

AL Wild Card Series: Tigers vs Astros

Wednesday, October 2, 2024

Houston, Texas, USA

Minute Maid Park

Detroit Tigers

A.J. Hinch

Postgame Press Conference

Detroit - 5, Houston - 2

Q. A.J., when you saw Meadows' ball hit the right field foul pole, did you think that would be a good omen for you, considering the last time it happened here?

A.J. HINCH: Baseball can be incredible. Baseball can be cruel. Baseball -- I'll take the good parts. I obviously have history on something like that. But that was just the beginning. It felt like that was going to be the biggest play of the game, and we had just gotten started. The game turned a couple different times after that. So it's much better to be on this end of the foul pole than the other.

Q. I know you had, like, five years between playoff games after what happened in 2019. But how hard was it to come to grips with that, with that team coming that short that year?

A.J. HINCH: I think this is about the Tigers. I think this is a young group celebrating in our clubhouse in what was an incredible series for us and microcosm of our season. We've come from behind. We've fought. We've played 27 outs. All the things that a manager can be proud of our team exemplifies.

So I think getting this group, getting their buy-in, getting their trust, getting their willingness to do anything allows us to make a ton of decisions during the game to win the game.

So I appreciate the connection between my past, but this is about our team and the Tigers.

Q. A.J., how much did your pitching order go to plan, and how much did you have to improvise?

A.J. HINCH: When I said chaos, I meant it. We had Hanifee up in the first. Really all we were planning on that



we knew what was going to happen was Holton to Hanifee. After that we needed Hanifee to be good. He got one of the biggest outs of the game that we won't talk about, now I'll talk about it, is the Heyward at-bat that allowed him to stay in the game and get to Altuve by getting out of that inning scoreless, which sets up Hurter to enter for the two lefties. Now, they're two of the best lefties in the league, but that set us up in the order with as long as Hanifee could go with all the good at-bats they put at him.

After that, it's read and react. Then you look up, and you still have nine outs to go. I put Jackson in a really tough spot. They didn't hit him hard. They get the clipper inside, hits Caratini. Pena shows some fight and fights a ball to center field, and we don't field the bunt and get an out, and all of a sudden the building was loud and things were going -- we were really only going for five at-bats for Jackson to get to Guenther against Tucker.

Our goal was to give those two lefties as many different looks as we could get and try to avoid left-handed pitching on Altuve. And so the map started to right itself when the game started.

Q. Staying on that point, the way that Guenther first got out of the previous inning, and then three ground ball outs that could have been a bigger, a much bigger situation for you guys if he hadn't closed out the inning. He's come out of nowhere, speaking of -- with the teams. How did you see his effort?

A.J. HINCH: I think he's -- first off, he's come back from some adversity, and he's had to fight his way through injury. He's had to fight for opportunity. And when he got here, he's evolved as a pitcher. Our PD system, Bach and Gabe and the group in the minor leagues harped on him about the different arsenal that he's got to use in order to get big league hitters out. Not Triple A hitters out, but big league hitters out.

He's changed the way he pitches, which allows him so many opportunities to get ground balls and allowed him to stay in against Bregman and Diaz the following inning and get the ball on the ground.



So I'm proud of him for staying in that mindset of always trying to get better. And, listen, he wouldn't be here if he hadn't made those adjustments. The pitcher that he was in the past was talented, but maybe not having the arsenal that works against right-handed hitters. And with the three-batter rule, you've got to come and get some really good right-handed hitters out. He continues to do that.

Q. Hey, A.J., in the same topic about the pitchers, you had openers game today. So what's next against Cleveland? I mean, do you plan to have Maeda or (indiscernible) in the next round?

A.J. HINCH: We'll see. The beauty of winning today is now we have two days off before we get to the weekend. Maybe three. What day is it? I don't even know what day it is. I know we have a couple days off. I know that. Two days. So we'll have plenty of time to go through the roster and see how we attack a five-game series, as opposed to a three-game series.

The guys that are here are going to celebrate tonight. We're going to enjoy it, and we'll think about Cleveland tomorrow.

Q. A.J., in the fourth inning, you had a situation, they put two runners on, one out. Hurter gets Pena to ground to that double play. When you look at this game, how big a moment was that, considering how Brown was dealing in the early innings and they weren't able to give him the lead to work with?

A.J. HINCH: That's a great point. Those are outs that kind of get glossed over because of the intensity of the game, whether it's the Heyward at-bat against Hanifee, whether it's the double play with Hurter. I'm glad you brought up Hunter Brown because he was incredible.

Like he came out, like, as high-end stuff as you're going to find, pitching with a ton of passion and a ton of energy and a ton of plus, plus, plus stuff. And we had a really hard time with him.

So we tried to grind him out and make sure that we put up some good at-bats, maybe drive a pitch count up. I know there were a couple key walks that pushed him a little bit. But, man, things were hard to come by, and so our guys, in whatever order they were going to go, had to be as close to perfect as we could be, and that included those big outs at the highest leverage moments.

Q. A.J., you mentioned buy-in earlier and you were talking about glossing over outs. To me, it seemed a little connected in terms of everybody having a role. Sometimes in other sports, we think of maybe football

or basketball where the roles are more immediately obvious, one related to the other. How did you convince in a sport where we maybe don't think about it in the same way, and when did you first start to feel it?

A.J. HINCH: I appreciate that question because I've said this after the -- when we clinched, buy-in's not for free. You've got to get players to understand the bigger goal. You've got to get players to understand how we're going to maximize their strengths. You've got to have players that will give up something in order for them to -- for another person to have an opportunity. That's on the mound, that's on defense. It's certainly on offense today.

So I think our players understand it's not about the player I'm taking off the field. It's not about Zach McKinstry, who I pinch-hit for. It's about Andy Ibáñez's immense strength against left-handed pitching. It's not about taking Carp off the field today. It's about putting J-Hen in.

If you can switch the psyche and maybe take a tick of the pride and ego out of it, anything's possible. You can make decisions that put guys in a position to be successful. Who knows what we're going to do. One of our things that we pride ourselves in is that we're unpredictable and our players buy into that leading to success. When you find some success, you win a couple series. You perform on the highest stage. That strengthens that belief that we're going to try to chase every strength we can.

Q. A.J., just wondering if you'd take us through Andy's at-bat there. Seems like we've seen this season when he fouls off some pitches, that's usually a prelude to good things to come?

A.J. HINCH: Yeah. So Andy, from the beginning of the game, knew with Kikuchi in the pen, with Hader obviously in the pen, Ferguson, King, and even the way the game went yesterday, we knew they were probably going to take a shot at attacking our left-handed hitters. We had six of them in the lineup.

So he's just sort of waiting. He literally pacing in the dugout. And as soon as the lefty did as much as pick up a ball, Andy's got his helmet on and he's ready, and he's looking at the iPad and being ready.

The at-bat, in itself, was really tough because when you do foul those balls off, it helps your timing. It helps -- you feel like you're on it. And then you're looking out there and it's Josh Hader. So you don't know if that's the only mistake you're going to get or only hittable pitch you're going to get so he stays in the at-bat.

He was locked in, and for those that aren't around our team, that's not by mistake that he's on the -- literally on the rail with his helmet on, taking strides against a pitcher that he doesn't even know if it's going to get to his spot to hit.

So I love that kid. I love how prepared he is, and I love that he stayed mentally in the mindset that he was going to get big at-bats when he went through a really rough September and things weren't as heroic as they are today.

Q. Earlier in that inning, you had -- looked like Wenceel was getting ready to hit for Tork, and then he came back. Was that a response for them going to Hader, or was that something else?

A.J. HINCH: They made the move first when going to Hader, which allowed me to leave Tork in, and then got Andy to hit for McKinstry. So Tork's at-bat is sort of unsung hero by getting on base and setting the stage for Andy. Obviously, would have taken a base hit from Tork too. Against Pressly, we were going to try to get as many lefties as we could, see if we could get a spinning breaking ball. He was throwing a lot of change-ups to them.

I was thinking about that. So I was pulling Tork back to make the decision as Joe was walking out. When Hader came in, it changed the order in which we were going to go. I put Wenceel back on the bench, and it went Tork and Ibáñez for the two at-bats.

Q. We talked near the end of the season about Andy having a fairly tough September. How much was his preparation and how he prepares for games key in keeping faith?

A.J. HINCH: His confidence is key for us. But our confidence in him is equally important. Because we kept giving him those at-bats. We kept giving him -- this is how we've done it all year. This isn't a different style because we're in the playoffs or chasing a win or -- we prepared for this from the beginning of the spring in having the meetings about how we were going to play offensively and how you were going to have to give up at-bats to others.

I think Carp referred to Andy as the Barry Bonds against left-handed pitching, at a point this year where managers would manage against Andy Ibáñez. They didn't want him on the field. He had a game-winning hit the first game of the year or the first series of the year to just recently. When Andy's looming and he's in a place like he is right now, he's a real threat off the bench to get the biggest at-bat against left-handed pitching.

Q. I know you've maintained it's not about you. It's

about the Tigers. But the opponent notwithstanding, for you after being out of the game for a year and where you started with this franchise in 2021, how sweet or satisfying is this for you today?

A.J. HINCH: This is what you play for. Baseball's great. It's going to lead you in so many different -- down so many different holes, rabbit holes and mental -- the mental grind of the season and putting it all together with this group for this team and not just being satisfied getting to the playoffs, but winning a playoff series and getting to go play a familiar team. I'm forever grateful being a Detroit Tiger.

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