

CUBS

WORLD SERIES QUEST

Here we go again: Cubs one win away from World Series after Game 5 triumph

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Call them the Sundowners.

When the blazing Southern California sun sets, the previously snoozing Cubs hitters go to work. They muscled up in a victorious Game 4, and followed suit Thursday night in Game 5 to put the Cubs where they were in 1984 and 2003 – one game away from their forever-delayed World Series berth.

This time, in the sixth inning, Addison Russell homered for the second night in a row to break a 1-1 tie, easing the frustration of his teammates stranding runners in scoring position up to that point. Further climbing out of an offensive crater, Russell gave reward to Jon Lester for the money performance the Cubs had hired him to record as a free agent nearly two years ago.

And to put the cherry on the sundae, perpetual man-in-motion Javy Baez put the game away with a three-run double in the eighth not before scaring Cubs fans with coming up lame after rounding 2nd base. The “Star is Born” Baez shook off the injury and stayed in the game.

Taking a 3-2 lead in the NLCS with the 8-4 victory over the Dodgers, the Cubs must overcome another crucible in the elimination game Saturday at Wrigley Field: beating all-world Clayton Kershaw. They will experience the challenge of other teams a half-century ago facing Sandy Koufax, another Dodger lefty pitching above big-league standards, under the same pressurized conditions.

Game 6 will represent the latest in any season a game has been played at Wrigley Field. The previous deep-October foray was Game 7 of the ill-fated NLCS on Oct. 15, 2003. Of course, the Cubs’ goal is further pushing that distinction to Oct. 29 or 30 – Games 4 or 5 of the World Series against the Cleveland Indians.



Addison Russell (left) likes Dodger Stadium after dark, while Jon Lester again earned his money in October.

Photos: baseball-reference.com.

As the Tinseltown air cooled after sunset, normally making it tougher for power hitters, Russell blasted another booming homer as the Cubs' youth had to be served from that juncture forward.

Catcher Willson Contreras (at that point 7-for-16 in the postseason) was in the middle of manufacturing the first two insurance runs in the eighth. Cubs manager Joe Maddon must ensure Contreras joins Baez in starting in all Cubs postseason games to follow, given aggressiveness and maturity for his age (24) that matches Baez's.

The Russell blast was enough for the postseason-tested Lester to nurse a winning effort through a crafty seven innings and 108 pitches. The lefty kept the Dodgers away from serious threats.

Manager Joe Maddon had conserved Lester for this effort by pulling him perhaps an inning early, after the sixth and 77 pitches, in Game 1.

Lester simply continued his cold-blooded October performance. In 16 previous postseason starts and two relief outings, Lester had a 2.57 ERA. He allowed one earned run or less in eight of those starts.

The Dodgers did not go down without a fight as they touched Aroldis Chapman for two runs in the ninth giving the fans left in Dodger Stadium something to cheer and hope for.

Funky order faces Lester

A funky Dodgers batting order meant to somehow counteract Lester featured the right-handed-hitting Enrique Hernandez leading off, Carlos Ruiz (0-for-16 lifetime against Lester) batting cleanup and Howie Kendrick fifth, while employing a strategy of showing bunts to distract Lester due to his fielding and throwing yips, angering Lester at one point. Unlike the Cubs, the Dodgers simply don't have the roster balance to tackle effective left-handers, undercutting their poor regular-season numbers with a .187 postseason average against southpaws.

Another odd Dave Roberts move was removing starter Kenta Maeda with two out in the fourth inning and Lester up. Managers are quick to burn up their bullpens these days, and sometimes get caught short with a lack of arms available later in the game. To be sure, Maeda was nearing of his endurance with his 76-pitch "Stanley Struggle" (old timers: 1974-vintage Sox Stan Bahnsen) performance stranding baserunners while giving up few runs.

Roberts must have been torn starting Maeda instead of bringing back Kershaw on three days' rest to get a better shot at grabbing a 3-2 series lead. Maeda was on seasonal overtime compared to his workload in Japan. In his previous four outings, including the postseason, he had gotten an average of just 10 outs per start.

The equivalent Maddon moves in the postseason were using Chapman twice in the eighth inning, while remaining loyal to good-field, no-hit right fielder Jason Heyward. The free-agent bust (so far) feebly stranded more runners in scoring position in Game 5. Maddon must come to his senses and bench Heyward against Kershaw, allowing him

to see right field only for late-inning defensive purposes. And if Kershaw wins, Heyward should still be confined to cheerleading status against lefty Rich Hill in a climactic Game 7, no matter the size of his paycheck.

One pundit compared Heyward to Adam Dunn for spectacular failure. No, Heyward was never as historically bad as Dunn with his .159 average and just 11 homers in 496 plate appearances with the Sox in 2011. Dunn rebounded somewhat in 2012 with 41 homers. Think of Heyward as the position-player equivalent of Steve Blass, the Pirates ace who lost it all suddenly in his prime in 1973.

The Dodger Stadium games represented a combo of a baseball tour de force and exposure to Indian Summer for Cubs fans, who travel well. One estimate featured as many as 10,000 Cubs fans at each game, with royal blue regalia everywhere. They witnessed first pitches in temperatures of 88 for Game 4 and 93 in Game 5 – not uncommon for LA Octobers featuring the final bursts of mid-summer heat off the nearby desert.

Far more Cubs loyalists will pack Wrigley Field in anticipation, and with a bit of trepidation due to Kershaw, on a cool Saturday night for Game 6.