

AL Division Series: Tigers vs Guardians

Friday, October 4, 2024
Cleveland, Ohio, USA
Progressive Field

Detroit Tigers

A.J. Hinch

Workout Day Press Conference

Q. How does the familiarity play in a series like this? You've obviously probably been in a situation where you played a team this many times, but they don't -- you're a different team than you were --

A.J. HINCH: Yeah. First off, I think it's awesome that three AL Central teams are still fighting to represent the American League. We've often talked about the talent in this division, and I get asked a lot about it, and three teams still stand, that's pretty cool. Obviously one is standing right in front of us in the way.

So I think familiarity is both a good thing and a trap. You know, we can kind of rest assured that we're coming in here with some at-bats stacked on some of their pitchers. They've faced some of our pitchers. But that doesn't mean you're not going to study as much, you're not going to prepare as much. If anything, you're going to do it more to make sure you're not missing anything because of that familiarity. It's nice and convenient.

I hope some Detroit fans come to Cleveland. We're going to be home for a home game soon. But I know our guys are going to attack this series the same way regardless of the fact that we play them a lot.

Q. How does the extra off day between Games 1 and 2 impact how you'll deploy your pitching?

A.J. HINCH: Yeah, you know, the way we've used our pitching, I think it's easy to think that we'll be more rested. Obviously we're all hands on deck. Nothing's changed. We didn't transform our strategy from one series to another. We're going to still attack them as much as we can with as many arms as we can and try to create advantages when we can.

So I think the day off will be good for us. The downside is we're not the only one resting. Like their side is resting as



well, and they have a tremendous bullpen that is arguably one of the best in the league. So they're going to get that rest, too. So it may change a little bit how aggressive we are in Game 1.

We're going to start with Tyler Holton tomorrow to open the game, and then as usual, we're going to go a lot of different ways, and then Tarik Skubal will pitch Game 2. So we're going to use our relievers as we need to, and having an extra off day between those games is probably an advantage for every single pitcher in this series, including our guys.

Q. What kind of conversation did you have with Jackson Jobe after his outing, and does anything good or bad influence how he can be used going forward?

A.J. HINCH: Yeah. So Jackson, I texted back and forth with him after the game with Game 2 and just let him know that I thought he did tremendously well. If anything, the way that he threw the ball gives me more confidence that he can handle it. I mean, he didn't even get hit hard. He didn't -- I mean, there wasn't a ball that was on the barrel.

I think the closest thing was 180-foot pop-up that Vierling caught in foul territory. So he got a little unlucky, clipped the first hitter. Slow ground ball. We didn't convert an out. We didn't convert an out on the bunt.

I know I put him in a tough, unfamiliar spot, but this kid can handle it. And I'm excited to get him back on the mound. That's exactly what I told him. And I expect him to be on this roster. We haven't announced our roster yet. But he's equipped to do this and pitch as many innings as we need.

Q. When talking to Jackson just about how he can learn from the bullpen and their experiences, you compared Casey to the closest. What do you think he can take away from a guy like that?

A.J. HINCH: He can grab any of those guys down there. Those guys are all starters in their own way. Some of them have started a game, some of them haven't. I think the biggest thing is just routine, and guys are used to playing long toss and they're used to having plenty of time



on their own time line as to when they're getting ready.

And even though I try, when you're in the pen in the playoffs, like you might have two batter notice. If you get three, you're pretty lucky because I'm reading the game as fast as I can, so if we can create some good routines for them, which is why we brought him up and put him in the pen right away.

That's why we didn't even flirt with starting him in his first week in the Big Leagues. We're trying to get him up to speed as fast as possible. Now, he's the youngest. So I guess that stereotype, but he should be ready faster than maybe some of the guys that have been doing it all year. But adrenaline is a beautiful thing for a starter transitioning to the bullpen in a series like this.

Q. If I had told you on July 30th that you'd be back here in October playing in the ALDS, would you have believed me?

A.J. HINCH: Well, I didn't even have half this team it feels like.

Q. What's been the hardest?

A.J. HINCH: I think a couple things. One, I'm glad you brought up July because this has not been a one-series thing or a one-month thing or a small little stretch. This has been two months of us stacking good days on good days, putting wins together, winning series, weeks, having a couple road trips, fun home stands.

And you gotta do a lot over the course of two months to not only make up the ground that we made up, that's in its separate little bucket, we also had to do it to get to the win total that got us in the dance.

So we believed in our talent. We believed in our young players. We believe in our process. We felt like we were getting better. A couple big wins here creates a little more belief, and then you win a tough series against playoff-caliber teams, and that creates even more belief. And you look up, and we were right in the thick of things as we got into the middle of September.

And then, still, I thought a lot of people were wondering when was it going to fade, when was it going to fall off, when was it going to be a nice story but maybe not our time. But that was all outside our building.

So we just kept at it and found ourselves in a really good position to make it to October and get to the first playoff series in a while. And I think we responded just fine.

Q. You've been extremely up front about the team's pitching strategy outside of Skubal. When you think back to the evolution of that, at what point during the season did you not only realize it was the best strategy but also a feeble one?

A.J. HINCH: Good question. We talked about it because of the defensive line. We were trading away pitching both in the bullpen and in the rotation. We were starting to promote young pitchers who and still are in their development cycle of becoming the pitchers that they're going to be.

And we realized we had a lot of strengths and we had guys that could do a lot of different things and they came from different angles and different approaches. Some are fastball heavy, some are slider happy. Some are change-up artists.

And we started to piece this together player by player, and we felt like the best way to break these guys in was maybe shorter outings with a little bit more strategy as to who they're facing first, and it started to work.

When it starts to work, the player buy-in multiplies. Guys start having fun with it. Our willingness to try anything. Brant Hurter came in with a runner on base for the first time in his life and got a ground ball and got out of it. Ty Madden had a really good debut as a starter. Next outing, instead of going back in the rotation, he's coming out of the bullpen.

So I think we started to think, as teams were having a hard time responding to this type of strategy, why change it.

Q. Have you been in a situation that the Guardians are in now where they've had a week off after the regular season? And if so, like what's the challenge, and is there an advantage that you guys have kept grinding and playing momentum baseball through this?

A.J. HINCH: Yeah. So I have been in that spot. And I've gone back and forth, and this year I choose to believe that playing is better than sitting. (Laughs.) And so I may think differently in the future if we're ever in a better position, but I'm not sure what the right route. It all depends on your health, depends on your readiness, depends on the psyche of your team.

I think, you know, I know what the history tells you, recent history, and I know most managers that will sit in this chair will take the rest and reset, you know, because they get to choose their Game 1 starter is somebody who pitched extremely well for them and they had a lot of options.

But our series took some innings out of our pitchers, and we're doing it a little bit differently. So if Stephen is listening, it's really hard after that time off to get your team ready. So we're fortunate to be playing.

Q. Sort of a non-baseball question. These two cities are separated by 90 miles as the crow flies, and these two franchises have never played in the postseason. And the cities have never really been rivals in really any sport, maybe football in the '50s. I'm just curious if you've thought about that at all, or is this series a possibility that maybe get the juices flowing a little bit?

A.J. HINCH: Yeah, I think for us, this will be the best commute in my playoff history, you know, playing not too far from -- it's a 15-20 minute flight for us over the lake. So that'll be unique.

I also think, you know, two organizations that are -- that build from within, you know, we -- Detroit is a city that built around grit. We say that all the time because we live it. Cleveland, obviously, a very good city, very proud of their sports teams, including Cleveland, the Guardians, who have been really good at getting to the playoffs and being in the playoffs and not too far removed from the World Series.

So two proud cities in a great part of the country, more so in the summer than the winter. But I'm glad that this natural rivalry of young teams, exciting, youthful exuberance of fan bases that are going to come out, and you're going to see packed stadiums on both sides. It's good for baseball.

Q. What makes Holton so special that he can do anything?

A.J. HINCH: Yeah. Slow heartbeat is the first ingredient. Being able to get anybody out is also key. He's got pitches for everybody. He can get creative. He can be stubborn. He's a strike thrower.

But the slow heartbeat allows me to deploy him at any time. I think he's pitched in every inning, including the tenth. I'm not sure if he got to the eleventh or twelfth. But he's the type of pitcher you want in every situation.

And so I know it's unique, and for a reliever to have as many innings as he has, but he never feels sort of overused or tired. He can get righties out. He's got a tall task with that, whether they sit Lane at the top.

Jose is going to be somewhere in the lineup unless he needs a day off. I think he can handle the emotion of that by being a bully in the strike zone and getting really key

outs. He just did it the other day. I'm not sure how many people have started back-to-back games. But he's going to be on the short list.

Q. Over the past few days, we've talked to Jake Rogers about how the pitching chaos impacts him. Did you have to prep him for that when that became the plan, or is it something that is a little easier than it might seem on the outside?

A.J. HINCH: Yeah, well, we prep him just by continuing to hone in on our pitchers' strengths and how that matches up against the hitter weakness. It doesn't mean you don't always take a risk sometimes. You're not going to pitch the same way over and over again. Like both sides have the same information, somewhat translated in different ways or used in different ways.

As a catcher, you know, you're no longer held hostage to having to set up a hitter or not show a hitter everything in the first at-bat or sort of worry too much about exposing your guys' stuff. You can attack him there kind of like you do out of the bullpen and realize you can do anything you want, and you're probably not going to see him again. If you are going to see him again, maybe it's only one other time.

There were some situations last series where I was going to leave a guy to go one time through, and they swung at the first pitch. It's still an advantage the next time you see him. That almost doesn't count as a repeat. Getting Jake out of the starter mindset of somebody who's going to be in for 90 to 100 pitches is one thing, but given him the liberty to be as creative as he can be actually frees him up to call games and attack the opponent.

Q. The power of suggestion trying to suggest Jose on the day off?

A.J. HINCH: Right. No reaction from anybody, including Vogt. I bet he already put him in.

Q. The news today about Tito coming back in Cincinnati, just your reaction to that. Obviously you've had encounters with him here over the years.

A.J. HINCH: Yeah. I've had some tough battles with him in the playoffs and throughout the years and someone I've always looked up to. And I guess, embarrassingly now, I went to him in the last game of the year last year to give him a hug and tell him thanks for everything for what he's done for managers and how he's welcomed young managers into the game. Now I gotta go back to hating him. (Laughs.)

I love Tito. I think he's good for the game. Bringing his experience back into this chair makes it hard to manage against these teams. And I'm thrilled for him, for his health, for his eagerness to get back in this chair. Obviously it means somebody lost their position. And I have a tremendous amount of respect for David Bell. But baseball is way better with Tito Franco in it.

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