

CUBS

WORLD SERIES QUEST

Montero gets just rewards for professionalism as Cubs snag Game 1

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One of the most professional Cubs got his just rewards Saturday night.

Pushed aside for more David Ross catching starts behind the plate and the mid-season arrival of star rookie Willson Contreras, Miguel Montero was almost the forgotten man as the 2016 season progressed. He slumped and grabbed a lot of bench, but never complained. He was the true team man, helping Contreras break in.

Against the Dodgers in Game 1 of the National League Championship Series, Montero showed why he is admired in the Cubs organization. Continuing a late-season revival, Montero slugged a pinch-hit game-winning grand-slam homer off Joe Blanton in the eighth to cover for another controversial Aroldis Chapman outing in the Cubs' 8-4 win.

More important than merely breaking a 3-3 tie in the most dramatic fashion, Montero staved off the kind of fear and loathing that would have enveloped the Cubs Universe had the NLCS opener slipped away, as momentum threatened starting in the top of the eighth.

An opening Cubs loss with Dodgers ace Clayton Kershaw ready to catch his second wind in Game 2 amid his overly busy postseason would have been déjà vu all over again for fans and media burned seemingly a million times by past playoff collapses.

Montero's blast certainly took the edge off the second consecutive eighth-inning Chapman appearance that did not work out. But this time cut Cubs manager Joe Maddon some slack. He was not entirely wrong with his bullpen moves.



Miguel Montero began reviving at the plate in September, and came all the way back in Game 1.

Maddon rightly stuck with usually effective setup man Pedro Strop until he loaded the bases with none out and a 3-1 lead. A manager cannot keep pulling his relievers batter-by-batter until he runs out of warm bodies. Then Maddon summoned Chapman, against all common sense, as repeated eighth-inning appearances have not been in the Warp 8 Master's comfort zone.

Sometimes, though, the save situation is earlier than the ninth. Maddon lives in the moment. He'd worry about the ninth when he got there, knowing he had Hector Rondon, demoted as closer in favor of Chapman, in reserve.

Chapman almost got away with it, striking out lefty-hitting Corey Seager and Yasiel Puig swinging with a series of 100 mph heaters. However, Adrian Gonzalez then evened up for being thrown out of the plate earlier by doing the only thing a hitter can reasonably accomplish against Chapman. He smacked a single up the middle to tie the game 3-3. Interestingly, Gonzalez was the third left-handed hitter to have ruined a save opportunity for Chapman in his 2 1/2 months as a Cub.

All the drama packed into one inning obscured a brainy Cubs effort on both the mound and at the plate.

Lester survives with 'B' material

Starter Jon Lester used guile and moxie to survive six innings as Dodgers lefty hitters made uncommonly good contact against a southpaw.

Meanwhile, the Cubs batters were good enough against Dodgers starter Kenta Maeda, with more theatrics from Javy Baez, this time via a dash of "crazylegs."

The earlier Cubs successes were money in the bank with Clayton Kershaw the scheduled starter in Game 2.

Lester allowed hits to the first two Dodgers lefty hitters he faced. Later, he served up a wind-aided pinch homer to lefty pinch hitter Andre Ethier. Totaling just three strikeouts in six innings, he needed a big helping of defense. Center fielder Dexter Fowler obliged with two sparkling catches, one a belt-buster as he dived to his left.

This is why Lester was paid the megabucks by old patron Theo Epstein. Playoff-tested like few pitchers this side of Madison Bumgarner, Lester could rely on experience and coolness to keep his composure with his "B" material. On this night, Joe Maddon was spot-on to pull Lester after six innings to start his bullpen fresh with no inherited baserunners, and employ all his lefty relievers.



Jon Lester survived with his "B" material and rightly was pulled after six innings.

Lester had all the logical advantages. Too bad the Cubs don't have a second lefty starter to toss at Los Angeles. They are truly southpaw-challenged, having batted .213 against lefties. Their lineup is shortened when they face a lefty.

Puig, almost banished from the organization in mid-season, batted cleanup for want of any other strong right-handed hitter for the role. Catcher Carlos Ruiz and second baseman Kiki Hernandez, no right-handed boppers, batted sixth and seventh. Center fielder Joc Pederson had to drop to eighth. The first pinch-hitter off the bench was Ethier.

The Cubs had a reasoned approach to working Maeda through their at-bats. A potential "trap" performance with the Cubs having never faced the right-hander did not transpire. Cubs hitters took enough pitches starting off each sequence to gauge Maeda, who appears to be nothing special. Then they swung, with good results, in amassing an early 3-0 lead.

Jason Heyward was a revelation with his second-inning triple. Slumping all season, the so-far free-agent bust did not just slice the ball the opposite way to left to spark a revival. The triple was struck with authority, pulled into the right-field corner. That enabled the athletic Heyward to use his speed. Players cannot bottle such results with wishful thinking, but a few more reps by the big guy could point the Cubs straight into the World Series.

Baez is truly in his zone, adding his feet to the growing legend of his quicksilver second baseman's hands and strong bat.

He executed the first Cubs' steal of home in the postseason since 1907 in a non-purposeful move. Taking a monstrously aggressive lead off third in the second inning, Baez momentarily got caught in no man's land when Ruiz fired to third baseman Justin Turner. Baez took off for home the moment Ruiz throw. Pulling Turner off-balance, the throw gave Baez enough seconds to make it in when the third baseman made his return throw to Ruiz.

Common sense did not accompany the Dodgers field staff in the second as the ghost of "Waving Wendell" Kim must have been haunting the third-base coaching box. On a two-out hit by Maeda to left, Dodgers coach Chris Woodward sent a piano-lugging Gonzalez home from second. Gonzalez was easily thrown out by Ben Zobrist.

Fox announcers Joe Buck and John Smoltz immediately focused on Gonzalez's lead off second.

Dodgers ace Clayton Kershaw is ready to take the mound on Sunday night with aim to snatch a win in Chicago and bring the series tied 1-1 back to LA.