



‘Froggy’ Hands: Maybe cut down Cubs rotation workload in second half?

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As a man who knew how to maintain his effectiveness during the Cubs’ most fateful ever stretch run, Bill Hands has a pretty good idea what manager Joe Maddon must do with his starting rotation two months down the road.

The quintet of Jake Arrieta, Jon Lester, John Lackey, Jason Hammel and Kyle Hendricks are stunning baseball with a collective ERA that even undercut Hands’ best season in 1969. The trick will be maintaining that stingy efficiency, and even improving upon it, in the playoffs. Otherwise, the Cubs’ spectacular regular season will be consigned with that of the Golden State Warriors – much ado about nothing when a world championship is not attained.

“There’s a question of being well rested and a question of staying sharp,” said Hands, 76, monitoring the Cubs’ skyrocketing ascent from the burgh of Orient, at the eastern tip of Long Island.

“It’s kind of a happy medium. Can you say to a Jon Lester I want you to pitch every fifth day, but only have you pitch five innings or 75 pitches? It might be up to each individual (not coming out of games, especially with a shutout going). That’s human nature. I don’t know if I have a fair answer. If a guy has a nagging little something, skipping a start or a five-inning start is to his benefit.



At 76, Bill Hands (left) is still active in the family auto repair business in Orient, N.Y. The shop is a three-generation affair with Hands son, Billy III (center) and grandson Alex (right).

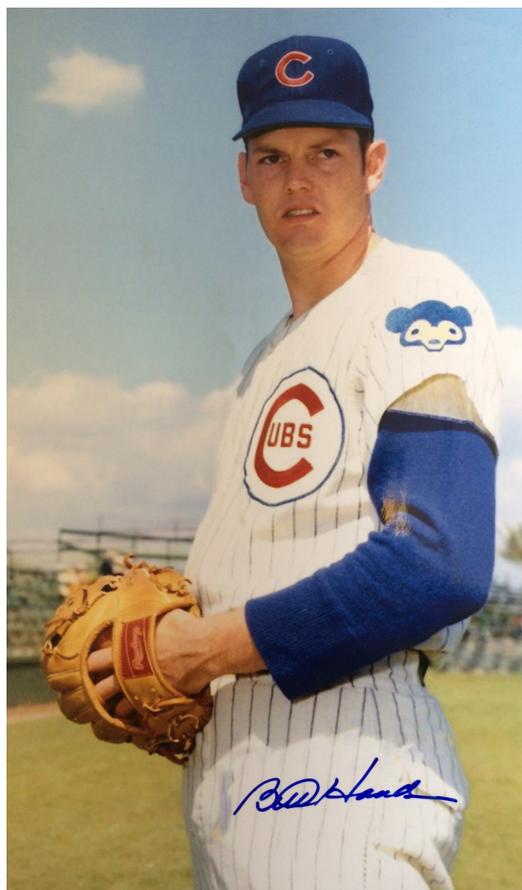
“Some guys, maybe an Arrieta, who’s a workout freak, might need to throw 100 pitches to stay sharp. They got to get their heads together to figure out what’s best for an individual.”

The Cubs' brass is already thinking along the same lines. Reliever Adam Warren was dispatched to Triple-A to get stretched out for several spot starts during an upcoming busy part of the schedule, enabling the existing five starters to get extra rest at mid-season.

Cubs manager Joe Maddon appreciates baseball history and no doubt, as a professed Cardinals fan in his teen-age years, remembers control-pitcher Hands. He might want to call “Froggy” at his three-generation family-run auto repair shop in Orient or at the seasonal home he shares with wife Sandy to get a primer on how to maintain one’s stamina down the stretch.

While almost everything else was collapsing around the Cubs in the final month of 1969, Hands kept his end of the bargain and actually pitched better. He ended up winning 20 games, teaming with Fergie Jenkins’ 21. They remain the only pair of Cubs 20-game winners in one season since Lon Warnecke and Bill Lee in 1935.

On Aug. 25, 1969, Hands was allowed to pitch into the ninth trailing 6-4 against the Reds at Wrigley Field in the umpteenth example of Leo Durocher’s senile managing late that season. Hands, who in 2010 called Durocher a “different kettle of fish” as a personality, gave up another run in the ninth before he was pulled. Fading closer Phil Regan was charged with two more and that negated Cubs’ four-run rally in the bottom of the ninth in the 9-8 loss.



Bill Hands in his prime as the Cubs' No. 2 starter.

Hands drops ERA in September while others’ balloon

Hands was 15-11 with a 2.61 ERA after the six-earned-runs yield after his ERA had been in the 2.40s in August. During his next three starts, he recorded a 2-1 win over Atlanta, a 2-0 loss to the Reds and Jim Maloney, and 3-2 loss to Jerry Koosman in the infamous Black Cat Game on Sept. 8 in Shea Stadium. Hands went on to break the Cubs’ eight-game losing streak that dropped them from first place for good in ’69 with a 5-1 win over Cards on Sept. 12.

He finished the season 20-14, dropping his ERA to 2.49, earning Chicago Player of the Year honors from the Chicago chapter of the Baseball Writers Association of America. The ERA now ranks fifth among all Cubs starters since World War II after Arrieta's 1.77 of last year, Dick Ellsworth's 2.11 in 1963, Greg Maddux's 2.18 in 1992 and Mark Prior's 2.43 in 2003.

While Hands did his job during the Cubs' collapse that haunts the city to this day, Jenkins and lefty Ken Holtzman stumbled to the finish. Jenkins was 19-11 with a 2.90 ERA on Sept. 2, but wound up 21-15, 3.21. Holtzman was 14-7, 3.12 as a result of his no-strikeout Aug. 19 no-hitter against the Braves, yet was consistently ineffective for the duration to end at 17-13, 3.58.

Hands has been scarce around Wrigley Field and all things Cubs since his playing days. He did attend the 100th anniversary celebration of the ballpark in 2014. That was at his convenience -- it was during summer. During winters, he flees icy Long Island for Florida. Thus he passed up invitations to the mid-January Cubs Convention, which made a specialty of booking almost exclusively veterans of the 1969 and 1984 teams for years.

Hands did attend an independently organized '69 player's reunion in 1992 at McCormick Place. Even the enigmatic center fielder Don Young showed up, revealing how he worked on the construction of the new Denver airport. But most of the players, with the exception of Ernie Banks, were stiffed on their promised appearance fees.

So you'd like to see the avant-garde, against-the-grain Maddon go back to the past to add another kernel of wisdom from the likes of Hands.

"In my era, I would say (Bob) Gibson," he said of the pitcher to whom he can best compare Arrieta. "He's been that good. Can he do it for several years back to back? We're going to find out."

"He's a workhorse. It's too bad he couldn't carry last season into the playoffs, and could have helped them."

Hitters don't pick up Arrieta

To hear Hands describe Arrieta, he might be a Maddux with a 7 mph better fastball that moves almost as much.

"He's very aggressive," Hands said. "He's ahead of the hitter all the time. You're ahead of the hitter, you have the advantage. It looks to me like the hitter just doesn't pick him up. All hitters look for the fastball, and they try to adjust to the breaking ball. That's been forever. But if you're looking for a fastball and he throws it in the right spot, he's going to hurt you with it anyway."

Another pitcher who has caught Hands' eye is right-hander Hendricks. Although he analyzed that Hendricks needs an improved breaking ball, "he's got a great changeup and move it away from both hitters. It's a very effective pitch, the ball really does dive."

It's doubtful Durocher would handle the Arrieta-led rotation as deftly as Maddon and pitching coach Chris Bosio. In fact, contributing to Jenkins' and Holtzman's downslide ending 1969 was Durocher attempting to compress the rotation into three men, and skipping several turns of fourth starter Dick Selma.

Twice, Durocher pitched Jenkins to start on two days' rest after he was routed early in a game. Jenkins turned down The Lip the first time, then felt pressured to pitch the day after the Black Cat Game, a Tuesday after Jenkins had started the previous Saturday. Jenkins gave up 10 hits, including two homers, and five earned runs in seven innings in a 7-1 loss to the Mets.

Maddon, at 62 just two years younger than Durocher was in '69, is diametrically opposite in another important aspect. While taking care of his rotation, he will not wear out his position players. The ability of Kris Bryant, Javier Baez and Ben Zobrist to play multiple positions without compromising the defense is a benefit to the strategy.

"Rest is always good," Hands said, acknowledging it's a new era where days off are crucial with energy-boosting amphetamines, called "greenies" in '69, officially banned. "Durocher was old-school, and thought everyone should play 155 games. Give him a day off once a month instead of once a week."

But Hands believed the '69 Cubs did not need a lot of rest. "Other than Ernie Banks, we weren't old. We had guys basically in their prime, 28, 29," he said. For the record, in '69 Hands was 29, Jenkins was 26 and Holtzman 23. Ron Santo was 29, Billy Williams 31 with his two best seasons still ahead, Glenn Beckert was 28, Don Kessinger and Randy Hundley were both 27.

Santo, Kessinger, Hundley needed the most rest

Santo, of course, was taking regular insulin shots for his Type 1 diabetes. He had to risk the onset of a severe reaction during a game without the surefire ways to check his blood sugar as exist today. Santo, the lean, lanky Kessinger and especially catcher Hundley were the key players who needed more days off by any sane standards – whether a manager grew up in the Thirties or the Eighties.

Maddon imposed a first-in-Wrigley Field history program in the second half of 2015 to promote more rest: canceling mandatory batting practice before many home games. With the Cubs still playing the majority of games during the day and shift-work disorder a possibility due to the eccentric schedule, every extra minute the players can sleep in mornings helps.

While Hands sees the logic, he claimed his era's Cubs did not mind batting practice or the then-all-day schedule at all. Family men liked afternoon games for obvious reasons. And it was a different era, period. A Beckert or Hundley living a middle-class lifestyle more than 25 miles away in northwest suburban Palatine did not have the monstrously jammed rush-hour traffic to and from their jobs as they would encounter today.

“I know the pitchers at home had batting practice,” Hands said of his time. “We looked forward to it. We had little games and so forth (to inject humor into the daily routine).”

“When you’re home, playing all day games, it was actually advantage to us. We were home with our family and working like a 9-to-5 job. Teams on the road are coming in from somewhere and getting in at midnight, and having to get out to the ballpark early.”

“I don’t think the Cubs now are at any less a disadvantage than anyone else.”

Only time and the October results will tell. In the meantime, Hands is enjoying the fresh blood injected into the ’16 Cubs by rookie position players like Albert Almora, Jr. and Willson Contreras. Maddon’s style is again 180 degrees from Durocher: welcoming and then nurturing young players while letting them play through mistakes.

After breaking in the likes of Jenkins, Holtzman and Hundley as rookies in 1966, Durocher tended to be skeptical, even abusive, of young players, especially pitchers. Jim Colborn said the kid hurlers were treated like “whipped puppies.” Bill Stoneman said Durocher second-guessed his use of breaking pitches. Both Colborn and Stoneman had to get away from Durocher to



Albert Almora, Jr. (left) and Willson Contreras are young players breaking in who would not have been treated as well by Leo Durocher as they are now by Joe Maddon.

enjoy success with the Royals and Expos, respectively. Colborn went on to become a longtime respected pitching coach and scout, while Stoneman advanced to general manager of the Angels.

“You got to remember, Durocher was of the old school where they hazed rookies,” Hands said. “Even the pro football players, guys who sign for the first year have a lot of different duties (kowtowing to veterans).”

“Obviously, they are much more tolerant today than 40 or 50 years ago.”

Cubs fans should thank goodness for the year 2016 and a Maddon who thinks and acts younger than 62. Every creative, positive way of handling players, especially pitchers, will be necessary to reserve important games at Halloween.

Hands has been down that road. Thus he’s is a very interested spectator waiting for a far different outcome compared to 47 years ago.