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Twins bats back strong performance by Slegers

Jarrid Denney | MLB.com | July 6, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS -- The fifth spot in the Twins rotation has been up in the air of late, and Minnesota manager Paul Molitor said before Thursday's game that the club will explore all options. In his second appearance of the season, Aaron Slegers made a convincing argument that the spot should remain his.

Slegers tossed six innings and held the Orioles to a single run as he and the Twins topped Baltimore, 5-2. The 25-year-old sinker-baller generated just nine swinging strikes all evening, but induced seven groundouts as he held the Orioles to three hits and picked up his first Major League win.

"It's nice," Slegers said. "It's fun to have that in the stat column, be a Major League winner. I can say that for the rest of my life."

Manny Machado smashed a two-out double off of Slegers in the first inning, but the Minnesota righty settled down from that point and didn't allow another hit until the fifth inning. He worked his way out of a mini-jam in the third after he plunked Trey Mancini to lead off the inning and later walked Adam Jones before getting Machado to ground out.

The lone Orioles run against him came by way of a Jonathan Schoop homer in the fifth inning that left the bat at 108.3 mph, per Statcast™. Slegers followed by getting behind in the count against Mancini and eventually yielding a single. But he bounced back to force Caleb Joseph to fly out to center and then rolled up a 4-6-3 double play to end the inning.

"I was kind of battling back after the home run there," Slegers said. "Threw a couple of balls and I was disappointed with myself; I take pride after a home run, you know, get after the next guy, don't let it slip away. I was glad I got back in that count. Then I got Joseph on the pop-up. So I'm glad I pulled myself together after that homer."

The Twins offense came to life in the third inning when Jake Cave smashed a leadoff double to left-center field. Cave then scored when Bobby

Wilson hit a grounder to the right side of the infield and Andrew Cashner was unable to catch a throw from Chris Davis while covering first. The ball dribbled toward the Twins' dugout, and Cave came around to score from second.

"I'm happy I could contribute to help Slegers get his first win," Cave said. "I played with Slegs a good amount this year down in Triple-A, and he came up here, you get off the plane and you've got to throw on the first day of the home series when we had a pretty bad road series. So it was big pressure for him, and I'm glad that I could just help contribute to a win."

Minnesota tacked on a second run in the inning when Eddie Rosario plated Wilson with a single to left. An inning later, Logan Morrison led off the fourth with a home run to make it a 3-0 Twins lead.

Baltimore cut into that lead in the seventh when Schoop battled his way through an eight-pitch at-bat before taking Minnesota reliever Addison Reed deep for his second homer of the game. In the eighth, the Orioles saw a chance to tie the game when Jones lined a two-out double off of Trevor Hildenberger. The Twins then elected to walk Machado intentionally, and Hildenberger escaped the jam when he got Davis to swing on a sinking 0-2 changeup to end the inning.

The Twins added a pair of insurance runs in the eighth when Max Kepler lined a single to right that scored Morrison. Kepler then scored on a double to center by Cave that pushed the Minnesota lead to 5-2.

Cave finished the night 3-for-3 with a pair of doubles and a walk. It marked his second three-hit game of the week; he went 3-for-5 with a homer and a double Sunday against the Cubs.

Fernando Rodney came on to close out the ninth for the Twins and struck out Davis to begin a three-up, three-down frame and lock down his 18th save of the season.

Molitor said that Slegers' spot in the rotation isn't set in stone, but his outing on Thursday did help make the decision to start him again next week a bit easier.

"We're going to figure that out," Molitor said. "Off the top of my head, I would say that between the bullpen outing that he gave us and tonight, there would be strong consideration to do that."

MITEL REPLAY OF THE DAY

In the bottom of the sixth, Kepler roped a double to the left-field corner that sent Jorge Polanco sprinting home from first to give the Twins a 4-1 lead. However, the Orioles challenged that the ball had actually bounced over the left-field wall and back onto the field.

After a brief review, umpires ruled that the ball had indeed cleared the fence and Kepler's hit was scored as a ground rule double. As a result, the run was taken off the board and Polanco was sent back to third base. Cashner proceeded to work his way out of a bases-loaded jam and escape the inning unscathed.

UP NEXT

The Twins continue their four-game set with the Orioles on Friday at 7:10 p.m. CT. Minnesota will send Lance Lynn to the hill in search of a bounce back start after a rocky outing against the Cubs on July 1. Lynn will face off with Orioles right-hander Dylan Bundy (6-7, 3.75 ERA).

Twins sign first-round pick Larnach

Jarrid Denney | MLB.com | July 6, 2018

MINNEAPOLIS -- The past month of Trevor Larnach's summer has unfolded in storybook fashion. On Thursday, the 21-year-old outfielder and College World Series hero closed the book on his collegiate career and signed a professional contract with the Twins.

Minnesota announced Thursday afternoon that it had inked Larnach, whom the club selected with the 20th overall pick in the first round of the 2018 Draft, for a \$2.55 million signing bonus. The slot for the pick was valued at \$3.12 million.

"It's special for my parents and [me]," Larnach said. "We have waited a long time for this and to be able to sign the contract. The stadium and Minnesota, I've heard nothing but good things about the state, the people and the organization, so I'm ready to go."

Larnach was an integral part of Oregon State's recent College World Series title run. The Pleasant Hill, Calif., native hit in the No. 3 spot in a loaded Beavers lineup and delivered a dramatic, go-ahead home run in the ninth inning of a June 29 win over Arkansas to keep his team's championship hopes alive.

Oregon State's late run through the postseason delayed the signing of the Beavers' draftees, and Minnesota scouting director Sean Johnson joked that Larnach's late-game homer in Omaha helped ease the rush to sign him.

"We were actually watching it -- I was with [Twins vice president of player personnel] Mike Radcliff -- we were in Cary, N.C., in a Cheesecake Factory," Johnson said. "Twenty seconds before he hit the home run, I'm like, 'If he hits a home run here to give them the lead, we can wait another day.' Right on cue, he hit it. That was the first time I celebrated in a Cheesecake Factory. That was pretty cool."

Due to the heavy workload that came with battling a gaggle of elimination games late in the season, the Twins organization is giving Larnach some time to recover before he begins his professional career. The club announced on Thursday that he will begin his career at Rookie-Level Elizabethton of the Appalachian League. They haven't decided on a timeline yet for when that will happen.

"(Larnach) has played in a lot of high-leverage situations in the last month and he's played a lot of games and had a lot of at-bats," Johnson said. "We want to get him through the summer in one piece and give him some time to get his life back together and go home and see his family. I think the plan is maybe to get him to Fort Myers and get him established with our player development and get him to meet some coaches and get him revving back up. I'm not sure where he's going after that, but get him back on the field."

Johnson said the club plans to keep the 6-foot-4, 210-pound Larnach in right field. During the 2018 season with the Beavers, he hit .327 (70-for-214) with 13 doubles, 17 home runs and 65 RBI in 58 games. In the College World Series, he batted .417 (15-for-36) with five doubles, one triple, one home run, nine RBI and 10 runs scored in eight games.

"I would say it's probably the closest thing you are going to get to playing here in the big leagues," Larnach said of his experience at Omaha. "There are a lot of people at every game. You start playing some SEC teams and you start hearing them pretty well. It's all part of it. It's a wonderful experience, and I wish I could relive some of it, but you know, there are better times ahead."

AL Central: Who's buying, who's selling?

Jeffrey Flanagan | MLB.com | July 5, 2018

The second quarter of the 2018 season is in the books, and by now, each team has a much clearer picture of whether it is a pretender or contender, and a seller or buyer come the non-waiver Trade Deadline.

Expect a lot of activity in the selling department from almost every team in the American League Central.

TWINS

What we've learned

Just like in the first quarter of the season, the Twins remained inconsistent and haven't been able to put together a run to get back into contention. They're coming off a rough six-day trip in Chicago, losing five out of six against the White Sox and Cubs. Minnesota has missed players such as Byron Buxton, Miguel Sano and Ervin Santana, with Buxton out with fractured left big toe, Sano optioned to Class A Advanced Fort Myers to work on his conditioning and Santana still out after surgery to repair his right middle finger.

Hoping to accomplish

The Twins would love to find a way to get back into contention, much like August last season, when they went on a run even after being sellers at the Trade Deadline. But they've showed no signs of any kind of turnaround, so they're likely to be sellers at the Trade Deadline.

Stock watch

Barring a dramatic turnaround, Minnesota is poised to be a seller. The Twins have several players in the last year of their deal such as Brian Dozier, Eduardo Escobar, Fernando Rodney, Zach Duke and Lance Lynn. Logan Morrison hasn't played well enough to get traded, Joe Mauer has a full no-trade clause and Santana isn't expected to be back soon enough to be dealt. The most interesting decisions will be what they decide to do with Escobar and Dozier, who are both clubhouse leaders.

Aaron Slegers' fill-in start helps Twins drop Orioles, end six-game losing streak

Phil Miller | Star Tribune | July 6, 2018

Amid a revolving-door flurry of buttress-the-bullpen transactions, mostly caused by their six-game losing streak, the Twins wound up needing a fill-in starter to open the homestand.

They settled on Aaron Slegers. In doing so, they ended the losing streak.

Slegers earned his first career victory Thursday — but only a tentative “maybe” about getting another start next week — by allowing only three hits and a lone run over six innings as the Twins eked out their first victory in a week, 5-2 over the Baltimore Orioles at Target Field.

“Aaron really picked us up. To come in and have to start a homestand, knowing we came off the [road] trip that we did, and to pitch as well as he did, it was good,” Twins manager Paul Molitor said. “We needed a win, and we found a way to get it done.”

The Twins, who scored only two runs in their final 23 innings at Milwaukee this week, didn't exactly batter Orioles starter Andrew Cashner, but they got to the Baltimore bullpen enough to put away a slump-busting victory. They used a lineup that included five hitters batting .220 or lower on the season, but somehow it worked: Three of them collected two or more hits.

Logan Morrison, batting .189 coming into the game, had his first two-hit night at Target Field since June 2. He smacked an outside fastball from Cashner the opposite way, drilling it five rows deep into the left-field seats for a solo home run in the fourth inning, then singled and scored during the Twins' two-run eighth.

"He's been hitting plenty of balls hard. He just hasn't had a lot of positive results," Molitor said. "Tonight, he lined out in the first inning, then came back and went the other way. He's just trying to build and not worry too much about where it's going or what it's doing."

Max Kepler, who entered the night owning a .219 average, doubled and singled, and Jake Cave, hitting only .217, went 3-for-3 with a walk. He doubled and scored in the third inning, then doubled home Kepler in the eighth.

Nearly as big a contribution from Cave: a Byron Buxton-esque leap at the center field wall to catch a Chris Davis blast, an effort applauded by Slegers.

"I saw that all year in Rochester," Slegers said of his Class AAA teammate. "He's like me, just new up here. I know he can really flash [the defense] out there, and that was fun to watch."

But so was Slegers, who has started four games for the Twins but never more than once in any two-week period. The righthander appeared confident and competent all night, and he made only one major mistake against the last-place Orioles. Jonathan Schoop smashed that one far into the upper deck in left field, a home run that he would reprise two innings later against Addison Reed.

Schoop's two-homer night couldn't dampen the enthusiasm of a victory-starved crowd of 23,895, who were standing as Fernando Rodney completed a spotless ninth inning to earn his 18th save — but first since June 24, after back-to-back misfires on the Twins' 1-8 road trip.

Slegers was given the start on Thursday partly because the Twins have made so many changes to their pitching roster over the past couple of weeks. Now Molitor needs another starter next Tuesday against Kansas City, too, and probably the following Sunday against Tampa Bay. Considering the Twins hadn't had a starter credited with a victory since June 24, we might as well pencil in the 6-10 kid who only needed 72 pitches to record 18 outs, right?

"We're going to figure that out," was all Molitor would commit to. "Off the top of my head, I would say that, between the [five-inning May 30] bullpen outing he gave us and tonight, there would be strong consideration to do that."

Hmm. Have an opinion about that, Aaron? "I do what they tell me," he said.

Twins sign first-round pick Trevor Larnach, three others **Phil Miller | Star Tribune | July 6, 2018**

He's only been with the Twins for one day, but already Trevor Larnach's new team is thrilled by what it has received from him.

The Twins got a power hitter. They got a College World Series champion. And they got the cash necessary to afford three other players.

Larnach, an Oregon State outfielder chosen 20th overall in last month's draft, was at Target Field on Thursday to sign a contract that paid him a bonus of \$2.55 million — or \$570,000 less than MLB's recommended bonus for that pick. By day's end, the Twins had invested that savings in three other draftees, ultimately signing 29 of the 39 players they chose.

"There's a method to signing these guys in the order we do," Sean Johnson, the Twins scouting director, said after making Larnach's signing official one day before the deadline. "We're not signing every single guy. But we have a couple more big ones."

Three, actually. With Larnach in the fold, the Twins — limited by MLB rules to spending \$5.933 million on their entire Class of 2018 — then signed fifth-round pick Cole Sands, a Florida State righthander, for \$600,000, or \$269,000 above his slot value; sixth-rounder Charles Mack, a high school infielder who agreed to forgo a scholarship to Clemson for \$500,000, or \$246,300 than his slot value; and 11th-rounder Michael Helman, a Texas A&M second baseman, whose \$220,000 bonus was \$95,000 more than the \$125,000 value for players beyond the 10th round.

The big prize, though, was Larnach, a player the Twins drafted in hopes he would be a future champion. Now they know for certain.

"You always worry when [draftees] go to the [College] World Series, but we're just happy he's healthy and in one piece," Johnson said. "With a

national title under his belt, that's cool. We'll take it. It was worth the wait."

On June 27, Larnach hit a two-out, ninth-inning home run that forced a winner-take-all championship game at the College World Series, and his Oregon State Beavers, who survived six elimination games during the tournament, won the title the next day. And after celebrating with his teammates, Larnach accepted the Twins' offer.

The College World Series "is a wonderful experience, and I wish I could relive some of it, but you know there are better times ahead," the 21-year-old outfielder said. "I was there to win championships, and now I'm coming to the Twins with the same mind-set."

Larnach was in Target Field on Thursday, the day before the deadline to sign draftees, to accept the Twins' offer, meet the team and manager Paul Molitor, and prepare for the transition to the pros. The Twins will allow him to return home to Pleasant Hill, Calif., to rest up for a few days; then he will report to Fort Myers, Fla., and eventually join most of the other Twins draftees on the rookie-level Elizabethton (Tenn.) Twins.

"Never even heard of it, man, but I'm excited to go," said Larnach, who hit .348 with 19 home runs and 77 RBI in 68 games for the Beavers this season. "It's going to be an interesting experience. I can't wait to get started."

Etc.

- Ervin Santana's velocity is slowing returning. The Twins All-Star righthander hit 91 mph with his fastball a few times on Thursday, during a four-inning start for Class A Fort Myers. Santana, working his way back from February surgery on his pitching hand, gave up two runs on three hits — including a home run by Dunedin's Kacy Clemens, son of Roger Clemens — and no walks, while striking out two.

- The Twins didn't seriously consider bringing back Fernando Romero to make Thursday's start, Molitor said, because they want to give the rookie righthander time to make adjustments to his game. Romero, who posted a 7.54 ERA in his last five starts with the Twins, has given up one run over 11⅓ innings since being demoted again two weeks ago.

Twins broadcasters ponder how much analytics is too much during broadcast

Chris Hine | Star Tribune | July 6, 2018

Shakopee resident Larry Drinkwitz doesn't mind when he's listening to a Twins game and the announcers discuss an advanced statistic. He understands some of them but not all of them.

"I don't really understand OPS," Drinkwitz said, referring to the metric that calculates on-base plus slugging percentage. "They don't really explain what that means and what that's really about and how it's figured, what's considered a good one and what's not."

On the other end, Jim Stanley of Elk River doesn't take as kindly to advanced statistics.

"When I hear [radio analyst] Dan Gladden talking about exit velocity, I just want to heave," Stanley said. "Baseball has always been the sport I love. I think it's the best game there is, and sometimes we try to ruin it statistically."

Waves of information populate baseball in 2018. New statistics and metrics pop up every season. It can be hard to keep up, and it presents an interesting challenge for broadcasters. How much of this information do you present to educate the audience about the modern changes to the game at the risk of confusing or alienating viewers and listeners?

"It's vital to do that in today's age," said Twins WCCO-AM play-by-play man Cory Provus.

"If you don't, you're being naive to how teams are being assembled. ... To just rely on home runs, batting average, RBI and pitcher wins and losses — you're going to be behind the times and just maybe out of a job one day because you have to adapt."

Provus and Fox Sports North's Dick Bremer said it's important for both broadcasts to make their audiences aware of some of the advanced statistics in the game. Frequently viewers will see or hear the broadcasts present Statcast information, such as exit velocity or launch angles after home runs.

But broadcasts can't be too technical, they said, since many people might be absorbing a statistic or metric for the first time.

"It's like trying to teach someone a new language almost in terms of your viewer base," Bremer said. "What do you do if you flood all the information out at one time and just go overboard? Well, the retention isn't going to be very good for your viewer."

Provus said he will use stats like OPS (the sum of on-base percentage and slugging average) or weighted runs created for hitters and will use WHIP (walks and hits per innings pitched) for pitchers along with relaying Statcast information, which he said is a sponsored segment on Twins

radio broadcasts (much to Stanley's chagrin).

Provus will also cite WAR (wins above replacement), but he said he needs to add context behind every statistic.

"What I feel the need to do is that if I'm going to go down that path, and I try not to do it every day, but maybe once a week is to remind the audience what the league average is, to give it context," Provus said. "Because if I'm not, then I feel like I'm maybe losing a percentage of my audience."

Most of that audience is above 55 on radio, Gladden said.

"I don't think it confuses the listener; I think there's some listeners that get a lot of knowledge from it," Gladden said. "I think you have to be able to broadcast to your fan base."

Bremer said Fox's research has shown viewers don't want to get overloaded with too many statistics, but as a broadcaster he still has to do his job to inform viewers.

"It's our responsibility to make them aware, but to a point," Bremer said. "It does take time to explain fielder-independent pitching [FIP], and will we succeed in explaining it to them? In an ideal world, we would have some time to do that, but it is a live sporting event. It's not a seminar."

Or as one of Bremer's partners in the booth, Bert Blyleven, said: "Just call the game. The game is the game. Sometimes you get overloaded."

Some fans still prefer seeing only the statistics they grew up seeing, those that are intuitive to understand, such as batting average, RBI and home runs, even if they don't present a complete picture of the game they're watching.

"Baseball is a statistics game and so it does fit the game, the launch angle and exit velocity," Drinkwitz said. "You know, they're OK, but they don't seem to mean a lot to an average fan."

But that's not going to stop the broadcasts from relaying that information in the hope that the average fan becomes an informed one.

Postgame: Cave 'took a chance' on catch; Slegers OK with quick hook

Phil Miller | Star Tribune | July 6, 2018

A couple of extras from a much-needed win for the Twins:

Not a bad night for Jake Cave. After going 0-for-7 with five strikeouts in Milwaukee, the 25-year-old center fielder responded by helping the Twins beat Baltimore, 5-2, with his play in the field, at the plate and on the bases.

Cave's flashiest moment came in the fourth inning, when Chris Davis hit a one-out blast just to the right side of straightaway center. It appeared certain to bounce off the wall for a double — but not to Cave.

"I knew I had a good bead on it, and I knew that [right fielder Max] Kepler was definitely going to back me up if it went off the wall," Cave said. "So I took a chance. I timed it right. Didn't really think too much about it — you kind of just got to go get it."

Cave leaped and caught the ball a few feet above him, just inches from the wall. It was a defensive gem worthy of Byron Buxton, and it earned a round of applause from his starting pitcher, Aaron Slegers.

But it was far from Cave's only contribution. Cave also doubled twice as part of a couple of rallies, and singled and walked. It was the rookie's third three-hit game of his career, weirdly remarkable since he hasn't had a mere two-hit game yet.

And on the bases, Cave's alertness allowed him to score when Baltimore pitcher Andrew Cashner's throw to first base on Bobby Wilson's grounder got past Davis. The ball eventually rolled into the dugout, so Cave would have been awarded home anyway, but he had long since committed to scoring.

"I'm happy I could contribute to helping Slegers get his first win," Cave said. "It was big pressure for him, and I'm glad I could help. Whether it was with the bat or the glove, it was fun both ways."

XXX

It wasn't easy removing Slegers from the game, Twins manager Paul Molitor said, after he had cruised so easily through six innings. But he just thought it was time.

“We talked a little bit about trying to extend him, but you get 18 outs from a guy, with three hits and one run, it was a good note to [end on],” Molitor said after limiting Slegers to just 72 pitches. “Turn it over to the bullpen and see if we could hold on.”

Only seven times this season had a Twins starter thrown so few pitches, and none of them earned a win — or even lasted more than four innings. So it was a remarkable outing.

“He had a good night, mixed in enough changeups and sliders to keep them guessing a little bit,” Molitor said. “I know he’s been working on things, always trying to find ways to improve his repertoire, if you will. Working on that little one-seam fastball, which he seemed to get a lot of really good results, as far as getting in on the righties and getting some grounders from the lefties.”

But Molitor detected some changes as the game went on.

“They were getting a little bit better swings in the fifth and sixth [innings]. And the slider was starting to change shape just a little bit,” Molitor explained. “With a two-run lead, it can evaporate quickly. I’m sure he was disappointed, but sometimes you make tough decisions to protect those young guys when they’ve had good outings. [You want to] make sure they feel good when they come out of the game.”

Slegers was a little surprised, but wasn’t complaining afterward. “I want to stay in until the manager shakes my hand. I was ready to go out,” Slegers said. “Obviously I was disappointed. But I understand his decision, and the bullpen, I have full confidence. It was fun to watch” Trevor Hildenberger, Addison Reed and Fernando Rodney finish off the win.

Twins are 4-16 in one-run games, continuing a recent trend

Michael Rand | Star Tribune | July 5, 2018

In this age of baseball analytics and advanced stats, there is a clear winner when it comes to the biggest gap between the fanciest name for a specific metric and the level of sophistication of the thing it actually measures.

The winner: Pythagorean won-loss record. If you are searching your brain for long lost facts about geometry and triangles, wondering how this measure relates to the theorem of the same name, you can stop. All it means is what a team’s expected won-loss record is based on a formula tied directly to how many runs they have scored and allowed.

You can then compare a Pythagorean won-loss record to an actual record and draw conclusions about whether a team has underachieved, overachieved or properly achieved.

Baseball Reference displays Pythagorean won-loss records for teams prominently, and it sent me down a rabbit hole recently as it pertains to the Twins under manager Paul Molitor and previously under Ron Gardenhire. Here are what I consider some relevant numbers and possible takeaways:

*The Twins entered Thursday with a Pythagorean won-loss record of 38-45 — three games better than their actual 35-48 record. That suggest they are a little better than their record indicates.

Overall in three and a half seasons under Molitor, they are six games worse than their Pythagorean won-loss record suggests they should be. In their two winnings season, they were two games better in each. In the 103-loss disaster of 2016, they were seven games worse.

*In 13 seasons under Gardenhire, the Twins were 18 games better than their Pythagorean won-loss record says they should have been.

That said, all 18 of those games are accounted for in Gardy’s first three seasons, when they were plus-8, plus-5 and plus-5 in winning three consecutive AL Central titles.

In fact, every one of Gardenhire’s six division-winning teams finished ahead of its expected record – suggesting the Twins overachieved in the regular season to a degree, which is perhaps part of the reason they fell flat in the postseason.

As things turned sour after 2010, the Twins were minus-3 in Gardenhire’s final four seasons – all of which were 90-plus loss years.

*A team’s record in one-run games correlates strongly to their Pythagorean won-loss record. Molitor’s twins are a combined 55-83 in one-run games – including a putrid 4-16 in one-run games this year entering Thursday. If they were merely 10-10 in one-run games this year, they would be right around .500 overall.

Whereas Molitor’s Twins teams are 28 games under .500 in one-run games, Gardenhire’s Twins teams were a combined 30 games over .500 in one-run games in his 13 seasons. So CLEARLY Gardy was a better manager, right?

*Well, that's debatable. Perhaps this is an explanation: Gardenhire had more to work with, particularly in the bullpen – an area I might argue is the largest predictor of success in one-run games. In Gardenhire's first nine seasons as manager, the Twins never finished worse than No. 12 in the majors in bullpen ERA and led the league in that category in 2006.

Molitor's teams have never finished better than No. 21 in bullpen ERA and rank No. 24 this year, nor has he enjoyed the stability of a lights-out closer like Joe Nathan (who averaged 41 saves and a 1.87 ERA from 2004-09 while making four All-Star teams).

Long story short: If you're looking for a reason the Twins have suffered in recent years, look hard at the bullpen and the stalled progress of all those young hard throwers who were supposed to save the day.

Thursday's Twins-Baltimore game recap

Phil Miller | Star Tribune | July 5, 2018

GAME RECAP

IMPACT PLAYER

Aaron Slegers, Twins

The 6-10 righthander earned his first career victory in his sixth career game, giving up three hits over six innings.

BY THE NUMBERS

1,305 Career strikeouts for Baltimore's Chris Davis, who whiffed against Fernando Rodney in the ninth inning. That ties the Orioles franchise record held by Cal Ripken Jr. — who played 3,001 games. Davis has played 972.

2 Home runs for Jonathan Schoop, scoring both Orioles runs.

ON DECK

After losing twice in Chicago last week, Lance Lynn tries to get back on track when he faces Orioles righthander Dylan Bundy.

From WAR to launch angle, we explain baseball analytics

Chris Hine | Star Tribune | July 6, 2018

Advanced baseball statistics can be hard to understand and often contain more acronyms than the New Deal. Here is a list of 12 terms that are widely used with an explanation of what they measure.

WAR (or WARP, wins above replacement player)

WAR attempts to encapsulate the value of all players across all positions for a season: How much better or worse is a player than a theoretical call-up a team has waiting in the wings? And how many wins did he add to his team's total that season compared to if he wasn't in the lineup? It takes into account a player's offense, defense and base running. Pitchers' WARs have their own metrics. Three websites, Fangraphs, Baseball Reference and Baseball Prospectus, have different variations of this statistic. They differ the greatest in what metrics (some of which are on this list) they use to calculate a player's defense and how they evaluate pitchers. So a player's WAR on one website can be different than the others.

Good, bad and average: These are the general ranges across each version of WAR -- below 0 is replacement level; 0-2 is a bench player; 2-5 is a starter; 5-8 is an All-Star and above 8 is MVP-worthy.

Examples: Mike Trout of the Angels leads the majors with a 6.3 WAR, according to Fangraphs, and Eddie Rosario leads the Twins with a 3.6 WAR (13th in MLB). Joe Mauer's WAR this season is .5; during his 2009 MVP season it was 7.6.

OPS (on-base percentage plus slugging percentage) and OPS+ (OPS plus)

OPS is a statistic that can sound more complicated than it is – it simply adds a player's on-base and slugging percentages together to show how often he reaches base and hits for power. OPS+ makes small adjustments to OPS and scales it to a more easily digestible number with 100 being the league average and each point up or down being 1 percent better or worse than league average.

Good, bad and average: That changes by year, but according to Fangraphs, an OPS of .570 and below is awful, .600 is poor, .670 is below

average, .710 is average, .800 is above average, .900 is great, 1.000 excellent. For OPS+, 150 and up is excellent. 125-150 is very good. Below 75 is poor.

Examples: Boston's Mookie Betts is edging out Trout in OPS so far this season: 1.103 to 1.089. Rosario again leads the Twins – and just misses the top 10 – with his .924 number.

wOBA (weighted on-base average)

This is a more refined statistic that attempts to improve on OPS. Instead of counting the value of a double as twice that of a single (as slugging percentage does), wOBA attempts to use that actual mathematical value of each outcome at the plate (walks and hit batters included) in how it usually contributes to scoring a run.

Good, bad and average: The average changes by season, but these are generally the accepted ranges, according to Fangraphs: below .300 awful; .300 to .310 poor; .310 to .320 below average; .320 to .340 average; .340 to .370 above average; .370 to .400 very good; .400 and up is excellent.

Example: Betts leads MLB at .458 with Trout at .450. Boston's JD Martinez is third at .428, giving the Red Sox two of the top three players in that statistic. Rosario again leads the Twins at .385, 15th overall in MLB.

wRC (weighted runs created) and wRC+ (weighted runs created plus)

Updates a statistic Bill James devised called runs created. It uses a player's weighted on-base average to determine a player's offensive value and measure it in runs. wRC+ takes every outcome a hitter had and adjusts for the park he was playing in and how the rest of the league was scoring that season. Similar to OPS+, wRC+ uses a scale with 100 as the league average.

Good, bad and average: For wRC+, 60 is awful; 75 is poor, 80 is below average, 100 is average, 115 above average, 140 great, 160 is excellent.

Example: Trout leads here at 196. Betts isn't far behind at 195. Rosario leads the Twins at 146, good for 16th.

Exit velocity

How hard the ball is hit off the bat, in miles per hour. This was introduced in 2015 with the launch of MLB's Statcast, the technology that provides a lot of advanced data.

Good, bad and average: Anything 95 miles per hour and above is hard hit. Most home runs are around the 100 miles per hour mark or greater. The hardest hit ball this season was 121.1 MPH by Gary Sanchez of the Yankees. Anything from the mid 80s to 90 is moderately hit and the low 80s and below is not that hard and unlikely to result in a hit.

Example: The hardest hit home run for the Twins this season was a two-run blast from Miguel Sano on April 25 at Yankee Stadium. Sano hit the ball 440 feet at 114.6 MPH off the bat.

Launch angle

The angle at which the ball comes off the hitter's bat, with the point of contact serving as the vertex of the angle. MLB also introduced it with Statcast technology in 2015. Players in recent seasons have tried to raise their average launch angle in an attempt to hit more home runs.

Good, bad and average: MLB.com says 10 degrees or less is a ground ball; 10-25 degrees is a line drive; 25-50 degrees is a fly ball; 50 degrees and up is a popup. Most home runs occur in the sweet spot just above the 25 degree line – a line drive with a little bit of lift. Anything in that area, provided it has a hard-hit exit velocity, is likely to result in an extra-base hit or a home run. When the launch angle and exit velocity are in such a positive correlation, it's referred to as a "barrel."

Example: Eddie Rosario's 18 home runs have an average launch angle of 33 degrees. His highest was 42.4 degrees, his lowest was 24.7.

BABIP (batting average on balls in play)

This statistic only focuses on balls a batter puts in play. It does not take into account home runs. It shows how often a batter gets a hit when he puts the ball in the field of play. It can also be used to evaluate pitchers to see what their batting average of balls in play is against them. You can use BABIP to determine how lucky or unlucky a hitter is. If a hitter has a high BABIP, it usually means he's getting lucky. If it's low, he might be unlucky. This works in reverse for pitchers.

Good, bad and average: The league average tends to be around .300, but you have to take into account each individual when using BABIP. For

example, if a hitter has had a career .280 average BABIP but in a given season it's .330, that might mean he is getting a bit lucky. Or maybe he's hitting the ball harder. You can then use his average exit velocity to see if that's the case. For pitchers, a lower BABIP than their career averages may mean they are benefiting from luck or good defense or maybe they're inducing softer contact.

Example: Eduardo Escobar hit just .279 on balls in play last season but that number improved to .327 this season. Escobar has also raised his hard contact rate by eight percent. It's one reason Escobar has been so successful through the first three months.

Catch probability

According to MLB.com, it's "likelihood that a batted ball to the outfield will be caught, based on four important pieces of information. 1. How far did the fielder have to go? 2. How much time did he have to get there. 3. What direction did he need to go in? 4. Was proximity to the wall a factor?"

Good, bad and average: Every fly ball gets assigned a catch probability percentage. MLB has a star-rating system for each catch. Catches with a 0-25 percent catch probability is a five-star play; 26 to 50 is four star; 51 to 75 percent is three star; 76 to 90 is two star; 91-95 percent one star.

Example: Byron Buxton led baseball in 2017 with 16 four-star catches and was tied for second with five five-star catches.

UZR (ultimate zone rating)

This attempts to quantify how many runs a fielder saved because of his range, their arm strength (for outfielders) and double plays turned (for infielders). It attempts to quantify every batted ball event in terms of the amount of effort it would take an average fielder to make the play. Its calculations vary by position. Another related statistic is defensive runs saved (DRS).

Good, bad, average: Per Fangraphs, the scale for both UZR and DRS is: -15 awful; -10 poor; -5 below average; 0 average; +5 above average; +10 great; +15 Gold Glove caliber.

Example: This is a statistic that accumulates throughout the season. Kansas City outfielder Alex Gordon leads MLB at 9.7. Rosario leads the Twins at 3.5. Buxton was seventh in baseball last season at 10.0.

FIP (fielding independent pitching)

A metric similar to ERA, but FIP uses all the batted ball events within a pitcher's control (the amount of strikeouts, walks, hit by pitches and home runs allowed) and puts them into a complicated formula to show how a pitcher would perform regardless of the defense behind him.

Good, bad and average: The numbers compare to ERA. FIP can be helpful if there's a significant gap between a pitcher's ERA and his FIP. If his ERA is lower than his FIP, it could suggest he has been a bit lucky and had good defense behind him. If his FIP is lower than his ERA, he might be getting unlucky.

Example: Lance Lynn had an ERA of 3.43 and FIP of 4.82 with the Cardinals last season. Even though his ERA is worse this season (5.49), his FIP is actually better (4.38). However, his hard contact rate has risen from 29.2 percent to 35.9 percent.

WHIP (walks plus hits per innings pitched)

It adds together the walks and hits a pitcher allows to give you an indication of how often a pitcher allows base runners in an inning. Whether it was a walk or a home run, each time a batter reaches base is treated the same.

Good, bad and average: WHIP varies by season, but according to Fangraphs a general guide is this: 1.6 awful; 1.5 poor; 1.4 below average; 1.3 average; 1.2 above average; 1.1 great; 1.0 excellent.

Example: Justin Verlander leads MLB with a 0.86 WHIP. Jose Berrios is tops on the Twins at 1.00.

Spin rate

How much a ball spins out of the pitcher's hand to home plate. It is measured in revolutions per minute. Data has suggested that fastballs and breaking balls are harder to hit when they have a high spin rate, which can create more movement on the pitch.

Good, bad, average: It varies by pitch. For a four-seamer, the average in 2016 was around 2,226 rpm; two-seamer was 2,123; splitter 1,524; changeup 1,746; slider 2,090; curveball 2,308.

Example: Cubs reliever Carl Edwards Jr. has the highest spin rate in baseball among all fastballs at 2,663 RPM. Ryan Pressly is tops on the Twins at 2,561 RPM.

Twins take advantage of MLB-worst Baltimore in 5-2 win to stem skid

Andy Greder | Pioneer Press | July 5, 2018

The Baltimore Orioles provided a temporary bandage to conceal the Twins' open wound Thursday.

After losing six straight in consecutive road series against two top National League teams, the Brewers and Cubs, the O's — and their MLB-worst 24 wins — were a welcome sight for a four-game series at Target Field.

Twins rookie right-hander Aaron Slegers earned his first career win in his fourth start, and center fielder Jake Cave had two doubles, an RBI, a run, intentional walk and leaping catch at the wall in Minnesota's 5-2 win.

With contributions from the pair of Triple-A regulars, the victory served as a welcome tourniquet for a Twins team that had fallen 13 games below .500 on the road trip.

Slegers, an Arizona native, gave up three hits and one earned run over six innings, with a couple family members watching at Target Field and grandparents checking it out on TV in Cloverdale, Minn.

Manager Paul Molitor gave him the game ball afterward.

"It's fun to have that in the stat column, be a major league winner," Slegers said. "I can say that for the rest of my life."

Reliever Trevor Hildenberger eluded danger in the eight and Fernando Rodney picked up his 318th career save, which tied him with former Twin great Rick Aguilera for 20th all time.

The Twins took a 2-0 lead in the bottom of the third. Cave's leadoff double and Bobby Wilson's grounder couldn't be handled by Baltimore starting pitcher Andrew Cashner at first base, allowing Cave to score from second. Eddie Rosario then drove in Wilson with a single to left.

In the next half-inning, Cave made a leaping catch against the wall to take an extra-base hit away from Chris Davis.

Logan Morrison's homer to left-center made it 3-0, but a pair of solo homers by Jonathan Schoop in the fifth and seventh innings cut the lead to 3-2.

Max Kepler's RBI single provided an insurance run in the eighth inning, and Cave then hit his second double, scoring Kepler.

"I'm happy I could contribute, though, to help Slegers get his first win," Cave said. "I played with Slegs a good amount this year down in Triple-A, and he came up here, you get off the plane and you've got to throw on the first day of the home series when we had a pretty bad road series, so it was big pressure for him."

After Manny Machado doubled off the wall in the first inning, Slegers got him to bounce out to second base during a two-on, two-out situation in the third, the most trouble he got in during the first three innings.

Molitor moved Slegers out after 72 pitches and wanted to leave a good taste for the rookie.

"I thought they were getting a little bit better swings in the fifth and sixth," Molitor said. "And I thought the slider was starting to change shape just a little bit."

"With a two run lead, it can evaporate quickly, and with the experience that we had and the rest in terms of the guys that I want to try to get the last nine outs from — I'm sure he was disappointed, but sometimes you make tough decisions to protect those young guys when they've had good outings and make sure they feel good when they come out of the game."

But the strong outing sets up another potential start.

"We're going to figure that out," Molitor said. "Off the top of my head, I would say that between the bullpen outing that he gave us and (Thursday), there would be strong consideration to do that."

Twins sign three more draft picks before Friday's deadline

Andy Greder | Pioneer Press | July 5, 2018

Hours before Thursday's game, Twins scouting director Sean Johnson was hopeful the club would be able to lock in its three remaining unsigned draft picks before Friday's 4 p.m. deadline. The Twins didn't push it too much further and had all three done before 11 p.m. Thursday.

Fifth-round draft pick Cole Sands, a pitcher from Florida State, signed for \$600,000, which was above the slotted value of \$330,000; sixth-round selection Charlie Mack, a shortstop from a New York high school, agreed to \$500,000, which was above the value placed at \$253,000; and 11th-round pick Michael Helman, a second baseman from Texas A&M, was set at \$220,000, according to mlb.com.

Johnson said they were cautious with Mack because "You don't want to endanger his signability if he goes to college. So we're doing it in a specific order."

On top of signing first-round pick Trevor Larnach on Thursday, the Twins also have signed 25th-round pick LaRon Smith of Foothills Composite High in Okotoks, Alberta for \$125,000.

Seth Halvorsen, the 30th-round pick from Heritage Christian Academy in Maple Grove, won't sign with the Twins and will attend the University of Missouri.

"I'm not sure he'd be interested in our offer with the dollars we have left," Johnson said. "Hopefully, we'll get a chance in three years to get him. He's going to be a heck of a college player."

Another notable selection Johnson mentioned that the Twins won't sign is Anthony Hoopii-Tuionetoa, the 16th-round pick out of Baldwin High on the Hawaiian island of Maui. He will go to college instead.

ROMERO'S BIGGER FOCUS

Starting pitcher Fernando Romero, a fast-rising prospect out of the Dominican Republic, stayed down in Triple-A Rochester over Thursday starter Aaron Slegers because the Twins are "looking at resetting some ... development things," Twins manager Paul Molitor said, putting Romero in the same fix-it category as center fielder Byron Buxton.

Romero pitched 5 2/3 scoreless innings with eight strikeouts for Rochester on July 3, but had five walks.

"To bring him back after one start down there, as much as it went fairly well — even though the command was still an issue — we told him we were going to try to get him back into doing some things over a little bit of time," Molitor said. "We didn't want to take away from the big-picture things."

BRIEFLY

Rehabbing starter Ervin Santana gave up two earned runs and three hits across four innings for Class A Fort Myers on Thursday. He retired the final nine batters he faced. ... Twins shortstop Jorge Polanco turned 25 Thursday.

Twins sign first-round draft pick Trevor Larnach

Andy Greder | Pioneer Press | July 5, 2018

Sean Johnson and Mike Radcliff had a routine dinner on a scouting road trip at a Cheesecake Factory restaurant turn celebratory in Cary, N.C., on June 27.

They were watching TV as the Twins' first-round draft pick, Trevor Larnach, stepped to the plate for Oregon State against Arkansas in Game 2 of the College World Series in Omaha, Neb.

"Twenty seconds before he hit the home run, I'm like, 'If he hits a home run here to give them the lead, we can wait another day' (for Game 3).' Right on cue, he hit it," Johnson, the Twins director of scouting, recalled Thursday at Target Field. "That was the first time I celebrated in a Cheesecake Factory. That was pretty cool. That was a fun moment to watch."

The celebration continued Thursday as the Twins announced the signing of their new slugging outfielder a day before the deadline to lock in draft picks. The slot value for Larnach's deal was \$3.12 million, but he signed for \$2.55 million, according to multiple reports.

Larnach toured Target Field with his parents, Jeannine and Adam Larnach, on Thursday. He watched batting practice and leaned against the railing on the Twins' home dugout, but was itching to get started.

"It's wonderful to be here, but it's kind of like a tease to me," he said. "I want to do everything I can to be up here and start playing for this team."

Larnach will go home to Pleasant Hill, Calif., for a few days, then to the Twins' facility in Fort Myers, Fla. and will report to the Twins' rookie league team in Elizabethton, Tenn.

“Never even heard of it, man, but I’m excited to go,” Larnach said. “It’s going to be an interesting experience. I’ve heard different things about it, but it’ll be fun. So I can’t wait for that.”

Johnson said “E-Town” is the destination for most players because it’s viewed as a “rite of passage.”

“It’s a good place to start to get perspective on the pro life,” Johnson said. “Not many fans, not the greatest facilities. But as you go, things get better and improve. I think it’s that way by design. Like, nobody has a great A-ball facility vs. Double-A, Triple-A because you don’t want guys getting comfortable there.”

The 21-year-old outfielder from Oregon State was selected with the 20th pick in the first-year player draft on June 4, but his signing was delayed until after the Beavers wrapped up the College World Series title on June 28.

Johnson said the Twins were thankful Larnach’s price tag didn’t go up after the national title.

“You always worry when those guys go to the World Series, and it can go one way or the other, but we’re just happy he’s healthy and in one piece,” Johnson said. “With a national title under his belt, that’s cool. We’ll take it. It was worth the wait.”

Larnach said there was some relief to having the draft conclude before the collegiate postseason heated up.

“It’s there the whole season,” he said. “You’ve got scouts at every single practice there, every single game, and they’re asking you questions. You see them in the stands. You can’t really get away from it, because it’s all over social media and that stuff, so it’s all part of it. But once I got drafted, it was a wonderful experience that I shared with my family, and getting drafted by the Twins, it’s a special honor.”

Larnach, who is 6-foot-4 and 210 pounds, completed his junior season with a .326 batting average 17 home runs and 65 RBIs in 58 games, including defeating the Gophers in a NCAA Super Regional.

“Nice to meet him,” said Twins manager and Gopher alum Paul Molitor. “I’d heard a lot of good things, and he backed it up. He’s an impressive guy to talk to, very humble. Excited to talk about the Twins organization. We talked about his experience against the Gophers and John Anderson. Obviously congratulated him not only on becoming a Twin but winning a national championship.”

Larnach, who was selected by San Diego in the 40th round of the 2015 draft but didn’t sign, turned it on during in the postseason when he hit that memorable home run, batted .417 and totaled nine RBIs and 10 runs in eight games.

“Going into the year, he wasn’t a first-rounder, per se,” Johnson said. “He took a big leap this year, obviously with the power. The offense is the thing we’re most excited about with his overall game. He’s gonna be a fine right fielder, we hope. But really it’s about — I mean, the guy can drive the ball out of any part of any ballpark. ... From all of the looks that we got, he can hit the ball out of any part of the park, and that’s the part that’s exciting.”

The ‘buy low, buy late’ strategy from contenders would be bad news for sellers like the Twins

Derek Wetmore | ESPN 1500 | July 5, 2018

The Twins ought to be clear sellers at this year’s MLB trade deadline, considering how things have gone for the club over the past 10 days.

There are two problems with that, aside from the obvious disappointment experienced during a summer in which the team expected to contend. One is that there aren’t a lot of players on Minnesota’s 25-man roster that would fetch a haul in prospects. The second problem I wrote about recently is that the number of “tanking” teams means that the Twins can’t afford to sit around and wait until the non-waiver deadline at the end of July to see if something will materialize. They sort of have to be moving right now.

And in reading Buster Olney’s column over at ESPN, we stumbled into another problematic item for the Twins. Olney reports that contenders this summer could be tempted to wait it out and “buy low” at the non-waiver trade deadline – or even hang on until August to further reduce the asking price in prospects.

Here’s an excerpt from the column:

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

“I don’t know if we have the best collection of prospects to deal,” said one evaluator, “but I don’t think we’ll have to have those, either. I think

that as we get closer to the deadline, we'll have a lot to choose from.”

And as we've discussed before, the more sellers in a marketplace – and conversely the fewer big buyers – that's bad news for a team like the Twins. Ever tried selling your house at the same time as everyone of your neighbors with only a handful of buyers looking to move?

The Twins have five types of players that they could choose to trade – or six, if you include younger players that could be part of the future, like Eddie Rosario, for example. I'm not counting that final group, since I think 2019 ought to be a competitive year for Minnesota.

One group of trade chips is the pair of pending free agents who could be Qualifying Offer candidates (Brian Dozier and Eduardo Escobar). The Twins will have to choose if the prospect(s) in any trade are worth more than the hypothetical compensatory draft pick, or the one additional year under contract. The Twins don't need to “dump salary” on good and affordable players like Dozier and Escobar. The problem is just that if there is another seller that does need to move salary — and that club can meet a buyer's needs for much cheaper in terms of prospects — well then that takes away one potential landing spot for, say, Dozier. And at this stage of the game, it's fair to ask how many landing spots there would be to begin with.

Then there are the pending free agents who could not or should not be offered the QO (Lance Lynn and Zach Duke).

Then there's the pair of players with options in their contract for 2019 (Fernando Rodney, Ervin Santana and Logan Morrison).

Joe Mauer has a full no-trade clause and is in the final year of his mega contract with the Twins.

Kyle Gibson and Jake Odorizzi are mid-rotation starters with another season of team control. Those guys could in theory bring back more than Lynn, due to the extra team control in 2019. But I think you've got to ask the question on those hypothetical trade fronts: How many contenders would ask any of those three pitchers to start Game 3 in an October series?

If you're trying to maximize return for these players are reload for another run next year, the possibility of another slow play from contenders could be bad news for the Twins.

Twins sign first-round pick Trevor Larnach **Derek Wetmore | ESPN 1500 | July 5, 2018**

The Twins on Thursday returned home from a long road trip and handled an important item of official business.

Their first-round draft pick Trevor Larnach officially signed his first pro contract. Larnach signed on July 5 in part because his Oregon State Beavers were busy winning the NCAA championship in the weeks after the June draft.

The team announced that Larnach will begin his pro career in rookie ball, at Elizabethton (Appalachian League).

So the Twins now have some more World Series cred in the fold. It's college World Series, but that still counts for something, right?

Slegers' first major league win leads Twins past Orioles **Associated Press | Fox Sports North | July 6, 2018**

MINNEAPOLIS — Aaron Slegers got his first major league win by finished six smooth innings in his first start of the season for Minnesota, and the Twins stopped their six-game losing streak by hanging on to beat the Baltimore Orioles 5-2 on Thursday night.

Logan Morrison homered and Jake Cave reached base all four times he batted for the Twins, who turned to Fernando Rodney for the ninth for his 18th save following two consecutive blown chances.

Jonathan Schoop hit two home runs, but the Orioles squandered another quality start by Andrew Cashner and lost for the 10th time in 11 games. They have the worst record in the major leagues at 24-62, just the team the Twins needed to face to start a season-long 11-game homestand after a pivotal 1-8 road trip.

Trailing AL Central-leading Cleveland by 11 1/2 games, Minnesota has become a probable seller before the non-waiver trade deadline on July 31 with several accomplished players on expiring contracts.

Baltimore has essentially been in that boat since April, with slugging shortstop Manny Machado widely considered the best asset on the market this summer. The second-lowest scoring team in MLB managed just three hits against Slegers (1-0), who was recalled from Triple-A Rochester to

fill the recently revolving fifth spot in the rotation.

The 6-foot-10 right-hander gave up only one run, the first long ball by Schoop.

Cashner (2-9), one of the offseason acquisitions by the Orioles that suggested their commitment to contending in the daunting AL East, has had more than three runs scored for him in only one of his 17 starts this year. He gave up three runs, two earned, and six hits. Orioles starters have received the least amount of run support in the major leagues this season.

Cashner was charged with an error in the third, when he was covering first base on a chopper hit by Bobby Wilson to Chris Davis and fumbled the relay toss to let Cave score from second. Wilson eventually scored on a single by Eddie Rosario.

SWINGING AND MISSING

Rodney struck out Davis to start the ninth, pushing him into a first-place tie on the Orioles list for strikeouts with 1,305. He is tied with Cal Ripken Jr., who played 3,001 games for Baltimore. Davis has appeared in 972 contests.

MAN, CAVE

Cave, who was recalled from Rochester last week, made a fully extended catch at the wall in right-center to take a potential extra-base hit away from Davis in the fourth inning. He doubled twice, driving in one run, to go with a single and an intentional walk.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Orioles: RHP Darren O'Day (strained left hamstring) has been scheduled for his season-ending surgery on July 12. He'll need six months to recover.

UP NEXT

Orioles: RHP Dylan Bundy (6-7, 3.75 ERA) will come off the DL to start Friday night. Bundy has been sidelined by a sprained left ankle.

Twins: RHP Lance Lynn (5-7, 5.49 ERA) will take the mound in the second game of the series, coming off his worst turn of the season (seven runs, 1 2/3 innings).

Preview: Twins vs. Orioles

STATS | Fox Sports North | July 6, 2018

Lance Lynn gets the start Friday night when the Minnesota Twins continue a four-game series with the Baltimore Orioles at Target Field.

Lynn's 2018 season has not gone anywhere near the way he may have envisioned when he hit the free-agent market for the first time last fall, ending a six-year run with the Cardinals.

Instead of landing a lucrative, multi-year deal he went unsigned until late in spring training, when he agreed to a one-year, \$12 million contract with the Minnesota Twins — approximately \$5.4 million less than he would have earned under the Cardinals' one-year qualifying offer he turned down last November.

After an abbreviated spring camp, Lynn got off to an abysmal start. He went 0-3 in his first five outings, posting an 8.37 ERA in those contests but finally got into a groove when the calendar flipped to May. He went 5-2 with a 2.88 ERA over his next nine turns.

Lynn, who is 5-7 with a 5.49 ERA for the season, continues his hit-or-miss season Friday after losing his last two starts. He is fresh off his worst outing of the season when he allowed seven runs on five hits and three walks, failing to get out of the second inning in an 11-10 loss at Wrigley Field on Sunday.

Cubs pitcher Jon Lester homered off Lynn during a disastrous second inning that also included Lynn failing to cover first on a routine grounder, which kept the inning going long enough for the Cubs to take a big lead.

"We gave them an extra out," Twins manager Paul Molitor said of Lynn's gaffe. "I think that was the biggest thing that stuck out to me. An offense like that, outs when you don't get them, that was problematic to me. The arithmetic says that was an extra five runs because of that particular play."

Lynn is 1-1 with a 7.30 ERA in three games (two starts) versus Baltimore.

The Twins snapped a six-game losing streak in the series opener Thursday night and, in turn, extended the misery for the Orioles, who have lost three in a row and 10 of their last 11.

They'll turn to Dylan Bundy (6-7, 3.75 ERA) to snap the skid. Baltimore plans to activate the right-hander from the disabled list Friday and get him back on the mound for the first time since suffering a sprained left ankle June 23.

He went 3-7 with a 4.46 ERA through his first 12 starts of the season but got hot in June, posting a 1.98 ERA while going 3-0 in four starts before suffering the injury while running the bases after collecting his first big league hit.

His return comes as the Orioles need to decide a course of action ahead of the trade deadline. At 24-62, Baltimore owns the worst record in baseball and will almost certainly be a seller as the deadline approaches.

The 25-year-old Dylan is in his third full big league season and still has three more years of team control, making him an intriguing candidate for a motivated buyer.

The Twins' Logan Morrison has two home runs in 15 at-bats versus Bundy, who is 0-2 with a 3.60 ERA in four career games (three starts) versus Minnesota. Bundy faced the Twins in his first start of this season, giving up five hits over seven shutout innings in Baltimore's 3-2 victory on March 29.

Twins' Joe Mauer remains consistent even while baseball evolves **Jared Wyllys | Sporting News | July 5, 2018**

Justin Morneau remembers when his old roommate used to put on Michael Jackson songs and moonwalk across the hardwood floors of the apartment they shared, but that's a side of Joe Mauer most people don't see. What they have seen on the field for 15 years now has been an impressive yet unflashy consistency through injury and changes to the game.

Since coming to the league in 2004, Mauer has been almost boringly good, not like the moonwalker in his apartment. Right now, Mauer is closing in on 7,000 career at bats. He might not get there this year, but if he plays beyond his current contract, he'll likely hit that mark in 2019. In that span, he has a .307 lifetime batting average. Of his more than 2,000 career hits, about 1,500 of those are singles. Mauer has just 139 career home runs, despite a frame that looks capable of at least 30 moonshots a season.

In that way, Joe Mauer is an anomaly. Thanks to an approach he honed while he was still in high school and his dedication in sticking to it ever since, he has been relatively unfazed by the most recent trend in baseball. Caught up in the emphasis on launch angle and exit velocity, many hitters are selling out for more power by trying to drive the ball into the air more often. Strikeouts are up, and fans are seeing less of offenses stringing hits together and scoring in the long-held traditional way.

At the same time, pitchers seem to be dominating in a way not really seen since 1968, which led to a lowering of the mound to even the stakes for the hitters. Bullpens are deeper, and more of those pitchers can throw in the upper 90s with nasty movement. It seems a wonder that anyone can hit the ball at all.

And then there's Mauer.

As the game continues to evolve around him, Mauer has stuck with what he said he started to figure out in high school when his coach took him aside to help figure out the plate approach that would work best.

"My coach always told me, 'Joe, you get a good swing, you'll pretty much always hit it. Now let's just pick out a spot where you really like it.' He got me out there, it was just him and I, and he was throwing me different pitches in different spots, and found where I like the ball more," Mauer told Sporting News.

He already had the fluid, simple swing that can sometimes summons memories of Will Clark or John Olerud, but Mauer said that day helped him to figure out something else. Not only did he realize where he liked the ball best — history indicates that it's low and away, where he's hit .401 in the past 10 years — but he also began to see the advantage of taking pitches. He started doing it in his high school at-bats after that day and saw immediate returns.

"The more pitches I saw, the stronger I got," Mauer said. "I guess a lot of people were afraid to strike out. I don't like it, but I always felt that as the at-bat goes on, the more pitches I see, the stronger I get, the better that I get."

Even with two strikes, Mauer is far from an easy out. Mauer owns a .250 career average in those situations (league average tends to be below .180) and seems unflappable — something that has always caught the attention of teammates.

“He is so consistent in the way he approaches every day, and sometimes you wonder if he has a heartbeat,” Logan Morrison said. “He’s so calm and collected in big situations, two strikes, you can just tell he’s ready, he’s good.”

Morrison joined the Twins just this season, and he has shared the field with perennial All-Stars on other teams, but he said Mauer’s plate approach is a standout.

“How calm he is. How, no matter the situation, he always seems to be in control of it,” Morrison said.

Along with seeing so many pitches — Mauer has averaged more than four pitches per at-bat in his career — he has a rare ability to see the ball deep in the zone and pick up what’s being thrown more readily than most of his counterparts. Mauer said being a catcher helped him pick up on pitchers’ tendencies, especially when they’re looking for an out pitch, and he saw that they’ll often go low and away. So, naturally, he sought to improve himself in that way specifically.

Mauer’s days of hitting for batting titles are likely behind him. He’s hitting a modest .264 so far this season, but it’s not because his approach has changed. It would have been tempting for Mauer to ride the wave of baseball’s current trend, but he’s stayed true to what has worked for him for a long time. Hall of Famer Paul Molitor, his manager since 2015, makes no bones about how he feels, both about baseball’s latest fad and about how Mauer has handled it.

“The whole idea of home runs, launch angles, and exit velocities and all those type of things, there’s a lot of good things about that trend. I find it ironic that there’s been some really good players in the history of our game that never even heard those terms,” Molitor said. “But as that stuff became more popular and people try to find a way to increase their value by being able to elevate balls and all those type of things, Joe already knew his value. It’s played well for a long time, and he didn’t just fall into anybody trying to impress upon him that he should make changes to put the ball over the fence.”

Second baseman Brian Dozier, Mauer’s teammate since 2012, said that not straying from his approach has helped Mauer remain productive even as his batting average slipped the past few seasons.

“He hasn’t let things influence him as far as the new age of baseball and everything, and I think that’s really good in a sense he knows what works for him, and he’s always stuck with it. He’s not a guy who’s going to go up there hacking every single time. His approach is working pitchers over, taking a lot of first pitches, maybe second pitches, to kind of get a better understanding of what the pitcher is trying to do,” Dozier said. “That’s Joe. That’s always been Joe.”

Morneau, who was teammates with Mauer from 2004 until he was traded in 2013, was impressed from the get-go.

“From the time he came in, he knew the strike zone,” Morneau said. “His knowledge of the strike zone is as good as anybody in baseball.”

Morneau saw what everyone else has seen for years now, and that’s the way Mauer has always taken a lot of pitches, avoided mistakes and capitalized when the pitchers missed their spots. Even through a 2013 concussion that probably shortened the prime of his career, Mauer has remained steady. There was something of an offensive awakening last season, when Mauer hit .305, but in the years since 2013, it’s been evident that he’s not quite the same.

But if Mauer walks away at the end of this season when his contract with the Twins is done, he will be remembered fondly, and not just for the gaudy numbers he put up for the first 10 years of his career. The Twins have a rich history of stars, and his teammates — past and present — and his manager agree that he should be remembered among the best of them.

That side of Mauer that moonwalks across a hardwood floor is one that he has chosen to keep mostly to himself, but he’s made a profound impression regardless. Dozier is adamant that Mauer should be in Cooperstown when the time comes, and Morrison described him as one of the best human beings he has ever been around, and not just in baseball.

“I’m a Joe Mauer fan for life. I don’t have enough good things to say about him. I don’t have the vocabulary for that,” Morrison said, pausing to try to find the right words. “He should be being treasured. He’s that rare of a talent.”

With the Twins reeling, Aaron Slegers seizes opportunity and gets his first win
Chad Graff | The Athletic | July 6, 2018

Before his first MLB start of this season, Aaron Slegers didn’t think about the current vacancy in the Twins rotation or what could be with a strong outing, the potential for two more trips to the rubber before the All-Star Game arrives.

He insisted little was out of the usual in his prep and process. But with his first victory in four career starts and the best performance of his young

career, Slegers likely earned at least one more start this month. With six innings of three-hit, one-run ball Thursday night, Slegers helped the Twins return home from a brutal 1-8 road trip with a 5-2 win, albeit a victory over the Baltimore Orioles, the worst team in baseball.

But the Twins (36-48) don't make the schedule and can't do anything other than try to take advantage of back-to-back home series against the league's worst two teams as a trade deadline that will likely bring attrition nears.

With Ervin Santana still rehabbing, Slegers took advantage Thursday night of a chance to earn another start next Tuesday. If that goes well, the Twins still have an opening the following Sunday.

"Off the top of my head, I would say that between the bullpen outing that he gave us and tonight, there would be strong consideration to do that," manager Paul Molitor said of Slegers starting Tuesday against the 61-loss Royals after handing the Orioles their 62nd loss.

But even if it were against this Baltimore lineup that doesn't elicit much fear outside of Manny Machado, Slegers did his job Thursday, earning the game ball from Molitor afterward.

His lone blemish was a fifth-inning homer by Jonathan Schoop (one of his two on Thursday). But outside of that, he threw clean innings and only walked one. After six innings and 72 pitches, Molitor considered sending the 25-year-old out for another frame. But with the back end of his bullpen ready after resting as losses piled up on the road, he went with Addison Reed, Trevor Hildenberger, and Fernando Rodney to finish the game.

"I'm sure he was disappointed, but sometimes you make tough decisions to protect those young guys when they've had good outings and make sure they feel good when they come out of the game," Molitor said of Slegers.

The 2013 fifth-round pick made some mundane spot starts at the end of last season, but with a 3.55 ERA through 14 Triple-A starts this season, he earned the call from the Twins for this start ahead of Adalberto Mejia or Fernando Romero.

"I know he's been working on things, always trying to find ways to improve your repertoire, if you will," Molitor said. "Working on that little one-seam fastball, which he seemed to get a lot of really good results, as far as getting in on the righties and getting some grounders from the lefties. I thought he had a good night, mixed in enough changeups and sliders to keep them guessing a little bit. Gave up the home run to Schoop there on a fastball, but mostly he was good. We talked a little bit about trying to extend him, but you get 18 outs from a guy, with three hits and one run, I thought it was a good note to turn it over to the bullpen and see if we could hold on."

Slegers relished the first win with little complaint about his early exit and no desire to make predictions about future starts to come.

"It's fun to have that in the stat column, be a major-league winner," he said. "I can say that for the rest of my life."

First-round pick Trevor Larnach signs

A week after helping guide Oregon State to a College World Series victory, Twins first-round pick Trevor Larnach was in town Thursday to sign his deal with the Twins one day before the league's deadline for inking draft picks.

He signed for \$2.55 million, The Athletic confirmed, less than the \$3.12 million slot value designated for the No. 20 pick in the draft. Larnach hit .417 with a home run in eight games at the College World Series after hitting 16 regular-season home runs for the Beavers, part of what vaulted him up the draft board.

"Going into the year, he wasn't a first-rounder, per se," Twins scouting director Sean Johnson said. "He took a big leap this year, obviously with the power. The offense is the thing we're most excited about with his overall game. He's going to be a fine right fielder, we hope. But really it's about (power). I mean, the guy can drive the ball out of any part of any ballpark. We saw him do it. Right field, dead-center — I saw him in Surprise, Arizona (go) dead-center and to left-center for home runs. From all of the looks that we got, he can hit the ball out of any part of the park and that's the part that's exciting. It's not often you get a chance to acquire a guy like that, especially where we picked in the first round."

Larnach will take a few days off after Oregon State's lengthy postseason run, then get acclimated with the player development staff in Fort Myers, then likely report to rookie A-ball in Elizabethton, Tenn.

He chatted Thursday with current Twins players and spent some time with Paul Molitor.

"He's just excited to get started," Molitor said. "It's good to have him in the fold. I told him to enjoy the experience. I couldn't really relate to him what it was like to sign at this particular point in my life because it was 40-some years ago, but it was nice for him and his parents to come in and have a chance to talk with them."

Because baseball's draft takes place before the college postseason begins, it can be a nerve-racking proposition for teams with high picks playing

in the tournament, especially for ones with pitchers who are frequently used on short rest.

Last week, Johnson was watching Game 2 of the World Series at dinner with vice president of player development Mike Radcliff as Larnach's Beavers were on the brink of elimination with the Twins pick headed to the plate. Johnson joked that he'd be fine waiting an extra day to begin negotiations with the outfielder if Larnach homered to force Game 3.

"Right on queue, he hit it," Johnson said. "That was the first time I celebrated in a Cheesecake Factory. That was pretty cool. That was a fun moment to watch."

Larnach said he was looking forward to some time off after a taxing run with Oregon State that included a win over the Gophers in the NCAA Super Regional.

"It's been a lot of fun. I will tell you that," Larnach said. "At first it was pretty stressful over at the World Series, but with the team that I had it was a great group of guys, a really special team and we won it. It couldn't have ended better. Now I've got the privilege of playing for the Twins and I will start my dreams as a professional baseball player."

The Twins also expect to sign three more picks before Friday's deadline — sixth-round shortstop Charlie Mack, fifth-round pitcher Cole Sands, and 11th-round second baseman Michael Helman.

Rosenthal: Playing by the rules, here are my (sometimes cringeworthy) picks for the All-Star teams

Ken Rosenthal | The Athletic | July 5, 2018

Here was the existential question as I made my All-Star picks, and it was most definitely not brought to you by Camping World or any other sponsor of Major League Baseball:

Should teams that stink get, uh, fewer selections?

The Miami Marlins, Pittsburgh Pirates and Detroit Tigers rebuilt over the last 12 months in part by trading former All-Stars. The Oakland Athletics, Tampa Bay Rays and Chicago White Sox built low payrolls in part because they would not pursue expensive All-Stars. The New York Mets, Baltimore Orioles, Toronto Blue Jays and Texas Rangers entered the season with ambition and flopped, and it sure does not seem like the incompetence of those clubs — and others — should be rewarded.

The players bear a measure of responsibility for the sports' current rich-man, poor-man state — the most recent collective bargaining agreement, crafted by MLB and the players' union, included no provision requiring clubs to spend at a certain minimum. But after careful consideration — ok, three minutes — I decided to follow my usual practice, picking the players on merit without holding the performances of their individual teams against them.

My magnanimous gesture somehow left me with two Mets and one Phillie — a cringeworthy outcome, if not a fireable offense. But hey, I'm playing by baseball's rules, assigning 20 position players and 12 pitchers to both the AL and NL rosters, and making sure each club, gulp, is represented.

As always, direct all of your righteous anger to the comments section below as well as to my Twitter account, @Ken_Rosenthal. But do not — repeat, DO NOT — mention your favorite All-Star wanna-be and ask, "Not even an unfortunate omission?" The answer is, No, not even an unfortunate omission!

Oh, and don't worry: Once the withdrawals start, whether because of injury or some other unforeseen circumstance, virtually every deserving player will find his way onto the team, anyway.

AMERICAN LEAGUE

Third base

*José Ramírez, Indians

Alex Bregman, Astros

Unfortunate omissions: Matt Chapman, Athletics; Eduardo Escobar, Twins; Mike Moustakas, Royals.

Escobar needs to be on the team. I just can't find a spot for him.

Outfield

*Mookie Betts, Red Sox

*Aaron Judge, Yankees

*Mike Trout, Angels

Andrew Benintendi, Red Sox

Nicholas Castellanos, Tigers

Eddie Rosario, Twins

