



Minnesota Twins Daily Clips
Saturday, April 7, 2018

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Top takeaways from first week in AL Central

Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | April 6, 2018

After capturing the past two American League Central titles, including winning an AL-best 102 games last year, the Indians came into this season as the prohibitive favorites to win their third straight division crown.

But after the first week of the season, the Indians have scuffled a bit, losing both games started by last year's AL Cy Young Award winner Corey Kluber, and they find themselves behind the Twins and White Sox in the standings.

Minnesota (4-2) and Chicago (3-3) have both had solid starts to the season despite opening on the road and have taken an early lead on the Tribe (2-4). The rebuilding Royals (1-3) and Tigers (2-4) have both gotten off to tough starts.

The Twins remain the most likely team to contend for the division title with the Indians. After making a surprise run to the AL Wild Card Game last year, Minnesota added starters Jake Odorizzi and Lance Lynn, relievers Fernando Rodney, Zach Duke and Addison Reed and designated hitter Logan Morrison to its roster.

But the White Sox believe they could be ahead of schedule and boast some of the game's best young talent, with more on the way. All they must do is look to last year's Twins to find a team that defied expectations on the way to a postseason berth.

It's still incredibly early in the year, but here's a look at all five AL Central clubs after the first week of the season.

Minnesota Twins

What we know: Not only is this team going to score runs, but its pitching staff is much improved, especially with its added bullpen depth. Brian Dozier is generally a slow starter, but he's already tied for the Major League lead with four homers, and he could be in for a huge season in his contract year. Young starter Jose Berrios looked unhittable in his first outing of the year against the Orioles, throwing his first career shutout on just 102 pitches.

What we still don't know: Ervin Santana has been the club's best pitcher over the past two seasons, but he has suffered some complications since undergoing surgery on his right middle finger in early February. Santana has yet to begin throwing off a mound, and he could get another X-ray to see what's slowing his progress. Minnesota hoped he'd return by late April, but now it appears more likely he'll return in late May or possibly even June. In the meantime, the Twins must find a fifth starter. Phil Hughes is the top candidate, but he's coming off a second surgery to alleviate thoracic outlet syndrome.

The bottom line: The Twins believe they have the roster to win the division, even after losing shortstop Jorge Polanco to an 80-game suspension for the use of a performance-enhancing drug. They have more depth than in recent years and still have a strong farm system, so they believe they're well-suited to weather Santana's injury and Polanco's suspension.

Chicago White Sox

What we know: The lineup will produce. The White Sox hit 14 home runs during a five-game road trip to start the season, and they have shown they have the offense to not only come back at any time, but come back quickly.

What we still don't know: How deep will this bullpen be? Nate Jones has been very solid through his early outings, but the rest of the relievers have been a bit inconsistent. The increased relief depth could prove to be a difference maker in any sort of continued success for this group.

The bottom line: This team believes it can win, regardless of whether others outside the organization feel the same. The top young players have gained from last year's on-field experience, which could help make for an interesting campaign, whether it ends in the playoffs or simply results in competitive and exciting baseball.

Cleveland Indians

What we know: The Indians' pitching staff remains good. Kluber does not have a win to show for it, but he was strong in his first two starts. A clunker from Josh Tomlin aside, Cleveland's staff still looks versatile and deep from top to bottom.

What we still don't know: How the offense will look over a full season without Carlos Santana and Jay Bruce, who left via free agency. The Indians hope to have Michael Brantley back Friday, and Yonder Alonso has shown promising power, but the lineup as a whole has limped out of the gate.

The bottom line: With stars like Francisco Lindor and Jose Ramirez in the lineup, the results of the first road trip (.559 OPS) should turn around soon enough.

Detroit Tigers

What we know: Miguel Cabrera is back, healthy and swinging, and he should be able to at least approach his old numbers. Victor Martinez and Michael Fulmer are healthy, too, which the Tigers will need to stay afloat in the division this year. Meanwhile, Nicholas Castellanos' start has made it clear last season's lofty numbers weren't a fluke.

What we still don't know: While the Tigers have pitched well so far, it's hard to tell how much of that is related to the hitter-averse weather conditions in which they've pitched, such as two 1-0 losses on cold afternoons. The bullpen roles beyond closer Shane Greene remain undefined, as manager Ron Gardenhire tries out different pitchers in various roles to see who responds to the challenge.

The bottom line: Weather postponements have given the Tigers a smaller sample size of games from which to judge how they're looking. What little we've seen so far suggests a team in a learning process, both players and coaches.

Kansas City Royals

What we know: The bullpen is still questionable beyond closer Kelvin Herrera, who had lost his closer job last September. Veterans Blaine Boyer and Brandon Maurer have scuffled so far, and the bullpen could be a weakness this season.

What we still don't know: How will the rebuild look? The Royals have the seventh-oldest team in the AL, but they're waiting on top prospects such as Hunter Dozier, Adalberto Mondesi, Nicky Lopez and Foster Griffin to contribute.

The bottom line: The Royals miss catcher Salvador Perez, who is out 4-6 weeks after suffering a sprained medial collateral ligament in his left knee while carrying a suitcase up a staircase in his home. Perez is a clubhouse leader and is instrumental in helping Kansas City's pitching staff. He's been a fixture over the past five seasons, averaging 140 games per year.

Pipeline Preview: Matias looks to continue power surge
Mike Rosenbaum | MLB.com | April 7, 2018

Here's a look at top prospects to watch in today's Minor League action:

Pitcher to watch: JoJo Romero (Phillies' No. 8), Reading vs. Erie (6:15 p.m. ET on MiLB.TV)

The Phillies' fourth-round pick in the 2016 Draft, Romero enjoyed a breakout full-season debut last year as he garnered midseason All-Star honors in the Class A South Atlantic League before moving up to Class A Advanced Clearwater. Logging 129 innings over 23 starts across the two levels, the 21-year-old left-hander posted a 10-3 record with a 2.16 ERA and 128 strikeouts while holding hitters to a .223 average. He'll be making his Double-A debut when he takes the mound Saturday for Reading.

Hitter to watch: Seuly Matias (Royals' No. 3), Lexington vs. Charleston (6:35 p.m. ET on MiLB.TV)

Matias' power was on full display Thursday as he belted a pair of solo home runs in his full-season debut for Class A Lexington. The 19-year-old outfielder tacked on another long ball Friday, hitting a two-run shot as part of a 2-for-4, three-RBI performance for the Legends.

Duel of the day: Stephen Gonsalves (Twins' No. 3) vs. Jordan Stephens (White Sox No. 22), Chattanooga vs. Birmingham (7:15 p.m. ET on MiLB.TV)

Gonsalves, MLB Pipeline's No. 79 overall prospect, takes the ball for his first start of 2018 after going 9-5 with a 3.27 ERA in 20 games last season. The lefty struggled a bit in Triple-A, but had good success with the Lookouts last season, going 8-3 with a 2.68 ERA over 15 starts.

Stephens will also be back in Double-A for the second straight season. The right-hander, a fifth-round pick back in 2015, went 3-7 last year, but posted a 3.14 ERA and a 1.30 WHIP. Stephens struck out 83 and pitched 91 2/3 innings after missing the first two months of the season with forearm tendinitis.

Saturday's Top 100 prospect probables

No. 50 Adrian Morejon (Padres' No. 6), Lake Elsinore at Stockton (9:10 p.m. ET)

No. 61 Dylan Cease (White Sox No. 5), Winston-Salem at Carolina (5 p.m. ET on MiLB.TV)

No. 69 Corbin Burnes (Brewers' No. 2), Colorado Springs at Omaha, Game 2 (on MiLB.TV)

More top prospect probables

Sandy Alcantara (Marlins' No. 3), New Orleans vs. Nashville (Triple-A)

Jaime Barria (Angels' No. 7), Salt Lake vs. Albuquerque (Triple-A)

Yohander Mendez (Rangers' No. 7) vs. Austin Gomber (Cardinals' No. 14), Round Rock vs. Memphis (Triple-A)

Chris Flexen (Mets' No. 9), Las Vegas vs. El Paso (Triple-A)

David Hess (Orioles' No. 18), Norfolk vs. Gwinnett (Triple-A)

Thomas Hatch (Cubs' No. 7), Tennessee at Mississippi (Double-A)

Logan Allen (Padres' No. 8) vs. Chase De Jong (Mariners' No. 21), San Antonio at Arkansas (Double-A)

Keegan Akin (Orioles' No. 9), Bowie vs. Harrisburg (Double-A)

Scott Blewett (Royals' No. 9), NW Arkansas vs. Corpus Christi (Double-A)

Dillon Tate (Yankees' No. 11) vs. Jordan Johnson (Giants' No. 29), Trenton vs. Richmond (Double-A)

Jesus Tinoco (Rockies' No. 14), Hartford vs. New Hampshire (Double-A)

Conner Greene (Cardinals' No. 21), Springfield at Midland (Double-A)

Brandon Waddell (Pirates' No. 28), Altoona vs. Akron (Double-A)

Cody Sedlock (Orioles' No. 12) vs. Bryan Hudson (Cubs' No. 24), Frederick at Myrtle Beach (Class A Advanced)

Bryse Wilson (Braves' No. 13), Florida vs. Daytona (Class A Advanced)

Jonathan Loaisiga (Yankees' No. 14), Tampa vs. Lakeland (Class A Advanced)

Jordan Sheffield (Dodgers' No. 18), Rancho Cucamonga at Visalia (Class A Advanced)

McKenzie Mills (Phillies' No. 23), Clearwater at Dunedin (Class A Advanced)

Jackson Tetreault (Nationals' No. 15), Hagerstown at Rome (Class A)

A.J. Alexy (Rangers' No. 17), Hickory at Greensboro (Class A)

Spencer Howard (Phillies' No. 22), Lakewood at Kannapolis (Class A)

Mason Thompson (Padres' No. 25), Fort Wayne vs. Lake County (Class A)

Wyatt Marks (A's No. 26), Beloit at Wisconsin (Class A)

Matthias Dietz (Orioles' No. 30), Delmarva vs. Asheville (Class A)

Twins starting the season with a power surge
La Velle E. Neal III | Star Tribune | April 6, 2018

Twins manager Paul Molitor believes his offense is able to vary its methods of attack.

He sees a group of hitters who can manufacture runs as well as inflict damage with one swing. A team that can steal bases and be much more than station-to-station.

"We have more than one way to score," Molitor said, "which I like a lot."

While there have been some signs of that during the first week of the season, there also are some signs that they can just bash their way through the summer — if summer ever arrives.

After belting three home runs in Thursday's 4-2 home-opening victory over Seattle, the Twins pulled into a tie for second in the major leagues with 12 long balls over their six games. Only the Chicago White Sox, with 14, had hit more.

Brian Dozier has four homers, tying for the league lead. This is the same man who hit 42 in 2016, when he set the AL record for homers by a second baseman, so his start might be more than a small sample size case.

And, after hitting a two-run shot in the sixth inning Thursday off the Mariners' James Paxton, Twins third baseman Miguel Sano offered a simple explanation of what can happen if an opposing pitcher makes a mistake and gives the Twins something to hit.

"If they make it," Sano said, "they pay."

And the Twins have had a powerful start despite getting no home runs from free-agent acquisition Logan Morrison, who belted 38 last season for Tampa Bay. He has started off 1-for-15 with the Twins, who had an off day Friday before resuming the Mariners series Saturday.

Morrison gives the middle of the order more thump.

"Most definitely," center fielder Byron Buxton said when asked if he thought the Twins are a bigger power threat this year. "They got some acquisitions to come in and help us out with that. We are just going out there, having fun and doing our thing. The way we are supposed to."

Dozier, Sano, and Eddie Rosario each hit at least 27 home runs last season. Buxton, whose blazing speed makes him an inside-the-park home run threat, hit 16, including 11 over the final two months of the season. Max Kepler hit 19. Even Eduardo Escobar hit 21, pressed into everyday service when Sano missed the last several weeks of the season because of a shin injury.

With Morrison joining and the younger players gaining more experience, first baseman Joe Mauer might be the only starter who doesn't have a shot to hit 20 homers this year. As baseball embraces the launch-angle movement, the Twins are one of the model teams, able to field power all over the field and throughout the batting order.

"We've got a lot of guys," Molitor said. "You can guesstimate how many guys have a chance to get 15 [home runs] or more. It is pretty high."

The Twins have homered in each of their past five games, hitting at least three home runs in three of them, including Thursday's. They hit four homers in a 7-0 rout at Baltimore on April 1. They had seven games all of 2017 in which they hit at least four homers — six of those coming after the All-Star break, when they surged to an AL wild-card berth.

Of the Twins' 12 home runs, 11 have been solo shots. They are showing what they can do to a baseball, but they aren't exactly making Molitor look like managing great Earl Weaver, who loved the three-run homer.

"We're hitting some homers, but we really know how to manufacture runs, getting guys over, whatever it is," Dozier said. "We know how to do that, which good teams do."

True, but the way they are doing it now — by hitting balls over the fence — is working fine.

Twins expect to play Saturday, but Sunday could be an issue
La Velle E. Neal III | Star Tribune | April 6, 2018

A couple hours after the Twins' 4-2 win over Seattle on Thursday, we were all reminded what the club was facing over the next few days.

As night time fell over the stadium, Larry DiVito and his groundscrew went out to cover the field -- and not just the infield. The crew went out and covered the entire outfield as well. As of they knew something was going to happen. That certainly would not have occurred if it was 65 degrees outside. But that's what happens when you expect worse weather this weekend.

Fans were surprised when the Twins were adamant about playing yesterday's game. Actually, the fans I spoke with who braved the elements said the weather on Thursday wasn't that bad. Game time temperature was 38 degrees, and some said it was perfectly fine if you sat in the sun. It was also a good time for the Twins to unveil their new bar that replaced the Metropolitan Club, Bat & Barrel. Heard a lot of people just hung out in there during the game.

It also helped that the wind was not much of a factor Thursday. A stiff breeze would have altered a few attitudes.

But let's see what happens Saturday, when it's expected to be sunny but below 30 degrees at gametime, then Sunday, when snow is in the forecast. The Twins like their chances of getting tomorrow's game in. Sunday, however, could be a tester. If they get out of this weekend with just one game postponed, it could be viewed as a victory. Given that this is Seattle's only trip into town this year, they likely will do all they can to play the games,

"As of now, we are a full go for Saturday," Twins President Dave St. Peter said.

After that, who knows? We all know the weather can change on a dime and make forecasters look bad. But Twins manager Paul Molitor was a little foreboding when talking about the weather during his pre-game talk on Thursday.

"It's not overly optimistic about some of the things that might happen the next three four five days," Molitor said. "But don't worry about tomorrow, today has enough concerns. We'll just tackle that when we get there."

By the way, Class AAA Rochester already has postponed its opener tonight because of snow.

One more thing. According to the Twins, the bald eagle that landed on James Paxton yesterday made three successful practice runs earlier on Thursday before his appearance during the national anthem. The only thing they can think of is that Challenger got Paxton mixed up with the handler, saw a glove on his right hand and went for it.

Miguel Sano's new mantra: 'Take what the game gives you'
Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | April 6, 2018

Miguel Sano was in a buoyant mood after the Twins' home opener Thursday.

The man-child known as "Boqueton" for his talkative nature in his native tongue showed he could fill a reporter's notebook in English as well.

Team translator Elvis Martinez stood to Sano's left, just in case, but the all-star third baseman's words tumbled forth with ease in the wake of a 4-2 victory over the Seattle Mariners and Robinson Cano, Sano's boyhood mentor from back home in San Pedro de Macoris.

"We play for 27 outs," Sano said. "We got a mentality that's positive to win the game. We never put our head down. We try to keep our head up and do something different to change the game. We play like a team. We play together. We do the little things and we win the game."

Sano's first-inning throwing error put the Twins in an early hole — "Almost got me over there in the dugout, to be honest with you," Twins manager Paul Molitor said — but the slugging third baseman made up for that with a game-tying home run in the sixth inning.

Tied with Giancarlo Stanton a week into the season for the American League strikeout lead with 13, Sano offered a reminder that, like Stanton, the whiffs are more than worth the tradeoff for the blasts that round out the package. Sano's third homer, a 386-footer into the left-field stands, sent lefty starter James Paxton to the showers.

Hearing Sano recap his day against a pitcher with a 97-mph fastball and a cutter at 88-91 mph offered more evidence of his professional

maturation with his 25th birthday approaching next month.

“He struck me out the first at-bat with two sliders,” Sano said. “He threw me fastball, then two sliders in the same spot.”

A five-pitch walk followed in the third, when Sano swung through a 3-0 knuckle curve but showed impressive patience with two outs and a runner on third. Then came the pivotal sixth, when he hit a 1-2 knuckle curve a very long way.

“Second at-bat, 3-0, he threw me the same pitch,” he said. “My third at-bat he threw me breaking ball, (cutter) two times and I hit my foot (with a foul ball). He threw me one over the middle, and I had the chance to hit it out.”

Sano saw just 78 knuckle curves last season, according to Baseball Savant, swinging through 21 of them and hitting just .200 with one home run when they decided an at-bat. He hit .167 against the cutter last year with no homers and 35 whiffs on 122 pitches, so Paxton wasn't the best matchup for him on paper.

“For me, I think the pitcher made one mistake only,” Sano said. “When he made that mistake, we needed to get him. I remember one story about Pedro Martinez. He threw like 12 innings, no-hitter and somebody hit a homer and won the game. It's like that. We stay positive, and when we get a chance, we take it.”

There should be many more chances for Sano to do that this year, especially if he is able to stay on the field. Two weeks ago he learned he would not be disciplined after a two-month investigation by Major League Baseball into an off-field incident from October 2015, his rookie season.

After having the game taken away from him by a foul ball off his shin late last August, he is moving well in the wake of November surgery to install a titanium rod in his left tibia.

“Everything is in the mind,” he said. “I don't think about that. Right now I don't have any problems. Like I say, I'm positive. I hope I can play 162 games and do the best I can and show everybody this is the best team I've played on in my life.”

Considering Sano has yet to play more than 116 games in a season, landing on the disabled list each of the past two years, that's quite a statement. The late signing of Logan Morrison to serve as the primary designated hitter means Sano should have a chance to blow past his high mark of 79 starts at third base, set last year after stints in right field (2016) and DH (2015).

Surgery meant a late start to his offseason work with Fernando Tatis in the Dominican Republic, but Sano made up for lost time this spring.

“When I got a chance to start working, I started,” he said. “I worked really hard in the offseason. When I come here to spring training, I got (third-base coach Gene Glynn) and the same work I do with Fernando Tatis I do with Geno. I got my routine every day to go out and take grounders. I prepare my mind and my (body) to be ready for the game.”

Thursday's error was Sano's first, although he also mishandled Jean Segura's slow roller that was ruled a hit in the fourth. Those early miscues might have sent him on to a three-strikeout game in past seasons, but Thursday he found a way to persevere.

For that, he credits the support he receives from his teammates.

“We play like a team, we play like a family, we play together,” he said. “We try to do the little things in the game. If somebody's not hitting, play good defense. Take what the game gives you. If somebody's not playing good defense but he can hit good, that's what we do. We try to do something different and have patience in the game.”

Not even snow in Pittsburgh or temperatures in the 30s have thrown Sano off his game in the early going.

“We all need to be positive because we can hit in the cold weather, we can hit in the hot weather,” he said. “We only need to think about one thing: Play good.”

Twins' Phil Hughes seeks role models during mid-career makeover
Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | April 6, 2018

If Phil Hughes' fastball is never coming back, if 11 seasons in the major leagues and a pair of thoracic-outlet syndrome surgeries have robbed him

of his mid-90-mph weapon for good, then it's time for the Twins right-hander to find new role models.

One that comes to mind is former New York Yankees teammate CC Sabathia, who transitioned in mid-career from a power-pitching left-hander to one who had to use his entire arsenal and move the ball around the four quadrants of the strike zone to hold opponents at bay.

"CC was a guy I leaned on a lot throughout my career," Hughes said recently. "He was a role model for me growing up. Seeing him go from a guy that sat 96-97 (mph) to now he's kind of reinvented himself — a lot of people thought he was done."

Some scouts are saying the same about Hughes, despite the fact he's only 31 years old and has two years and \$26.4 million left on his contract. On the 10-day disabled list with a mild oblique strain, Hughes started his rehab assignment with a five-inning stint for Class A Fort Myers on Thursday night.

Facing the Charlotte Stone Crabs, he gave up eight hits, half of them doubles, along with three earned runs and a walk. He struck out five while pouring in 47 of his 65 pitches for strikes.

The hope was that he would push his pitch count closer to 100 in preparation for a possible start against the Houston Astros on April 11. It's unclear if Hughes will be summoned for that start or asked to continue building arm strength and sharpness during a 30-day rehab window that runs through May 4.

"He's coming back from not pitching much last year and trying to earn his innings at this level," Twins manager Paul Molitor said. "We're not going to see the occasional mid-90s fastball. He's got to pitch a lot more and he's got to determine how his arsenal best plays."

Hughes remains in the early stages of his reinvention process, which had him throwing more sliders this spring along with his trusty cutter and more lightly used changeup and curveball. He also has a two-seam fastball to go along with his once-vaunted four-seam (or riding) fastball.

"They're running out of fingers to put down," he said drolly.

SUB-90 CREW

So-called junkballing lefties have been far more common over the years than right-handers forced to mix things up in a similar vein. In part that is due to the natural movement most lefties seem to have on their pitches, with another factor being the limited number of them in starting rotations.

Among righty starters with at least 50 innings in the majors last season and an average fastball velocity just below 90 mph, Hughes (89.7 mph) takes his place alongside the likes of Adam Wainwright, Doug Fister, Mike Fiers, Zach Davies and Scott Feldman.

Drop down another tick or two and you'll find A.J. Griffin, Josh Tomlin, Kyle Hendricks and Bartolo Colon on that list. Colon, who turns 45 next month and shut down the Oakland A's for six innings of one-run ball on Monday for the Texas Rangers, is maybe the best modern example of a right-hander who lost his big fastball and still found a way forward.

"That's a great example of a guy that lost velocity on his fastball but still pounds the zone and throws a lot of strikes," Hughes said of the Twins' second-half sensation in 2017. "He's maybe not throwing more offspeed than he has but certainly to a more effective degree. He's been doing it a long time, too."

The difference with Colon is he found a way to make his two-seamer bore into the bats of right-handed hitters that essentially allows him to be a one-pitch pitcher for long periods of time. Hughes, it seems, will need to take the kitchen-sink approach.

"It's something that I'll probably have to refine exactly what I'm going to go out there with," Hughes said. "I'm not going to necessarily throw six different pitches altogether. It's something where I at least wanted to throw them all in spring training, just to read swings and see what's working, see what's not and go from there."

Early returns, despite a 6.06 earned-run average and six home runs allowed in 16 1/3 spring innings, were somewhat encouraging, at least on a granular level. His fastball sat in the 89-91 mph range.

"I think the changeup still has a chance to be a good pitch for me," Hughes said. "I think the slider's really good. The slider and the cutter, they're the same but different. They're kind of the same idea, but you change the grips on them a little bit."

He's not doing this out of desperation, he suggests, but more so curiosity.

"It's not like I'm throwing knuckleballs and screwballs and stuff," he said. "It's still a pretty standard set. It's just a matter of figuring out what's

going to work on any particular day and how to use them best to get results and get guys out.”

NO EGO

Whether Hughes returns as a fifth starter or a multi-inning reliever, something he tried to do last season before TOS symptoms returned, the Twins are just hoping he finds a role in which he can contribute.

He wants to do the same. Having been a key part of a World Series winner with the Yankees in 2009, Hughes knows what it feels like to claim the sport’s ultimate prize.

“Everybody’s first reaction is, ‘Are you healthy?’ ” he said. “That’s always the first thing. Apart from that, it’s just about sticking with what I’m doing. Not everybody can do it. Some guys, when they lost velocity, it was kind of the end for them.”

Hughes doesn’t want to join that sad parade.

“It’s just a matter of being willing to adapt and not having that ego anymore that you can throw a fastball letter-high by everybody,” he said. “Not to say that I’m giving up hope that I can have that plus fastball, but it’s certainly at least something where I can get a head start on trying to be a more complete pitcher overall.”

With a deep analytics department constantly searching for better methods of pitch sequencing and the like, Hughes has accepted their suggestions and remains open to further feedback. Physically, he might not be able to change direction at this point in his career, but it won’t be because he didn’t try.

“I think the idea behind the whole thing is if my velocity isn’t what it used to be and that’s a permanent thing, at least I have some fallback options,” he said. “I’m not going to try to be a guy that just keeps burying fastballs in there a tick or two down from what they normally are and hope for the best. I’m going to try to adapt and adjust as much as I can to be productive even without that 93-94 (mph). It’s certainly not impossible.”

Twins battling freezing temperatures in 10-game homestand

Associated Press | Fox Sports North | April 6, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS — Kyle Gibson was given the assignment to take the mound for the first home game for the Minnesota Twins, an afternoon that was quite the cold opener to the team’s ninth season at Target Field.

He didn’t mind the 38-degree first-pitch temperature. That’s good, because the Twins have a 10-game homestand. Gibson will probably get another turn or two in the frigid air of this early April in the north that just won’t thaw.

“I’m the warmest guy out there. I’m the only one who’s moving every pitch and who’s that active, so I enjoy it,” said Gibson, who grew up outside of Indianapolis and played at Missouri before being drafted by the Twins.

Though the 30-year-old right-hander was removed in the fifth inning, the Twins rallied to beat Seattle 4-2 on Thursday . The sun was shining and the skies were dry above a ballpark that was remarkably clear of the nine inches or so of wet snow that fell on the area. Twins employees brought shovels to work on Wednesday to contribute to the cause, with President Dave St. Peter and general manager Thad Levine among the participants.

“It was different than shoveling your driveway,” St. Peter said. “This was part of something a bit bigger.”

The Twins and Mariners were off on Friday, when the forecast for Minneapolis called for a high of 23 degrees — which happens to be the major league record for first-pitch cold set in Denver in 2013 for an April game between Colorado and Atlanta.

Weather projections for the weekend matinees weren’t much more favorable: highs of 31 degrees on Saturday and 33 degrees on Sunday. There’s ample sunshine in the forecast for Saturday, but the snow was supposed to return on Sunday.

“We’ll take it one day at a time,” St. Peter said.

The Mariners are only scheduled for one visit to Minnesota. The same goes for Houston, which is due in for three games starting on Monday. The forecast looks better for early next week, but the first two games against the Astros are at night. The home ballpark in Houston for the World Series champions has a retractable roof.

These one-trip opponents make the club's decision, in conjunction with major league officials and the players' union, about postponements more complicated. Squeezing in a one-game series later in the season on common off dates is less than ideal, though easier now that the schedule is four days longer.

Cincinnati, Detroit, Kansas City and both New York teams have already had to call off games in the first week of play in 2018. The Twins played in Pittsburgh on Wednesday evening in swirling snow.

"It's a crapshoot," St. Peter said. "Early April baseball can be a challenge, weather wise. We talk about it every single year."

Right-hander Jake Odorizzi, like Gibson, got a valuable taste of pitching in the cold with his start against the Pirates. His previous employer, the Tampa Bay Rays, didn't provide this experience.

"It was good experimentation of what works in the cold weather and what doesn't," said Odorizzi, who also didn't finish the fifth inning. "It was more the wind than the cold. That's definitely the toughest part for me, getting a feel for the baseball and being able to command it. My command wasn't very good because of that, but I was trying to learn and figure out how it would go. If that's the worst that it can be in that situation, I think all things considered it was all right."

5 observations from the first week of the Twins' season

Tom Dierberger | Fox Sports North | April 6, 2018

There's a lot of baseball left to be played in 2018, but with all the thoughts and prognostications from spring training now in the rearview mirror and actual MLB games being played, here's five thoughts gleaned from the first week of the Minnesota Twins' season.

Starting rotation is the real deal

So far, so good for pitching coach Garvin Alston's new-look rotation. Through six games, the Twins starters lead the league with an opponent batting average of a mere .163 and rank fifth in MLB with a 2.41 ERA, allowing nine earned runs in 33 2/3 innings pitched. Young phenom Jose Berrios has a lot to do with that after he registered a three-hit shutout over the weekend in Baltimore. Kyle Gibson has followed up a strong second-half in 2017 (6-0 and a 2.92 ERA in his last eight starts) with an 0.87 ERA through 10 1/3 innings pitched in April. And Jake Odorizzi, brought in from Tampa Bay via trade, is looking like he'll be everything the Twins wanted and more, allowing just three earned runs in 10 1/3 innings. All of this, of course, is without ace Ervin Santana, who is still recovering from finger surgery.

Bullpen is no slouch, either

Besides new closer Fernando Rodney allowing a walk-off homer to Adam Jones in a 3-2 extra-inning loss to Baltimore on opening day, the Twins' bullpen has been nearly perfect. Four relievers have yet to allow a run: Addison Reed (5 1/3 IP), Trevor Hildenberger (3 1/3 IP), Ryan Pressly (2 1/3 IP) and Taylor Rogers (3 1/3). Overall, Minnesota's bullpen has a 2-1 record, 2.21 ERA and 22 strikeouts in 20 1/3 innings. Rodney, who looks to be a GIF machine this season (see here and here), earned his first save in a Twins uniform Thursday.

Twins are never out of a game

If there's one thing we've learned, it's this Twins lineup can come back and make things interesting no matter the deficit. Robbie Grossman's Texas leaguer with two outs in the ninth inning erased a 2-0 Baltimore lead and forced extra innings on opening day. On Monday in Pittsburgh, the Twins found themselves trailing 5-0 after a rocky first inning by new pitcher Lance Lynn, but the sluggers made it a ballgame again with a four-run sixth. And in its most recent two wins, Minnesota erased a pair of early two-run deficits to boost its record to 4-2.

It's going to be a slugfest at Target Field

The Twins rank second in MLB with 12 dingers, tied with three other teams, most notably a New York Yankees squad with a lineup that boasts sluggers like Aaron Judge and Giancarlo Stanton. In a contract year, Brian Dozier is proving he's still the best power-hitting second baseman in the league with four homers. Miguel Sano has cranked three moonshots, and Mitch Garver mashed his first career tater to give the Twins the go-ahead run Thursday afternoon. The scary thing is designated hitter Logan Morrison has yet to get going. The 30-year-old hammered 38 dingers last season but has managed just one hit in 18 plate appearances in 2018.

The cold never bothered us anyway

We were left scratching our heads when the MLB schedule-makers locked in a 10-game homestand for the Twins in early April, but so far the Twins have lived up to their state's #BoldNorth motto. The Twins won back-to-back games in the snow, a 7-3 win in Pittsburgh on Wednesday and the home-opening 4-2 victory over Seattle. Unfortunately for Twins fans looking for some sun, it's not going to warm up anytime soon. Here are the high temperatures for the next nine games at Target Field: 31, 33, 38, 39, 46, 43, 38, 36 and 42. Let's hope those bats can stay hot in these freezing temps. It could be good practice for when things cool down again and the Twins are hosting playoff games in October ...

Preview: Twins vs. Mariners

Associated Press | Fox Sports North | April 7, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS — Jose Berrios was dazzling in his first action of 2018, going the distance in a 7-0 shutout of Baltimore last weekend.

Coming off an impressive 14-victory season a year ago, the 23-year-old held the Orioles to three hits and a walk while striking out six. At one point, he retired 17 consecutive batters and finished with his first complete game shutout.

“I want to have more,” he said.

Berrios gets his chance Saturday, when the Twins resume their first home series of the season with a matinee against the Mariners at Target Field.

“There were a lot of positives to take from a start like that,” manager Paul Molitor said.

The Twins have pitched well to open the season and they’ve been punishing opposing pitchers from the batter’s box as they enter the weekend with 12 home runs, good for second in the American League.

They hit three homers Thursday in a 4-2 victory over Seattle in their home opener. Brian Dozier has four and is tied for the league lead.

“You can guesstimate how many guys have a chance to get 15 [home runs] or more,” Molitor said. “It is pretty high.”

Power was a specialty last season for Minnesota, which also added Logan Morrison, who hit 38 for Tampa in 2017, during the winter. He’s started out slowly, with just one hit in 15 at-bats, but he joins a lineup that had three players hit at least 27 homers a year ago.

“They got some acquisitions to come in and help us out with that,” Dozier said. “We are just going out there, having fun and doing our thing. The way we are supposed to.”

Mike Leake, who gets the start for Seattle, has been good not just at keeping the ball in the park but from keeping his opponents from scoring in general.

Since the Mariners acquired him from St. Louis last August, Leake has posted a 2.54 ERA in six starts and held Cleveland to two runs on five hits over a seven-inning debut last week.

After playing Thursday with temperatures hovering in the low 30s, Leake and the Mariners will again need to be prepared for the elements Saturday, when the game-time temperature is expected to be around 31 degrees.

While the Mariners have played just 11 games with the first-pitch temperature below 40 degrees since 1988, Leake has plenty of experience, having pitched previously for the Cardinals and Reds.

“You just have to bundle up and stay as warm as you can,” Leake said. “If you can keep your hand warm and stay mobile and make sure your blood is flowing, for the most part you can keep your grip. Once you start getting cold and losing that feel, that’s when you start losing it. You have to try to ignore it. If you can block out the weather and get the tunnel vision, it distracts you from how cold it is.”

The Mariners will still be without catcher Mike Zunino when they return to action. There was hope he’d come off the disabled list this weekend but after taking part in a simulated game earlier this week in Tacoma, Zunino will get a little more time to heal from his strained oblique.

“Just going off what the medical people say, let’s just be safe instead of sorry on this one,” manager Scott Servais said. “So we’re just slowing down a little. Still hopeful to get him back soon. I don’t think it’s going to be four to six weeks, but based on where the temperatures are here, just tap the brakes a little bit.”

Weather forces postponement of tonight's Red Wings opener

Staff Writer | Democrat and Chronicle | April 6, 2018

The Rochester Red Wings have postponed tonight's opening game.

The Red Wings will play Buffalo in a single game on Saturday at 3:05 p.m. with gates opening at 2 p.m. The doubleheader date for Friday’s postponed game will be announced later. Saturday’s game was originally scheduled for 1:05 p.m.

Since the temperature never quite reached 50 degrees, as Red Wings general manager Dan Mason "guaranteed", ticket owners for Friday's postponed game can exchange a ticket for two games this season. One of the tickets must be used for a home game in April or May. The ticket exchanges must take place at the team's ticket office.