

CUBS WORLD SERIES QUEST

LA's Roberts gets away with stretching Jansen again in Game 2

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Can Dave Roberts continually get away with long outings from closer Kenley Jansen?

Through a 1-0 victory in Game 2 of the National League Championship Series Sunday, the answer is yes.

And now the Cubs will have to punch their World Series ticket with at least one win at Dodger Stadium, after finally breaking their 0-for-the-West Coast postseason streak in San Francisco a week ago.

After a victory the Dodgers needed badly, the Cubs now will have to work hard for their Fall Classic quest. Good thing they pulled out Game 1 Saturday night for the collective psyche of their worldwide fan base.

Just three days after throwing a career-high 51 pitches, four-seam cutter specialist Jansen was summoned to start the eighth as Dodgers manager Roberts pulled a brilliant Clayton Kershaw probably an inning early. Jansen mowed down the Cubs six in a row - including the top of the lineup -- with 95 mph-plus speed, getting slumping Anthony Rizzo to end the game.

This time, Jansen, who has never been scored upon in Wrigley Field, spread one inning's labor over two. He threw just 18 pitches. Roberts figured with the off-day Monday, Jansen would be available again for Game 3 at Dodger Stadium.



Dave Roberts (left) again rolled the dice on an extended Kenley Jansen (right) outing.

While Roberts went long again with Jansen, he shortened Kershaw's outing, erring on the side of caution and obviously with an eye toward his next start, as early as Game 5.

The Cubs could not have done anything more with Kershaw than they did in their two-hit, one-walk production. While Fox announcer John Smoltz – who should know – compared Cubs starter Kyle Hendricks with Greg Maddux, Kershaw pitched as efficiently as the latter. He kept his pitch count in check with master control, trading quick outs for his usual strikeouts.

Batters might as well swing earlier in the count if they perceive a hittable pitch from Kershaw. He will not walk you. He passed just 11 hitters in 149 innings in the regular season, and has not exceeded 63 walks since his third season in 2010. Only way to score, it appears, is belting a serious Kershaw mistake out of the ballpark. In his regular season shortened by a herniated disc, he recorded a career-low 0.725 WHIP. It doesn't get any better than that.

Obviously, Kershaw had motivations to even-up his mediocre postseason record. He was just 3-6 with a 4.79 ERA in October going into the game. But he had a gutty, 11-strikeout outing in Game 3 of the NLDS against the Nationals, followed by an emergency, seven-pitch save relieving Jansen to clinch Game 5. Kershaw's past playoff performances were a sharp dropoff from his 126-60 regular season mark with a 2.37 ERA.

The crafty left-hander retired the first 14 batters he faced before Javier Baez and Willson Contreras got back to back hits to mount a chance for the Cubs to tie the game. Yet, Joe Maddon did not pinch hit Jason Heyward, who is 0-11 career against Kershaw, who got the struggling right-fielder to pop up and end the fifth--the Cubs only scoring chance of the night.

Hendricks did all that could have been expected opposing Kershaw. Despite being a bit off his fine control, he served up just Adrian Gonzalez's homer. With the Dodgers running up his pitch count early, Hendricks could not have gone any longer than the sixth inning. He showed he has earned Joe Maddon's slotting as the No. 2 Cubs postseason starter.

Gonzalez is one of the more underrated run producers in the game over the past decade. He simply hasn't gotten prime postseason exposure, having gone as far as the League Championship Series only once previously. Gonzalez has spent the bulk of his career out of a lot of the national baseball eye, playing those late games on the West Coast after starting his big-league career with the Rangers. He had a short tenure for a Red Sox team that did not make the postseason.

Manager Joe Maddon must consider tweaking his lineup for Game 3 when ex-Cub Rich Hill takes the mound for the Dodgers. Anthony Rizzo is in a 1-for-23 postseason skid.

He may consider benching Jason Heyward against lefty Hill.

With the scene shifting to the West Coast and a Game 5 start lurking for Game 2 hero Clayton Kershaw, the Cubs need to grab a win in Game 3 or 4 to ensure the series makes it back to Wrigley Field with Rizzo, Russell, and Heyward slumping.

Though the Cubs were on the losing end of the game, it was nice to see a play-off game end before 10pm.