

## Tribes to make interesting ALDS roster decisions

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

HOUSTON -- With little drama in the American League Central and the Indians' place in the postseason locked in fairly early, Cleveland had ample time to pore over the Astros' roster. That process, in turn, led the Tribe to make some interesting decisions concerning its own cast for the AL Division Series.

The Indians' final ALDS roster will be officially announced on Friday morning ahead of Game 1, but manager Terry Francona has detailed his plans over the past few days. The most intriguing development was making it known that righty Trevor Bauer -- an AL Cy Young contender for most of the season -- will be available out of the bullpen initially as a leverage weapon.

"They present so many challenges," Francona said of the Astros. "The one thing that I think they've really done for the last couple years, they play until it's time to go home. Sometimes you'll beat them, but they might just have [run] out of outs. They keep coming at you. You've got to pay attention to detail. They're fun to play, though, because they've got so many good players, so many good pitchers."

### Starting pitchers

Corey Kluber will take the ball in Game 1 on Friday night, followed by Carlos Carrasco in Game 2 on Saturday and Mike Clevinger in Game 3 on Monday. If the Indians and Astros play to Game 4, Cleveland will choose between Bauer and Shane Bieber for that start. Should the ALDS reach a decisive Game 5, Kluber would be positioned to return on five days' rest.

### Relievers

The Game 4 decision between Bauer and Bieber is related to the bullpen picture. There is a good chance that Bauer will be used as a multi-inning leverage arm, especially with so many tough right-handed hitters in the Houston lineup. Bauer's workload in the early games will impact who starts Game 4.

The Tribe's bullpen has endured plenty of ups and downs this year, but the team feels Andrew Miller and Cody Allen are positioned for improvement in October. All-Star Brad Hand is present for leverage work, too. Expect lefty Oliver Perez and righty Adam Cimber to be used as specialists, with groundball specialist Dan Otero rounding out the cast.

### Infielders

In order to accommodate the arrival of third baseman Josh Donaldson, Jose Ramirez shifted to second base for the final month of the season. Donaldson, who missed three months with a calf issue earlier this year, is back to full strength. Shortstop Francisco Lindor and Ramirez give Cleveland one of the most dynamic up-the-middle duos in baseball. Yonder Alonso will get the bulk of the work at first base, but Edwin Encarnacion and Yandy Diaz can play there as well.

### Outfielders

Once Ramirez moved to second, Jason Kipnis exited the infield and took over as the Indians' primary center fielder. Kipnis has held his own at the position, but the Indians will not hesitate to send rookie Greg Allen in as a late-inning defensive replacement. Michael Brantley is locked in for left field, while Melky Cabrera handled most of the innings in right. Both Brandon Guyer and Rajai Davis can offer defensive protection for the corners. Allen and Davis also give the Indians a pair of stolen-base threats off the bench.

### Catchers

On the final Saturday of the regular season, Yan Gomes came up firing when Kansas City's Adalberto Mondesi attempted to steal second. Alex Gordon was at the plate and swung on the play, letting his bat linger on the backswing. Gomes' right hand hit Gordon's bat at full force, resulting in a laceration that required two stitches. During Thursday's workout, Gomes threw to bases and took batting practice with no issues and has "no restrictions," per Francona. Roberto Perez has filled the starter shoes before, so he will be at the ready behind Gomes as usual.

Here is the expected roster:

	Dan Otero	Francisco Lindor
	Oliver Perez	Jose Ramirez
Pitchers (11)	Catchers (2)	Outfielders (6)
Cody Allen	Yan Gomes	Greg Allen
Trevor Bauer	Roberto Perez	Michael Brantley
Shane Bieber		Melky Cabrera
Carlos Carrasco	Infielders (6)	Rajai Davis
Adam Cimber	Yonder Alonso	Brandon Guyer
Mike Clevinger	Yandy Diaz	Jason Kipnis
Brad Hand	Josh Donaldson	
Corey Kluber	Edwin Encarnacion	
Andrew Miller		

## Ramirez revels in unexpected excellence

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

HOUSTON -- Three more outs and the Indians could have called it a day. The Astros were up by five runs in the ninth inning, and this was only a late May contest. Jose Ramirez strutted to the plate, his hands wrapped in pink batting gloves to honor his mom and he did not intend on going through the motions.

Stretched across his right forearm is a tattoo with his mother's name, Xiomara. Earlier on that Mother's Day morning, she asked her boy to hit a home run and help the Indians win. Ramirez came through with that first present in the first inning with a blast off Gerrit Cole. Now, the Indians' slugger was going to try to put a bow on the second gift.

The hard-throwing Ken Giles, who was with the Astros at the time, crouched, shifted into his delivery and then unleashed a 97-mph fastball up and in. The pitch was effective in moving Ramirez's feet and getting him to retreat from the batter's box momentarily. Ramirez stepped back in, hoisted his bat and readied himself for the next pitch.

No one could have predicted what came next.

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Inside the library of Thomas Jefferson Elementary School on Cleveland's west side, while the clamor of children could be heard from the playground outside, Ramirez sat in front of a crowd of students. The moderator of the August visit asked how many in the room spoke Spanish.

One by one, every single hand went up.

There were kids from Puerto Rico and Venezuela. Others from Cuba, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Mexico. And, there were children originally from the Dominican Republic. For them, Ramirez needed no introduction. Not only was this the Indians' American League Most Valuable Player candidate, he was one of them, once a kid from Bani on the southern coast of the D.R.

Ramirez was not like them, though. He looked around the pristine library filled with books and thought back to the decision he made in his youth. Ramirez was so focused on his dream of playing baseball that he stopped attending school by the time he was 13 years old. Now, sitting in front of students who can see his designer clothes and view him as a star, Ramirez explained that he made a mistake.

"Never drop out of school. Never stop your studies like I did," Ramirez said in Spanish. "It turned out fine for me -- one in a million. I was that [one in a million]. Thank God, because not everyone gets there. I got here. I'm here, thank God. But, your studies, never stop them."

Ramirez spoke for roughly 45 minutes with the students, telling his story, expressing the importance of staying in school and fielding questions. These particular students were part of the International Newcomers Academy, which helps ease children from other countries into Cleveland's public school system. He urged them to learn English and not be afraid to say something wrong.

Ramirez said that when he arrived to the United States at 17 years old, he would often go 12 or more hours without eating due to not knowing the language.

"Everybody in the world knows how to say that word, 'Hi,'" Ramirez said. "I got here, I didn't even know what 'Hi' was. But you know, I kept moving forward, because I knew what I wanted in my heart. I wanted a better life. I wanted to help my family. I wanted to be big in life, you know what I mean? No obstacle can stop the dream that you have."

During the discussion, Ramirez was asked what career he would have pursued had he stayed in school.

"I could have been a good engineer," Ramirez said.

Some of the children laughed.

Ramirez then mentioned that he has a younger sister who is an architect.

"My little sister is always joking with me," Ramirez said. "[She says], 'You have money, but I'm a professional. I'm a professional.' You know, I laugh and everything, but that hits me, because in reality, she's telling the [truth]. She is a professional. What I am is an athlete. I'm an athlete. Now, that's a profession. It's a profession, because that's what we've chosen, but she's the real professional."

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The count finally ran full on the ninth pitch of the battle with Giles, who sent a slider bouncing into the dirt.

With the Indians stuck in an 8-3 hole, Ramirez continued to fight through this leadoff at-bat in the ninth inning. To that point, he had seen pitches up and in, down and away, elevated, over the middle and painted on both edges. After two more foul balls, bringing the pitch count to 11 in this particular at-bat, Ramirez finally cracked a smile.

Foul ball. Foul ball.

Now, Ramirez allowed himself to let out a laugh. The Progressive Field's crowd -- stunned quiet after the Tribe bullpen allowed six runs in the eighth -- was buzzing again. Over in the third-base dugout, Ramirez's teammates were starting to smile along with him.

Foul, foul, foul.

The plate appearance was now 16 pitches deep. At shortstop, Houston's Carlos Correa said something to second baseman Jose Altuve, and they both smiled. Ramirez got back into the batter's box, feeding off the energy that the dozen foul balls had generated inside the stadium.

"I wasn't really tired," Ramirez said. "I was so concentrated on looking for a pitch and getting a pitch that I could drive."

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When Ramirez walks the streets of Bani in the offseasons these days, he usually has a pack of kids trailing behind him. He loves when they try to copy the strut that Ramirez has brought to Cleveland. Whether he is walking over to the Mario Kart machine to take on a teammate in the clubhouse, or heading to the plate, Ramirez has his chest out, chin up and arms swinging.

In his hometown, he hears shouts of his name.

"Enriquito!"

"That's the name that they've called me over there since I was a kid," Ramirez said. "They still call me that -- Enriquito. That's a nickname that they call me around the neighborhood."

It means "Little Enrique," which is in reference to the name of Ramirez's father. When Ramirez was growing up, his dad instilled in him the belief that anything was possible for his son. Ramirez was always viewed as the runt of the litter, but that did not stop him from taking the baseball field with kids who were much bigger, stronger and older than him.

While men from the neighborhood would place bets in the stands, Ramirez would take the field with the attitude that he was better than everyone else. Then, he would go out there and prove it, helping some of the onlookers fill their pockets.

"I believed that no one was better than me, even though I was small," Ramirez said. "I always felt like that -- like a little man -- when I was young."

It still proved daunting to overcome the "too small" opinions of evaluators.

Ramirez went unsigned at 16, when the bulk of the international talent is scooped up. In November 2009, he was invited to a three-game showcase, along with some other unsigned players, at the Indians' facility in Boca Chica. Ramon Pena, who used to head the Indians' Latin American operations, got a look at Ramirez, negotiated with his trainer and completed a handshake deal to sign the scrawny infielder for \$50,000.

That deal was fine by Ramirez. Surprising people was a specialty.

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Ramirez again lifted his bat, rocking it back and forth behind his head. Giles again crouched and came set, planning where to place the 17th pitch of this draining, seemingly never-ending plate appearance.

The pitch came in at 99 mph -- a fastball to the lower portion of the strike zone. Ramirez finally got the one he wanted, swung and shot the baseball off his barrel and into right field. The Progressive Field crowd erupted as Ramirez sprinted up the line, and then grew louder when the ball struck the padding of the wall. Ramirez slid headfirst into second base with a double.

"That was an incredible at-bat," Indians manager Terry Francona said. "It changed the whole inning."

That double sparked a five-run outburst for the Indians, who went on to win, 10-9, thanks to a walk-off home run by rookie Greg Allen in the 14th inning. Even though the deficit seemed too big, Cleveland clawed back and emerged victorious. Even though Ramirez has always been viewed as too small, he has emerged as one of baseball's elite players.

That at-bat on May 27 embodied Ramirez's abilities as a player. The switch-hitting infielder boasts one of the best contact rates in the Majors and has blossomed into an extra-base machine in the middle of the order for the AL Central champions. Come Friday, Ramirez will look to inflict more damage against the Astros in Game 1 of the ALDS.

This season -- even with a six-week offensive slump at the end of the year -- Ramirez finished with 39 home runs, 38 doubles, 34 stolen bases, 105 RBIs, 106 walks, 110 runs scored and a .939 OPS. He started at third base for the AL All-Star team for the second consecutive season and will once again be in the conversation for the AL Most Valuable Player Award.

"I'm not surprised by anything that is happening with my career," Ramirez said. "I've always been like that, since I was a little kid, always doing things that no one was expecting of me."

### **Indians-Astros: Lineups, matchups, FAQs**

By Brian McTaggart and Jordan Bastian MLB.com @brianmctaggart and @MLBastian

An enticing matchup between the last two American League champions gets underway Friday in Houston when the Astros play host to the Indians in Game 1 of a star-studded AL Division Series.

The best-of-five series features two dominant pitching rotations, led by former Cy Young winners Justin Verlander and Dallas Keuchel of the Astros and Corey Kluber of the Indians. The Astros have the best bullpen in the game, but it's on offense where the stars will shine.

The defending champion Astros, who set a club record with 103 wins, have a deep lineup that features All-Stars Jose Altuve, George Springer, Alex Bregman and former All-Star Carlos Correa. The Indians counter with All-Stars Francisco Lindor, Jose Ramirez and Michael Brantley and former MVP Josh Donaldson.

What might the starting lineups look like?

Indians: The top of the Tribe's lineup is fueled by two of the most dynamic hitters in the game in Lindor and Ramirez. The switch-hitting duo hits for power and can leg out extra-base hits and steal bases. The late-season acquisition of Donaldson lengthens out a lineup that finished first in MLB in steals (135), third in runs (818) and fourth in weighted on-base average (.330).

1. Francisco Lindor, SS
2. Michael Brantley, LF
3. Jose Ramirez, 2B
4. Edwin Encarnacion, DH
5. Josh Donaldson, 3B

6. Yonder Alonso, 1B
7. Melky Cabrera, RF
8. Yan Gomes, C
9. Jason Kipnis, CF

Astros: There are dangerous hitters throughout the lineup, though almost every batter took a step backward this year with the exception of Bregman and White. If Correa is fully over the back ailment that hampered him in the second half, that would be a boon for the Astros:

1. George Springer, CF
2. Jose Altuve, 2B
3. Alex Bregman, 3B
4. Carlos Correa, SS
5. Yuli Gurriel, 1B
6. Tyler White, DH
7. Marwin Gonzalez, LF
8. Martin Maldonado, C
9. Josh Reddick, RF

Who are the starting pitchers?

Indians: Coming off his second career AL Cy Young Award, Kluber (20-7, 2.89 ERA) turned in another strong season for the Tribe. The ace topped 200 innings and 200 strikeouts for the fifth consecutive season, becoming the first pitcher in Indians history to accomplish that type of streak.

Hitters adopted a more aggressive approach this season against Kluber, who adjusted by leaning more on his sinker and cutter than a year ago. His strikeout rate dropped (9.3 K/9 in 2018 vs. 11.7 K/9 in '17), but Kluber led the AL in walk rate (1.4 BB/9) and was happy with inducing weak contact in early-count situations. In two starts vs. Houston this year, Kluber has given up two runs with 17 strikeouts and no walks in 13 1/3 innings.

Kluber on facing Verlander

Kluber on facing Verlander

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Astros: Veteran right-hander Verlander (16-9, 2.52 ERA) had one of the best seasons of his career at 35 years old, with a career-high 290 strikeouts and 0.90 WHIP in 34 starts. The Astros wouldn't have won the World Series if not for last August's trade for Verlander, who had a 2.21 ERA in six playoff outings '17 and was the Most Valuable Player of the ALCS against the Yankees.

Verlander didn't face the Indians this year, but has tons of experience against them while he was with the Tigers. He has 11 more losses in his career against the Indians than another team, going 20-24 with a 4.71 ERA.

How will the bullpen line up after the starter?

Indians: Cleveland has shown in recent postseason games that it is not afraid of having a quick hook with its starter and leveraging the late-inning arms earlier in games. Expect the trio of Andrew Miller, Brad Hand and Cody Allen to get the bulk of the work, with Oliver Perez, Adam Cimber and Dan Otero filling speciality roles.

The Indians have added a wrinkle into their 2018 October bullpen, too. For the early games, righty Trevor Bauer -- a front-runner for the AL Cy Young Award before a stress fracture in his right fibula cost him six weeks in the second half -- will be available as a multi-inning leverage arm in the early games of the ALDS.

Astros: The Astros have rebuilt their bullpen from last year, when they used starters in key relief spots throughout the playoffs. The makeover started in December when they signed veteran right-handers Hector Rondon and Joe Smith and continued into July in trades to acquire former All-Star closer Roberto Osuna and another veteran righty, Ryan Pressly.

The Astros finished the regular season with a bullpen that led the Major Leagues in ERA (3.03), batting average against (.214), WHIP (1.06) and fewest walks (137). Another key development was the re-emergence of lefty Tony Sipp, who was a legitimate weapon following a pair of poor seasons.

Any injuries of note?

Indians: Miller dealt with three DL stints this season, but finally looked like himself in a solid September. Gomes sustained a laceration in his right thumb on Saturday, but is expected to be fine for the ALDS. Bauer is healthy, but he has not thrown more than 60 pitches in a game since early August. Corner outfielder Brandon Guyer is dealing with a minor right shoulder issue, but is cleared to play.

Astros: The Astros appear to be as healthy as they can be heading into the playoffs. There were questions about pitchers Lance McCullers Jr. (elbow) and Charlie Morton (shoulder), but they showed enough in the final days of the regular season to give the team optimism that they were good to go. Same with Correa, who hasn't been himself since going on the DL with a back issue in August. He homered and doubled Saturday in Baltimore, a sign his injury might be behind him.

Who is hot and who is not?

Indians: Ramirez was a clear-cut AL MVP candidate through July, but labored at the plate over the final two months. Dating back to Aug. 19, when he last had a .300 average, the slugger has hit .167 with a .583 OPS. On the other side of the coin, Donaldson hit .280/.400/.520 with a 149 wRC+ in September. Gomes (141 wRC+) and Brantley (140 wRC+) also had strong September performances.

Astros: Verlander went 3-0 with a 1.09 ERA in five starts in September. Offensively, many of Houston's hitters were struggling entering the playoffs. In the team's final seven games, Altuve was 5-for-19, Bregman was 4-for-18, Correa was 3-for-12, Gattis was 1-for-14, Kemp was 1-for-14, Gonzalez was 2-for-15 and Springer was 3-for-12. Reddick (5-for-17) and Gurriel (7-for-19) were trending up.

Anything else fans might want to know?

The Astros are trying to become the first team to defend a World Series title since the 1999 Yankees. ... This is the Astros' 12th postseason appearance. They're 35-45 all-time in the playoffs, including 17-8 at Minute Maid Park. They were 8-1 at home in the playoff last year, with the only loss coming in Game 4 of the World Series.

In order to accommodate Donaldson's arrival in August, Ramirez moved off third and took over at second. That prompted Kipnis to shift from second to center. Kipnis has looked fine in center, while Ramirez has been shaky at times at his new spot on the infield. ... This is the fourth postseason appearance for the Tribe in six years under manager Terry Francona. Cleveland has gone 0-6 in close-out games in the playoffs, dating back to the 2016 World Series.

### **Davis, known for WS HR, brings speed to ALDS**

By Jordan Bastian MLB.com @MLBastian

HOUSTON -- Rajai Davis was at dinner outside Cleveland on Tuesday evening, when he was approached by some Indians fans in the restaurant. They asked if they could take a picture with the veteran outfielder and then told their own story of witnessing his iconic home run off Aroldis Chapman in Game 7 of the 2016 World Series against the Cubs.

"That happens pretty often," Davis said with a smile on Thursday. "People remember where they were, what they were doing. It's something special."

Davis will once again have a chance to impact the Tribe in October.

Before Cleveland's players took the field at Minute Maid Park for Thursday's workout, Indians manager Terry Francona informed Davis that he would be on the roster for the American League Division Series against the Astros. The team's decision-makers were debating between carrying Davis (a weapon on the bases) or Erik Gonzalez (a utility man and the team's only true backup shortstop).

In the end, Francona felt that having Davis as a stolen-base threat off the bench was more important than maintaining a safety net for the Indians' infield. This season, the Tribe led the Majors in steals (135) for the first time in franchise history and became the first Cleveland team to have four players with at least 20 steals since the Naps of 1911.

That offensive element can be critical on a stage where a small event can have a major influence on a game's outcome.

"Nobody has a crystal ball," Francona said. "But, who could impact a series? We felt like Raj had a better chance. It's nothing against Gonzie. But, if Gonzie gets in [the game], that meant something went wrong. If something goes wrong, we might be kicking ourselves, but I think we felt like the risk is worth the reward."

Within the Indians' surplus of steals, Jose Ramirez led the way with 34, followed by Francisco Lindor (25), Greg Allen (21) and Davis (21). As a team, Cleveland's 78.9 percent success rate ranked third in the American League, while the team's 13.7 base runs above average (an all-encompassing baserunning metric) ranked second in the Majors.

Speed in October can be a difference-maker.

"It's going to be huge," Davis said. "That plays a factor in how guys pitch to the next guy that's at the plate. When you know a guy is quick or he can steal a bag, nobody wants to give up 90 feet. Obviously, we're trying to score runs. If that affects the pitcher and the way he thinks, the way he delivers pitches, and hopefully helps our hitters get better pitches to hit, that only benefits the team."

The Astros are hoping catcher Martin Maldonado and his 49-percent caught-stealing rate can help neutralize that aspect of the Cleveland's attack.

"If they want to test us on the bases and Martin's catching," Astros manager AJ Hinch said, "they're going up against the best-throwing catcher in baseball. With the work from our pitchers and the way that [Maldonado] can shut down the running game, it's a huge dilemma for the other side."

Worth noting

- Catcher Yan Gomes still has two stitches in his right thumb -- due to a laceration sustained on Saturday in Kansas City -- but the All-Star is expected to be behind the plate for Game 1 on Friday. Gomes has been hitting with no issues, and the catcher threw to bases during Thursday's workout at Minute Maid Park without a bandage on the digit.

"He had a completely normal workout. He's fine," Francona said. "There are no limitations, and it won't get in the way."

- Besides backup catcher Roberto Perez and Davis, the Indians' bench for the ALDS will feature Allen, Brandon Guyer and Yandy Diaz. Francona said that Diaz, specifically, was carried to give Cleveland an additional pinch-hitting option against Houston reliever Tony Sipp.

"It gives us protection against them bringing in a lefty," Francona said. "It's another guy that can play the infield, but it's a guy that really swings the bat really well against left-handers. That's basically why he's there."

### **Tribe-Astros features throwback rotations**

By Anthony Castrovince MLB.com @castrovince

HOUSTON -- Invention is interesting. Innovation is imperative. The world changes, and baseball changes, and, even in the very small window of time that is this first week of the 2018 postseason, we've seen that with the lines between starting pitchers and relievers becoming more and more blurred by teams like the Brewers and A's, that the sport has changed in a dramatic way.

And then, on the other hand, you have this American League Division Series between the Astros and Indians.

Don't get me wrong. These are two analytically advanced clubs. AJ Hinch and Terry Francona are two open-minded managers who undoubtedly have a few tricks up their sleeves in the best-of-five that begins Friday afternoon at Minute Maid Park. Things will evolve, as they tend to do.

But to peer at the probable starters is to be taken back to a long-ago era when, well, starting pitchers started games ... and in some cases even finished them.

Justin Verlander vs. Corey Kluber in Game 1? That is the exact opposite of "the opener."

"Sometimes you have to think outside the box to get where you're going," Francona said. "Not [Friday]."

It's Gerrit Cole vs. Carlos Carrasco in Game 2. It's Dallas Keuchel vs. Mike Clevinger in Game 3.

Every starter listed above finished in the top 20 in the Majors in innings pitched and in the top 30 in ERA this season. Five of them (Kluber, Verlander, Keuchel, Cole and Clevinger) reached the vaunted 200-inning mark, which is something only eight other starters across the Majors can say.

Toss in potential Game 4 starters Charlie Morton and Trevor Bauer (who, as part of the potential evolution mentioned above, could wind up being utilized out of the bullpen beforehand), and you've got seven of the AL's top 10 adjusted ERA+ leaders from 2018.

In other words, these are the two best rotations in baseball, and it's not particularly close.

"However you like to slice it, us and them, them and us," Verlander said. "Pick your poison. We both have very defined starters who have a great track record and have good stuff. This should be a really fun series."

With the definition of "starter" changing by the day, these teams are evidence that there remain outliers to the industry trend of shying away from starters once the top of the opposing lineup comes to bat a third time. Major League pitchers faced just 25,241 batters a third time in 2018, down from 27,692 a year ago and 32,153 a decade ago.

Why this occurs is no state secret. In the last 10 seasons, opponent OPS is .656 the first time through the order, .714 the second and .733 the third. As pitchers tire and are more exposed to opposing lineups, batters thrive.

Heck, Blake Snell (1.89 ERA in 180 2/3 innings) might win the AL Cy Young Award over Verlander (2.52 ERA in 214 innings) precisely because of the way Rays manager Kevin Cash proactively managed him. Snell's opponent OPS the third time through the order (.729) was almost identical to Verlander's (.725), but he faced 67 fewer batters in those situations. That explains some of the ERA difference right there.

We've come to expect horses like Verlander and Kluber to get a longer leash, but it's notable that in 2018, a guy like Clevinger can still earn that level of trust in just his first full season. He hit the 200-inning mark on the nose in his final start of the season.

"First, you have to have the weapons to be able to do that, to attack both lefty and right-handed hitters a couple times through the order," Indians president of baseball operations Chris Antonetti said. "But you also have to condition yourself to be strong and durable so there's not a degradation of stuff. Our staff deserves a lot of credit for helping guys prepare for their starts."

And that leads to one of the most fascinating question of this fascinating matchup of AL powers: How much will the trust that was accrued over the course of 162 matter in a tournament that is becoming more bullpen-oriented every year?

Relievers accounted for 46.5 percent of all innings pitched in last year's postseason, in part because the importance of maximizing matchup strengths is heightened, and in part because of the extra off-days in the schedule. In a short series like this, Bauer might actually have more value as a long reliever in Games 1, 2 or 3 than as a starter in Game 4. There might not be as much incentive to ride a guy that third time through the order in this series as there is in the regular season.

"You lean on the numbers but also what you're seeing and the feeling from everybody involved," Cleveland pitching coach Carl Willis said.

But the Indians and Astros are in the increasingly rare position of actually having starters for whom the third time through the order is even an option on this stage.

"It's significant," said Hinch, "because you'll see the most starter innings -- you know, if things play out as people expect."

Ah, there's the rub. The heightened aggression of a best-of-five is quite likely to lead to earlier-than-usual hooks for some of these horses, because it's not as if either club is short on bullpen weapons.

But for now, Astros-Indians stands as an outlier in an evolving industry. A series in which the starting pitching probables actually maintain their old-school allure

### **Analyzing the data behind José Ramírez's late-season slump (and why a few well-timed postseason swings can make everyone forget about it)**

**T.J. Zuppe 2h ago 1**

CLEVELAND — Shane Bieber knew.

It wasn't a guess. It wasn't just an inkling. He just knew.

"Man, he's 100 percent swinging here," Bieber said to himself.

Having battled José Ramírez many times in adrenaline-fueled "Mario Kart" races within the clubhouse — even emerging victorious on occasion — Bieber knew he wasn't one to take the conservative route. Ramírez's reckless use of turtle shells and banana peels or his wild antics on Koopa Troopa Beach (not to mention his many first-place finishes) told him that.

Bieber, taking his knowledge and experience from the Mushroom Cup, was now facing him on the Progressive Field mound. But this time, there would be no last-second power-ups or gamer-friendly shortcuts.

The Indians' intrasquad clash this week may have been the first matchup of Bieber and Ramírez on a baseball field, but the young right-hander knew enough about the Tribe's budding star and his lofty confidence level to surmise how he'd handle being up in the count.

And Bieber wasn't backing down.

"It's a scrimmage," he said, laughing. "I'm not going to walk him on a 3-0 curveball or something like that. So, I was like, 'Here it is.' "

And there it went.

Ramírez deposited Bieber's offering nearly six rows deep in the right-field stands, sending the switch-hitter on a happy trot around the bases.

Sure, Mario Kart may be an evenly-matched battle between the two, but Ramírez's intrasquad homer off the rookie earned him the most recent laugh.

"I think it was a little bit of payback for talking smack," Bieber said.

That sort of fearless, unapologetic aggressiveness is partially what helped build one of the American League's strongest MVP cases through the middle of August, seemingly putting the infielder on an inevitable collision course with one of the best individual seasons an Indians position player has ever had.

And while Ramírez still finished the year with a strong resume, blasting 39 homers, slashing .272/.388/.555 and compiling the third-highest WAR total in baseball, via FanGraphs, perhaps a small drop in aggressiveness — on top of a tweak in how opposing pitchers attacked him — was partially to blame for a late-season slump that tainted an otherwise spectacular campaign.

But it's rarely as simple as one or two things that send things out of whack. For Ramírez, it all seemed to start with one pitch — or in this case, the absence of it.

By the time August arrived, if you weren't paying attention to Ramírez's sparking offensive numbers, you may have been stuck in a coma. In particular, the switch-hitter was demolishing fastballs at a clip almost any other batter would envy and every pitcher feared.

The Nightmare on Elm Street level terror for right-handed pitching was attempting to figure out where to sneak one by him. Essentially, there was almost nowhere within the zone to safely silence him.

He was turning and driving nearly everything inside, and if you attempted to squeeze one in the upper inside corner and missed, Ramírez would attack and punish with more ferocity than Freddy Krueger.

But, as you can expect, the league adjusted — and really, what took so long?

Ramírez witnessed a near 12 percent drop in fastballs from July to August. At 45.7 percent, the rate of heaters he earned was the lowest he'd seen over any month in his career.

The difference was made up almost entirely by offspeed pitches, an offering he — like many hitters — has a greater trouble punishing. Ramírez finished the year with a .253 average and .389 slugging percentage against pitches classified as offspeed by Statcast, so the plan made sense.

It became easy to theorize that the shift in game plan had something to do with the mid-August numbers dip, but it never felt like something to dwell on. The blueprint to attack players is always changing, and overall, his August was still solid (.823 OPS, 114 wRC+).

But a consistent rebound never came.

On Aug. 18, Ramírez belted his 37th homer of the season. For the sake of illustrating his late-season struggles (and maybe you should shield your eyes from the numbers to be safe), we'll focus on the rest of the season following that night.

In the next 38 games, he posted a .165/.304/.273 slash line. He smacked just two homers. His hard-hit rate plummeted. The near-blinding shine on his MVP caliber season began to slightly diminish. And many began to scratch their heads.

Thankfully, as the slump lingered, Ramírez continued to take his walks, establishing a career high percentage (15.2). He never struck out at freakish rates. And when he did reach base, he was still a major problem for the other team. His standing as baseball's top base runner, according to FanGraphs, didn't happen by accident.

He was contributing. Just not at All-Star levels.

"When you guys say struggling, he's struggling to get hits," Francisco Lindor said of his teammate. "But, he keeps on getting walks. He walks almost every game and he has good at-bats. It's just when he hits the ball, they're not (falling). So, he's getting on base. He's still scoring runs. It's a slump, yes. It's a slump. But, it's a slump of hits — not a slump of helping the team win. He's helping the team win on a daily basis."

Still, the drop off was curious.

No one doubted his ability. He's been a dynamic player for three years now. That was no fluke.

But what the hell happened in the final quarter of the season?

Players like big, round numbers. They're just like you and me.

Hitting .300 just looks better than .299. Winning 20 games, in an era of diminished pitcher win importance, still feels cool. And for Ramírez, there was probably some appeal in chasing 40 homers.

He finished one shy of that mark — one season after finishing with 29 home runs — but if you wanted to stretch the rules of baseball stat keeping, maybe you could mentally pencil in his solo blast off Bieber this week.

Hell, the rookie was willing to count it.

"I'm glad I could be a part of it," Bieber said with a grin.

With No. 40 in mind, maybe Ramírez got away from his typical approach. Maybe he began to press. Maybe, in the midst of some rather unimportant September games, his swing got a little lengthy. Or, maybe it had nothing to do with his frigid finish.

The one thing we can say with some level of certainty — it wasn't just due to seeing fewer fastballs. In fact, Ramírez actually saw a rise in heaters in the final month, at least when compared to August.

That should have been good news. But for some odd reason, Ramírez just didn't have the same success against fastballs in the final month.

Ramírez average/slugging vs. fastballs (per Baseball Savant)

Prior to Sept. 1: .320/.719

Since Sept. 1: .185/.352

It's difficult to definitively say that shocking contrast came down to just one factor — they rarely do — but perhaps the most noticeable difference came in the types of pitches he was offering at in the final month.

Overall, he was swinging at fewer pitches, but more notable, he was swinging at fewer pitches in the zone.

Before the final two months, well better than 60 percent of his swings came on offerings within the strike zone. That dropped by roughly five percent in August and September.

It might be oversimplifying to say, "Hey, just swing at strikes and success will come," but considering he posted an .826 slugging percentage on pitches within the zone, that feels somewhat significant.

Now, here's where it gets tricky. Hurlers began to throw more of their breaking and offspeed pitches for strikes, tossing fewer fastballs in the zone and occasionally using them more as a teaser than a strike-getter.

For example, here is how right-handers tossed Ramírez fastballs in the first four months compared to how they've utilized their heaters since August.

April-July August-September

All but one strike zone quadrant has seen a decrease of some sort in fastball frequency in the final two months.

Perhaps the pitchers' adjustments has toyed with the switch-hitter's aggressiveness on pitches within the zone, elevating his walk rate but allowing hittable pitches — offerings he'd typically send to extra-base territory — to sail through untouched. To his credit, his chase rate on



pitches outside the zone hasn't drastically changed, but maybe seeing fewer appealing pitches in the strike zone has lulled Ramírez out of the aggressive mindset that helped build his season-long assault on the opposition.

His drop in pull rate since the start of August — it's down over 10 percent — might speak to that theory, demonstrating a little less eagerness to slash at hittable strikes with authority.

Now, for the encouraging news.

Ramírez has always hunted fastballs extremely effectively, particularly in the past three years. That's a sample size worth trusting. There's little reason to believe the recent skid on heaters that almost single-handedly derailed his September will continue forever — that much no one doubts.

And whether the theory about aggressiveness within the zone has some validity — Terry Francona suggested on Thursday that his swing mechanics might be a little off — or Ramírez just needed the benefit of a few days to flush the past month and hit the physical and mental reset, he's offered a clean slate. His September struggles this season or the fact that he scuffled last October won't have any bearing on what takes place in the next few weeks.

"Regardless of how you've done in September, you have to throw it out because it doesn't matter anymore," Francona said. "Come that first pitch on Friday, that's all that's going to matter."

Success won't come by accident — an adjustment of his own will likely prove critical — but a few well-timed swings or fence-clearing shots could quickly erase concerns over his uninspiring finish. That first chance will come in Game 1, when he steps in against the resurgent and fastball-reliant Justin Verlander.

And despite the depths of his struggles, still, no one seems overly concerned about Ramírez's ability to safely cross the finish line ahead of all combatants at Luigi Raceway or confidently stride to the plate and impact a game in a multitude of ways.

Sometimes you just know these things.

"He's still crazy Josey," Lindor said, flashing a smile, "Loud Josey. He's fine."

### **Marla Ridenour: As Indians throw out end-of-season concerns, rising to occasion will determine playoff success**

By Marla Ridenour

CLEVELAND — Jose Ramirez's post-All-Star slump is a concern.

Cody Allen's psyche gives cause for pause.

Jason Kipnis' defensive adventures in center field prompt fans to hold their collective breath, along with Josh Donaldson's recurring calf injury.

And if the Indians' erratic run production isn't enough of a worry going into Friday's opener of the American League Division Series against the defending world champion Houston Astros, there's the Tribe's 11-16 record this season against AL playoff teams.

Although Northeast Ohio's "expect the worst" mentality might be starting to change in regard to the Browns, that's not the case with the Indians. Perhaps it was the kick in the teeth after the Indians' exhilarating 22-game winning streak in 2017, only to see them eliminated by the New York Yankees in the ALDS after taking a 2-0 series lead.

Maybe it's because it feels like to get to the World Series, the Indians must win the NBA's Western Conference or the NFL's NFC title. The Boston Red Sox, Astros, Yankees and Oakland A's won 108, 103, 100 and 97 games, respectively, and outscored opponents by 229, 263, 182 and 139 runs. By those standards, the Tribe's 91-71 record — 49-27 against the weak AL Central — seems paltry. In the National League, only four out of 15 teams surpassed the Indians' victory total.

But as they begin postseason play in Minute Maid Park, the Indians aren't letting themselves be consumed by Ramirez hitting .174 in September, by Kipnis' .230 average or Allen's 7.09 ERA this season in non-save situations. They are throwing out stats from September, when they were coasting to their third consecutive AL Central title.

They say what matters is who can seize the momentum in October, not who finished the regular season on a roll.

"Playoff baseball is a totally different situation," catcher Yan Gomes said Tuesday as the Indians prepared to travel to Houston for Games 1-2. "Momentum is big. We're just going to go over there and try to get the momentum going on our side."

Manager Terry Francona said a lack of pressure in a weak division isn't why Ramirez hit .218 after the All-Star break. More likely it's the fact that Ramirez started seeing fewer fastballs in August and that continued the rest of the way. Ramirez has said his pursuit of individual batting goals was a distraction.

"But regardless of how you've done in September, you have to throw it out because it doesn't matter anymore," Francona said. "Come that first pitch on Friday, that's all that's going to matter. You could win 22 in a row, as we did, once that first pitch happens, it's the first team to win three."

The Indians reached the 2016 World Series because Francisco Lindor improved his average from .301 in the regular season to .310 in the playoffs. Brandon Guyer batted .333 against the Red Sox, Toronto Blue Jays and Chicago Cubs. Ramirez hit .268, Kipnis drove in a team-high eight runs and Roberto Perez seven. Corey Kluber went 4-1 with a 1.83 ERA in six games. Andrew Miller set the standard for bullpen dominance, going 2-0 with a 1.40 ERA in 10 relief appearances.

Last season, the contrasts were striking. Kluber posted a 12.79 ERA in two starts against the Yankees. Lindor batted 2-for-18, Ramirez 2-for-20. Prized free agent Edwin Encarnacion went hitless in seven at-bats; Kipnis posted a .182 average with one RBI. Facing great expectations, they folded.

The Indians boast a more balanced lineup and a healthier roster than a year ago, but it will mean nothing if some Mr. Octobers don't emerge quickly.

What the Indians did in 2016 doesn't matter. What they did (or didn't do) against the Yankees in 2017 doesn't matter. What they did in September doesn't matter.

As the Indians seek to win their first World Series in 70 years, the fears of Northeast Ohio will not be eased until they prove the moment is not too big for them.

### **Indians first baseman Yonder Alonso set for first postseason 'surrounded by a bunch of good guys'**

By Michael Beaven

When first baseman Yonder Alonso entered free agency this past winter, he considered his options.

In addition to seeking a lucrative contract, he also wanted to play for a team that could contend for a World Series championship.

Enter the Indians with a talented pitching rotation and a dynamic batting order that was in need of a first baseman after the departure of free agent Carlos Santana to the Philadelphia Phillies.

"He has been wanting this since he signed with us," Indians shortstop Francisco Lindor said of Alonso in a recent interview at Progressive Field. "That was the first thing he mentioned when I first saw him. He said, 'I want to be in the playoffs.' And I was like, 'Yeah, we have got a winning atmosphere here and it will be completely different from where you are coming from.'

"He is very excited because he has been wanting to play in the playoffs. Obviously, a lot of good things happen in the postseason." This week Alonso will experience the MLB playoffs for the first time in his playing career when the Indians (91-71) meet the defending World Series champion Houston Astros (103-59) in an American League Division Series.

Games 1 and 2 are in Houston on Friday and Saturday, and then the series shifts to Cleveland for Game 3 on Oct. 8. Games 4 and 5, if necessary, are scheduled for Oct. 9 in Cleveland and Oct. 11 in Houston.

Alonso, 31, bats in the middle of an Indians lineup that features playoff veterans Lindor, Michael Brantley, Jose Ramirez, Edwin Encarnacion, Josh Donaldson, Melky Cabrera, Yan Gomes and Jason Kipnis.

"I am lucky that I am in this position, obviously," Alonso said in the Indians clubhouse before a recent Saturday night game. "I am surrounded by a bunch of good guys, and for me, specifically, I am going to enjoy the moment but understand that it is just a baseball game. It is not anything different. It is still the game. You have 27 outs and you gotta score more runs than the other team.

"Other than that — just enjoy the moment, have fun with it and try not to put so much pressure on yourself."

Alonso compiled a .250 batting average (129-for-516) with 23 home runs, 83 RBI and 64 runs scored in 145 games for the Indians this season.

Alonso came to Cleveland with eight years of MLB experience with stints in Cincinnati, San Diego, Oakland and Seattle. The Reds selected Alonso in the first round pick of the 2008 draft, and after three trades and a free agency courtship by the Indians, he is finally getting the opportunity to play postseason baseball in October.

"That was the main priority and why I came here," said Alonso, who was born in La Habana, Cuba, and now makes his home in Miami. "I knew they have gone to the postseason quite a bit, and that is something that I wanted to experience. I came over here and in December I said, 'Hey, I am going to come here with the main priority to win, get to the playoffs and have some fun.'"

Alonso observed from a distance as the Indians had fun and went to the playoffs in 2016 and 2017 as the American League Central Division champions.

The 2016 Indians went 94-67 in the regular season, and then beat the Boston Red Sox and the Toronto Blue Jays in the American League playoffs before losing to the Chicago Cubs in seven games in the World Series.

The 2017 Indians put together an American League-record 22-game win streak en route to a 102-60 regular-season record, and then were eliminated by the New York Yankees in an AL division series.

"I leaned on everybody — Kipnis, Brantley, Lindor, Encarnacion — during my transition to coming here," Alonso said. "All of those guys have been good teammates. They have given me a lot of advice and I continue to get the advice and ask questions."

Alonso said he attended a World Series game in 1997 when the then Florida Marlins hosted the Indians in Miami.

"It was electric in the stadium," Alonso said. "I expect that atmosphere. It is definitely going to be a lot of fun."

### **Indians notebook: Rajai Davis selected to complete ALDS roster; Corey Kluber to start new postseason chapter**

By Ryan Lewis

HOUSTON — The Indians had one last decision to make. They could either take the safe route, choosing the insurance of extra defensive flexibility, or they could be aggressive and select a speedier option who can impact the game with his legs.

Manager Terry Francona and the Indians have chosen to be the aggressor.

On Thursday, Francona announced that Rajai Davis, and not Erik Gonzalez, would get the 25th and final spot on the Indians' American League Division Series roster against the Houston Astros.

Barring something unforeseen, the Indians' bench will feature catcher Roberto Perez, infielder Yandy Diaz and outfielders Brandon Guyer, Greg Allen and Davis.

Gonzalez would have given the Indians additional insurance in the infield in the event of an injury, namely to shortstop Francisco Lindor. That's also likely the only way Gonzalez would have entered a game. Davis, on the other hand, can be a weapon on the basepaths late in games.

### **Many in Indians clubhouse know this could be 'last hurrah' together**

By Ryan Lewis

CLEVELAND — One of the hallmarks of the collection of talent the Indians' front office has assembled, and built into a World Series contender, in the past several years has been the ability to keep so many of the key players together and in Cleveland.

The Indians' contention window likely won't come to a close this fall as they begin — at 2:05 p.m. Friday in Game 1 of the American League Division Series against the defending champion Astros in Houston — their bid for a return trip to the World Series and hoped-for redemption for the past two Octobers. Those seasons ended in heartbreaking fashion in Game 7 of the World Series and then in an unexpected, crashing halt much earlier last season.

But regardless of whether this October ends with the Indians on baseball's summit or again dealing with disappointment, this could be the last go-round in Cleveland for several key members of the team. Unlike in years past, when turnover on the roster was light, this offseason could present the biggest challenge thus far for the front office, with several upper-tier talents eligible to walk out the door and command top dollar as free agents.

It means Cody Allen and/or Andrew Miller, arguably the backbone of that improbable run through the 2016 postseason, could be entering their final weeks or days as members of the Indians. That goes, too, for Michael Brantley, who has returned to near top form after several injury-plagued seasons.

And it's also true for Lonnie Chisenhall and Josh Tomlin, the longest tenured player in the clubhouse. Neither will be on the ALDS roster.

Because of the extensive years of control with so many players, the Indians should be able to remain legitimate contenders through at least the 2020 season, with the possibility of extending that window to 2021 or even further. But it's also possible, looking at this season and the next few, that 2018 is their best shot to secure their first World Series title since 1948 with Miller, Allen and company all still under contract. That also goes for Josh Donaldson, who likely will end up being a two-month rental for the Indians.

The futures of Allen, Miller, Brantley and more won't be known until after this postseason, but it's not likely that all, if any, return.

"We look at this, this could be my last year here," Allen said on Sept. 15 as the team celebrated its third consecutive division title. "It could be a lot of guys' last year here. You don't take this for granted. The city of Cleveland and this organization will, no matter what happens, hold a special place in all of our hearts."

It also means the breaking up of some of the nucleus that has made for such a stable and consistent clubhouse. Allen, Brantley, Jason Kipnis, Corey Kluber, Tomlin, Yan Gomes and several others have been mainstays and team leaders in Cleveland. Others have joined a little more recently, such as Francisco Lindor, Jose Ramirez and Miller. But this could be the beginning of the end for that run to a much greater degree than in winters past, when, for the most part, players stayed put.

Kipnis, for example, had his name thrown around in trade rumors this year and for the second consecutive season has had to transition to center field for the postseason. With a \$14.5 million base salary for next season and a \$16.5 million club option for 2020, he could be the second-highest-paid player on the club, making him a possible trade chip yet again despite being under contract beyond this fall.

"It hasn't been talked about as much, but amongst us, within that group, more or less this might be our last hurrah," Kipnis said. "There are a bunch of guys who are not going to be here next year with free agency and all that stuff. There's no guarantee myself, that I'll be around next year."

In that regard, this October might feel different for the Indians. There's more of a sense of urgency than normal. The Indians replaced Carlos Santana with Yonder Alonso last offseason. Replacing the likes of Miller and/or Allen is more difficult. The trade for Brad Hand relieved some of that pressure for the bullpen beyond 2018, but those two would still leave massive holes for a unit that struggled without both at their best earlier this season.

Brantley would likewise leave a hole at the top of the lineup, and his departure would leave the Indians with one of the weaker outfield units among any contender in baseball.

It could be the first time in quite a while that the Indians will have so little control, which they have craftily framed into so many of their deals.

It's possible, though, the Indians will re-sign everyone. Owners Paul and Larry Dolan have shown since the 2016 trade deadline that they're willing to break franchise records in terms of payroll spending. But it doesn't seem likely. It's a daunting thought that the Indians might not be in control of so many key players come November.

For now, all they have is October — which also goes for any player who might be walking out the door for good once the lights are turned off after this postseason.

"It's always the reality and it's not something I think does a whole lot of good to look at in advance," Miller said. "If I'm focused on that, I'm obviously not focused on this series with the Astros. Wherever I end up is going to be something I'll figure out later. Right now, I have to give everything I've got in this series for us trying to win a World Series."

### **Friday's ALDS opener between Cleveland Indians, Houston Astros features, aces, pressure and thievery**

By Paul Hoynes, [cleveland.com](http://cleveland.com) [phoynes@cleveland.com](mailto:phoynes@cleveland.com)

HOUSTON - Terry Francona manages to put pressure on the other team's defense. The running game is one way to do that and the Indians executed it well this season.

For the first time in franchise history they led the big leagues in stolen bases with 135. But steals are just part of the pressure speed puts on a defense. What Francona really counts on is his team's ability to go first to third and second to home.

Houston manager A.J. Hinch talked about how the Astros will counter that when the best-of-five ALDS starts Friday at 2:05 p.m. at Minute Maid Park. Hinch mentioned one name, catcher Martin Maldonado.

The Astros acquired Maldonado from the Angels on July 26 and he's been their primary catcher since. For the season he's thrown out 45.5 percent (15-for-33) of the runners who have challenge him this year. In 41 games with Houston, he's thrown out 62.5 percent (5-for-8) of the runners who've tried to steal on him.

"If you look at what the Indians do on the bases, he could factor in very, very highly depending on what strategy the Indians try to take with their base runners and base stealing," said Hinch.

Jose Ramirez is the Indians top thief with 38 steals. He's followed by Francisco Lindor with 25 and Rajai Davis and Greg Allen with 21 each. Given Francona's fondness for speed, it's not surprising Davis was the 25th and final roster pick, getting the nod over utility man Erik Gonzalez.

Davis found out he'd made the roster just before the start of Thursday's workout.

Maldonado is no stranger to the Indians, especially Lindor. For the last couple of years, whenever the Indians and Angels played, the Puerto Rican natives spent time yapping at each other during Lindor's at-bats. If Lindor reached base, he'd frequently look back and say something to Maldonado.

Asked if the conversation would continue on Friday, Lindor smiled and said, "Probably. . .He's a cool guy and I respect him a lot. As a competitor and friend, he says something. When I get in the box, I look at him like, 'Yeah, OK,' and once I do my thing, I respond back.

"I love him. He's a great guy. It's nothing against him, but he'll probably be there tomorrow, too."

Lindor said running the bases hard is part of the Indians' game that they will continue to push.

"He (Maldonado) has got a great arm," said Lindor. "But us runners usually don't steal on catchers. If the pitchers give us a good time (a slow delivery to the plate) to steal, we're going to go. That's part of my game. That's part of our game as the Tribe.

"That's what we do. If we get two runners on, we're going to go. It doesn't matter who's behind the plate."

Hinch said Maldonado is more than ready for the challenge. In fact, he sounded like he was baiting the Indians.

"If they want to test us on the bases and Martin's catching, they're going up against the best throwing catcher in baseball," said Hinch. "With the work from our pitchers and the way he can shut down the running game, it's a huge dilemma for the other side. . .They want to put pressure on the best and we have a perfect counter for that."

Baserunners, of course, could be at a premium in this series considering the starting rotations the two teams will roll out. Corey Kluber (20-7, 2.89) will face Justin Verlander (16-9, 2.52) in Game 1 on Friday. Carlos Carrasco (17-10, 3.38) and Gerrit Cole (15-5, 2.88) will pitch Game 2 on Saturday and Mike Clevinger (13-8, 3.02) vs. Dallas Keuchel (12-11, 3.74) are scheduled for Game 3 on Monday at Progressive Field.

"If you look at the numbers, making contact is a problem," said Hinch. "They have four guys (Kluber, Carrasco, Trevor Bauer and Mike Clevinger) with 200-plus strikeouts and we have three (Verlander, Cole and Charlie Morton).

"The bullpen matchups, I know Tito well, and he's going to try and find the perfect matchup. They have a balanced bullpen, three left-handers and right-handed relievers who are going on right-handers. Contact will be at a premium. We're a good contact team and so are they."

Which means something has to give.

"You have two good contact teams against two good pitching staffs that are the best at getting swings and misses," said Hinch. "Someone is going to continue that trend, and someone is not. . .Contact is going to be huge in this series."

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## **Speed wins out over security as Cleveland Indians pick Rajai Davis for last spot on ALDS roster**

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com phoynes@cleveland.com

HOUSTON -- The Indians went with Rajai Davis' speed over the security blanket of Erik Gonzalez for the last spot on their ALDS roster. Manager Terry Francona announced the move on Thursday during the Tribe's workout at Minute Maid Park.

"No one has a crystal ball, but we went with who had a better chance to impact a series and we felt like Raj had a better chance," said Francona. "It's nothing against Gonzy. But if Gonzy gets in that meant something went wrong.

"If something goes wrong, we might be kicking ourselves, but I think we felt like the risk is worth the reward."

Davis hit .224 (44-for-196) with one homer and six RBI in 101 games during the regular season. Not great numbers, but where he stood out was on the base paths, stealing 21 bases in 28 attempts.

He is one of the reasons the Indians led the big leagues in stolen bases for the first time in franchise history. Jose Ramirez led the way with 38 steals followed by Francisco Lindor with 25 and Greg Allen and Davis with 21 each.

Davis, who hit one of the biggest home runs in franchise history in the 2016 World Series, was told he made the roster just before the Indians started stretching exercises Thursday at Minute Maid Field.

Gonzalez hit .265 (36-for-136) with 10 doubles, one homer and 16 RBI in 81 games. He played all four infield positions.

Ramirez, in the absence of Gonzalez, becomes the Tribe's backup shortstop. If he has to move to short, Jason Kipnis could move from center field to second base and Allen or Davis could take over in center.

The Indians and Astros will play Game 1 of the ALDS at 2:05 p.m. on Friday. They do not have to submit their rosters to the commissioner's office until 10 a.m. Friday, but with the addition of Davis, here's what the Tribe's unofficial 25-man roster looks like.

Starting pitchers (three): Corey Kluber, Carlos Carrasco and Mike Clevinger.

Bullpen (eight): Trevor Bauer, Shane Bieber, Cody Allen, Dan Otero, Adam Cimber, Andrew Miller, Oliver Perez and Brad Hand.

Infield (six): Lindor, Ramirez, Yonder Alonso, Josh Donaldson, Yandy Diaz and Edwin Encarnacion.

Outfield (six): Allen, Brandon Guyer, Kipnis, Michael Brantley, Melky Cabrera and Davis.

Catchers (two): Yan Gomes and Roberto Perez.

### **Is a healthy Josh Donaldson the biggest X-factor for the Cleveland Indians in the ALDS vs. Houston?**

By Joe Noga, cleveland.com jnoga@cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Houston took four of seven games against the Cleveland Indians during the regular season, but none of those matchups featured the Tribe's newest addition, third baseman Josh Donaldson.

Will the former American League MVP be the biggest X-factor when the two teams open AL Division Series play Friday at Minute Maid Park? Indians manager Terry Francona said Donaldson can impact a game in a variety of ways.

"He's always got that one swing from being able to change a game," Francona said. "But the other thing that he can do is he can hit the ball the other way. We've seen him shorten up and get a base hit up the middle or he'll take his walk when we need a baserunner."

Acquired from Toronto in late August, Donaldson had missed three months with a calf injury but returned to action gradually as the Indians progressed through September. In 16 games with Cleveland, Donaldson hit .280 with three home runs, three doubles and seven RBI while scoring eight runs and collecting 10 walks to go along with 10 strikeouts.

The 32 year old says he is in a good place now, physically, and he's ready for his sixth postseason to get underway.

"It's a great opportunity for everybody in this locker room," he said. "I know everybody is excited and looking forward to it. We're excited to see what's going to happen."

Donaldson should be excited to open the series in Houston, where he's hit .333 with seven home runs and 23 RBI in 30 career games. After facing the Astros often during parts of his four seasons in Oakland, Donaldson has a career 1.081 OPS at Minute Maid Park.

Teammate Edwin Encarnacion watched Donaldson slug a pair of homers and drive in four runs in eight games at Houston with the Blue Jays in 2015 and 2016. He's not surprised by Donaldson's career numbers in the park because the environment is very hitter-friendly.

"You really see the ball well there," Encarnacion said. "I think he feels comfortable in that stadium and generally that helps people's confidence when they're hitting there."

Francona admitted the the team was being cautious and held Donaldson back when he first arrived, but that he handled the transition respectfully, and has been fun to get to know during the process.

"He wanted to play every inning of every game, which I respect a lot," Francona said. "He's a baseball player. He wants to play and he wants to beat you."

For Donaldson, that starts with winning Game 1, in which his teams are 1-for-6 during his postseason career.

"Every game is huge, but the first game is obviously important," he said. "Whoever catches the most breaks and whoever forces the pressure and continues to do the things that got them to this point will be successful."

Donaldson, who will be a free agent after the World Series, said he knew while he was rehabbing his injury that there would be an opportunity for him to join a team with a postseason agenda. The chance to showcase himself and his progress is something he's also considered.

"I'm preparing as if it's my last game," he said. "It's kind of 'here, here's what's on your plate today, you either eat it or you don't.' And I'm choosing to try to eat as much as possible."

## **Corey Kluber, Justin Verlander ready for Friday's ALDS opener between Cleveland Indians-Houston**

By Paul Hoynes, cleveland.com phoynes@cleveland.com

HOUSTON - Corey Kluber says the easiest way to get past a bad start is to flush it and move on. He said he did that a long time ago regarding his starts in Game 2 and Game 5 of the 2017 ALDS against the Yankees.

This season he definitely pitched like man who was looking forward instead of backward. Kluber won 20 games for the first time in his career, topping 200 innings and 200 strikeouts for the fifth straight season.

On Friday he will plunge into the ALDS again, this time against the defending World Series champion Houston Astros and Justin Verlander. Last year Kluber was not 100 percent, a point that quickly became evident as he allowed first-inning homers to Gary Sanchez in Game 2 and Didi Gregorius in Game 5.

In 33 starts during the regular season this year, Kluber allowed six of his career-high 25 homers in the first inning. So just how important is it for Kluber to get through the first inning on Friday with limited or no damage?

"You want to get through every inning without damage," said Kluber on Thursday at Minute Maid Park. "Whether a team scores a run in the first inning, ninth inning or seventh inning it's how many you add up at the end.

"I think a lot of times guys can maybe give up runs early on and they start trying to make up for it and it adds up to a few runs quicker than it should. But I think each inning is separate from the others one. It's only an inning and you're trying to get three outs as fast as you can, hopefully without anyone scoring, and then you try to do it again."

We meet again: Verlander will be facing the Indians on Friday for the first time since the Tigers traded him to Houston in August of 2017. Before that Verlander and the Indians couldn't get away from each other.

He made his big-league debut against them on July 4, 2005. In his career, he's made more starts (52) against the Tribe than any team in the big leagues. He's 20-24 with a 4.71 ERA against them.

"It's been over a year (since I've faced them)," said Verlander. "I've changed a lot. Their lineup has changed. I will be interesting to see what happens."

Verlander said he's thrown a lot more four-seam fastballs since he joined the Astros.

"I think just overall, the adaptation of myself and how I use my stuff has changed," said Verlander. "Some of that is analytics. Some of that's just personal feel and knowing what works and kind of sticking to my guns a little bit."

Houston manager A.J. Hinch say Verlander just keeps evolving.

"He's had this start circled for a while now," said Hinch. "He's got a long history with the Indians. He's going to come up with ways to combat the successes or failures that he's had and he does that on a start by start basis.

"He has the mindset and the ability to evolve as the game around him gets younger and he gets older. When people think his stuff is going to decline, he throws harder. When guys start to hit his breaking ball, he comes up with a cutter. He's always doing something to evolve."

Need for speed: Outfielder Rajai Davis, the last man to make the Tribe's ALDS roster, was asked how important speed can be in the postseason.

"It's going to be huge," said Davis, who stole 21 bases during the regular season. "It plays a factor in how guys pitch to the next guy at the plate. When you know a guy is quick or can steal bag. . .no one wants to give up 90 feet. If that effects the pitcher, the way he thinks, the way he delivers his pitches, and helps our hitter get better pitches to hit, it only benefits the team."

Asked what his role will be in the ALDS, Davis said, "I don't know what that is. I can't name it, but I'm going to claim it."

Good for Yandy: Last year Yandy Diaz didn't make the Tribe's postseason roster. This year he did.

"Yandy gives us protection from them bringing in a lefty," said Francona. "It's another guy who can play the infield, but it's a guy that really swings the bat well against lefties. That's basically why he's here."

The Astros have just one lefty in the bullpen, Tony Sipp. Dallas Keuchel, scheduled to start Game 3 on Monday, is a lefty as well. Diaz hit .289 (13-for-45) against lefties and .328 (21-for-64) against righties.

Finally: Catcher Yan Gomes, recovering from a lacerated and bruised right thumb, went through Thursday's workout without a problem. He's scheduled to catch Kluber on Friday.

"Once I found out that it wasn't broken, I was already very optimistic," said Gomes. "Today we took all the bandages off and tried to throw. It felt normal. It's just like a swollen thumb, like I got jammed or something like that."

### **Cleveland Plain Dealer LOADED: 10.05.2018**

#### **Why Will Harris made the Astros' ALDS roster over Héctor Rondón**

By Jake Kaplan

In the end, the Astros' decision-makers weren't lying in their stated intent to tailor their postseason bullpens to their opponent.

Even if it meant leaving off one of their most valuable relievers from the regular season.

Héctor Rondón's omission and Will Harris' inclusion in the seven-man bullpen the Astros will carry in their ALDS against the Indians was by far the biggest surprise of the decisions manager A.J. Hinch revealed Thursday at Minute Maid Park on the eve of Game 1. A struggle-filled September marred Rondón's otherwise great season, but there had previously been no indication it would cost the hard-throwing right-hander his spot in October.

"He had a tough month," Hinch said. "September [was] really his only bad month. He wasn't great in the second half as a whole, but most of that is weighted into September. And honestly, this is a very difficult offense to match up with, and some of the things that he does and some of his execution that he does didn't match up very well with very many areas of the lineup with the Indians."

Astros ALDS bullpen

RHP Roberto Osuna

RHP Ryan Pressly

RHP Collin McHugh

RHP Lance McCullers

RHP Will Harris

LHP Tony Sipp

RHP Josh James

Conversely, the Astros like how Harris' cutter-curveball combination matches up against the Indians, who feature a bevy of left-handed and switch-hitters. Though his numbers didn't reflect it this season, Harris has traditionally been more effective against left-handed hitters than right-handed hitters.

Harris with Houston	Opponents' OPS vs. RHB	Opponents' OPS vs. LHB
2015	.586	.455
2016	.603	.513
2017	.619	.606
2018	.506	.672

Harris also quietly finished the season strong after working his way out of leverage earlier in the year. His final 13 appearances, dating to Aug. 15, were scoreless — a 13 1/3-inning span in which he limited lefties to three hits (all singles) and two walks in 22 plate appearances: a .150/.227/.150 batting line.

Overall, Harris finished the regular season with a 3.49 ERA but a 2.44 FIP that suggests some bad luck over his 56 2/3 innings. Rondón, the Astros' closer from early June to mid-August, finished with a 3.20 ERA and a 2.79 FIP in 59 innings.

2018 season	G	IP	ERA	FIP	WHIP	BB/9	K/9
Héctor Rondón	63	59.0	3.20	2.79	1.322	3.1	10.2
Will Harris	61	56.2	3.49	2.44	1.094	2.2	10.2

"I kind of just kept my head down and realized that the stuff I was doing in April and May and June was who I've been my whole career and eventually the tides would turn," Harris said. "They did there toward the end of the year. It was basically a lot of the same stuff. I just was able to have better fortune here and there."

As far as this year's righty-lefty splits, Harris chalked it up to the randomness that comes with the relatively small sample size of a reliever's season. "I'd be willing to bet the lefties were a bunch of singles and righties were hitting balls at people," he said. "It's just kind of the way it works out. That's the way relievers are. You only get 50 to 60, 65 innings, so sometimes the numbers can be a little bit misleading." (Indeed, 23 of the 28 hits Harris allowed to left-handed hitters were singles.)

"When you look at Harris's weapons and his curveball and how it typically performs against lefties and what his repertoire looks like against the particular players in the Indians' lineup, it became a pretty clear answer for us that Harris needed to be a weapon that A.J. could rely on," Astros president of baseball operations Jeff Luhnow said.

Harris doesn't have a substantial sample size of experience against any of the Indians' hitters save for ex-Athletic Yonder Alonso, whom he's held to a .154/.154/.385 in 13 plate appearances. Alonso and those likely to bat after him — Melky Cabrera, Yan Gomes and Jason Kipnis — probably represent the pocket of hitters Harris could face.

The odds of Hinch deploying Rondón, the Astros clearly concluded, had reduced in recent weeks as his performance dropped out. His chances would've been better against a more right-handed heavy opponent like the Yankees. Ditto for sidearm Joe Smith, who's had a lot of success against New York's right-handed hitters.

Smith missed the cut largely because of the emergence of Josh James, the flamethrowing rookie the Astros decided to carry because his ability to bridge multiple innings serves as protection for their two pitchers who only recently returned from injury: Charlie Morton and Lance McCullers Jr. Smith would have been a right-handed specialist and an option for only one inning at most.

"We sat down, we talked, [Hinch] explained everything and it all makes sense," said Smith, the ex-Indian. "Obviously we all want to play, and with as deep as this team is it's just not possible. And obviously I want to play against them for a lot of reasons. But the roster we're running out there is really good, and it gives us the best chance to win."

Other takeaways from Thursday's workout:

— Hinch indicated the Astros won't have Morton available in their bullpen for Games 1 and 2 despite him not being lined up to start until a potential Game 4 on Tuesday in Cleveland. He cited Morton's recent injury-related layoffs and the presence of relievers who can pitch multiple innings (McHugh and James) as reasons.

"Given he's thrown only a few innings in the recent weeks, he's not somebody that I would feel comfortable using in the first couple games and then bringing back for Game 4," Hinch said of Morton. "So I'd expect to see him in Game 4."

— Myles Straw's elite speed and the threat of him stealing a key base outweighed the insurance Max Stassi would have signified as a third catcher behind Martín Maldonado and Brian McCann.

"He is so fast he forced a third catcher off the roster," Hinch said of Straw, whose story The Athletic detailed last month. Carrying Straw will allow Hinch to insert Jake Marisnick as a defensive replacement without worrying about losing his best pinch-run specialist. He can also use Tony Kemp as strictly a pinch-hitter in a pivotal spot against a right-hander.

"He's a virtual upgrade [as a runner] on every single player on our offense," Hinch said. "I won't run for [José] Altuve. I likely won't run for [Alex] Bregman or [George] Springer, but he's probably faster, and that type of weapon in these type of games can pay huge."

## **The Athletic LOADED: 10.05.2018**

### **Final Thoughts: On Cleveland's forgotten team, Rajai Davis' free drinks and what made Jason Kipnis proud this year**

By Jason Lloyd

HOUSTON — Twenty-three thoughts for Tyler Naquin's 23 RBI on the eve of the Indians' playoff opener against the Houston Astros ...

1. A crowd of about 15 reporters was huddled around Andrew Miller in the Indians' clubhouse a few days ago when Yan Gomes walked in somewhat surprised.
2. "Where have you guys been all year?" Gomes asked. He was being playful, but he wasn't joking.
3. Despite this run, the Indians remain Cleveland's anonymous success story.
4. The Cavs sold out every home game the past four years and ranked second in the league in attendance because of arena size (United Center in Chicago also sells out every game and is bigger). The Indians, meanwhile, ranked in the bottom 10 in attendance again and were one of 17 teams to suffer a decline in attendance over last year, according to a recent Forbes report.
5. Sagging attendance is an issue across baseball — fewer than 70 million fans attended games for the first time in 15 years. The Indians, specifically, were punished by a schedule that was frontloaded with too many April and May dates when the weather is always lousy in Cleveland.
6. Still, it's fair to wonder why a team with the second-best record in baseball during the past six years needed an average of 22 home dates this season to eclipse what the winless Browns drew in eight home games last season.
7. "Unless you're from Cleveland or you've been here awhile, it's tough to explain the Browns to people," Jason Kipnis said. "I'm on the bandwagon, too. I've been following along and I've become a Browns fan myself. But you'll have to ask a Cleveland native to explain that one."
8. Indians players are slow to discuss all this, of course. They don't want to alienate or upset the fans who do show up. And while they continue to consistently rank among the top teams in television ratings, it isn't translating to the gate.
9. "We always seem to catch people by surprise, even though we've had literally the same guys and we added some even better guys," Gomes said regarding the lack of media attention. "I think Cleveland kind of has that about them. Other than when the Cavs were there, they always seem to be the underdog every time. Whatever, man. We're ready to take on the challenges and just do them proud."
10. Speaking of Gomes, he still has stitches in his right thumb, but they aren't preventing him from hitting or throwing. The medical staff unwrapped all the bandages Thursday and he threw with just a bandage covering the wound. He's fortunate the cut was on the outside of his thumb, so it never really touches the ball when he throws. "It feels normal, to be honest with you," Gomes said.
11. Rajai Davis will forever be a Cleveland hero for his home run off Aroldis Chapman in Game 7 of the World Series two years ago. Davis was just at dinner earlier this week when fans recognized him at Carrabba's and bought him drinks to celebrate.
12. "That happens pretty often," Davis said. "People remember where they were, what they were doing. It's something special. Because I remember, too."
13. Davis learned before the team's workout Thursday he had claimed the final spot on the roster over Erik González, which gives him another reason to celebrate. Terry Francona said earlier this week that he was debating keeping González as insurance in case something happens to Francisco Lindor. Then again, as Zack Meisel astutely pointed out to me the other day, if Lindor goes down, the Indians' chances of winning probably go with it.
14. "Nobody has a crystal ball, but who could impact a series? We felt like Raj had a better chance," Francona said. "It's nothing against Gonzy. But if Gonzy gets in, that meant something went wrong. If something goes wrong, we might be kicking ourselves, but I think we felt like the risk is worth the reward."
15. Lindor is the only spot the Indians would struggle to fill. José Ramírez would slide to short and Kipnis would move back to second, but Ramírez hasn't played there in a few years now and he's thicker than he was the last time he tried it. Regardless, keeping Davis is an aggressive, proactive move toward winning rather than playing it safe with González in an effort not to lose. Davis' legs can change a game and a series. History proves his bat can, too.
16. Maybe Kipnis' season wasn't as lousy as you think. Consider his 18 home runs were the second-best of his career and his 75 RBI were right in line with his best seasons, too. He hit a career-low .230, but he was essentially one extra hit a week away from matching his average from two years ago.
17. Kipnis certainly had his struggles. He lost his starting job in the infield because of his dreadful slumps, but his final numbers aren't as bad as you might have expected given where he started.
18. "I haven't said this to anyone, I'm very proud of not folding this year," Kipnis told me earlier this week. "There's a lot of things that just didn't go my way. I was hitting the ball hard and it was all getting caught. I was unlucky at first and it seemed like I was in quicksand. The harder I tried to fight it, the lower I got. Nothing was going right. ... But you can still have a good October and that's all anyone will remember. I think having that kind of light at the end of the tunnel for me kept my head above water the whole time."



19. Kipnis acknowledged to me he was angry he had to shift to the outfield. But if his only choices were to move to center field or the bench, he was, of course, going to choose the outfield.

20. "I'm happy that I just got to this point. Because it wasn't easy, no. And changing positions and being told, just like last year we might not have a spot for you in the lineup, that's not easy to hear, especially when you've been around as long as I have," Kipnis said. "I'm proud of myself for that fact."

21. I already wrote at length about the possibility of Trevor Bauer serving as a key weapon out of the bullpen, but something Andrew Miller told me that's worth considering is protecting Bauer's future.

22. "He'll tell you he can throw 100 pitches and then throw 100 pitches the next day. I don't know that I'd put it against him, I just don't know that the organization will do that to him. He's still pretty valuable to them moving forward," Miller said. "He's a legit Cy Young candidate. There is a next year. It's not what everybody wants to hear all the time and we're going to play like there isn't one, but to an organization, he has a lot of value. They don't want to run him into the ground. But he could be the most important player in the postseason if everything falls into place."

23. Indians and Astros from Minute Maid Park on Friday. Corey Kluber and Justin Verlander. Talk to you then.

## **The Athletic LOADED: 10.05.2018**

### **Lloyd: Trevor Bauer and the Indians' secret weapon**

Jason Lloyd

HOUSTON — If it wasn't for a line drive off his leg, this wouldn't be a debate. Trevor Bauer would be the starter in one of the first two games here, and that would be that.

Instead, Terry Francona keeps sprinkling enough of a trail to see where this all could be headed. Now it's realistic to believe Bauer will be an enormous weapon for the Indians this postseason as something more — much more — than just a guy who starts every fifth game.

"He could be the most important player in the postseason," Andrew Miller told me on the eve of Game 1 of this Division Series. And Miller would know — he was the most important player in the 2016 playoffs.

I've listened to Francona enough these last few days to draw one conclusion: Trevor Bauer could be this year's version of Andrew Miller. Given some of the bullpen's struggles this season, Bauer could be the perfect solution and the path back to the World Series.

There is a long history of terrific starters turning into relief heroes, from Pedro Martinez to Curt Schilling, Randy Johnson and more recently Madison Bumgarner. Just last year, the Astros camouflaged a bad bullpen by using starters like Lance McCullers to close out the ALCS and Charlie Morton to close out a World Series championship.

"Whenever they give me the ball, whatever role they want to use me in, I'll pitch," Bauer said recently. "That's my comment."

Bullpens have become so important that they have replaced the starters entirely within some small-market teams. The A's tried, unsuccessfully, getting through their wild-card game at New York this week using only relievers.

Baseball has set a record each of the last three years for the amount of innings relievers have thrown. For the first time in history, relievers totaled more than 17,000 innings this season — 17,428 to be exact. That was nearly 1,000 innings more than last year, which, of course, was the previous record, according to FanGraphs. Relievers accounted for 40 percent of the innings pitched this year, up from 38 percent last year and 37 percent the year before.

The Indians remain fairly traditional with four starters this season totaling 200 innings, but Bauer has the potential to be a game changer. Adding to the intrigue are his career numbers against the Astros: 7-0 with a 3.18 ERA. In eight career appearances, Houston is hitting just .195 against him. Tampa Bay is the only American League team with a lower average against him.

"If we get where we want," Francona said Thursday, "my guess is that Trevor's going to be used a ton."

Miller was named MVP of the ALCS in 2016 because of his durability and dominance. He threw 31 pitches in Game 1 against the Blue Jays and came back the next night to throw 24 more. The Indians won 10 games that postseason and Miller appeared in nine of them. Only once did he throw fewer than 20 pitches and three times he broke 40.

Bauer's arm is built for that type of workload and he was sensational this season before a stress fracture in his leg ruined everything. The Indians rode Miller and their bullpen to within one win of a championship two years ago. Bauer gives them the ability to do it again.

"He can have as big of an impact on a playoff series as anybody in baseball," Miller said. "You've got to have a team that wins games and goes long enough to give you those pitching opportunities. You've got to have things go well. I think we love having him on the mound and there's a pretty good chance Tito finds out what he can get out of him. And it's probably going to be a lot."

Think about it: Bauer enters for the seventh and eighth innings of Game 1 on Friday and returns to throw the sixth and seventh innings Saturday. Or he throws three innings in Game 2 and comes back after a day off to be available for Games 3 or 4 at home. He is the perfect bridge to guys like Miller, Brad Hand and Cody Allen and he has the durability to handle it. Miller joked Bauer will tell you he could throw 100 pitches one day and come back and do it again the next.

That's not going to happen, but Francona has always been bold enough to think unconventionally. He has spent this week repeating that he wants to do whatever he has to do to put the team in the best position to win. Sometimes that's walking the thin line between being smart and being stupid. And that just might mean taking a Cy Young contender and turning him into a reliever this postseason.

This only works because of the emergence of Shane Bieber and the organization's trust in him, and Francona was fairly convincing this week that he has no issue handing the ball to a rookie if he has to for Game 4 because Bauer has been used so much out of the bullpen. If that happens, don't be surprised if Bauer is available in case Bieber gets into trouble.

Francona has already insisted, and repeated this week, he will not use Miller the same way he did two years ago. He doesn't want any reliever to burden that type of pitch count again.

With a pitching staff ravaged by injuries two years ago, Francona called on Miller to throw 40 pitches over two innings in a Game 1 win against Boston in the division series that set the tone for the way Miller would be used the rest of the postseason.

Ideally, Corey Kluber gives the Indians eight shutout innings Friday, and Carlos Carrasco and Mike Clevinger come back with the same type of outings in Games 2 and 3. But that isn't very likely.

Bauer as a super reliever in the mold of Miller? The idea is gaining traction around the clubhouse.

"I absolutely think he could. I see no reason why not," Allen said. "That's a lofty goal, but Trevor is the one guy if you put something in front of him and give him a challenge, he's going to do everything in his power to meet that challenge. If we looked up at the end of the year and saw all those numbers in the postseason, I would not be surprised at all."

Neither would I.

## Astros announce ALDS playoff roster

Chandler Rome

Neither Hector Rondon nor Joe Smith, the two offseason additions made to reinforce the Astros' bullpen, are a part the club's seven-man American League Division Series bullpen, manager A.J. Hinch revealed on Thursday.

"We've had some pretty grueling meetings getting through the roster," Hinch said, "which is a good problem to have as a team, it's a tough problem to have for the players."

As was anticipated, the Astros will carry closer Roberto Osuna and set-up man Ryan Pressly along with Lance McCullers Jr, Collin McHugh and Tony Sipp. The inclusion of veteran Will Harris and rookie Josh James were the two variables which pushed Rondon and Smith out.

Astros' 25-man American League Division Series playoff roster	Collin McHugh	Martin Maldonado
Starting pitchers	Tony Sipp	Outfielders
Justin Verlander	Will Harris	George Springer
Gerrit Cole	Infielders	Josh Reddick
Charlie Morton	Jose Altuve	Tony Kemp
Dallas Keuchel	Carlos Correa	Jake Marisnick
Bullpen	Yuli Gurriel	Myles Straw
Ryan Pressly	Marwin Gonzalez	Designated hitters
Roberto Osuna	Alex Bregman	Tyler White
Lance McCullers	Catchers	Evan Gattis
Josh James	Brian McCann	

"There's going to be some guys left off for certain series that could very well be on next time, but this time given our matchups, they're not," general manager Jeff Luhnow said. "Part of it was we didn't expect James to come up and dominate the way he did."

James affords the bullpen length in the wake of injuries to McCullers and Charlie Morton. He garnered Minor League Pitcher of the Year honors before making three major league starts in September.

In 23 big league innings, he struck out 29. Houston tested the rookie during a Sept. 8 game in Boston, too, placing him in against the middle of the Red Sox potent order. James struck out four in 2 2/3 innings of one-hit ball.

"I'm still trying to process it," said James, who threw five pitches harder than 100 mph as a major leaguer. "It's awesome. It's an amazing honor and I'm happy to be a part of the postseason roster. I'm ready to go."

Rondon's omission was the most unexpected. Hinch called it "the most difficult decision by far."

Signed to a two-year deal in the offseason, Rondon entered September with a 2.13 ERA and 14 saves, momentarily stabilizing the back-end of Houston's bullpen between Ken Giles' volatile exit and Osuna's acquisition.

The veteran righthander could not continue his form in September. He allowed nine earned runs and 18 hits across 8 1/3 September innings, misery the club initially attributed to a mechanical flaw in his delivery.

Last week in Toronto, Rondon said he corrected the flaw, and threw two scoreless innings in his final two appearances. He was unavailable for comment on Thursday afternoon following the team's workout at Minute Maid Park.

"He had a tough month," Hinch said. "September (was) really his only bad month, he wasn't great in the second half as a whole, but most of that is weighted into September. Honestly, this is a very difficult offense to match up with and some of the things that he does and some of the execution he does didn't really match up well with very many areas of the lineup with the Indians."

Harris' cutter and curveball repertoire matches up favorably with the Indians, Hinch said, something the organization failed to see in Rondon's arsenal.

Cleveland will dispatch a lefthanded heavy lineup, which historically would favor Harris. Lefthanded hitters have just a .574 career OPS against him. This year, though, righties are OPSing .506 against him in 111 plate appearances. Lefties have a .672 mark in 119 plate appearances.

"When you look at Harris' weapons and his curveball and how it typically performs against lefties and what his repertoire looks like against the particular players in the Indians lineup, it became a pretty clear answer for us that Harris had to be a weapon that A.J. could rely on," Luhnow said.

The decision left Smith without a chance to face his former team. The 12-year veteran sidearmer spent six seasons in Cleveland.

Smith functions as solely a right specialist. Ostensibly, if he were included, his duties would include facing two Indians hitters — Josh Donaldson and Edwin Encarnacion.

"We sat down, we talked and they explained everything and it all makes sense. Obviously we all want to play, but with how deep this team is, it's just not possible," Smith said. "Obviously I want to play against them for a lot of reasons but the roster we're running out there is really good and it gives us the best chance to win."

"We're here to win and if this is the best course, let's do it (and) let's go. Hopefully we can get by this series and I can get in there next series."

As for position players, the Astros opted to keep the speedy Myles Straw as a late-inning pinch runner instead of third catcher Max Stassi.

The Astros play the Cleveland Indians in the ALDS, beginning with Game 1 at 1:05 p.m. Friday at Minute Maid Park. Game 2 is at 3:37 p.m. Saturday.

Chandler Rome

### **Astros, Carlos Correa hoping rest has helped his back soreness**

David Barron ,

"Right now I feel great, and I feel ready to go and hopefully this (his back soreness) won't come back."

Correa said the back soreness has been the toughest physical trial of his career, even more so than the broken ankle that forced him to miss the second half of the 2014 minor league season.

"I came back (from the ankle injury) and it was no big deal, but coming back from this injury has been tough," he said. "It's definitely the worst injury I've had."

Correa sat out much of the final days of the season after the Astros clinched the West Division title, and general manager Jeff Luhnow said the shortstop has benefited from the rest.

"He's feeling really good, and it's really about how physically he's feeling and how that transfers into his swing," Luhnow said. "Defensively he's going to be fine — he's always elite defensively — but I think he's going to be a weapon for us."

"Can we win without Carlos being at his best? I don't know. Will we win if he's at his best? I think we absolutely will, because I think he's one of the best players in the game."

Correa had a home run and a double in the first game of a doubleheader Saturday in Baltimore and said he "got the feeling of my swing, how I felt when I was right. Hopefully I can carry that into the playoffs."

He said he tries to forget about the day to day physical uncertainty, focusing on pregame treatment and stretching.

"After the game, when I cool down, is when I don't know what to expect," he said. "Hopefully for the next day it feels great."

Chronicle staff writer Chandler Rome contributed to this report.

Houston Chronicle LOADED: 10.05.2018

### **Indians will beat Astros if Lindor, Ramirez end postseason slump | Jeff Schudel**

By Jeff Schudel JSchudel@News-Herald.com @JSProInsider on Twitter 12 hrs ago Comments

The Indians are good enough to win the last game they play in 2018 — an event that would make them World Series champions — but for that to happen, Francisco Lindor and Jose Ramirez have to play in October the same way they play in June and July when the pressure is minimal.

There is no time like the present for each All-Star to start performing like they can, because if they don't, the Indians won't get past the Houston Astros in the ALDS, and it will be another disappointing end for the three-time Central Division champions.

Lindor has been in a postseason slump since the Indians took a 3-1 lead in the 2016 World Series. He was 1-4 in Game 5, 0-for-3 in Game 6 and 0-for-5 in Game 7. He had two RBI in the series. He followed that up last season by going 2-for-18 in the ALDS against the Yankees. One hit was a grand slam in Game 2 to account for all four of his RBI in the series.

Lindor hit .277, homered 38 times, drove in 92 runs and scored 129 times in the 2018 regular season.

Ramirez finished the 2018 regular season in a terrible slump, batting .167 in his last 15 games, but he still clobbered 39 home runs and had 105 RBI while batting .270 despite the September slide.

Ramirez was 2-for-20 with no RBI in the ALDS last season.

Lindor and Ramirez, with Michael Brantley hitting between them at the top of the order, ignite the Indians. Their electricity runs through the batting order when they are hitting well. The opposite happens when they don't.

The Game 1 matchup between Indians ace Corey Kluber and Justin Verlander should set the tone for the five-game series. Kluber, as with Lindor and Ramirez, failed in the clutch last year.

Kluber was dealing with a sore back and coughed up four home runs over two starts in just 6 1/3 innings against the Yankees. He is rested now, coming off the first 20-win season of his career (20-7, .288 ERA), so there is no reason to fear he won't be stellar. Certainly, the Houston crowd will not ruffle him.

Team owner Paul Dolan and Indians president Chris Antonetti built this team to beat the Astros and go deep into the postseason.

Antonetti traded for late-inning relief pitcher Brad Hand plus Adam Cimber, another reliever who came along with Hand in the trade that sent Francisco Mejia to the San Diego Padres. He got slugger Josh Donaldson from the Blue Jays in an 11th hour trade on Aug. 31.

The Indians have a successful track record against Verlander; they were 24-20 against him over 13 years when he was with the Tigers. Kluber will face him twice if the series goes five games

The Astros are defending World Series champions. They won 103 games in the regular season — 12 more than the Indians won. Las Vegas has made the Astros a minus-140 betting favorite, meaning a person would have to place a \$140 bet to win \$100.

None of that matters to the Indians. They are not intimidated.

“I think pressure is just kind of what you put on yourself,” Donaldson said when asked about Lindor and Ramirez. “I don’t think these guys are feeling any more pressure to do more than they’re capable of doing. At the same time, it takes a total team effort.”

True, but if the Indians are going to feast, Lindor, Ramirez and Kluber have to set the table.

### **For the Indians in the ALDS, Houston may pose a problem**

**Chris Assenheimer** | **Chris Assenheimer** | **The Chronicle-Telegram** | **Published on Oct. 5, 2018** | **Updated 8:38 a. m.**

Advancing in October is an extremely difficult task. Moving on against a restocked reigning World Series champion like the Houston Astros?

You get the picture.

That’s what confronts the Indians as they return to the postseason for the fourth time in six years under manager Terry Francona, who with around two weeks remaining in the regular season and the Central Division title wrapped, began sneaking a peek at the West Division champs.

“Certainly can’t hurt,” said Francona then of his advance scouting work. “I shouldn’t say can’t hurt, you try to be up-to-date as much as you can but then you watch (the Astros) play and it kind of makes you nervous because they’re good.

“They’re really good. We knew that. Shoot, this will be quite the test, but that’s what you play for. It’s so good to be a part of. It’s an honor.”

In many ways, the pair of American League heavyweights are similar. They each employ elite rotations and lineups full of All-Stars, including former MVPs in Josh Donaldson (2015) and Jose Altuve (2017).

Houston’s star-studded starting staff, which is headlined by but far from carried by former MVP and Cy Young award winner Justin Verlander, posted the lowest ERA in the American League.

Cleveland’s top-shelf starters — two-time Cy Young award winner Corey Kluber, Trevor Bauer, Carlos Carrasco and Mike Clevinger — headlined but far from carried by Kluber, posted the second-lowest ERA and became the first foursome in MLB history to each record 200 strikeouts.

Now that the Indians have acquired Donaldson — in an August waiver-wire deal that drew the ire of potential playoff opponents Boston and New York — they can employ a former

All-Star at every spot in the lineup after Jason Kipnis shifted to center field for the second straight postseason and Jose Ramirez moved from third to second.

The Astros, who employ a younger roster, still have multiple all-stars throughout the batting order in Altuve, Alex Bregman, Carlos Correa and George Springer.

“It’s gonna be a great series,” said Indians shortstop Francisco Lindor, who is an MVP candidate this year. “They got great hitting and pitching and we do, too. I can’t wait.”

“They’re one of the best teams in baseball, they’ve shown that over the last two years,” Andrew Miller said of the Astros. “Our hands are going to be full, it’s not going to be easy, but we’ve got some pretty good arms. We’ll be prepared, we’ll be ready.”

The Astros, who cooled off after a torrid first half, know they are facing a challenge, too.

“They’re a really good team,” Altuve said of the Indians after Houston clinched the division title for the second straight season, winning a franchise-best 103 games. “They’ve got really good hitters like we do. They’ve got good pitching. We’ve got good pitching, too. It’s going to be interesting. I pick my team, obviously, but I think it’s going to be good competition.”

The Indians enter October in a different mode than 2017, when they ripped off an AL-record 22-game streak from Aug. 24-Sept. 14 and appeared to enter the postseason hot as the favorite to advance to the World Series for the second time in three years. But after taking the first two games of their ALDS matchup against the Yankees, they stopped hitting and pitching and lost the next three, including Game 5 with Kluber on the mound against former Cleveland ace CC Sabathia.

This time around, there was no outrageous final month to finish, and it certainly wasn’t required, with the Central Division at one of its weakest points ever and the Indians clinching with over two weeks remaining.

How you finish the regular season, whether you're fighting until the end to secure a spot or coasting to the finish line with a playoff berth in tow, isn't much of a factor, according to Francona. After all, there's a layoff before the first postseason game, anyway.

"People talk about momentum — I think you build momentum on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday on the off days (prior to the postseason)," Francona said. "Because regardless of how you finish, you have those four off days. If you just sit around, go at half speed, all of a sudden the playoffs start and you're going 100 miles per hour, and it's too fast. So the teams that handle those off days the best, I think that's where you build your momentum."

But the manager does like the fact that there aren't as many uncertainties confronting his club as there were when the postseason began last year — Kipnis in center for the first time, Kluber's apparent back injury that kept him out of Game 1 and an unproven player at third in Giovanni Urshela, who isn't even on the team anymore.

"We were so unsettled last year in the playoffs," Francona said. "We went through a lot of that the last two weeks (this year). It's not a lot of fun, because it's unsettling. But I think — in fact, I know — it was for a good reason. Now, we're going to see if it pays off."

"We think we have Donaldson in a good place. We think Andrew's come so far. Kip's had three weeks to play center field. Jose's had three weeks at second. If you have too many question marks, sometimes the answer is no. And we really don't want that to happen."

It's a comfortable feeling for the Indians, who are confident they are putting a World Series-contending team on the field against Houston.

"Roster-wise, this might be the best roster we've had going into the playoffs the last couple years," Kipnis said. "Just look at health. If you look at depth, now we have a healthy Bauer and Carrasco and we have Clev and Beiber. Now we have Edwin, Donaldson, we just have a bunch of extra stuff that we didn't have in '16 and '17."

"Does it mean we're going to win? No, but that's just October baseball. That's what happens, so I think it can only help us with how healthy we are now and everyone is kind of feeling rested and good and now it's time to crank it up, but yeah overall, I think top to bottom pitching and everything, this might be the best roster we've had."

Whether the Indians are a better team or not this time around might not matter anyway. They enter October as the clear underdog after playing what some would call mediocre baseball for much of the year — with a struggling closer, Cody Allen, and without the services of Miller for a large part of the season, and Bauer, a Cy Young contender, missing nearly all of the final two months.

Cleveland finished with a modest 91-71 record, which ranked fifth in the AL — six games behind Oakland, the league's second wild-card entrant.

Still, the underdog role served the Indians quite well in 2016. Remember Ryan Merritt? Josh Tomlin? Rajai Davis?

If anything, it gives them even more motivation to end the franchise's 69-year world title drought after coming so close in 2016 and bowing out so early last season.

"I certainly think that the way the last couple of years have gone have hopefully driven us to work towards even where it's a little bit harder, crave it a little bit more in getting there and being that last team to win a game," Miller said. "It's not going to be easy. There's a lot of good teams that you got to go through and you got to have a lot of things probably go your way. You got to have luck on your side on top of it all so, I think this team is as capable as anybody. It's just a matter of us getting those breaks and playing up to our ability."

### **Rajai Davis cracks Indians' roster for ALDS vs. Astros**

Associated Press

HOUSTON -- Rajai Davis is getting the chance to further his October legacy.

Indians manager Terry Francona said Thursday the speedy outfielder will get his team's final spot on the 25-man roster for the AL Division Series against the Houston Astros.

Davis was given the nod over backup infielder Erik Gonzalez. Davis cemented his place in October baseball lore with a tying home run in Game 7 of the 2016 World Series before Cleveland lost to the Chicago Cubs in 10 innings.

Houston manager A.J. Hinch chose to carry just two catchers, leaving off Max Stassi for rookie Myles Straw, another speedy outfielder who has been mostly used as a pinch runner. The Astros bullpen will consist of closer Roberto Osuna, Lance McCullers Jr., Ryan Pressly, left-hander Tony Sipp, Collin McHugh, Will Harris and hard-throwing rookie Josh James.

Hinch chose to go with James over Hector Rondon, who has struggled over the past month, for his ability to pitch multiple innings. Also left off the roster was right-hander Brad Peacock, who appeared in seven games with one start last postseason.

### **Indians face long road -- and 70 long years of losing -- this October**

Tim Kurkjian/ESPN Senior Writer

Tito Francona had hip surgery two days after the 2016 World Series, which ended, again, in heartache for the Indians, their fans and the city of Cleveland. When Francona came to, he was wobbly, which isn't unusual for him. A doctor and a nurse asked him about the World Series. "I was so doped up from the drugs," he said, laughing, "I thought we won."

The Indians haven't won the World Series since 1948, the longest active drought of any team in Major League Baseball. The loss to the Cubs in Game 7 in 2016 was the cruelest, which is saying something, given the heartbreaks of 1954, 1995 and 1997. But the Indians are back in the playoffs for a third straight year, with a team good enough to win the World Series. Since Francona took over as skipper in 2013, no American League team has won more games than the Indians. That resurgence has helped bring a renaissance to Cleveland; it is a vibrant city again. Even the Browns are getting better, and the Cavaliers won the NBA championship in 2016. There is a sense around town that the Indians are next.

"I was asked to help recruit the Democratic National Convention to come here [in 2016]. Me, of all people. It was hilarious. I talked to the [DNC] representatives, and I got CPAC mixed up with a Z-Pack, which is what you take when you have a chest cold," Francona said. "I talked a lot about Cleveland. I told them that our baseball team is a lot like our city here: We have been pushed around a lot, but now, we are pushing back."

The American League is going to be a nightmare this October, with three 100-win teams, the Red Sox, Yankees and Astros, the latter of which the Indians will face in the ALDS. But the Indians also are potentially an elite team. They are the only team in major league history to have four pitchers (anchored by Corey Kluber) post 200 strikeouts. Their offense is demonstrably better than the one that nearly won the 2016 World Series, led by shortstop Francisco Lindor and second baseman Jose Ramirez, sawed-off switch-hitters, each of whom recorded 80 extra-base hits this year. They have a rebuilt bullpen that features a healthy Andrew Miller to go with new closer Brad Hand. They traded for third baseman Josh Donaldson, a former MVP whose calf injury has healed.

"It's a really cool city to be a part of now," Indians reliever Dan Otero said. "I was at Trader Joe's the other day, and the cashier told me, 'Hey, you guys keep it going.' I'm not very recognizable, but things have changed here. Now, we just have to finish the job."

Herb Score and 70 years ago, their forefathers brought forth, in Cleveland, a new title, conceived in starting pitching and dedicated to the proposition that not all teams are created equal. The Indians won the 1948 World Series, beating the Boston Braves in six games. The Indians had future Hall of Fame pitchers Bob Feller, Bob Lemon and Satchel Paige, future Hall of Fame outfielder Larry Doby, the American League's first African-American player and the AL MVP, shortstop Lou Boudreau, a player-manager.

"Amazing, how did he make pitching changes and keep on hitting?" Francona said of Boudreau. Then he laughed and said, referring to his own commute, "but I bet he didn't ride a scooter to the park every day."

That was the Indians' second championship ever and their first since 1920.

"I was born in 1963," said Bernie Kosar, who grew up in Northeast Ohio as a huge Indians fan, then played quarterback for the Browns from 1985 to '93, during which time he suffered his share of agony in both football (The Fumble and The Drive) and baseball. "But," he said with a laugh, "I was at the '48 World Series because that was so big for this city, everyone from Cleveland said they were at that World Series -- even if they weren't born yet."

The 1954 Indians team could've been even better. It went 111-43, and it was supposed to tear through the Giants and win the World Series again. Instead, the Giants, led by Willie Mays, swept the Indians. Mays' robbery of Vic Wertz's drive was the iconic play in the Series.

"I still can't believe we lost," Feller told me 50 years later.

"My dad," Kosar said, "told me about it nine million times. Nine million times."

"I was born in 1963. But I was at the '48 World Series because that was so big for this city, everyone from Cleveland said they were at that World Series -- even if they weren't born yet."

Former Cleveland Browns QB Bernie Kosar

That started a historic slide, one filled with heartbreak and bad luck. In 1955, rookie left-hander Herb Score won 16 games, and the next season, at age 23, he won 20. But he was hit in the eye with a line drive in 1957. He pitched a few more seasons but was never the same.

The Indians took three decades to recover. Every year from 1960 to 1993 (not counting the strike-shortened 1981 season), they finished at least 10 games out of first place; only the Philadelphia/Kansas City/Oakland A's (1932-68) had a longer such streak. It was a difficult 1960s for the Tribe, other than a bunch of strikeouts from Sam McDowell and Luis Tiant. The '70s were miserable, as they finished a combined 229 games out of first place, and jokes about their ballpark (The Mistake By The Lake) reigned. But at least they had catcher Duke Sims, who, according to a former teammate, could vomit on command.

Outfielder Super Joe Charboneau brought hope, winning the AL Rookie of the Year award in 1980, but he played two more years, without success, then vanished. Then in 1987, Sports Illustrated picked the Indians to win the World Series. They lost 101 games.

"We thought we were going to be good, we had a 10-game winning streak in '86," said Tom Candiotti, a pitcher on the 1987 Indians. "We had a few games delayed 15 minutes because there weren't enough people to work the gates because so many people were coming in. Can you imagine that? We had high expectations for '87. We had a good spring, but as soon as the season started, everything went sour. After three weeks, we were 10 out, and it never got better. We looked at each other and asked, 'What just happened to us?'"

The Indians didn't rebound until 1994, when they moved to Jacobs Field. They played .647 baseball for a seven-year period and sold out 455 consecutive home games. But they lost to the Braves in six games in the 1995 World Series, out-foxed by Greg Maddux and Tom Glavine.

"That was hard," said Sandy Alomar, an Indians coach and the catcher on that team. "We had the best offense in baseball. But '97 was worse. It was devastating. That feeling of loss is still with me."

The Indians led 2-1 in the ninth inning of Game 7 in 1997, with closer Jose Mesa on the mound, but he gave up a run to tie it. In the 11th inning, an error by second baseman Tony Fernandez led to a walk-off single by Edgar Renteria: The Marlins, not the Indians, won it all.

"In '97, I was a huge Indians fan, as I have been for more decades than I care to say, but I was close friends with [then-Marlins and Dolphins owner] Wayne Huizenga [for whom Kozar played]," Kosar said. "And I was a [former Miami] Hurricane, so he took good care of me for tickets for Game 7. If you look at the picture when Craig Counsell crossed home plate with the winning run that night, everyone is standing and cheering, except for two people: Me and my mom were sitting there, being sad. I have that picture hanging in my office."

Pitcher Orel Hershiser, an Ohio native who started games in the '95 and '97 Series, said, "That's the best team I've ever played for, talent-wise, but we couldn't achieve the final prize."

Ten years later, the Indians had a 3-1 lead on the Red Sox in the 2007 American League Championship Series but lost the next three games. They weren't relevant again until Francona was hired to manage the team in 2013. He could have managed several other places, but he chose Cleveland, partly out of loyalty to the team that hired him for the front office in 2001 and partly because his father, Tito, from whom he got his nickname, played for the Indians from 1959 to '64.

"Everything changed when he walked in the door," second baseman Jason Kipnis said. "He had two rings. That's what we all wanted. We knew he could show us how to get there."

"I changed my way of thinking about the importance of a manager after watching Tito keep us in contention in 2014 despite all our injuries," former Indians GM Mark Shapiro said. "He was brilliant."

But even Francona couldn't get the team through the 2016 World Series. The Indians had a 3-1 lead over the Cubs in the Series but lost the last three games. They lost Game 7 in the 10th inning after a 17-minute rain delay in the ninth inning perhaps took away their momentum.

"We had a chance to change the movie," Alomar said, "but we came up short."

"I don't think you ever get over something like that," Otero said, "until you win the World Series."

In a battle of lovable losers in 2016, the Cubs beat the Indians to win their first World Series title since 1908. AP Photo/Matt Slocum, File So now they have another chance, but the noise will be even louder. In 2016, the Cubs hadn't won the World Series since 1908. Now the pressure is on the Indians to end their drought.

"It's hard enough to win as it is," Francona said. "It's not my fault that my dad wasn't good enough to win. We try not to think about what happened yesterday, let alone 70 years ago. What has happened before never enters the equation for what we're trying to do."

Plus, the window is slowly closing on the small-market Indians. Donaldson, Miller, reliever Cody Allen and outfielder Michael Brantley are free agents at the end of the season. This might be the team's best chance for the next few years, and everyone here knows it.

"There will be no words to describe what this city will be like when we win."

Indians coach and former Cleveland catcher Sandy Alomar

But if they do win ...

"That city will go bonkers," Candiotti said. "I love Cleveland. I grew up there as a player. I always root for the Tribe. We had a day recently [with the Diamondbacks, for whom he is a broadcaster] where we got to wear our favorite team jersey. I wore my Tom Candiotti Indians jersey."

"I remember there were hundreds of thousands of people that greeted us at the airport and lined the streets on our way down. All that for a team that came up one game short," Hershiser said, recalling the reaction after 1997. "If they win, it will be a full-scale celebration."

"I was part of the parade when the Cavs won. There were one million people downtown that day. It was a defining day in the lives of so many people here," Kosar said. "And with all due respect to the Cavs, when the Indians win, it will be even bigger. The depth and the level of passion by the fans here is amazing."

"We remember what it was like when the Cavs won," Otero said. "We were asking ourselves, 'What is it going to be like if we win?' If there were one million at the parade, there will be three times as many if we win."

"There will be no words," Alomar said, "to describe what this city will be like when we win."

And no one here, especially not Francona, will ever forget it.