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Giants hope outfielder Mac Williamson has found swing to unleash power

Henry Schulman

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — If spring training is a time for big dreams, nobody should fault the Giants for believing they finally have their Big Mac.

After working this winter with the same private hitting instructor who made such a difference with the Dodgers' Justin Turner, outfielder Mac Williamson has reworked his swing and become a slugging machine in the Cactus League.

The Giants are crossing their fingers that their endless quest for more pop could lead them to a player who has disappointed them — and himself — since he first reached the majors in 2015.

"I'm so happy for him," bench coach Hensley Meulens said Sunday. "He's finally given us hope that he can be that power hitter like he's shown this spring. It's a huge difference. For two weeks straight, we've seen this guy drive balls like we've hoped he would when he first came up."

All the standard caveats about spring numbers apply. Pitchers are not snapping off their best breaking pitches. Balls soar in the thin desert air. Williamson also has seen a lot of minor-league pitchers. He has not faced a Clayton Richard, much less a Clayton Kershaw.

Still, 14 hits, including two doubles, two triples and four homers in 34 at-bats is hard to ignore anywhere. Saturday's homer against the Angels cleared the batter's eye at Tempe Diablo Stadium.

Williamson might not be on the cusp of supplanting Hunter Pence as the left fielder. But Pence,

who turns 35 in April, is not guaranteed 500 at-bats. The Giants need youthful options in the outfield. At 27, Williamson is bidding to be one, and Pence is on board.

“I love it,” Pence said. “He’s such a strong athlete. Now he’s got kind of a foundation where he can trust his swing, and it’s been proven with a lot of these hitters (who make this adjustment). They’ve come out and hit a lot of homers in a season. I think it’s very special and going to be hopefully a strength for us.”

The Giants’ optimism is rooted in the direction the ball travels off his bat — in the air — with backspin that creates carry.

For years, Giants coaches have adjusted Williamson’s swing, hoping he could hit like a 6-foot-4, 240-pound outfielder should and drive balls into gaps and over fences, rather than playing pepper with the shortstop when not striking out.

“As frustrating as it has been for you guys, the coaches and management, it’s been twice as frustrating for me,” Williamson said. “I made some adjustments here or there. Some things worked a little bit. Some things were the start of a solution and I couldn’t get through the finish line.”

Williamson was inspired to approach private coach Doug Latta after watching former teammate Tim Federowicz swing the bat in September. Federowicz also worked with Latta.

“I loved his approach and his swing,” Williamson said. “I loved how quiet he was at the plate and how mature his approach and swing seemed to be. In September, he mentioned he had just gone and seen Latta that morning. I said, ‘Hook me up. I want to know what you know, what he knows, what he’s talking about.’”

Latta knew he needed to lower Williamson’s hands and eliminate what Meulens described as a “double trigger” in his swing. The result is a shorter swing on a more level plane, rather than a downward chop.

His swings this spring have been on time, not late.

Even Williamson cautions that his swing is not totally “fixed,” that he is not on a direct path toward a 20-homer season in the majors.

“By no means am I a finished product,” he said. “After 20 years of swinging, the habits you develop as a kid, swinging that way tens of thousands of times, it’s not going to change overnight. Once you get into a game, muscle memory takes over and your old swing tries to creep back in there.”

San Francisco Chronicle

Giants' Hunter Pence finally makes noise with grand slam

Henry Schulman

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Hunter Pence's swing is kind of like the color pattern on a Jackson Pollock painting. Any lay person trying to make sense of it quickly will be in the market for two aspirin and a hot compress over the eyes.

What's important is, Pence understands his swing, and he has felt better about it since he took an .056 average into his final at-bat against the Angels on Saturday and singled. In his first at-bat Sunday, Pence hit a first-pitch grand slam to ignite a 5-4 victory over the Padres.

"I'm feeling a lot better about my path and my balance," Pence said.

His path in 2018 is unclear. He is ticketed to be the Opening Day left fielder as he completes the five-year, \$90 million deal he signed on the final day of the 2013 season.

Younger players such as Chris Shaw, Austin Slater and Mac Williamson are nipping at his heels. If Steven Duggar emerges as the everyday center fielder at any point of the season, Austin Jackson surely will get starts in left.

Pence, who turns 35 on April 13, knows that getting his body into proper shape is paramount. He believes he has checked that box. Now, he needs to rediscover his timing in time for the season opener against Clayton Kershaw and the Dodgers on March 29.

Pence had experimented with a closed stance this spring to improve his balance after feeling "jumpy" and "wobbly" at the plate. But he sees the ball better with an open stance and said he went back to it in time for his single against the Angels.

In the first inning Sunday, a wild Luis Perdomo left a fastball up and Pence crushed it over the fence in left-center for his third hit and first extra-base hit of the spring — no Arizona cheapie. He was glad to see it leave the yard.

"It matters, these games. We're competing," said Pence, who sounds less concerned with his .143 average (3-for-21) than anyone else.

"A lot of these pitchers, they come in ready," he said. "Sometimes you've got to be real and get your work in. This was my third game in a row. I'm starting to get my rhythm. It's still a work in progress."

Briefly: The first cuts of spring are expected Monday as games are set to begin in minor-league camp. ... Johnny Cueto likely will pitch in one of those games Wednesday rather than face the Mariners for the second time in six nights. He is expected to face them in the first home series

of the regular season.

MLB.com

Mac attack: Adjustments working for Williamson

Chris Haft

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. -- Boxers learn to keep their hands elevated, lest they expose themselves to a vicious punch. Giants outfielder Mac Williamson has lowered his hands and has just begun to fight.

Williamson has altered his hitting mechanics to achieve remarkable results during Cactus League action. He appeared in Sunday's 5-4 Cactus League victory over San Diego and grounded into a force play in his lone at-bat, which shaved his batting average to a still-impressive .412 in 15 games.

The Giants welcome Williamson's surge. They're seeing the 6-foot-4, 240-pounder sustain production that's commensurate with his considerable physical gifts.

"I love it," left fielder Hunter Pence said. "He's such a strong athlete. Now he has a foundation where he can trust his swing."

Williamson is competing for a reserve role in the outfield, though he has plenty of competition. Giants manager Bruce Bochy reiterated that each of the 10 outfielders in camp remains "in the mix" for a spot on the 25-man Opening Day roster. With the Giants likely to keep a maximum of five outfielders, and given that Pence, Andrew McCutchen and Austin Jackson are assured of jobs, Williamson is among seven outfielders battling for two openings.

Williamson has commanded the Giants' attention by recording two doubles, two triples and four home runs among his 14 hits. He has increased his pop by making simple yet significant adjustments: dropping his hands and narrowing his batting stance. These techniques have helped him take a quicker, more direct path to each pitch.

Williamson learned these stratagems from Doug Latta, an accomplished hitting coach based near Los Angeles. Latta is credited with transforming third baseman Justin Turner, once a backup with the Mets and now an All-Star with the Dodgers. Catcher Tim Federowicz, who spent last year in the Giants' organization, recommended Latta to Williamson. After batting .226 in 92 games spanning parts of three seasons with the Giants, Williamson knew changes were necessary.

"I'm not getting any younger," Williamson reasoned. "I'm 27, and what I have done in the past hasn't worked. I've gotten some really good opportunities to show what I can do at the big league level, and I haven't fully taken advantage of them. ... I didn't want another year or two or three of the same bouncing around. Who knows what the future holds this year, but I want to be able to put myself in a better position to be successful whenever I get another

opportunity."

Each visit to Latta, whom Williamson saw several times per week throughout January, required him to hurl himself into Los Angeles' notorious freeway traffic for two hours. This barely perturbed Williamson.

"It was a commitment to try to get a change going in my career and really make something happen," he said.

Williamson never allowed his struggles to overwhelm him.

"I've always had a belief in myself," he said. "I think when you get to this level, you had to have had some sort of self-confidence, arrogance and cockiness, to some degree, to believe in yourself and your ability to perform."

Something's working for Williamson, as he proved Saturday by clobbering a titanic home run over the center-field batter's eye at Tempe Diablo Stadium. The long ball overcame light rain and a breeze that was blowing in.

"It was really impressive," Pence said. "That was not an Arizona home run."

Giants hitting coach Alonzo Powell has encouraged Williamson to stick with the mechanics he learned during the offseason.

"He's doing exactly what you're supposed to do," Powell said. "You want to play well and put pressure on your organization to make a decision."

MLB.com

Pence's bat shows signs of life with grand slam

Chris Haft

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. -- Hunter Pence might not have silenced all skeptics, but he at least drowned out a few doubters Sunday with a first-inning grand slam that propelled the Giants to their fifth consecutive Cactus League victory, a 5-4 decision over the Padres.

Pence entered the game hitting .105 (2-for-19) with 10 strikeouts. But he has downplayed concerns about his performance, pointing out that he was experimenting with batting stances. He went from a closed stance to a conventional square one (feet even with each other) before settling on an open stance -- at least for now.

Pence admitted that he felt "jumpy" at the plate before finding comfort.

"I definitely felt better at the end of yesterday, coming into today," he said.

Maybe Blanco's ageless

After watching Gregor Blanco dash around the bases on a first-inning triple, some observers wondered whether the 34-year-old might be faster than he was when he initially joined the Giants as a Minor League free agent in 2012.

"I feel like I am, to tell you the truth," Blanco said.

Blanco, 34, said that he has maintained his physical condition with a workout routine featuring exercises that requires quick bursts.

Up next: The Giants play their first exhibition against the Bay Area-rival Athletics at 1:05 p.m. PT in Mesa. Chris Stratton will start for the Giants, while right-hander Jharel Cotton starts for the A's. The game can be heard on Gameday Audio.

NBC Sports Bay Area

Mired in rough spring, Pence finally breaks through with first-inning grand slam

Alex Pavlovic

SCOTTSDALE — Hunter Pence is preparing for his 12th big league season, so he probably wasn't too worried that he carried a .105 batting average into Sunday's game. But that doesn't mean a first-inning grand slam didn't carry some significance.

"It matters," Pence said. "These games, we're competing. I got the opportunity with some guys table-setting and (Luis Perdomo) had thrown a bunch of balls so I tried to be ready if he threw one over the plate."

Perdomo's first pitch did just that and Pence crushed it to straightaway center. The 440-foot blast was his first of the spring and carried over the momentum he started to feel in his third at-bat Saturday. Pence said he tried to close his stance earlier this spring, but he opened back up after striking out twice in his first two at-bats Saturday, and he ended up with a single to right. He kept his stance open Sunday and felt he had more balance.

"I feel better about the path (of the swing) and my balance," he said. "I was a little off-balance before, getting a little jumpy."

When Pence isn't right, he often looks like he's lunging at the ball. But he's working on his timing with new assistant hitting coach Rick Schu, who has been showing him videos and photos of his swing from times when he was having success. Pence has also been doing swing work in front of the mirror, trying to find the right foundation.

Sunday's results surely had the staff breathing a bit easier. Pence had been off to a rough start,

and it looked like some of last year's struggles would carry over. At the same time, the Giants have seen younger outfielders, particularly Mac Williamson, take serious strides. Pence didn't seem to be hearing any footsteps. He lit up when asked about Williamson's revamped swing, which has led to four homers this spring.

"He's such a strong athlete and now he's got a foundation that he can trust," Pence said.

NBC Sports Bay Area

Is 34-year-old Blanco faster in second stint with Giants?

Alex Pavlovic

SCOTTSDALE — Gregor Blanco turned 34 years old a few weeks before signing with the Giants, so it seems unlikely that he's faster than he was during his first stint with the organization, which started six years ago. And yet...Blanco sure does look to have an extra step.

"I feel like I am (faster), to tell you the truth," Blanco said.

Teammates and team officials have noticed. Bruce Bochy has repeatedly said that Blanco looks like he's still in his twenties, and after he legged out an easy triple — his second of the spring — on Sunday, Hunter Pence noted that Blanco looks faster. Pence said Blanco has opened eyes with his explosive work in the weight room.

"You watch some of what he's doing...it's incredible," Pence said.

Blanco has made speed work his emphasis, doing work with training bands and mixing in plenty of box jumps. He said Pence is actually the one who deserves credit. Blanco overhauled his workout routine after seeing Pence's work on explosiveness when the two were teammates the first time. He has continued to tweak things. Blanco said he recently ran a 6.4-second 60-yard dash.

"The last time I did that was when I was like 16 years old," he said, laughing.

According to Statcast's Sprint Speed metric, Blanco was one of the fastest players in the big leagues last year at the age of 33. He was as fast as Jarrod Dyson, known as a burner, and he entered camp as the fastest Giant (Steven Duggar hasn't been tracked by Statcast yet). That skill gives him a leg up on others. The Giants did so many things poorly last season that sometimes it got lost just how little speed they had on the field, and Bochy has noticed the dimension Blanco has added to his roster once again.

"It's like he hasn't changed," Bochy said. "We've all gotten older but he looks exactly the same as when he came in as a non-roster (invitee) in 2012."

Bochy continues to talk about how competitive the race for the final two outfield spots is, but at this point, Blanco looks like a pretty good bet to once again be wearing orange and black on

opening day.

--- Pablo Sandoval made a nifty play in the fifth when Andres Blanco's throw to first went up the line. Sandoval jumped off the bag and swipe-tagged Freddy Galvis as he ran by. Sandoval was pretty much a roster lock coming into the spring, and he has done nothing to hurt his status. He looks pretty agile at first, which could come into play at some point. The staff has not fully shelved the idea of Brandon Belt playing the outfield against certain pitchers.

Sandoval said he hasn't caught any bullpen sessions yet, but he still plans to as he prepares to be an emergency catcher. He was slowed a bit in recent days after jamming his hand taking a swing.

--- Mark Melancon gave up a solo homer to Jose Pirela, but otherwise had a good day. He struck out Eric Hosmer and got Wil Myers and Hunter Renfroe to ground out. The appearance was Melancon's second of the spring, and his stuff looked pretty crisp. Melancon has mentioned some lingering arm discomfort, but there don't seem to be any issues when he's on the mound.

--- Pence hit a grand slam and talked about some of the things he's trying to do with his swing this spring. Here's video of the blast.

The Athletic

Giants notes: Sandoval passes the sniff test, Blanco is outrunning Father Time and Pence enjoys a grand moment

Andrew Baggarly

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. – Pablo Sandoval reached for the cologne bottle in his locker and sprayed the back of his neck. Then under his chin. Then three pumps down the front of his shirt. Both shoulders. The top of his head. Spff. Spff. And that was just the primer coat.

Then came a second full application. Spff, spff, spff.

And this was before he took the field to play first base in the Giants' exhibition game Sunday afternoon. As they say, smell good, play good.

If it's a breath of fresher air you're after, then Gregor Blanco continues to provide it this spring. You can't outrun Father Time, but tell that to a 34-year-old who might be faster home to third than he was in his first spring as a Giant six years ago. Hunter Pence was breathing easier, too, after snapping out of his Cactus League doldrums with a grand slam.

But let's start with the perfumed Panda.

Sandoval might have been in good and grateful spirits last season after he rejoined the Giants, but he has truly settled back into a comfortable skin this spring. He's the happiest that I've ever seen him. And while his presence with the club might continue to be polarizing for many Giants

fans, including those who hate the way he blithely shuffled off to Boston after the 2014 season, the bet here is that the Panda is poised to win some people over.

His left shoulder underwent no small repair in May of 2016. He had anchors put into his torn labrum along with a rotator cuff debridement. Surgeons also shaved down a portion of bone. Dr. James Andrews told Sandoval that he could return to full function within a year, but he wouldn't truly feel 100 percent again for two years.

Sandoval doubted that prognosis at the time. He doesn't doubt it now. He told me that while he was able to swing right-handed last season, this spring is the first time in several years that he can swing right-handed without any pain. He is beyond excited about his ability to thrive this season. And you only need to watch a handful of at-bats this spring to realize that his left-handed swing remains a weapon, too. When is the last time the Giants had left-handed power on their bench?

Maybe it wasn't a foregone conclusion that Sandoval would be on the Opening Day roster when the Giants reported to spring, but that's only because the club is responsible for paying him the major league minimum after the Red Sox released him last year with more than \$50 million still owed to him through 2019. The Giants would have no hesitation about cutting him loose if he had reported to camp in objectionable shape or didn't display good work habits or didn't appear motivated to embrace a reserve role.

Now that we're less than two weeks from breaking camp, it's pretty obvious that Sandoval has checked off all the boxes. Nothing about him warns of being a clubhouse malcontent. Quite the opposite, actually. And he is playing an athletic first base in addition to an acceptable third base. (After making a lunging catch of a wide throw, and a swipe tag on Freddy Galvis, we can only assume that Galvis walked away from that encounter smelling pretty good, too.)

It also helps that Sandoval is batting .346 after contributing a single amid a first inning when the Giants sent 11 men to the plate against Padres right-hander Luis Perdomo, a pitcher who proved tough to crack in five starts against them last season.

The Giants won, 5-4, scored all of their runs in that first inning, and Pence accounted for four of them with one swing. He entered the day hitting .105 and was playing for a third consecutive day because he needed at-bats. It would be common for a veteran player to wave off a poor average or a good result in the spring, saying that none of it matters.

Pence: "It matters. These games are about competing."

Pence had been trying to incorporate a more closed stance in an effort to keep from pulling off the ball and tapping outside pitches. He was feeling too jumpy and not balanced, so he modified to a more square stance. Then he struck out in his first two at-bats Saturday at Tempe. So he decided to go back to a truer version of himself. He opened up again in his final at-bat Saturday, and collected a single to right field.

Then came the grand slam. Pence later drew a walk as well.

“I definitely felt better toward the end of yesterday and today,” he said. “I’m feeling a lot better about my path and my balance.”

It’s not as if Pence is fighting to earn his spot as the Opening Day left fielder. He is making \$18 million in the final year of his contract. But there are roster decisions to be made around him. If he had struggled straight through to Opening Day, then that could impact the choice for a fifth outfielder.

Blanco is not on the 40-man roster, but he’s on the team. That much is a given at this point. Manager Bruce Bochy confirmed that there is no scenario in which the Giants would carry six outfielders to start the season. So the last spot comes down to a flurry of candidates: Gorkys Hernandez, Austin Slater, Steven Duggar, Jarrett Parker, Mac Williamson.

“They’re all in the mix,” Bochy said. “It’s not like there’s a young guy you know is going down.”

Parker and Hernandez are the players out of options, and although it would appear that Hernandez and Blanco are a bit redundant, the Giants probably could use both of them. Given how deep Pence is playing in left field this spring, and how much Bochy wants to preserve Austin Jackson’s legs, it might not be such a terrible idea to have two potential late-inning defensive replacements in the outfield.

When you have an older team, you don’t want those guys standing around in the late innings of blowout games, either.

The candidate drawing the most attention this spring is Williamson, who is batting .412 and golfed a pitch over the batter’s eye at Tempe on Saturday. Pence had ducked down the tunnel and didn’t see it.

“But I heard it, and what’s wild is it was raining and the wind was blowing in,” said Pence, noting an Angels player had a deep drive knocked down in the previous inning. “It was really impressive. That was not like a regular Arizona home run. That was awesome.”

Bochy lauded Williamson’s ambition to overhaul his swing, patterned after the Dodgers’ Justin Turner, to better take advantage of his athleticism. Pence is marveling at the change, too.

“I love it,” Pence said. “He’s such a strong athlete. Now he’s got a foundation he can trust. The swing, it’s been proven with a lot of these hitters. They’ve done this and come out and hit a lot of homers in the season. It’s very special and hopefully it’s a good strength for us.

“He’s such a strong and natural athlete and now he’s got this really cool bat path that he’s learned. And that says a lot about him to make that adjustment, and we’re watching it pay off.”

How wonderful it would be for the Giants if Pence could simply copy what Williamson is doing, too. But the game is not that simple. The reason more pitchers don't throw like Tim Lincecum did, for instance, is that it takes an incredible amount of athleticism, flexibility and coordination. It's the same for hitters.

Pence doesn't have the same body type or upper spine mobility as most players. He's always had to find a unique bat path that worked for his unique body. He hopes he is a bit closer to finding something that allows his front foot to land where it will, according to the speed and location of the pitch, and then just be athletic and react.

He said hitting assistant Rick Schu has been a huge help with showing him videos and freeze frames about what he's done in times when he was driving the ball with success.

"I don't know what it is with me, but I feel I see the ball better and my body gets out of my way," Pence said of his open stance. "It might not look normal, but it feels better to me."

And that just goes to show: coaching isn't an easy job, either. The Giants wanted Pence to close his stance to cover outside pitches better. A coach with a stubborn streak would consider it a victory when he convinced the player to take his advice. A coach who truly makes a positive impact understands that the victory is when the player puts himself in position to produce on the field, however his swing or his throwing mechanics might uniquely apply.

Of course, some of the most important work happens before anyone pulls into the Scottsdale Stadium parking lot for the first time.

Blanco is a non-roster invitee in Giants camp for the first time since 2012, and he is now 34 years old, and there simply is no way he coasts all winter into a spot on this roster.

Blanco is moving at something well beyond cruise control. He showed off his speed yet again Sunday while hitting a ball into the right field corner for a triple — a stand-up triple — and later lined out.

"Like, he is fast," Pence said. "He might be faster now."

That's not hyperbole.

"I feel like I am, to tell the truth," said Blanco, adding that he ran a few 60-meter dashes at 6.4 seconds — a time he hadn't clocked since he was 16 years old.

Blanco trains with resistance bands and box jumps — the kinds of exercises he learned from being Pence's teammate five years ago.

"He was so explosive," Blanco said. "I was like, 'Man, I want to get that.'"

Blanco started his first game of the spring in left field on Sunday. While he is likely to be used most often in center, as mentioned, there are going to be late-inning opportunities in left as well. He said he hasn't played the position much, so getting some innings there this spring will be important.

As much as Pence always wants to be on the field, it's hard to imagine he would selfishly object to Blanco replacing him when the Giants have a late lead.

"His work ethic and enthusiasm brings life to the clubhouse every day," Pence said of Blanco. "It brings life in the weight room, in the food room, the dugout. ... Like, if you watch some of his stuff in the weight room, it's incredible what he's doing. He has bands and he's doing foot drills and he just brings it. You can feel his love for the game of baseball and it kind of leaks into everyone. It makes it fun."

The Giants need more of that – almost as much as they need to score more runs and play tighter outfield defense and protect leads and re-establish one of the league's most accomplished rotations.

That's the only way to cover up the stink of last year's 98-loss season. Not even Sandoval's cologne is strong enough to do that.

Mark Melancon made his second exhibition appearance and allowed a home run to the Padres' Jose Pirela but otherwise appeared to stay within his delivery and throw quality pitches. The homer came on a 2-2 fastball over the plate.

Bochy said he liked some of the pitches Melancon threw while behind in the count to Eric Hosmer, and he has no concerns about his closer being ready to start the season.

"He's on schedule," Bochy said. "We'll get him back-to-back before we leave here. He looks healthy and ready to go."

Ty Blach gave up three runs in four innings but otherwise pitched well, and the guess here is that he is being lined up to open as the No. 4 starter.

That doesn't mean that Blach has an edge over Chris Stratton, who also has done nothing to lose his incumbent status for a rotation spot. It just might make the most sense to begin the season that way, since the Giants open with a four-game series at Chavez Ravine and Blach has a 2.23 ERA in seven games (four starts) against the Dodgers.

Blach would line up to face the Dodgers again in the following weekend series at AT&T Park, too.

Stratton could be available in relief for those first three series of the season, possibly backing up

Blach and allowing the Giants to keep the left-hander from facing them a third time.

If that's the thought process, then it makes sense that the Giants got Stratton his three innings of work last Wednesday in a relief role against the Padres at Peoria.

Blanco finds himself with the same non-roster uncertainty that he did six years ago. Namely, finding a place to live in San Francisco, without signing a lease until he's absolutely sure he's on the club.

"I was just talking to my wife about that last night," he said. "I told her we have to wait."

In 2012, Blanco spent a week in a hotel before he found a place. Perhaps let's not make him aware of what's happened to the Bay Area housing market since 2012. Better that he focuses on baseball for now.