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Sox falter in 9th after Rodon duels Verlander

By Scott Merkin / MLB.com / July 5, 2018

HOUSTON -- Carlos Rodon could have done without the six walks issued during Houston's 4-3 walk-off victory over the White Sox on Thursday night at Minute Maid Park.

But even with the White Sox southpaw walking six in a start for the fourth time in his career, matching a career high, he held the Astros to just two runs over six innings. Rodon did so in a start against Justin Verlander and in front of a crowd of 34,995 hanging on basically every pitch.

"Yeah, that'll get me geeked up a little bit," Rodon said of pitching against Verlander. "But no, it was good to be out there, man. It's fun when you've got a crowd like that and you're playing a team that just won the World Series.

"It was a battle today. We had to throw some big pitches, and we had some double plays. The defense picked me up. It was just one of those days where you've got to fight."

Houston put two runners on base in five of the six innings worked by Rodon, but the only runs allowed came via a long Jose Altuve home run with one out in the fifth. Rodon struck out six and allowed five hits, throwing 58 of his 109 pitches for strikes.

Rodon recorded four swinging strikes and six called strikes among his 27 sliders thrown, per Statcast™, making it an important pitch in his sixth trip to the mound this season in coming back from season-ending arthroscopic shoulder surgery performed last September.

"There were some good sliders for strikes that bailed me out today and I kind of found that," Rodon said. "Piece by piece, it's starting to come together. I wish I had it all ready, but it's coming around."

"Oh, yeah. He's filthy," said White Sox catcher Omar Narvaez of Rodon. "Whatever he throws, he's pretty filthy. He wasn't hitting his spots today, but he showed a lot."

- Narvaez catches pitch with chest protector

Five White Sox pitchers combined to walk nine, a noticeable blemish on an otherwise well-played game by the visitors. Only one of those walks came around to score -- pinch-hitter Tony Kemp, who drew a leadoff free pass from closer Joakim Soria in the ninth.

George Springer singled home the tying run, ending Soria's scoreless-innings streak at 15 1/3 and his consecutive-saves streak at eight, and Yuli Gurriel drove home the game-winner with a single to right as the fifth hitter in six batters to reach off of Soria. Leury Garcia homered in the eighth to give the White Sox a 3-2 lead.

"We lost the game. That's the only thing that matters. I didn't execute my pitches when I needed and the result was a loss," said Soria, who allowed his first run since May 26. "I walked the first guy and it always hurts when you walk a guy you cannot walk. After that, they have good at-bats and they ended up hitting the ball where they needed."

"Joakim has been unbelievable this season," Rodon said. "He's out there competing, and they just got the job done."

Verlander yielded one hit over the first five innings, before Narvaez, who had that hit, homered leading off the sixth. Yoan Moncada singled two outs later and came around to score on Yolmer Sanchez's double to left center.

Houston outscored the White Sox by a 27-2 margin during a three-game sweep in Chicago from April 20-22. So even in falling to a season-high 27 games under .500 (30-57), the White Sox are already off to a better start against the Astros this series.

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Walk no further: After issuing walks to Tyler White and Max Stassi with one out in the sixth, Rodon received a mound visit from pitching coach Don Cooper upon going 2-0 on Jake Marisnick. Those words of wisdom paid off, as Rodon threw a strike on the next pitch and induced an inning-ending double play started by Sanchez.

Holding steady: Juan Minaya, Xavier Cedeno and Bruce Rondon got the White Sox through the eighth despite a leadoff walk issued to Gurriel before he reached third with one out. Josh Reddick's grounder to first baseman Jose Abreu off of Cedeno resulted in Gurriel being thrown out at the plate, and Rondon struck out White to strand Reddick at second.

SOUND SMART

Avisail Garcia's 14-game hitting streak ended with an 0-for-4 effort.

ANDERSON EXITS

Shortstop Tim Anderson was replaced in the bottom of the eighth inning after he was hit by a Chris Devenski pitch on the left forearm in the top of the frame. White Sox manager Rick Renteria said more would be known Friday about the shortstop's condition.

"We obviously had to remove him. He's pretty lean and got hit flush pretty much on the upper forearm," Renteria said. "It's always the next day, the aftereffects of a blow right now. We'll evaluate him tomorrow, day to day."

HE SAID IT

"Nothing. He got hit." -- Renteria, on what he saw different from Soria on this rough night, after Soria had allowed one unearned run over his previous 18 appearances.

UP NEXT

Reynaldo Lopez gets the Game 2 call for the White Sox for a 7:10 p.m. CT first pitch on Friday at Minute Maid Park. Lance McCullers Jr. makes the start for Houston. Lopez will be making his 18th start of the season, 11th on the road and second against the Astros.

No. 4 pick Madrigal signs with White Sox

By Scott Merkin / MLB.com / July 5, 2018

HOUSTON -- Regardless of how great your summer has been, Nick Madrigal's almost certainly has been better.

The talented middle infielder was drafted No. 4 overall by the White Sox in the 2018 MLB Draft and followed that up by helping Oregon State top Arkansas in the College World Series finals. On Thursday, his signing was announced by the White Sox for a slot value \$6,411,400 bonus, and he began his professional career Thursday night with the organization's Arizona Rookie League team.

"Ever since the Draft, I tried to stay focused with our college season and let that play out first," Madrigal told reporters during a conference call. "I was excited just to put the White Sox logo on, get in uniform."

"I really don't need a whole lot of break. I've been playing all season long. I told them I only needed a couple of days to swing a wood bat, get used to it. I'm ready to go and just excited to move forward."

Madrigal, 21, batted .367/.428/.511 with eight doubles, six triples, three home runs, 34 RBIs, 41 runs scored and 15 stolen bases in 42 games as a junior in 2018 for the Beavers. The 5-foot-7, 165-pound second baseman, who bats right-handed, will play a couple of games at shortstop in Arizona before moving to Class A Kannapolis.

As for a future position for Madrigal -- on a team featuring Tim Anderson at shortstop and Yoan Moncada at second base -- he is open to anything.

"It really doesn't matter to me, and I really do mean that. I've played shortstop my whole life and I feel comfortable with it," Madrigal said. "Most of my college career I played second base. I feel like second is pretty easy to play, I feel comfortable there, too."

"At the end of the day, it's whatever the Chicago White Sox need me to do. I feel comfortable for both. I'll be ready for wherever they put me when the time comes."

The White Sox have agreed to terms with 34 of their 40 selections from the 2018 Draft, including all of their top 30 picks. They announced Thursday the signing of right-handed pitchers Davis Martin (14th round) from Texas Tech and Jason Morgan (35th round) from North Carolina, and third baseman Bryce Bush (35th round) from De La Salle Collegiate High School in Warren, Mich.

- 2018 Draft Tracker: Every White Sox pick

Both Morgan and Bush could end up as major Draft values in regard to their high talent level. But Thursday's focus fell upon Madrigal, a player with the potential to become a starting second baseman or shortstop at the end of the White Sox rebuild.

"Normally, our goal is to assimilate players as quickly as possible into our system, but in this case, we are very happy for Nick and the Beavers that any delay was because of winning a national championship," White Sox general manager Rick Hahn said in the statement to announce the Madrigal signing. "Nick is a talented young player in many aspects of the game, and we look forward to adding his skills, drive and leadership to our organization as he joins a developing core of talented young prospects."

"I'm going to go out there and just play as hard as I can and play my game," Madrigal said. "As far as the plan of moving up, that's in their hands. I'm going to do everything I can to be ready for when they need me. When they move me up or anything like that, it's kind of out of my control at this point. I just want to go out there and play my game."

Jones nearly ready to test arm on mound

By Scott Merkin / MLB.com / July 5, 2018

HOUSTON -- Nate Jones' progress in rehabbing the pronator muscle strain in his right arm hit somewhat of a high point Wednesday, according to the White Sox right-hander, who has been on the disabled list since June 13.

"I got loose and ready and long-tossed out to 120, 130 [feet] or something like that," Jones said. "I came back in and threw flat ground. That was my second one [on flat ground]. I think we are getting pretty close to throwing off the mound sometime soon.

"We test it each day, and I've got to accomplish X, Y and Z before I throw and do what we need to do. So far we've done that, and every time, the next day I've responded well and been able to go after X, Y and Z again and get back out there again. It's going good. Everything has been feeling fine after throwing. It's been reacting well. We keep moving forward."

Jones knows a Minor League rehab stint will come before he returns to the White Sox. So the hard-throwing right-hander certainly won't be back with the team until after the All-Star break.

"I haven't asked and they haven't told me about a schedule," said Jones, who pitched in just 11 games last year before having season-ending nerve repositioning surgery in his right elbow. "At the beginning it's frustrating because you have worked hard to get back from other major surgeries and setbacks and stuff like that. But you just have to keep grinding through it and know it's all part of the plan.

"So, I always try to look at all of them being blessings in disguise. Look at the positive that comes out of it and makes me stronger, mentally and physically, and helps me realize how to take care of a new body part, the forearm area, better."

Renteria won't be surprised by trades

The White Sox talent acquisition won't be as major in 2018 compared to the massive amount of movement leading into the 2017 non-waiver Trade Deadline and then in August. But, White Sox manager Rick Renteria wouldn't be surprised to see trades involving his roster, including first baseman Jose Abreu and right fielder Avisail Garcia.

"Well, no, it wouldn't be surprising because it's just the nature of the business," Renteria said. "These guys are two top guys, along with a couple of other guys we have. Hopefully they are still a part of the guys that are going to be here for us moving forward."

Third to first

Donn Roach, the White Sox Minor League Pitcher of the Month for June, was released from his contract Thursday to pursue an opportunity to play in Japan. The 28-year-old posted a 9-2 record with a 2.65 ERA in 16 games (15 starts) for Triple-A Charlotte.

White Sox make signing of first-round pick Nick Madrigal official

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago / July 5, 2018

The White Sox made official Thursday the signing of first-round pick Nick Madrigal.

Reported earlier this week, Madrigal signed a minor league contract with a \$6,411,400 signing bonus, according to the team's website.

The middle infielder out of Oregon State was described by White Sox brass as the best all-around player in college baseball shortly after the team made him the No. 4 pick in last month's draft. The White Sox thought highly enough of Madrigal to select him even though they boast a pair of young middle infielders, Yoan Moncada and Tim Anderson, they expect to be key contributors for years to come.

Madrigal — who slashed .367/.428/.511, scored 41 runs and drove in 34 runs in 42 games for the national-champion Oregon State Beavers — is expected to become one of the newest stars of the White Sox rebuilding effort and could supply an infusion of late-season positivity in a system that's dealt with a lot of bad news lately, due to some significant injuries and poor performances from the highest-rated players in the organization.

Madrigal will reportedly start his pro career with Class A Kannapolis.

Versatile Nick Madrigal open to playing wherever White Sox want

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago / July 5, 2018

Nick Madrigal is officially a member of the White Sox organization and officially a member of the White Sox rebuild.

It's an exciting thing for White Sox fans, who have heard the organization's brass call this kid "the best all-around player in college baseball" and a guy who plays "Gold Glove caliber defense."

Here's a pretty important question, though: Where will Madrigal be playing that Gold Glove caliber defense?

Between Madrigal's versatility and the current status of the White Sox middle infield — a status that looks like it could stay the same for years into the future — where the No. 4 pick ultimately lines up on the major league diamond is a bit of an unknown at this point.

It's not a question the White Sox need to answer with any rapidity, as they'll give Madrigal all the time he needs to develop — not to mention that the team appears to be a year or two away from switching from rebuilding mode to contention mode.

But the question is here already, asked of Madrigal during a Thursday conference call with Chicago reporters.

"It really doesn't matter to me, and I really do mean that," Madrigal said. "I've played shortstop my whole life and I feel comfortable with it. Most of my college career I played second base. I feel like second is pretty easy to play. I feel comfortable there, too. At the end of the day, it's whatever the Chicago White Sox need me to do. I feel comfortable for both. I'll be ready for wherever they put me when the time comes."

Madrigal will start out as a shortstop for a few days in Arizona before shipping off to Class A Kannapolis to start his journey through the White Sox system. But as for "when the time comes," that's what White Sox fans — particularly those that enjoy projecting out the lineup of the next contending group of South Siders — really want to know.

Yoan Moncada and Tim Anderson currently occupy the two middle-infield positions, and if they live up to the expectations the White Sox have for them, they could occupy those spots for years to come. That wouldn't leave a whole lot of room for Madrigal, though it would qualify as a good problem to have for Rick Hahn's front office.

The fate of Moncada and Anderson over the next several seasons, however, will likely be the ultimate determination of where Madrigal will play. Should either falter in their own continuing developments, Madrigal would figure to be the next in line to claim any available spot.

As for future position changes? Well, White Sox fans on social media seem to be nudging Anderson toward the outfield. But maybe it's Madrigal who will find a spot outside the middle of the infield. Third base? Outfield? Madrigal seems to have versatility as one of his more appealing attributes, and if he hits as well as he did with Oregon State, the White Sox will find a spot for him, no matter where it might be.

The White Sox top two pitching prospects continue to struggle in the minors

By Vinnie Duber / NBC Sports Chicago / July 5, 2018

We haven't exactly entered the darkest timeline of the White Sox rebuild. But things throughout the farm system have seemed to taken a bummer of a turn all at the same time.

Eloy Jimenez and Luis Robert, the organization's top-ranked position player prospects, will both miss weeks with a pair of injuries. Pitcher Dane Dunning is out weeks, as well. And third baseman Jake Burger is out for the remainder of the season. Injuries happen. And while they aren't welcome, they don't exactly cloud the White Sox bright future.

The more surprising of the recent bevy of bad luck and bad news, however, are the continued struggles of the organization's top two pitching prospects.

Michael Kopech and Alec Hansen could very well be the 1-2 starting-pitching punch on the next contending White Sox team. But right now, things are not going well. The two combined for a whopping 363 strikeouts in 2017, but so far in the 2018 campaign, they own a combined 5.20 ERA.

Kopech was expected by many onlookers to breeze through Triple-A and crack the White Sox starting rotation in a matter of months. There were plenty out there on social media who believed he should've been the team's Opening Day starter. But after a dominant beginning to the season — he had a 3.00 ERA and 38 strikeouts through his first six starts — things have been a struggle over the past seven starts. He's got a 6.10 ERA in that span with 31 walks. After posting a 2.65 strikeout-to-walk ratio in 2017, he's got a 1.98 mark in 2018.

Thursday night, Kopech issued four first-inning walks, threw 42 pitches and gave up two runs. After allowing a two-run homer in the third inning, his night ended after recording just nine outs. It was the seventh time in his last nine outings he's issued at least four free passes.

It snapped a streak of limited damage on the scoreboard for Kopech, who entered Thursday's game with just three earned runs allowed over his previous three starts. He still issued a fair number of walks, with 10 of them in those three games, but also piled up the strikeouts, with 23 of them in the same span.

Rick Hahn has insisted all along that the White Sox are waiting to see things from Kopech that don't always show up in a box score, that the dominant start didn't make Kopech ready for the majors. And the inverse would figure to be true, as well: The ugly numbers of late don't necessarily tell the whole story of Kopech's development. Thursday was no exception to that line of thinking, as Kopech — not to mention his manager and pitching coach — were in visible disagreement with how the home-plate umpire was calling balls and strikes. A different guy behind the plate, and maybe Kopech's Thursday-night line looks a lot different.

Instead, the walks piled up again. And that's the same problem that Hansen keeps running into.

Hansen's season started late due to a significant forearm injury, a worrisome enough issue considering the missed developmental time. But in his first four starts of the season, he's looked like anything but the No. 46 prospect in baseball. Hansen has 16 walks in those four starts, 15 of those coming in the last three starts. He's reached the fifth inning just once and has recorded just 49 outs on the season, owning a 7.71 ERA after Tuesday's outing.

Pitching slumps are not uncommon, and these struggles from Kopech and Hansen are not causing the slightest bit of danger to the White Sox rebuilding effort. But watching these two having trouble finding the

strike zone on a consistent basis is not what White Sox fans want to see right now, not when so many other prospects are battling injuries.

The White Sox farm system is loaded, the depth the strength of this rebuild at the moment. But with the organization's two top position player prospects on the disabled list and its two top pitching prospects struggling, this is not the happiest stretch of the rebuild.

Carlos Rodon slowly returning to his old self: 'I wish I had it already, but it's coming around'

By Paul Sullivan/ Chicago Tribune / July 5, 2018

Carlos Rodon figures to be the most experienced starter in the White Sox rotation if James Shields gets dealt by the July 31 trade deadline, as expected.

The ace role would then be thrust upon the 24-year-old former first-round draft pick, and it would be up to Rodon once again to live up to the hype.

Been there, done that.

After shoulder surgery and a long rehab process, the return to the old Carlos Rodon might not be as smooth as some might have hoped.

But so far, it's looking better by the start.

"Yeah, it's starting to come around," Rodon said Thursday after throwing six strong innings in a 4-3 loss to the Astros. "There were some good sliders for strikes that bailed me out today, and I kind of found that.

"Piece by piece it's starting to come together. I wish I had it already, but it's coming around."

The Sox will have to be patient with Rodon, who was brought up to the majors too quickly and inserted into the rotation in 2015 at a time management thought the team was a contender. It turned out to be a mirage, but when Rodon went 9-6 with a 3.75 ERA that year, the Sox thought they had struck gold.

But the shoulder injury last year put Rodon back a ways, and now he's fighting to return to his former self. He had his stuff Thursday and the mid-90s velocity was there, though his command was a little off.

"Oh, yeah, he's filthy," catcher Omar Narvaez said. "Whatever he throws, he's pretty filthy. He wasn't hitting his spots today, but he showed a lot."

Rodon got out of jams most of the night and made only one bad pitch, Jose Altuve's two-run homer in the fifth.

"He had traffic," manager Rick Renteria said. "He obviously gave up the two-run homer to Altuve and got out of some jams with the double play and some nice plays behind him. He came in after the fifth and said, 'Let me finish that sixth.'"

Renteria let him finish it, and the Sox tied it with a two-run inning off Justin Verlander.

Rodon has a 4.29 ERA in six starts but has allowed only two earned runs in four of them.

It won't always be pretty, but piece by piece he appears to be getting there.

White Sox need to listen to offers for Jose Abreu and Avisail Garcia

By Paul Sullivan / Chicago Tribune / July 5, 2018

A year ago at this time, the White Sox were going through Phase 2 of the rebuild, trying to collect more top prospects in exchange for players they couldn't deal over the previous winter.

Todd Frazier, David Robertson, Tommy Kahnle, Anthony Swarzak and Melky Cabrera were among the next batch of players on their way out of town, though the prospects the Sox received in return — Blake Rutherford, Tito Polo, Ian Clarkin, Ryan Cordell, A.J. Puckett and Andre Davis — weren't quite in the same area code as the Yoan Moncadas, Michael Kopechs and Reynaldo Lopez of their earlier deals.

With the July 31 trade deadline on the horizon, the Sox once again have a chance to add to the Rick Hahn collection. Whether they'll go that route remains to be seen, but they have to keep their minds open.

That means they should shop Avisail Garcia and Jose Abreu as well as obvious trade bait such as James Shields and Joakim Soria. Before Thursday's 4-3 loss to the Astros in the opener of a four-game series, manager Rick Renteria said he expects some changes but nothing earth-shattering.

"I'm sure some of the guys we have in the rotation and some of the guys in the pen might be the ones most people might be clamoring for," Renteria said. "Obviously we have 'Pito' (Abreu) at first and some of the other young guys coming through the system now, so depending on the need of other clubs ... For us, it has not been a topic of conversation, so we're able to allow them to continue to develop and try to improve."

Would Renteria be surprised if Abreu's or Garcia's name came up in trade rumors?

"No, I wouldn't be surprised because that's just the nature of the business," he said. "These guys are the two top guys, along with a couple other guys we have, (who) have been around the game at the major-league level and playing very consistently. It wouldn't be surprising, but hopefully they're guys (who) are going to be here as we move forward."

Abreu is likely to be the only Sox All-Star, though the market for him might be limited because he's a first baseman/designated hitter and his June slump dropped him to 14th among first baseman with a 0.4 WAR.

Garcia, however, is a different story. After missing two months with a hamstring injury, he came into Thursday's game with a career-high 14-game hitting streak, raising his average from .232 to .289, with six home runs in his previous nine games.

With Garcia's affordable salary (\$6.7 million) and another year before he becomes a free agent, the timing couldn't be better for Hahn to see how much he could get for Garcia. Plenty of contenders would be interested in adding a bat like that, though the Sox would have to get a decent haul to make it worthwhile.

It's hard to imagine the Sox re-signing Abreu and Garcia when they become free agents after 2019 because the team is unlikely to be anywhere close to contending. Abreu is a good mentor to the young Latin American players and has said he wants to stick around, but he's going to command a nine-figure deal. Garcia needs to prove he can stay healthy, but his bat is worth the risk to some teams.

And at some point the kids have to go out on their own and spread their wings.

Moncada, who has handled the spotlight well in spite of his up-and-down season, relies on Abreu for counsel and has a strong relationship with Garcia. If Abreu and Garcia are dealt, he really has no one else to turn to in the clubhouse.

"It would be very difficult if that happened," Moncada said Thursday through an interpreter. "But I hope that doesn't happen and we can keep counting on them. They are two big pieces of our team and well-respected players. They are our leaders."

Maybe he won't have to worry about it. But at the very least, the Sox have to find out what their two big hitters are worth.

Astros rally past White Sox in ninth

By Daryl Van Schouwen / Sun-Times / July 5, 2018

Rodón, though, wants you to know he really, really means it.

“You take a No. 3 pick, the mindset is you want to be the best,” the 25-year-old lefty said this week.

Carlos Rodón delivers in the first inning against the Astros in Houston. Eric Christian Smith/AP
Carlos Rodón delivers in the first inning against the Astros in Houston. Eric Christian Smith/AP

Rodón, whom the Sox selected with their first pick in 2014, has the mid-to-upper-90s fastball and dynamite slider to be great. Yet injuries, along with shoulder surgery last September, have made it difficult for him to meet the high expectations early in his career. He made his sixth start of the season against the Astros on Thursday night, going six innings at Minute Maid Park against likely future Hall of Famer Justin Verlander.

The Sox certainly weren't great in the ninth, as their one-run lead turned into a 4-3 walk-off loss. George Springer singled, scoring Tony Kemp, to tie the score at 3 before Yuli Gurriel's single with one out brought Marwin Gonzalez home for the winner, halting closer Joakim Soria's streak of scoreless appearances at 15. Soria (0-3) hadn't allowed a run since May 18.

How lofty are Rodón's expectations? He utters the words “Hall of Fame” in the discussion, though not specifically tied to his name.

“You don't want to come off too cocky. I'm not a guy who likes to be that way. I'm quiet,” he said. “But in my head, I've always had expectations that are far higher than anyone has for me.

“As soon as I step on that mound, I'm a different person. That fire, that fight, I want to be one of the best. I'm not playing this game just to make money, not just to be mediocre. Hopefully, every one of my teammates shows up the same way: ‘I want to be a Hall of Famer, I want to be one of the best guys.’ You've got to have that.”

Rodón said after the game that he was “geeked” about facing Verlander and the defending World Series champion Astros. Though he matched a career high with six walks, he kept the 30-57 Sox in an intense battle, struggling in spurts to master his command but featuring enough good stuff to go toe-to-toe with Verlander. He struck out six, gave up five hits and left with the game in a 2-2 tie.

“Whatever he throws, he's pretty filthy,” catcher Omar Narvaez said. “He wasn't hitting his spots today, but he showed a lot today.”

The only damage against Rodón was Jose Altuve's two-run homer that broke a scoreless tie in the fifth. But his pitch count of 109 — 58 of them strikes — called for relief from right-hander Juan Minaya.

Rodón (4.29 ERA) called his outing “a fight” where he needed good pitches to overcome the walks.

“There were some good sliders for strikes that bailed me out, and I kind of found that,” he said. “Piece by piece, it's starting to come together. I wish I had it all ready, but it's coming around.”

Verlander, who struck out 10 and walked none while allowing four hits in seven innings, had a 2-0 lead in the sixth when Narvaez homered and Yolmer Sanchez doubled in Yoan Moncada to tie it.

Leury Garcia's homer in the eighth against Chris Devenski gave the Sox a 3-2 lead before things fell apart an inning later. Making matters worse, Devenski hit shortstop Tim Anderson with a pitch on the forearm after Garcia's homer, and Anderson exited in the ninth. Manager Rick Renteria said he'll be day-to-day.

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Carlos Rodón wants to be ‘that guy’ for the White Sox

By James Fegan /The Athletic / July 45, 2018

CINCINNATI — Five starts into his return from shoulder surgery, Carlos Rodón is pretty optimistic for someone who, judging by some up-and-down early results, is understandably still getting the feel back on his full arsenal.

“It’ll be nice to get through this year and be able to pitch healthy through and through,” Rodón said. “I know it’s not a full year it’ll build off into the next year. It’ll just be nice to finish a season, you know. Finish the season with the club, nothing like last year. Just crazy how much time a surgery or a shoulder injury or an arm injury takes up for a pitcher. Because I basically lost a full year just for this one thing. It’s good to be back.”

Through those five starts, Rodón has a 4.55 ERA, one eight-inning outing against Oakland that reminded everyone of what he’s capable of when it’s all working, and select moments when he’s shown his top-level stuff with 94-97 mph velocity and a dominant slider at the height of his powers. In the very, very early going, it’s shaken out to a strikeout rate (17.3 percent) and swinging strike rate (8.9 percent) that would both be the lowest of his career.

For someone with Rodón’s raw stuff, the overriding focus is doing what’s needed to enhance his command, rather than worry about adding deception or anything like that. When Rodón talks about the next stage in his maturation, he uses terms like “strike-thrower,” and “become more of a pitcher.” He doesn’t talk about adding whiffs, which he trusts will ultimately be there. The White Sox preach a straight line to the plate for nearly all of their young pitchers, and after four years together, Rodón’s rapport with pitching coach Don Cooper is strong enough for them to quickly diagnose when he’s in compliance.

“[Cooper] said yesterday he could stand in front of me and not see where the ball goes and knows if I’m going to throw a strike or if it’s going to be a good pitch because he’s seen me so many times,” Rodón said. “One of my keys is back to front, which is basically working a straight line down the hallway toward the plate, driving the ball through the catcher. That’s my main key to keep my command right.”

In that vein, Cooper and Rodón might just as soon look at his 7.1 percent walk rate in the early going — which would also be a career-low — and see hints of a breakthrough. Looking at his early drop in swinging strike rate, the clear culprit is his changeup not getting the whiffs it used to, but his catcher, Kevan Smith, feels like his ability to put it in the zone will set up his monster slider.

“He feels great with his changeup right now, he feels like he can throw it both sides of the plate whenever he wants in any count,” Smith said. “That’s going to help a lot of pitchers, when they can throw a plus-plus off-speed pitch for a strike and a putaway pitch. I think he’s survived his whole career off that slider, which is lights out, but when he can develop that changeup, and this is just speculating, possibly a decent curveball, the sky’s the limit with him.”

Rodón doesn’t sound like he’s considering a curveball anytime soon, but there’s a distinct difference between the slider he tries to locate for a strike and the high-80s, low-90s monster that he buries for swings-and-misses. The key to getting the most out of the latter lies in being consistent with the former.

“One you throw pretty hard, one you throw — obviously you’re just trying to drop it in. It feels significantly different,” Rodón said. “When I try to throw a putaway slider I’m trying to throw it as hard as I can. When I want to throw a slider for a strike, I’m just trying to drop it in there, it’s a smooth kind of feeling the spin out of my hand to place it.

“When you’re going right you can drop it in. And when you’re dropping them in, now they have to start swinging at it and that’s when the putaway comes into play. I’m ahead, they see me drop in the slider early, I want to throw one late in the count, they’re probably going to swing at it because it looks like a strike, rather than if it’s late in the count, they see spin, they’re just going to take it because it’s going to end up being a ball.”

Rodón doesn’t fret too much about recovering the feel on his signature pitch, remarking “slider’s my guy,” when he was still in the midst of rehab in spring training. Even after a rough outing in Texas, he was happy that he was mostly on the plate with all of his pitches, which could not be said about his first few outings after he returned from the disabled list last season.

Two years removed from anything that resembles a healthy campaign, Rodón is confident about what will come when he doesn’t have to focus on building back arm strength and regaining the feel on his pitches. It might seem strange for a pitcher who just had his shoulder opened up to feel like his greatest health difficulties are behind him, but it’s no stranger than him being one of the veterans of the starting rotation when he’s just 25 years old with plenty of upside left.

“The more I pitch, the more I gain consistency,” Rodón said. “You see guys get paid for that. That’s what teams want. I want to be that guy for our club. I want to be that guy who coasts every five days, quality starts every time I go out, or at least try to give our team a chance to win. That’s big. Durability is big in this game. A lot of guys who are durable are very good players.”

Five observations: Joakim Soria’s hot streak ends in crushing fashion

By James Fegan / The Athletic / July 6, 2018

The last time the White Sox faced the Astros, in late-April, the defending World Series champions swept the Sox at Guaranteed Rate Field, outscoring them 27-2 in the process.

Thursday’s 3-2 loss in Houston went a little smoother in a sense, or a lot worse, depending on how one views the introduction of a glimmer of hope, only for it to be snatched away in almost inconceivable fashion, as opposed to no hope at all. After eight innings of White Sox pitching dancing around control problems to hold down one of the best lineups in baseball, Joakim Soria’s 15-game scoreless streak ended in a train wreck ninth for a 4-3 loss.

1. Nine walks eventually proved too many

Joakim Soria has never had 95 mph in his arsenal and has never had top-of-the-scale strikeout numbers, so if you had to explain why he’ll be a highly sought reliever at the deadline, the first place to start would be to talk about his elite control. As such, when he led off the ninth by walking Tony Kemp while trying to hold a 3-2 lead, it seemed like the Sox were in trouble.

It turns out they were!

Without a pair of soft singles, neither of which eclipsed 75 mph in exit velocity, Soria might have escaped his first multi-walk appearance of the season without a blown save, and maybe Rick Renteria doesn't have to play the infield in with the bases loaded, only to see Yuli Gurriel bloop one over Yoán Moncada's head for the game-winner. But that's what walks do: they eliminate the margin for error, and striking out Jose Altuve with the bases loaded to briefly stall the inevitable is all the magic Soria had available on Thursday.

2. How does history view the Brett Myers trade for the White Sox?

Positively, obviously. Maybe Myers only provided the Sox with a couple of months of solid relief work while Chris Devenski has transformed from 25th-round pick into a late-inning relief ace for the Astros, but Devenski also allowed a tie-breaking homer to right-center to Leury García in the eighth on a down-and-in fastball, so now the Sox won the trade.

With the home run assault from last year trending downward across the league, García hasn't had as many opportunities to strike a pose after a no-doubter this year, but he certainly did on this one. If García's essentiality wasn't already apparent from his offensive contributions the past few days, it is now after he slid in and replaced Tim Anderson at short after Anderson took a pitch off his left forearm.

3. Interesting-looking success from Rodón

So far this season, Carlos Rodón has run up an above-average ERA while showing good control and some slight diminishment in his swinging strike rate. Naturally, facing a stacked Astros batting order, Rodón held them to two runs — on a single Altuve moonshot — in six innings and struck out a batter per inning, but walked a career-high six.

Did the home plate umpire contribute to the walks? Rodón seemed to think so and it's usually a factor in any extreme result, but he did seem to fail to execute fastballs in some critical three-ball counts to save an at-bat, even if he had some help getting to those points. The velocity was popping and the slider was dominant while he racked up 109 pitches with no diminishment in stuff. He won't always get assessed on the shoulder recovery grading curve, but maybe he will for the rest of this season.

4. Narváez owns Justin Verlander

As Verlander was perfect through two and tallied six strikeouts through three, the only White Sox hitter who looked like he had a bead on him was Omar Narváez. The no-hitter was broken up by Narváez ripping a ball into the right-field corner — and getting thrown out by a monstrous throw from George Springer. But Narváez showed he was legitimately all over Verlander by blasting a down-and-in slider around the right-field foul pole for his second home run of the season in the sixth.

Narváez has been a good contact hitter since arriving in the majors, so it shouldn't come as too much of a shock that he's normalizing after an awful start. Since June 1, he is hitting .393/.433/.571 and is back up to a 101 wRC+ for the season. Defensive foibles aside, that's pretty nice contribution from that position.

5. José Abreu probably won the All-Star Game voting Thursday night

He did it while embroiled in the worst slump of his career. Every indication from talking to him in Cincinnati is that he does not appreciate the irony present in this situation.

Everyone knows Nick Madrigal can hit, but the White Sox believe he's a shortstop with power

By James Fegan / The Athletic / July 6, 2018

How different of a player is Nick Madrigal from Yoán Moncada? Even an innocent description of the batting cage work Madrigal's been doing with his father and brothers since he was 8 years old unintentionally reads like a subtweet.

"In the cage, I've always tried to stay disciplined, but I've also tried to hit pitches outside of the strike zone," Madrigal said during a media conference call Thursday. "Umpires sometimes are kind of all over the place so I try not to let them take control, leave it in their hands. These last couple years I've really tried to shrink the strike zone and hit more pitches I can handle and not chase."

Madrigal, who officially signed on Thursday at full slot value for the No. 4 overall pick, makes his living with elite — bordering on absurd — bat-to-ball ability, and struck out in less than 4 percent of his plate appearances as a college junior. Despite his big, honking leg kick, Madrigal places a lot more emphasis on battling through plate appearances and making contact than waiting on something to hammer with a long, leveraged swing. And with that kind of approach and ability, he's going to trust his ability to square up the ball on borderline pitches.

His contact is clean enough that White Sox amateur scouting director Nick Hostetler mentioned that he believes there is more power potential in Madrigal's game than the .144 ISO he showed as a junior. Madrigal is inclined to agree, and intends to spend the offseason building strength on his 5-foot-8, 165-pound frame, but at the same time, he knows that's not why he got drafted fourth overall.

"My job is to get on base," Madrigal said. "I've always played that way and I'm going to steal bases, hit balls in the gap. I'm not going to change my game at all."

Moncada knows he needs to get better at keeping himself alive in plate appearances, but it will never be fair to compare him to someone whose whole game is doing just that — even though it's inevitable due to their playing the same position. Unless they're not at the same position after all.

Hostetler said on draft day that they would give Madrigal opportunities at shortstop, despite him playing at second in favor of Cadyn Grenier for the bulk of his college career. He started there in his professional debut in the AZL on Thursday night (he got hit by a pitch twice, scored and was picked off — welcome to complex league ball). It's standard practice to give any meaningful prospect the most aggressive defensive assignment possible and see if they can handle it, but the White Sox defied outside scouts and experts when they committed to Zack Collins at catcher and Jake Burger at third base, and they seem just as determined here.

Madrigal has the glove skills, range and athleticism to make shortstop look like a passable option for him, but multiple scouts have questioned whether his throwing arm strength makes that the best fit. Hostetler said the Sox not only believe in the arm strength but also praised the quickness of his release and his ability to transfer the ball out the glove, which will serve to take some pressure off the raw power he has to provide from his arm.

A league scout who watched Madrigal's debut was witness to a "web gem" where he showed off his athleticism with a diving stop and started a double play from his knees. But Madrigal also bounced his first throw from short before adjusting and reaching back for more on his throws for the rest of night. It was clear that when he set himself, he had the arm strength to stick at shortstop. It's when he's firing from deep in the hole, or firing on the run while ranging up the middle, or just can't set his feet, where he'll be tested. As Tim Anderson has showed at times, being able to set your feet consistently is part of the game, but since Anderson is possibly the most improved player on the White Sox roster, Madrigal playing his position is no less complicated.

After moving off short for his college team, Madrigal sounds genuine in his professed flexibility to play wherever the White Sox put him. And after missing much of his final year at Oregon State with a wrist injury, he had no interest in resting his body and recovering from the College World Series before jumping into pro ball. He will be at Kannapolis in a few days, where Tate Blackman and Luis Curbelo are currently

manning the middle infield, but they probably won't be the last decent prospects to get moved around to accommodate Madrigal's talent.
