Rays drill back-to-back homers in 15th inning to sink Twins 8-6

Phil Miller | Star Tribune | May 29, 2017

Two runners thrown out at the plate and 17 more left on base. The lack of another clutch hit, another stride around the bases or perhaps another arm in the bullpen cost the Twins their shot at a series-winning victory over the Rays. It also cost them about three hours of extra baseball.

Evan Longoria and Logan Morrison smacked back-to-back home runs off Hector Santiago — the Twins’ eighth pitcher of the game, a volunteer who threw 101 pitches two nights earlier — and the Rays won the longest game ever played in the state of Minnesota on Sunday, 8-6 in 15 innings.

The long home runs, which came on Santiago’s second and third pitches of the inning, led to the end of a game full of missed opportunities by both teams, a game in which both team’s closers surrendered leads. And at 6 hours, 26 minutes, it eclipsed a 6:17 game on Aug. 31, 1993, a 5-4, 22-inning victory over Cleveland in the Metrodome, as the longest home game in Twins franchise history. It’s also the second-longest game anywhere in franchise history.

“I want to thank the fans who hung around, trying to push us through there,” Twins manager Paul Molitor said of the 1,500 or so of the original crowd of 28,951 who stayed all 15 innings. “I’m proud of the way we competed for six hours.”

That seventh hour, though, undid the first six. As the Twins emptied their bullpen in the 15th inning, with Tyler Duffey taking the ball despite throwing 30 pitches Saturday, Santiago told Molitor he believed he could throw an inning, maybe two. “I just wanted to do my part,” Santiago
said, and the fact that he gave up two home runs had little to do with any weariness.

“My thing was to go out and locate pitches, and I did, for the most part,” Santiago said. “The pitch to Longo, he’s a good low-ball hitter, he barreled it up. If I had to throw it again, I would, same pitch. And Morrison, the ball flopped back over the plate and he hit it out.”

That’s the sort of big hit the Twins felt like they were lacking all weekend. Though they did receive a couple of timely hits and big performances Sunday.

Joe Mauer reached base seven times, including a seventh-inning home run that tied the score at 3-3. Brian Dozier broke an eighth-inning tie for the second day in a row, and Robbie Grossman tied the score again in the 14th inning. Then again, the Twins had the winning run on third base with one out in both the 11th and 14th innings, only to come up empty both times. Their 17 runners left on base were their most since 2010.

“We couldn’t get a break that way,” Molitor said. “There are probably guys thinking about some of the things that happened, opportunities we had, but it won’t linger. This game won’t allow you to do that.”

The Twins batted .206 (7-for-34) over the three-game series with runners in scoring position, including 3-for-13 Sunday. It appeared that Dozier’s eighth-inning single would be the decisive hit, especially when Jorge Polanco followed with a sacrifice fly for a 5-3 lead. But the Rays defense kept the Twins from pulling away — center fielder Kevin Kiermaier robbed Polanco of an extra-base hit, and Dozier then was thrown out trying to score on a two-out single by Mauer.

In came Brandon Kintzler, who had converted 13 of 14 save chances this year. Not this time, though. Corey Dickerson ended an 11-pitch at-bat by smacking a one-out single. Two batters later, Longoria drove him in with a two-out double on the ninth pitch he saw from Kintzler.

After an intentional walk to Morrison, Steven Souza singled to right on Kintzler’s 34th pitch, and Longoria got his foot on the plate just ahead of Jason Castro’s tag for the tying run.

**Souhan: Twins’ Mauer does what he does best, reaching base seven times**

Jim Souhan | Star Tribune | May 28, 2017

Baseball lovers say any time you go to a ballpark you may see something unique.

You also might wind up with your first cases of ballpark-induced saddle sores, dehydration, cased-meat addiction, sunburn and night sweats all in one game, while watching Joe Mauer do something he had never done in his 14 big-league seasons.

Try this sentence on for size: Joe Mauer made his first out of the game in the bottom of the 15th inning, 6 hours, 23 minutes after the first pitch.

The Twins lost 8-6 in 15 innings to Tampa Bay on Sunday, in the second-longest game in team history, even as Mauer produced the most statistically efficient game of a career that once had him headed for the Hall of Fame.

Mauer had never done this before. Not when he roomed with Justin Morneau. Not when he was winning three batting titles or an MVP award, or battling alleged bilateral leg weakness, or turning into one of baseball’s most overpaid players.

Sunday, Mauer reached base in his first seven plate appearances. He would strike out in the 15th inning to ruin the hitters’ version of a perfect game.

He finished 4-for-5 with three walks. With Miguel Sano again out of the lineup, Mauer batted in his old No. 3 spot and hit a tying home run in the seventh. He hit two singles and a double and drew three walks, one of which was intentional.

Mauer and Rod Carew are the only Twins ever to reach base seven times in one game. “I felt good today,” Mauer said. “I wish the outcome would have been a little different. I had some good at-bats.”

Has he changed his approach this month? “Not really,” he said. “Not too far. You’re making adjustments throughout but nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing too crazy.”

One game is not justification for hope. But maybe one month can be.

In April, Mauer hit .225. In May, he is hitting .347 with six doubles and three home runs in 72 at-bats. He has drawn 13 walks. Sunday, he raised
his on-base percentage from .337, which would be a career worst, to .363, which would tie for his best mark since 2013. He raised his average from .265 to .283, which also would be his highest mark since 2013. He has hit five of his 10 doubles in the past eight games.

Mauer hit two balls Sunday that were not of his usual bloop-to-left-field or grounder-through-the-middle variety. In the third inning, he lined an RBI double to right field, where outfielders rarely position themselves during his at-bats. “It’s where it was pitched,” Mauer said. “It was inside pretty good. He was kind of working me in there pretty good, so it was more of a reaction.”

In the seventh, he tied the score with a leadoff homer into the seats in left-center. Only two of his 15 home runs since the start of the 2016 season have been pulled.

Mauer’s three walks moved him into second place on the Twins’ all-time list. He has 840. Harmon Killebrew had 1,321. Kent Hrbek drew 838. Mauer’s homer gave him 133 for his career. He needs eight to tie Michael Cuddyer for 10th place.

Mauer performed like a star through 2009 and like a valuable if overpaid player from 2010 through 2013. The true downturn in his career began in 2014.

Keen observers like Tom Kelly and Roy Smalley have noted that Mauer’s swing had grown longer and slower and wondered if he would make allowances for age, as Paul Molitor did when he whittled his swing down to a twitch and a blur.

Mauer has stood by his belief that his swing had served him well. This month allows him to preserve that argument.

“It’s fun, I guess,” he said. “It was good. Had some good at-bats and was able to get on there.”

During the long day’s journey into night, Mauer signaled that he has a chance to stave off twilight.

In need of pitching, Twins send Kennys Vargas back to minors after 0-for-8 day
Phil Miller | Star Tribune | May 28, 2017

Hector Santiago was charged with the loss on Sunday, but Kennys Vargas lost a lot more. He lost his job.

The Twins bullpen was forced to throw 201 pitches and absorb 9⅔ innings in the 15-inning defeat, with all seven relievers and Santiago, Wednesday’s scheduled starter, forced into action. That doesn’t bode well for Monday’s game against Houston.

"It's pretty obvious something needs to be done," Twins manager Paul Molitor said. "We just need pitching, there's no two ways about it."

Molitor conferred with bosses Derek Falvey and Thad Levine after the game, and they decided to add two relief pitchers Monday. But that means returning Vargas, who went 0-for-8 Sunday and struck out four times, to Class AAA Rochester to make room.

In addition, righthander Justin Haley, who threw 40 pitches and retired five batters late in the game, will go back on the 10-day disabled list, where he spent the latter part of April because of a biceps injury. "Haley's shoulder still isn't quite right," Molitor said. "He's got a little stiffness in there."

The Twins will reveal their additions Monday. Drew Rucinski, Buddy Boshers and Nick Tepesch are all on the 40-man roster and have pitched with the Twins this season. Michael Tonkin is at Rochester, too, though he would require opening another spot on the roster.

Vargas had an eventful monthlong stay with the Twins, including five home runs. He batted .255, but the switch hitter also concerned the Twins with his increasing split differential: He entered Sunday batting .362 with a 1.090 OPS against righthanders, but .087 and a .207 OPS against lefthanders.

"He's been working on his swing," Molitor said. "Like everybody, he's got certain holes, and the one [batting] righthanded is a little bigger right now."

No regression

Kyle Gibson lasted into the sixth inning Sunday and was probably effective enough to keep his spot in the starting rotation, though it didn't look like it at first. Six batters into his latest "last chance," he had given up two runs, two hits and two walks.
"I lost a little bit of command from the bullpen to the mound. I don't know what happened that first inning," Gibson said. "But I had a clean second, and then got into a little bit of a groove."

He did, mostly by improving at a skill that so often eludes him: first-pitch strikes. Gibson got ahead of 15 of his 23 batters, facing only three hitters each in the second, third and fourth innings.

A pair of two-out hits, combined with right fielder Max Kepler's error fielding a Kevin Kiermaier double, cost Gibson an unearned run in the fifth inning, but his final numbers were respectable: 5⅓ innings, three runs, five hits, four walks and four strikeouts. With Phil Hughes on the disabled list, it appears likely that the Twins will stick with the 29-year-old Gibson, and send him to the mound Friday in Anaheim.

Etc.

• Hughes traveled on Sunday to Houston, where he will undergo an examination on Monday by vascular specialist Gregory Pearl. The righthander is seeking a second opinion in hopes of learning why he experienced soreness in his shoulder and a loss of velocity a week ago, symptoms similar to the thoracic outlet syndrome that required surgery last year.

• With four hits and three walks, Joe Mauer became the second Twins player to reach base seven times in a game. Rod Carew holds the team record with eight, collecting five hits and three walks in a 22-inning loss to Milwaukee on May 12, 1972.

• Eddie Rosario hesitated too long to break for the plate on Byron Buxton's steal of second base in the fourth inning, becoming the first Twins player to be thrown out trying to steal home since Torii Hunter in 2015. The Twins haven't had a successful steal of home since Clete Thomas in 2013.

**Twins-Houston series preview**

Phil Miller | Star Tribune | May 28, 2017

**THREE-GAME SERIES AT TARGET FIELD**

Monday, 1:10 p.m. • FSN, 96.3-FM: RHP Ervin Santana (7-2, 1.80 ERA) vs. RHP Brad Peacock (2-0, 0.87)

Tuesday, 7:10 p.m. • FSN, 96.3-FM: RHP Jose Berrios (3-0, 1.66) vs. RHP Mike Fiers (1-2, 5.21)

Wednesday, 12:10 p.m. • MLBN, 96.3-FM: LHP Hector Santiago (4-3, 4.07) vs. RHP Joe Musgrove (4-4, 4.89)

**TWINS UPDATE**

They are 12-15 at home after losing two of three to the Rays. They are 24-21 all-time against the Astros and 7-6 at Target Field. They are 13-12 since Houston joined the AL in 2013. ... The teams have played 15 series in their history, but there has been only one sweep: The Twins took all three at home in 2013. ... C Jason Castro, who played six seasons with the Astros, will be facing his former team for the first time. OF Robbie Grossman, who played with the Astros from 2013 to ’15, is 2-for-8 with a home run in two career games against Houston. Grossman has reached base in 29 of his 31 starts this season. ... In 26 games, Joe Mauer has a career .235 average and .317 on-base percentage against the Astros, his worst against any AL team. ... Santana is 3-0 with a 2.20 ERA in four career starts against Houston. Last year, he gave up one hit in 15 innings against the Astros, with 21 strikeouts.

**ASTROS UPDATE**

Houston (35-16) has the best record in the majors and leads the AL West by 10 games. The Astros have won four in a row and five of six. ... They are 15-6 on the road and have won seven of their past eight; only the Twins have a better record away from home. ... They have scored 254 runs, one more than the Yankees for the AL lead, and have hit 72 home runs, two fewer than Tampa Bay for the AL lead. ... They have given up 186 runs, by far the fewest in the AL. ... Mike Fiers has given up 18 home runs this season, the most in MLB. RHP Charlie Morton was originally scheduled to start Tuesday, but he went on the disabled list Sunday (strained right lat). ... Marwin Gonzalez, who has started at five positions this year, has 11 home runs in 113 at-bats, a .628 slugging percentage. His OPS is 1.019. ... Ken Giles leads the AL with 14 saves in 15 opportunities.
Twins drop 15-inning marathon to Tampa Bay Rays
Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | May 28, 2017

Nearly nine hours after throwing his usual between-starts bullpen, Twins left-hander Hector Santiago was back on the mound early Sunday evening at Target Field.

That’s the sort of epic day it was as the Twins and Tampa Bay Rays slugged it out for 15 innings and six hours, 26 minutes in the longest game played in the major leagues this season.

Consecutive home runs by Evan Longoria and Logan Morrison finally spelled the difference in an 8-6 Twins loss. Both homers came off Santiago, who was pressed into service after throwing 101 pitches on Friday night in the series opener.

“I just wanted to do my part,” Santiago said. “It sucks the first two guys hit it over the wall, but I’m good. I’ll throw tomorrow if they need me.”

The Twins had tied the game in the bottom of the 14th on Robbie Grossman’s pinch single following a dropped fly ball by Gold Glove center fielder Kevin Kiermaier, but Jorge Polanco flied out with the bases loaded.

Corey Dickerson’s two-out single off Twins rookie reliever Justin Haley had put the visitors ahead in the top of the 14th. Eight Twins relievers combined for the final 9 2/3 innings after starter Kyle Gibson was lifted in the sixth.

After the game Haley was placed on the 10-day disabled list with shoulder stiffness and first baseman Kennys Vargas was optioned to Triple-A Rochester. The Twins will make corresponding moves for relief help before a Memorial Day afternoon game against the Houston Astros.

“It’s a tough loss, there’s no question,” Twins manager Paul Molitor said. “A lot of guys stepped up and did a little bit more than you would expect in a normal situation. I’m proud of the way we competed for six hours. It was a good battle.”

Had the game gone to a 16th inning, Molitor said backup catcher Chris Gimenez would have taken the mound for the third time already this season.

Only one game lasted longer by the clock in Twins history. That came May 7, 1995 at Cleveland when it took the Twins 10 additional minutes and 17 innings to finish a 10-9 loss to the Indians.

The previous longest game at Target Field had been five hours, 11 minutes against the Los Angeles Dodgers on May 1, 2014 in the second game of a doubleheader.

In terms of innings it was the longest Twins game since a 16-inning loss at Washington on April 24, 2016, and it tied the Father’s Day 2012 win over the Milwaukee Brewers for most innings played at the Twins’ current home.

Earlier, Longoria doubled in one run off Twins closer Brandon Kintzler in the ninth and scored the tying run with a slide under the glove of catcher Jason Castro. The play survived a replay review of two minutes, 24 seconds after Max Kepler fielded Steven Souza Jr.’s line single and made a two-hop throw home.

“I think they probably had it right,” said Castro, who hadn’t seen a replay. “Based on the hop I wasn’t able to get the ball in my glove, so I had it in my bare hand when I went to tag and it kind of hindered me from getting around to make the tag. They replayed it. They got a good look at it.”

The messy ninth, just the second blown save in 15 chances for Kintzler this year, wrecked a convenient storyline. After snapping Saturday’s 2-2 tie with a two-run homer to right, Twins second baseman Brian Dozier coaxed a run-scoring dribbler through the right side to snap Sunday’s 3-3 tie.

Jorge Polanco added a sacrifice fly, but Dozier was thrown out on another close play at home on Joe Mauer’s single to right.
Mauer, who tied a club record by reaching base seven times, continued his torrid month with a game-tying homer in the seventh. It was the 133rd homer for Mauer, moving him past Jacque Jones for 11th place in Twins history.

An intentional walk in the 11th moved Mauer past fellow first baseman Kent Hrbek for second in Twins history with 838. Mauer added a run-scoring double in the third.

Eddie Rosario, Castro and Dozier reached four times apiece as the teams combined for 31 hits, 33 strikeouts and 20 walks (five intentional).

“It’s tough,” said Castro, who caught 289 pitches and went the distance behind the plate. “We had some chances there. A few things didn’t go our way, but it was a good fight.”

Gibson issued four walks for the third straight outing, including the second of two tune-ups at Triple-A Rochester. Half of those walks came in a two-run first that took 26 pitches and featured a two-out run-scoring single by Colby Rasmus.

Twins’ Miguel Sano gets another day to fix his broken swing

Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | May 28, 2017

Before Miguel Sano even left for Target Field on Sunday morning, he received a phone call from his boss letting him know he would be left out of the Twins starting lineup for a second straight day.

“I just told him I was thinking about doing that,” Twins manager Paul Molitor said. “I think he’d rather play every day. He’s kind of that guy, but I think he sees it’s probably a good thing.”

After suffering a ninth strikeout in as many plate appearances on Sunday in an 11th-inning pinch-hit appearance, Sano saw his home/road and day/night splits suffer further. He did come back with a key single off Rays closer Alex Colome in the 14th.

Eight of his team-leading 11 home runs have come away from home this year. He is hitting .343 with a 1.212 combined on-base/slugging percentage on the road and just .250 with an .815 OPS at home.

Under the lights Sano is hitting .324 with a 1.081 OPS versus .259 with a .900 OPS during the day.

For his 240-game career in the majors, Sano’s numbers are actually a little better at home and during the day. His OPS is 44 points higher at home and four points higher during the day.

“I tried to measure whether one day was a good mental recharger for him,” Molitor said. “He’s been grinding it pretty good, I think, all the way back to spring training. His swing has been off. He’s been pulling off balls. Just back him off for a couple days, more with the idea of just taking the mental stress off him and hopefully he’ll come back ready to go (Monday).”

Sano is “doing fine physically,” Molitor said, even after a belly-flop slide into home plate on Wednesday that the skipper initially joked would have to be measured on a Richter Scale.

“That was kind of an ‘I’m done running’ slide,” Molitor said with a laugh.

ESCOBAR’S MISSION

Memorial Day carries added meaning for Twins infielder Eduardo Escobar this year.

Escobar, a native of Venezuela, was scheduled to fly home to Miami after Monday afternoon’s game to a scheduled interview Tuesday morning with U.S. Immigration officials. Escobar has spent the past 15 months or so pursuing a green card as a naturalized U.S. citizen, but the process has been interrupted at a couple of different points.

“I’m excited,” Escobar said through a translator. “I’ve been waiting a long time. Hopefully God guides me the right way and I pass the test.”

Escobar, 28, will be accompanied by his immigration attorney during the process. Uncertain if he’ll be able to make it back to Target Field in time for the start of Tuesday night’s game, Escobar explained the situation to Molitor after Saturday’s game.

“It’s not an actual test; it’s more of an investigation,” Escobar said. “They will verify my file, make sure that I’m who I say I am. They will make
sure I don’t have a criminal background and make sure I’m married.”

Escobar and wife Eucaris have five children between them: four sons and a daughter.

BRIEFLY

Right-hander John Curtiss, yet to allow an earned run in 16 outings for Double-A Chattanooga, was named Twins minor-league player of the week. Curtiss, perfect in nine save chances, has struck out 25 in 17 2/3 innings but also has allowed 10 walks. He was a sixth-round pick in 2014 from the University of Texas.

With his next walk, Joe Mauer will tie fellow first baseman Kent Hrbek for second in Twins franchise history with 838. Mauer has played 1,630 games, 117 fewer than Hrbek. Harmon Killebrew has likely put the Twins’ record out of reach at 1,321.

Right-hander Nick Tepesch was placed on the 7-day disabled list at Triple-A Rochester with an impingement in his throwing elbow. Tepesch has a 5.59 ERA in 29 innings for the Red Wings, including 19 runs allowed (14 earned) in his past 11 innings since making a spot start with the Twins on May 6 against the Boston Red Sox.

The Twins will miss the 1-2 punch of lefty Dallas Keuchel and right-hander Lance McCullers Jr. in the upcoming series with the Houston Astros.

Twins turn to Santana in opener vs. Astros
Christian Boutwell | MLB | May 28, 2017

Two of the American League’s hottest teams, the Astros and the Twins, square off for a three-game series this week at Target Field, beginning with Monday’s series opener at 1:10 p.m. CT.

Prior to Sunday, the Twins had a three-game lead in the AL Central in front of the Indians. The Astros, who have the most wins in baseball, lost only 16 of their first 50 games. In 2016, the World Series champion Cubs were 35-15 at the 50-game mark.

Brad Peacock (2-0, 0.87 ERA) will make his second start this season on Monday against Minnesota’s Ervin Santana. Peacock tossed 4 1/3 shutout innings in a spot start for Dallas Keuchel on May 22.

"He's been good," Astros manager A.J. Hinch said. "He's missed bats and really gotten off to an excellent start, and an excellent start last time. If we can build on that momentum, it's nice to have him be able to step up."

Houston is 5-8 against the AL Central this season and will face the Astros' former first round pick in 2008, catcher Jason Castro, for the first time since he signed with the Twins in the fall.

The Astros are 15-6 on the road. Prior to Sunday, the Twins are 12-14 at home.

Three things to know about this game

• Peacock earned another start, Hinch said. In his Monday spot start, Peacock acquired eight strikeouts in 4 1/3 innings, becoming the fifth pitcher in club history to fan eight in a start of 4 1/3 innings or fewer.

• Charlie Morton (10-day DL, right lat strain) will not pitch Tuesday for the Astros, though he was originally scheduled to do so. Mike Fiers will replace him as Tuesday’s starter.

• Before Sunday, Minnesota had won seven of its past nine games, and its bullpen has a 1.95 ERA in the stretch.

Twins come up short in marathon vs. Rays
Shane Jackson & Patrick Donnelly | MLB | May 28, 2017

MINNEAPOLIS -- After trading punches all afternoon, the Rays outlasted the Twins, 8-6, in 15 innings on Sunday. The series finale marked the longest game in the history of Target Field, in terms of time. At 6 hours, 26 minutes, it was also the longest in the Major Leagues this season.

Minnesota left-hander Hector Santiago, who started and lost the series opener on Friday, served up consecutive solo home runs to open the final frame. Evan Longoria and Logan Morrison went the distance to break the deadlock. The Rays have now hit an American League-leading 74
homers on the year. The teams traded runs in the 13th inning.

"We're all kind of just swinging at that point, hoping that the guy makes a mistake," Longoria said. "He's usually around the plate, so the plan was just to go up there and be aggressive."

Tampa Bay was able to force extra innings by plating two runs on three hits against closer Brandon Kintzler. Longoria roped an RBI double to left to score Corey Dickerson. Longoria, who was then driven in by Steven Souza Jr., evened the score at 5 on a close play at the plate. Dickerson drove in a go-ahead run in the top of the 14th, only to have the Twins match his effort in the bottom of the same frame on a single from Robbie Grossman.

"Exhausting," Souza said after the marathon. "Everyone emptied their clip today. It took 18 of our 25 guys to win."

Before all of the free baseball, the Twins appeared poised for their second consecutive come-from-behind victory. After a go-ahead two-run home run in the eighth on Saturday, Brian Dozier gave his team its first lead in the same inning in the series finale with an RBI single to center.

"A lot of guys stepped up and did more than you would expect in a normal situation," Minnesota manager Paul Molitor said. "It's a tough loss; there is no question about that. We always try to measure our ability, as a club, to be resilient. We will find out in the short term how we do with this one."

Joe Mauer set the stage for Dozier with a game-tying solo shot in the seventh frame, which came off righty Ryan Garton. According to Statcast™, the ball traveled an estimated 381 ft with an exit velocity of 106.5 mph. It was the second-hardest hit that Mauer, who finished 4-for-5 with two RBIs and a trio of walks, has recorded this season.

Neither starter factored into the decision for the second consecutive game. Tampa Bay righty Alex Cobb tossed five innings of one-run ball, scattering six hits. Minnesota right-hander Kyle Gibson lasted 5 1/3 frames, and allowed three runs (two earned) off five hits.

MOMENTS THAT MATTERED

Bases juiced: The Twins left the bases loaded on two different occasions. In the sixth, Cobb got out of the inning unscathed by fanning Kennys Vargas and Max Kepler with his knuckle curve. After a pair of intentional walks, Miguel Sano swung through Danny Farquhar's heater to end a pinch-hit at-bat during the 11th inning. Minnesota went 7-for-34 with runners in scoring position this weekend.

Caught in the act: The Twins tried to plate the tying run in the fourth inning, but a heads-up play by Rays shortstop Tim Beckham kept Minnesota off the board. With runners at the corners and two outs, Byron Buxton broke for second base. Jesus Sucre's throw was not in time to nab Buxton, and the throw brought Beckham to his knees to field it. Eddie Rosario hesitated, then broke for home when he saw Beckham hit the ground, but Beckham sprung to his feet and fired back to Sucre in time to nail Rosario. It marked the first time a Minnesota player tried to steal home since Tori Hunter's unsuccessful attempt on April 22, 2015.

"A lot of things happened in that game, a lot of close plays," Molitor said. "They didn't go our way. We just couldn't get a break that way, but we kept playing."

SOUND SMART WITH YOUR FRIENDS

• Mauer reached base a career-best seven times in the loss to the Rays. He is only the second Twins player to reach base seven-plus times in a game, joining Rod Carew, who did it eight times on May 12, 1972, vs. Milwaukee.

• In Erasmo Ramirez's last outing -- Wednesday vs. the Angels -- he started and earned the victory, while Colome got the save. On Sunday, Colome was credited with the win and Ramirez nailed down the save.

UPON FURTHER REVIEW

• Tampa Bay challenged a play at third base in the bottom of the first inning. Polanco was initially ruled safe advancing from first on a single into left by Mauer. However, after a review that lasted 1 minute, 20 seconds, the call was overturned, and it was ruled Longoria placed the tag in time.

• The Twins were hoping to add a third run in the eighth inning when Dozier tried to score from first on Mauer's two-out single to right-center. Souza's throw reached home on the fly but pulled Sucre to the first-base side of the plate. Dozier slid head-first while Sucre dived to tag him.

Plate umpire James Hoye called the runner out, and after a review the call stood.
• Tampa Bay evened the score in the ninth on a close play at the plate. Longoria scored from second on a single to right by Souza. Longoria was able to avoid Jason Castro's tag to slide in safely. Minnesota challenged the play, but the call stood after a replay review of 2 minutes, 24 seconds.

WHAT'S NEXT
Rays: Tampa Bay's nine-game road trip continues with a three-game series in Texas starting Monday at 8:05 p.m. ET. Rays manager Kevin Cash said he planned for Ramirez to start Monday's game against the Rangers even though he threw 12 pitches in the 15th inning on Sunday.

Twins: Right-hander Ervin Santana will start the series opener against Houston at 1:10 p.m. CDT on Monday. Santana notched his Major League-leading second shutout in his previous start, against the Orioles. He is 3-0 with a 2.20 ERA in four career starts against the Astros.

Mauer enjoys #ASGWorthy day at plate
Shane Jackson | MLB | May 28, 2017

MINNEAPOLIS -- Joe Mauer became all too familiar with the basepaths in Sunday's 8-6 loss at Target Field.

During the 15-inning marathon, the Twins' first baseman reached base successfully on seven of his eight trips to the plate, including three walks and a pair of RBIs. Mauer joined Rod Carew -- who accomplished the feat in 1972 -- as the only two players in franchise history to reach base at least seven times in a single game.

"That was a tough one to lose, but the boys are battling which is good," Mauer said. "I had some good at-bats. Just got off the field, it was a long day, wish it would have turned out different."

Mauer finished a triple shy of the cycle, notching his first multiple extra-base-hit game of the season. He started the day off with a single to left off Tampa Bay righty Alex Cobb, and has now hit safely in 13 of his past 14 games.

In the third, Mauer smoked a full-count fastball for a double off the right-field wall, bringing in the team's first run. The ball came off his bat at 106.3 mph, according to Statcast™. Half of his doubles on the year (10) have come in the last eight games.

Mauer then one-upped himself with his second-hardest-hit ball of the year on a game-tying solo home run in the seventh. Per Statcast™, the ball traveled an estimated 381 ft from the plate at 106.5 mph. His highest recorded exit velocity of the year came on a single, hit 107 mph on May 18.

"[The home-run pitch] was an outside cutter," Mauer said. "The first couple were in, and I think he tried to go away. I was able to put a good swing on it."

Mauer added a pair of walks and another single before his day was done. But it signified the strides he has taken at the plate, particularly in May.

Entering Sunday, Mauer posted a slash line of .313/.410/.478 in 19 games this month. In comparison, Mauer logged a .225/.271/.275 across 21 outings in April. He has increased his batting average on the year (.283) by 58 points since the first month.

"He wasn't retired until the last one, that says a lot about his day," Minnesota manager Paul Molitor said. "A lot of things happened. I am proud of the way we competed for six hours. It was a good battle."

Worth noting
• Following Sunday's game, the Twins placed Justin Haley (right shoulder stiffness) on the disabled list. Haley entered in the 12th inning and threw 1 2/3 innings of relief in Sunday's loss, allowing one earned run on four hits and a walk. He also struck out one. The team also sent Kennys Vargas to Triple-A. Molitor said the corresponding roster moves will be announced tomorrow.

Sano sits for second day; Molitor not worried
Shane Jackson | MLB | May 28, 2017

MINNEAPOLIS -- Twins manager Paul Molitor called Miguel Sano on Sunday morning before Sano even had a chance to make it to Target Field.

The phone conversation was a brief one, and Molitor told Sano he would not be in the starting lineup for the series finale against Tampa Bay. It
marked the second consecutive day Molitor has elected to sit his slugging third baseman.

"He would rather play every day, he's kind of that guy," Molitor said. "But I think he sees that it's probably a good thing."

Sano, who has appeared in all but one game this year, has struggled as of late. Sano is hitless in his last 14 at-bats, including eight consecutive strikeouts.

After not starting for the first time this season, Sano got a pinch-hit at-bat in the seventh with a chance to drive in the go-ahead run on Saturday. Sano fouled off a first-pitch fastball from Danny Farquhar, and watched the second one pass for a strike. Farquhar missed with his next three heaters before getting Sano to swing through an 86-mph changeup.

Molitor admitted nothing from the at-bat warranted another day on the bench; it was more to give Sano another day of rest.

"I try to measure if one day was a good mental recharge for him," Molitor said. "He's been grinding it pretty good, all the way back to Spring Training. Just to back him off for a couple days. His swing has been off."

Strikeouts have been the one glaring hole to Sano’s strong start to 2017. Despite a team-best 11 homers, Sano leads the Majors with 69 strikeouts, having registered one 37.8 percent of the time at the plate.

When he does put the ball in play, good things tend to happen. According to Statcast™, Sano boasts the highest average exit velocity (97.7 mph) in baseball. In fact, he is 3.3 mph faster than the next closest batter, which is why Molitor doesn't seem too concerned about Sano's recent slump.

"I think it was more the idea of just take the mental stress off him for a couple days, and hopefully he will come back ready to go tomorrow," Molitor said.

**Wetmore's 5 thoughts: Mauer's great day, marathon game, Sano's ups and downs**

_Derek Wetmore | ESPN 1500 | May 28, 2017_

This column presents 5 thoughts from my first:

1. Joe Mauer had a pretty good day at the office on Sunday.

Mauer reached base seven times in eight trips to the plate, including an RBI double in the 3rd inning and the game-tying home run in the 7th inning.

After a trying April, Mauer has experienced a bit of a resurgence in May. He’s still not a lock to be in the lineup every day – he’s sat in some days games after night games and taken a seat against some lefties. But Mauer is back to being an important contributor for an offense that is answering the bell through 2 months of the season.

In his first game this month, Mauer went 1-for-4, and hit a home run as part of Minnesota’s home run derby against the Oakland A’s. Since that day, Mauer entered Sunday hitting .313/.410/.478, with 2 homers and 8 RBIs. Those totals all went up Sunday.

And without having studied film on every other first baseman in the American League, the old eye test is telling me right now that Mauer is playing Gold Glove-caliber first base. I don’t know if he’s seen a bounced throw that he can’t scoop this year, and he’s fielding his position well, too.

2. The late-game ups and downs for Dozier.

On Saturday, Dozier hit a 2-run homer that broke a tie in the bottom of the 8th inning. Sunday, he made a highlight defensive play and again came through in a clutch spot with the bat in his hands, when his 8th-inning RBI single briefly gave the Twins a lead. (Eventually Brandon Kintzler gave up that lead, but that shouldn’t diminish what Dozier did.)

The Rays infield had Dozier played to pull the ball, and Dozier grounded a hit through the right side of the infield to put his team in front.

Then, with Dozier running on a pitch to Joe Mauer, the first baseman hit a ball to the outfield and Dozier tried to score all the way from first base. Or, if you like, he tried to score on the hit from second base with a running lead.
Dozier was thrown out at the plate with Kennys Vargas due up next, and the Twins had to settle for taking a 2-run lead in the 9th. As it turned out, it wasn’t enough of a cushion for Kintzler.

3. Miguel Sano was out of the starting lineup Sunday, which Paul Molitor characterized as a mental day off.

It was Sano’s second consecutive day sitting on the bench, which catches your attention for the best hitter in a lineup like the Twins’.

“He’s doing fine physically,” Molitor said. “Just that long stretch we’ve got forthcoming. ... That’s the best way to keep him going.”

“It’s one of those things, that I tried to measure whether one day [off] was a good mental recharger for him,” Molitor said. “He’s been grinding it pretty good, I think, all the way back to spring training.”

The Twins are in the midst of 50 games in 50 days, so it makes sense to find rest of players, even those as crucial to the team’s success as Sano. And the strikeouts were starting to mount for Sano, who has fanned in 21 of his past 42 plate appearances, but still managed to hit .300/.333/.400 over that stretch.

The two days off in a row were Sano’s first breather of the season, other than a one-game league-mandated suspension following the on-field incident in which Sano shoved Tigers catcher James McCann.

4. Sano still made it into Sunday’s marathon.

He entered as a pinch hitter for Eduardo Escobar in the bottom of the 11th inning with the bases loaded. He took his healthy cuts, but eventually swung through a fastball to strike out and strand three runners aboard.

The next half-inning, in his first defensive action of the day, he mishandled a ground ball for an error, but the Rays didn’t capitalize on the mistake.

In the 14th inning, Sano laced a single through the left side of the infield, and was lifted for a pinch runner once he got to second base on Eddie Rosario’s sacrifice bunt.

5. Sunday’s contest was the longest game in Target Field history.

The previous time-of-game record at Target Field was a 5:11 tilt with the Dodgers in May of 2014.

One of baseball’s charm is the (mostly) absence of a clock, and a byproduct of that was that 9 innings Sunday took about 4 hours to play. Then extras rolled around and Twins relievers kept giving the offense a chance, and the bats continued to go down quietly.

One of the most difficult parts of writing a column called ‘5 thoughts’ is that in a 9-inning baseball game, there are probably a dozen or more interesting strategy decisions or near-miss plays that flipped the fortune of both teams. In an extra-inning marathon game, it’s especially difficult to pick and choose.

Just to give you an idea of things I considered Sunday but won’t make this column: the implications for the Twins’ rotation of having Hector Santiago pitch late in the game; Kevin Keirmaier made a great running catch in the gap in the 4th inning; later, he dropped a pop fly and that error came around to score to tie the game at 6-6; Eddie Rosario got himself thrown out at home on an attempted double steal; Alex Cobb got himself into and out of a tight spot in the 5th inning; Buxton isn’t the most consistent bunter in the world; Kyle Gibson started and pitched well enough to earn another start, given the Twins’ current slate of options; the bullpen chain was well-represented, except that Brandon Kintzler blew the save; rally caps; Strike 3 to Souza Jr.; Buxton’s choice to not dive for a ball late in the game; Craig Breslow is having himself a season; the tricky decision of when to pinch-hit Miguel Sano; and on, and on.

Twins send out Vargas, put Haley on DL to make room for 2 pitchers

Twins send out Vargas, put Haley on DL to make room for 2 pitchers

MINNEAPOLIS — The Twins needed 9 pitchers — including 2 starters — to get through the longest game in Target Field’s history. Sunday’s 15-inning affair lasted nearly 6-and-a-half hours, and forced the Twins to chew through pitchers.

If it had gone one more inning, backup catcher Chris Gimenez would have made his third appearance on the mound this season.
After the game, the Twins optioned first baseman/DH Kennys Vargas to Triple-A Rochester, and put Rule 5 reliever Justin Haley on the DL.

That clears the way for two new pitchers. The Twins could hold off until Monday morning to make those moves official.

Vargas went 0-for-8 with 4 strikeouts Sunday. Haley pitched 1 2/3 innings and gave up 1 earned run.

**Miguel Sano out of the lineup for 2nd day in a row; Molitor says it’s not health-related**

Derek Wetmore | ESPN 1500 | May 28, 2017

MINNEAPOLIS — The Minnesota Twins’ lineup doesn’t look as daunting without Miguel Sano entrenched in the middle. But a reality of a long baseball is that Sano won’t be able to go every day.

That’s especially true during a stretch in which the Twins are playing 50 games in 50 days, and that’s why manager Paul Molitor chose to sit down Sano twice in a row this weekend.

Sano was on the bench for Saturday’s win — and so were Jorge Polanco and Byron Buxton. So when Sunday’s lineup card was posted in the clubhouse, it caused a few heads to turn, since Sano’s name was not penciled into the batting order.

“It’s one of those things, that I tried to measure whether one day [off] was a good mental recharger for him,” Molitor said. “He’s been grinding it pretty good, I think, all the way back to spring training.”

Molitor called Sano on Sunday morning to let him know he was considering sitting the 24-year-old a second consecutive day.

“He’s doing fine physically,” Molitor said. “Just that long stretch we’ve got forthcoming. ... That’s the best way to keep him going.”

He pinch-hit for third baseman Eduardo Escobar in the 11th inning and struck out with the bases loaded. He later committed an error in the field, but it didn’t lead to a Rays run.

Sano has been one of the best hitters in the American League this year, and he sure looks like he’s destined for his first all-star game in July. But the past few games haven’t been so kind to Sano. He has at least 2 strikeouts in 8 of his past 9 games, excluding his pinch-hit appearance Saturday, in which he struck out with a runner on base in his only trip to the plate.

Overall in that stretch since a May 18 doubleheader, Sano has struck out in half of his 42 plate appearances, but he’s still producing a .300/.333/.400 batting line, which is a great example of the paradox of Sano. His approach at the plate will lead to strikeouts, but the tradeoff is that he’s a highly productive player with power and the ability to draw walks.

Still, he’d only had one day off all season before this weekend, and that was for a league-mandated suspension after he got in the middle of a shoving match with the Detroit Tigers. And Molitor said Sano’s approach hasn’t been quite as locked-in lately as we’d grown accustomed to seeing from the slugger this season.

“His swing’s been off, he’s been pulling off balls and all those type of things. So I think it was more with the idea of just kind of take the mental stress off him for a couple days, and hopefully he’ll come back ready to go [Monday],” Molitor said.

**Twins run out of rallies in 15-inning loss to Rays**

Associated Press | May 28, 2017

MINNEAPOLIS — In a game featuring 17 pitchers and 553 pitches, the Tampa Bay Rays and Minnesota Twins fittingly had to resort to previously scheduled starting pitchers to resolve the outcome.

Evan Longoria and Logan Morrison hit back-to-back homers off Hector Santiago in the 15th inning as Tampa Bay outlasted the Twins 8-6 on Sunday following a ninth-inning comeback by the Rays that extended the game to extra frames.

At 6 hours, 26 minutes, it was the longest game in the eight-season history of Target Field and the longest game in the major leagues this year. The longest game in Twins history lasted 6:36, a 17-inning marathon at Cleveland in 1995.

“Exhausting,” said Rays right fielder Steven Souza Jr. “Everybody emptied their clip today.”

Minnesota went to Santiago (4-4) in the 15th with nobody else available in the bullpen. He allowed the decisive home run on consecutive
pitches to the first two batters of the inning. Longoria has 16 home runs and 57 RBI in 58 career games against the Twins.

But without Longoria’s timely hitting in the ninth inning, the game wouldn’t have reached extras. With the score 5-3, Longoria delivered a pivotal RBI double to keep the game alive. Souza followed with a RBI single to hand Brandon Kintzler his second blown save.

Longoria scored on Souza’s single, but the Rays had to endure a replay review on the play at the plate that would have ended the game had Longoria been ruled out.

“From watching on the Jumbotron we were pretty comfortable it was going to stand,” said Rays manager Kevin Cash.

Erasmo Ramirez, Monday’s scheduled starter for Tampa Bay, pitched a perfect 15th for his first save.

The Rays had taken the lead in the 14th when Corey Dickerson delivered a single off Justin Haley to make it 6-5. Pinch-hitter Robbie Grossman answered with a RBI single in the bottom half, but Jason Castro and Jorge Polanco both missed opportunities to win the game, striking out and flying out with a runner on third.

Despite allowing a run in the 14th, Rays closer Alex Colome (1-2) got the win.

Roughly three hours before the final pitch, Minnesota thought it had secured a victory with its second eighth-inning rally in two days. Brian Dozier broke a 3-3 tie with a RBI single, and Jorge Polanco followed with a sacrifice fly, but Kintzler couldn’t hold the lead in the ninth.

“It’s a tough loss,” said Twins manager Paul Molitor. “There’s no question about that, and we always try to measure the ability of our club to be resilient, and we’ll find out here in the short term how we do with this one.”

Dickerson had four hits in eight at-bats. Souza got three hits and Longoria snapped a 0-for-12 slump with his ninth-inning double.

Joe Mauer got four hits for the Twins, including a home run, and drew three walks. It was the first time he reached base seven times in a game.

Both bullpens are depleted as the teams head into their next series, but for Cash and the Rays, there is only one thing to do after a marathon like that.

“You get on a flight,” said Cash, “and maybe have a beer.”

TRAINER’S ROOM

Twins: RHP Justin Haley was placed on the 10-day DL with shoulder stiffness after giving up the tying run in the 14th inning, and DH Kennys Vargas was also sent to Triple-A Rochester after going 0 for 8 with four strikeouts and eight runners left on base. The Twins will recall two pitchers in time for Monday’s game.

FALLING BEHIND

The Twins allowed the game’s first run for the sixth straight time at Target Field on Sunday. The team’s record is 3-3 in those games.

THERE’S NO PLACE LIKE ROAD?

The Rays won their fourth consecutive road series after losing their first four of the season. Meanwhile, the Twins dropped to 3-6 in home series, while their 14-5 road record is still the best in baseball.

UP NEXT

Rays: The team’s nine-game road trip continues at Texas on Monday. Ramirez was scheduled to make his fourth start of the season. LHP Martin Perez (2-5) will pitch for the Rangers.

Twins: The AL Central leaders will welcome Houston, which has the best record in the majors, for a three-game series beginning on Memorial Day. RHP Ervin Santana (7-2) takes the mound against RHP Brad Peacock (2-0) as the Twins’ ace looks to duplicate his last start, a complete-game shutout at Baltimore.
MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Evan Longoria and Logan Morrison hit back-to-back homers in the 15th inning, Steven Souza Jr. drove in the tying run with a single with two outs in the ninth, and the Tampa Bay Rays outlasted the Minnesota Twins 8-6 Sunday in a game that took nearly 6 hours.

At 6 hours, 26 minutes, it was the longest game in the eight-season history of Target Field. The longest game in Twins history lasted 6:36, a 17-inning marathon at Cleveland in 1995.

Minnesota resorted to using Wednesday’s scheduled starter, Hector Santiago (4-4), in the 15th. He allowed the decisive home runs on consecutive pitches to the first two batters of the inning. Longoria has 16 home runs and 57 RBIs in 58 career games against the Twins.

Erasmó Ramirez, the scheduled starter Monday for the Rays, pitched a perfect 15th for his first save.

The Rays took the lead in the 14th when Corey Dickerson delivered a single off Justin Haley to make it 6-5. Pinch-hitter Robbie Grossman answered with an RBI single in the bottom half to extend the game for the Twins.

Despite allowing a run in the 14th, Alex Colome (1-2) got the win.

The Twins had a 5-3 lead in the ninth, but Tampa Bay rallied against Brandon Kintzler on an RBI double by Longoria and Souza’s tying single. Longoria slid home in a close play, and a video review upheld the call.

Corey Dickerson had four hits for the Twins, Souza got three hits and Longoria snapped an 0-for-12 slump with his ninth-inning double.

Joe Mauer got four hits for the Twins, including a home run, and drew three walks. It was the first time he had ever reached base seven times in a game.

Twins starter Kyle Gibson gave up two earned runs in 5 1/3 innings. Alex Cobb allowed one run, but only lasted five innings in his shortest start since April 26 for the Rays.

TRAINER’S ROOM

Rays: C Wilson Ramos (knee) is nearing the date when he is eligible to be activated from the 60-day disabled list following his recovery from an ACL tear. Ramos, a former member of the Twins and Nationals organizations, will be headed to Class A Charlotte with several rehabbing teammates on Monday to take live batting practice. He can be activated as early as June 1.

Twins: Manager Paul Molitor insisted slugger Miguel Sano is OK physically despite being absent from the starting lineup for a second consecutive day. Sano pinch-hit in the 11th inning and struck out, then batted again in the 14th and singled.

UP NEXT

Rays: The team’s nine-game road trip continues at Texas on Monday. Ramirez was scheduled to make his fourth start of the season. LHP Martin Perez (2-5) will pitch for the Rangers.

Twins: The AL Central leaders will welcome Houston, which has the best record in the majors, for a three-game series beginning on Memorial Day. RHP Ervín Santana (7-2) takes the mound against RHP Brad Peacock (2-0) as the Twins’ ace looks to duplicate his last start, a complete-game shutout at Baltimore.
**Minnesota Twins: Miguel Sano has MVP credentials**

Jonathan Platek | FOX Sports | May 28, 2017

Miguel Sano is the MVP candidate nobody is talking about, as he has put the Minnesota Twins on his back and taken them to the top of the AL Central.

Miguel Sano of the Minnesota Twins might not be one of the first names brought up in a discussion of baseball’s most exciting young players, much less in one about MVP candidates. He probably should be.

There’s no shame in it, really. Already this year, we have the likes of Aaron Judge (191 OPS+) and Michael Conforto (187 OPS+) vaporizing baseballs as they begin their professional careers in earnest. Mike Trout (226 OPS+) and Bryce Harper (195 OPS+) are advanced by a few more years, but are already household names signifying dominance.

Then there is Miguel Sano, the 24-year-old third baseman for the oft-forgotten Minnesota Twins who has quietly climbed to fifth in the league in FanGraphs’ fWAR metric so far in 2017, adding an extra 2.4 wins. The next Minnesota Twins player on the list is Max Kepler, who ranks 75th in baseball among hitters with 0.8 added wins.

Pick virtually any statistical measure of value you please, and Sano is currently in the top-10 or so throughout all of baseball. Sano is currently 10th in FanGraphs wOBA at .417. He’s ninth in baseball in wRC+ at 167. He’s also eighth in both OPS+ (170) as well as walk rate (16.3 percent).

Sano’s indisputable dominance of the league thus far shows up in the standings, too. Such is a prerequisite for MVP consideration in the minds of many voters. Presently, the Twins rule the AL Central at 26-19, a full three wins above their expected Pythagorean win-loss record. For a specific instance of Sano’s influence, recall a mid-May game against the Cleveland Indians, in which Sano’s home run off Josh Tomlin was the only run scored, and allowed the Twins to take first place in the division.

At this point in the season, regression to the mean is the biggest fear for the Twins and Sano. His BABIP is a ludicrous .459, which tops the league among qualified hitters. Similarly, his HR/FB rate is an equally ridiculous 28.2 percent. If either of those numbers falter, as they are wont to do, Sano risks his production falling off a cliff, with the Twins’ playoff hopes in hot pursuit.

With a full five of their regular starting nine players sporting OPS+ figures below league average, as well as a coveted prospect headed for a long rehab, the Twins must pin their dreams to Miguel Sano. Only time, as well as more samples, will tell if he can shoulder that load. For now, though, he is unquestionably an incredibly valuable player to a first place team, so his credentials match those of all other candidates for MVP.

**Joe Mauer becomes first Twin to reach base seven times in a game since Rod Carew**

Bill Baer | NBC Sports | May 28, 2017

Twins first baseman Joe Mauer had a game for the record books on Sunday against the Rays. He finished 4-for-5 with an RBI double, a solo home run, two singles, and three walks in eight plate appearances. Unfortunately for him, the Twins still lost 8-6 in 15 innings.

ESPN’s Stats & Info notes that Mauer is the first Twin to reach base seven times in one game since Rod Carew in 1972 against the Brewers. The last player to reach base seven times in one game (without the aid of an error) was Giants shortstop Brandon Crawford on August 8 last season against the Marlins. The feat has only been accomplished seven times this decade, so about once a year.

After Sunday’s game, Mauer is batting .283/.363/.408 with three home runs, 18 RBI, and 23 runs scored in 171 plate appearances. Not too shabby.

**Twins’ Miguel Sano pranks pitching coach with rubber snake**

Joe Rivera | Sporting News | May 28, 2017

This may shock you, but the Twins are in first place. But you probably won’t be as shocked as Neil Allen was on Sunday.

During the Twins’ throwdown with the Rays, Minnesota’s young stud Miguel Sano totally pranked pitching coach Allen with a rubber snake.
The Twins certainly aren’t snakebitten. As mentioned, they entered Sunday’s games in first place in the American League Central, 2 1/2 games ahead of the reigning AL champion Indians.

Sano has been a big part of that success. In his third year with the Twins, he’s hitting .290 with 11 home runs and boasts a gaudy .986 OPS.

If Minnesota wants to prove it’s no joke, Sano will have to keep up the production in a lineup that’s less than good. It ranks near the bottom of the American League in runs, hits and total bases.

But with Sano as the team’s snake charmer, the Twins could be in good hands for the rest of the year.

Twins Likely To Draft Kyle Wright No. 1 Overall
Connor Byrne | MLB Trade Rumors | May 27, 2017

As they prepare to pick first overall in next month’s draft, the Twins are doing their due diligence on six players, but Vanderbilt righty Kyle Wright has emerged as the front-runner, writes Jim Callis of MLB.com in his latest mock draft. Like Wright, Louisville first baseman/left-hander Brendan McKay is garnering strong consideration, notes Callis, with California high school righty Hunter Greene, North Carolina high school lefty MacKenzie Gore, California prep outfielder Royce Lewis and Virginia first baseman Pavin Smith also in the mix. Between Wright and McKay, the former has the higher ceiling, per Callis.

Teams Expect Twins To Make Ervin Santana Available
Connor Byrne | MLB Trade Rumors | May 27, 2017

Although the first-place Twins have been one of the majors’ biggest surprises this year, teams expect them to make righty Ervin Santana available before the trade deadline, says Cafardo. Long a decent starter, Santana has turned in a front-line-caliber ERA this year (1.80) through 70 innings, but his strikeout and walk rates (6.43 and 3.47, respectively, per nine), unsustainable batting average on balls in play (.136) and sky-high strand rate (91.5 percent) suggest regression is around the corner. To Santana’s credit, his success has hardly been all luck – hitters have had major difficulty squaring him up, evidenced by a relatively paltry average exit velocity against (84.1 mph). Any team acquiring Santana would land a multiyear rotation piece, as he’s signed through next season at $13.5MM and carries a $14MM club option for 2019.

Twins Not Considering Brandon Kintzler Extension
Charlie Wilmoth | MLB Trade Rumors | May 27, 2017

The Twins have not seriously considered extending closer Brandon Kintzler, 1500ESPN’s Darren Wolfson tweets. Kintzler is eligible for free agency this winter, so Wolfson suggests he could become a trade chip later this summer. Of course, the Twins are currently, and somewhat surprisingly, in first place, so while they don’t appear to be considering an extension for Kintzler, a trade probably isn’t yet on their radar either. It would perhaps be mildly surprising if the Twins were considering extending Kintzler, since he’ll be 33 in early August. The righty is, however, off to a strong start this season, posting a 1.71 ERA, 2.6 BB/9 and 12 saves, albeit with a modest 5.6 K/9.

Minnesota Twins Are Weighing Their Early Success
Tyler Kepner | The New York Times | May 27, 2017

The baseball schedule stretches so long that most teams, in time, reveal their true selves. The Chicago White Sox and the Philadelphia Phillies reached Memorial Day last season with winning records, only to sink to fourth place in their divisions. They looked like pretenders, and that is what they were.

Every now and then, though, an upstart team will sustain its hot start, allowing players and fans to dream. Executives have a more complicated task — which brings us to the Minnesota Twins.

The Twins scraped together a winning record in 2015 but fell hard last season, to 59-103. They hired a new president for baseball operations, Derek Falvey, and a new general manager, Thad Levine, who considered what they had inherited.

“We felt this wasn’t a team reflective of 103 losses,” Falvey said. “Usually those teams are devoid of any talent, and we didn’t think that was the case. We did think that some young players were going through ups and downs.”
So far this season, the ups have far outnumbered the downs. After sweeping the Orioles in Baltimore early last week and then splitting the first two games of a homestand on Friday and Saturday, the Twins have a 26-19 record and the top spot in the American League Central. Through Friday, their rotation’s earned run average, 4.18, ranked 11th in the majors, with help from a renewed emphasis on defense. Last season their starters’ E.R.A. was last in the majors, at 5.39, and their defense was among the worst.

Ervin Santana is the Twins’ ace, with two shutouts and a 1.80 E.R.A., and Jose Berrios has been a sensation, winning all three of his starts while allowing only eight hits and four earned runs in 21 ⅔ innings. Berrios, 23, had an 8.02 E.R.A. as a rookie last season.

“We always talk about guys who are good now, and we forget about their first 15 to 20 starts,” Falvey said. “Look back at Corey Kluber’s first 15 starts. They did not look like Corey Kluber now, I can tell you that. It’s not that rare for a young pitcher.”

Kluber had a 5.35 E.R.A. in his first 15 major league games, before establishing himself as the ace of the Cleveland Indians, Falvey’s old team. Kluber is on the disabled list with a back strain, and the other starters from the Indians’ World Series rotation, Trevor Bauer and Josh Tomlin, have been hit hard.

Cleveland’s uneven start — with the lackluster play of Detroit, Kansas City and the White Sox — has given the Twins hope. As the July 31 nonwaiver trading deadline gets closer, Falvey must decide if that hope is realistic.

“You’re constantly trying to create the right environment and culture around your players to give them the runway to build momentum in a season,” Falvey said.

“It’s our job, when we get to late June and July, to get a sense of where we are, as objectively as possible,” he continued, “and to make sound baseball decisions — in some cases short-term and in some cases long-term — but we need to know that we’re building a sustainable, long-term, championship-quality team. We can’t shut any doors to any moves, one way or the other.”

Veterans like Santana, starter Hector Santiago and second baseman Brian Dozier could have trade value that would accelerate Falvey’s long-term plan. Whatever happens, though, the Twins believe they have cornerstones in third baseman Miguel Sano and right fielder Max Kepler, who have carried the offense, and in center fielder Byron Buxton, an elite defender. Sano and Kepler are 24, and Buxton is 23.

Buxton — who has struggled profoundly at the plate — was the second overall pick in the 2012 draft. This June 12, the Twins will pick first over all, and Falvey said they were considering at least five or six candidates and trying to keep an open mind.

“You can sometimes have a tendency to narrow it down to a very small selection of players, and you maybe miss someone who comes on a little later,” he said. “We haven’t made up our minds, and we will not make up our minds until we do our work in the draft room.”

Meanwhile, the major league team will try to make Falvey’s job difficult as he ponders his strategy for the trading deadline.

“We still have a long way to go to find out who we are,” Falvey said. “But I’m really proud of the effort our guys are putting in.”