

AL Wild Card Series: Tigers vs Guardians

Tuesday, September 30, 2025

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Progressive Field

Detroit Tigers

Manager A.J. Hinch

Pregame Press Conference

Q. Coach, have you guys decided on a game 2 starter?

A.J. HINCH: Yeah, Casey Mize will pitch game 2, Jack Flaherty game 3.

Q. Coming into this series, you guys have a lot of pitchers with a lot of experience under their belt. How important is it, even though they might not be pitching a certain game, having that expertise coming in?

A.J. HINCH: I think experience matters. I also think players' ability to stay in the moment is sort of equally as important. So if you have a young guy, whether it's on the mound or at the plate, getting them just center focused on where their feet are and just enjoying the competition is really important.

Experience will help you breathe a little bit easier, center focus a little bit more, adjust and things like that. But this is an excitable moment and we should embrace it. We shouldn't run away and try to be the cool guy. We have a lot of experience. We were in this exact situation last year. So that experience, I think, will help all of our guys.

But on the mound, I don't think, whether it's Tarik or guys on their side are going to get caught up in the moment. They're going to get into the competition.

Q. How did Casey take that news, especially after not getting the opportunity last year?

A.J. HINCH: I joked we could have gone to the same place in the same ballpark and had a completely different conversation yesterday. I was going around and talking to some of the guys that didn't know whether they were on the team or not. We knew we were going to have to cut down two guys, regardless of position.



So I talked to Casey yesterday as he was in the clubhouse. I said, do you want to walk out to the exact spot where I told you you weren't on the roster? He can exorcise that demon and be done with it. He said no. As soon as I told Casey he was on the roster, Tarik came over and gave him a high five. We had a funny moment there. Then I told him he was going to pitch game 2, and he's ready to go.

Both he and Jack were prepared from a bullpen standpoint and workload standpoint to be ready for game 2. And now we can adjust Jack's work a little bit.

Q. What was it like watching Casey start in Boston against the Red Sox? How much does it give you confidence going into this one?

A.J. HINCH: That was really good to see on a lot of fronts. The fastball was legit. The split was there. His breaking ball was there. He was in complete control. When we had started that game, our season, you know, was still undecided. So there was a lot going into that start, and he stepped up in a tough park to pitch in and pitched exceptionally well.

It was good to see him be able to stay in the moment and just be himself and be the pitcher that we know he can be and that he has been throughout the majority of this season. He's thrown the ball as well as he has at any point of the season right now, which is the perfect time to be doing well.

Q. To follow up just with Casey again, when we asked him about what the difference was between him down the stretch in September and earlier when he scuffled a little bit, he put a lot on the slider and the fact that he's throwing his slider harder. From your vantage point, was there more than that? Was that the pitch that unlocked everything else?

A.J. HINCH: If he thinks that, I think that. He's got the ball in his hand on the mound. It comes together with a convicted fastball and everything plays off of that. Doesn't mean you're always going to throw the fastball or doesn't mean it's the most primary pitch for him.



But when his delivery is synced up and he has a conviction behind his fastball, then everything plays up better. Him having a third weapon against either side hitter is -- any pitcher will tell you is a huge advantage. So what's going through a pitcher's mind is, by far, the most important aspect of the mental approach to pitching against a lineup. And if that's what gives him confidence and gets the results that we're getting right now, then that's it.

Q. You mentioned experience a couple times. Last year, you rolled into Houston with none. Seems like a lifetime ago. But from your experience, how do those experiences stack on each other and make this different?

A.J. HINCH: There's a lot less to explain to our players on how this all goes, right? Whether it's the morning meeting obligations, it's the preparation, it's the getting your family in to an unknown city for us until Saturday.

It's the chaos that surrounds the playoffs. The first time you go through it, it's pretty overwhelming. And a lot is not even about the baseball. Once you get to the game, then it's awesome. Everybody plays baseball.

But all the extra stuff that comes with being a playoff team was a first last year. Pretty easy this year. Like the players have adjusted and adapted pretty well. Even the workout yesterday, last year, you know, it felt like they had to do everything. This year, they all sprinkled out and did a little bit of something, but we individualized it to where get the most out of yourself so you're ready to play at your best at 1:00 tomorrow.

That is received a little bit more constructively this year. So I see a more grounded team and a more balanced team coming into this series than the chaos of last year.

Q. A.J., the intimate knowledge these two teams have of each other is obviously a theme. They just rostered a guy who hasn't debuted, hasn't played in a few months. Not that he's leading off or anything, but how do your pitchers prepare for that?

A.J. HINCH: The good news is Tomas Nido joined us yesterday who caught in Toledo. We have an expert in a new player who spent time in Triple-A. Coming into yesterday -- our guys follow it closely of what the possibilities were. You can't get into the building and not be seen by somebody. So we had some time to talk. And we have some pitchers and position players who spent some time in Toledo this year as well.

It's funny. Our teams, not only are we sort of intimately close at the big league level, but in Triple-A, in Double-A, in

Single-A. We play these guys coming up throughout. And so you'll hear our hitters talk about facing these guys in Akron or facing these guys in Erie, along with Toledo and Columbus.

It's a unique top half of your organization that overlaps quite a bit and there are no surprises even when a new guy comes up for the first time.

Q. When we talk about you guys have played this team six times in the last two weeks, obviously, pitcher preparation becomes different because you know them a little bit more intimately. What have you learned about the Guardians' offense, their bats, and how they're difficult to pitch against?

A.J. HINCH: Yeah, I mean, they're willing to play a lot of different brands of baseball. I think they're adaptable to the situation. Like last week, they weren't really doing a ton swinging the bat against Skubal and all of a sudden they turn to back-to-back bunts. They get a couple infield choppers and put up a 3-spot. When you look across the board and see somebody put up a 3-spot, you rarely see that without the ball leaving the infield or living the yard.

On the flip side, they can play big boy ball too. It's not just trying to touch it. They have some guys that can get the ball out of the ball park with Ramirez and Manzardo. Kwan can do a lot of different things. If you shift him over a little bit he'll knock it the other way. If you play traditional, he'll knock it in a hole on the pull side.

Their adaptability is one of their endearing qualities. They're momentum-based. They try to put together multiple quality at-bats in a row to make it really hard on you.

I've never seen, I think, a bench with six left-handed hitters. So things like that that they're willing to do to try to put a lot of pressure on our decisions in the back end of our bullpen that's primarily right-handed. So those are some thoughts that come to mind when I think of Cleveland.

Q. Decisions to make for the final spot in your bullpen. What do you think about Keider Montero in that type of role and what you saw from him in Boston?

A.J. HINCH: Obviously, our fans and the Guardian fans will remember Keider started a really important game last year in the playoffs against this team. We ambushed him with taking him out of the lineup because we were going with mostly bullpen games. His is outing in Boston mattered too with how he could command his fastball. Fastball was tipped up a little bit. Breaking ball was really good. He's thrown some pretty effective sequences to this



particular team.

I know he can go long if we need to. I don't know what long is in the playoffs because usually it's a fast-paced -- like the gate's usually always open in the bullpen. But his versatility and his weapons against this lineup was attractive.

Other thoughts are just trying to match up with the possibilities of these games can turn into a memorable starter, an anchor, a guy who goes deep into the game, like we all grew up watching or sometimes they turn into nine pitchers in nine innings. And you have to account for both when you're building your roster with a lot of unknown of when is the elimination game and who is in the possibility of being eliminated. You've got to make the decision before the series, before you even know what game 2 and game 3 will bring.

Q. This is more of a general question, but you talked about match-ups. Do you like the rule that a reliever has to face at least three guys?

A.J. HINCH: I think it's really changed the strategy. I think it's made the pitchers better because very rarely are you ever going to get the freedom to face the same sided hitter three times in a row. Lineups aren't built that way. Rosters aren't built that way. The evolution of pinch-hitting more and more, even with the DH, I think it's grown over the years.

The pitchers have had to sharpen their arsenal to be able to get the opposite-handed hitter out. There's no more free pass to try to expose one guy in the lineup. So when you look at the way our team is attacked, you can't bring in a lefty for Carp or you can't bring in a lefty for Riley or a righty for Gleyber. There are consequence that come with all the decisions that didn't exist prior to the three-batter rule.

I think you've seen less of us on the field making pitching change after pitching change. More importantly, I think it's sharpened the competition and been good for the game and the players to get to stay in the game.

Q. A.J., with all the lefties they have on the roster, how important is Tyler Holton, Brant Hurter. Also, too maybe your righties who have splitter, the two neutral pitches, how important can they be?

A.J. HINCH: They're huge. All of our guys are prepared to pitch all three games. Obviously, it's a little different for us in that we're going to have a left-handed starter today, which changes their lineup. The next two games can be -- will be completely different lineups for them.

So ours is a little bit different. We're facing three righties and may have a similar lineup in the next couple of days. Believe it or not, with me, I might actually repeat the lineup.

There's a need for all of our guys to be good. I don't know what the moment is. Like I talked to Jake Rogers this morning that Dillon's going to get the lion's share of innings behind home plate, but you might end up in the exact spot with the season -- the biggest moment of the season. Maybe I run for Ding, maybe I do something different. Maybe something happens and you end up behind the plate defensively in the eighth inning with the back end of our pen.

So you've got to stay locked in, and you need all of your players, including the left-handed relievers, or even, you know, the right-handed guys getting lefties out to finish a series with a win.

Q. I just saw the Blue Jays are selling tickets to the inner squad. I'm sure you'd rather be in their shoes than playing meaningful games. With this format, where do you fall on the rust versus rest?

A.J. HINCH: I would like to keep playing. I would have jumped ship and said rest is necessary had we gotten the bye. I'm just convenience when it comes to answering that question. Every team needs it a little bit more. The momentum part, the teams that are playing well and the energy -- last year I wouldn't have wanted time off. Last year, it was a long run at the end. We're fine because I was able to rest a lot of guys Sunday. We had yesterday for a super light workout. We're ready to go physically.

It kind of depends on where your team's at physically, more importantly than competitively. Competitively, I think baseball is a game that needs to be played. But it doesn't suck to sit at home and not have the vulnerability of being eliminated over the next three or four days when you've earned the right to get the bye. So I don't think anyone should take that for granted.

Q. You and Stephen, I believe, are among the most likely to use guys all across the roster, right? This time of year, where pressure's heightened, decisions come a little faster, how much do you enjoy the chess match?

A.J. HINCH: Obviously, I love the challenge of trying to put the players in the best position to win. The games are won by the players on the field. My job in this is to compete with the group we have and put them in the best position that I can and let the competition dictate itself.

I love baseball. I love every form of baseball. I love when there's less action and the players are out there doing their thing and a guy's throwing a complete game and the nine get to play and everybody goes home happy.

I also like the challenge of sometimes you got to use all 13, 14 of your position players, and I've used nine relievers in a playoff game. That's what the game calls for. So I think as a manager, your job is to play the game with your players to the best of your ability.

More than anything, I love playoff baseball. Like this is what you do or what you get when you do all of it right throughout the course of the season and you're one of the last teams standing.

So the thrill of playoff baseball, the chess match, the watching players rise to the occasion and everything in between is why I love this job.

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