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San Francisco Chronicle
Despite homers, Giants fall to Padres
John Shea

SAN DIEGO — Evan Longoria hit a ball into the second deck, flew around the bases and returned to the dugout to high-five his teammates and do a quick, little dance with Andrew McCutchen.

It was a festive Saturday night at Petco Park for the new Giants, at least until the Padres crashed the party.

McCutchen also homered, and a third newcomer, Austin Jackson, added an RBI single, but the Giants wasted a late lead and fell 5-4.

It hasn't been a stellar start for the Giants, and Longoria and McCutchen have had issues, McCutchen's two walk-off hits notwithstanding.

McCutchen, the former face of the Pirates' franchise, had been 3-for-21 with runners in scoring position. Longoria, the best player in Rays' history, was dropped a notch in the lineup because of his .149 average.

Manager Bruce Bochy hinted after Friday's game he could alter the lineup, and he did. Longoria

moved from fifth to sixth, and it might not be a one-day thing. Bochy is considering hitting Brandon Crawford fifth against right-handed starters.

McCutchen and Longoria were supposed to provide improved protection for cleanup hitter Buster Posey, but Longoria was making anywhere between little and no contact. His second-inning strikeout was his 17th in 48 at-bats.

His next at-bat had a far better result, a two-run homer off lefty Clayton Richard. That tied the score 2-2, neutralizing the two runs Derek Holland yielded in the first inning. Two batters after Longoria's homer, Brandon Crawford hit the Giants' first triple of the season and scored on Jackson's single.

The Giants took a 4-2 lead in the fifth on McCutchen's homer — the new threesome drove in all four runs — but failed to hold the lead. Holland gave up a run in the fifth, and Hunter Renfroe's two-run homer in the seventh off reliever Cory Gearrin provided the difference.

It was a crushing blow for the Giants, who thought they had scored an insurance run in the top of the inning. Bochy challenged an out call at the plate on Joe Panik, who appeared safe on at least one replay. The Giants didn't get their wish, however. Panik indeed was out.

Panik tagged from third on McCutchen's fly to right, and the Padres made two splendid throws, by Renfroe and first baseman Chase Headley, and catcher A.J. Ellis applied a sweep tag.

Instead of a 5-3 lead, the Giants were up 4-3, a lead that didn't last long.

San Francisco Chronicle
Cherishing the beauty and rarity of a major-league debut
John Shea

SAN DIEGO — Nobody forgets his major-league debut. Especially if you're **Juan Marichal** (one-hit shutout), **Willie McCovey** (4-for-4 with two triples) or **Will Clark** (home run off **Nolan Ryan**). Or **Terry Steinbach** (homer in first at-bat), **Campy Campaneris** (first-pitch homer) or **Mike**

Norris (three-hit shutout).

On the other hand, there's **Colten Brewer**, the Padres' reliever who was knocked around by the Giants on Thursday (four unearned runs, four hits, two walks, two-thirds of an inning). Still memorable.

Every debut is a fabulous story, a culmination of a journey but also an introduction to a dream. Just ask **Tyler Beede**, who on Tuesday became the first pitcher to debut in the Giants' rotation since 2013. Oddly enough, **Andrew Suarez** started the next day, also his debut.

"Sometimes crazy things like that line up. You don't question it, you take advantage of it," Beede said. "You try to treat it like any other game, but it's really not. There's so much going on inside than just another baseball game. The family's in town, it's your debut, there's a lot there. It's something else."

It wasn't just rare for Giants starters to debut in consecutive games — first time since **Bob Knepper** and **Frank Riccelli** in 1976 — it was rare to have a pitcher debut in the Giants' rotation, period.

No team in the past nine years had fewer starting pitchers make their debuts than the Giants — just four. **Madison Bumgarner** (2009), **Ryan Sadowski** (2009), **Eric Surkamp** (2011) and **Mike Kickham** (2013).

Pitchers including **Chris Heston**, **Ty Blach** and **Chris Stratton** debuted as relievers and eventually got opportunities to start. The Royals had the second-fewest with five, followed by the Yankees, Cubs and Rangers (six).

The Reds had the most (17). The A's had 12.

Whether it was a lack of elite prospects knocking on the door or a lack of space in the rotation, the Giants weren't known as a team that was giving young starters many chances. Of course, three championships in five years, led by virtually a set rotation, was a factor.

Beede knew he wasn't ready for the big leagues two or three years ago. Even if he was, he would have wondered if there was any room for an opportunity.

"Particularly with the Giants, you feel they have guys who throw 200 innings every year," Beede said. "Historically, these guys eat innings and stay healthy. There was a time, I think, going back

a couple of years, you knew it would take some time. But it's a positive, too, because you get more time to develop and work on things in the minor leagues."

Jobs suddenly opened with Bumgarner, **Jeff Samardzija** and **Johnny Cueto** shelved.

Jackie's day: Major League Baseball, in a news release to advance of Jackie Robinson Day, announced 8.4 percent of players on Opening Day rosters were African American/African Canadian, which MLB called the highest percentage in six seasons.

It's still a low figure, historically speaking, but MLB considers it promising and hinted it'll rise, thanks in part to its programs directed at inner-city youth. In the past six drafts, 20 percent of first-round picks (41 of 204) were African Americans, including the first two picks last year.

Meantime, **Dave Roberts** is the lone African American manager. Last year, there were two, but the Nationals fired **Dusty Baker** despite 97 wins and a second straight division title.

Baker, 68, questions whether he'll get another chance to manage. If not, perhaps the next stop is the Hall of Fame. He didn't manage a World Series winner, but he has 1,863 career wins, and of the 13 managers with more wins, 12 have been enshrined in Cooperstown.

Asked if he's open to managing again or whether this is it, Baker said, "I didn't fire myself, so how are you going to say this is it? I would've loved to say 'this is it.' But evidently, it has to be the right place and the right situation and the right everything.

"I'll leave myself up to anything, but in the meantime, you've got to keep doing your thing, keep living. You can't wait on people. Because last time I was out, it was two years in between both jobs, and I never got a call. So why would I expect to get a call this time?"

Away from the daily grind, Baker has the opportunity to commute from his home in Granite Bay (outside Sacramento) to watch his son **Darren** play baseball at Cal.

Ohtani's impact: We've seen 11 players win the MVP award and Cy Young award in the same season, including Oakland's **Vida Blue** in 1971 and **Dennis Eckersley** in 1992.

Two players won the MVP and Rookie of the Year awards in the same season, **Ichiro Suzuki** and **Fred Lynn**. Just one won the Cy Young and rookie awards the same season, **Fernando Valenzuela**.

Nobody has won the Triple Crown, the MVP, Cy Young, rookie trifecta. Impossible, right?

Imagine we're in September and **Shohei Ohtani** is in competition for all three. That would mean two things: His first three weeks of the season weren't a fluke, and general manager **Billy Eppler** wrapped up Executive of the Year honors.

The Angels have been careful with Ohtani's schedule, pitching him on Sundays and not hitting him on days before and after he pitches. But Ohtani wants more action and might eventually force the Angels' hand. If they believe they'll be in the playoff hunt and realize Ohtani can help get them to October baseball, the pressure to play him more will increase.

Are we getting ahead of ourselves? Absolutely. But until further notice, we can't have enough Ohtani.

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Giants starters

A look at Giants starting pitching over the season's first two weeks:

Pitcher	Age	GS	W-L	IP	H	ER	BB	SO	ERA
LHP Ty Blach	27	4	1-2	201/3	24	10	9	9	4.43
RHP Chris Stratton	27	3	1-1	171/3	10	5	7	11	2.60
RHP Johnny Cueto*	32	2	1-0	13	9	1	2	5	0.69
LHP Derek Holland	31	3	0-2	152/3	11	8	6	16	4.60
LHP Andrew Suarez**	25	1	0-1	51/3	4	4	0	7	6.75

Pitcher	Age	GS	W-L	IP	H	ER	BB	SO	ERA
RHP Tyler Beede	24	1	0-0	4	3	2	5	3	4.50

Statistics through Friday; * — On 10-day disabled list; ** — In Triple-A

MLB.com

Longo, Cutch homer, but Giants fall late to SD **Chris Haft**

SAN DIEGO -- The Giants received home runs Saturday night from **Evan Longoria** and **Andrew McCutchen**, but the final dinger of the game meant the most. And it belonged to San Diego's **Hunter Renfroe**, whose two-run, seventh-inning clout off Giants reliever **Cory Gearrin** propelled the Padres to a 5-4 victory at Petco Park.

Longoria, who entered the game batting .149, and McCutchen, hitting .204 as Saturday dawned, accounted for all but one of the Giants' runs as they took a 4-2 lead in the fifth. San Francisco still led entering the seventh inning, 4-3, when the game turned in the Padres' favor.

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The Giants had a chance to pad their lead when **Joe Panik** lashed a one-out triple. McCutchen then lifted a fly to right field that prompted Panik to race home, where he slid feet-first. Renfroe's throw home was cut off by first baseman **Christian Villanueva**, who then quickly threw home. Panik was declared out, and the call stood after a lengthy video review.

Gearrin, unscored upon in his first five appearances of the season, yielded **Freddy Galvis'** single leading off the bottom of the seventh before Renfroe belted his second homer of the season to put San Diego on top for good.

MLB.com

Cueto poised for Tuesday return vs. D-backs **Chris Haft**

SAN DIEGO -- Giants right-hander **Johnny Cueto** passed the necessary physical tests on Saturday to convince manager Bruce Bochy that his sprained left ankle will be sufficiently healed to enable him to face the D-backs on Tuesday.

Cueto went on the disabled list on April 10, retroactive to April 7. He threw to hitters and off a bullpen mound and performed various fielding drills such as covering first base and handling comebackers on the mound.

View Full Game Coverage

Asked whether he thought that Cueto could rejoin the starting rotation on Tuesday, Bochy replied, "I would say right now it looks like a go."

Cueto, who's 1-0 with an 0.69 ERA in two starts, also sounded upbeat.

"I think I should be able to field the position, and everything I did today was to test that," Cueto said through interpreter Erwin Higueros.

NBCsportsbayarea.com

Giants waste homers from Longoria, McCutchen in loss to Padres Alex Pavlovic

SAN DIEGO — The Giants will have to wait a bit longer to finally take a series.

They lost 5-4 to the Padres on Saturday, so the best they can do is salvage their fourth split of the season with a win in Sunday's finale.

The visiting dugout at Petco Park is in clear sight of cameras and the press box, so you could see the Giants go through a range of emotions throughout. Derek Holland was roughed up in the first, settled down, and then got pulled in the fifth. Evan Longoria and Andrew McCutchen homered, but the rallies proved short-lived. Reyes Moronta and Cory Gearrin had big moments out of the bullpen, but then Gearrin gave up the go-ahead two-run homer. It all added up to a second straight loss.

Here's what else you need to know...

Longoria hit it a long way

— Longoria's homer left the bat at 110.4 mph. Per Baseball Savant, it was the hardest-hit homer of the year for the Giants, surpassing Pablo Sandoval's 108 mph shot against Felix Hernandez. The ball was by far the hardest one Longoria has hit this year. His previous high exit velocity was 103.7 mph.

Cutch hits second homer

— McCutchen joined Longoria in the upper deck at Petco Park with a 427-foot blast in the fifth. The ball was hit 108.6 mph. McCutchen, like Longoria, has two homers this season.

Trouble in the field

— It wasn't all good for Longoria. He bobbled a routine grounder to third in the third, allowing Hunter Renfroe to reach. It was the third error in 13 games for Longoria, who won the Gold Glove Award last season while making just 12 in 142 starts.

Triple-happy Giants

— The Giants didn't have a triple in their first 13 games, but Brandon Crawford got them on the board with a three-bagger into the right field corner in the fourth. Joe Panik had a triple with one out in the seventh and tried to tag up on McCutchen's liner to right. He was thrown out on a play that held up under review.

A steal for the Giants

— It continues to make zero sense that Tony Watson had to wait until the middle of February to sign with a team. He came on in the seventh with a runner on and the Padres quickly loaded the bases on a single to right and bunt single. Watson struck out Matt Szczur and A.J. Ellis before getting Carlos Asuaje to line out. He hasn't given up a run this year.

NBCsportsbayarea.com

Play at plate haunts Giants as they fall by a run to Padres

Alex Pavlovic

SAN DIEGO — Derek Holland currently has a problem with allowing runs in the first inning, and when that was brought up a few minutes after Saturday's game ended, he smiled.

"I wish I could say what I really want to say," he said.

Perhaps that holds true of all the Giants.

They fell 5-4 to the Padres on a night when the visiting dugout was filled with grumbles and sour faces in the late innings. The Giants did not agree with several strike calls as they tried to

overcome the one-run deficit — most notably, a strike two call to Hunter Pence that was far outside — but they were also peeved about a play at the plate that was not overturned.

Joe Panik tripled with one out in the seventh and tagged up when Andrew McCutchen hit a laser to right. Hunter Renfroe's strong throw was cut off and redirected to the plate, and Panik was ruled out on a bang-bang play. A lengthy review process upheld Rob Drake's call. Bruce Bochy said Shawon Dunston and Chad Chop, who handle the replay decisions for the Giants, felt Panik was safe.

"I haven't had a chance to look at it, but they were pretty confident he was safe," Bochy said. "But it wasn't overturned. They said he definitely beat the tag. We'll find out what happened."

The play was one that always seems to trip up the review system. It was clear pretty early on in the process that whatever was called on the field would stand. Several angles appeared to show A.J. Ellis missing the tag, but there was at least one that showed Panik possibly missing the plate. Panik said that if Ellis tagged him, it was just a grazing swipe. He had not gone back and watched a replay of his slide.

"It happens," he said. "It was really quick. You think your foot hits it. The call is the call. It happened quickly. I thought it hit home plate, but I guess it didn't. I have no idea. I didn't ask for an explanation. With replay, it is what they say."

Later, Panik added, "It's not something you can cry about." The Giants won't, because they know they gave this game up in other ways, wasting Evan Longoria's upper deck shot and a similar blast from Andrew McCutchen.

Holland allowed two runs in the first, settled in, and then got wild in the fifth. The bullpen was mostly strong, but Cory Gearrin got beat in the seventh. Renfroe's two-run rocket to left gave the Padres a lead that would hold up.

"A couple of pitches in that inning, that was the difference," Bochy said. "His ball was up more than it normally is. They took advantage."

The Athletic

Longoria and McCutchen homer, but Giants flattened by controversial replay review in one-run loss at San Diego

Andrew Baggarly

SAN DIEGO — It is the whole point of the game. It is what we all seek to do. It's where we find comfort and contentment.

Joe Panik thought he made it home in the seventh inning Saturday night. His spiked shoe most certainly crossed over the top of the plate. Even after umpire Rob Drake called him out, the

Giants were confident that the play would be overturned following a replay review.

It was not overturned, and the controversial call became the most obvious thread to pull following a one-run loss to the San Diego Padres at Petco Park.

A lot more happened in the 5-4 defeat, and before we get to the postgame comments and a few suggestions about how to improve the whole dang replay thing, here's a highly concentrated recap:

Bobby Evans' All-Stars all contributed – Evan Longoria and Andrew McCutchen hit home runs while Austin Jackson drove in a run with an all-too-infrequent two-out single – but Derek Holland couldn't squeak out of the fifth inning and Cory Gearrin lost a lead when Hunter Renfroe laser-tagged a two-run home run in the seventh.

In other words, it was the kind of loss the Giants probably expected to endure every so often when the news was fresh that Madison Bumgarner and Jeff Samardzija would begin the season on the disabled list.

That they have not lost many games this way is a testament to the starting pitching performing better than anticipated while waiting for the middle of the lineup to wake up. Those things won't combine in time for the Giants to win their first series at Petco Park since May of 2016 – they have done no better than split here in five series since then, and must win behind Tyler Beede on Sunday just to manage that much – but it counts as encouragement to see Longoria and McCutchen smiling in the dugout for a change.

Especially when the Giants are already five games behind the Arizona Diamondbacks, who are 11-3 and loom for a three-game series beginning Tuesday at Chase Field. It's hard to label any series in April as critical, but getting swept there would put the Giants in a considerable hole. After last season, the last thing they want to do is start digging again.

The dirt was flying in the crucial moment of Saturday's loss.

Panik slid home after he had tripled and then tried to advance on Jackson's lineout to medium-shallow right field. Third base coach Ron Wotus told Panik in advance to be ready to tag up. Even though Renfroe has a plus arm in right field, it was the right play. The Giants held a 4-3 lead at the time, and you let the scoreboard guide you. With one out and playing from ahead, you force your opponent to execute.

First baseman Christian Villanueva cut the throw and his relay was just a smidge up the third base line to catcher A.J. Ellis, who waved a tag.

Replays appeared to show that Drake blew the call two ways. There was no conclusive view that Ellis applied a tag. But critically, there also wasn't a conclusive view that Panik touched the plate.

Two angles appeared to show that Panik's cleat skidded across a corner of the dish. But another angle appeared to show that his foot might have hovered over the plate.

The official major league explanation was that the call stood because the replay official could not definitively determine whether Panik's foot touched the plate.

That's the difficulty in this frame-by-frame era: the plate is not a puffy, rubberized base that rises 3 inches from ground level. If time is a flat circle, the plate is a flat isosceles right pentagon. It can be difficult to tell whether a slide crosses the plate or actually makes contact with it.

So this was the suggestion from one corner of the Giants clubhouse after Saturday night's game: amend the rules to treat the plate like an NFL end zone. Merely break the plane and you're safe.

Panik said if Ellis tagged him, it was a graze that he did not feel. He was reasonably certain that he touched the plate, too. But he did not act resentful over the call.

"I didn't ask for an explanation. With replay, it is what they say it is," he said. "I didn't even take a look (at a replay) because at this point, it doesn't matter. They're getting calls right for the most part. They take their time. And it doesn't matter what we think.

"It's not something you can cry about."

Longo lets loose at the plate

The Giants matched their season high with five extra-base hits and the home runs off the bats of Longoria (110 mph) and McCutchen (108 mph) were the club's two hardest hit home runs of the season.

Longoria admitted he put some extra anger into his swing. The Gold Glove third baseman was upset from the previous inning when he made an error on a bouncer down the line – the kind of plays he makes so effortlessly, but one he has botched on consecutive days.

"I need to take that little bit of anger to the plate every time," Longoria said. "Get mad before my first at-bat instead of after three at-bats."

He took something else to the plate, too.

"It was nice to take the same swing up there four times today," he said.

Longoria said he often rushed back to the clubhouse to look at video when the first at-bat didn't go his way, looking for a flaw he can fix or an adjustment he can make. It's led to an inconsistent approach.

Like most hitters, he does pregame video work by looking at some of his hottest stretches. He

cued up video with the Tampa Bay Rays going back to 2007.

“But every year, your body feels different,” he said. “Sometimes what you did last year, you can’t replicate. In ’16 I had a good year but what I was doing isn’t something my body was cooperating with.”

He might have found something while looking at video from 2015. He tried to mimic what he saw and it felt good in the cage. It felt good in the game, too. Even after striking out in his first at-bat, he didn’t feel the need to rush back to the clubhouse to take a peek.

As for being dropped down to sixth in the lineup, which could become the norm against right-handers if Bochy heeds his gut to move Brandon Crawford up to break up his right-handed 3-4-5 batters, Longoria said he wasn’t offended. It’s the same way he has reacted to being removed on double-switches.

“The way I’m swinging the bat, yeah, it doesn’t really matter,” he said. “I’d like to get going no matter what position I’m in the lineup.”



Extra Innings

— Jeff Samardzija threw 61 pitches over 2 2/3 innings in a rehab start at High-A San Jose, and while the results weren’t really the point, they weren’t pretty. He allowed a grand slam to Stockton’s Nate Mondou — who isn’t known for his power — in a six-run first inning.

Samardzija gave up five hits and walked two. He also struck out five and his fastball reached 94 mph, according to San Jose announcer Joe Ritzo.

The Giants could activate Samardzija for next weekend’s series at Anaheim. But the guess here is that he’ll be asked to make one more rehab start and rejoin the rotation early on the next homestand that begins April 23 with the Washington Nationals.

As for Johnny Cueto, he is still expected to return Tuesday at Arizona after throwing 20 pitches off a mound and 20 more in live batting practice on Saturday. The Giants made sure he could cover first base and field his position on his sprained ankle.

— The Mac-o-Meter is out of control.

Mac Williamson hit a home run for the fourth consecutive game and he has five this season while sporting a .500 average for Triple-A Sacramento.

The Athletic

On Hunter Pence's 35th birthday, some signs were more encouraging than others

Andrew Baggarly

SAN DIEGO – Hunter Pence walked off the field in the golden light of batting practice Friday afternoon. It was his 35th birthday, and naturally, there were signs in the stands. One little girl, from the looks of her rainbow-colored effort, wore her Crayolas down to the nubs.

Pence stopped to sign autographs, because it is better to give than receive, and as he visited the bat rack, manager Bruce Bochy bellowed birthday greetings from the other side of the dugout.

Pence smiled. “Your birthday is coming up, too,” he replied.

There would be no early gift for the manager and little worth celebrating between the lines. Pence went 0 for 4 and struck out three times in a 5-1 loss to the San Diego Padres at Petco Park. No party and no piñata, even if a few Giants looked on occasion to be swinging at one.

Pence was not alone in struggling on Friday, nor has he been alone. The Giants were held to one run or fewer for the seventh time in 13 games. They collected 10 hits, but just one came from a right-handed batter, and that belonged to pinch hitter Kelby Tomlinson. They went 1 for 7 with runners in scoring position, and their .170 average in those clutch spots is the worst in the NL.

Bochy, obviously, is rooting for all his batters to pick up their production and feel better about themselves. But it would be understandable if he finds himself pulling a bit harder for his relentlessly optimistic 35-year-old left fielder. Wouldn't it?

“You're right,” Bochy said prior to the game. “You see him every day, the person he is. He's a great person in addition to being a great teammate. He works so hard. You always want everybody to do well, and he's getting a bit older. He's 35 now.

“You do pull for him to beat Father Time.”

It is a wish but also an acknowledgment — and an important one. It's a signal that the Giants are realistic about what to expect in this final season of Pence's five-year, \$90 million contract. It is tacit recognition of the fact that Pence does things differently on a baseball field, and of the scout's adage that unorthodox players generally do not age well.

Beyond that, Pence is playing in a league that is skewing younger and younger.

Last season, the average major league OPS was .750 and only two players aged 35 or older — Nelson Cruz and Curtis Granderson — finished on the high side of it. The Giants haven't had a player 35 or older finish with an OPS of at least .750 since Barry Bonds in 2007.

And there is little encouragement to be found in Pence's recent track record. He posted a career-low .701 OPS last season while hitting 13 home runs and, alarmingly, just 13 doubles — the fewest doubles by a Giant in a season since Matt Williams in 1992 (minimum 500 plate appearances).

Pence still has bat speed. He can still put the bat on the ball, which is a useful skill. His broken-bat flare drove in two runs in the first inning of Thursday's victory.

But he simply hasn't driven the ball in three years. Of his nine hits thus far, he has eight singles (two on the infield) and one double. The swing adjustments that coaches encouraged him to make in the spring did not stick through St. Patrick's Day. He is back to an open stance, frenetic feet and lunging at the outside part of the plate where he cannot possibly put himself in position to produce anything more than a Baltimore chop.

The street signs appear to place Pence at the intersection of pragmatism and pessimism. Just don't expect him to cross the street with you.

"It's still early," he said Friday night, after the Padres' Tyson Ross took a shutout into the seventh inning. "Yesterday, I had some good at-bats; today, not. He was pitching pretty good today. He had some really late life. Sometimes you've got to keep plugging away, and April can be one of those months like this. That's an excuse and you don't need to make excuses, but it's super early. Lot of ball to be played. You've just got to keep going out there."

You could look at it one of two ways. Bochy said it is unfair to single out any one player, including Pence, amid so many slow starts. Even Andrew McCutchen, who owns two walk-off hits, is just 3 for 21 with runners in scoring position, failed to come through three times Friday and bemoaned that he has rolled over more pitches than he could ever remember in a two-game span.

The other way to view it: A productive and constantly churning lineup can afford to tuck Pence somewhere in the bottom third and live with his singles and choppers and productive outs. Right now, the Giants are nowhere near that level of luxury.

Ask Pence about whether the team's struggles make it harder to endure any personal challenges, though, and be prepared for him to take polite issue with the question.

"Struggling ... that's your perspective," he said. "We're one game below .500. We're right in the hunt. We've got a lot of pitchers hurt right now, but good things to look forward to. The feeling of this group, to me, is strong."

There might be baseball fans out there who see players as inputs, who will discard them the moment they no longer produce at a sufficient level, who treat every rolled over slider or lunging strikeout as a personal affront.

As much noise as those fans can generate through social media and terrestrial radio, they are just one faction. There are many others, and some of them bring signs to the ballpark.

Those are the fans who never lose sight of what Pence has meant to this franchise since arriving in a midseason trade in 2012, of the effervescence he brought to a clubhouse that had just lost Melky Cabrera to a drug suspension, of his bugged out eyes after making a sliding catch, of his tongue wagging, of how he laughed at the sign that said, "Hunter Pence picks the hamburger in the hot dog race," of those seed-shower postseason pep rallies in the dugout and, of course, of his screaming sermons when the team faced elimination six times against the Reds and Cardinals and passed through every wall of flame.

This is the player who once fractured his forearm when hit by a pitch in spring training and sought to turn it into a positive, calling it “a wonderful blessing.” Who was the first to embrace Pablo Sandoval upon his return. Who had his beloved scooter stolen, setting off a citywide search, and who auctioned off that scooter for charity after it had been recovered. Who recently poked fun at himself while sharing an Instagram of the outfielders’ album-cover victory pose, using a slapping-forehead emoji to describe his attempt at a “Blue Steel” facial expression.

This is the player who enjoys playing a fantasy card game, “Magic: The Gathering,” and, discovering last September that I had a few decks of my own way back in college, invited me to join him sometime. I said sure, love to, figuring he was just being personable. Then a day or two after the season ended, the text alert sounded: “Is tomorrow good for you?”

Spend a game fixated only on Pence and you’ll notice that he always greets the opposing catcher and umpire before his first at-bat. He might allow frustration to flash across his face after striking out, but he never throws equipment or leaves it in a heap for the batboy. Down six runs in the eighth inning of a spring training game, he will bust ass down the line on a grounder to third.

Of all the things he screamed in that clubhouse in Cincinnati in 2012, this is what his teammates will remember most: “I love you guys and I want one more day with you.”

The days are numbered for every player, and they are dwindling for Pence. Mac Williamson is batting .480 with four home runs at Triple-A Sacramento, and went deep for the third consecutive game Friday night. If the Giants have a set number of at-bats they feel they owe Pence before they would contemplate a change, they aren’t saying.

So, like most things associated with the Giants’ beloved outfielder, this is bound to get awkward. And not cute awkward or quirky awkward or offbeat awkward. There is nothing lovable or embraceable about this. There is only the hope that tomorrow will be a little less difficult to watch.

Because Pence will never stop resonating with so many Giants fans. And after going 0 for 4 on his 35th birthday, he said that they would never stop resonating with him.

“I feel extremely lucky,” he said after a pause and with the slightest heaviness in his voice. “Not only for the support from the fans, but to be able to play the game that I love. Even one day in the big leagues is a dream come true for me. So every day, I’ve been grateful to do what I love. It’s really awesome.”

ESPN.com

**How the Cubs and Braves combined for best terrible inning ever
Bradford Doolittle**

CHICAGO -- This is why you don't leave a baseball game early. Never. There is no clock. Hope is

a vampire in this sport. It cannot die.

Not even in a mid-April blowout game at Wrigley Field on a mist-filled afternoon with wind chills dipping into the upper 20s. Not even when the home team has less than a one-in-a-hundred chance of winning. And especially not when the visitors show little inclination toward finishing a sure victory.

You don't leave early because you don't know if you will miss the best terrible inning in recent baseball history.

By the time the bottom of the eighth between the Chicago Cubs and Atlanta Braves rolled around Saturday, the crowd at the Friendly Confines had thinned considerably. The attendance was announced at 36,788, but a fraction remained near their dark-green stadium seats. Yes, near the seats, not in them. For many, the incessant blowing mist meant that the seats were too wet to actually sit in. The wind-chill temperature had dropped to 28 degrees by the middle of the game.

"I thought the 2008 World Series game [with Tampa Bay] was the worst weather game I ever participated in," Cubs manager Joe Maddon said. "I think it just got surpassed. That's not baseball weather. I don't know what the intent is. I really don't. The elements were horrific to play baseball. It's not conducive."

It was Bears weather. That's an old saw that suggests a cold baseball game is played in football conditions. It fits this one, though, and not just because of the eventual gridiron-like, 14-10 final score in the Cubs' favor. Bears coach Matt Nagy, who once played arena ball for Atlanta's team (the Georgia Force), threw out the first pitch.

Atlanta had a 10-5 lead. The Braves had at previously led 9-1 and then 10-2, so the Cubs had actually gotten closer. But according to the play logs at FanGraphs, Chicago still had just a 2.3 percent chance of winning when its half of the eighth began.

"We've been there before," Maddon said. "We've taken advantage of wild pitchers, wild pitches, passed balls."

No one would have blamed the Cubs for folding. It was miserable out there. Truly. They were five runs down. The game was already about three hours old. The Atlanta bullpen entered the game having surrendered only seven runs all season. A few quick at-bats and everyone would have gone home and forgotten about it.

Then, to start the eighth inning, Braves reliever Luke Jackson hit Jason Heyward with a pitch.

The Cubs had lost three of their first four home games of the season, with their pitching staff often serving as punching bags for the hot offenses from Pittsburgh and Atlanta. Chicago had dropped to 6-7 on the season.

When the game began, with the wind blowing in, everybody wondered how those hardy fans out there could possibly sit through the whole thing.

"Craziest weather [I've played in]," said Cubs second baseman Javier Baez, who made an error in the game. "The weather really got to me today. No excuses on my error."
A quick game seemed likely because, after all, who could hit in those conditions?

Well, Ozzie Albies could, for one. If you haven't seen Albies yet during his brief big league career, make a note to do so. In two days against the Cubs, he has already shown there isn't much he can't do on a baseball field. And everything he does, he does with panache.
"The Braves are swinging the bat as well as you possibly can," Maddon said. "I don't care if the weather is 80 or balmy or whatever it was today. They have been really impressive."

Albies homered to start the game on a looping drive toward the left-field foul pole that didn't look like it could have possibly stayed fair. But it did, and Cubs starter Jose Quintana found himself in an early hole he never dug out of.
Albies added two more hits on the day and drove in four runs as Atlanta built its big lead, one that saw their win probability climb better than 99 percent at several points during the contest. He became the youngest visiting player with a three-hit, four-RBI game at Wrigley since a rookie from the Braves did it Aug. 22, 2010.

That rookie was Heyward, now a Cub, who was taking a lead off of first base when Kyle Schwarber struck out for the first out in the eighth. But Heyward moved to second when pinch hitter Tommy La Stella looped a single to left.
Cubs win probability: 4.0 percent.

Javier Baez's bases-clearing double was the biggest of the three Cubs hits in Saturday's bizarre eighth inning. Dennis Wierzbicki/USA TODAY Sports

You just don't leave a game early. Things can turn on a dime. You look at win-probability charts and you know the odds are against it. But when it happens, you'll have a memory for life. Or, if it happens to you and not for you, it's an unwelcome trauma. That's the life of a baseball fan.

Jackson left the game early, or at least earlier than he would have liked. After La Stella singled off him, Braves manager Brian Snitker pulled Jackson and put in Jose Ramirez, a hard-throwing righty who has been up and down in the early going.

Right from the start, he looked down. The wind had kicked up even stronger. The mist was a little thicker, blowing directly toward home plate and coating the press box windows. In the broadcast booth, frozen Cubs broadcaster Jim Deshaies looked like a guy who could use a warm bath. Meanwhile, Ramirez seemed to have no idea where his pitches were going.

"We were making mistakes in the infield," Maddon said. "They were making mistakes on the infield. And these are really good teams. I think to a certain extent their wildness was attributed to the horrible weather. Whatever. We're going to do what we're asked or told to do. But I'm just here to tell you, those were the worst elements I've ever participated in in a baseball game. Ever."

In the clubhouse, Cubs reliever Eddie Butler was in the training room. He was getting a rubdown after putting up 3 $\frac{2}{3}$ key innings of relief, picking up Quintana, who was knocked out in the early innings. By the end of Butler's outing, he had given up trying to be precise with his pitches. In those conditions, it just wasn't possible.

"At the end of the outing, I ended up telling [catcher] Willson Contreras], 'You know what? Just sit down the middle,'" Butler said. "You kind of had an idea where the ball was going to go, but you had no real pinpoint control."

Ramirez would certainly agree. After striking out Efrén Navarro, he hit Kris Bryant with a pitch to load the bases. There were two out, though, and still the Cubs had not dented the Atlanta lead.

Back there in the training room, Butler's rubdown continued. It would last for a long time. Why? Baseball superstition. A rally had started.

"The training staff was like, 'Everybody keep doing what you're doing,'" Butler said. "Do exactly what you're doing. I was getting the same thing stretched out for 20 minutes. I was like, 'I'm super loose now!'"

Watching Ramirez fight his command was like watching a spider in a toilet bowl trying to swim

its way to safety. It was painful. But he got Contreras to hit a little nubber out in front of the plate. That didn't do it, with Atlanta's luck at that point being what it was. The ball went just far enough to allow the Cubs' athletic catcher to beat the throw to first. A run was in.

The bases were still loaded, but there were still two out. Now, though, the lead run was coming to the plate. The Cubs' win probability more than doubled. It was 7.6 percent.

"How about our guys?" Maddon marveled. "Easy to pack that game in."

As miserable as this week has been for the Cubs during their first homestand, it's been exhilarating for Baez. In the first four games at Wrigley, he homered four times -- going deep twice in back-to-back games against Pittsburgh -- and put up six RBIs and five runs.

Given Ramirez's wildness, you might not want the swing-from-your-inner-soul Baez up there. But with the bases loaded, and with Baez's flair for the dramatic, who else would you want?

"I just wanted to hit the ball on the barrel," Baez said. "I've faced him before, and he throws the ball hard. I mean, back to the weather. [I was] trying not to get jammed and feel my hand get numb."

Baez battled Ramirez to a full count and stayed alive on one of his customary big swings after which he nearly lost his balance. Then he lined a 107 mph double into left-center that skipped over the wet grass all the way to the wall. The bases cleared. The game was tied.

"We don't really give up, ever," Baez said. "The energy in the dugout was pretty pumped. [Anthony Rizzo] was joking around and stuff. I took good ABs even going 0-for-4. But we didn't give up."

The Cubs' win probability at that point was 58.1 percent.

"How about Javy again?" Maddon said. "Javy might have been 0-for-4 to that point, but all of a sudden, it mattered, and here comes an absolute lean drive to the gap, perfectly placed to score everybody."

Given the extreme weather, you don't want to be too hard on the Braves or Ramirez, Jackson, Snitker, Hulk Hogan or anybody else associated with the city of Atlanta. Still, there were two

teams dealing with the same stuff. One of them was able to fight through it. One was not.

"That was the craziest," Bryant said. "It's freezing cold, what was it 10-2? I think we scored all nine runs with two outs. Give credit to the fans for sticking that one out with us. It was one of the craziest wins that I've been a part of."

It felt like there wasn't any doubt about what would happen after the Cubs tied the game. Addison Russell was walked intentionally, and Snitker went to lefty Sam Freeman in a last-ditch effort to keep the game tied. It wasn't to be. Freeman had no idea where the ball was going, either.

A brutal day for pitchers was particularly so for Braves lefty Sam Freeman, who walked in what would turn out to be the winning run and didn't get an out. Dennis Wierzbicki/USA TODAY Sports

The inning got worse and worse until it finally came together with the sort of illogical unity you might find in a Van Gogh masterpiece. Freeman walked Heyward, who reached base twice in the inning without putting the ball in play. Schwarber walked, putting the Cubs in the lead and putting their win probability at 87.5 percent. La Stella walked in another run. Win probability: 94.2 percent.

Snitker was back out to the mound again, this time summoning Peter Moylan. But the veteran had no better luck and, certainly, no help behind him.

This is where the inning reached tragicomedy brilliance. Moylan uncorked a pitch that can only be described as "wide right," and while the ball was bounding off the brick behind home plate, Heyward scored. However, La Stella was caught off second in what should have become a rundown. But catcher Kurt Suzuki threw it away, and Schwarber scored. La Stella almost did, too, when a throw home skipped away.

And that's how we arrived at our football score: 14-10. Win probability for the Cubs was then 98.7 percent.

Finally, Navarro struck out to end the most beautiful ugly inning you'll ever see, or at least one of the most memorable. The Cubs had scored nine runs, all with two out, on three hits. The Braves threw 55 pitches in the inning.

The ninth was mercifully quick. After Brandon Morrow got Suzuki for the final out, 3 hours and 43 minutes after first pitch, the probability ticker finally reached 100 percent.

Maybe Maddon was right. Maybe they shouldn't have played. But when you do, anything can happen. Afterward, there was a smattering of cold, wet Cubs fans, fresh off singing an unexpected round of "Go, Cubs, Go!" who wandered out into the early evening of Wrigleyville. They were the ones who stuck out it and now will never forget.

They are the ones who will also tell you: You don't leave early.