

CUBS

WORLD SERIES QUEST

Underused Contreras helps spark Cubs hitting revival in Game 4

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Welcome to prime time, Willson Contreras.

Slumping Addison Russell and Anthony Rizzo made the biggest noise with overdue homers, but catcher Contreras did the little things to spark the Cubs' NLCS-tying 10-2 victory over the Dodgers in Game 4 Wednesday night.

Aggressive rookie Contreras, 24, the Cubs' future behind the plate, touched off the desperately-needed Cubs offensive revival. Better yet for the anxious multitudes, Contreras ensured the return of his team's World Series quest to Wrigley Field Saturday night for Game 6 – and another matchup against Dodgers ace Clayton Kershaw.



Willson Contreras (left) took care of the bloop, Addison Russell (right) muscled up for the blast as the Cubs bats revived in Game 4. Photos: baseball-reference.com.

So at least for one day, the creeping nervousness in the Cubs Universe could be allayed. Any setback in the Cubs' drive for the century-delayed championship, which would be accomplished against the home-field possessing Cleveland Indians, touches off mini-panic and media fear-mongering.

The old baseball strategy of a “bloop and a blast” worked to perfection as Contreras got the petrified lineup moving with a what Hawk Harrelson calls a “Kansas City special” RBI single to left in the fourth. Moments later, Russell broke out of his 1-for-25 post-season deep freeze with a booming two-run homer to right center to ensure a short night for 20-year-old Dodgers lefty Julio Urias.

For good measure, Contreras picked off Justin Turner from second base in the first before making a tough tag on piano-lugging Adrian Gonzalez trying to score in the third. A microsecond before Gonzalez touched home plate with his hand, the tag was upheld by a lengthy replay.

Although Contreras started Game 2 catching Kyle Hendricks, his timely emergence as the impactful Cubs rookie of 2016 should have earned him a playoff regular's slot shifting between catcher and the outfield, perhaps in place of the offensively-challenged Ja-

son Heyward. But manager Joe Maddon carefully calibrates rookies' playing time while assuaging the egos of veterans like Heyward. And a Maddon favorite like Ben Zobrist – Game 4's cleanup hitter amid another altered lineup -- was not going to grab some bench.

Put me in, coach, Contreras had a right to say after a 12-homer, .282 performance in 76 regular-season games after making his big-league debut June 17.

Contreras certainly was not given the chance to slump. So you wonder if Maddon and hitting coach John Mallee, pride of Schererville, Ind., counseled their throttled hitters in the manner of Fox analyst John Smoltz's mid-game commentary. Transformed under Theo Epstein into a high on-base, count-working team, the Cubs obviously had to tweak their strategy against the strike zone-pounding Dodgers. Smoltz said the Cubs needed to be "a little more aggressive," a "little more committed" with swings.

Rizzo apparently adapted that tactic with his homer and a two-run single in the sixth that nearly put the game out of reach for the Dodgers.

Meanwhile, managers' baseball-wide desperation in pitching moves continued to envelop Maddon in Game 4. He pulled playoff-tested John Lackey with a 5-0 lead with two on and none out in the fifth. Of course, Cubs reliever Mike Montgomery was immediately greeted by a Howie Kendrick single to load the bases while Fox TV cameras kept focusing on the obviously peeved Lackey. One out later, Justin Turner ricocheted a two-run single off Montgomery's glove to get the Dodgers temporarily back into the game.

But sometimes such a move changes into chicken salad from something a lot worse on the fowl side. Montgomery limited the damage to two runs. Then, allowed to bat in a bunting situation in the sixth, he instead contributed a single and scored on Rizzo's single amid a five-run inning capped by Keystone Kops Dodgers fielding.

Jon Lester can give the Cubs a 3-2 edge in the series -- one triumph over Kershaw from the World Series -- with a victory in Game 5 Thursday in a rematch with right-hander Kenta Maeda.

On paper, the Cubs apparently have the edge with the feeling the bats will continue to wake up. But more unexpected playoff drama is always in the offing.

Hold on tight.