



### **WHITE SOX HEADLINES OF NOVEMBER 13, 2018**

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### **Cooper calls Mauer best lefty hitter he's seen**

By Scott Merkin / MLB.com / November 12, 2018

CHICAGO -- When the White Sox dropped a 5-4 decision to the Twins at Target Field during the 2018 season finale, Don Cooper wasn't sure whether Minnesota first baseman Joe Mauer had played the final game of his illustrious career.

The White Sox pitching coach had a feeling Mauer was retiring after 15 years and three batting titles, with Mauer making a brief but surprise appearance behind the plate in the ninth and receiving a handful of standing ovations from the appreciative crowd recognizing their hometown sensation. So just to be sure, Cooper sent a message to Mauer during the game through White Sox first-base coach Daryl Boston.

"What I said when I sent the message was 'Tell him he's the best left-handed hitter I've seen in my time here,' " said Cooper during a recent interview. "Over the years, since 2002 basically (when Cooper became pitching coach), I've seen a lot of players and I've seen a lot of players' whole careers. I've seen their first and their last moments.

"Maybe it's because we play Minnesota 18 games. You see these guys in our division a lot, and he got my full attention when he was at the plate. This guy is a tremendous hitter. He always wanted to hit for average and doubles. Home runs didn't seem to interest him.

"Made him a very, very tough out, along with he could lay wood on a bullet. There's no fastball he couldn't catch up to," Cooper said. "He did it in a very sound mechanical way, staying inside the ball so much."

Mauer, 35, held his official retirement press conference Monday. He was a six-time All-Star, five-time Silver Slugger and three-time Gold Glove winner at catcher. Mauer captured 2009 American League Most Valuable Player honors and finished with a .306 career average and .388 on-base percentage.

Against the White Sox, Mauer hit .298 with an .822 OPS, 18 home runs, 53 doubles, 109 walks and 105 RBIs over 911 plate appearances and 212 games.

"He became a pain in the ass," Cooper said. "Seeing him 18 times [per season], the guy could flat out hit."

Frank Thomas rates as the best right-handed hitter Cooper ever watched, while a player such as Miguel Cabrera holds a place in Cooper's best hitter team photo. But Mauer exacted some serious career-wide

damage against the White Sox, a point Cooper wanted to acknowledge and a gesture Mauer appreciated according to his postgame comments back on Sept. 30.

"I had heard that he said that and I'm glad because I meant it," said Cooper of Mauer's gratitude. "That day I was watching him, I was thinking, 'I've seen this guy's first game and last game in the big leagues.' I became grateful to be able to see people's entire careers.

"There are others, and we talked about Miguel and guys now that are starting to climb being great players and great hitters, a guy like [Francisco Lindor] and [Jose Ramirez]. Those guys are very good young talents, guys coming up. As I say that, I laugh to myself, I hope I can see the end of their career."

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### **When will the White Sox call Eloy Jimenez and Dylan Cease to the major leagues?**

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago / November 12, 2018

In 2018, two questions dominated the minds of White Sox fans: When would Michael Kopech be promoted to the major leagues, and when would Eloy Jimenez be promoted to the major leagues?

Those questions lingered into the last 40 days of the season, when Kopech was called up for his big league debut in late August and general manager Rick Hahn announced that Jimenez wouldn't be coming up at all before the season ran out.

Well, 2019 is now right around the corner, and so there are two more questions surrounding the rebuilding White Sox: When will Jimenez be promoted to the major leagues, and when will Dylan Cease be promoted to the major leagues?

Jimenez is the White Sox No. 1 prospect and one of the top three prospects in baseball. In his first full season in the White Sox organization, he mashed at Double-A Birmingham and Triple-A Charlotte, slashing a combined .337/.384/.557 with 22 home runs and 75 RBIs. Confidence is not an issue, as he's been talking about his readiness for the majors since he arrived in 2017's midseason trade with the Cubs.

And speaking of the Cubs, it wouldn't be at all surprising to see him receive the same treatment as Kris Bryant, who the North Siders held in the minor leagues to finish out the 2014 season and then promoted in the first few weeks of the 2015 campaign.

Speaking last week at the GM Meetings in Southern California, Hahn said it was possible Jimenez could spend the whole season at the big league level, not ruling out that the organization's top prospect could be on the Opening Day roster.

"Let's see how he looks when he gets to camp and we'll go from there," Hahn said. "Nothing has changed since Sept. 1, but let's see what happens come February and March.

"Eloy has been saying since A-ball that he's ready, which is wonderful and exactly where I want him to be. We'd much rather try to rein a guy back than try to prod him forward. Eloy's level of confidence and enthusiasm for being in the big leagues is wonderful. We actually had dinner with him and his family last month in the Dominican. ... I think right now he's in very good spirits. He looks great. He's working out and been working on his nutrition. I know he's planning to come to camp eager to show everybody what he's capable of doing."

The financial realities of baseball might end up making whatever Jimenez shows during spring training moot, but we'll see.

As for Cease, he was good enough in 2018 to earn MLB Pipeline's minor league pitcher of the year honor and shot up the White Sox prospect rankings to No. 3 in the farm system. He pitched at both Class A Winston-Salem and Double-A Birmingham before getting shut down at year's end, combining to post a 2.40 ERA and strike out 160 guys in 124 innings.

Last year, Hahn talked about Lucas Giolito and Reynaldo Lopez, who made their White Sox debuts late in 2017, as potential templates for Kopech, and things turned out that way with Kopech debuting in late August. Should Kopech be looked at as a potential template for Cease and when we can expect the other big part of the Jose Quintana trade to make his big league debut?

“That’s very possible,” Hahn said. “I think the only possible concern or the only thing holding back Dylan Cease right now is the innings base he has under him. Right now his career high in innings was 2018, about 125-ish. So you can’t necessarily project him, ‘Oh he’s going to go throw 180 in the big leagues next year.’ So that’s really the only sense of caution on him.”

“I think it’s fair to compare where he is now to where Kopech was a year ago in terms of coming to spring training with the stuff, with everything he’s accomplished, with the stuff he has and the ability to compete at the big league level. It’s just a matter of going to start that process and what we can expect once we do.”

The 2019 season should be different in that we’ll get an answer on Jimenez early instead of wondering all season long. But 2019 could be a sort of replay when it comes to Cease, who if he continues the kind of performance he turned in last season could be the subject of season-long questions, like Kopech was in 2018.

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### **Sox Drawer Q&A: Are the White Sox really gonna get Bryce Harper?**

By Chuck Garfien / NBC Sports Chicago / November 12, 2018

“Batting third, playing right field for the Chicago White Sox, No. 34, Bryce Harper!”

Yeah, I went there. I’m sure White Sox public-address announcer Gene Honda wouldn’t mind going there for the next 10 years, either.

But really, Harper coming to the South Side? White Sox fans have been in a frenzy ever since MLB Network’s Jon Morosi broke the news that the White Sox are interested in signing Harper and Manny Machado.

By the way, a big thank you to Jon from all of White Sox media for this hot stove bombshell to help get us through November.

So, let’s open up this week’s Sox Drawer. Not surprising, lots of questions about Harper and Machado.

Q: How realistic are these rumors? — @jdwyer02

CG: I can’t say for sure. The White Sox have always been tight-lipped on such matters and rightfully so. But it makes sense for the White Sox to pursue both players. Harper and Machado fit many, if not all the requirements for what the White Sox need on the field, and they have the resources to spend big if they choose.

Now, will the White Sox pony up \$300 million to \$500 million to sign either of them?

Here’s what Rick Hahn said last January at SoxFest when asked if money will be available to sign big-time free agents: “I can certainly assure you the resources will be available. Will we be able to convert on every target? No, not always in a robust and competitive market. Ultimately, competing for free agents and targeting big-ticket items and hopefully converting on them will be the next logical step when the time is right.”

Q: I think we are just wasting time even entertaining this subject. Fact is we won’t sign either — @RickyRi48202029

CG: I’ve definitely seen skepticism like this coming from White Sox fans questioning whether the front office will offer the type of record-breaking contract needed to sign Harper or Machado. But as I’ve said before,

these are different times. The White Sox have very little money on the books for the foreseeable future, and besides Tim Anderson, all of their young players are signed to cost-controlled rookie contracts. There's plenty of money available to go big for one of these top-tier free agents.

Also, look at the White Sox track record in the last several years. When they've chosen to be aggressive, they've been all in. In 2013, they outbid the Red Sox, Astros and Giants for Jose Abreu, signing him to a \$68 million contract. In the 2014 offseason, they signed Adam LaRoche, David Robertson, Melky Cabrera and Zack Duke and acquired Jeff Samardzija and his \$9.8 million contract for 2015. All told, that cost a combined \$137 million, and the longest contract was Robertson's for four years. In 2017, the White Sox won the Luis Robert sweepstakes in a deal that cost them \$52 million. Signing Harper or Machado will cost much more than these deals, but the White Sox have never had this kind of financial flexibility. Will either of them sign with the White Sox? I can't answer that. Neither can the White Sox. But if Morosi's report is true, the White Sox are seemingly attempting to do everything in their power to make it happen.

Q: Chuck, just make the call for us and lock them both up. Jerry's checkbook is in the first drawer to the right of his desk. 2 blank checks will do. — @TheJoeyMcNeely

CG: (No response.)

Q: Hey Chuck, do you think the front office should be making the big splash in free agency now, or waiting until next year? Players such as Puig, Goldschmidt, Castellanos, Arenado as well as a slew of starting arms (Sale, Gerrit Cole, Michael Wacha) are available in 2020. — @drunkchisoxfan

CG: Not sure if you were sober when you asked the question, @drunkchisox fan, but it's a fair point. Here's what I think: Players like Harper and Machado rarely become available. If you have a chance to sign one of them now, you do it. Plus, you can't assume that all of those players you listed will be available in 2020. Who's to say that Arenado and Goldschmidt won't sign extensions with their respective teams before hitting free agency? Or that they'll be healthy? Or that the two sides will be able to agree to a deal? There are too many unknowns. What we do know is that the White Sox contending window is coming. There are a handful of big-time free agents who they can possibly sign in the next few years. I say take your swings at as many as possible with the hopes of landing one of them.

Q: Is it smarter for the Sox to spend on one of the big ticket free agents (Harper, Machado) or to get multiple guys from the second tier of free agents with the same money? — @LandoJQuintana

CG: Good question. If the White Sox are unable to sign one of the marquee guys in the next couple years, this might be the way they end up going. Is it smarter? If Harper and Machado end up getting hurt or not playing up to their contracts, then the answer is yes. But as I mentioned before, the White Sox spread the money around in 2014. They were crowned the winners of the offseason. Unfortunately, it didn't work out. The White Sox went 76-86 in 2015, which set them on a course for the rebuild.

The reason to sign a guy like Harper is that it has a ripple affect on your entire franchise. Not just in wins, but in attendance, TV ratings, luring future free agents, etc. My feeling with the White Sox is they didn't go through the rebuild and all the losing that comes with it to end up being a good team or a really good team. They want to be great and for a long time.

Q: Sign Harper. Trade remaining OF depth (not named Jimenez) for Trout. 2019-beyond OF of Eloy, Trout, Harper. Sox win the next 10 World Series. My question: what am I missing here? — @HockBomb

CG: Absolutely nothing — other than maybe some reality! But I do like your thinking! Here's the deal. If Mike Trout had four to five years remaining on his contract, I would make a trade like that in a heartbeat. However, he only has two years left. That's not enough time to give up all that prospect talent for a very small window to win with Trout. Maybe the White Sox try to sign him in 2021?

Q: When can we expect to see Luis Robert up and is he more likely projected as a CF or corner outfielder? How is he progressing with off speed pitches? — @mpovilaitis

CG: Robert has been making up for lost injury time, tearing things up in the Arizona Fall League. I'm actually heading out there on Tuesday, so I'll have much more on Robert in the coming days. He's projected to be a center fielder. I can see him reaching Double-A (and maybe Triple-A) in 2019 and the majors in 2020. He has the talent to move up quickly. It all depends on how he develops. What he's been doing so far in the AFL is a good sign going forward.

Q: How many top 30 Sox prospects (and which ones) do you expect to see in the majors this year? — @DavidRHorning

CG: It's tough to predict and project on prospects. How about a list of players who have a chance to make it the majors this year (and if they don't, that's fine): Eloy Jimenez, Dylan Cease, Dane Dunning, Zack Collins, Luis Basabe, Zack Burdi, Jordan Stephens, Kodi Medeiros, Seby Zavala and Spencer Adams.

Q: Should I buy season tickets? — @Nashpotatoes6

CG: I can't tell you yes or no. But I will say this: If the White Sox were a stock, I'd be buying it.

Q: If the Bears have a great season and the Sox invite a couple of them for a Bears day. Who would you want to see throw out the first pitch? — @venticedredeye

CG: Trubisky and Mack. Offense and defense. Let's make it happen.

And finally:

Q: How many times does Yolmer dump Gatorade on himself in 2019? — @DaRealScaletta

CG: I'm hoping for double digits.

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### **Stark: Where does baseball go from here on pace of play?**

By Jayson Stark / The Athletic / November 12, 2018

For 100 years, it has been The Game Without A Clock. And baseball was proud of that, bragged about that, carved its identity around that.

But that was then. This is 2018. So you know what we can't wait for? We can't wait to see how the people who run baseball explain to us, just a few months from now, that the "solution" to one of their favorite issues is...

You guessed it — a clock.

At this week's owners meetings, this sport will begin the process of figuring out the next step in its never-ending battle with pace of play, pace of action or lack thereof. But somewhere over the end of that rainbow, there seems to be little doubt about the change most likely to shock the game by Opening Day 2019.

The Pitch Clock. Is it coming soon to a big-league park near you? Good chance.

"I think everyone [in management] is pretty much on board with it," says one baseball executive who has been involved in the ongoing discussions about this topic. "So it's really just a question of whether it's worth the fight with the players."

The potential of that fight with the players — over pitch clocks and everything else — will hang over this entire debate. For the rest of this winter. Possibly for the rest of our lifetimes.

But why can't there be ideas on this topic that work for everybody, without all that pesky fighting? C'mon, of course there can. So let's take a look at what's next on the pace of play front — and the potential innovations that could be on the table between now and spring training.

#### The Pitch Clock

So why would The Game With No Clock put a pitch clock at the top of its to-do list? We can think of a few reasons.

1) Because the minor leagues have been playing with a pitch clock for four years now. So more than half the players in the big leagues already have been there, done this.

2) Because it looks good! The pitch-clock supporters believe that fans like the whole concept. When the clock hits zero, something will actually happen. Can't beat that.

3) And because MLB and the players have already gone down this negotiating road two offseasons in a row. So that gives MLB some serious leverage to make this happen. Since owners have made formal pitch-clock proposals throughout that period, they have the right to bypass the union and just implement a 20-second clock on their own if they want to — without having to reach agreement with the players.

But does their favorite commissioner, Rob Manfred, really want to go down that road, almost immediately after agreeing this week to a new five-year contract extension? Does he really want to just flex his muscle and do this unilaterally? He hasn't in the past. And people who speak with him regularly doubt he's any more motivated to do that now.

"Rob doesn't want to implement anything," says one of those people. "He wants to find a way to come to an agreement."

But is there any pitch-clock proposal the players' union would agree to? Don't bet your grandpa's stopwatch on it.

Under the terms of the labor deal, owners have the power to implement a 20-second clock, sources say. It would apply both with runners on base and nobody on. Violators would get one warning. Then umpires could start calling an automatic ball (on a pitcher) or automatic strike (on a hitter) if they ignore the clock.

But now imagine this: Two outs in the eighth. Bases loaded. Full count. J.D. Martinez at the plate. And Angel Hernandez calls strike three on Martinez for an inning-ending, rally-zapping pitch-clock violation.

That is why players have always balked at any sort of pitch-clock experiment — and why nothing has changed.

So how could the two sides possibly agree on this? Here's a thought: They could just put so many seconds on the clock that almost no one would ever violate it. That's how.

Even a 25-second clock, one executive estimated, would have affected no pitchers who worked more than 30 innings this season and no hitters who got more than 200 plate appearances — assuming the clock wouldn't start until the pitcher has the ball on the mound. With runners on base, it would have impacted a handful of each. But a 30-second clock would take care of that.

"So that's my prediction," says one longtime executive. "There will be an agreement on a pitch clock that won't impact anybody. Then they can say, 'We've reached agreement on a clock. And everyone agrees that it's an issue.' But the truth is, it won't impact anybody."

#### 2018'S SLOWEST PITCHERS\*

PITCHER	SECS/PITCH
Vince Velasquez	27.6
Justin Verlander	27.0

Masahiro Tanaka	27.0
Robbie Ray	26.9
David Price	26.9
(min. 140 IP)	

#### 2018'S SLOWEST HITTERS\*

HITTER	SECS/PITCH
Marwin González	29.3
Jorge Alfaro	29.3
A.J. Pollock	29.3
Robinson Canó	28.6
Martín Maldonado	28.4
Odúbel Herrera	28.2
(min. 300 PA; source: FanGraphs)	

(\*-MLB estimates that because a pitch clock wouldn't start until the pitcher has the ball on the mound and the hitter is in the box, and because the clock would stop when the pitcher begins his windup, there would be approximately an eight- to nine-second difference between these times and the time on a pitch clock.)

#### Limiting Pitching Changes

When you go to a baseball game, you never know what might happen. Except yes, you do. You know what's definitely going to happen? Those bullpen gates are going to open. Over and over and over again. That. Will. Happen.

Well, whatever you think about bullpening as a baseball strategy, there's unanimous agreement on how it affects speed-up-the-game strategy. By which we mean it's basically crushing speed-up-the-game strategy.

For the first time in history, there were more than 16,000 pitching changes this season. Sixteen thousand! That comes to nearly seven a game. So when owners and players sit down this winter to discuss pace of play, that will come up.

But what can baseball do to limit all those pitching changes? There are two major options that have been kicked around:

#### 1. REQUIRE RELIEVERS TO FACE MULTIPLE HITTERS

The mid-inning pitching change grinds games to a halt. But there's a surprising news bulletin on that front: Here in the post-Randy Choate era, that one-batter, left-on-left or right-on-right relief appearance is already beginning to die out on its own. Check out the trend just over the last few years:

YEAR	ONE-BATTER APPS	TOTAL RELIEF APPS	PERCENT
2018	1,145	16,339	7.0%
2017	1,119	15,657	7.1%
2016	1,182	15,305	7.7%
2015	1,398	15,108	9.3%

(Source: baseball-reference.com)

So given that trend – toward relievers who have weapons to attack hitters from both sides – there might be less resistance to a “must-face-multiple-hitters” proposal than there would have been even three years ago.

#### 2. LIMIT HOW MANY RELIEVERS CAN PITCH IN ONE GAME

OK, this is where things could get interesting. The average team now uses more pitchers per game (4.36) than ever before. So despite that decline in one-batter appearances, the number of mid-inning changes hasn't dipped – because there were an incredible 4,463 relief appearances this year of two outs or fewer.

That's the second-most in history. It means that more than 27 percent of all relievers don't stick around for a full inning.

So what's the answer? One proposal circulating is to limit teams to four total pitching changes — and/or just one mid-inning pitching change — per nine-inning game, barring injuries. That's a creative idea. But would modern, bullpen-loving front offices sign off on it? Would players agree to a rule that could force a team to leave its final reliever on the mound even if he gave up 14 runs or had to throw 60 pitches in an inning? Seems doubtful. But this is almost certain to come up this winter.

Tighten up the replay system

Are there still fans populating the earth who think baseball was better before replay? Are there really still people who really prefer getting the big calls wrong? Judging from our Twitter feed, there apparently are. But it's time to give up that fight. Replay is never going away. Ever. Got it?

Nevertheless, it does feel kind of shocking that the replay format has never been a serious target of Rob Manfred's war on dead time. The official reason is that the actual system of reviewing challenged plays has gotten better and more efficient every year.

#### LENGTH OF AVERAGE REVIEW

2014:	1:46
2015:	1:51
2016:	1:36
2017:	1:28
2018:	1:23

You might be surprised to learn that the average team only challenges three to four calls per week. So the reviews themselves are adding very little time to that game you're watching. But...

There are two aspects to replay that still make people crazy, inside and outside the sport:

The non-challenge delay: "The problem isn't replay itself," one exec grumbles. "It's the number of times every game that the manager goes to the top step and holds his hand up while he waits for his replay guy to tell him whether to challenge. That's just a bad look. That's worse than the time it takes to get the [challenged] calls right."

The umpires' waiting game: "What gets to me," says another longtime exec, "is the umpires leaving the field and wearing those headsets. It's not like they do anything. They just stand there."

So what are the potential replay ideas that could be kicked around to clean up this process? We've heard a few.

Force managers to make near-instant decisions on whether to challenge? ... Have the crew chief wear an earpiece, so the replay officials in New York can communicate with him at whatever base he's umpiring? ... Possibly eliminate certain reviews, such as runners who overslide a base by a quarter-inch?

That's all worth talking about. But this doesn't appear to be a major priority. Sorry!

Other Possibilities

#### FEWER MOUND VISITS?

Remember the outcry last winter, when baseball imposed the six-mound-visit rule? Astonishingly, the sport survived. In fact, you know many times, during this entire regular season, any team used up all six of its mound visits in a nine-inning game? Exactly once. So is shrinking that quota to five visits out of the question next year? Why would it be?

#### SHORTER BETWEEN-INNING BREAKS?



MLB made big strides this season in tightening the breaks between innings, by instituting strict time limits on when hitters had to be in the box and pitchers had to finish their warm-ups. But if you watched those split-screen YouTube TV commercials during the postseason – which appeared with no break in the action at all – you might have seen *The Future*.

“The split-screen commercial is the way to go,” says one of the execs quoted earlier.

Because almost nobody is clicking away from those ads, because the game hasn’t stopped and is still in view, the potential here is enormous. Could baseball use this technology to lop 30 seconds off the breaks between inning? How about an inning or two in which they don’t cut away for commercials at all? We don’t know where this is leading yet. But there’s serious interest in this – from all parties.

#### A CRACKDOWN ON SIGN-STEALING?

What does sign-stealing have to do with pace of play? Not much. But what does sign-stealing paranoia have to do with pace of play? Ha. Just count how many times pitchers step off the rubber every night because they can’t figure out the mega-complicated sign sequence designed to foil the sign-stealers. That’ll sum it up.

“The paranoia,” says one exec, “is at an all-time high. So sign-stealing is now a huge issue – and a huge pace-of-play issue.”

In the short term, MLB is likely to limit clubs’ in-game access to center-field cameras and team-operated cameras, and to beef up enforcement. In the long term, there’s more interest than ever in finding a way for catchers and pitchers to communicate electronically, with no hand signals at all. But that would probably require minor-league experimentation. So there’s almost no chance you’ll be seeing it in the big leagues next year.

#### LIMIT SHIFTS?

Messing with shifts – after a season in which there nearly (gulp) 8,000 more of them than the year before – wouldn’t really be a pace-of-play strategy. It would be a pace-of-action strategy.

This sport is looking for ways to boost offense and, especially, produce more balls in play. So of course the competition committee has talked about whether it makes sense to limit shifts. But there is so much difference of opinion on where that might lead, we’re not seeing much, if any, momentum toward shift-busting. Not yet anyway.

How big a crisis is this, really?

So with all of these ideas in play and the competition committee meeting with owners this week, that brings us to the biggest question of them all:

Has pace of play reached the stage where it’s such a looming emergency that the sport has no choice but to frigging do something already?

The easy answer: Hell, yes. The actual answer: Are you really so sure of that?

Here are the facts: The war on dead time was so effective this year, it cut about four and a half minutes off the time of an average nine-inning game – from 3:05 to just under 3:01. That was the second-largest drop in game time in the last 15 years.

But how much more dead time is there to cut? As we outlined above, there might be a few seconds here and there – barring a major decrease in between-inning breaks. But here’s one more fact that everyone needs to come to grips with:

Baseball games take three hours to play. They just do. And they have for a long time. You can go back 30 years – and the average game time has settled in at between 2:45 and 3:00 every single year. Take a look:

YEAR	AVG. GAME TIME
1988	2:45
1993	2:48
1998	2:48
2003	2:46
2008	2:50:38
2013	2:58:51
2018	3:00:44

Has that number been creeping upward over those last three decades? Obviously. But baseball games are never going to shrink to the length of, say, the average basketball game. Can't happen.

"We'll never get to 2:30," says one baseball official. "That's impossible .... And to even get under 2:45, it would have to be a radically different format."

Who out there wants to play seven-inning games? Well, Jim Kaat for one. But the reality is, nobody is seriously ready for a format that radically different. And the point is, time of game isn't baseball's biggest problem.

Generating more action – with better pace and rhythm – now that's the problem.

But it's also a problem that requires a whole different set of solutions. To get more balls in play, less swinging and missing, more swings early in counts, more people running around the bases – that has almost nothing to do with whether a baseball game lasts 3:01 or 2:56.

And solving that problem is so complicated, the conclusion we came away with is this: Nobody in this sport agrees on anything.

So in the meantime, they're all about to spend this winter honing in on smaller things they might be able to do. Like pitch clocks.

"But what's that going to do?" says one baseball man who has been involved in these discussions for years. "Face it. If you go to a clock, aren't guys just going to strike out faster?"

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### **How the White Sox view their pitch-framing struggles**

By James Fegan / The Athletic / November 12, 2018

A nice selling point to the idea that the White Sox can develop the next Tyler Flowers-level pitch-framer is that everyone who was around the last time they did it is still around.

When Flowers bloomed from an entirely unremarkable defender in 2010 to one of the best framers of the game, according to Baseball Prospectus' Framing Runs metric, by the end of 2015 (after which he was non-tendered), Mark Salas was still the White Sox's bullpen catcher as he is now, serving the same role instructing major league catchers on best receiving practices. Bryan Johnson was still the video coordinator isolating clips for catchers to watch how they are gloving certain pitches, and John Orton was still the roving minor league catching instructor and was still running drills in spring training. Don Cooper, who's always had an active interest in how his pitchers are being received, was certainly around as well.

The White Sox's famous tendency for continuity means most of their coaching miracles are theoretically repeatable. Not coincidentally, they are still continuing forward as if framing is more replaceable than other elements of the game, as Kevan Smith, who was the best-graded framer who suited up for the big league club last year but possessed less offensive potential than Wellington Castillo and Omar Narváez, was lost to the Angels after being placed on waivers last month.

"In my opinion it's harder to find a good hitting catcher than it is to teach a guy to be a better framer," Rick Hahn said at the GM meetings last week. "Some of these guys, especially the older ones, they sort of are what they are. Even Smitty (Smith) as you referenced, he improved over his time with us. Tyler Flowers who is obviously toward the top of these public metrics in terms of his framing, was a guy who struggled with it when we first had him in the minors. He was a bat-first catcher when we acquired him from Atlanta and with the work from our coaches and the diligence that Tyler put in, he worked himself into what's viewed as one of the finer framers in the game. That's an easier skill to teach. You can't teach it across the board but it's probably easier to teach a guy how to do that than to teach a guy how to hit."

By that principle, what really burns about letting Flowers walk in order to seek offensive upgrades at the position is his pair of above-average seasons at the plate in Atlanta in 2016 and 2017 (not his blocking or throwing). Still, without him, and with the same coaching staff, the Sox have finished dead last, 22nd and 27th in baseball in BP's Framing Runs (26th, 19th, 28th per Baseball Info Solutions' metric) in the three seasons since Flowers departed.

Bad seasons for over-30 veterans Alex Avila and Dioner Navarro in 2016 are one thing, but Narváez's struggles to improve his framing and blocking since debuting at the end of that season are particularly bedeviling in this light. The White Sox have overseen his growth into one of the best hitting catchers in the game, or at least one of the most proficient at getting on base, even if his numbers fall back to Earth a bit after 2018.

But BP's public metrics graded him as the worst defensive catcher in the game this past season, which was in no way aided by dealing with a young and wild pitching staff. Interviews reveal Narváez is just as conscious of working to improve his framing as anyone else, but on a per-pitch basis, 2018 didn't witness a step forward in his second full season. For someone who stood out early more for his plate discipline as a prospect than his refined defense, the White Sox would preach more patience for the 26-year-old, especially after a .275/.366/.429 season that earned him some.

"Narvy's improving," Hahn said of the fundamentals behind Narváez's framing. "He was a young guy when we took him in the minor league phase of the Rule 5 and got to the big leagues pretty quick. He continues to show progress in that area. Over the long-term, it's obviously a benefit to have guys who are strong in that area and we're going to continue to work with not only the guys at the big league level but in the minors as well as they try to refine. It's not an area that we ignore, it's not an area that we don't feel is important, but we do view it as one element of what a catcher brings and we try to look at the entirety of what they're capable of doing in assessing as they fit."

Hahn made an allusion to the White Sox, like every team, possessing their own proprietary pitch-framing metric. But when asked whether that metric provided more optimism or positivity than public statistics have offered for their catchers' pitch-framing performance, he waved away the idea that a successful White Sox catching season would be difficult to perceive.

What the Sox saw in Castillo that encouraged them to sign him to be their starting catcher in 2018 was plain enough to see. Historically a strong hitter, Castillo was also an above-average framer per BP in 2017 (though BIS still graded him harshly) after offseason work with revered former catcher Jose Molina produced real mechanical adjustments in his game.

Considering Castillo endured a difficult first couple months dealing with the worst stretches of Carson Fulmer and Lucas Giolito in the rotation, an 80-game PED suspension, and a rusty return that saw him playing through a sore elbow at the end, the Sox are mostly writing off his 2018 performance (which was graded as below-average) in assessing him. But in sum, the Sox's answer to their struggles with pitch-framing is that they went out and signed a veteran who they felt could perform the task and they expect him to get back to that level in 2019. And despite Narváez's offensive breakout, Castillo's defensive prowess is why he sounds like the primary starter going into next year.

"None of the guys have done as well as Welington did in '17," Hahn said. "This season was kind of a lost one for him and obviously was not as strong from the publicly available metrics as he was in '17 and obviously as we hope he will be in '19. He's shown it's in there. He's committed to it. He knows what he has to do and we'll see hopefully that '19 will be more like the '17 framing work where he graded out better than any of the guys that we've had here the last couple years."

Castillo has a team option for 2020, but especially after such a difficult first season for him, it's easy for focus to drift toward Seby Zavala and Zack Collins in the high minors as candidates to replace him. As the 10th overall pick in 2016, Collins has always been more respected by scouts for his bat than trusted to stick behind the plate long term, and his early BP numbers rating him as one of the worst framers at Double-A reflect the development left for his game. But if the White Sox have shown anything, it's that they're unlikely to get discouraged by early career struggles.

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### **Luis Robert's Effort Stands Out In Arizona Fall League**

By Kyle Glaser / Baseball America / November 12, 2018

GLENDALE, Ariz.—Luis Robert stands out for his sheer physicality the moment you lay eyes on him.

A chiseled 6-foot-3, 185-pound blend of power and speed, the 21-year-old outfielder is straight out of central casting for what a Major League Baseball player should look like.

That's a big reason why Robert was a highly pursued international free agent in 2017. It's a big reason why the White Sox gave him a \$26 million bonus to sign.

There's something beyond Robert's physicality that makes him special, though.

It's his effort—a boundless enthusiasm that translates into a ceaseless motor on the diamond, turning outs into hits and creating runs out of thin air.

On Friday afternoon, Robert put that perpetual energy—and its game-changing ability—on display for all to see.

Robert carried Glendale to a 6-5 victory over Scottsdale in the Arizona Fall League by pure force of effort.

Leading off the second inning against Astros No. 1 prospect Forrest Whitley, Robert busted hard out of the righthanded batter's box on a ground ball to third base and turned what should have been a routine groundout into an infield single, getting down the line in 4.3 seconds. Two pitches later, he stole second to move into scoring position.

On the very next pitch came Robert's signature moment. Yu Chang (Indians) lifted a fly ball deep to center field, and Robert tagged up and raced to third at full speed. As Scottsdale shortstop Alfredo Rodriguez (Reds) took the throw in from center field, he slowly jogged back toward the infield rather than getting the ball in quickly. Robert saw Rodriguez's slow gait and took off, racing home and scoring with a nifty slide past catcher Matt Winn (Giants) after a startled Rodriguez threw home.

In a span of five pitches, Robert beat out an infield single, stole second, and took two bases on a sacrifice fly to give Glendale a lead.

"That tells you something about him," said Glendale hitting coach Charles Poe, a hitting coach in the White Sox's system who coached Robert for 32 games at high Class A Winston-Salem this season. "He's a physical specimen, he's an awesome athlete and he's just playing the game like you're playing in the backyard. Like a kid's game. What we just saw in that inning ... that's just how he is. His baseball IQ is very high."

Robert's hustle wasn't done. With two outs in the third inning, he lifted a fly ball into shallow right field. Rather than jog down the line, he moved quickly out of the box, and when Scottsdale second baseman

Andres Gimenez (Mets) failed to make the catch, Robert kicked into another gear and raced to second for a bloop double.

His effort getting out the box quickly, and moving to second on what could have been an assumed out paid dividends just one batter later, when Chang singled past the shortstop to bring Robert home and extend Glendale's lead to 3-0.

"I work hard always, I run hard every time every play," Robert said through teammate Laz Rivera, who was translating. "I'm very prideful in all my efforts that I make. I try to run everything hard, even if it's a fly ball or ground ball. I've been playing like that since Cuba. That's what I feel like the White Sox like about me."

The White Sox like a lot about Robert, the organization's No. 5 prospect. Most of all, they like that he is hitting.

Robert finished 3-for-4 with his double, stolen base and two runs scored. He has a hit in all 14 AFL games he's played, and overall is batting .386/.435/.526.

That's a stark turnaround from the .269/.333/.360 line Robert put up in an injury-shortened regular season. He played in just 50 games across three levels due to a sprained ligament in his left thumb that twice sent him to the disabled list.

Staying healthy is a part of Robert's improvement, but Poe also sees a discernible growth and maturity in the prized Cuban's game.

"(He's) just being really consistent and swinging at good pitches," Poe said. "During the season you'd see him coming out swinging early in the counts, coming out of his approach, swinging at bad pitches. Now he's starting to find pitches in his zone that he can handle or do damage with, or he lets them go. He's even now been mixing in a walk or two. It's pretty awesome to see how he's putting his at-bats together."

For Robert, the progression as a hitter is something he knew would come, in part because of the way he approaches the game. It's also easy to make it come when you create singles out of ground balls and doubles out of bloopers by effort alone.

Robert recognizes that and considers that a foundational part of his game. It's an attitude that is ingrained in the Cuban's psyche and one that ensures he gets the absolute most out of his substantial physical gifts.

"Every day I come out here and try to have fun," Robert said. "At the end of the day it's a baseball game. I try to enjoy every bit of it."

## NEWS AND NOTES

— Whitley pitched four innings, gave up four hits and five runs (one earned), walked two and struck out four. He was repeatedly victimized by poor defense but also did not have his best stuff, sitting 92-94 mph and topping out at 95 while struggling to locate his 80-83 mph slider. His 81-82 mph changeup was excellent but rarely used.

— Dodgers reliever Jordan Sheffield pitched a scoreless ninth for the save for Glendale, sitting 93-94 mph and touching 96 while mixing in an 80-81 mph slider. The 23-year-old righthander has not allowed a run in eight appearances this fall, with just three hits and one walk allowed and seven strikeouts in eight innings.

—Dodgers catcher Keibert Ruiz was removed from the Glendale roster and has left the Fall League after a death in his family. Ruiz hit .286 with a .357 on-base percentage in 13 games.

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