

# CUBS WORLD SERIES QUEST

## *Arrieta's second-half decline bites Cubs at just the wrong time in Game 3*

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Posted Tuesday, October 18, 2016*

The location problems that afflicted Jake Arrieta in the second half came back to bite the Cubs hard Tuesday in a 6-0 defeat, their second consecutive shutout loss to the Dodgers in Game 3 of the National League Championship Series. The Dodgers back-to-back post-season shutouts was the first in their storied franchise history.

Pitching like the third starter to which his performance level had often devolved, Arrieta's gopher balls to Yasmani Grandal and Justin Turner revived the age-old paranoia about playoff collapses from Cubs fans, whose heroes must now play from behind with a 2-1 deficit. And they're forced to do it in two more games at Dodger Stadium, never a comfortable place for the Cubs since it opened in 1962.



**It was a tale of two pitchers: Jake Arrieta (left) continued his second-half decline, while ex-Cub Rich Hill pitched the game of his life.**  
Photos: [baseball-reference.com](http://baseball-reference.com) and [mlb.com](http://mlb.com).

Their best hope to restore equilibrium is rattling 20-year-old rookie starter Julio Urias in Game 4 Wednesday with the Cubs hurling the veteran John Lackey, with his big-game playoff winner resume and 38<sup>th</sup> birthday looming this coming Sunday. Cubs manager Joe Maddon's tinkering with the slumping lineup, which began with Game 3, might continue as the situation approaches criticality. Eighteen straight scoreless innings tossed at the previously prodigious lineup will conjure up nightmares of past postseason pratfalls with the Cubs hitting only .190 versus breaking balls so far this year.

Timing is everything in baseball. Suffering his third consecutive postseason loss, Arrieta could not craft a lockdown performance in the same game ex-Cub Rich Hill tossed the outing of his life. The curveball specialist survived a somewhat shaky second inning to stifle the Chicago lineup on two hits through six innings.

Arrieta's 22-6 Cy Young Award season of 2015, in which he out-pitched vintage 1968 Bob Gibson in a record-breaking second half, is a fading and increasingly painful memory. That was a once-in-a-lifetime performance for any pitcher. Yet the drop-off to just plain average for Arrieta plays to the old adage that baseball truly is a cruel game, who had earned some criticism this year as his pitching suffered as some suggested "for pimping his new celebrity this season."

The evening-up of Arrieta's performance in the second half compared to the previous season was evidenced by the pair of well-struck blasts by 27-homer producers Grandal and Turner. Although hard to hit overall, Arrieta began serving-up homers at just the wrong juncture in games from mid-summer on. He gave up 16 homers in 197 1/3 innings compared to just 10 in 229 innings in 2015. Further evidence of awry control was shown by a big jump to 76 walks in 2016 from 48 in 2015, and leadership in wild pitches with 16. In fact, Arrieta's fear of throwing a wild pitch may have led to the pitch selection that resulted in Yasmani Grandal's 4<sup>th</sup> inning homerun. With Josh Reddick dancing off third base after he reached on an infield single and stole second and third, Arrieta laid in a low 93 mph fastball that Grandal crushed to increase the Dodgers lead to 3-0.

Maddon was absolutely correct in "re-arranging the chairs," in his own words, for his lineup. Jason Heyward was benched in right in favor of Jorge Soler. But given eventual pitching changes, Heyward would be in position to get back in later in the game, as he did via a seventh-inning pinch-hitting at-bat and return to right field.

Ben Zobrist batted third to start off the order with three consecutive right-handed hitters against Hill. Zobrist also provided a high on-base percentage type to bat in front of slumping Anthony Rizzo, dropped to cleanup.

### **Baez deserves bump up to No. 5**

Meanwhile, Javy Baez was justly rewarded for go through his baseball bar mitzvah – "now you are a man" – in the playoffs with the fifth spot. Still a work in progress, Baez was deemed mature enough to handle a prime RBI slot. Baez's promotion enabled Maddon to take pressure off skidding Addison Russell, dropped to seventh, but still in place to battle curveball specialist Hill.

Baez showed off his developing savvy and patience in his first at-bat against Hill. As a rookie two years ago he'd swing wildly at pitches off the plate. But Baez the go-to man took the first four pitches, working the count full before popping out.

Amid two walks, an Anthony Rizzo stolen base and several near-wild pickoff attempts to get Rizzo, the Cubs attempted a logical tactic against Hill in the second. They boosted his pitch count to 41. The key to beating the Dodgers in a Hill outing was to get him out of the game by the fifth.

But the Cubs could not, as Hill quickly found his rhythm, dropping curveballs over or just off the corners. Worried about blisters on his left hand, the Dodgers watch Hill like a hawk. He is not a pitcher of long endurance. Manager Dave Roberts was pleased with squeezing six innings out of Hill.

Even if Hill stood in the Cubs' way to finally reach the World Series after 71 years, you have to appreciate his storyline. A University of Michigan product and fourth-round Cubs draft choice in 2002 who grew up in the Fenway Park bleachers, Hill was the starting pitcher a few feet away from the infamous A.J. Pierzynski-Michael Barrett fight at The Cell in 2006. A year later, he was the Cubs' No. 3 starter with an 11-8 record. He drew a start in the three-game NLDS sweep by the Diamondbacks.

But even after that modicum of success, Hill ran afoul of impatient manager Lou Piniella with control yips right off the bat in 2008, then was injured. He never pitched again for the Cubs, who sold him to the Orioles prior to the 2009 season. The quick departure from Chicago began the journey of a baseball vagabond that led him back twice to his childhood favorite Red Sox, through more injuries including Tommy John surgery and a torn labrum, to his comeback this season with Oakland and now-mainstay role in LA. Hill also overcame personal tragedy with the death of his newborn son, Brooks, just before spring training in 2014.

After the game, the 35-year-old Ex-Cub Hill, who last year was pitching for the Long Island Ducks in Independent League Ball, reflected on his comeback to baseball after his Game 2 gem against his former team: "perseverance... continue to keeping pushing through no matter even if you feel like you are ready to give up. You never know the next door that you open may be the one that makes the difference."

For ex-Cub Rich Hill that door opened up wide in the biggest game of his career.

The arrival of the NLCS is required to sell out 56,000-seat Dodger Stadium in diversion-laden Tinsel Town. The Dodgers did not sell out the NLDS against the Nats. The easier availability of tickets enabled scores of Cubs fans to gain entrance. Our friend Al Yellon, managing editor of BleedCubbieBlue.com, simply bought his tickets for the three LA games via a general sale. No ticket lottery was needed, as has long been a requirement for Wrigley Field playoff games.

One satisfied longtime Dodger fan viewed Hill's outing from the first row behind home plate. Talkmeister Larry King, who traces his love of the Bums back to Ebbets Field in his native Brooklyn, scarfed what appeared to be ice cream while telling his stories. Unlike Game 2, at Wrigley Field there was no Marlins Man sightings behind home plate.