longest streak for the team and one of its starters since Johan Santana's 12-game streak in 2006. Gibson is 7-0 in those 11 games, with a 3.09 ERA.

Wednesday's Twins-Houston game recap
Phil Miller | Star Tribune | April 12, 2018

GAME RECAP

IMPACT PLAYER

Max Kepler, Twins

His first homer of the game capped an eight-run inning, his second one won the game.

BY THE NUMBERS

17 Consecutive Target Field games with a hit by Astros star Jose Altuve, the ballpark record by a visiting player.

32 Combined walks issued by both teams in the three-game series, along with 61 strikeouts.

11 Consecutive Twins victories when Kyle Gibson starts, the team's longest such streak since 2006.

Twins-Chicago White Sox series preview
Phil Miller | star Tribune | April 11, 2018

Four-game series at Target Field

Thursday, 7:10 p.m. • FSN, 830-AM: RHP Jose Berrios (1-1, 3.29 ERA) vs. RHP Lucas Giolito (0-1, 6.17)

Friday, 7:10 p.m. • FSN Plus, 830-AM: TBA vs. RHP Reynaldo Lopez (0-0, 6.55)

Saturday, 1:10 p.m. • FSN, 830-AM: RHP Lance Lynn (0-1, 5.00) vs. RHP Miguel Gonzalez (0-2, 8.68)

Sunday, 1:10 p.m. • FSN, 830-AM: RHP Jake Odorizzi (1-0, 2.20) vs. RHP Carson Fulmer (0-1, 5.59)

Twins update

The Twins have lost the season series to the White Sox only three times in the past 17 seasons, yet they are only 40-36 vs. Chicago at Target Field. ... The series is expected to be affected by inclement weather — rain is in the forecast for Friday, snow for Saturday, and weekend highs are expected to be around 30 degrees. The White Sox return to Minnesota on June 5-7 (and both teams have June 4 off), and the teams close the season here Sept. 28-30. ... The most likely candidates for Friday's start are RHP Phil Hughes, currently on a rehab stint at Fort Myers, and LHP Adalberto Mejia, currently at Class AAA Rochester. ... RHP Addison Reed was drafted by the White Sox and played his first three seasons in

Chicago, a teammate of IF Eduardo Escobar in 2011-12. LHP Zach Duke spent 2015-16 with the White Sox.

White Sox update

Chicago is 4-7, ending a five-game losing streak Wednesday by beating Tampa Bay 2-1, its first victory in six home games this season. DH Matt Davidson hit a two-run homer in the eighth inning, his fifth home run this season, putting him one ahead of Brian Dozier and Mike Trout for the AL lead. ... The White Sox went 0-for-9 with runners in scoring position Wednesday, dropping their average in those situations to .163, second worst in the AL only to Cleveland. ... The White Sox bullpen has a collective 5.59 ERA, second worst in the AL. Their starters have a 4.72 ERA. ... SS Tim Anderson leads the league with six stolen bases and has yet to be caught. ... Giolito and Lopez were acquired from Washington for OF Adam Eaton in December 2016. Lopez has given up only one run in each of his two starts, but Chicago lost both games. ... LHP Carlos Rodon is on the disabled list following shoulder surgery. ... Former Twins LHP Hector Santiago made the team as a long reliever.

Twins worth \$1.15 billion as franchise values soar

Michael Rand | Star Tribune | April 11, 2018

The Twins are worth \$1.15 billion according to a new valuation released by Forbes this week, ranking No. 22 among Major League teams. There are several other interesting pieces of data relating to that and other valuations:

*The Twin Cities now have three pro franchises valued at \$1 billion or more. The Twins reached that mark in Forbes' valuations last year, and saw their value increase by \$125 million from last year to this year. The Twins were valued at \$356 million by Forbes in 2009, their last year in the Metrodome.

The Timberwolves reached the billion mark in the most recent Forbes valuations in February, checking in at \$1.06 billion. And the Vikings are worth more than both of them combined, at \$2.4 billion according to Forbes.

All three can thank, in large part, massive TV contracts that have propped up franchise values across the board in the NFL, NBA and MLB.

The Wild, by the way, was valued at \$440 million in the most recent Forbes valuations. That ranks No. 18 among NHL teams – but that's tied for the highest ranking within a league among the five local teams along with the Vikings, who are also No. 18 in the NFL. The Twins, as noted, are No. 22 in MLB. The Wolves are No. 27 in the NBA. So all four are in at least the bottom half of their respective leagues. Minnesota United was not yet included in the most recent MLS valuations, but the average MLS franchise was worth \$223 million per Forbes in 2017.

*Even with the Twins being worth more than a billion dollars, massive disparities between MLB clubs remain. The Yankees are valued at \$4 billion, and five other teams are worth at least \$2 billion.

Forbes breaks down its valuation attribution into four categories: revenue shared by all teams, city and market size, stadium and brand.

Not surprisingly, the value of revenue shared by teams is similar across the board. But the Yankees get nearly \$2 billion of their value from their market and another \$700 million from their brand. The Twins? Their market is worth \$375 million and their brand is worth \$110 million. These are teams that compete against each other, and we know how it usually ends in the playoffs.

*That said, when you compare the Twins to a rival market like Milwaukee, you see some positives. Forbes says the Brewers are worth \$1.03 billion – or \$120 million less than the twins. Much of that gap comes from the Twins having a more lucrative market, stadium and brand.

The White Sox have the highest value of any American League Central team (\$1.5 billion), with much of that attributable to their market size.

*While it should be noted that valuations are not equal to revenue — they're merely estimates of a team's value, useful primarily in case of the sale of a team — the Twins' value has followed a lucrative trajectory.

They were bought for \$44 million in 1984 by the Pohlads family. That's the equivalent of about \$105 million in 2018 dollars. But if the Twins are really worth \$1.15 billion ... well, then they're worth a little over a billion dollars more than the Pohlads paid for them 34 years ago.

That's a pretty nice return on investment.

For Twins' Joe Mauer, two hits shy of 2,000, milestone is no big deal

Brian Murphy | Pioneer Press | April 11, 2018

Jake and Teresa Mauer rarely come to midweek afternoon games, but the sun broke out Wednesday to melt the permafrost at Target Field, so mom and dad figured why not see if Joe would stay hot enough at the plate to achieve his latest Twins milestone.

They'll have to return Thursday night.

Mauer singled in his initial at-bat against Houston Astros vanquished starter Lance McCullers Jr., for career hit 1,998. But then he walked, struck out twice and grounded out in the balance of Minnesota's 9-8 victory to remain two shy of becoming the third Twin and 287th major-leaguer to reach 2,000 hits.

"It's been fun to see some of the fans come out and make signs and have meters," Mauer said. "That's been kind of cool. For me, it's been just trying to have good at-bats and help our ballclub win."

According to the Twins, the Hall of Fame will want something to commemorate the event, probably Mauer's bat or the ball from the feat.

Some piece of memorabilia likely will end up at his parents' St. Paul house, which has become a repository for whatever Joe has not stored away for his own future display.

Like his 2009 American League Most Valuable Player trophy.

"He drove around with that in his trunk for three months after getting it," Jake Mauer said. "He's never really been big about personal stuff. I think a World Series ring would mean a little more."

Mauer is off to a strong start in 2018.

He is batting .387 and reached base safely in all nine games, 21 times in 40 plate appearances, for a .525 on-base percentage.

Mauer is poised to join Kirby Puckett (2,304) and Rod Carew (2,085) as the only players to amass at least 2,000 hits with Minnesota.

Among active players he ranks 10th, behind 44-year-old leader Ichiro Suzuki (3,085).

Albert Pujols was 17 hits shy of 3,000 entering play Wednesday. Others still playing with 2,000-plus hits include Miguel Cabrera (2,645), Robinson Cano (2,388), Jose Reyes (2,095), Nick Markakis (2,065) and Victor Martinez (2,043).

"The air gets a little rarer the farther you go," said Twins manager Paul Molitor, who finished his hall of fame career with 3,319 hits. "We'll acknowledge it. It's a special thing. You don't see that number roll around very often."

Mauer's hitting prowess in his first 10 seasons put him on a hall-of-fame trajectory until concussions and leg injuries ended his catching career and sent him into a three-season tailspin at the plate.

He overcame blurred vision related to his concussion symptoms and regained his durability after switching to first base, hitting .305 with an .801 on-base-plus-slugging percentage in 2017.

Mauer's lost seasons beg the question of whether the three-time AL batting champion would have been able to chase 3,000 hits — the magic number for enshrinement. Debatable if he had remained behind the plate, with the physical toll the position takes and at-bats lost to more off days than position players.

"I don't know, I never put too much thought into those kind of things," he said. "They come along when your team has success and you're out there every day. When this happens it'll be a nice little thing. But there are a lot of things we're trying to accomplish this year that are a lot bigger than that."

Twins survive Astros 9-8 on Max Kepler's walk-off homer in the ninth **Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | April 11, 2018**

Max Kepler had a message for the rest of the American League after Wednesday's walk-off homer to beat the Houston Astros 9-8 in the bottom of the ninth.

"We're ready to play any team," the Twins right fielder said. "It doesn't matter who it is. They're a good team, but like I said we could play anyone."

After the Twins blew an 8-1 lead, Kepler saved the day with his second home run of the afternoon and second career walk-off homer, the first coming against the Boston Red Sox in June 2016 on his first big-league homer. This one came on a full-count slider from Astros right-hander Brad Peacock.

“I was just in battle mode, trying to put the ball in play,” Kepler said. “I struck out the at-bat before. I hate striking out. It was right over the middle. It was kind of low. I like them low. It was a good pitch to hit.”

Kepler’s two-run blast off a Lance McCullers Jr. knuckle curve capped an eight-run fourth that included Eddie Rosario’s bases-clearing triple. Rosario is slugging .556 in 45 career at-bats with the bases loaded.

The Astros, however, clawed all the way back to tie the score in the ninth with two runs (one earned) against closer Fernando Rodney. Brian Dozier’s throwing error on a potential game-ending double play allowed the tying run to score.

“If I make a better throw, he’s out,” Dozier said. “Just a baaad throw. We’re big-league players. We’re supposed to make that play. Kepler saved us tonight.”

REED COMES THROUGH

Strep throat and all, reliever Addison Reed gave the Twins five huge outs on Wednesday.

With the bases loaded in the seventh inning and a seven-run lead down to two, Reed blew away pinch-hitter Marwin Gonzalez with a pair of sliders and got George Springer to fly out on a full-count fastball.

Reed stayed in to record three more outs (all on pop-ups) in the eighth. Not bad for a reliever sent home mid-game on Tuesday night so he could rest after falling ill on Sunday night.

“Monday it got worse,” Reed said. “After the game I got checked out, and they told me I had strep. That was great news. I had a couple of bags of IV (Tuesday), felt all right (Wednesday) and ready to roll.”

Twins manager Paul Molitor knew before the game Reed would be available, but he didn’t expect to use him for five outs until he got through the sixth on nine pitches.

“I like coming into those situations,” Reed said. “That’s when I have the most fun out there.”

Signed to a two-year, \$16.75 million deal in January, Reed has stranded all five inherited runners this year. The only earned run off him in eight innings was a double that hit off the wall in left field on Monday; his earned-run average through six outings is 1.13.

SANO SITS

Third baseman Miguel Sano was out of the starting lineup for the first time this year as the Twins loaded their lineup with left-handed batters against McCullers Jr., and his power curve.

Sano was 1 for 9 with six strikeouts over his past two games, leaving him two strikeouts behind American League leader Giancarlo Stanton’s 22. The infield hit was a dribbler under Dallas Keuchel’s glove that required a postgame scoring change.

“I know we haven’t played a ton of games, but I don’t want to get greedy with him either,” Molitor said. “He’s moving around. The leg has responded. Just thought it was a good day to make him available late in the game rather than give him a start.”

BRIEFLY

— Paid attendance was 15,438, marking the third straight day the Twins failed to reach 16,000. Total attendance for the three-game series was 46,459. The lowest paid attendance in the Target Field era was 15,171 last April 5 against the Kansas City Royals, the second game of the season.

— Jose Altuve’s run-scoring single in the fifth inning for the Astros gave him a 17-game hitting streak at Target Field.

— Twins starter Kyle Gibson was unable to capitalize on the early run support, getting pulled in the fifth despite being handed an 8-1 lead. Molitor said the long offensive half inning just before may have contributed to that.

— No determination has been made on the Twins’ starting pitcher for Friday’s game against the Chicago White Sox.

Ex-Astros see championship-core parallels with young Twins

Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | April 11, 2018

They each spent several years playing for the Houston Astros before joining the Twins, but neither Jason Castro nor Robbie Grossman attended any of the three World Series games in their home city last fall.

Same went for the championship parade, although Grossman did get a sense of the magnitude when he tried to run some errands that day near his home, which is about five miles northwest of Minute Maid Park.

“The morning of the parade, I was trying to leave my place,” he said before Wednesday’s 9-8 victory that claimed the three-game series over the Astros. “It took me about 45 minutes to go a couple blocks. All the streets were blocked off.”

What normally might have proved annoying instead gave Grossman another chance to grasp the enormity of the moment for a hurricane-ravaged city.

“Just to have the light of something for the city to rally around and root for was huge at that time,” said Grossman, who grew up in the area. “It brought a lot of happiness at a bad time for a lot of people. I know people who lost their homes. To see them have something to have some joy about was very cool.”

As they went head-to-head this week with an Astros team just a few years removed from 324 combined losses from 2011-13, it struck both former Astros how quickly such turnarounds can happen in the modern game. They look around the Twins clubhouse, filled with talented young pieces and a number of respected veterans, and wonder why the same sort of championship parade can’t happen again in the Twin Cities.

“I saw a lot of similarities as far as the amount of youth coming in to this organization, but I didn’t think that 100-plus loss season here (in 2016) was indicative of the state the organization was in,” Castro said. “Obviously we showed that last year. I don’t think the timeframe will be quite as long as it was (in Houston), so I’m hoping that we can really continue to push forward this year.”

With Castro behind the plate, the Astros improved from 51 wins in 2013 to 70 the following year and then jumped all the way to 86 wins and a wild-card spot in 2015. They won at Yankee Stadium, where the Twins saw their 85-win season end last year, and then had the eventual World Series champions on the ropes early in the division series before falling in five games to the Kansas City Royals.

“We should have won that Royals series,” Castro said. “It was a tough series. That would have put us even deeper into the postseason. I definitely think this team is easily capable of that. I’d say compare this team to the playoff team we had in ’15.”

The Astros slipped back to 84 wins in 2016, after which they traded for catcher Brian McCann and allowed Castro to leave via free agency, but they surged to 101 wins and their first division title in 16 years last season. The Twins would love to make a similar jump without a year of retrenchment/disappointment in the interim.

The Astros-Twins parallels have come up at times in the clubhouse, Castro said, mostly in casual conversations.

“It’s just getting guys to understand how close it can be,” Castro said. “It doesn’t have to be something that’s like this lofty dream. If we play to our abilities and stay consistent, I mean, it’s not out of reach by any means.”

In some ways, Grossman said, the Twins are ahead of where the Astros were at a similar stage of their rebuild.

“This core is more talented than the core they had, the core of guys I played with coming up,” said Grossman, who played his first three seasons in Houston (2013-15). “There’s more of them over here. It’s crazy how quick it can happen. A couple guys here, a couple guys there — you never know.”

And yet, there will always be an element of luck in such journeys.

“So many things have to go right,” Grossman said. “So many things had to go right for the Astros last year. Look, if they get (Zach) Britton at the deadline, they never get (Justin) Verlander and they never win the World Series.”

One thing that shines through, both Twins said, is the clubhouse chemistry the Astros developed through their hard times and sustained all the way to the top. Castro remains in touch with Astros pitchers Dallas Keuchel, Lance McCullers Jr. and Collin McHugh; like Grossman, he worked out this offseason with center fielder George Springer.

“When you get a group like this and the young guys are in the same age and playing hard and everyone gets along, I think that’s the biggest thing they took away from over there,” Grossman said. “I remember talking with Springer about how good the clubhouse is and how everyone gets along. We’ve got the same thing over here.”

Wetmore’s 5 thoughts: Rosario’s big hit, a big blown lead, Kepler saves the day for Twins

MINNEAPOLIS – The Twins looked like they'd cruise to a series win against the defending World Series champion Houston Astros. And then in the 5th inning it all hit the fan at once. By the end of the day, the Twins sent Houston packing having taken 2 of 3 games on a dramatic home run from Max Kepler. As you'd expect, there was good news and bad news from Wednesday's 9-8 walk-off win.

"It's just how you draw it up, right? You give up a 7-run lead and then you homer," manager Paul Molitor cracked.

"We're talking strategy in the dugout [in the bottom of the 9th inning] and the next thing you know the game's over," he said.

This column presents 5 thoughts from Wednesday's win.

1. Max Kepler hit two home runs, including the walk-off winner against Brad Peacock.

It's Kepler's second walk-off homer in his big league career, and who could forget the line-drive shot over the wall he used to beat the Boston Red Sox last year? He said that one was probably more dramatic than Wednesday's shot to left field to walk off the Astros. But who's comparing? The Twins will take the win and bank it.

His first blast capped an 8-run 4th inning for the Twins, when Kepler took Lance McCullers deep to right field on a knuckle curve. Eleven Twins hitters took a bat to the plate that inning and at that point it looked like the Twins and Kyle Gibson were really in control of things.

Then Minnesota was down to the last out in the 9th against Peacock. Kepler got a full-count slider to his liking and crushed it over the right field wall to send chilly Twins fans home happy.

"I wasn't really expecting anything I was just trying to see the ball out of his hand and keep it simple," Kepler said calmly, just minutes after his second blast made him the hero.

2. It wasn't quite Michael Jordan's Flu Game but Addison Reed deserves credit for his Strep Throat Game.

The Twins' fireman reliever was unavailable during Tuesday's game because he'd been diagnosed with strep throat and was getting fluid intravenously. I wasn't there but it sounds unpleasant.

Wednesday he got to the park with more energy and proclaimed himself available to his manager, and Molitor took him up on it in a game that had become much closer than it should have been.

The Twins were up 8-5 and reliever Zach Duke loaded the bases with one out in the 7th inning. Molitor went to Reed. Reed responded by striking out off-balanced Marwin Gonzalez on a slider and then left the bags full of Astros when George Springer flew out to Eddie Rosario. Nine pitches, crisis averted.

Molitor talked to Reed between innings, presumably to get a gauge on how far Reed could go in the next inning. "We asked him right away, and I don't even think he liked the fact that we asked him," Molitor said. "You knew he was going back out."

Reed needed just 10 more pitches to get through the 8th inning versus the middle of one of the best lineups in baseball – Alex Bregman, Jose Altuve, Carlos Correa and Josh Reddick.

3. Eddie Rosario announced his return to the lineup with a much better game.

On Monday the Twins' left fielder had a bad day at the plate and in the outfield. He's made you scratch your head a few times this year (like when he threw a ball from left field to center field in his haste to get it back into the infield). He's also coming off a breakout season at the plate and could be one of the real keys to the Twins making noise this season.

Monday he missed a catch at the wall that I thought he could have hauled in. He also let a sinking liner bounce in front of him and get by him, although that one didn't cost the Twins a run. He was on the bench Tuesday against lefty Dallas Keuchel, as was Kepler, as Molitor loaded the lineup with right-handed hitters.

Rosario chalked up his shortcomings Monday to the old standby: Sometimes, that's baseball. Back in the lineup Wednesday, he raked a bases-clearing triple to put the Twins in front, 5-1.

4. Fernando Rodney and the Twins' bullpen blew a big lead Wednesday.

The Twins, of course, should never have been in a situation where a walk-off homer was necessary. They were up 8-1 and Kyle Gibson looked fine heading into the 5th inning. Then Gibson ran into some trouble and was pulled after he allowed four consecutive hits to the middle of the

Astros' order.

Trevor Hildenberger came and couldn't put out the fire. Gibson left the game with the bases loaded and all three runs scored on Hildenberger's watch. According to MLB.com, Hildenberger has now inherited 7 runners this season – and all 7 have scored. That's a bad sign for a guy who was among the Twins' best relievers last year.

In the 9th inning, with the Twins still clinging to an 8-6 lead, Rodney came in and gave up a base hit to the leadoff hitter to welcome the tying run to the plate. Moments later the game was tied, after a failed double play turned into two runs rather than a game-ending ground ball.

You could pin that sequence on Brian Dozier for his throwing error, or on Rodney for not getting to the first-base bag quickly enough. You could go back and assign blame to Gibson for his inadequate outing. But when the bullpen coughs up 6 runs – including 3 charged to Gibson – I'd prefer to lay the blame at their feet.

5. Joe Mauer slapped a single to left field in the 1st inning for career hit No. 1,998.

I wrote about Mauer for my Wednesday morning column. I totally get it if you think 'Whoop-dee-doo, 2,000 is just an arbitrary round number.' I thought that for a stretch, too. But I've come around to the idea that round-number celebrations are meaningful and important in pro sports. If nothing else, it gives us a chance to pause and reflect on a great career – one of the greatest in franchise history.

Twins open four-game series against White Sox **Associated Press | Fox Sports North | April 11, 2018**

MINNEAPOLIS — Taking two of three from the defending World Series champion Houston Astros has the Minnesota Twins riding high as they welcome the Chicago White Sox to town for a four-game weekend series at Target Field starting Thursday.

Jose Berrios (1-1 3.29 ERA) returns to the mound for the Twins after a rough outing his last time out. He pitched a complete-game shutout in his 2018 debut, but after dominating the Orioles for three innings on Saturday, he allowed three runs in the fourth inning and two more in the fifth as the Twins fell to Seattle 11-4.

"I thought Jose threw the ball fairly well," Twins manager Paul Molitor said. "He got behind a couple good hitters."

Berrios said part of the problem stemmed from relying more on his fastball. He struck out seven batters over 4 1/3 innings but was not able to command it enough to replicate his season-opening performance.

"The plan was fastballs inside," Berrios said. "I didn't throw the changeup a lot, but that was the game plan. And it just didn't work out."

Berrios has faced the White Sox four times in his career, going 3-1 with a 2.13 ERA, striking out 31 with eight walks in 25 1/3 innings. He held the White Sox scoreless the last time he faced them, tying his career high with 11 strikeouts over seven innings on Aug. 30 of last season.

Right-hander Lucas Giolito (1-0, 6.17 ERA) will start Thursday for the White Sox, and he hasn't enjoyed the same level of success against the Twins. He has faced Minnesota just once in his career, and he served up three home runs and allowed four runs on six hits while striking out four over six innings of a 4-1 loss on Aug. 22 of last season.

It was his first-ever appearance for the Sox, who had acquired him from the Nationals in the Adam Eaton trade. He went on to finish the 2017 season with a 3-3 record and a 2.38 ERA in seven starts, leaving a White Sox catcher Omar Narvaez impressed and optimistic.

"I think he's going to be one of our best pitchers," Narvaez said. "Because his fastball is kind of sneaky, and he has a great changeup. He uses it whenever he wants to. And he has a really, really good curveball."

Chicago is hoping to create some momentum after snapping a five-game losing streak with a 2-1 victory against the Tampa Bay Rays on Wednesday.

The White Sox opened the season by beating Kansas City twice but have dropped seven of nine since.

"Everybody that does anything, from tiddlywinks to marbles, when you win it feels good," manager Rick Renteria said after Wednesday's victory. "It was nice the way they came back and did what they did. We had a few miscues out there in the last couple of innings, but the at-bats that those two guys, quite a few guys, put together toward the end is probably something we're more (used) to seeing. ... It was nice to get that game, absolutely."

Kepler hits 2nd HR, connects in 9th, Twins beat Astros 9-8
Staff Writer | Associated Press | April 11, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS -- Following Fernando Rodney's first blown save with Minnesota, Twins manager Paul Molitor took the long-game approach and began talking strategy in the bottom of the ninth inning.

Max Kepler stepped to the plate and negated any further planning.

Kepler hit his second home run of the game, connecting for a solo drive with two outs in the bottom of the ninth as the Twins bounced back from a late collapse to beat the Houston Astros 9-8 on Wednesday.

"We're talking strategy in the dugout and the next thing you know, the game's over," Molitor said.

After the Twins blew an 8-1 lead, Kepler homered with two strikes off Brad Peacock (1-1).

"I wasn't really expecting anything," Kepler said of his second career walkoff homer. "I was just in battle mode, trying to put the ball in play. I struck out the at-bat before. I hate striking out, so I was just trying to put it in play."

Kepler also hit a two-run homer to cap an eight-run fourth, an inning that included Eddie Rosario's bases-loaded triple. Rodney (1-1) gave up two runs -- one earned -- on two hits and a walk in one inning.

A throwing error by second baseman Brian Dozier helped Houston tie it in the ninth against Rodney. Down 8-6, the Astros loaded the bases with one out. George Springer grounded into an RBI forceout, and the tying run scored when Dozier threw wide to first trying for a double play.

"There was a lot in that game that could've gone a little bit better for us, but obviously I'm proud of the way we fought back," Houston manager A.J. Hinch said. "They hung in there, too, and they came back from a tough blow losing an 8-1 lead. Weird game all the way around. For them to win on one swing is frustrating."

A series that had been marked by cold weather, walks and strikeouts finally saw a bit of offense after both starters faltered in the middle innings.

The first-pitch temperature was 44 degrees after starting in the 30s at night the previous two days. The teams combined for 32 walks and 61 strikeouts in the three-game series.

Lance McCullers Jr. allowed a career-high eight runs in 3 2/3 innings for Houston. He gave up seven hits, tied a career high with six walks and struck out six.

"I had a game plan going into the game that maybe doesn't fit what I do best," McCullers said. "That's on me. I've got to kind of have a better idea of what I really want to do and what I feel comfortable with."

Alex Bregman had a career-high four hits, including his first homer of the season for the Astros.

FEELING MINNESOTA

Houston's comeback had players and coaches remembering their big comeback in Target Field on Memorial Day last season. Then, the Astros were down 8-2 before rallying for 11 runs in the eighth inning of a 16-8 win.

"When we got down 8-1, I told A.J. in the dugout, I said, 'There's something about this field where I don't feel like we're ever out of it,'" Bregman said. "Sure enough, we were down six again in the eighth and came back and tied it. It's what our team's all about. We're going to keep fighting and competing every single pitch."

GOOD RECOVERY

Dozier offered a similar feeling as Bregman, talking about Minnesota's resiliency to come back strong after tough moments.

"We don't let stuff bother us," Dozier said. "Keep the line moving. Take your walks, take your hits and move on, and Kepler was the hero today. We don't let too much faze us, which is a really good thing at this level."

TRAINER'S ROOM

Astros: 1B Yuli Gurriel (left hand surgery) returned to Houston and will work out in preparation for being cleared to return to the lineup on

Friday. Gurriel hit .429 with four doubles and three RBI in six rehab games at Double-A Corpus Christi. He was suspended for the first five games of the major league season for making an inappropriate gesture toward Dodgers pitcher Yu Darvish during the World Series.

Twins: RHP Addison Reed gave up one hit in 1 2/3 innings the day after an illness kept him away from the park.

UP NEXT

Astros: Following an off day, RHP Gerrit Cole (1-0, 0.64 ERA) will start Friday as Houston hosts the Texas Rangers. Cole has struck out 11 in each of his first two starts for the Astros and has given up one run in 14 innings.

Twins: RHP Jose Berrios (1-1, 3.29) will start the opener of a four-game series at home against the Chicago White Sox, though weekend weather could disrupt the schedule. Berrios gave up five runs in 4 2/3 innings to lose his last start on April 7 against the Seattle Mariners.

Max Kepler's maturation at the plate already paying off for Twins in 2018

Dan Hayes | The Athletic | April 11, 2018

There's plenty of untapped potential in Max Kepler's game, and the Twins have to be excited to see him unleashing some of it.

While Kepler still hasn't had many opportunities to conquer left-handed pitching, the third-year major-leaguer has provided plenty of other signs his game is maturing early in 2018.

Wednesday's two-home-run effort, including a walk-off to beat the Houston Astros 9-8 at Target Field, is surely the biggest highlight of the season for Kepler. But the outfielder has made plenty of other improvements at the plate that must have the Twins excited about where he could wind up.

"It's a really good player with another year experience and he's just maturing," hitting coach James Rowson said. "He's starting to figure this thing out. It's fun to watch it. He has an idea of what he wants to do and it happens like that, it starts to show up in the games."

Kepler admits there had been a little frustration on his part and also of the Twins when he stepped into the batter's box in the ninth inning. He wasn't happy that he struck out in the sixth inning — one of 14 consecutive batters retired by Astros relievers — on a 2-2 curveball out of the strike zone. And the Twins weren't particularly happy to be tied with Houston after taking an 8-1 lead when they scored all of their runs in the fourth inning, Kepler's two-run shot to right capping the eight-run rally.

But one facet of the game in which Kepler says he has improved is in moving on from anything that previously happened.

"All you can do is really keep your game focused and hunt for the next pitch," Kepler said. "You can't let what happened an at-bat before stay in the present."

When Kepler stepped to the plate in the ninth inning, he merely wanted to simplify the process. He knew that Astros reliever Brad Peacock featured a good fastball and an outstanding slider and simply hoped to get a pitch in the zone. Before the homer on the 3-2 pitch, Peacock made six offerings with Kepler laying off the three pitches outside of the zone. He attacked the three in the zone — something he's done much more so far this season — swinging and missing at one and fouling back two more. Having just fouled off a 3-2 slider, Kepler was ready when Peacock's next slider was down the middle and ripped it 389 feet to right for the game-winner.

"It was a good at-bat," manager Paul Molitor said. "We've seen a lot of progress the last couple years. We know he has power. It's not the towering home runs, it's more of the line-drive type swings. They have a lot of carry on them. I think he's more comfortable being here and his place here. And as a result of that, I think he's going to get better."

Small sample sizes can be misleading. There's no guarantee that what a player has done in his first 38 plate appearances won't eventually even out over 500-plus trips to the plate.

But early on, Kepler has made some encouraging gains by having a better sense for how pitchers will approach him through two seasons of experience. Kepler is striking out far less than in the past with a 10.5 percent strikeout rate this season, down from 20.2 percent for his career. He's also improved his walk rate from 8.9 percent for his career to 15.2 percent this season.

Those figures are a direct result of better pitch selection. Kepler has seen an increase in his zone-swing rate (swinging at pitches inside the strike zone) from 61.2 percent to 74.5 percent in 2018.

And, Kepler has begun to do more damage to off-speed pitches. All three of his home runs have come on them after he hit only four all last season, according to BrooksBaseball.net. If Kepler can improve against the slider, changeup and curveball — he was 35-for-195 (.179) with a

.328 slugging percentage last season — he could be on the verge of tapping into that potential.

Rowson attributes much of that to Kepler's persistence with his daily routine, which includes studying video to have a better sense of what might be coming.

"He has an idea what he wants to hit," Rowson said. "He's trying to keep it simple and not trying to cloud the brain. He has an idea of how he may be attacked and what he wants to hit and he's taking that into the game with him."

Even though he knows what might be coming, Kepler said he doesn't like to try and guess. After two full seasons, he knows a wrong guess can do more damage than good — "I would look for something, get something else and then be all in my head about what's coming next," Kepler said.

Instead, Kepler likes to clear his head, prepare for what might come and let his hands do the rest. Even earlier this season, after teammates and coaches praised him for his 11-pitch walk on Opening Day that helped tie the score in the ninth inning, Kepler said he's better suited to move on from the past and focus on the future.

"Baseball is up and down," Kepler said late last month. "You've got to stick with what you control and believe in that. I got my pitch and did some damage with it. Other days you're going to miss that pitch, you recognize it, and then you have to start a whole new project to get a new pitch.

"But it's baseball."

Simplified swing has led to increased confidence for Twins' Ryan LaMarre

Dan Hayes | The Athletic | April 11, 2018

One of the primary reasons Ryan LaMarre reconstructed his swing this offseason is for nights like Tuesday.

No matter how well he performed this spring, the Twins outfielder knew there was almost no chance he'd win a starting job out of camp. If ever he reached that prestigious role, LaMarre, who previously played 29 games for the Cincinnati Reds, Oakland A's and Boston Red Sox, would have to earn it through a reserve role.

The ups and downs LaMarre has experienced in a career that began in 2010 told him as much.

This offseason, LaMarre figured if he ever wanted to make an impact at the major-league level, he'd need to cut down his swing and be ready for games like Tuesday, when he started against the Houston Astros after three days of inactivity. LaMarre — who went 0-for-2 and made a heads up play in the field in a 4-1 win at Target Field — reworked his swing in Florida with the help of several friends and "trimmed the fat." With four hits in eight at-bats to start the season after a red-hot spring, LaMarre feels as confident as ever with his new look.

"It's felt amazing," LaMarre said. "It has just been really simple. I just feel like I know what I'm doing. I know when it's off. I know what's off with it and I know how to fix it. That just gives me peace of mind. Baseball is a huge mental game. Especially when you've got so much downtime, it's easy to let your mind start to wander. You see other players having success and you try to replicate their swing. I don't do that anymore. I feel comfortable with what I'm doing and I've been able to trust it a lot easier."

LaMarre's comfort is easy for friends and teammates to detect.

Astros catcher Max Stassi worked out with LaMarre in Jupiter, Fla., during the offseason at Cressey Sports Performance. The same site also hosted the Twins' Logan Morrison and Lance Lynn, and LaMarre also worked out with Astros outfielder Derek Fisher and former third baseman Colin Moran. The group had met last year at Triple-A and became friends. Stassi said the difference he sees in LaMarre between now and their initial meeting is remarkable and it's all about the confidence.

"It's like driving a car with a flat tire down the road and it's like, 'Be confident,'" Stassi said. "You're not going to be confident if you see something is broken. As soon as you know how to fix something and you know that it plays at the highest level, it's the ultimate confidence booster. He's definitely not lacking any confidence.

"What I see is a whole different player ... It's awesome to see a guy that has made changes late in his career. It's never too late in this game."

LaMarre is pretty frank about how he reached this point.

A second-round pick of the Reds in the 2010, LaMarre never quite progressed as he hoped, producing a .719 OPS in eight minor-league seasons. He always had the eye, but the bat wouldn't cooperate. Still, he had enough defense and pop to reach the majors in three straight seasons: 2015

with the Reds, 2016 with the Red Sox and 2017 with the A's. But he combined to go 2-for-37 in the majors in those stints and wondered if he'd ever get back after Oakland released him last season.

"A lot of failure," LaMarre said. "A lot of auditions. Not a ton, but enough auditions where I knew as a non-roster (invitee) 28-, 29-year-old, you're not going to come in and win a starting job with minimal MLB experience. If it were to happen, it'd probably be in a reserve role. I just tried to get ready for that and that's how we attacked the changes in the swing, the mentality. That's how we addressed it from Day 1 and just kept pounding it home every day."

LaMarre said he made several minor mechanical changes with the bigger picture of comfort at the plate in mind. He knew he felt good when leaving Jupiter and immediately started to back it up at Twins camp in Fort Myers.

The performance — he hit .475/.511/.775 with two home runs and 10 RBIs in 45 plate appearances this spring — constantly impressed the Twins. Ultimately, the club chose to reward LaMarre and picked him over Zack Granite.

"We've always known about his defensive ability, but offense has always been a little bit lighter," chief baseball officer Derek Falvey said late last month. "For him to use this offseason to retool his approach, I think it's just a credit to a guy looking to get better. It's impressive, and it was exciting to be able to tell him (he earned the roster spot)."

LaMarre singled on Opening Day in Baltimore and has kept up his hot streak. He produced the first RBI of his career in Saturday's loss to the Mariners and is feeling both confident and at peace. Given he has an active brain that likes to overthink things, LaMarre said the quiet has made it easier to keep working every third day.

"I've always questioned what I'm doing — is it right?" LaMarre said. "But this offseason, I knew it was right. To see the results right away was definitely rewarding."

"Sitting around on the bench, you might not hit for days. You might have to sit around and get a big at-bat late in the game and if you don't know your swing inside and out, it's tough to truly focus on the pitcher when you're focusing on yourself. I feel like I've got to the point where I trust this enough to focus on what he's doing. That's the peace of mind that has just been awesome."