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San Francisco Chronicle

Giants mash four homers, slam King Felix in rout of Mariners

Henry Schulman

He caught a Johnny Cueto bullpen then took credit for Cueto's seven shutout innings in Los Angeles. He told a teammate Wednesday he would hit a homer against one of the game's best pitchers then made the Splash Hit counter spin.

He laughed and made others laugh around him, as he has done every day since the Giants gave him the gift of a second chance.

Pablo Sandoval repaid them during his first start of the season as the Giants punished Felix Hernandez and the Mariners 10-1 at AT&T Park to even their record at 3-3.

The Giants hit three homers in an inning at China Basin for the first time since 2007 and four in a home game for the first time since 2016.

Sandoval's blast was the loudest. With two on and nobody out in the fifth inning of a 5-0 game, Sandoval hit his eighth career water shot, more than any Giant besides Barry Bonds (35).

Before the game, when a reporter joked that Sandoval will only start against Cy Young winners, he retorted that he already had two homers against Hernandez.

Then he chatted up Andrew McCutchen, who said after the game, "I'm not going to lie. He said he's going to hit a homer today and he did."

Gorkys Hernandez, Brandon Belt and Brandon Crawford also went deep for the first time in 2018. Hernandez's second-inning homer was notable because he did it in his third plate appearance of the season. Last year, no major-leaguer had more plate appearances without a homer (348).

He knew the stat, went home over the winter and gained 10 pounds of muscle.

On a night the Giants raised their season run output from six to 16, doing most of the damage against an ace who physically did not look right, the big takeaways did not come at the plate.

They also won on the strength of two facets of the game that they needed to improve significantly from last year, their depth and defense.

Austin Jackson, Hunter Pence and Evan Longoria were on the bench, Pence with a mild thumb sprain that did not prevent him from pinch-hitting. Hernandez replaced him in the lineup. Gregor Blanco played for Jackson, although in left field, while Sandoval got a start at third that was planned long before Longoria homered Tuesday.

The Giants had their best defensive outfield on the field in recent memory with McCutchen, Hernandez and Blanco. All three, as well as Joe Panik, Crawford and Belt on the infield, made above-average plays behind Cueto. McCutchen's was way above average.

The Giants led 4-0 in the third inning when Kyle Seager sent a drive toward Triples Alley, which way too many opponents visited last year with Pence in right and Denard Span in left.

Two runs would have scored, halving the lead, had McCutchen not intercepted it to end the inning.

McCutchen's hitless night left him 2-for-24, but still made a huge contribution.

"You ain't getting hits, you've got to try to take them away," McCutchen said. "Even if you're getting hits you want to take them away, but especially when you're not getting them. You don't want anyone else joining the hit parade."

Belt extended the 4-0 lead with his homer in the fifth, to left field. King Felix then walked his fourth and

fifth hitters, McCutchen and Buster Posey, before Sandoval hit the 77th Splash Hit by a Giant to cap a four-RBI game.

"It was one of those days I felt great with all the work I've been doing," Sandoval said, "one of those days I thought something would happen."

Manager Bruce Bochy said Sandoval will get starts at third and first base. Bochy is also serious about Sandoval as the emergency catcher, saying he is more apt to use Nick Hundley to pinch-hit knowing he has the Panda in reserve.

Sandoval smiled when asked which pitcher he wants to catch most and said, "Cueto," which he actually did in the bullpen during the Bay Bridge Series.

Throwing to a more conventional catcher, Posey, Cueto ran his season-opening shutout streak to 12 innings before allowing a run in the sixth. He pitched the final three-plus innings after tweaking his ankle on a defensive play.

Cueto has started two of the three Giants wins. The losing pitchers in those games were Clayton Kershaw, Kenley Jansen and Hernandez.

San Francisco Chronicle
Glory day for Cueto, Sandoval
Scott Ostler

They are the Giants' odd couple, Johnny Cueto and Pablo Sandoval.

They both play with a unique style and flair, they're both in full comeback mode, they're both with the Giants basically because they weren't wanted elsewhere, and if the Giants are going anywhere this season, these two men are going to have to be big contributors.

Cueto will have to lead an otherwise anonymous pitching staff, at least until two injured starters get back to action. And Sandoval is going to have to be a force off the bench.

That's how it shook out Wednesday afternoon in the Giants' cleansing 10-1 win over the visiting

Mariners.

Cueto pitched six strong innings to pick up his first win, and Sandoval, getting his first start of the season, smacked a three-run Splash Hit, highlighting a four-homer day for the power-challenged Giants.

Sandoval is playing this season basically for free. He could have made the exact same salary, \$18 million, had he sat out the season and gone to the beach, because he's still collecting money from the Red Sox, who cut him last year. The Giants are paying Sandoval the veteran minimum \$545,000 and the Sox are (not) cheerfully chipping in the \$17,455,000 balance.

Sandoval made the Giants' roster with a strong spring training, where manager Bruce Bochy actually saw visions of the Original Panda.

"Pablo's pretty close to what we saw when we brought him up (from the minors in 2008), when he was going well," Bochy said. "He had a great spring, really swung the bat well, worked hard on his defense, both at third and first base."

Cueto isn't playing for free, he just *looks* like he is. Nobody has that much fun *working* at a real job. And his attitude is infectious. When the Giants' infielders went around the horn before the first pitch Wednesday, shortstop Brandon Crawford took the ball, went into a perfect Johnny Cueto windup, gave a patented Cueto Shimmy, and fired the ball to the starting pitcher.

Last season, Cueto dealt with blister and arm problems, then exercised his option to return to the Giants, his value on the free-agent market having plummeted below his Giants-guaranteed salary for this season. So in a way, he is back by default.

Suddenly, Cueto is the ace, leading the way for the other starters, anonymous pitchers who really need a leader, with Madison Bumgarner and Jeff Samardzija out with injuries.

"He's got to be the guy that we look to right now," catcher Buster Posey said of Cueto after the game.

Posey said Cueto "probably didn't have his best stuff today," but sometimes that's when Cueto's at his artful best. His fastball hit 90 on the gun only a couple of times, and his only strikeout was looking, and

Cueto didn't have a runner-free inning. But he competed, leader-like, and won, stopping a three-game skid.

In two starts, Cueto has gone 13 innings and given up one run.

"He's the veteran, he's the guy leading the staff," Bochy said before the game. "Even though Ty (Blach) went Opening Day, I think it's fair to say Johnny's the one that we look at to be leading the staff."

The Giants look to Sandoval to be a leader, too, in a different way. He's a late-game pinch-hitter now and a temp fill-in at third, first, and, if needed, catcher. On a fairly quiet ballclub, Bochy looks to Sandoval to add a little spark and sparkle to the clubhouse and the bench.

They're unlikely leaders, Cueto and Sandoval. Both struggled last season, and though they're not old — Cueto is 32 and Sandoval 31 — they've got a lot of miles, and looked suspiciously over the hill last year. This is Cueto's 14th pro season.

But on Wednesday, they were two fresh and peppy youngsters, showing the way.

San Jose Mercury News
Pence scratched, Sandoval starting, facing Ichiro Suzuki
Kerry Crowley

SAN FRANCISCO—Giants outfielder Hunter Pence was initially scheduled to start in left field Wednesday, but manager Bruce Bochy announced Pence was scratched with a sprained right thumb.

Pence injured his thumb diving for a flyball in the left field corner in Tuesday's home opener against the Seattle Mariners.

Bochy said Pence might be available as a reserve on Wednesday, but he would prefer to keep him out of the game altogether and wait to play Pence until Friday when the Giants host the Dodgers.

"He may be (available) once we get this game started with the treatment," Bochy said. "If this was September, he could play. So my guess is he's available. I haven't talked to him."

With Pence out, the Giants moved center fielder Gregor Blanco over to left field and inserted Gorkys Hernandez into the lineup in center. Blanco will hit seventh and Hernandez will hit eighth against Mariners right-hander Felix Hernandez.

Pence, 34, is the oldest player on the Giants' roster and is 4-for-18 to start the season.

After third baseman Evan Longoria broke an 0-for-17 stretch to begin his career with the Giants in their 6-4 loss Tuesday, Longoria will sit in favor of Pablo Sandoval.

Bochy typically abides by a “hit a home run, play the next day” rule, but it’s loosely enforced. Even though Longoria snapped his hitless streak with a two-run home run, the Giants’ skipper felt it was important for Sandoval to make his first start of the season.

“I’m just giving Pablo a start,” Bochy said. “I can keep him involved and give him some at-bats and that was kind of the plan before yesterday.”

Sandoval is 3-for-8 lifetime against the Mariners’ ace and has hit a pair of solo home runs off of Hernandez.

The utility infielder struggled for much of the second half last year after he was designated for assignment by Boston and picked up by the Giants, but Sandoval was one of the team’s most consistent hitters this spring.

Sandoval finished spring training with a .302 batting average and four home runs, and he’ll hit in the fifth slot Wednesday for a Giants’ offense that needs a spark.

“He’s pretty close to what we saw when we brought Pablo up when he was going well,” Bochy said. “He had a great spring, he was working on his defense both at third and first base and that’s why I wanted to keep him in the loop here.”

Facing Ichiro

The Mariners will start Ichiro Suzuki, 44, in left field Wednesday against Giants righty Johnny Cueto.

Suzuki was 27 when he made his Major League debut in 2001, a season in which he hit .350 and won the American League MVP Award.

A number of Giants players were still teenagers when Suzuki debuted, making his run all the more impressive.

“He looks the same,” Bochy said. “I bet he weighs exactly the same he did when he broke in. It’s a credit to how he takes care of himself and to be doing what he’s doing, competing against these young guys at 44 years old, that’s one of the most impressive things in the game.”

Suzuki isn’t even the oldest player in his own division, though, as that title is claimed by Texas Rangers pitcher Bartolo Colón, who will turn 45 in May.

“I said the same thing about Colón,” Bochy said. “You don’t see it very often, but it’s cool when it happens. How competitive these guys are but also how blessed they are with staying in the type of shape they are and having the ability to continue to compete.”

San Jose Mercury News
Home run-happy Giants crush 'King Felix', reward Cueto with win
Kerry Crowley

SAN FRANCISCO—For a Giants club that scored just six runs in the first five games of the season, a matchup against Mariners' ace Felix Hernandez didn't exactly sound like the prescribed method to cure an ailing offense.

It turns out, a date with the six-time All-Star and 2010 American League Cy Young Award winner scrubbed away every lingering symptom of ineptitude.

From Joe Panik's leadoff walk in the first inning to Pablo Sandoval's three-run home run that knocked Hernandez out of the game in the fifth, the Giants made life painful for the Mariners right-hander in a resounding 10-1 victory.

"It's one of those days where I came to the field and I felt great," Sandoval said. "With all of the work I've been doing, it was one of those days where something was going to happen."

The Giants' efforts to dethrone "King Felix," began in the bottom of the first with a three-run frame and continued into a five-run fifth inning that featured home runs from a trio of Giants lefties.

After first baseman Brandon Belt led off the inning with a solo shot to left field, Sandoval launched the 77th splash hit in AT&T Park history to open up an 8-0 lead that forced the Mariners to relieve Hernandez of his duties.

"(Pablo) is bringing it every game," manager Bruce Bochy said. "You see him around, you hear him, he's involved."

The very next batter, Brandon Crawford, greeted left-hander James Pazos with a solo home run that landed in the right field arcade seats. Sandoval and Crawford's eruptions marked the first time the Giants have hit back-to-back home runs since Crawford and Eduardo Nunez did so May 21, 2017 in St. Louis.

The offensive explosion paired beautifully with starter Johnny Cueto's outing, as the interim ace tossed five shutout innings before allowing his first run of the season. After Cueto threw seven frames of shutout ball against the Dodgers on Friday, he returned to AT&T Park and dazzled with an effective changeup and a sound defense behind him.

"I just keep working, every time I do my bullpen session I work on the changeup," Cueto said through translator Erwin Higueros. "I just keep working on it."

The Giants' first home victory of the season went according to plan for Bochy, who was forced to make a late adjustment to his Wednesday lineup. Left fielder Hunter Pence was scratched with a sprained right thumb he suffered while diving for a ball in the fifth inning of Tuesday's loss, so Bochy slid Gregor Blanco from center field to left and started reserve outfielder Gorkys Hernandez.

Sometimes a manager plans ahead of time, as Bochy did by starting Sandoval, and on other occasions, he gets lucky. Bochy was both prepared and fortunate with the lineup he sent out against Felix Hernandez, as Sandoval had hit two previous home runs against the Mariners' top starter while Gorkys Hernandez created his own history Wednesday.

After recording 348 plate appearances without a home run last season, Gorkys Hernandez took Felix Hernandez (no relation) deep to left center field to lead off the bottom of the second inning.

"Last year I had nothing, zero home runs," Hernandez said. "But that's what I was working on in the offseason. To be a little more strong. So now I have one."

The Giants didn't score again until Belt led off the fifth inning with an opposite field shot, but the opening of the floodgates was a welcome sign for a team that was shut out twice in the opening weekend of the season.

Though Bochy elected to sit third baseman Evan Longoria a day after his first home run as a Giant, his decision to insert Sandoval into the starting lineup for the first time this season paid off. The switch-hitting infielder was one of the club's most consistent hitters throughout spring training and could provide a potent power presence off the bench this season.

"He's going to be an important pinch hitter for us," Bochy said. "Probably more late in the game. I'm not afraid to pinch hit him right-handed either. It's nice to have a switch hitter you can put up there."

The four-home run output by Bochy's offense marked the first time the Giants had accomplished the feat at AT&T Park since August 28, 2016.

"I know we've got a great offense," Sandoval said. "It's five games, six games. I didn't panic at all. I know those guys are going to finish .300, .280, .290, 20 homers, 90 RBI so it's nothing to panic."

San Francisco's defense backed up Cueto and the Giants' bullpen, as Hernandez and right fielder Andrew McCutchen each made difficult grabs on the run to take away base hits while Crawford twice threw out a speedy Dee Gordon.

"We've got some years on our belts," McCutchen said. "So we know what we need to do out there to make plays. It's just learning each other."

After Cueto tossed six innings of one-run ball, left-handers Josh Osich and Tony Watson each recorded

an inning of work before Bochy used his interim closer, Hunter Strickland, for the first time since Friday. All three relievers threw scoreless innings, helping the Giants close out an eventful afternoon.

A scare for Cueto

With Madison Bumgarner and Jeff Samardzija already on the disabled list, the Giants can't afford for another pitcher to suffer a serious injury.

In the top half of the third inning, Cueto nearly did as he turned an ankle attempting to throw out Gordon on a bunt single.

Bochy and Giants' trainer Dave Groeschner paid Cueto a visit on the mound, and he threw a pair of warmup pitches before determining he was healthy enough to continue pitching. The Giants' skipper said he was impressed by Cueto's ability to gut through six innings, because he knows the right-hander was in some pain.

"Nothing serious, it's just that the grass gave way and my ankle just slipped," Cueto said.

Pence plays anyway

Bochy scratched Pence from the lineup with a sprained thumb, but said he might be available as a pinch hitter late in the game.

After Pence went through batting practice without showing any signs the pain in his thumb would bother him, he hit for Watson in the bottom of the eighth and flew out to right field.

Friday in jeopardy?

Forecasts are calling for wet weather to hit the Bay Area later this week, and the Giants aren't optimistic AT&T Park will be playable by the time the Dodgers arrive for the first game of a three-game set on Friday evening.

Los Angeles has reportedly adjusted its rotation so that Clayton Kershaw can pitch Sunday's contest on regular rest, but it's unclear how a potential Friday postponement would impact the Giants' pitching staff.

Bochy said before Wednesday's game the club had not yet discussed how it planned to handle its pitchers in the event rain impacts the series.

MLB.com

'He called it': Panda follows boast with blast

Chris Haft

SAN FRANCISCO -- Each of the Giants' four home runs in their 10-1 rout of the Mariners on Wednesday proved to be distinctive. None, however, was as special as the one by **Pablo Sandoval**.

It was a Splash Hit, touching down in San Francisco Bay as if an astronaut were aboard. It was an act of fulfillment, given Sandoval's pregame prediction that he would hit one out in his first start of the season. And it was hit by Sandoval, who remains beloved by Giants fans for his association with the franchise's World Series-winning clubs and his enduring charisma.

"I ain't gonna lie. He called it," right fielder **Andrew McCutchen** said. "He said he was going to hit a homer today."

That was an ambitious boast, since Mariners ace **Felix Hernandez**, a six-time All-Star and the 2010 American League Cy Young Award winner, was on the mound. But Sandoval, 3-for-8 with two homers lifetime against his fellow Venezuelan Hernandez, felt confident. Said Sandoval, "I was telling the guys I faced Felix before. I had a feeling that we were going to come to the field to do some damage today, as a team and as an offense."

Sandoval was in the lineup -- filling in at third base for **Evan Longoria** -- primarily because manager Bruce Bochy wants none of his reserves to get stale sitting on the bench. Keeping Sandoval sharp is a priority, since he'll likely enter games in critical pinch-hitting situations when he's not receiving on occasional start at third or first base. He's also the Giants' emergency No. 3 catcher.

"I've talked to Pablo about this, and he's good with it," Bochy said. "He brings it every day."

Sandoval's homer was the biggest hit in a huge five-run fifth inning for the Giants, who bore no resemblance to the team that finished last in the Major Leagues in home runs last season.. 4th, 2018

Gorkys Hernandez, replacing injured **Hunter Pence** (right thumb sprain) in the **lineup**, turned on the shower of power with a second-inning drive. It was his first home run since Sept. 13, 2016, a span of 338 at-bats. It was a reward of sorts for Hernandez. Having accumulated more plate appearances last year (348) without hitting a home run, he lifted weights aggressively during the offseason and added 10 pounds of muscle.. 4th, 2018

Brandon Belt, batting .353, opened the big fifth with an opposite-field homer -- a sure sign that he's swinging well.

Sandoval delivered the next homer, his first **Splash Hit since May 12, 2013**, against the Braves and his eighth overall. Asked if he knew the identity of the only Giants hitter who has more Splash Hits, Sandoval said, "Number 25." That would be Barry Bonds, of course, who has 35.

Then came **Brandon Crawford's** clout into the right-field seats, complementing Sandoval's homer to form the Giants' first back-to-back jacks of the season.. 4th, 2018

It marked the first time the Giants slugged three home runs in a single inning since June 2, 2016, at Atlanta. They hadn't hit three homers in an inning at home since May 7, 2007, against the Mets. And they hadn't accumulated four homers in a game since Aug. 28, 2016.. 4th, 2018

The beneficiary of all this offense was **Johnny Cueto**, who overcame a tweaked ankle early in the game to last six innings. He allowed eight hits and Seattle's lone run.

MOMENTS **THAT** **MATTERED**

Defense stands tall: Though the Giants' offense hit double-digits, defense made the difference early in the game. Right fielder McCutchen reminded observers that he's a multidimensional performer who the Giants acquired not just for his ability to produce runs, but also to prevent them as he ran down **Kyle Seager's** third-inning drive to right-center field with two out and runners on the corners. That preserved a 4-0 lead. McCutchen's grab had a 55 percent catch probability and earned a three-star rating, according to **Statcast™**.

"If you're not getting hits, you want to try to take them away," said McCutchen, who's batting .083. "I was positioned well. All I had to do was try to get the ball."

First things first: Though the Giants' power hitting ultimately dominated the scene, they established command with their homerless first-inning outburst, good for three runs, against Hernandez. After Sandoval drew a bases-loaded walk to produce the first run, Belt scored on a wild pitch and Crawford lifted a sacrifice fly., 2018

WHAT'S **NEXT**

Following Thursday's scheduled off-day, the Giants will oppose the archrival Dodgers for the second weekend in a row. Left-hander **Derek Holland**, who pitched respectably (five innings, three hits, five runs, three earned) last Saturday at Dodger Stadium, will start at 7:15 p.m. PT on Friday in the series opener at AT&T Park.

MLB.com

Cutch's 3-star catch keeps Mariners at bay

Chris Haft

SAN FRANCISCO -- Outfielder **Andrew McCutchen** reminded observers that he's a multidimensional performer who the Giants acquired not just for his ability to produce runs, but also to prevent them.

McCutchen drew his first warm burst of applause from fans at AT&T Park for running down **Kyle Seager's** third-inning drive to right-center field with two out and Mariners runners on the corners. That preserved the Giants' four-run lead as they went on to a **10-1 win** on Wednesday.

McCutchen's grab was not in the least bit routine. It had a 55 percent catch probability and earned a three-star rating, according to **Statcast™**.

"A big ballpark like here, if the ball hangs up long enough, you are able to be there to use those legs and catch up to the ball," McCutchen said.

McCutchen shared the outfield on Wednesday with two reserves -- **Gregor Blanco** and **Gorkys Hernandez**. Left fielder **Hunter Pence** was nursing a **sprained right thumb** and manager Bruce Bochy wanted Hernandez to get some playing time.

"Good speed out there," McCutchen said of the trio. "We've got some years under our belts. We know what we need to do out there to make plays. Good clean defense out there. We've got some guys who can go get the ball for sure."

MLB.com

Pence dealing with sprained right thumb

Chris Haft

SAN FRANCISCO -- Giants left fielder **Hunter Pence** was scratched from the lineup for Wednesday's **10-1 win** over the Mariners with a sprained right thumb. He entered the game as a pinch-hitter in the eighth inning and flied out to right.

Prior to the game, manager Bruce Bochy indicated that Pence wasn't seriously injured.

"We expect him to be fine after [Thursday's] off-day," Bochy said.

Pence hurt himself as he dove to snare **Robinson Cano's** fifth-inning RBI double in the Mariners' 6-4 victory Tuesday. On Wednesday, Pence was replaced in the lineup by **Gorkys Hernandez**, whom Bochy stationed in center field. **Gregor Blanco**, initially listed as the center fielder, moved to left field.

Pence started the Giants' first five games and batted .222 (4-for-18).

NBC Sports Bay Area

Healthy and bulked up, Gorkys Hernandez starts homer parade in win over Mariners

Alex Pavlovic

SAN FRANCISCO — Pablo Sandoval was a bundle of confidence as first pitch approached Wednesday. As he walked out of the clubhouse, he pointed out to a couple of reporters that he had two career homers against Felix Hernandez. Later, he dripped some of that swag on Andrew McCutchen.

“I’m not gonna lie,” McCutchen said after a 10-1 win over the Mariners. “He called it. He said he would hit a homer.”

Gorkys Hernandez didn’t call it. He couldn’t. First of all, he had never before faced King Felix. But of more importance, Hernandez led Major League Baseball last season with 348 plate appearances without a home run. Asked if he had any premonitions when Bruce Bochy tapped him as a late replacement for the hurting Hunter Pence, Hernandez laughed.

“No,” he said. “No.”

Still, Hernandez was in the middle of all that went right for the Giants on Wednesday. He represented three phases in which they excelled.

His homer was the first of four, with Brandon Belt, Pablo Sandoval (splash hit) and Brandon Crawford later getting on the board for the first time this year. (Joe Panik did not hit a home run.) The latter three came in the same frame, marking the first time since 2007 that the Giants hit three homers in an inning at AT&T Park.

Hernandez took his shot in the second, smoking a hanging slider from Hernandez. He said he added 10 pounds of muscle in the offseason after the homer-less season, and he is benefiting from having a healthy wrist. A year ago, he dealt with hamate issues that required surgery.

“Last year I felt pain a lot,” Hernandez said. “This year I don’t feel anything.”

Hernandez also was part of what might have been the best defensive Giants outfield — Gregor Blanco was in left, Andrew McCutchen in right — in years, and the infield matched that group in the win. Hernandez, playing center, chased down a liner to left-center in the third and with two outs McCutchen went a long way into Triples Alley to glove a Kyle Seager liner that would have been at least a two-run double. A year ago, both of those balls drop.

“A big ballpark like here, the ball hangs up long enough that you can go catch up to those balls,” McCutchen said. “If they hit it high enough, you have a chance to run it down. It’s about always having that mentality of not giving up on the ball.”

McCutchen has another thing on his mind, too. He is batting .083 through six games and a couple of hard-hit balls Wednesday found gloves.

“If you ain’t getting hits,” he said, “You’ve got to try to take them away.”

Hernandez and Blanco did that elsewhere in the outfield and the infield was spectacular, too. In addition to his homer, Crawford had a slick-and-quick throw to first in the fifth to nail the speedy Dee Gordon. Belt dug that one out of the dirt. When Jean Segura followed with a single, Johnny Cueto picked him off.

Cueto got an easy win on a day when the Giants led 4-0 after two and 9-0 after five. Sandoval's splash hit was the big swing in the fifth, and he and Hernandez represented the final positive from the demolition of the Mariners.

They are both bench players, and Bruce Bochy wanted them to stay involved early. He'll need them at some point, perhaps for extended stretches, and this was a positive start. While Hernandez is more of an emergency starter, Bochy said he'll try to keep Sandoval involved. For the most part, though, the energetic Panda will be the top bat off the bench.

"I'm going to have to start him occasionally to keep him sharp," Bochy said. "But I've talked to Pablo about this and he's good with it. He's bringing it every game."

NBC Sports Bay Area

With addition of another Gold Glove infielder, Giants take shifts to next level

Alex Pavlovic

SAN FRANCISCO — In the second inning last Friday night, with left-handed pull-hitter Yasmani Grandal at the plate, Brandon Crawford left his position and joined a shift on the right side of the infield. Evan Longoria was alone on the left side, but when the count got to two strikes, he started walking toward second base. Crawford went back to his original position and handled the entire left side.

"He just started coming over and I was like, 'alright, I guess I'll go back over,'" Crawford said the next day smiling.

There is some freelance work at play here, but for the most part this is all actually pretty choreographed. The Giants don't like talking about their use of advanced analytics — for whatever reason, they're comfortable with fans thinking they're still in the dark ages — but they did beef up the department over the offseason. One change was to add a recently added member of the front office to the traveling party, and you can see subtle changes.

In spring training, an exit velocity leaderboard was on display in the clubhouse. Players have talked about getting additional info regarding launch angles and their tendencies. Then there are the shifts, which the Giants have embraced for years.

They certainly have taken it to a new level this season, shifting between pitches for the first time. In the first inning Sunday, Longoria was once again by himself on the left side for Grandal, and he once again swapped positions with Crawford when the count got to two strikes. When the next hitter, Cody Bellinger, walked up, the two switched positions again.

The Giants are being more aggressive in part because of data and in part because of the offseason addition of another Gold Glove infielder.

"It's all based on personnel," said Ron Wotus, who coaches the infielders.

Crawford never swapped between pitches with Matt Duffy or Christian Arroyo or Pablo Sandoval, but Longoria has gotten used to doing it and he made it clear which plays he's comfortable with. He'll stay by himself on the left side to handle a bunt as a third baseman normally would, but when the count reaches two strikes to some hitters, Crawford takes over and Longoria plays a modified second base.

"That gives me the freedom to make plays over there," Crawford said.

There are variations the Giants use. With a runner on, Longoria will never move into the shift because the Giants don't want him turning double plays. He is, however, comfortable playing a version of second base with the bases empty. He fielded a slow roller to second at one point over the weekend and flipped it to first.

The Giants also shifted Matt Kemp, moving everyone over toward third base for the right-handed hitter. They surely have more up their sleeves this season, as there are plenty of shift-worthy players elsewhere in the National League. There's one common theme to all the alignments though.

"With the infield we have here, it doesn't matter who it's hit to," Crawford said.

The Athletic

Pablo Sandoval makes a splash again, and he is making the Giants a stronger team

Andy Baggarly

For some, the path to absolution involves baptism. And every baptism involves water.

So perhaps Pablo Sandoval did more than soak a baseball Wednesday night. His three-run home run splashed into McCovey Cove, and even after he skittered across the plate, the ballpark remained plush with applause.

Sandoval pointed to the cheering crowd. Then he grabbed the front of his jersey with both hands, and puffed out the embroidered letters on the front.

Every reminder is a tiny joy. Sandoval is back where he belongs. In this moment, he was awash in it.

The prodigal Panda is a Giant again, and not some experimental dumpster dive in the waning stretch of a 98-loss season, but a full-fledged part of a team that aspires to matter in 2018. If forgiveness came grudgingly from some corners of the clubhouse and stands last season, it might be coming easier now.

Sandoval was cheered loudest and longest Wednesday night, and his three-run shot was just one of several crackling moments for a resurgent offense in a 10-1 victory over the Seattle Mariners at AT&T Park.

"It was one of those days," said Sandoval, his smile shining almost as brightly as the jeweled studs in his ears. "I came to the field and I feel great. I said, 'It's one of those days something is going to happen.'"

He really did. And he has witnesses.

"Not going to lie, he called it," Andrew McCutchen said. "He said he'd hit a home run and he did. That type of attitude is cool to see. You definitely get that feel for what he did here in the past. It was fun to watch."

No, Sandoval did not also correctly predict that Gorkys Hernandez would hit a home run. Even the Panda is not bold enough for that.

Hernandez learned he was starting a few hours before the first pitch, pressed into service because Hunter Pence had sprained his right thumb. And last year, as major leaguers flashed an unprecedented amount of power, Hernandez had the ignominious distinction of finishing with the most plate appearances (348) of any player without going deep.

“Last year ... didn’t have nothing,” said Hernandez, who healed up from surgery to remove a fractured hamate bone in his wrist and packed on 10 pounds of muscle over the winter. “So now I have one.”

Brandon Belt and Brandon Crawford also connected for solo shots to build on the three-run lead that the Giants had manufactured in the first inning against struggling former ace Felix Hernandez.

It was the offensive breakout that eluded the Giants when they scored just two runs in their four-game series at Dodger Stadium, and only hinted at in the late innings of a comeback bid that came up short in Tuesday’s home opener. It was the kind of display the Giants need to restore faith with a sellout crowd of 42,582.

Manager Bruce Bochy trusted it was coming. But he couldn’t have foreseen four home runs on a chilly late afternoon – the first time the Giants went deep four times in a home game since Aug. 28, 2016 (when Joe Panik hit two, with Denard Span and Eduardo Núñez joining him). Prior to that, the Giants didn’t have a four-homer game at China Basin since 2010.

A three-homer inning was even more rare. The Giants achieved it in the fifth when Belt led off with his home run, Sandoval followed two walks with the cove shot that knocked Hernandez from the game, and Crawford followed with his first of the season. It was the first time the Giants hit three home runs in an inning at AT&T Park since 2007. (Bengie Molina, Rich Aurilia and Bengie again, in case you were curious.)

It was a feast for Johnny Cueto, who persevered after rolling his ankle while fielding a bunt in the third inning and kept the Mariners scoreless until the sixth. His streak of 13 scoreless innings to start a season was the best by a Giant since Barry Zito in 2013.

The Giants played nearly a perfect game from every angle. The outfield defense sparkled behind Cueto, as Hernandez ran down balls in center and Gregor Blanco made it look easy in left. McCutchen contributed the top defensive play of the night, a running grab to the gap in right-center on Kyle Seager with two on, two out and the Giants leading 4-0 in the third.

If the ball screamed triple off the bat, that’s because last year it almost certainly would’ve been. The Giants led the major leagues with 58 triples allowed in 2017 – it was their most since 1977 – and the pitching was only one factor.

“If that ball gets by him, it’s doing damage,” Bochy said. “Those are game-changing plays. It does so much for your pitching staff.”

It not only saved two runs but also saved Cueto some taxing pitches.

Everyone was able to loosen up after the fifth, though. Sandoval owns eight of the 77 splash home runs hit by Giants in AT&T history, a distant second to Barry Bonds’ 35. It was Sandoval’s first time reaching the water since 2013.

In the first inning, Sandoval put a lid on his eagerness and took four pitches out of the zone while drawing a bases-loaded walk. That walk gave the Giants their first lead since Friday at Dodger Stadium.

Sandoval is not here because of a misplaced effort to sell tickets or liquidate dusty Panda hats. He is here to be a functional part of a contending roster. And he is a cheap one at that. The Boston Red Sox

are cutting checks for nearly all of Sandoval's \$18 million salaries this year and again in 2019. The Giants are paying just the major league minimum salary of \$545,000. Think of it this way: the Giants will pay Sandoval the same amount that Rule 5 draftee Julian Fernandez will make for sitting on the disabled list all season.

Having a veteran switch-hitting backup corner infielder at the minimum salary also helped the Giants make the math work to acquire Evan Longoria and McCutchen while nudging under the \$197 million competitive balance tax threshold.

Moreover, he has proven to be unanimously popular in the clubhouse again.

Bochy was so intent to get Sandoval involved that he sat Longoria one day after the third baseman hit a home run to snap an 0-for-17 streak to begin his Giants career. Longoria, don't forget, leads the major leagues in games played over the past five seasons. He does not require regular rest.

But Bochy acknowledged that Sandoval had a good spring, and there is a benefit to involving the entire roster early in the season beyond keeping swings from gathering rust.

"You're going to need your role players," Bochy said. "It's good to keep them sharp and create a sense of oneness here."

Bochy explained that Sandoval's primary role would be as a pinch hitter from both sides of the plate. It's hard to imagine Sandoval expanding that role beyond occasional starts, both because Longoria plays every day and also because Buster Posey will pick up a first baseman's glove on days when Belt sits against a tough lefty.

But Bochy said he didn't have to promise Sandoval a chance to expand his role.

"You know, I've talked to Pablo about this and he's good with it," Bochy said. "He's on the bench and you hear him. He's involved. ... You have someone like Pablo helping us as a role player and it shows you how much stronger we are."

Bochy lauded Sandoval's willingness to catch pitchers in the bullpen to make himself available as an emergency catcher – a luxury that allows the manager to rest Posey in the last two innings of a blowout game, as he did Wednesday, without fearing calamity if a foul tip happens to catch Nick Hundley in the wrong place.

And besides, Sandoval is having fun with it. He caught Cueto's session during the Bay Bridge exhibition games, and cackled about the seven perfect innings he received.

Just don't get Cueto and Sandoval started on their past history. It's clear they enjoyed the competition.

"I got him out," Cueto said through interpreter Erwin Higueros. "I got him out a lot. He'd do some fly balls. I got him out every time I faced him."

Sandoval takes issue with this.

"No, no!" he said. "I had a blooper. Two hits! One blooper and one chopper between first and second."

The facts: 4 for 16 with two doubles. No walks. No strikeouts. Constant action.

You know, the way the game was meant to be played.