

# AL Wild Card Series: Tigers vs Guardians

Monday, September 29, 2025

Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Progressive Field

## Detroit Tigers

## Manager AJ Hinch

### Pregame Press Conference

(In progress.)

AJ HINCH: For tomorrow. Kills a couple hours during the day and guys can get a couple hours of work in and get out of here.

**Q. (Indiscernible).**

AJ HINCH: No, that's the group. The group that was in Boston plus those two are here, and obviously we've got to pare it down to 26 by tomorrow. I think it's around the 10:00 deadline. There's always the debate. There's always the hard decisions at the end, and you know, most likely they're pitching decisions.

I'm expecting us to carry all the position players who were in Boston to end the year I would expect to be active. And then decide how many pitchers we're going to use and how to configure it in order.

**Q. For Colt, is there any chance we see him in this series?**

AJ HINCH: Yeah, Colt is here too. Colt is going to be here. He's not going to be active. He's going to come and continue his rehab. He's not here yet. He's flying over after he does his rehab today in Detroit. He'll join so you'll see him tomorrow, but he's not going to be on the active roster.

**Q. Is there optimism if you guys advance he could be in play for you?**

AJ HINCH: We hope so. We don't now because there is a lot of time between now and then, but one of the reason we are going to bring him here is to be a part of this group and get his work in and start to increase the volume and intensity of his work and then we have to make a judgment call.



But let's just hope we have that judgment call to make, which is because we won the series; we want him around this team and ready to go.

**Q. Do you have anything set in stone for your pitching?**

AJ HINCH: Tarik. Tarik definitely set in stone. We're going to talk about it again today. I'm about to go to a meeting after this and go over both the last-minute roster decisions and Game 2 and potential Game 3.

Obviously Jack and Casey are the two most likely candidates and both have strengths that could help us.

We're going to kind of go over every scenario.

So the good thing about the Playoffs and the Wild Card round and how fast it gets here is that we certainly know Cleveland, they know us.

We obviously have had all of our pitchers pitch against these guys in the last 10 days, 12 days. So we'll sort it out and hopefully have something for you tomorrow.

**Q. Is there a conventional wisdom on whether greater familiarity helps more the pitching side or the hitting side?**

AJ HINCH: I don't know. I think in my time in the game, I feel like it's all relative to who dominates, right. When a pitcher gets hit, we often shift it towards that it was advantage hitter, and when the pitcher dominates, it's advantage pitcher because he can make adjustments faster.

But I don't think it really matters when you get into this segment. It is kind of weird to think that we've played these guys so many times in the last couple weeks and then we start the Playoffs with them. I think it doesn't necessarily make Gavin Williams easier to hit or Tarik Skubal.

It doesn't present any more challenges for him than what's



already there. It's kind of in the eye of the beholder a little bit on what it means to play a team that these guys have faced.

**Q. What is it about their style of play that makes them such a difficult team?**

AJ HINCH: Cleveland, they're super talented and they are relentless with their approach. I mean, you can talk about on the pitching side their approach is to pound the strike zone and continue to throw quality arms at you. Their starters have been going deep, which will be a question going into this series is how quickly can we put pressure on them to make decisions, and what you get rewarded for by that is going into an elite bullpen. They're difficult matchup-wise from a pitching standpoint.

On the offensive side, Cleveland has really -- despite me always talking about José Ramirez when we play them, their length of their lineup of where they put the ball in play and put pressure on you. It do a lot of different things. They usually get the platoon advantage. They are relentless with coming at you with small ball. They obviously -- it feels like every time that a big spot comes up, they get to insert José Ramirez into that spot no matter where we are in the order because he seems to come up with guys on base all the time.

Whether it's Kwan getting on base for them or Martinez has floated in there, Schneemann has floated in there. They present challenges for us because of the bold play.

**Q. Where did your relationship with Stephen Vogt start?**

AJ HINCH: Yeah, so I got to know Stephen at the All-Star Game in 2015. He was an active player. I was an invited coach. I got a chance to spend a little bit of time with him.

Over the years you develop these baseball friendships from the other side. There's always the bro hug. There's always the common respect among catchers and ex-catchers. There's always this time to -- you seem to know people even if you haven't spent a ton of time with them.

At the All-Star Game I got behind the scenes a little bit and got to talk to him and learn how his mind works, and at that time you don't want to tell him you should retire because he's an All-Star, but I started hitting on him about getting into coaching, and if he ever wanted anything to let me know.

When he came off the field which was a remarkable career but also remarkable exit, the whole kids thing and his

family and things that are so important to him, I put the full-court press on him to potentially come to work.

I got to recruit him a little bit and got close until hometown team in Seattle took him and put him in the bullpen.

I've always had a great respect for him and how his mind works, and now we're seeing it play out fully at the highest level as one of the better managers and tougher managers to manage against because he's willing to do anything, and that includes using his gut on when he stays with his pitchers or using the numbers to guide his framework of decision making.

**Q. Any worry with Skubal that this is his first start since what happened last Tuesday, and it's at the same place?**

AJ HINCH: No. I think Tarik did an incredible job of switching to being a human that night. He went and visited him in the hospital and was able to connect with him and get some peace that he was going to be okay. Then he's gone about his norm ago work.

I don't, I don't think Tarik will be impacted by much of anything other than the adrenaline he needs to control going into Game 1 of a playoff series, which is something he's done before. We were in this exact position last year, and he went in and had an incredible game using that energy and that adrenaline.

When it comes to Cleveland and the incident last week with Fry, I think Tarik has come to peace with -- that it was an unfortunate incident and David is going to be okay.

**Q. Does it surprise you that he was concerned enough to go and visit him --**

AJ HINCH: Not at all.

**Q. You know him better than we do in Cleveland. What is he like as a person?**

AJ HINCH: Well, what you see on the field is what you see off the field. He is a super respectful, highly motivated, like, driven athlete to be good, and that's how he runs his family too. He's a great father. He's a great husband. He's super consistent with how he goes about his business. He's very methodical. He's prepared. Like everything about him is sort of one and the same.

Now, you see an intense competitor when you get him on the field, and when his kids get older I bet he's going to try to beat them at board games. That's sort of what he's about.

I think for him, being able as he's matured in the game and where his status has grown, he's done an incredible job of being able to bring that human in him out on the field. You see the interaction with players. You see the banter. You see walking off, strutting off the mound and inciting the crowd.

There's a lot of that that has grown over the years because of how comfortable he is as a person first and then pitcher next. He's got hardware to back it up, so he's a tough guy to compete against. He's an easy guy to compete with.

**Q. You mentioned that competitive fire on the field. I've also noticed Skubal in between innings seems to be rather loose. Obviously when you're having that success you have that confidence, but have you noticed that, too? At what point during his career did that become clear?**

AJ HINCH: That he can be a normal person in the middle of the competition? It's grown. I think when you're young and you're trying to figure it out -- I think people see Tarik right now and they think that he has been this way his whole career. This has been a work in progress. He has evolved as a strike thrower. He's evolved in his repertoire. He has tweaked his stuff. He has grown physically. So he has developed at this level with a ton of attention on him through some pretty lean years in Detroit. He had to navigate injury. He had to navigate losing. He had to do a lot to get to this point.

He's learned something every step along the way.

I think experience does help you become more and more comfortable in those moments, whether it's reviewing a good inning, a bad inning, whether it's handling success, handling failure. It hasn't just clicked one time. It's been a growing sense of accomplishment for him.

I would say completing a season last year in the regular season and stamping it with a Cy Young is always going to give a guy some stability in his world that he's among the elite. There are only so many pitchers who have that hardware, and once you get to the top of that mountain, the best part of Tarik is he got right back to the bottom of that mountain and he's climbing it again, and he's hopefully going to win another one this year.

**Q. When discussing Cleveland's lineup, what makes Rocchio a dangerous player, especially in a short series, because you guys got to see it during the divisional last year.**

AJ HINCH: Yeah, so Rocchio is again, another young

player who's starting to learn who he is and what he's been about. We watched him from the other side. We saw him at shortstop; now we see him at second. I think for a young player to be able to have the platoon advantage is a big deal early on. I don't know the person or the human, but I know the player always hitting the opposite handed pitcher is a nice luxury to have.

We've watched it with our guys. Wenceel Pérez has grown at the Big League level over the last year and a half, precisely because he's had tough at-bats, but at-bats where he's had the platoon advantage.

I think with Rocchio, what I see from the other side is a calm heartbeat. I see him under control. I know that he's going to bring that defensively, and as more and more offensive at-bats, I've watched from the other side of him being comfortable in the moment, the ball is play is going to help him, too.

I think it's fun for me to look around the league and watch these young players grow and then a year later look at what they are and a year later after that. It's tough when they're on the other side and they get better, but he's gotten better, and I think that's a hat tip to him and the staff over there.

**Q. AJ for those of us that weren't with you in Boston, can you give us an idea of maybe the sense of relief when you clinched and the fact that maybe September hasn't gone the way you wanted it to --**

AJ HINCH: That's an understatement. But I appreciate the respect.

Yeah, so I don't know if relief is the right word. I think it's a sense of accomplishment. One of the things that we believe in is playing your whole schedule and making sure that you post for 162.

We had done so well and banked so many wins at the beginning of the season that it allowed for a tough stretch to challenge that.

But the sense of accomplishment is the same. We don't need to apologize for getting to October the way that we did because we put up the wins, and we played well enough to be an October team, and I would guess Steven is going to come in here and say that we're a real challenge.

I think there's always a need to explain yourself when you're in my shoes or when you're in your team's shoes of why did it happen the way it happened. The reality is when we set out, we wanted to be a playoff team. We wanted to

win the division, and we wanted to continue on into the Playoffs. The one thing we can't do now is win the division, but we're in the hunt, and we have a chance to win this series as much as Cleveland does. There's no more talk about how we got there.

The sense of accomplishment was real, the party was real, and our players deserved that moment because we earned it, and that's always going to stick with me about this team.

**Q. Last year you were the team left for dead and you went on a run in August and September. What was it like viewing it from the other side and seeing another team do it knowing you have that experience --**

AJ HINCH: No, we got to see it firsthand last year. We went on that magical run that led us to the postseason, and we fed off of that for a long time. So we know how they feel, given that parts of the roster were traded off. The conversations were around playing out the season and into next year. We went through all that.

But none of that matters, and we know that. We know when we walked into Houston last year as the feel-good story and the attention was coming to us about how unique it was on our path to get there, we still had people we had to deal with on the other side and we responded.

I want to congratulate them because it's an incredible accomplishment to maintain your level of success for as long as you did, and then the superlatives stop. I'm done with them now, and now we're going to go one-on-one for a three-game series, and whoever gets two gets to advance.

**Q. At what point over the past year did you see Dillon Dingler as this guy could be an everyday catcher?**

AJ HINCH: I think it's more this year. We had Dillon up here last year. He didn't catch a playoff inning, but he was around it, he was part of the meetings. Jake Rogers took down every aspect of the catching position, down the stretch and into October.

But Dillon is a great observer and he's a good learner, and this year when the opportunity opened up and Jake got hurt, a lot of our fate was in his ability to transition to being an everyday guy and handling the bulk of the catching and leading that pitching staff and contributing something on offense.

But one thing I've shared with our local beat before is that he's always made the adjustment at every level. He's been better the second time that he's come back after initial experience.

It shouldn't surprise us, although it usually does when a player gets that much better. But his balance, his preparation, his demeanor, like everything screams everyday catcher and someone you can rely on every single day, and we have.

Yesterday was his first day off in a while, and it's getting him ready for this next step, which can be a long time if we play well.

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