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San Francisco Chronicle

Giants end stellar June with shutout of first-place Diamondbacks

Henry Schulman

PHOENIX — Fifteen games ended with the Giants shaking hands near the mound, three more in joyous dogpiles on walkoff hits. Only 10 times did they retreat to their clubhouse in silence, without the strobe lights, bubble machine and music that greet them after every victory.

The Giants ended an 18-10 June, their first winning month in two years, with an atypically serene 7-0 victory against the Diamondbacks on Saturday night that ensured them a series victory against the only opponent to take one at AT&T Park this season.

Brandon Crawford, Andrew McCutchen and Joe Panik homered in the Giants' ninth win in their past 11 games, which moved them into a virtual tie with the Dodgers for second place in the NL West.

One night after Andrew Suarez tamed the first-place team in his 13th big-league start (six innings, one run), Dereck Rodriguez trumped him in his sixth start with 6 $\frac{1}{3}$ shutout innings.

Ty Blach and Cory Gearrin completed the Giants' 10th shutout, matching the Cubs for most in the majors, a fitting end to a month in which they rode the wings of a youth-fueled pitching staff to the best June ERA in the National League at 2.70. They nearly caught the Yankees (2.62) for best in the majors.

The emergence of Suarez and Rodriguez, plus Chris Stratton's competency, allow the Giants not to rush Johnny Cueto and Jeff Samardzija back. It also provides hope that this 44-40 team has the foundation for a run toward the division lead.

"I'd like to think so," manager Bruce Bochy said. "You throw the ball like that, shame on us if we don't. Messing around .500 was not something we were talking about. You get pitching like this you hope to get on a roll. These guys are giving us a chance to win."

The Giants won their fourth road series of the season, surpassing last year's total, with perhaps their most complete win of the season — offense, pitching, defense and even their shifts.

Infield coach Ron Wotus had his quartet moving everywhere, and wherever they moved, a Diamondback hit a groundball right to them.

"Where have you been?" Wotus joked. "We've been magic all year."

The Giants slammed Shelby Miller for six runs over the first four innings in his second start back from Tommy John surgery.

Crawford found the swimming-pool area in the second inning for his 10th home run and a 1-0 lead before the Giants batted around in the third and scored four more without an extra-base hit.

Crawford walked on four pitches after Buster Posey, McCutchen and Brandon Belt singled to load the bases. Pablo Sandoval threaded the middle infielders for a two-run single and Panik hit a 410-foot sacrifice fly for a 5-0 lead.

It grew to 6-0 when McCutchen ripped an opposite-field home run to right-center in the fourth and to 7-0 in the eighth when Panik hit his first long ball since his three-homer burst over the season's first five games. Reliever Jimmie Sherfy served it up.

Alen Hanson and Gorkys Hernandez each had an outfield assist in the first two innings. Hernandez's was most impressive, a seed to second that nailed speedy Ketel Marte trying to stretch a single.

Posey became a Hall of Famer as he played. The Arizona Fall League announced his selection with a news release during the game. Umpire Ted Barrett also was picked. He was working third base and congratulated Posey, who had no idea — a funny moment on a big night for the Giants.

“These are big games for us, for sure,” Posey said. “I think we all collectively know we’ve got to play better on the road. Tomorrow is a big game, too. Then we go to Denver, where we haven’t played well the past couple of years. It’s a matter of keeping our focus and executing.”

San Francisco Chronicle
Giants’ Will Smith looking for a green light to pitch more
Henry Schulman

PHOENIX — Giants manager **Bruce Bochy** consistently says that a closer must be strong enough to pitch three days in a row. **Hunter Strickland** has that strength. That Bochy has adopted a committee since Strickland was injured suggests he believes the other late relievers do not.

That could change after the All-Star break if the medical staff is convinced that **Will Smith** is fully back from his March 2017 Tommy John surgery.

Smith saved Friday night’s 2-1 victory in Arizona, then said the staff planned to ease him back when he returned May 2. As Smith put it, talking from the team’s perspective, “When he comes back, we’ll kind of take care of him and protect him in certain situations here or there.”

Assuming no physical issues arise, the plan is to cut the tether in the second half and let Smith pitch three days in a row or as often as his arm allows.

At 6-foot-5 and 250 pounds, Smith has the build to pitch often without fatiguing. He also has another closer’s trait: He is tough on left-handed hitters (7-for-39, 18 strikeouts) and even more dominating against righties (3-for-39, 15 strikeouts).

Smith had an almost perfect rehab from Tommy John with no setbacks. The Giants estimated he would return in 13 months and he did, almost to the day.

On the day Smith learned he had a torn elbow ligament and needed surgery, he got a pep talk — more like a directive — from catcher **Buster Posey** and said he took it seriously.

“When I found out I was going to have TJ, I was down, not the happiest guy in the world,” Smith said. “Buster said, ‘I know it sucks, but your responsibility to the team now is to get better.’”

I said, “OK, done.”

2019 opener: The Giants will open their home schedule against an American League team for the second consecutive year in 2019. Under the proposed schedule, which still must undergo team and player reviews, the Giants will host the Tampa Bay Rays on April 5. Per a tradition the Giants prefer, they will start the season on the road, at San Diego on March 28.

If that schedule holds, third baseman **Evan Longoria** will line up for introductions at AT&T Park against his original team. He said that seeing the Rays on the other side will be a “weird feeling,” but less so than facing them at Tropicana Field, which the Giants will not visit next season.

Other highlights of the proposed schedule include a trip to Boston in mid-September and a Yankees series at AT&T Park in April.

Briefly: **Johnny Cueto** remained in Sacramento after pitching four shutout innings in his second rehab game Friday night. He will throw a bullpen session there Monday before the Giants decide whether to have him throw a third game in the minors or activate him. Cueto did not allow a run in either of his minor-league games. ... Even with outfielder **Austin Slater** in the big leagues, he and Sacramento’s **Steven Duggar** remain tied for third in the Pacific Coast League with 24 doubles. Angels prospect **David Fletcher** and **Raimel Tapia**, whom the Rockies promoted Saturday, each have 25. Slater hit two doubles for the Giants on Friday night.

San Jose Mercury News

Bochy explains decision to start Hanson, sit Slater after three-hit game

Kerry Crawley

PHOENIX—If Austin Slater sat out Friday’s series-opener against the Arizona Diamondbacks, the Giants likely would have lost an old-fashioned pitchers’ duel.

Instead, Slater recorded three hits against three different left-handed pitchers and drove in both of the team’s runs in a 2-1 win.

They’ll take their chances without Slater in the lineup Saturday.

Manager Bruce Bochy said he chose to start Alen Hanson in left field instead of Friday’s hero because Hanson has a club-leading 1.069 OPS against right-handed starters.

“It’s always a tough call when a guy gets three hits, but the last time we faced a right-hander, Hanson was the guy that had the big day with two doubles,” Bochy said. “Knocked in the go-ahead run, he’s leading our hitters in OPS in a pretty good number of at-bats so it’s hard not to

have him.”

Hanson went 2-for-5 with two doubles in the Giants’ 9-8 loss to the Rockies Saturday, picking up both of his hits against right-handed pitchers.

With Shelby Miller on the hill for Arizona Saturday, Bochy stacked the Giants lineup with lefties, leaving four righties including Slater on the bench.

Bochy said Slater will probably start Sunday, but the Giants’ reluctance to reward the rookie with consecutive starts is surprising considering how well Slater performed at Triple-A this season. A utility player who can handle multiple defensive assignments including all three outfield positions, Slater’s versatility figures to improve his chances of earning playing time, but it’s difficult for young players to produce up to their capabilities without regular starting opportunities.

The Giants offered Mac Williamson a chance to seize the starting left field job earlier this month, but Bochy has yet to list Slater in the starting lineup on consecutive days this season.

What’s next for Johnny Cueto

After throwing four scoreless innings in a rehab start for Triple-A Sacramento Friday, the next stop for right-hander Johnny Cueto (elbow sprain) remains undetermined.

Cueto could rejoin the Giants rotation next week or make an additional rehab appearance to build up his stamina, but Bochy said the club will wait to see how the next few days go before finalizing a decision.

Instead of traveling to join the team, Cueto hung back in Sacramento and will throw a bullpen Monday. Cueto won’t throw in Colorado against the Rockies, but if the Giants do elect to activate him, he’ll start against the Cardinals in the club’s next homestand.

San Jose Mercury News

Giants end best month in two years with series win against first-place D'backs

Kerry Crawley

PHOENIX—A minor league free agent. A converted outfielder. A pitcher who had never even logged an inning at Triple-A.

Before the season began, that was Dereck Rodríguez's résumé.

He hasn't wasted much time exceeding every reasonable expectation.

After tossing 6 1/3 scoreless innings against the first-place Arizona Diamondbacks, Rodríguez earned his third career big league win and helped the Giants to their 10th shutout victory of the year in a 7-0 final.

With their ninth win in their last 11 games, the Giants moved into a virtual tie for second-place in the National League West and secure their fourth road series win of the season a year after San Francisco recorded just three series victories away from AT&T Park.

Though the Giants' road woes this season are well-documented, manager Bruce Bochy's squad arrived at Chase Field determined to continue a run that helped them keep pace with the hottest team in the National League West.

The D'backs opened the weekend having won 20 of their last 29 games, but they couldn't break away from their competitors within the division thanks to surges by the Giants and Dodgers.

With a series-opening win Friday behind rookie Andrew Suárez against Arizona lefty Patrick Corbin, the Giants picked up their 17th victory of the month, matching their total from June of 2016, the last time the club finished a month with a record above .500.

The Giants did themselves an early favor in their quest for win No. 18 Saturday, batting around in the top of the third en route to a four-run frame that eased the pressure on the rookie Rodríguez.

After nearly winning National League Player of the Month honors in May, shortstop Brandon Crawford continued his torrid pace throughout June. He put an exclamation point on the month with a solo home run to open the second inning against D'backs starter Shelby Miller, blasting a 418-foot home run into the pool area at Chase Field.

Crawford's 10th home run of the season required him to dig down and launch a curveball that dropped in below the strike zone, but his ability to lay off pitches led to the Giants' second run.

After three straight hits loaded the bases in the third inning, Crawford took four consecutive balls from Miller to plate Buster Posey.

The Giants continued to capitalize on Miller's location mistakes, as Pablo Sandoval drove in a pair of runs with a single and Joe Panik brought home another with a 402-foot sacrifice fly. In the eighth inning, Panik hit a ball 365 feet, but it skipped off the top of the right field wall and over the fence for his fourth home run of the year and his first since April 3.

Andrew McCutchen added to the onslaught in the fourth, launching a two-out solo shot into the right field bleachers to push the Giants ahead 6-0. McCutchen's second hit of the night capped off his best month with the Giants, as the right fielder recorded 35 hits, posted a .305 average and hit six of his nine home runs in June.

As the battle for spots in the Giants' rotation heats up, Rodríguez made another significant statement Saturday with his second straight quality start and his fourth of his brief career.

Despite earning a non-roster invitation to spring training, Rodríguez hardly pitched for the Giants in Cactus League play as he appeared in just four games. Still, he found time to make an impression on the club's decision-makers, earning a start on March 21 at Salt River Fields against the D'backs.

With three innings of scoreless work against a solid Arizona lineup featuring several regular starters, Rodríguez proved to the Giants he could get big league hitters out. Perhaps more importantly, a right-hander who had never thrown an inning above Double-A convinced himself he was capable of pitching at the highest level.

It took nine Triple-A starts and a handful of injuries on the Giants' staff for Rodríguez to receive a promotion, but he debuted in Denver on May 29 and has been a pleasant surprise for a San Francisco team that needed more young energy.

The emergence of Rodríguez and Suárez has solidified the Giants rotation and played a pivotal role in ensuring June was the franchise's most successful month in two years.

After Rodríguez joined the club, the Giants staff completed a remarkable turnaround as the team entered Saturday's contest with a 2.80 ERA in June, the second-best mark in the major

leagues after San Francisco finished May with a 5.39 mark.

MLB.com

Rodriguez adds to Giants' tough choice

Jack Magruder

PHOENIX -- This rotation thing may be getting complicated. Good-complicated.

On Saturday, right-hander **Dereck Rodriguez** became the second San Francisco rookie in as many nights to make his case for a continued spot in the rotation, even as the return of **Johnny Cueto** and **Jeff Samardzija** is imminent.

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Rodriguez threw 6 1/3 scoreless innings and was backed by homers from **Brandon Crawford**, **Andrew McCutchen** and **Joe Panik** in a 7-0 victory over Arizona, the Giants' ninth win in their last 11 games.

Rodriguez, who made his first start June 3, has given up six runs in 25 innings over his last four starts, with two wins and two no-decisions in Giants victories.

The present has been solid.

The future is not something to sweat.

"I don't think about that," Rodriguez said. "Just go out there and do what I know how to do best, and that's pitch good games. Whatever happens happens. I'm just enjoying myself right now.

"Whatever they decide, that's their decision."

Rodriguez's outing continued a streak of strong Giants pitching performances, including a 2-1 victory by fellow rookie **Andrew Suarez** on Friday in the first game of the series at Arizona.

The Giants have given up two runs or fewer in five of their last six games, and Rodriguez has had a hand in two of them. He gave up four hits and one run in seven innings of a no-decision in a 3-2, 11-inning victory over San Diego on Sunday.

Rodriguez gave up six hits, struck out five and walked two Saturday, when the Giants took their

second straight series from the D-backs, the only opponent to have won a series from Arizona in its last 10.

The Giants took two of three from the D-backs at AT&T Park from June 4-6. Arizona is 6-0-2 in its other eight series since May 28.

D-backs right-hander **Shelby Miller**, making his second start since returning from Tommy John surgery, gave up six runs in five innings, including four in the third when San Francisco batted around.

The Giants are embracing the options that Rodriguez and Suarez present as they prepare to welcome back Cueto and Samardzija. Cueto will throw a bullpen session Monday in Sacramento, after which his next start -- rehab or Majors -- will be determined. Samardzija could rejoin the rotation as early as next weekend after a Monday rehab start, his fourth.

"I can't tell you what we are going to do," manager Bruce Bochy said. "We'll answer that when we have to. Just proud of these kids, the way they are pitching. Come into this park and throw the ball like that, that's impressive.

"We want our guys back, but at the same time when they are throwing like this, it does give you the luxury of making sure that the guys are ready. Depth is going to be so important. We're only at the halfway point. You never know what can happen. This has been great the way Suarez and Rodriguez have come up and handled themselves."

Rodriguez mixed four pitches, and threw some cut fastballs later in the game to keep the D-backs from honing in.

"We knew that it would be front to back with that changeup," Arizona manager Torey Lovullo said. "He started to throw a curveball and a cutter in the middle innings and it seemed like he had four pitches working. His fastball was in two different areas, three different areas of the plate. So it was one of those special days where I feel like he had everything going in a really good direction."

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

D-ing it up: The Giants used a couple of nice defensive plays to keep the D-backs at bay while the game was close early.

Left fielder **Alen Hanson** bobbled **David Peralta**'s double down the left-field line with two outs in the first inning but recovered in time to make a quick throw back to the infield to catch Arizona baserunner **Jake Lamb** off third base.

Center fielder **Gorkys Hernandez** cut off **Ketel Marte's** single to left-center with one out in the second inning and threw a strike to Panik at second to retire Marte attempting to stretch it into a double.

"That does so much for the pitchers when you make plays like that," Bochy said. "Saves pitches. Gets guys off base. Defense played a big role."

Going deep: Crawford hammered a curveball into the seats to open the scoring in the second inning, and that bought him enough respect to earn a four-pitch, bases-loaded walk to drive in the first run of the four-run third inning. **Pablo Sandoval** followed Crawford's walk with the biggest hit in the third, a single up the middle on a 95 mph fastball to drive in the middle two runs. **SOUND SMART**

The Giants had three homers in a game for the first time since they hit four against the D-backs on June 4 (McCutchen, Crawford, Sandoval and **Nick Hundley**). **HE SAID IT**

"I think they are gaining confidence and we are able to come up with a game plan and they are able to execute it. It's been fun to watch the progression, and hopefully much more of that to come." -- catcher **Buster Posey**, on what he has seen from Rodriguez and Suarez in recent starts

UP NEXT

The Giants will look to keep rolling after their best month in two years when left-hander **Derek Holland** starts the final game of a three-game series at Arizona on Sunday. Holland is coming off arguably his best start of the season, giving up one run and striking out a season-high eight in a season-high 6 2/3 innings of a 3-2 victory over Colorado.

MLB.com

Bullpen session to determine Cueto's next step

Jack Magruder

PHOENIX -- This much of **Johnny Cueto's** schedule is set: He will throw a bullpen session in Sacramento on Monday.

The venue for his next start, however, remains a mystery.

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Cueto threw four scoreless innings in a rehab start for Triple-A Sacramento on Friday, with six strikeouts and one walk, and the Giants expect a decision on his next outing -- another rehab start or a return to the Majors -- after the bullpen session.

Read nothing into the fact that Cueto will do that work in Sacramento. His next start would not come until at the earliest Thursday, the day the Giants return home from a three-game series at Colorado.

"He came out of it fine, normal pitching soreness," Giants manager Bruce Bochy said Saturday.

"A solid four innings. A good day's work for him. All good there on Johnny's end. In a day or so, we should have more info on when he is going to pitch again.

Cueto threw 69 pitches (44 strikes) in his Friday start, and Bochy said that load would be enough if the Majors is his next stop.

Cueto was off to a remarkable start this season, going 3-0 with an 0.84 ERA in five starts, before being placed on the disabled May 2 because of right elbow soreness. He has made two rehab appearances.

The Giants entered Saturday's game 43-40 despite receiving only 18 starts from their big three - **Madison Bumgarner**, Cueto and **Jeff Samardzija**.

Rookie left-hander **Andrew Suarez**, who joined the rotation when Cueto went out, continued to make his presence felt in a bid to remain there with another strong outing Friday. He gave up one run and seven hits -- five infield hits -- in a 2-1 victory. He was 2-0 with a 2.62 ERA in six June starts.

"I'm not focused on that," Suarez said on the chances of remaining in the rotation. "I just go out and compete, and whatever happens happens. I'm not looking past that."

Lineup changes: Switch-hitter **Alen Hanson** started in left field for the fourth time in eight games against Arizona right-hander **Shelby Miller** on Saturday, a move not unexpected even after **Austin Slater** had three hits, including two RBI doubles, Friday.

"That's always a tough call, a guy gets three hits," Bochy said. "The last time we faced a right-hander, Hanson had the big day with two doubles."

Hanson leads the Giants with an .895 OPS in 118 plate appearances since being promoted in late April.

"It's hard not to have [Slater] in there," Bochy said. "Slater more than likely will play tomorrow. He's not only going to play against lefties. With the versatility we have on this club -- Hanson can play different places -- [Slater] will get his playing time."

Buster Posey is likely to get a start off Sunday and will play all three games in Colorado from Monday to Wednesday. Posey is a career .379/.435/.625 slasher with 13 homers and 48 RBIs in 64 games at Coors Field.

Moronta shines: Rookie right-hander **Reyes Moronta** has two wins, a save and a hold in his six appearances since saving a 6-5 victory over Miami on June 20, and it has come as no surprise to Bochy.

"He's got great stuff," Bochy said. "Power arm, up to 95 [mph] with a big slider and a changeup. No, no surprise at all. He has the equipment to pitch up here, and this guy is not afraid, either. He wants to be out there. He's doing what we thought he could do."

Moronta had his fourth hold of the season while pitching a 1-2-3 seventh inning in Friday's victory.

NBCsportsbayarea.com

Like Andrew Suarez, DERECK RODRIGUEZ SHOWS HE'S WORTHY OF ROTATION SPOT
Alex Pavlovic

PHOENIX — Dereck Rodriguez didn't see much game action in spring training, but on March 21 he got a start and opened some eyes with three shutout innings. It turns out that was a sign of things to come.

"We've come a long way from the spring..." Rodriguez said late Saturday night, smiling.

That's certainly an understatement for the right-hander, who has gone from rarely-used non-roster invitee to legitimate candidate to stay in one of the most expensive rotations in baseball. Jeff Samardzija and Johnny Cueto each appear to be one rehab start away from a return, but a night after Andrew Suarez staked his claim to a spot, Rodriguez did the same.

The rookie right-hander threw 6 1/3 shutout innings against the first-place Arizona Diamondbacks, leading the Giants to a 7-0 win and lowering his ERA to 3.16. Rodriguez said he is not thinking about the upcoming decisions, but manager Bruce Bochy admitted that the rotation was the first thing that was discussed when the staff met after the win, before reporters were let into the clubhouse.

"I can't tell you what we're going to do," Bochy said. "I'll address that when we have to. I'm just proud of these kids."

A couple of weeks ago, Rodriguez seemed a likely candidate to return to Triple-A. He is a converted outfielder, and there was some thought that he could benefit from continuing to

throw every five days. But he has allowed just one run over 13 1/3 innings in his past two starts and has shown the kind of stuff and command that can benefit this staff in any role.

Of the current group, Derek Holland looks like a solid bet to stick in the rotation with Madison Bumgarner. If Cueto doesn't have a setback in his final rehab start, he'll return as the No. 2 starter. And let's be honest, the Giants are going to slide Samardzija back in there, no matter what his early numbers were. That leaves Rodriguez, Suarez and Chris Stratton for one spot.

If Rodriguez is not chosen, he has, at the very least, shown that he can help this staff in other ways. The fastball averaged 93 mph on Saturday and hit 95.8, a season-high for Rodriguez, in a matchup with Paul Goldschmidt. Rodriguez works fast and throws strikes, and with that fastball plus solid secondary pitches, he could certainly be a big boost to a bullpen that needs right-handed depth.

After Rodriguez's first start, catcher Buster Posey said his fastball has a bit more life to it. The league still hasn't caught up to it weeks later. The first four strikeouts Saturday came on four-seamers, the fifth on a two-seamer.

"There's no doubt, the league will adjust, and it's a matter of him making adjustments," Posey said. "His stuff plays, even if the league makes adjustments. His stuff still plays."

In what role will it play? That's up to the staff to decide, but Rodriguez is doing his part. He threw a career-high 102 pitches in the win and showed that he already is plenty good at making adjustments. Early on, he went heavy on the four-seamer, but his velocity was down at the end of a hot night. Needing one more out before giving way to Ty Blach, Rodriguez threw three cutters and two sinkers at John Ryan Murphy. He said he wanted to change it up since his velocity was down. Murphy swung through an 89 mph sinker and Rodriguez walked off the mound, having matched Suarez's effort from a night before.

"They're gaining confidence," Posey said. "We're able to come up with a gameplan and they're able to execute. It's been fun to watch."

NBCsportsbayarea.com

Rodriguez makes his case to stay in rotation, Giants clinch series vs D'backs

Alex Pavlovic

PHOENIX — After Friday night's game, manager Bruce Bochy said he would have some tough decisions to make with the rotation. Dereck Rodriguez isn't making them any easier.

Rodriguez, making his seventh career appearance, threw 6 1/3 shutout innings on a night when the ball was flying out of Chase Field. He lowered his ERA to 3.16 in a 7-0 win over the Diamondbacks and firmly kept his name in the mix, despite the upcoming returns of Johnny Cueto and Jeff Samardzija.

Here's what else you need to know from the night the Giants snapped a streak of five consecutive one-run games...

— Rodriguez threw a career-high 102 pitches, and ended on a high note, striking out John Ryan Murphy before Ty Blach took over. In his last two starts, Rodriguez has allowed just one run in 13 1/3 innings.

— Brandon Crawford hit his 10th homer. Andrew McCutchen hit his ninth. Brandon Belt, Gorkys Hernandez and Evan Longoria already were in double-digits. The 2017 Giants had just one player, Belt, hit more than 14 homers.

— Joe Panik hit a homer, too, but it was just his fourth. Panik had three homers in the first week of the season but had not gone deep in 163 at-bats.

— McCutchen had three hits and all of them were scalded. His homer left the yard at 104 mph and his singles were measured at 110 and 105 mph.

— Shelby Miller is back from Tommy John, and his stuff remains elite, but he had a ton of trouble in his second start. Miller gave up nine hits and six earned runs in five innings, although he finished strong and had six strikeouts. The Giants had five singles in the third while piling up four runs.

The Athletic

Dereck Rodríguez's turning point came while replacing Jeff Samardzija in the spring, and now the Giants face a rotation dilemma

Andrew Baggarly

PHOENIX — Dereck Rodríguez's locker was cleaned out.

He took all the workout shirts off their wire hangers. He packed up his duffel bag. He loaded up boxes of spikes before he even had a chance to remove the tissue paper from the toe. His name plate was gone. Another one awaited him in a narrower, louder, more crowded room a mile down the road at the Giants' minor league complex.

The Giants reassigned Rodríguez in their second round of roster cuts last March, and up to that point in spring training, the 25-year-old converted pitcher and six-year minor league free agent had experienced an unremarkable camp.

That's not to suggest Rodríguez was an afterthought. The Giants had good scouting reports and thought of him as a nice Triple-A depth piece, at least. Otherwise, they wouldn't have signed him and invited him to major league camp — an invitation that was more valuable than ever as so many free agents scrambled to find a place to dress.

But Rodríguez had no real shot to make the team, and the club reassigned him out.

Then he came back. Because of Jeff Samardzija.

That's where all this momentum started, to tell the truth: with a March 21 exhibition against the Diamondbacks at Salt River Fields, and with Rodríguez's belief in himself, and with the Giants' obsession for hiding their starting pitchers from NL West opponents in the waning days of spring training.

The Giants instead had Samardzija throw against a Triple-A Cubs lineup, and they brought back Rodríguez to face the Diamondbacks. The 25-year-old right-hander took a Cactus League obligation and turned it into an audition. For three scoreless innings, he dazzled while painting 95 mph against a close approximation of Arizona's Opening Day lineup.

Rodríguez went on to begin his season at Triple-A Sacramento, where he posted a 4-1 record and 3.40 ERA while striking out more than a batter per inning in nine starts. But Giants pitching coach Curt Young acknowledges as much: That glimmer at Salt River Fields in front of the major league staff provided evidence as compelling as what Rodríguez did for two months in the Pacific Coast League.

Seeing is believing.

"Dereck pitched really well in those three innings, and you know what, he did it," Young said. "He went to Triple-A and didn't miss a start and showed good stuff and he got an opportunity here."

Now comes the ironic part. Rodríguez received that spring audition because the Giants wanted to hide Samardzija, and now that Samardzija is on the cusp of returning next weekend against the St. Louis Cardinals, Rodríguez might have to cede a major league rotation spot that he has done nothing to merit losing.

Rodríguez, facing the Diamondbacks for the first time since that spring audition, planted another flag on the mound in the Giants' 7-0 victory Saturday night at Chase Field. He spun 6 1/3 scoreless innings to finish the club's best month in two years.

Make no mistake: The Giants' 18-10 record was a direct reflection of a 2.70 ERA that led the National League in June. And that ERA was a direct reflection of how well rookies like Rodríguez and Andrew Suárez have complemented the return of Madison Bumgarner and the continued good work of Derek Holland.

It is the kind of pitching that can send the Giants climbing.

"I'd like to think so," Giants manager Bruce Bochy said. "If we throw the ball like this, shame on us if we mess around at .500."

Rodríguez, who has a 3.16 ERA in seven starts, smiled when asked about that afternoon more than three months ago at Salt River Fields.

"Yeah ... we're a long way from spring," he said. "But it was fun throwing against them in the spring, and then coming in today, I was pretty much doing the same thing — getting ahead of guys and throwing my offspeed for strikes."

Samardzija will make a minor league rehab start Monday for Triple-A Sacramento — an assignment the Giants asked him to make after he struggled to get through four innings in what

was supposed to be a final tuneup last week. It will be their second time trying to reincorporate him this season after he struggled with shoulder tightness that got worse in that spring start at the Cubs' Triple-A field.

When your printer isn't working, you reboot your computer. If your printer still isn't working, rebooting your computer a second time probably isn't going to make a difference. That is a tortured way of saying that the Giants cannot guarantee that Samardzija will be able to get loose in the first inning when he returns, or whether he can reestablish himself as a stable contributor to a rotation already on a roll.

They just know they are paying Samardzija a lot of money to occupy a place in their rotation, and they are obligated to keep paying him through 2020.

One more thing: Not long after Samardzija returns, they'll have to find a way to make room for Johnny Cueto, too.

The solid starts from Suárez and now Rodríguez here in a lively ballpark against the NL West leader will turn those decisions into dilemmas.

"Oh, no question," Bochy said. "We were just talking about it. I can't tell you what we're going to do. I'm just proud of these kids. To shut them down in this park, they're impressive."

The Giants entered this series having lost 10 of their last 13 at Chase Field. This time, two rookie pitchers set them up to try for a series sweep on Sunday that could get them within 2 1/2 games of first place. Their shutout Saturday, finished off by Ty Blach and Cory Gerrin, was their first here since April 2, 2014.

Managers and coaches are not too different from fans. They share many of the same impulses. But they have to serve different masters. So even if Bochy is secretly loathe to disrupt a good thing, the Giants know they stand to benefit if Samardzija can peel off a run of encouraging starts, if for no other reason than it could open their options as they seek to improve this roster a month from now at the non-waiver trade deadline.

This is pure spitballing here, but the Angels are an organization desperate for starting pitching, in the short term and beyond. They have 11 pitchers on the disabled list and just lost their fourth, John Lamb, to Tommy John surgery. And they are one of the eight places where the Giants could deal Samardzija without his permission.

If the Giants were to trade Samardzija and get the acquiring team to take a chunk of his \$18 million salary this season, they could ensure that they finish underneath the \$197 million competitive-balance tax threshold and perhaps even create enough flexibility to address other roster deficiencies for the stretch run. Of course, they'd almost certainly have to pay down some of Samardzija's contract in 2019-20, and/or attach prospects, or take future dead money owed to someone else's declining asset. But it would be a creative way to dig out a bit.

After all the work they did to turn around a 98-loss team, they aren't going to step away from trying to improve a contending roster. And after all the work they did to get under the tax threshold, they aren't going to mess that up, either.

Finding a trade fit for Samardzija might be a longshot. But it's not a scenario the Giants can begin to entertain without giving him an opportunity to reestablish himself.

While all of the Giants' decisions are happening at cruise-level altitude, Rodríguez is staying grounded. Both Bochy and catcher Buster Posey commented on the right-hander's feel for pitching and his touch on his offspeed stuff, which is remarkable for someone who was drafted as an outfielder and converted to the mound in 2014.

"He's got a really nice feel for what he's doing right now," Posey said. "The league will adjust and it's a matter of how you make adjustments. But his stuff plays. Even if the league adjusts, the stuff still plays even if they see him for a time or two."

Bochy's report: "Lot of life on the fastball. Curveball is better. Command of slider and the change. You locate four pitches and throw 93-95 (mph), you'll probably have some success."

Brandon Crawford's home run on a shin-high Shelby Miller curve was his sixth on breaking balls this season — he entered the year with 10 career homers on curves and sliders — and gave the Giants a lead in the second inning. Crawford drove in another run with a bases-loaded walk in the third, and Pablo Sandoval followed with a two-run dribbler up the middle.

Joe Panik showed signs of awakening (just in time for a visit to Coors Field!) with his first home run since the home opener and a sacrifice fly to the track. Andrew McCutchen hit a home run and singled twice, with each ball coming off the bat at better than 100 mph.

McCutchen has hit the ball hard all season, even if he doesn't have numbers that will send him to the All-Star Game. He has put 114 balls in play with an exit velocity of 95-plus mph, and while that doesn't lead the major leagues, it's interesting to note that Mike Trout has 113 and Giancarlo Stanton has 112.

The result was a rare, stress-free night.

While the Giants should feel good about finishing June with an 18-10 record, and winning their fourth road series after taking just three last year, it had been 24 days since they won a game by more than three runs. They had played five one-run games in a row prior to Saturday.

So to win without pushing to the final out made the victory all the more soothing, and allowed Bochy to rest his frontline relievers. Blach threw 1 2/3 innings in what turned into a mini-piggyback start. And Gearrin, who sees action as often as a Duke basketball walk-on, appeared for the second time in 17 games while sewing up the ninth.

It was a complete effort that included some solid defensive plays to keep the shutout in order, none better than center fielder Gorkys Hernández's strong throw and Panik's short-hop pick and tag to throw out Ketel Marte trying to stretch a single in the second inning.

"That squelches a rally," Bochy said. "That does so much for your pitcher."

It was a month when their pitchers did so much for them. Including a rookie who hadn't pitched above Double-A, yet was certain of his destination even as he packed his stuff for a different one.

“Hard work,” said Rodríguez, when asked how he reached this point. “Hard work, and a lot of bullpens. And a lot of confidence in myself. I believe I’m as good as any pitcher that’s up here.”

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Olney: Contenders consider buying low, buying late

Buster Olney

BRONX, N.Y. -- More than a handful of teams benefitted last winter from slow-playing the free-agent market and waiting for the asking prices to fall inevitably. This is how the Phillies landed Jake Arrieta on a three-year contract, how the Red Sox eventually snagged J.D. Martinez on a five-year deal and how the Twins grabbed Logan Morrison, Lance Lynn and others from baseball’s bargain bin.

Well, some executives increasingly believe the summer trade market will mirror what happened with free agency -- that if you remain patient, there will be such a high volume of players available that contenders will get really good deals, particularly as sellers increasingly become desperate to dump salary.

“I don’t know if we have the best collection of prospects to deal,” said one evaluator, “but I don’t think we’ll have to have those, either. I think that as we get closer to the deadline, we’ll have a lot to choose from.”

That’s one observation about the developing trade market, with 30 days remaining before the July 31 deadline. Here are eight more:

- The Toronto Blue Jays’ deal of Steve Pearce to the Boston Red Sox serves as a starting gun for what should be a busy month of dealing for Toronto, a team with a lot of assets to deal. With the San Francisco Giants uninterested in discussing any Madison Bumgarner trade proposals and the New York Mets indicating that they would have to be completely overwhelmed to talk about Jacob deGrom or Noah Syndergaard, the Jays’ J.A. Happ is arguably the best and the most cost-efficient starting pitcher currently on the market. Not surprisingly, Happ is also attached to what is said to be a high asking price. The 35-year-old lefty has held opponents to a .211 average this season, with 106 strikeouts in 97 innings, and because he’ll be eligible for free agency after this year, Toronto is almost certainly going to move him. “He’s a guy you’d be comfortable starting in a Game 1, 2 or 3 of the postseason,” said one rival evaluator.

The Jays are also talking to other teams about right-hander Marco Estrada and could deal almost all of the veterans from their bullpen -- John Axford, Aaron Loup, Tyler Clippard, Seunghwan Oh -- as well as outfielder Curtis Granderson.

- The Philadelphia Phillies and Atlanta Braves are buyers. Because the Washington

Nationals have not seized control of the NL East in the way most evaluators expected, the front offices in Philadelphia and Atlanta will be active.

The Phillies are a big-market team with a small-market payroll of under \$100 million, and they could have more flexibility to add money than any other contender. For example: If they have interest in a reunion with Texas Rangers lefty Cole Hamels -- and some teams are not enthusiastic about Hamels' potential performance -- Philadelphia could be willing to take a lot of his remaining salary for this year rather than pay with prospects. They have also had a dialogue with the Royals about third baseman Mike Moustakas, who is owed about \$3.25 million for the rest of this season.

The Braves are still trying to figure out what their focus should be, given various needs, but it's safe to say Atlanta will pursue bullpen help (like most contenders) and wait to see where the prices fall on starting pitchers. The Braves do not have the same sort of flexibility to take on payroll that the Phillies have.

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- The Cleveland Indians want to add at least one really good, late-inning reliever who will be under team control beyond 2018. After this season, the Indians will lose bullpen stars Andrew Miller and Cody Allen to free agency. The Indians know that surviving the October steel-cage match with the Astros, Yankees and Red Sox will be incredibly difficult, and while Cleveland's bullpen performance has improved since it started feasting on its AL Central brethren, it will need more bullpen weapons for the postseason.
- The Red Sox have the highest payroll in baseball and are already over the luxury tax threshold, meaning there will be additional levies on every bit of player salary they take on between now and Aug. 31. But the Boston farm system is extremely thin at the highest levels, and the best way for the Red Sox to improve might be to take on a reliever dumped by another team in salary savings. Rival officials think the Red Sox will make their move in the last days before the deadline, or in the August waiver period.
- No matter who has the dominant voice in the Mets' front office, sources say the Mets are indicating they would have to be overwhelmed by an offer to trade either deGrom or Syndergaard, and a deal is highly unlikely. Theoretically, the Mets have three internal candidates for general manager -- former general manager Omar Minaya and current assistants John Ricco and J.P. Ricciardi. But the expectation is that ownership will look outside the organization for the next GM hire, and Minaya -- an advisor trusted deeply by owner Fred Wilpon -- will have a major say in who is the long-term successor to Sandy Alderson.
- The Los Angeles Angels play nine of their next 29 games against the Mariners, and how they fare might have a big impact on whether the Angels surrender assets to augment their team before the deadline. They worked aggressively to make the team better this year, but pitching

injuries have decimated them again, and they have hemorrhaged games in the standings.

- There is still time for Zach Britton to rebuild some of his trade value for the Baltimore Orioles before the deadline, because this is the time of year when small sample size -- two or three consecutive dominant outings -- can change perception. But Britton has really struggled, with six walks in 7⅓ innings and six earned runs allowed -- or two more earned runs than he allowed through the entire 2016 season.
- Hector Rondon has gotten five saves for the Houston Astros in the past four weeks, and he has allowed just one homer and nine walks in his 30 innings this season. But it's probably way too soon to say his emergence has settled the back end of the Astros' bullpen -- keep in mind that Rondon was the closer for the Cubs in 2016 when Chicago decided it needed to fork over Gleyber Torres to the Yankees for the finishing World Series piece in Aroldis Chapman. The Astros will keep an open mind about bullpen additions in the weeks ahead, especially left-handers, but an elite-level southpaw like a Chapman or Andrew Miller might not necessarily become available.

News from around the major leagues

Some of the player poll results compiled by USA Today for a piece published the other day should concern not only Major League Baseball, but the players, as well. About two-thirds of the players polled indicated they believe a work stoppage will be needed to help take back ground lost in recent Collective Bargaining Agreement negotiations.

Which begs the question: How would the players -- or anyone -- know? *Because the two sides have not been talking.*

In Tony Clark's meetings with players in spring training, the idea of a future work stoppage was raised time and again, with talk of a labor war. But this seems more than a little premature, because nobody really knows what the union actually wants for adjustments, or what the reaction of MLB would be -- and there would certainly appear to be plenty of intermediate options to explore before anybody has to drive over a negotiation cliff with a strike or a lockout.

For example, right now there seems to be gathering momentum within the sport for the adoption of the designated hitter for the National League. That would be a good thing for the union, an additional 15 landing spots for veteran hitters at a time when the older sluggers have increasingly struggled to find jobs. The union could be asked to attach this to a roster expansion that MLB was more than willing to talk about during the 2016 negotiations.

Also, commissioner Rob Manfred has been pushing for rules to augment the pace of action and offense, whether it be a discussion about shifts or relief pitchers or a pitch clock. This could all

be a great thing, because the conversation could present some leverage for the players: Manfred wants something, so the union can ask for something in return.

Finally, some players gave voice in spring training about the issue of tanking in baseball -- front offices slashing payroll and effectively designing failure to have the best shot at the talent at the top of the draft. Well, there are plenty of folks on the management side who share that concern, and it could be that MLB would embrace some anti-tanking measures.

But we cannot possibly know this now because the two sides *are not talking*.

As each day goes by, the union loses time to address these issues and find solutions, and perhaps put the players in a better position for the upcoming offseason or the 2019-20 offseason, or for when the current Collective Bargaining Agreement expires.

Clark cannot know what's possible *unless there is engagement between the union and Major League Baseball*.

Recently, Clark reached out to agents and asked for input and thoughts. But there needs to be a greater sense of urgency because of what's at stake. The union leadership must be properly prepared; its agenda must be well-defined and vetted through thorough discussion and analysis.

And the players must be better educated about what's possible, what is needed and what is being discussed. An agent was shocked in the spring when some of the experienced players he represents were unaware of the existence of the union's executive board, which theoretically advises and works with Clark.

One player representative suggested that on a regular basis -- once every few days, or at least once a week -- the union leadership should send group texts to all players in English and Spanish to advise them on the latest relevant developments. "They need to know what's going on," said the rep. "There's not a lot being communicated to the players so they understand (what's at stake)."

The union is comprised of really competitive people who are ready for a scrap, as the poll indicates; the solidarity of the players was a powerful force for decades. But that was in place because of decades of diligent conversation by former union chiefs Marvin Miller and Don Fehr, and there is so much foundational preparation that Clark must affect before any serious consideration of a labor war begins -- including the enormous risks. If that doesn't happen, then the true power of the union will be in jeopardy.

- When J.D. Martinez was with the Tigers, the guy who lorded over the hitters' meetings was Miguel Cabrera, who would respectfully listen but wouldn't necessarily draw much out of the conversation that he could use. On the prism of preparation, Martinez is on the other extreme of Cabrera, because he wanted all the information possible -- he wanted the feedback, the conversation about hitting. Through his release from the Astros, how he adapted afterward and what he learned in Detroit, Martinez learned about hitting, and along the way, he learned to teach it to others.

Diamondbacks Manager Torey Lovullo encouraged him to help others, and now that Martinez is with the Red Sox, he is at the epicenter of the Boston world of hitters. Manager Alex Cora says that when Martinez met with Red Sox officials at the winter meetings in Orlando, he listened to Martinez talk about hitting and about his self-evaluation, and he thought immediately that the slugger would have no problem adjusting to the Boston market because of his focus on his work. "This is going to be all about baseball with him."

Mookie Betts, a relentless source of questions and energy, began picking Martinez's brain earlier this year, and others joined in; during games, there is a constant byplay, a constant conversation.

"Guys see what he does in the video room," said David Price, who pitches Sunday for the Red Sox on Sunday Night Baseball, "and I think guys kind of pick up on his routine. Everything he does, there's a purpose behind it."

- A number that speaks for itself: The Mets' cleanup hitters had combined for 29 RBIs through Friday's games; the Dodgers' pinch-hitters had combined for 26 RBIs.

Baseball Tonight Podcast

A special Call to the Legends as former player and White Sox announcer Hawk Harrelson tells stories from his career, including anecdotes about Ted Williams, Arnold Palmer and that time when he thought he was going to fight Thurman Munson.

Friday: Karl Ravech on the College World Series, Sammy Sosa's denials and some interesting numbers from the USA Today poll of players; Nate Bukaty of WHB Radio in Kansas City on the possibility that the Royals will sign convicted child molester Luke Heimlich; and the Boston Herald's Steve Buckley about the Red Sox-Yankees series and the historic significance of this year's race.

Thursday: Arizona manager Torey Lovullo on the return of Robbie Ray, the emergence of Paul Goldschmidt and the impact of J.D. Martinez; Bob Nightengale on the Dodgers' interest in Manny Machado; Dave Schoenfield on the Brewers and Jacob deGrom; Sarah Langs plays The Numbers Game.

Wednesday: Boog Sciambi and Chris Singleton with their first-half impressions; Dan Shulman on

J.A. Happ and the forthcoming changes to the game; and the latest Power 10 rankings.

Tuesday: Rays manager Kevin Cash explains the pitching philosophy of Tampa Bay this year and the use of humor in his work; Jerry Crasnick on why the adoption of the DH is inevitable; Sarah Langs plays The Numbers Game.

Monday: Before conversations with Max Scherzer and Phillies manager Gabe Kapler, Tim Kurkjian discusses Bryce Harper's recent success, Juan Soto and an interesting decision by Kapler; Todd Radom's weekly quiz.

And today will be better than yesterday.