

# CUBS WORLD SERIES QUEST

## 2016 World Series belongs so far to Kyle Schwarber

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Call it the Joy of Schwarbs.

Jake Arrieta got much of his old groove back and the Cubs drew first blood off Cleveland Indians starter Trevor Bauer in the visitors' 5-1 victory in Game 2 at Progressive Field.

But the 2016 World Series, tied 1-1 going back to Wrigley Field Friday, is fast becoming The Kyle Schwarber Show.

The stocky, smart left-handed hitter's unprecedented comeback is overshadowing the sheer magnitude of his team's first World Series appearance, if that's at all humanly possible. Schwarber seems to have been dropped from the sky to give the Cubs a final push to scratch their 108-year itch.



**Kyle Schwarber (left) took over the storyline in Game 2, while Jake Arrieta showed much of his old form.**

Appearing like he could hit from a wheelchair, the rehabbed Schwarber collected a pair of RBI singles in his second and third at-bats Wednesday. He was visibly moved after the first hit, off Bauer. By the time he slashed another single up in the middle off Bryan Shaw amid a three-run rally in the fifth, it seemed old hat.

The fans joined in with quick home-made "Schwarb-O-Meter" signs, a riff on the old Shawon Dunston "Shawon-O-Meter" sign dating back to 1989 in the left-field bleachers.

Give his surgeon, Cubs physicians, trainers and team president Theo Epstein credit. But most of all, give props to Schwarber himself. He kept himself mentally involved in the Cubs' 103-victory parade while doing his physical rehab. When his body caught up to his mind games, he was ready to DH for the World Series, the first player in history to get his first hit of the season in the Fall Classic in Game 1.

Schwarber simply is a baseball junkie. Our first visit with him at Kane County in 2014 revealed a positive, detail-oriented hitter. Schwarber then claimed, with the majors still seemingly years away, that he could adjust his stance pitch-by-pitch if necessary. Such

an ability enabled him to come fast to the Cubs in 2015 – and come back fast from a severe knee injury last April.

In any championship journey, players not expected to contribute heavily going into the season end up as key factors. First there was Javy Baez, compiling an all-around portfolio that eventually led to a starting job. Then there was the aggressive, lively Willson Contreras, forcing himself into the catching equation in a big way.

Finally, there's the Schwarbs, the cherry on the sundae. The only thing that seemingly will slow him down is physician's red light against playing in the field when the World Series moves back to Wrigley Field for Game 3. If another unexpected turn of events finds Schwarber playing the field at Clark and Addison, the whole ballpark might tremble from the crowd's frenzied reaction. More than likely Schwarber will be just baseball's most watched pinch hitter in Chicago.

Either his teammates caught his spirit or Schwarber picked up on the Cubs' revived hitting philosophy. Maybe both. The lineup, this time featuring the changeup of Jorge Soler in right field, did what it needed to do against Indians starter Bauer.

His right pinkie injured in a drone accident did not split its sutures and drip blood as against the Blue Jays in his previous start. But the Cubs still drained Bauer by running up his pitch count to nearly 80 and forcing a fourth-inning exit. Indians manager Terry Francona had burned up Andrew Miller with a 46-pitch outing in Game 1. So Francona had to play catch-as-catch-can once Bauer went to the showers, calling on right-hander Zack McAllister of downstate Chillocothe as his first relief option.

The Cubs Universe could breathe a sigh of relief with Arrieta. He nearly pitched like the No. 1 starter he was as recently as the first half of the regular season. Settling down after early control issues, Arrieta did not allow a hit until the sixth inning. He quickly ran out of gas, pulled in favor of lefty Mike Montgomery. Given his 4.20 ERA over his last 16 starts, Arrieta's one-run yield was the best possible outcome, given the pressure involved.

"Three outs in a postseason game is like getting three outs in Coors Field," was a telling comment by Fox analyst John Smoltz.

Lefty reliever Mike Montgomery deserves almost as much credit as Arrieta for keeping matters under control after the right-hander's departure.

Schwarber's return also provided the ultimate misdirection play for the grab-some-bench status of Cubs right fielder Jason Heyward. Finally giving up on reviving Heyward's wayward bat this season, Maddon benched Heyward for the second straight game Wednesday.

If the rest of the lineup had not produced and the Cubs had endured yet another playoff pratfall, Heyward's arrival would be branded the biggest free-agent flop in team history. But that's an issue for another season, possibly in Year One "AC" – after championship.