Chicago Tribune
Joe Maddon's vision has his never-say-die Cubs eying bigger things
By David Haugh

With his players still partying in the clubhouse, Cubs manager Joe Maddon took off his glasses at the podium late Tuesday night at AT&T Park and wiped champagne off the lenses.

Maddon likes a clear view of everything. And the Cubs find themselves playing for a pennant for the second straight year — and eying a World Series — largely because of Maddon's vision and perspective.

"I like to have fun," Maddon said. "I have never done anything well in my entire life that I didn't enjoy. I want them to enjoy this moment."

Is there a coach in sports who would be any more enjoyable to play for than Maddon?

Nothing epitomized the full impact Maddon has made on the Cubs better than perhaps the greatest ninth inning in team history, a four-run rally in a 6-5 victory over the Giants to clinch the National League Division Series. From the tinkering with the roster to the temperament required to pull off such a comeback, it was vintage Maddon.

His unorthodox move of pinch-hitting Willson Contreras for All-Star shortstop Addison Russell caught nobody off guard because Maddon warned his team before the playoffs to expect the unexpected. Such as benching $184 million free-agent right fielder Jason Heyward for Game 3. Or playing a hunch to start catcher David Ross in Game 4 for defense and Ross hitting a home run. Or not allowing fear of making a bad decision — and Maddon made a few in the NLDS — to prevent him from making good ones.

His players stayed positive down three runs after managing just two hits in the previous eight innings because Maddon knows no other approach. It could be a spring-training game in Arizona or a playoff game in San Francisco, Maddon will be the upbeat guy with something interesting to say.

His infectious enthusiasm always keeps the mood light, and with the Cubs three outs away from dealing with the heaviest of burdens, hitters went to the plate expecting good things the way Maddon naturally does. Maddon urges players not to let the pressure exceed the pleasure, but it's more than just a mantra that makes a cool T-shirt. It's something Maddon practices, as Tuesday's pregame news conference demonstrated yet again.

Judging by Maddon's demeanor, the Cubs could have been one loss from putting Chicago on edge or two hours away from a charity golf outing. Remember, only one night before — or, more precisely, early Tuesday morning — the Cubs had lost a heartbreaking 13-inning game that ended at 1:43 a.m. Central. Yet here was Maddon hours before Game 4, engaged and inquisitive, elaborating on everything from Giants pitcher Matt Moore's hometown to his hobby of searching the Internet for pictures of old ballparks. He stays in the moment, every moment, so it shouldn't be surprising that his team follows suit. From reporters to Cubs players to stadium workers he just met, Maddon simply possesses a knack for making people comfortable.

Even professionals trailing baseball's toughest team to eliminate by three runs in the ninth inning of a playoff game on the road. The Cubs didn't press because Maddon has conditioned them to believe anything is possible until the 27th out. They always think they can be one of the exceptions to the rule, and this time they were; only the 1986 Mets have come back from a three-run deficit in the ninth inning to win a series-clinching game in the playoffs, according to Elias.
And what a shock it was to everybody, sports writers included. With the Tribune's deadline for filing only 23 minutes away when the ninth inning started at 10:32 p.m. Central, this was my working lead:

*If the Cubs think Giants pitcher Johnny Cueto poses a challenge now that the National League Division Series has come down to Game 5 at Wrigley Field, wait until they confront the history staring them in face for the next 48 hours. One generation of Cubs fans will say it feels like 1984 again. The younger set will compare the consternation more to 2003. Now the Cubs have to ignore the anxiety forming around them like rush-hour traffic on the Edens, testing patience and fraying nerves.*

Then Kris Bryant singled and Anthony Rizzo walked. Ben Zobrist doubled in a run. Contreras — batting for Russell instead of Chris Coghlan, the original pinch hitter before Giants manager Bruce Bochy called on lefty Will Smith — singled in two more. Giants shortstop Brandon Crawford’s uncharacteristic throwing error on Jason Heyward’s bunt into a fielder’s choice suggested this was the Cubs’ night. Then Javier Baez, the most valuable player of the NLDS, drove in the game-winning run with a single up the middle to confirm it. It was 10:54 p.m., and in 22 minutes the Cubs had changed more than just so many newspaper stories.

"We scratched and clawed," Zobrist said.

"We play all 27 outs," Baez added.

Maddon's magic was worth believing in.

"We're building that reputation, just like the Giants have established that reputation, that you have to play to the last drop," Maddon said.

A reporter asked Maddon if he preferred to play the Dodgers or the Nationals in the NLCS. Diplomatically, he deferred. Both teams are worthy of respect and have reasons to think this is their year too.

But if the Cubs keep seeing things with Maddon’s clarity, it might not matter.

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**Chicago Tribune**

The Weight: Chapter 14 Never-say-die Cubs make national statement in NLDS

By Paul Sullivan

Theo Epstein stood in the stands at AT&T Park in the top of the ninth inning of Game 4 of the National League Division Series, staring out onto the field.

Giants left-hander Matt Moore had two-hit the Cubs for eight innings, and they were trailing by three runs. They had blown a chance to sweep the series the night before in a 13-inning classic, and if this dream season was going to continue, it looked like the Cubs would have to get it done at home.

In Game 5 at Wrigley Field. In a do-or-die game. With a city scarred by past disasters holding its collective breath.

They would have to try to solve Giants star Johnny Cueto and his quirky corkscrew delivery, knowing Madison Bumgarner was waiting in the wings to reprise his role as their October surprise. "MadBum" had pitched out of the bullpen in the Giants' Game 7 victory over the Royals in the 2014 World Series, and was willing to do it again.

The fate of this Rockwellian season was hanging in the balance. What was going through his mind?

"OK, here we are, now we're here," Epstein said. "Let's see if we can come all the way back. It just felt like we weren't ourselves for eight innings. But it was still there. We just had to find it."

This NLDS already had been a classic by most accounts, starting with the Jon Lester-Cueto 1-0 pitching duel in Game 1.
It was a must-win game for the Cubs because, well, they were the Cubs. No matter that they had won 103 games and clearly were the more talented team. They still had to beat the best franchise in baseball, the one with three titles since 2010, and MadBum was going in Game 3. And they still had to calm the nerves of jittery Cubs fans who had hoped for the best but feared the worst.

One of those fans had a seat right next to Epstein in his Wrigley Field box the first two games of the series. Chicago-area native Eddie Vedder, a close friend of the Cubs’ president, admitted he went into default mode at his Seattle home in the days before the series began.

"Once I landed in Chicago I felt better," Vedder said. "I couldn’t sleep, feeling a little tight. It has been such an enjoyable ride and the season has been so incredible, and not only did they win, but they won in exciting ways, in spectacular ways, and with this incredible emotion.

"So it has been a great ride, and nothing would change that. But then you get to this part, and all of a sudden the screws kind of tighten a little bit. But I’m glad it’s happening to me and not happening to them. They feel great, just like I wouldn’t be nervous about playing a show."

Lester and Cueto dueled into the eighth when one Javier Baez swing sent a ball flying into the basket in left field, lifting the Cubs to victory.

Once the top prospect in the Cubs system, the 23-year-old Baez had watched as Kris Bryant, Kyle Schwarber and Addison Russell passed him by. He had learned to become a valuable utility player, contributing at second, third, shortstop and even first base, using his glove like a virtuoso.

Baez turned the tag into an art form in Game 1, teaming up with catcher David Ross to pick Conor Gillaspie off first like they were perfecting a Harlem Globetrotters basketball routine.

But even after his heroics, Baez had no illusions about the role he had to accept.

"There’s no choice," he said. "I was and I am the backup."

Everyone seemed more relaxed at Wrigley in Game 2, where Kyle Hendricks left early after taking a line drive on his right forearm, and reliever Travis Wood showed off his hitting prowess with a solo home run in a 5-2 victory.

The Cubs only worry heading to San Francisco was how they were going to keep Wood from talking about his shot the entire four-hour flight.

'Hard to kill'

The marquee matchup of Jake Arrieta vs. Madison Bumgarner in Game 3 was a case study in cool-on-cool.

Arrieta had a Cy Young award under his belt and had thrown two no-hitters, famously wearing his onesie to the postgame news conference after his no-no in Dodger Stadium in 2015.

Bumgarner was a World Series MVP and had off-the-charts partying skills, famously shot-gunning beers after their third title in 2014.

Arrieta's three-run second inning homer off Bumgarner seemed like a perfect harbinger of things to come, but it was just an optical illusion. The Giants chipped away and took the lead in the eighth on Gillaspie's two-run triple off Aroldis Chapman, who Maddon hoped could pitch two innings.

Just when all looked lost, behind 5-3, Bryant cranked a ball off Sergio Romo that glanced off the top of an ad on the left field wall that featured a cartoon dog hanging out the window of a cartoon car that had eyeballs for headlights, and into the bleachers for a game-tying, two-run homer.
Notified of his "car bomb," Bryant asked: "Why do they have a car out there?"

Because a game like this one just had to have a car with a dog hanging out the window so a home run could deflect off the roof.

Rookie Albert Almora would save the Cubs with a spectacular catch in the ninth, and rubber-armed reliever Mike Montgomery would suck it up to get the game to the 13th inning. But Montgomery had nothing left in the tank, and Joe Panik's RBI double finally ended it after 5 hours, 4 minutes.

"We're hard to kill," Bumgarner said.

It was a loss, yes, and magnified by the fact that it had come in October against a team that has resurrected itself more often than John Travolta. But music still played in the Cubs clubhouse, and the players were well aware they had lost a postseason classic in an epic series.

"It feels like it," Arrieta said. "Game 1 of the series, and now Game 3, to play out like it did? A tremendous start to the playoffs for us."

Arrieta said the Cubs would "come out tomorrow and be ready to go again." He was reminded that it was already "tomorrow" and that Game 4 would be played today.

"Today, yeah," he chuckled. "We'll get a little sleep. It's tough to not get up for games like this. The emotions are going to continue to run high throughout the playoffs, and that's kind of what you live off."

The Cubs quietly packed their travel bags, donned their Beats by Dre headphones and headed back to the bus that would take them to the team hotel.

"We're all pretty exhausted," Bryant said. "I'm sure they're exhausted too. A lot of thinking involved, but that's playoff baseball at its best. Great for the game, a game like that."

The Cubs never seemed to recover in Game 4, despite an early home run from Grandpa Ross. They trailed 5-2 in the ninth with Moore pitching a gem. But manager Bruce Bochy went to his bullpen, a move that would blow up in his face.

"Getting Moore out of the game and working their bullpen was big," Bryant said. "We had seen a lot of what they had to offer the last game, so I think we were prepared for it."

Bryant started the rally with a leadoff single off Derek Law. The chess game between Maddon and Bochy had begun.

Lefty Javier Lopez entered and walked Rizzo. Exit Lopez.

Sergio Romo came on and served up an RBI double to Ben Zobrist, putting the tying runs in scoring position. Maddon sent up left-handed hitter Chris Coghlan for Addison Russell, knowing Bochy then would bring in lefty Will Smith. Maddon promptly countered with rookie catcher Willson Contreras, who responded with a game-tying, two-run single up the middle.

This was a piece of strategy the Cubs brain trust had envisioned during their pre-playoff meeting to set the roster.

"What can I say, man?" Maddon said. "Everything fell into place. We actually carried extra position players so we could burn someone in a pinch-hit situation. So Coghlan gets burnt for Contreras."

Jason Heyward's bunt attempt resulted in a fielder's choice, but when shortstop Brandon Crawford's throw to first trying to complete a double play went awry, Heyward wound up on second as the go-ahead run.
In came right-hander Hunter Strickland, the fifth Giants reliever of the inning. Up strolled Baez, the new center of the Cubs' universe.

It was Javy Time again.

"The game of baseball is a game that is 27 outs," Baez said. "We can't give up because we're down."

Baez singled up the middle on an 0-2 pitch as Heyward rounded third like a commuter racing to catch the last train home.

The Cubs finally were themselves again.

With a one-run lead, Chapman struck out the side in the bottom of the inning to seal the deal, starting the party on the AT&T Park infield.

'We never quit'

"We always yell after games 'We never quit, we never quit,'" Maddon said. "And there you go."

This was Cassius Clay knocking out Sonny Liston in Miami.

Out with the old school, in with the new-age.

Baez would be the consensus MVP of the series, but they didn't name MVPs in the NLDS. Maddon drolly stated Baez deserved a Corvette anyway.

"Javy played incredible," Epstein said. "I'm so glad he had his national coming out party. Obviously we're around him and get to see how special he is in all three phases of the game."

Epstein stopped in mid-thought and corrected himself.

"All four phases," he said. "His at-bats, his baserunning, his defense ... and his tagging. He has come such a long way. So happy for the kid. There was something about the ninth inning the last two nights. Our focus just got brought to another level. Incredible at-bats. It was fun to watch."

Game 4 had fallen on Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement. Epstein could have done a "Sandy Koufax" and taken the day off, but felt he needed to be at the ballpark with his team.

"I think I atoned for about eight innings," he cracked.

As the 106th clubhouse celebration wound down, Epstein walked through the cramped corridors of AT&T to the Giants clubhouse to shake hands with Bochy. The two were old friends from Epstein's days as a 20-something front office executive with the Padres when Bochy was the manager, when he was foolish enough to dream of taking the road less traveled to a general manager's job.

"They're so hard to knock off — 10 straight elimination game wins, 10 straight postseason series," Epstein said. "They're the standard bearer for postseason toughness and resilience and everything else."

"To do what we just did in their ballpark is kind of shocking in a way."

Epstein had watched his Red Sox lose a heartbreaking Game 7 in the 2003 American League Championship Series on Aaron Boone's 11th-inning home run, and then saw the Red Sox bounce back from an 0-3 deficit in the '04 ALCS to win in seven games, en route to their first World Series title in 86 years.

As he stood outside the Giants clubhouse, drenched in champagne and reeking of cigar smoke, Epstein reflected on the 48 hours of pure, unadulterated madness he had just witnessed.
"The last two nights were pretty hard to beat, back-to-back games like that," he said. "Amazing comebacks and huge moments, and huge at-bats, and with what the Giants have accomplished over the last six years, and how hard they are to beat in this situation …

"Our young guys being such a big part of what we accomplished, it felt like a rite of passage almost, that we had to go through them to get there.

"Look, it's the division series. It wasn't the league championship series, or the World Series certainly. We have our work cut out for us. But this has been a special season, and this series has a very prominent place in the story."

The story, of course, still was being written. A happy ending was promised to no one, and the weight of the 107-year drought would get only heavier as they advanced to the NLCS.

But the Cubs were now one step away from where they wanted to be, in a place they knew they belonged, in a time when nothing seemed impossible.

The words echoed again in Epstein's head.

"Here we are. Now we're here."

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**Chicago Tribune**

After dramatic victory over Giants, Cubs get chance to regroup

By Mark Gonzales

Hitting the reset button Wednesday was a necessity for a Cubs team that dramatically avoided its first elimination game a night earlier.

The 6-5 comeback victory over the Giants on Tuesday night also allows the Cubs to rest before their next challenge.

"That's important for us," Ben Zobrist said as he surveyed a wild Cubs celebration at AT&T Park after Game 4 of the National League Division Series. "We really didn't play as well as we feel like we could have in this series. We pitched great. Some of us didn't play offensive the way we're capable of.

"So it will be nice to have a fresh start. ... You're facing a whole new group of guys, a new group of pitchers. And I think our confidence is up, which is good."

The Cubs won two of three one-run games over the Giants despite few contributions from Addison Russell, Anthony Rizzo, Dexter Fowler, Jason Heyward and Zobrist, who sparked a four-run, ninth-inning rally in the clincher Tuesday with an RBI double in the ninth inning.

"The big thing is we get a couple days off," said left-hander Jon Lester, his voice hoarse. "I don't want to say it wears off, but we become fans (Thursday) and see what happens. Then we'll try to get the momentum going when we face the next team. It can't hurt us."

The Cubs can feel optimistic and fortunate because they have a three-day break before Game 1 of the NL Championship Series against the Dodgers or Nationals on Saturday at Wrigley Field. Those teams play Thursday night in Washington in Game 5 of their NLDS.

The Cubs were 5-2 against the Nationals and 4-3 against the Dodgers this season. Manager Joe Maddon doesn't have a preference regarding which team advances.
"When you start worrying about who you're going to play, it could bite you," Maddon said. "We played very well against both. It's a different time of the year."

The NLDS reinforced Maddon's pre-series theme of rebounding from adversity. The Cubs overcame a 5-2 deficit in the ninth inning Tuesday, during which Maddon used Willson Contreras to pinch hit for Russell — who had 95 RBIs during the regular season. Contreras delivered a two-run single to tie the game 5-5.

"We're moving up," general manager Jed Hoyer said. "We got one of the three steps down, and we have two more. And there will be more adversity.

"That's one thing you try to tell yourself going into the playoffs. Even a successful postseason has these awful moments where you have a pit in your stomach. And we experienced that for eight innings (Tuesday night). It's great to (overcome that), but you have to steer yourself to think it's going to happen. How are you going to deal with that when it happens?"

Perhaps the ninth inning Tuesday will serve as a springboard for the slumping players. Rizzo, who was 1-for-15 in the series, showed better plate discipline and drew a walk against sidearm left-hander Javier Lopez during the decisive rally. And Zobrist was 2-for-15 before his RBI double.

"When you face adversity like that and come through, it makes you better," President Theo Epstein said. "Any kind of postseason experience matters, and we're looking forward to going on."

The magnitude of the victory wasn't lost on Rizzo, who suffered through a 101-loss season in 2012 but has played a major role in the franchise's renaissance. The Cubs won 200 games over the last two regular seasons.

"You can’t take for granted what we have done this year," Rizzo said. "We have one mission, one goal in mind. That's eight more wins. And we visualized it all year. And we'll keep visualizing it and enjoying it."

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**Chicago Tribune**

Wrigley's game-altering winds part of charm, frustration of postseason

By Tony Briscoe

When Cubs infielder Javier Baez crushed a pitch from San Francisco Giants pitcher Johnny Cueto in the bottom of the eighth inning in the first game of the playoffs, he admired it for a moment, flipped his bat and trotted out of the box as if he knew it would be a home run.

Instead, it seemed to suspend in midair before narrowly falling into the basket in front of the ivy-covered wall in left field. In a postgame interview, Baez appeared humbled by the blustery conditions at Wrigley Field that nearly squandered the game-winning homer.

"I forgot about the wind," he admitted. "The wind was straight in. And I hit it really good."

The Friendly Confines has a mysterious way of determining who is on the receiving end of its goodwill. But much of that lies in its mercurial wind patterns stoked by nearby Lake Michigan.

As the Cubs prepare to return to Wrigley for the National League Championship Series beginning Saturday, weather forecasters predict Game 1 could be a sluggers paradise with consistent wind speeds of 15 mph blowing toward the outfield and sporadic gusts of 20 to 25 mph.

What's a home run or fly out, fair or foul, strike or ball largely depends on which way the wind blows, according to state climatologist Jim Angel.
"The dominant wind direction from March to May is from the northeast, which would favor pitchers (who would have the wind at their back)," Angel said. "For the rest of the season, the dominant wind direction is more likely from the south or west, which would more likely favor the batters."

Winds are strongest in winter and spring and calmer in summer and early fall. Although October winds generally favor the batter, that wasn't the case last weekend for Baez.

According to historical wind patterns, there's a significant chance for unpredictable head and crosswinds to affect postseason play. And, unlike summertime breezes, autumnal winds are much stronger, averaging more than 10 mph in Chicago, according to state climate data.

"The spring lake breezes are the ones that really knock things down, but you saw (in Game 1) where there was a northwest (crosswind) blowing in, and it was enough to almost keep Baez's home run out."

MLB.com reporter David Adler noted Baez's home run left his bat at 107 mph at a 36-degree angle but traveled only 381 feet because of the wind. Other similarly batted balls have flown 415 feet, on average, he said.

After the Cubs’ 1-0 victory Friday in Game 1 of the National League Division Series, during which there was a 10 to 12 mph crosswind, other baseball pundits were quick to chime in about the weather on social media.

"Surprised Baez didn't know the wind would knock that ball down and barely get out. Got to know the Wrigley wind," said former MLB player Dale Murphy.

"The wind decided this game as much as the pitchers," Damon Bruce, the host of a Bay Area radio station, remarked. "Wrigley."

So what has the wind meant this postseason?

It may have spurned Cubs catcher David Ross, who clobbered a pitch in the third inning of Game 1, only for it to be gloved in deep left-center field by a diving Gorkys Hernandez. One sportscaster later commented, "Usually, that ball would be 12 rows back."

It means that the Cubs’ Travis Wood, who in Game 2 became only the second relief pitcher in baseball history — and the first since 1924 — to hit a postseason home run, might’ve had a little help from an 8 mph breeze that, at times, favored hitters. Until the sixth inning, when Baez again found himself flummoxed by the wind. His blast looked like a sure home run but fell shy of the wall, and he was thrown out at second after not immediately running full speed out of the batter’s box.

Batters and pitchers didn't have to worry about the wind influencing the outcomes of Games 3 and 4, even though the Giants' AT&T Park is positioned right on San Francisco Bay. Before construction of the ballpark, which opened in 2000, architects opted to rotate the original designs by a quarter-turn. The decision, based on wind tunnel studies, sacrificed a picturesque view of the skyline in favor of plans that have effectively shielded the playing field from wind.

The Cubs advanced to the NLCS on Tuesday night, beating the Giants 3-1 in the series. The starting time for Game 1 is 7:08 p.m. Saturday, and batters could be challenged with late rain showers and thunderstorms, in addition to strong gusts.

"The wind might be the bigger factor," said Ricky Castro, a meteorologist for the National Weather Service.

Sunday’s Game 2 will be a little trickier, Castro said. There will be another slight chance of precipitation in the afternoon and evening hours with winds up to 10 mph. Later that night, winds are forecast to blow inward on batters, likely curtailing the distance of their hits.
Of course, other weather conditions, including temperature, humidity and air pressure, can affect the distance of batted balls as well. Games played in warmer, more humid weather can benefit batters, while cooler, drier games can shorten hitting distance.

But in the Windy City, it's only fitting that gusty conditions hold a pre-eminent place in Cubs folklore.

In the past, the winds blowing out of Wrigley Field have had a hand in padding hitters' stats. In a game against the Philadelphia Phillies on May 17, 1979, a whistling, 20 mph wind blowing out toward the bleachers may have contributed to six Cubs home runs, including three from Dave Kingman, in a 23-22 Cubs loss.

More recently, in last year's NLCS Game 2, Jake Arrieta blamed his lack of command, marked by a wild pitch and mediocre pitch speed, on wind bearing down directly on the pitcher's mound in a 4-1 loss to the New York Mets.

In 2016, during the 19 home games when the wind blew out, the Cubs averaged more than two home runs and opponents hit more than one, according to team statistics.

But in the majority of home games, 48 of 81, winds have pressed batters. In addition to contending against Cubs pitchers — among the best in baseball — opposing batters sometimes vie against Mother Nature. In those games, the Cubs and their opponents both averaged less than one home run each game.

The predominant trend of northeastern winds coming into the stadium can be attributed to its proximity to Lake Michigan, which is about a mile east, said Gino Izzi, a senior meteorologist with the weather service.

"The air over the water is colder," Izzi said. "And cold air is heavier. So, when there's not some sort of wind blowing out (offshore), the cold air is oozing in and it brings wind from that direction."

These lake breezes may have a "minor impact by slowing down the ball after it's hit," Angel said.

"Of course, what you really want is winds from the lake while the Cubs are pitching and out of the west when the Cubs are at bat," Angel said. "But that's out of my hands."

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**Chicago Tribune**

Ben Zobrist: Cubs still have 'a lot to overcome'

By Mark Gonzales

Ben Zobrist knows the difference between exceeding low expectations and achieving lofty goals.

So after playing a major role on four Rays teams that reached the postseason in the stiff American League East, Zobrist recognizes the collision course the Cubs face with fulfilling their goal of winning their first World Series title since 1908.

"It feels like there's more to overcome," Zobrist said. "I felt like in Tampa Bay a lot of people thought we were overachieving. And with this team, the expectations are very high. And we've got a lot to overcome in the postseason with the history of this franchise.

"So for us, this (National League Division Series) is a huge win for this club, and this group, particularly going into the (NL Championship Series). We got to prove we can do it in the NLCS. Last year they didn't. This is a new group, so we got to get over the hump. This is the next goal, and we got to find a way to do it."

Zobrist said he sensed some relief from manager Joe Maddon and bench coach Dave Martinez, who were with him with the Rays, because the Cubs didn't have to play a fifth and deciding game with the Giants having "all the momentum."
Closer Aroldis Chapman, who spent the first part of the 2015 season with a Yankees franchise that has won 27 World Series titles, quickly recognized what's at stake for the Cubs and their title-starved fans.

"I'm just trying to help out and makes sure we can get there and get eight more wins," Chapman said. "And I understand how much it means to this city. It's a difficult task, but I plan on getting it done and helping my teammates get there."

Home, sweet home: Kyle Hendricks hopes the Cubs can make full use of home field advantage in the NLCS after losing the first two games of the 2015 NLCS and getting swept by the Mets.

"It's big," said Hendricks, taking note of the fact the Cubs won their first two games against the Giants in the NLDS. "You got to take care of home field. Starting on the road is tough. Playing on the road is tough in general. Hopefully we can take advantage of it in the next series, but it's definitely it's a key."

The Cubs won all four games against the Nationals and three of four against the Dodgers at Wrigley during the regular season.

Extra innings: The Cubs haven’t announced their rotation for the NLCS, but Hendricks has recovered from a right forearm bruise suffered Sunday and believes he's ready to resume pitching.

"To be able to throw again is awesome," said Hendricks, who played catch Tuesday and is expected to throw a bullpen session soon with the possibility he could start Game 2 on Sunday night.

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**Chicago Tribune**

Cubs’ NLCS Games 1 and 2 start times announced

By Staff

The Cubs' first two games of the National League Championship Series at Wrigley Field will start at 7:08 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, Major League Baseball announced Wednesday.

In military time, that's 1908.

The Cubs' opponent has yet to be determined. The Dodgers and Nationals play Game 5 of the NLDS Thursday night in Washington.

Both Cubs NLCS games will be on Fox Sports 1.

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**Chicago Sun-Times**

Does Cubs’ NLDS win over Giants signal changing of guard in NL?

By Gordon Wittenmyer

Before the start of this Cubs playoff run, Kris Bryant looked around the clubhouse and quickly dismissed the suggestion that the Cubs‘ season would be considered a bust if they didn’t win the World Series.

Based on what he saw in the room, he said, this group has “five, six years” to be “making runs like this all the time.”

Never mind for a moment that the deeper the Cubs go in this already breathtaking postseason, the win-it-all-now mandate only grows by the ton.

Or the facts that Aroldis Chapman is a rent-a-closer who goes away next month and that Jake Arrieta and John Lackey are only under club control through next year.
To Bryant’s larger point, the Cubs spent the last five days— in particular a 22-hour stretch from Monday night into Tuesday night— showing what he meant.

And along the way, this team that could get younger, and stronger, in the next couple of years might have signaled a changing of the guard in the National League with their elimination Tuesday night of the team that had won three of the last six World Series.

When fourth-month rookie Albert Almora Jr. made that run-saving, diving catch (that he turned into a double play) in Monday’s ninth inning and almost made an even more spectacular play in the 13th, the word was out on why the kid made the playoff roster over more experienced players.

And how big he plays into the Cubs plans this month, next April and in those next “five, six years.”

“I told you, he’s not afraid,” manager Joe Maddon said. “Listen, this is the kind of moment here that can really increase this kid’s confidence over the next couple of years. And he’s going to get bigger and stronger. The power is coming.”

The other rookie position player on the playoff roster, catcher Willson Contreras, seems to make a bigger impact the bigger the game gets.

Since debuting in June, he hit .282 with 12 homers during the season, had two hits in his Game 2 playoff start behind the plate (a Cubs victory) and in Tuesday night’s historic ninth inning, he pinch hit with the bases loaded and tied the game with a two-run single— two spots ahead of Javy Baez’s go-ahead hit.

It was just the second time a team had come from three runs behind in the ninth inning to win a postseason clincher (also 1986 Mets at Houston in the NLCS).

“Once the playoffs start, I don’t put pressure on myself,” Contreras said. “I wasn’t nervous at all.”

Suddenly, this team led by veterans Jon Lester, Arrieta and Anthony Rizzo starts looking younger and deeper in talent with Contreras and Almora in the lineup next April.

With Baez going from the top-fielding utility infielder in baseball to breakout playoff star to, maybe, a more stable place in the Cubs’ everyday lineup next year.

“I know what I can do,” Baez said. “And what I do I’ll do it for my team, for my fans, for Chicago.”

For “five, six years”? Don’t forget Bryant is just a second-year player with a Rookie of the Year award from last year and an MVP award likely waiting for him this winter. He went 6-for-16 in the Division Series against the Giants, with two of the biggest hits in the two San Francisco games: a tying two-run homer in Monday’s ninth, and the single that opened Tuesday’s winning rally.

Already, the window includes back-to-back NLCS appearances for the first time in franchise history, the first back-to-back years with postseason series wins since 1907-08.

“If you’re a player on this particular team within the organization, it’s getting to the point now you want to expect to get to the postseason and you want to expect to get deeply into the postseason,” Maddon said.

For years, says Bryant.

But first thing’s first.

“We’re going to enjoy the playoffs,” Contreras said.
Who’s better than Javy Baez? Right now, the answer is nobody

SAN FRANCISCO — Javy Baez tried to play it off as no big deal, but that dog wasn’t hunting.

Besides, the Cubs second baseman and breakout star of the NLDS was standing in the clamor of a winning clubhouse, cacophonous joy all around him, champagne soaking through his clothes, the preposterous goggles that covered most of his face beginning to fog over.

Moments like that one on Tuesday night, after the Cubs eliminated the Giants with a ninth-inning comeback for the ages, have a way of making the truth flow.

So again, this time more privately, Baez was asked to explain a particular dramatic gesture he made after rounding first base with the game- and series-winning hit.

Because this gesture wasn’t directed at his teammates, as Cubs players have been doing after big hits all season. Instead, Baez kept his back to the dugout and snarled as he stuck out his left fist and pounded it several times with his open right hand. He was glaring while he did it, but at whom or what, exactly?

“I had my reasons,” he said.

Was it intended for Giants reliever Hunter Strickland? Or for the whole Giants team? Or was it even broader than that — an exclamation point on his arrival as a postseason celebrity who is only beginning to be recognized for things he knew long ago that he could do?

“It was that,” he said. “It was all that.”

By the end of the teams’ series, the Giants — and their fans — clearly did not like Baez, who was booed for two nights solid at AT&T Park. It started in Game 1 at Wrigley Field when Baez lingered at the plate and watched his eighth-inning home run ball fly into the basket in left for the only run of the night.

In Game 2, Strickland buzzed Baez up and in. In Game 3, closer Sergio Romo yapped at Baez after striking him out. Reliever Derek Law had words for Baez and the Cubs, too. Before and during Baez’s winning at-bat against Strickland in the finale, the right-hander tried to rattle him.

Afterward, Baez laughed at Strickland’s effort to intimidate.

“He just kept staring at me for no reason,” he said.

He also laughed at Strickland’s effort to get him out.

“The last pitch was a fastball — you can’t throw that pitch to me.”

And he had a word or two in return for the Giants team and its supporters.

“If you’re tripping because I took a little time coming out of the (batter’s) box, if you’re talking trash to me, if you want to boo me, I don’t care. I have a clear mind. It’s only because I’m doing damage.”

The Giants didn’t like him, but baseball fans all over got to know him and Cubdom clearly fell head over heels in love with him as Baez was the best player on the field night after night. Baez led all Cubs in the NLDS with four runs scored and two game-winning hits, yet somehow it was his personal parade of web gems in the field that seemed to move the needle more.
Game 4 alone was a highlight reel of plays that perhaps only Baez — not just among the Cubs, but in all of baseball — is capable of making.

He showed range on ground balls that hasn’t often been seen — ever — and a contortionist’s flexibility on throws and tags. Go ahead, try sprinting 40 feet to your right only to violently twist your body on one foot in the opposite direction even as you’re crashing to the ground. Or better yet, don’t. Your insurance provider will thank you for it.

Is Baez the best defensive player in the major leagues? Despite not having been a full-time starter throughout the 2016 season, does he have the deepest well of talent of any member of the Cubs? Is there a more valuable Cub right now than Baez, Kris Bryant’s and Anthony Rizzo’s MVP candidacies notwithstanding?

These are questions being asked by plenty of people.

It’s almost comical now to think back to the Cubs’ offseason signing of Ben Zobrist, not because the signing was a bad idea — it certainly wasn’t — but because of what it said about Baez. In a nutshell, it said he wasn’t an everyday kind of player.

Who knows? Maybe that actually was an accurate read on him at the time.

But October Javy Baez is one player — maybe the player — the Cubs can’t take off the field for even an inning. And they won’t. Not this postseason. Probably not, to any meaningful extent, for a long time to come.

“I know what I can do,” Baez said. “And what I do, I’ll do it for my team, for my fans and for Chicago to bring the ‘W’ home.”

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Chicago Sun-Times
An unbeliever starts to soften on the David Ross phenomenon
By Rick Morrissey

SAN FRANCISCO — Some of us have been slow to understand the infatuation with Cubs backup catcher David Ross. Some of us have wondered what the results of this poll question would be in Chicago: What’s greater, Cubs fans’ love for Ross or God’s love for mankind?

A Cubs fan would respond: How many times can we vote?

People can see that the 39-year-old Ross is genuine and that he’s genuinely a nice guy. But the clear thinkers among us have to balance those truths with another, that some Cubs fans would cheer a turnip if it were wearing a Ron Santo jersey.

And then you see Ross hit that third-inning home run to tie Game 4 of their National League Division Series against the Giants, you watch him being interviewed as the Cubs celebrate their trip to the N.L. Championship Series and you feel the first rays of enlightenment washing over you.

“I got a homer — how about that!” Ross told CSN Chicago. “Blind squirrel theory.”

Self-deprecation can soothe the savage cynic.

It’s understandable that Ross’ teammates would be drawn to a part-time player, given his age, enthusiasm and impending retirement. He has been a mentor to and a cheerleader for his fellow Cub.

His on-base-plus-slugging percentage in the regular season was .784, sixth-best on the team, and he has done good work behind the plate. He threw out two San Francisco baserunners in Game 1 of the NLDS. And with that homer Tuesday night, he became the oldest Cub to hit a home run in a postseason game in team history.
But there is almost no way that whatever Ross has done for the Cubs could translate into this much love. None. And yet, somehow, it has. A standing ovation for him at Wrigley Field is not a rarity. When Ross caught a no-hitter in April, a few people even found time to congratulate the pitcher who threw it, Jake Arrieta. The Cubs honored Ross at a pregame ceremony Sept. 23, which included a video board tribute.

So what is it? I wanted to know if Ross could explain it and if he found it all a bit bewildering, if not a tad embarrassing. I started to ask him the question, and it was clear from the moment he cut me off that he got it.

Fans have really taken to you even though you’ve only been here two years ...

“And I don’t play much either,” he said, smiling.

Exactly. How does a career .229 hitter who has played a total of 139 regular-season games as a Cub engender this much devotion?

“I appreciate the love and support,” he said. “I mean, it’s a lot of love that I feel. I don’t know why. That’s something you could ask my teammates or the fans. I try to be myself. I think a lot of it stems from the nice things my teammates have said about me all year, the way they’ve treated me the last two years, at spring training.

“They’ve given me a lot of respect and (so have media members) talking about how great I am, which is complete BS. I think a lot of it stems from that. Guys that are the face of this franchise, guys like Jonny Lester and (Kris Bryant) and (Anthony Rizzo), the future stars in (Addison Russell), and all those guys seem to say nice things about me.”

A friend of mine appeared at a Sun-Times Playoffs Party at Harry Caray’s restaurant recently and expressed similar disdain on stage for the Ross phenomenon. When the panel discussion was opened to questions from the audience, a woman stood up and saluted the Cubs for honoring Ross for all that he had done.

Clearly, we Ross realists are losing big to the Ross rooters.

When Rizzo and Bryant set up a Grandpa Rossy Instagram account (@grandpaRossy_3) to chronicle Ross’ final season, it was an immediate hit. It has 153,000 followers. Not bad for a backup catcher.

“Since the Grandpa Rossy Instagram thing took place, it’s been a lot crazier for me just out and about in public,” he said.

Ross has been with seven teams in 14 full seasons. That he has been popular among teammates wherever he has played is probably the biggest tribute to him.

“You just try to go in with a clean slate and be yourself and you have to prove your worth everywhere you go and figure out how you’re going to contribute,” he said.

Yes, yes, but why all the affection?

“Who knows?” he said. “I have no idea, but I really appreciate it. It’s a lot of love and I promise you I don’t deserve even half of it.”

I used to think the same thing too.

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Chicago Sun-Times
Zobrist is Cubs’ steady man in the middle
By Daryl Van Schouwen
Ben Zobrist, as steady as they come, is the anchored, unshakable presence in the midst of all that rambunctious young Cubs talent.

Respected for his poise, needed for his bat, valued for his versatility in the field.

“He is Ben. And I love him for it,” Cubs manager Joe Maddon said.

Zobrist, 35, is situated in the middle of the clubhouse lineup, surrounded by lots of 20-somethings who watched and learned from him during his first tour with the Cubs.

“He’s just that veteran presence,” 32-year-old left-hander Jon Lester said. “He’s been around. And any time you have a ring in your back pocket, that’s a good thing to have with some of these young guys.”

It was Zobrist who delivered the first big blow of the Cubs’ historic four-run ninth inning in San Francisco Tuesday night, an RBI double into the right field corner against Sergio Romo which cut the Giants lead to 5-3 and put the tying runs in scoring position. And, well, you know the rest.

The Cubs’ young All-Stars, Kris Bryant and Anthony Rizzo, started the rally. Budding stars Willson Contreras and Javier Baez finished it. In between, Zobrist linked them with the clutch blow that put the Giants on their heels and sent the Cubs to the NLCS for the second year in a row.

This will be the first for Zobrist, a World Series champion with the Kansas City Royals last season, as a Cub. Maddon says it’s great to have him this time around.

“He’s a metronome,” said Maddon, who managed Zobrist with the Tampa Bay Rays. “If you watch his work, it’s meticulous. Everything he does has a purpose to it, whether he’s working in the infield or in the outfield. He’s 35 and he works as though he’s 21. That’s just who he is. Great shape, takes care of himself extremely well.”

Then there’s the influence, Maddon says, that Zobrist has on the rest of the lineup.

“His at-bats are what is most influential among the group,” Maddon said. “Not expanding his strike zone, never out of the at-bat, never giving away anything. I think for guys like Javy having a chance to watch him is very beneficial.”

And it’s not hit and miss with Zobrist.

“He just does this every day,” Maddon said.

What’s more, Zobrist, who played 119 games and started in the All-Star Game at second base this season, is patrolling the outfield, where he played 46 games, which essentially allowed Baez to flourish at peak levels at second base this postseason.

“Javy is coming into his own,” Zobrist said. “He has to be on the field.”

And Zobrist, who posted a .272/.386/.446 slash line with 18 homers, 31 doubles and 76 RBI, has to be in the lineup.

“That’s a hard thing to go from second to left to right, back to second,” Lester said.

“The biggest thing with Zo’ is just how consistent he is day in and day out. Never takes an at-bat off, no matter what the score is, what the situation is. Drawing walks and running the bases and all the little intangibles that get overlooked sometimes.”

And the occasional big things, too, like that double in Game 4.

“I got in a good count with Romo to be able to hit a pitch like that to hit,” Zobrist said.
The Cubs bench erupted.

“The ninth inning is the toughest time to beat a team,” Zobrist said. “Just do your part and pass the baton to the next guy and put some pressure on them. We were confident, but you still have to execute. Coming back to win says a lot about our team.”

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Daily Herald
High stakes or not, there's no quit in Chicago Cubs
By Bruce Miles

The two games had little in common, except for how the Chicago Cubs approached them and how they finished them.

One was the regular-season finale at Cincinnati. The Cubs didn't need to win the game, having clinched the National League Central more than two weeks previous. They trailed the Reds 4-2 heading into the eighth inning and 4-3 entering the ninth.

On the radio in Cincinnati, veteran Reds voice Marty Brennaman was busy saying goodbye for the season and thanking everybody from the team owner to the floor sweeper at the Great American Ball Park.

All the while, the Cubs kept pinging away at the plate, scoring 4 runs and winning the game 7-4.

The other game had much more meaning.

Tuesday night at AT&T Park, the Cubs trailed the San Francisco Giants 5-2 entering the ninth, and they were on the brink of frittering away a two-games-to-none lead in the National League division series and coming home to face the Giants' Johnny Cueto in a decisive Game 5.

But as they did in Cincinnati, the Cubs didn't quit. A porous Giants bullpen gave them an opening, and they took it, scoring 4 runs to rally for a stunning 6-5 victory and a happy trip home to get ready for the National League championship series.

In one of the media sessions during the NLDS, right fielder Jason Heyward cited the game in Cincinnati as a measure of what the Cubs are made. In the champagne-soaked clubhouse late Tuesday night, Cubs from one end of the room to the other voiced what's become a team mantra.

"We never quit," said bench coach Dave Martinez, the right-hand man of manager Joe Maddon, who had just got done saying the same thing.

Turns out, this approach is something that took life last season, when a then-surprising Cubs team won the wildcard and the NLDS before getting swept out of the NLCS by the New York Mets.

"Here we are," said third baseman Kris Bryant, a leading MVP candidate. "Last year we kind of adopted the saying, 'Never give up.' We'd say it after every big win. Today was no different."

That spirit was evident in Tuesday night's ninth inning, when Bryant led off with a single against Giants reliever Derek Law. Anthony Rizzo followed with a walk against Javier Lopez. Giants manager Bruce Bochy brought in Sergio Romo to face Ben Zobrist, who doubled home Bryant and sent Rizzo to third base.

Chris Coghlan came up to pinch hit, and Bochy countered with Will Smith. Seeing that, Maddon had rookie Willson Contreras bat for Coghlan, and Contreras singled up the middle to score Rizzo and Zobrist with the tying runs.
After Heyward bunted into a forceout -- accompanied by a throwing error -- Bochy made another move, making the bullpen call for Hunter Strickland. Javier Baez greeted Strickland with a single up the middle to score Heyward with the eventual winning run.

The outburst arrived in breathtaking contrast to how the Cubs hit -- or did not hit -- earlier in the game.

Until the ninth, they had just 2 hits, a home run by David Ross in the third inning and a single by Rizzo in the fourth. Both came against Giants starter Matt Moore, who gave Cubs little else.

"We needed to string a couple good at-bats together," said team president Theo Epstein from the middle of the postgame celebration. "It was starting to come (Monday) night. We hit a few balls hard right at guys. We weren't able to come all the way back.

"Finally, after all that frustration, it was released cathartically in the ninth inning. We just exploded in the ninth. It finally came to the fore for us."

Closer Aroldis Chapman came in and struck out all three Giants he faced in the bottom of the ninth, and before you knew it, the public-address announcer was telling fans the Giants would see them next April.

This is a Giants franchise that won the World Series in 2010, 2012 and 2014. This year's bunch wasn't going down without a fight.

"To do it in the postseason, on the road and against a team that's won 10 straight elimination games, is an incredible accomplishment," Epstein said. "It's hard to finish any team in a postseason series, let alone one that has their kind of pedigree and character.

"That says a lot, for not being ourselves for eight innings, to come alive like that. That says a lot about who we are."

In the middle of the clubhouse, pitcher Jon Lester, who has firmly established himself as a team leader, weighed in on the Cubs' wherewithal to win games like this.

"I think it's just our personality, it's our group," Lester said. "Yeah, you look at our lineups and you look at our staff and everything. We have a lot of talent, but we have a lot of grinders. And I think that starts top to bottom.

"We grind. Yeah, we have some flashy guys. We guys who are MVPs and Cy Youngs and stuff like that, but when it comes down to it, we're kind of like the 9-to-5 Chicago person who goes to work every day and grinds it out. That's what we do.

"That showed tonight, just with our at-bats and the way we went about our pitching and catching. You look at Rossy flying all over the place behind the plate, blocking balls and acting like he's 25. It's awesome to see. It's just the personality of our team."

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Daily Herald
How would Cubs fare against Dodgers or Nationals?
By Scot Gregor

As the Chicago Cubs look to claim their first World Series championship since 1908, it's one postseason series down and two more to go.

After dispatching the San Francisco Giants in 4 games and claiming the National League division series, the NL championship series is up next.
The Cubs play either the Washington Nationals or Los Angeles Dodgers in the next round, which opens Saturday at Wrigley Field.

While the Cubs catch some needed rest, the Nationals and Dodgers play the deciding Game 5 of their NLDS series Thursday night at Washington.

Here is a look at both teams from the Cubs' point of view:

**Nationals**

Pros: The Cubs were 4-2 against Washington during the regular season, and swept a key four-game series against the Nats at Wrigley in early May.

Beating an opponent four straight times is impressive, but not impossible. Much more notable in the series was the Cubs walking Washington slugger Bryce Harper 13 times, a major-league record.

The Nationals are playing in the postseason without star catcher Wilson Ramos, who injured his right knee in late September and had surgery.

Starting pitcher Stephen Strasburg has been out since early September with a partially torn tendon in his right elbow. He's been throwing bullpen sessions and might be ready for the NLCS, but Strasburg wouldn't figure to be much of a factor after such a long layoff.

Cons: Even without Ramos, the Nats have a much better offense than the Giants. Heading into Game 5 of the NLCS, Washington had four regulars -- Jayson Werth, Daniel Murphy, Trea Turner and Ryan Zimmerman -- batting over .300. Harper was not hitting well through 4 games in the NLDS, but he had 24 home runs and 86 RBI in the regular season.

San Francisco didn't have an established closer and that proved costly in Game 4 of the NLDS. The Nationals are in much better shape at the end of games with former Pirate Mark Melancon.

**Dodgers**

Pros: The Cubs were 4-3 vs. Los Angeles this season and were 3-1 at Wrigley.

Like the Nationals, the Dodgers have been dealing with injury issues and they had a staggering seven starting pitchers on the disabled list in late August.

Ace left-hander Clayton Kershaw was out from June 27-Sept. 8 with a herniated disc in his back. He's returned to Los Angeles' rotation and started 2 games against Washington in the NLDS.

The Dodgers' offense didn't do much in the first four games of the NLDS, averaging 3.75 runs per game while batting .221. Rookie shortstop Corey Seager, who hit .308 with 26 homers and 72 RBI in the regular season, is 3-for-18 heading into Game 5 against the Nats, although two of those hits cleared the fences.

Cons: Kershaw would be lined up to start Game 2 and 5 or 6, if necessary. He has struggled throughout his career in the postseason (3-6, 4.83 ERA) but is still one of baseball's top starters.

Like Washington, Los Angeles has some power with Seager, Justin Turner, Adrian Gonzalez and Joc Pederson.

Closer Kenley Jansen was struggling in the NLDS heading into Game 5, but he tied for second in the league with 47 saves during the regular season.

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Jon Lester will be the starting pitcher for the Chicago Cubs in Saturday's opening game of the National League championship series at Wrigley Field against either the Los Angeles Dodgers or Washington Nationals.

Had the Cubs lost Tuesday at San Francisco, Lester would have been the Game 5 starter against the Giants. He said that was something he was mentally preparing for.

"Yeah, after Game 1, you've got to prepare," he said. "I do my normal workout. I do my normal routine. You can't take any days off in the playoffs. You've got to prepare like you've got a next start. If you don't, that's when it sneaks up on you, and that's when you get in trouble."

The kids can play:

Cubs president Theo Epstein always has been willing to tip his cap to former general manager Jim Hendry and his staff for drafting or signing such young players as Javier Baez and Willson Contreras. Epstein did so again Tuesday night.

Both Baez and Contreras figured prominently in Tuesday night's rally that helped the Cubs beat the Giants 6-5 to win the division series. Contreras singled home the tying runs in the ninth inning, and Baez singled home the game-winner.

"He had a great series in just all phases of the game: baserunning, defense, the quality of his at-bats," Epstein said of Baez. "All our young guys -- Willson Contreras, what an unbelievable job there in the ninth inning."

"Those two guys in particular have come such a long way. Albert (rookie Almora) contributed. It was a teamwide effort -- young players, veterans. It was something to behold."

This and that:

At 39, David Ross became the oldest catcher to homer in a postseason game and the oldest player in Cubs history to homer in a postseason game. The previous mark for the oldest Cub was held by Moises Alou in Game 7 of the 2003 NLCS. ... Willson Contreras recorded the fourth game-tying hit in the ninth inning or later in Cubs postseason history, joining Kris Bryant, Sammy Sosa and Frank Chance. ...

Tuesday's victory in Game 4 of the NLDS marked the third time in franchise history the Cubs won a postseason game when trailing after eight innings. The previous time was 1910. ... The Cubs were the second team to come back from a 3-run deficit in the ninth inning to win a postseason series clincher, joining the 1986 New York Mets (NLCS).

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Cubs.com
3 keys for Cubs to reach World Series
By Carrie Muskat

CHICAGO -- In the National League Championship Series last year, Mets pitchers stifled the Cubs and swept the series. Now that the Cubs have ousted the Giants in the NL Division Series, they need to regroup for the next round, which starts Saturday (7 p.m. CT on FS1). It won't matter if it's the Nationals or the Dodgers, who will play a deciding Game 5 of their NLDS on Thursday (7 p.m. CT on FS1). The Cubs just do their own thing.

"It doesn't matter," manager Joe Maddon said about who's next. "When you start worrying about who you're going to play, it could bite you. Because it really shouldn't matter. ... I'm just happy to be in the dance."
The Cubs will likely hear more talk about the franchise's long drought since the last World Series championship -- 1908, in case you didn't know. They'll just shrug it off.

"I think the biggest thing is nobody really cares in there about a curse or a goat or anything else," Cubs pitcher Jon Lester said. "If we make a mistake, we're not going to blame it on a curse or anything else like that. We're going to blame it on ourselves and be accountable for it and move on to the next play or the next moment.

"Plus, I think we've got too many young guys in there that don't even know what that stuff is," Lester said. "It's almost better to play naive and just go out and worry about us, worry about the Cubs, and not anything else in the past or, like I said, any animals."

The Cubs finished with a franchise-record 57 wins at Wrigley during the regular season. The crowd dances to each player's walk-up music. There are "W" flags all over town. In Spring Training, there was talk about how they wanted to win this for catcher David Ross, 39, who is retiring at season's end. They hope his retirement party never ends.

What do the Cubs need to do to advance to their first World Series since 1945? Here are three things to consider:

1. Keep Javier Baez in the lineup

Baez, who began the season without a starting job, started at second base in all four games of the NLDS, primarily for his glove. He has contributed at the plate, batting .375 with two RBIs, including a go-ahead RBI single in the ninth inning of the 6-5 win Tuesday in Game 4. The Cubs need to catch the ball, and Baez will likely provide more web gems in the next series.

2. Let's get some runs

Pitchers drove in six of the Cubs' 17 runs in the NLDS. They will need to find offense somewhere else. Anthony Rizzo and Addison Russell each went 1-for-15 in the four games. Maddon pinch-hit for Russell for the first time this season in the ninth of Game 4. Maddon was encouraged by Rizzo's at-bats on Tuesday, because the first baseman was more patient and walked twice. But pitcher Jake Arrieta is tied with Kris Bryant for the most RBIs in the postseason (three). The position players need to step it up.

3. Pitching, pitching and more pitching

Cubs starters had the best ERA (2.96) in the Majors this year, and they need to continue that trend. Lester will be happy to start Game 1 of the NLCS at Wrigley, where he was 10-2 with a 1.74 ERA. The lefty had the best outing so far among the starters, throwing eight scoreless innings in Game 1 against the Giants. If he gets the go ahead, Kyle Hendricks could start Game 2 at home, which would also be a good thing. Hendricks was struck on the right forearm by a line drive in Game 2 of the NLDS, knocking him out after 3 2/3 innings. He posted a 1.32 ERA at home. Arrieta delivered at the plate, smacking a three-run homer in Game 3, and he held the Giants to two runs over six innings.

The difference for the Cubs this season is the addition of Aroldis Chapman. Mets closer Jeurys Familia overwhelmed the Cubs in last year's NLCS. Chapman pitched in all four NLDS games, and he struck out the side in the ninth inning of Game 4 for his third save.

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Cubs.com
Cubs not in short supply of pitchers who rake
By Jenifer Langosch

SAN FRANCISCO -- When either the Dodgers or Nationals turn their attention to facing the Cubs in the National League Championship Series starting Saturday (7 p.m. CT on FS1), they'll discover perhaps an unexpected note in the scouting report.
Many of the same Cubs pitchers who helped lead the staff to a Major League-best 3.15 ERA also have a knack for handling the bat. As was evidenced in Chicago’s NL Division Series win over San Francisco, that seemingly minor detail can have game-changing effects.

Of the 17 runs the Cubs scored in the NLDS, six were driven in by pitchers.

"I think that the mindset for us is we don't want to go up to the plate and just be a free out," said Jake Arrieta, who became the first pitcher to homer off Giants ace Madison Bumgarner with his three-run blast in Game 3 of the NLDS. "There's a lot of time and energy put into that to just help carry our weight. Being able to handle the bat really can put a lot of pressure on the other side."

That focus on being capable with the bat started back in Spring Training, largely under the guidance of pitching coach Chris Bosio.

"It's something we knew we were going to have to be better on, especially to be that team to play deep in the postseason," Bosio said before Chicago's 6-5 victory over San Francisco in Game 4 on Tuesday. "It's something that we know as an organization that we had to get better [at]. All that hard work from Day 1 in Spring Training is paying off."

Though their strikeout percentage (44) remained static from last year to this one, Cubs pitchers did see an uptick in production in every other offensive category.

Chicago's batting average jumped from .114 in 2015 to .157 this year, fourth best in the NL. And the Cubs ranked among the NL's top five teams in on-base percentage (.197), slugging percentage (.209), OPS (.406), hits (54) and total bases (72). Last year, they were below league average in all of those areas, with the exception of hits.

It's been a tangible reward for a group that has committed itself to taking batting practice almost every day this season.

"Our guys do put a lot of time in," manager Joe Maddon said. "They work at it. They take pride in it. And they know I'm not always going to call for a bunt. [I like to] give them a shot so they know we have confidence in them swinging the bat right there."

Capable personnel helps, too, as Maddon noted. Arrieta and Jason Hammel are among two of the best hitting pitchers in the league. In fact, Arrieta led the league in hits (17) and was one of four NL pitchers with multiple home runs. Travis Wood, before being moved to a relief role, presented a similar threat, as he reminded with a first-pitch home run to help Chicago to a win in Game 2 of the NLDS.

Jon Lester and Kyle Hendricks largely contributed in a different manner. Both finished among the league leaders in sacrifice bunts. Lester laid down nine, while Hendricks had eight.

The damage these pitchers did in the NLDS was historic. Their six RBIs tied the 1958 Braves (World Series) and the ’70 Orioles (American League Championship Series) for the most by a team’s pitchers in a postseason series. They also became the first team since the ’24 New York Giants to have two pitchers homer in the same postseason series.

Cubs pitchers finished the NLDS 3-for-9 (.333) with two homers and six RBIs. In comparison, the Giants as a team hit .252 with no home runs and 13 RBIs over four games.

"Run production is what we're all about," Bosio said. "Pitching and defense will win championships. But any time our pitchers can contribute in any way, whether it's getting down a bunt or big swing of the bat, we'll take it. "We've been rewarded for our hard work."
Bright young stars carry Cubs to new heights
By Phil Rogers

CHICAGO – Goats? To quote the T-shirt Bill Murray wore to Wrigley Field last week, the Cubs ain’t afraid of no goats.

There are a few reasons why not, including the leadership of four veterans who already own World Series rings and manager Joe Maddon, who announced upon his arrival in Chicago that he "doesn’t vibrate at that frequency." But the biggest might be that these Cubs -- who will play either the Nationals or the Dodgers on Saturday in Game 1 of the National League Championship Series (8 p.m. ET/7 p.m. CT on FS1) -- are too young to know better.

"Nobody really cares about a curse or a goat or anything else," Jon Lester said on Tuesday, a few hours before the Cubs eliminated the Giants in the NL Division Series. "It's what you make of it. If we make a mistake, we're not going to blame it on a curse or anything else like that. We're going to blame it on ourselves and be accountable for it and move on to the next play or the next moment.

"I think we got too many young guys in there that don’t even know what that stuff is. It's almost better to play naive and just go out and worry about us, worry about the Cubs and not anything else in the past or, like I said, any animals."

Lester is right. These Cubs are the biggest, best collection of young talent that a team has put together in 40 years, if not longer. Anthony Rizzo, Jason Heyward, Kris Bryant, Addison Russell and Jorge Soler were the primary players at their position this year, and all were in their age-26-or-younger season.

Chicago is in the NL Championship Series for the second consecutive season. If it wins the World Series, it will be the first team to do it with five regulars that young since the 1969 Mets -- and that list of young Cubs doesn’t include Javier Baez and Willson Contreras, who played leading roles in the Game 4 comeback against the Giants.

Youth has many advantages. One of them is the innocence and lack of scar tissue that comes from having known too much defeat and disappointment.

Rather than get caught up in why their predecessors couldn't win, Chicago's players seem to have embraced the chance to be part of the franchise’s first championship team since 1908. They must understand that the stress level would have been at maximum levels if they had found themselves facing Johnny Cueto in Game 5, but the Cubs seem confident they could have handled it.

Heyward was asked if players feel the fans' anxiety.

"I'm not going to call it anxiety; I'm going to call it a beautiful thing," Heyward said. "The live-or-die these fans have [with] this team is a beautiful thing. It's been an awesome experience to do it with this group, because the city is hungry. We know we need eight more wins to do what we came here to do, but all in all, it's just awesome to see the support from everybody."

Remember when Bryant spoofed the goat in that commercial before he was even called up to the Majors early in the 2015 season? Russell and the chest-pounders, Baez and Contreras, don't seem the personality types to fret about anything that happened in 2003, let alone 1984 or '69.

It's probably not a coincidence that the Cubs are both the youngest and the healthiest team in the postseason. Aside from losing Kyle Schwarber -- another young stud in his age-23 season -- to a knee injury in April, there have been no major medical issues for Maddon's team, and very few minor issues.

Kyle Hendricks, Chicago's youngest starting pitcher at age 26, took a line drive off his right forearm in Game 2, but everyone seemed pleased by his bullpen session following the injury. Reliever Pedro Strop had his left knee scoped on Aug. 12, but he has returned. The biggest question might be Hector Rondon, the closer before Aroldis Chapman
was added in a July trade. Rondon dealt with right elbow issues late in the season, and he hasn't regained his consistency.

Fatigue can be a problem for teams given the physical and mental demands of the extended postseason format. That may be why only four of the past 12 World Series have gone more than five games, with seven-game series only in 2011 and '14.

Maddon feels good about his team having the fresh legs and minds to battle for 27 outs every time. He loved Tuesday's four-run rally in the ninth to overcome a three-run deficit against the Giants, which matched the biggest in a postseason-clinching game.

"After the game, even on the mound there taking the photographs, the guys were chanting, 'We don't quit, we don't quit,'" Maddon said.

The Cubs are the best defensive team in the Major Leagues, with serious NL Gold Glove Award candidates at first base (Rizzo), second base (Baez), shortstop (Russell) and in right field (Heyward). Maddon believes there's an element of the team's defensive efficiency that goes beyond the individual players, however.

Maddon points to the range Chicago has at almost every position because of the way his young, athletic players cover ground. The ability to take away a few hits every game contributed to holding opponents to a .212 batting average, the lowest since the 1968 Indians of Sonny Siebert, "Sudden Sam" McDowell and a young Luis Tiant.

The Cubs will likely trade hitting for fielding in left field next season, when Schwarber returns. Albert Almora Jr., a first-round Draft pick in 2012 who is 22, profiles as a defensive upgrade to Dexter Fowler in center field if Fowler isn't re-signed. There are other young players on the way, including switch-hitting second baseman Ian Happ and 19-year-old outfielder Eloy Jimenez, who won the Midwest League Most Valuable Player Award. Happ is Chicago's top prospect, according to MLB Pipeline.com, and Jimenez is the club's No. 2 prospect.

"This is a special group," Maddon said. "It's pretty easy when you want to have kids act like kids. Listen, you see them on the field. They play. We play hard. I think we play it right. We're pretty fundamentally sound. Normally we play a good game of baseball on a daily basis. And understand, we're going to get better. These kids are young.

"To be able to be participating in this particular moment now speaks well for the future, because I don't anticipate any of them changing when it comes to their personalities, their methods. I just think they're going to get better."

Cubs.com
Cubs fly 'W' on social media after NLDS win
By Carrie Muskat

(All tweets referenced are available through the link above)

CHICAGO -- There were "W" flags all over Chicago on Wednesday as Cubs fans celebrated the team's 3-1 series win over the Giants in the National League Division Series. Players were excited, too, about advancing to the NL Championship Series, which begins Saturday night at Wrigley Field (8 p.m. ET/7 p.m. CT on FS1) against the winner of the Dodgers-Nationals NLDS.

The Cub who may be the most popular right now is Javier Baez, who has added more than 23,000 new followers on Instagram and more than 9,000 on Twitter since Game 1 of the NLDS, according to Crain's Chicago Business. Baez hit the game-winning RBI single in the four-run ninth inning on Tuesday in Game 4.

That rally prompted an outburst of excitement by Cubs players on social media.

Outfielder Matt Szczur, who was not on the NLDS roster but was traveling with the team, added a photo of the champagne-soaked players on the mound at AT&T Park.
Kyle Schwarber, who sustained a season-ending knee injury in the third game of the year, traveled with the Cubs to San Francisco and was their biggest cheerleader.

Aroldis Chapman may be fairly new to the Cubs, but he also celebrated on Twitter.

Even actor and comedian Bob Newhart joined the party, posting a photo of himself holding a "W" flag in front of the television after Chapman struck out Brandon Belt for the final out.

Chicago native and actress Bonnie Hunt posted a photo of herself and late Cubs third baseman and broadcaster Ron Santo on Twitter.

Former Bulls player Scottie Pippen also commented: "Just when you thought they were down and out ... redemption! Incredible victory for the @Cubs. On to the next one. #FlyTheW"

The Giants may have been eliminated, but they made a classy move in congratulating the Cubs on Twitter: "Congrats @Cubs fans! What a thrilling, unforgettable series. Good luck in the next round."

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ESPNChicago.com
What Cubs' NLDS decisions tell us about their October plan
By Jesse Rogers

CHICAGO -- Surely you've watched every moment over and over again by now, from Javier Baez's Game 1-sealing home run to the improbable ninth-inning rally in Chicago's NLDS-clinching Game 4 victory. Before we get to the NLCS, let's review what we learned -- and what it means going forward -- from watching the Chicago Cubs take down the San Francisco Giants in a dramatic NLDS victory:

Baez is an everyday starter

Those who didn’t watch the Cubs all season might not know that Baez didn’t play every day. He got his time in at second and third base, but only when the matchup was right or manager Joe Maddon wanted to rest others. Baez ended up with 450 plate appearances but never was entrenched.

Now? Maddon won’t move Baez off second base, a position the Cubs quasi-promised to Ben Zobrist last winter. Zobrist has been relegated to outfield duty, and even he understands why.

“Javy is playing great,” Zobrist said simply, with a shrug.

Baez is too valuable a defender to not have him in the middle of the infield, as evidenced by the multiple plays he made -- or nearly made -- the past four games. Plus, his bat has caught up to his glove, as he went 6-for-16 with a home run, a walk and two game-winning RBIs in the series. Maddon will have a wonderful challenge on his hands when Kyle Schwarber returns next season, as the Cubs have too many good players. The latest star to emerge isn’t going anywhere -- except to his position at second base.

Young players look ready

Playing off the Baez storyline, the Cubs employ incredibly mature young players. Last season, it was Kris Bryant, Addison Russell and Kyle Schwarber proving they belong. Now a new wave is coming through, including Baez, Willson Contreras, Albert Almora Jr. and Carl Edwards Jr. Like Baez, the latter three all had their moments, especially Contreras and Almora. A game-tying hit (Contreras, Game 4) and a game-saving catch (Almora, Game 3) are part of Cubs history now. It invokes a saying often heard about last year’s rookie crop: These kids can play. More importantly, Maddon isn’t afraid to use them.

Maddon will try anything to win
Perhaps it’s not all that surprising, as it’s the playoffs, but Maddon is willing to try anything and everything to get the matchup he wants. Sometimes, it backfires (see the eighth inning of Game 3), but sometimes it works to perfection. His move to pinch hit for Russell in the ninth inning of Game 4 might go down as one of the best of the postseason. This was a player with 95 RBIs but one who was struggling in the series. Not only did Maddon sit Russell, but he also burned Chris Coghlan in favor of Contreras. It was all to get the matchup with lefty Will Smith. Game, set, match. Contreras singled home two runs, and the Cubs never looked back.

It isn't just the in-game moves, though. Maddon benched Jason Heyward in Game 3 and used three different catchers in the first three games of the series, including starting Miguel Montero against the lefty Madison Bumgarner. The Cubs manager has a reputation for being unpredictable, and he lived up to it in the series. The eighth inning in Game 3 didn’t work out, but nearly everything else did.

Cubs’ pitching looks a little vulnerable

Slowly but surely, the Giants started to get to Cubs pitching. First, Aroldis Chapman looked hittable in Game 3, then John Lackey didn’t exactly rise to the occasion, as many thought he would in Game 4. Reliever Justin Grimm was hit hard Tuesday. There were enough cracks in the armor to be more concerned than before the series began but not enough to cause a panic. Still, the Cubs gave up 11 runs in the final two games -- a pretty high total for the best staff in the league against a weak-hitting opponent. The good news is Games 1 and 2 were terrifically pitched, so there’s little doubt the Cubs can return to form.

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ESPNChicago.com

Wait 'till this year? It’s time to believe in the Cubs

By Jayson Stark

SAN FRANCISCO -- Joe Maddon warned his troops this moment was coming. Never hid from it. Never ignored it. Never sugarcoated it.

"I said that 'something bad is going to happen -- and [when it does] we have to stay in the moment and maintain our composure,"' the manager of the best team in baseball was saying Tuesday night, as the Toques et Clochers Cremant de Limoux gushed around him like a waterfall. "That was the exact message: Something bad is going to happen. It always does."

This was before this National League Division Series ever started. But by the top of the ninth inning Tuesday at AT&T Park, the Chicago Cubs knew That Moment their manager had warned them about had officially arrived.

They were three runs down to the San Francisco Giants with three outs to go. Which meant they were three outs away from a game they didn't want to play. Three outs away from knowing they were going to have to take the field Thursday at Wrigley Field, having to beat Johnny Cueto in front of 42,000 people who couldn't guarantee they could get through the night without thinking thoughts like "Bartman" or "goat."

In the visitors dugout along the first-base line, the men in uniform were doing their best to follow the boss' advice, to embrace this moment and keep their composure. But if you think that mindset was unanimous, well, ho-ho-ho-ho-ho.

Nearby that dugout, in the box seats, Theo Epstein had to admit he already let his mind wander. Had already let his imagination race ahead -- to Thursday, to a nervous win-or-else Game 5 at Wrigley, and all that went with it.

"Obviously, it was in the back of everyone’s mind," the Cubs’ normally ultra-cool president said. "You've got Cueto -- and [Madison] Bumgarner behind him. And, I mean, I trust us to win that game. But there's no margin for error."

So that's what they were staring at -- a crisis point unlike any the 2016 Cubs had faced at any juncture since the day they showed up in Arizona in February to begin this magic carpet ride. When the season began, they burst out
of the gates like Usain Bolt. They started 8-1, 17-5 and 25-6. They spent one day all season out of first place. They held a nine-game lead in the NL Central by May 4.

Never, on any day of their beautiful journey, had they faced this: a game they had to win. A time when they had to prove who they were and what they were. A test -- the sort of test that every great team faces -- when Something Bad Happens and then you find out if you're as great as you think you are.

Well, we now know exactly how the 2016 Cubs coped with that first test. We now know all about the miraculous and historic four-run ninth-inning rally that turned a seemingly certain Game 4 defeat into the shock and joy and celebration that went with Cubs 6, Giants 5.

We now know that this team has found the will to do something that only one other team in history -- the 1986 Mets -- had ever done: charge back from three runs behind in the ninth inning to clinch a postseason series.

But here is what you might not know: The Cubs needed to do this. They needed to make this statement. They needed to find out something important about themselves when this moment arrived.

And because they did, the 2016 Cubs will arrive at their second straight National League Championship Series in a whole different state than the team that got swept by the Mets in last year's NLCS.

"I think every team that wins in the postseason, you have to have a comeback win," said Cubs infielder Ben Zobrist, a guy who spent last October hanging out with that Royals team that won the World Series. "I think it's important. I know that eight out of our 11 wins in Kansas City last [postseason] were comeback wins. So to me, that's such a huge part of a championship team -- is that you don't quit and you always believe you're going to come back."

True, the Cubs had done this many times during the regular season, winning eight games they'd trailed entering the ninth inning -- tied for the most in baseball. And just as true, if all Giants games had just gotten rained out after eight innings this year, they probably would have won the NL West -- considering that they lost nine times when leading after eight, the most in baseball.

But what happens between April and September often feels as irrelevant to success in October as the score of the first spring training intrasquad game. And the Cubs had spent the past two nights in San Francisco learning all about that.

They'd let a three-run lead melt away in an October classic Monday night. They'd found out all about the championship mindset that had driven the Giants to win 10 consecutive elimination games. And then the Cubs went out Tuesday and got dominated for eight innings, scraping together just two hits, while whiffing 10 times, against Maddon's old friend Matt Moore.

In those box seats, Epstein squirmed nervously, not so much because of the grim numbers on the scoreboard but because this wasn't the team he'd watched play all season. And how could he be sure -- how could anybody be sure -- that that team was ever going to show up?

"We didn’t play Cubs baseball for eight innings," Epstein said. "We weren’t ourselves. We weren’t having great at-bats. We weren’t all that heads-up. We weren’t us. And I think that frustration contributed to the eruption in the ninth, because all the good stuff happened at once. So obviously, hitting before the ninth inning is clearly overrated."

Right. Obviously. Before Kris Bryant dug in to lead off the ninth inning, teams in the Cubs' position -- three runs down in the eighth inning or later -- had gone an attractive 3-824 in postseason history. And it had been 30 years since any team had found itself in that big a mess and come back to win. So that was pretty uplifting.

But now you can forget all that. Now these guys can always remember the ferocious at-bats they ground out, the tough walk Anthony Rizzo drew off left-on-left machine Javy Lopez, the huge hits they got from Bryant and Zobrist, from Willson Contreras and Javier Baez, all amid a parade of five Giants relievers. Four runs in the ninth in this setting? How did that happen?
There had never been a series-clinching rally quite like it. And now it will live on in Cubs lore forever -- as long as this October turns out the way they keep dreaming it will.

"I'll be honest: I can't remember what happened yesterday," said 39-year-old catcher David Ross, on a night when he became the oldest catcher ever to homer in a postseason game. "But I'll never forget this."

And maybe no one will. Of course, we have no idea where the rest of this month will lead this team. We have no idea if this juggernaut really is going to prove that it has that undefinable quality that will make it different from the 107 Cubs teams that came before it.

But file this away: Something happened in San Francisco, on a beautiful Tuesday evening, that appeared to leave its mark on these men.

"I've been thinking about the adversity of the group for a while now," Ross said. "Even over the last month of the season, I've thought about having the ability to overcome adversity in big moments. And they don't get any bigger than that. There's no more adversity than being on the road, on the West Coast, playing a team that's won three championships in the last five years. And losing like we did last night ... then coming back today, it just says a lot."

"This," Ross said, "was a special, special night."

Because of this night, there are now just two rounds of glory standing between these Cubs and a place among the legends of baseball. Yeah, they were in this same position a year ago, too. But somehow, this feels different.

Last October, they arrived in the NLCS a year ahead of schedule, just living the dream and playing it all out to see how high they could climb. Now they return to this same place after a totally different journey. Now there are no doubts about how talented they are and how good they can be.

So now, they're expected to win. And once again, they'll have to take their manager's word for it that expectations are just part of the process.

"I'm telling you, man, that's a good word," Maddon said Tuesday night. "'Expectations' is a good word. Because normally it means that you have something good attached to it at the other side. Pressure. Expectations. I want our guys to thrive on those two words for the years to come, I want the organization to. In the end, that means there's a lot of expected of you. Good. There should be."

The journey begins anew Saturday at Wrigley, with the first NLCS to open in Chicago since the 2003 team unraveled on the doorstep of history. Now it's a new group's turn. And once again, it can be sure that something bad will happen. But something magical also can happen. And this edition of the Cubs seems remarkably cool with all of that.

"Now," Zobrist said, "we've put ourselves in position to do something special."

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CSNChicago.com
Cubs Survived What Went Wrong Against Giants, Showing How They Can Keep Advancing Through October
By Patrick Mooney

SAN FRANCISCO -- The Cubs are built as a team of checks and balances, blunt veterans who didn't come here for a haircut and young players acting like they've been here forever. A thumping American League-style lineup has the mix-and-match parts to play the National League game. An elite defensive unit works in concert with the pitching staff. The Geek Department supports Joe Maddon's coaching staff. An Ivy League front office nailed so many decisions through scouting and intuition.
Still, the best team in baseball, a 103-win machine during the regular season, encountered the broad message Maddon sent during his pre-playoffs meeting: Things will go wrong.

Meaning the Cubs will be defined by how they react to bad calls, bad bounces, bad performances, nonstop scrutiny and hostile environments. This team didn’t sulk or panic during the NL Division Series, responding to the awesome challenge presented by the San Francisco Giants, showing how to keep surviving and advancing through October.

“You’re going to have to scramble for some wins if you’re going to win in the postseason,” general manager Jed Hoyer said late Tuesday night amid the celebration on the West Coast, standing soaking wet in the middle of AT&T Park’s visiting clubhouse.

“Things aren’t going to go right. Obviously, Game 1 went perfect. You get eight innings out of Jon (Lester). That’s great. That doesn’t happen all the time. You got to be able to scramble in the postseason.”

The Cubs needed only four games to eliminate a Giant franchise that has the confidence and muscle memory from winning World Series titles in 2010, 2012 and 2014.

Even with two extremely reliable starting pitchers – Kyle Hendricks and John Lackey – not lasting beyond the fourth inning in Games 2 and 4. And superstar closer Aroldis Chapman blowing the six-out save in what became a 13-inning loss in Game 3.

Together, Willson Contreras and Kris Bryant committed five errors. Dexter Fowler, Anthony Rizzo and Addison Russell combined went 4-for-45 (.089 average) with one extra-base hit. Up until that ninth-inning rally in Game 4, pitchers Hendricks, Travis Wood and Jake Arrieta drove in almost half of the team’s runs during the NLDS.

“It shows that it doesn’t have to be the MVP candidate in Kris Bryant or Anthony Rizzo to win us the ballgame every night,” Arrieta said. “Guys step up, like Javy (Baez). It’s a timely hit from Kyle, a huge home run from Travis. Everybody contributes.

“To be able to have that contribution from up and down the order versus just a couple of guys really makes us a dangerous ballclub.

“If certain guys get pitched around, we know the guys behind them can handle the task of providing offense and (helping pick them up). It’s just really nice to see the growth (and) continued development of these young players at such a high level on such a big stage.”

Baez changed the entire direction of this NLDS with one swing in the eighth inning of Game 1, reacting to a Johnny Cueto quick pitch and launching it out toward Waveland Avenue. The wind knocked the ball down before it landed in the Wrigley Field basket instead of Angel Pagan’s glove, the difference in a 1-0 game.

The Plan can think of everything – every possible matchup, variable and contingency – but there is still an element of luck. Ben Zobrist – an influential player on the Kansas City Royals team that won last year’s World Series – put it this way: “Any time you’re in tight games and you’re playing against good teams, you have to get breaks.”

But the bullpen also backed up the shortened Hendricks and Lackey starts by limiting the Giants to two runs across 10-plus innings, securing a Game 2 win and keeping the Cubs within striking distance for that Game 4 comeback.

Chapman – the kind of high-octane reliever the Giants failed to acquire at the trade deadline – notched three saves. Baez – who doesn’t even have a set position on a team this talented – made so many defensive plays look easy that his human-highlight-film reputation is going national.

The Cubs can now line up Lester for another tone-setting Game 1 against either the Washington Nationals or Los Angeles Dodgers in the NL Championship Series that begins Saturday night at Wrigley Field.

What can possibly go wrong? The Cubs still have so many different ways to weather two more postseason rounds and win eight more games.
“They play for one another,” bench coach Dave Martinez said. “Every day, it’s somebody different.”

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CSNChicago.com
An Unbelievable Stat That Sums Up Javy Baez's Amazing Defense With Cubs
By Tony Andracki

Cubs fans are well aware of what Javy Baez brings to the table, but the young infielder had his coming out party on the national scene during the NLDS.

Baez was a force against the Giants, dripping with swag over the course of hitting a game-winning homer, leading the Cubs with four runs scored, turning in highlight-reel defensive plays every night and even winning the hearts of America just while sitting in the dugout:

It’s the defense that has really put the baseball world on notice, showing off his ridiculous athleticism and instincts that seem superhuman.

The numbers back it up, too.

Of anybody who played even one inning at second base in the big leagues in 2016, Baez was responsible for 11 Defensive Runs Saved, tied for third and just one run behind Boston's Dustin Pedroia and Detroit's Ian Kinsler.

Here's the thing, though: Baez only played 383 innings at second in the regular season. Pedroia and Kinsler both played more than 1,292 innings.

If you extrapolate out Baez's Defensive Runs Saved to 1,292 innings, he would've been at more than 37 DRS.

That's insane.

For good measure, Baez also saved one run while playing 370.2 innings at third base and four runs while appearing at 194 innings at shortstop.

Between his other-worldly tags and range, the Cubs opted to put Baez at second in each of the four games in the NLDS and moved veteran Ben Zobrist to the outfield.

The case could be made that move alone swung the balance of power in the series.

Baez has even surprised himself defensively.

When asked about the diving play he made to almost rob Denard Span of a hit in Game 4, Baez said:

"First of all, I was praying that it was going to be out," he said. "He was a lead-off hitter, that he can get down the line pretty much, pretty good. And I was playing pretty deep, and I was surprised I got to that ball and even more surprised that it was that close."

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CSNChicago.com
Shining On Playoff Stage, Willson Contreras A Billboard For The Cubs Way
By Patrick Mooney

SAN FRANCISCO — Holding two aluminum Budweiser bottles in his hands, Willson Contreras walked up to Theo Epstein and poured beer all over the Cubs president’s head in the middle of a TV interview.
Uh, yeah, Contreras acts like he belongs in The Show, with a big smile and Oakley goggles perched atop his head. That raucous scene from inside AT&T Park’s visiting clubhouse late Tuesday night on the West Coast showed how this team responds to all the noise about curses, panic and the indestructible nature of the San Francisco Giants in an even year.

The Cubs had just staged an epic comeback, winning a National League Division Series with a ninth-inning rally that saw them wipe out a three-run deficit — and the dreaded possibility of facing Johnny Cueto and Madison Bumgarner in Game 5 — by scoring four runs against five different Giant relievers.

Contreras delivered the game-tying, two-run, pinch-hit single in that 6-5 victory, driving the pitch from lefty Will Smith past diving second baseman Joe Panik into center field. Contreras pointed toward the visiting dugout and punched his chest with his right fist as he ran up the line. At first base, Contreras screamed and pounded his chest again, this time with both fists, a billboard for The Cubs Way.

“I wasn’t nervous at all,” Contreras said. “I was trying to have a good at-bat and make a good swing. That’s what I did. We don’t have to put pressure on ourselves. Once you start enjoying the game, you’re going to enjoy the playoffs.”

Be free. Be loose. Be yourself. That’s what Joe Maddon and his coaching staff kept telling this team, backed by a group of clubhouse enforcers with World Series experience.

In an NLDS where Javier Baez showed off his defensive wizardry, pimping at home plate and absolute joy for the game, Contreras proved that he could channel all that adrenaline, too, handling his catching responsibilities in a tense playoff series and going 4-for-6 with a walk in seven plate appearances.

“He’s a winner,” general manager Jed Hoyer said. “Our young guys, they’re excitable, but I love that. Look at Javy and Willson — they’re going to do that stuff. Listen, it’s just the postseason. I have no problem with teams celebrating against us. I like the fact that our guys celebrate. They’re excited. They should celebrate. There’s no showing anybody up in October.”

At this time last year, Contreras watched the playoffs from the Arizona Fall League, picturing what he would do for the 2016 Cubs and how he would build off a season that saw him win a Southern League batting title at Double-A Tennessee.

The Cubs envisioned Contreras being this year’s Kyle Schwarber, the midseason shot of adrenaline to the lineup, behind the plate and in the outfield. It became more of a necessity when Schwarber wrecked his left knee during an outfield collision in early April.

The Cubs will return to the NL Championship Series and battle the Washington Nationals or Los Angeles Dodgers with a deep roster accented by versatility, premium young talent and fearless personalities. Contreras is the 24-year-old rookie who only spent a little more than two months at Triple-A Iowa — and has the rocket arm to help control the running game the New York Mets exploited during that 2015 NLCS sweep.

“I don’t have the words to say how big this year is for me and for the team,” Contreras said. “But we got to keep on. We got to keep working to the next series.”

The Cubs needed that burst of energy to overpower a Giants team that had won 10 straight postseason elimination games. This didn’t look like a random playoff moment for Contreras, who loves performing on the big stage.

“We play 27 outs,” Contreras said. “You got to give credit to the San Francisco Giants. That’s a really nice team. They never give up. But we did the little things. We never give up.”

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