Defensive flubs by Carlos Gomez give Twins 3-1 win over Houston.

La Velle. Neal III | Star Tribune | August 9, 2016

Ever since he was traded by the Twins before the 2010 season, Carlos Gomez has played with a chip on his shoulder against his former teams.

But there would be no postgame hubris for Gomez on Monday night at Target Field after his adventures in center field helped the Twins beat Houston 3-1.

The Twins have won nine of their past 12 games and are 21-12 since July 1. And Monday victory, which took a season-quickest 2 hours, 18 minutes to play, enabled the Twins to pass Tampa Bay and no longer have the worst record in the American League.

A tidy pitchers’ duel between Twins righthander Tyler Duffey (8-7) and Houston righthander Collin McHugh (7-9) was interrupted by an outbreak of Gomez-ness in the bottom of the fifth inning.

Here’s how his adventures happened:

Eddie Rosario, who was 3-for-4 and hit the ball hard all night, singled to open the inning for the Twins. Jorge Polanco then executed a hit-and-run by lining a ball toward center that, somehow, skipped by Gomez and rolled to the fence. Rosario scored the first run of the game.

Juan Centeno followed with a fly ball that Gomez lost in the … evening sky? He held out his arms for help, but the ball landed about 25 feet behind him on the warning track.

“Gomez lost one in the twilight,” Twins manager Paul Molitor said, “which didn’t hurt our cause.”

Polanco scored as Centeno raced to third with a triple. Danny Santana added an RBI single to put the Twins up 3-0.
“The first one, I thought I had it and it missed my glove,” Gomez said. “The second one, I don’t know where the ball is at. It’s something you don’t feel good about. It made us lose the game. I feel worse than anyone in the clubhouse.”

Houston scored a run in the sixth and had two on and one out against Duffey, who got Carlos Correa to ground out to third and then struck out Evan Gattis with his 95th and final pitch of the sixth.

Duffey gave up one run on four hits and a walk while striking out eight — his highest strikeout total since July 7. The Twins bullpen pitched three scoreless innings, with Brandon Kintzler getting his 10th save in 11th opportunities.

The combination of Duffey, his relievers and Gomez’s one bad inning in center enabled the Twins to win for only the fourth time when they scored three or fewer runs this season.

“It all started with my fastball command,” Duffey said. “I got the sinker over the plate when I wanted to. Got it down and away. Got some later in the game up and in.

“It started with that and allowed me to really get the breaking ball going.”

Etc.

Molitor was able to get a message to Ichiro Suzuki to congratulate the Miami outfielder for his 3,000th career hit. The two have been friends since Molitor was Suzuki’s hitting coach in Seattle for a season. And, like Molitor, Suzuki got a triple for his 3,000th hit.

“That makes it kind of special,” Molitor said. “Kind of a little bond we developed 12 years ago. We can stay connected with that triple as well.”

Joe Mauer and Max Kepler were named AL co-players of the week. Mauer batted .560 with a home run, nine RBI, six doubles and eight runs scored. Kepler batted .370 with four homers, 11 RBI, and nine runs scored.

Class AA lefthander Tyler Jay, one of the Twins’ top starting pitching prospects, has been diagnosed with neurapraxia. That means he has a stretched nerve in his neck/shoulder area and is expected to resume throwing in a week to 10 days. Jay, a 2015 first-round pick, has a 5.79 ERA in five appearances at Chattanooga after being promoted from Class A Fort Myers.

**Twins’ Plouffe returns healthy but without an everyday role**

La Velle. Neal Ill | Star Tribune | August 9, 2016

As Trevor Plouffe pointed out, his medical report this season contains more than the broken rib that landed him on the disabled list last month.

“Anything from my knee acting up to my wrist, my groin,” he said. “I was able to take care of all those things [while on the DL]. Hopefully it carries over.”

Now fully healthy, Plouffe is ready to return to third base and be the everyday force that he wants to be.

Only he can’t.

Plouffe was activated from the disabled list Monday and was back at third base, but he’s not promised that position every day because the Twins want to look at Miguel Sano and Jorge Polanco there, too.

Next month with the Twins isn’t promised to Plouffe, either, because he could be a trade candidate provided that he clears waivers and a team has a need for a steady third baseman with some pop.

And next season certainly isn’t promised to Plouffe, because he’s scheduled to get an arbitration boost from the $7.25 million he’s making this year. With Sano and Polanco around, Plouffe might no longer be a fit.

“To be honest, I really don’t think about stuff like that because you can’t control it,” said the 30-year-old Plouffe, the Twins’ starting third baseman since 2012. “Especially in my situation. I’m just trying to get back on the field and continue what these guys have been doing. We have been swinging the bats real well, winning some games on the road.
“My focus right now is [Monday’s] game. Maybe as I get back in the swing of things I’ll start to think about [the future]. But if it happens, it would be really sad. But you can’t control that.”

There have been a few developments since Plouffe landed on the DL. Sano was moved to third to replace him, and his play has been hair-raising at times as he has committed 12 errors in 28 games. Eduardo Nunez was traded, and Polanco called up to replace him. Since Polanco is out of options next season, the time is now for the Twins to figure out what they have in him.

Even the team’s play has changed while Plouffe recovered, as the Twins were 20-12 in the 32 games he missed. They returned home Monday from a 5-2 road trip that included winning three of four games at AL Central-leading Cleveland.

“It’s been fun watching these guys play over their last road trip,” said Plouffe, who batted .316 with a home run and two RBI during a five-game rehabilitation assignment at Class AAA Rochester. “I want to be a part of that.”

First base and DH are options in addition to his customary spot at third. But the Twins already have Joe Mauer and Kenny Vargas at first.

“I think he knows that some at-bats are going to be curtailed just by how we are going to look at people here down the stretch, the last [51] games,” manager Paul Molitor said. “But he is going to get a chance to play. It might be at first, it might be DH. But we’re going to try to get him at-bat when we can.”

Plouffe could give Molitor a bigger headache by coming off the DL swinging a hot bat. Plouffe went 1-for-4 Monday and is batting .252 with seven home runs and 27 RBI in 59 games this season, but Polanco, who was 2-for-4 Monday, has forced Molitor’s hand by batting .378 through his first nine games since being called up.

After falling to meet his standards during a season interrupted by injuries — he missed 13 games earlier in the season because of a right intercostal strain — Plouffe is hungry to contribute. When he gets a chance to.

“We have a bunch of guys playing the same positions, but I think we will be able to do it,” he said. “I think some guys are going to get some days off, including myself. More so than we were before. That’s all up to [Molitor]. I just work here.”

Scoggins: Twins’ Polanco showing upside, without big hype

Chip Scoggins | Star Tribune | August 9, 2016

The Twins are scheduled to take their team photo Tuesday. Max Kepler and Jorge Polanco will be part of it.

Byron Buxton won’t.

Credit timing for that — Buxton was demoted to Rochester on Sunday — and the fact that narratives can veer off-script.

Buxton and Miguel Sano were headliners in just about every account trumpeting the Twins farm system. Billed as organizational saviors, 1 and 1A, they were supposed to ride in on white horses and save the day.

Or something like that.

A year ago, I visited the Twins’ Class AA affiliate in Chattanooga to chronicle the organization’s crop of hotshot prospects. A lot has changed since then.

Kepler and Polanco — and a few others — were treated almost as sidebars in my flawed forecast. High-level prospects in their own right, I surmised, but not in the same class as Buxton-Sano.

Oops.

Buxton’s demotion to Rochester after another failed attempt as a big-league hitter reaffirms that nothing should be written in ink when projecting the path of prospects.

Buxton appears lost as a hitter; Sano owns prodigious power but needs to mature in his approach. Kepler looks like a potential fixture in the heart of the order, and Polanco is showing that he belongs in the lineup and needs a position to call home.
“When you’re here,” Polanco said, “there’s always a chance to show something.”

That can work the other way, too. In Buxton’s case, he’s shown that he’s not ready to hit pitching above Class AAA. His problems at the plate should be a major concern inside the organization.

I’m not in the group of Twins followers who are ready to classify Buxton as a bust just yet. He’s 22 years old and has 356 major league plate appearances.

Duly noted, but he looks overwhelmed as a hitter. Not sure if there are a requisite number of career at-bats before alarm bells blare at Target Field, but anyone not concerned by Buxton’s struggles is either incredibly patient or naïve.

In hindsight, the organization’s decision to call-up Buxton from Chattanooga last season looks rushed and potentially damaging to his psyche.

Manager Paul Molitor acknowledged that Buxton is struggling with the weight of hype.

“I think some of it has to do with expectation and pressure, and it builds from game to game, at-bat to at-bat, when things aren’t going your way,” he said.

The flaw in anointing anyone as can’t-miss is that those predictions are based on best-case scenarios. Rare talent becomes so intoxicating that we often ignore the possibility that prospects might struggle — a lot, in Buxton’s case — before finding their way.

Any issues that have hindered Sano deserve equal blame. The team made an egregious blunder in putting him in right field to start the season. Sano showed immaturity in not losing weight per the team’s request and by taking a casual approach to struggles at the plate.

The brushfire last week surrounding Sano allegedly being a candidate for demotion to Rochester came across as a contrived effort to send him a message.

Put Sano at third and let him work through his mistakes, with a day or two each week at designated hitter.

With Sano and Trevor Plouffe sharing third base, Polanco should receive an extended audition at shortstop.

Six weeks ago, Brian Dozier’s grip on second base seemed slippery as his offense vanished. Felt like only a matter of time before Polanco replaced him.

Not now. Dozier’s about-face at the plate has put him on track for a career season. The Twins can’t trade Dozier now. That would be foolish, but that also means Polanco needs a different position.

Polanco’s ability to become an everyday shortstop remains a debate within the organization, but he deserves a shot to win the job.

Molitor said he’s evaluating Polanco’s “ability to finish plays” at shortstop. He handled several challenging plays in a flawless performance in the field Monday in a 3-1 victory over Houston.

Polanco also showed what he does best: hit. He added two more hits and is batting .378 in nine games since his call-up. His offense belongs in the lineup.

Polanco will be out of options next season. It’s nearing decision time. The organization has to find a spot for him.

Molitor gushed about Polanco after the game.

“Maybe one of the better games I’ve ever seen him play at short,” he said.

That’s a start.
Twins' Tyler Duffey outduels fellow investment option Collin McHugh

Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | August 8, 2016

Things move fast on the trading floor, so it probably shouldn’t come as any surprise that Tyler Duffey and Collin McHugh hooked up Monday night in the quickest game of the Twins season so far.

The whole thing took just two hours and 18 minutes, Duffey outpitching his fellow Fantex Inc. investment vehicle as the Twins zipped off with a 3-1 win over the fading Houston Astros.

Ex-Twins center fielder Carlos Gomez, known for untimely blips throughout his career, made a couple of fielding miscues in a three-run fifth inning, and that was enough to send the Twins to their ninth win in 12 games.

Now 46-66, the Twins improved to 16-10 against teams from the American League West. More notably, they slid past the Tampa Bay Rays, 7-5 losers at Toronto, to shed the worst record in the AL for the first time all year.

“August 8 — we passed somebody,” Twins manager Paul Molitor said with a wry grin. “How many weeks is that? It’s been a while.”

It had been more than a month since Duffey, 25, had posted a quality start before working six innings of four-hit ball on 95 pitches. The curveballing right-hander had posted an 11.25 earned run average in four starts since the all-star break, putting his rotation spot in jeopardy once again as his season ERA crept north of 6.

No, that couldn’t have been what the visionaries at Fantex had in mind this spring when they agreed to pay Duffey $2.23 million in exchange for 10 percent of his future earnings, on the field and off it.

“I’ve watched stuff from last year and nothing looks that different — at all,” Duffey said last week. “I know it’s just having the confidence to know I’m ready to be here, I’m capable of being here, I’m capable of getting people out here. It’s just getting my mind out of the way and letting the body take over.”

The 29-year-old McHugh, coming off a two-year run that saw him go 30-16 with a 3.39 ERA after being claimed off waivers from the Colorado Rockies, has sagged to 7-9 with a 4.69 ERA since Fantex guaranteed him $3.96 million under the same agreement.

Three position players joined those two right-handers in the five-player investment grouping: Baltimore Orioles second baseman Jonathan Schoop ($4.91 million), Philadelphia Phillies third baseman Maikel Franco ($4.35 million) and ex-Twins minor-league infielder Yangervis Solarte ($3.15 million), now with the San Diego Padres.

Back on June 21, in a 14-10 Twins win, Duffey (7-8) faced Franco twice in a three-inning stint. He gave up a single and saw him reach on an error. That was only intramural battle for Duffey within this sort of baseball mutual fund until Monday, when Eddie Rosario’s leadoff single in the fifth finally got something going.

Jorge Polanco followed with a hit-and-run single to center that handcuffed Gomez and rolled to the wall for a two-base error. Rosario scored on the play.

Catcher Juan Centeno then lofted a potential sacrifice fly to the edge of the warning track in center, but Gomez never moved. He spread his hands out wide, having lost the ball in the twilight, as Centeno scurried around the bases with his first career triple.

Danny Santana made it 3-0 with a line single off McHugh, who entered 3-0 with a 3.04 earned run average in four career starts against the Twins.

In case you’re wondering, those Fantex agreements are ironclad between player and company. While Duffey said his lump-sum payout was still “in the process” of receiving final approval from the Securities and Exchange Commission, it’s not like he was a couple more bad starts away from blowing the deal.

His season-long struggles can’t be pinned on any uncertainty that followed the unusual arrangement. If anything, the former fifth-round draft pick out of Rice should be able to operate more freely now.
George Springer pulled the Astros within 3-1 on a one-out double in the sixth, but Duffey retired Nos. 4 and 5 hitters Carlos Correa (groundout) and Evan Gattis (strikeout) with a base open and the tying run on. Duffey struck out eight, most of those on his sweeping curveball that was set up by a rare bout of fastball command.

Brandon Kintzler worked the ninth for his 10th save in 11 tries as the Astros fell for the 11th time in 14 games.

Brian Dozier went 0 for 4 with two strikeouts as his 16-game hitting streak ended.

**Minnesota Twins: from Plouffe-a-Palooza to cheesesteak truck**

Mike Berardino | Pioneer Press | August 8, 2016

Trevor Plouffe put a unique spin on the tradition of rehabbing big leaguers buying the postgame spread while on rehab stints in the minors.

Over the weekend in Allentown, Pa., the Twins’ third baseman arranged for a food truck from a local cheesesteak joint to swing by the visiting clubhouse at Coca-Cola Park after Triple-A Rochester’s game against the Lehigh Valley IronPigs. He got the idea from San Francisco Giants reliever Sergio Romo.

“I don’t know him, but I read that he did it,” Plouffe said. “He did a taco truck, and I thought it was really cool. I wanted to do a taco truck but we were in Pennsylvania, so I figured cheesesteaks were probably the regional food there. It was pretty seamless.”

This followed Plouffe-a-Palooza, which the Red Wings dubbed the rare 4 1/2-hour bus ride that included an active major leaguer.

“I’ve been on a lot of bus rides,” said Plouffe, whose pro career began in 2004. “It was nice to go back and have another one of those and relive the Rochester days.”

Just like the old days, Plouffe organized marathon card games along with the ID game.

“Everyone puts their ID into a bag, and the last person out wins the pot, so it’s pretty cool,” Plouffe said. “Some really fun guys down there.”

Fully recovered from a fractured rib suffered five weeks ago, Plouffe played in five games for the Red Wings and hit .316 (6 for 19) with a home run and two doubles.

**BUXTON’S BURDEN**

A day after sending Byron Buxton back to Triple-A on Sunday, Twins manager Paul Molitor said the organization is looking for constructive feedback from the talented young center fielder.

“We’re trying to get Buck to be as open as he can be in terms of, ‘What seems to be your biggest difference between here and when you go down to Triple-A and get things back on track?’” Molitor said. “I think some of it does have to do with expectation and pressure and it builds from game to game, at bat to at bat, when things aren’t going your way.”

In four separate big-league stints over the past 14 months, Buxton has failed to hit higher than .217 or reach base at batter than a .257 clip. In order, he has received 39, 99, 49 and 169 plate appearances in four separate stints.

Of 271 major leaguers with at least 100 plate appearances since June 7, only two aging vets (Juan Uribe and A.J. Pierzynski) had lower OBPs than Buxton’s .231. His .163 batting average was tied with Toronto’s Justin Smoak for lowest in the majors in that same time period.

“Yes we want our young players we hope are part of our future to get experience up here, but at what cost?” Molitor said. “I think there’s a time when they have to go back there and do what they need to do. I know he’ll do the work, but just get back to where he’s confident and uses the skills that he has and just plays the game.”

**TRIPLE THE FUN**

Molitor is no longer the only member of the 3,000-hit club to reach that milestone with a triple.

That’s OK. He was more than happy on Sunday to welcome Ichiro Suzuki to that exclusive subgroup.
“It was a good day for me to hear the news about my friend,” said Molitor, who was Ichiro’s hitting coach in 2004 with the Seattle Mariners. “That makes it kind of special (after) kind of a little bond that we developed 12 years ago. We can stay connected with that triple as well.”

Molitor sent a congratulatory text to Ichiro, using three different numbers their mutual agent, John Boggs, provided. Confirmation came Monday that the Japanese hit machine had indeed received Molitor’s well wishes.

Ichiro mentioned several times during his postgame news conference on Sunday how honored he was to join Molitor with a triple for hit No. 3,000. While Molitor had to hustle on his misplayed fly ball in Kansas City on Sept. 16, 1996, Ichiro’s hit high off the wall at Coors Field in Denver.

“He hit it a lot better,” Molitor said. “Both of them the right fielder had a chance, but mine was a lot more luck than his was luck.”

JAY GETS RESULTS

Tests on Double-A Chattanooga left-hander Tyler Jay showed mild nerve irritation in his neck, according to Twins farm director Brad Steil.

There had been concern about Jay’s throwing shoulder and possible thoracic-outlet syndrome after he landed on the disabled list a week ago, but a visit to Edina-based specialist Dr. Howard Saylor ruled that out. Instead, it was the nerve issue (neuropraxia) that was causing Jay’s shoulder weakness.

With Jay slated to resume throwing in 7-10 days, it’s still possible he will return to game action before the minor-league season ends in early September. The Twins “will see how the rehab goes after this calms down,” Steil said of a prospect ranked No. 2 in the Twins system by MLB.com.

Jay, who received a $3.89 million signing bonus as the sixth overall pick in 2015 out of the University of Illinois, went 5-5 with a 2.84 earned run average in 13 starts at Class A Fort Myers. Over his final five starts before moving to the bullpen for the Lookouts, he had a 6.55 ERA with five homers allowed in 22 innings.

BACK AT TARGET

The last time Hector Santiago pitched at Target Field, the veteran left-hander retired just two batters and was yanked after 30 pitches.

Brian Dozier reached on a two-out bloop double and Torii Hunter highlighted a five-run first inning with a three-run homer. Santiago, however, was taken off the hook when Mike Trout hit a pair of homers, including a second-inning grand slam off A.J. Achter, as the Los Angeles Angels roared back for an 11-8 win last Sept. 17.

“At that time I was struggling,” Santiago recalled as he prepared for his Twins home debut on Tuesday. “I think I had a two-week span where I wasn’t throwing very well and nothing was going right. Then Dozier hit that infield-fly double and everything went downhill after that.”

In five career outings (four starts) at Target Field, Santiago has a 7.13 earned run average with four home runs and nine walks allowed in 17 2/3 innings. That’s his highest ERA in any American League park and any big-league park where he’s worked at least five innings.

BRIEFLY

Joe Mauer and Max Kepler were named co-players of the week for the American League after a dominant four-game series in Cleveland. For the week Kepler hit .370 with four home runs, 11 runs batted in, six walks and nine runs scored. Mauer hit .560 with six doubles, a homer and nine RBIs. Kepler joins Danny Santana (2014), Carlos Gomez (2008) and Marty Cordova (1995) as Twins rookies to win the award.

Twins trip up Astros in 5th to back Duffey

Brian McTaggart and Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | August 9, 2016

As much as the Astros have been struggling swinging the bats the last two weeks, they certainly can’t afford to give away runs on defense.

Tyler Duffey held the Astros’ bats in check by allowing one run in six innings and the Twins took advantage of a pair of defensive miscues by center fielder Carlos Gomez in the fifth with some timely hits to pick up a 3-1 victory over Houston on Monday night at Target Field.
"We didn't play well enough to win," Astros manager A.J. Hinch said. "That's been troublesome for a couple weeks now. You've got to play better to win. For Collin McHugh, I thought the line's going to not represent how he pitched. There were a few balls hit hard and a few balls that could've been played behind him. They got a lot of hits. ... All in all just a bad game."

Duffey and McHugh were locked in a pitchers' duel before things came undone for the Astros in the fifth. Danny Santana capped a three-run outburst with an RBI single to score Juan Centeno, who was awarded an RBI triple on a ball Gomez lost in the sky--his second misplay of the inning.

"It was just one big inning," Twins manager Paul Molitor said. "The hit-and-run, [Jorge] Polanco did a nice job putting in play and it skipped to the wall. Gomez lost one in the twilight, which didn't hurt our cause and we cashed one in. We made it stand up. Obviously, between Duffey and our bullpen, it was a good night for the pitching staff."

The Astros' struggling offense managed only an RBI double by George Springer in the sixth. Houston has scored just 32 run in its past 14 games, 11 of which have been losses. The Astros are hitting .201 in that stretch and have one homer in their past 10 games.

"He hasn't had a great year and I know the rest of the league has hit pretty well against him," Hinch said of Duffey. "He had a pretty high ERA coming in. He pitched tough against us last year. We didn't adjust to his breaking ball very well."

**MOMENTS THAT MATTERED**

Duffey solid against hometown team: Duffey, a Houston native, turned in his first quality start since July 7, as he had posted an 11.25 ERA over his previous four starts. But Duffey, who has been working to improve his arm angle to get a higher release point, looked much better against the Astros, utilizing his curveball to help him strike out eight.

"It all started with my fastball command," Duffey said. "I got the sinker over the plate when I needed to. That allowed me to get the breaking ball in. They're an aggressive team, so it kind of plays into my game."

Gomez's gaffes: Gomez made a couple of costly misplays in the fifth, helping the Twins score three times. He let a hit off the bat of Jorge Polanco skip past him in the outfield for a two-base error, and then he lost a ball hit by Centeno that would up being a triple. On May 15 in Boston, Gomez misplayed a pair of fly balls, including one he lost in the sun, and was put on the disabled list the next day.

"I don't feel really good in this situation," Gomez said. "When we come every day and [work] hard and we play the game like that, like Little League, it's tough."

Polanco stays hot: Polanco has been impressive since getting called up on July 29, getting at least one hit in each of his last nine games, batting .378 (14-for-37) over that span. He went 2-for-4 against the Astros, also making two impressive plays at shortstop in the third inning. Polanco, who didn't see any action at shortstop at Triple-A Rochester this year, started at short for the second straight day and could get an extended look there going forward with the way he's been hitting.

"It was maybe one of the better games I've ever seen him play short," Molitor said. "He was clean. He finished. He threw with confidence. It was a great night for him all around."

McHugh goes seven: After giving up eight runs in 1 2/3 innings on July 29 at Detroit, McHugh has started August with a pair of quality starts, both of which have been losses. He worked seven innings Monday and allowed 10 hits and three runs, two of which likely wouldn't have scored without the misplays in center field.

"He pitched better than the line indicated and that doesn't give him much to show for it," Hinch said. "He deserved a better fate. But at the same time, obviously it's a team game. We've got to adjust behind him. He's got to make adjustments as well. I thought his pitch quality was really good early. I'm glad he finished his outing. That was a good way to finish a very unfortunate outing. I appreciate how he battled through there with some of the miscues behind him."

**QUOTABLE**

"I would think that these guys are aware of those things. We're going to keep playing. We're enjoying what we're doing right now. There is a lot of energy. Guys are having fun." -- Molitor, on the Twins no longer having the worst record in the American League, going 21-13 since July 1 to pass the Rays

**WHAT'S NEXT**

Astros: Right-hander Mike Fiers (7-5, 4.34 ERA) will start Tuesday (7:10 p.m. CT) in the second of four games against the Twins at Target Field.
He is 1-1 with a 2.33 ERA in his last three outings, all quality starts.

Twins: Left-hander Hector Santiago (10-5, 4.37) is set to make his second start with Minnesota since being acquired from the Angels on Aug. 1. Santiago is familiar with the Astros from his time in the AL West, and is 1-2 with a 3.69 ERA against Houston in 10 appearances (eight starts).

**Duffey in command against hometown team**

Do-Hyoung Park | MLB.com | August 9, 2016

It had been more than a month since Tyler Duffey registered a quality start. The right-hander was even moved to the bullpen briefly before the Twins reinserted him to the rotation after the Aug. 1 Trade Deadline.

Duffey rewarded the Twins for their continued faith in a 3-1 win over the Astros on Monday night, as he regained his fastball command and limited the aggressive Houston lineup to just one run over six innings for his seventh win of the season.

"It all started with [fastball command] and it allowed me to really get the breaking ball going," Duffey said. "They're a pretty aggressive team, and that plays into my game if I'm throwing good sinkers that day and breaking balls there."

Duffey, who has struggled with the mechanics of his three-quarters delivery in his bad starts, felt much more comfortable with his pitching motion against the Astros, and the results showed. He allowed only four hits and threw 62 of his 95 pitches for strikes.

Seven of Duffey's eight strikeouts were of the swinging variety, with all seven coming on the curveball. He also induced eight groundouts against only two outs in the air, a welcome turnaround for the sinkerballer after he yielded nine groundouts against 20 flyouts over his last two starts.

"I feel like I've been more consistent, and that's the big thing -- with my arm slot, release point, stuff like that," Duffey said. "It feels really good. It felt strong, and stuff was going where I wanted it to. That's the biggest thing."

He was the latest pitcher to stifle Houston's struggling offense, which has scored only 32 runs in its last 14 games while hitting .201 as a team in that span. Duffey has pitched well against his hometown Astros in both of his career starts against them -- he struck out eight and allowed two runs in a 6 2/3-inning outing last season.

Duffey only ran into trouble in the sixth inning, when he walked Tony Kemp and allowed a single to Alex Bregman before an RBI double from George Springer brought home Houston's only run.

But after a mound visit from pitching coach Neil Allen, Duffey buckled down, getting a groundout from Carlos Correa and a big strikeout of Evan Gattis to strand a potential tying run at second base.

"I knew Correa was going to be swinging, so I just wanted to throw a good breaking ball over the plate," Duffey said. "I got the ground ball and got out of it with just the one run. That was big for us. We'd just scored and I needed a quick inning for us. Fortunately, I was able to get out of it."

**Kepler, Mauer share AL Player of the Week honor**

Cash Kruth | MLB.com | August 8, 2016

Max Kepler and Joe Mauer have been named co-American League Players of the Week after leading the Twins to a 5-2 record last week.

Kepler, a rookie outfielder, began the week with a three-homer, six-RBI performance against the Indians on Aug. 1. He hit .370/.471/.815 with four home runs and 11 RBIs overall to earn his first career weekly honor.

"I'm not a home run hitter, so it's rare," Kepler said. "I'm just trying to hit singles. I'm just trying to put the ball in play and hit it hard. I'm thankful for the backspin I was blessed with."

Mauer recorded five multihit games, including two four-hit efforts, en route to a .560/.633/1.000 line for the week. The veteran first baseman also hit one home run, one triple and drove in nine runs.

This is Mauer's fourth career weekly honor and second of the season, with the other coming for the week of May 29.
"I don't spend a lot of time day to day, week to week, thinking about who's going to win those awards, but when it's your guys, it's always good news," Twins manager Paul Molitor said. "After hearing about it, you reflect on what those guys did last week, particularly in Cleveland. Joe had an incredible series. Max had the three-homer night and was piling up the RBIs. It's justice that they would share it. Congratulations to those guys. They deserve it."

Plouffe rejoins Twins from DL in revised role

Rhett Bollinger | MLB.com | August 8, 2016

Trevor Plouffe was officially activated from the 15-day disabled list before Monday's game against the Astros, starting at third base for the Twins for the first time since June 28.

Plouffe, who had been out since July 1 with a fractured left rib, played in five rehab games with Triple-A Rochester, hitting .316 with a homer, two doubles and two RBIs while seeing action at first and third base. Miguel Sano mostly played third in Plouffe's absence but committed 12 errors in 28 games. The Twins, though, still want to get Sano looks at third, along with rookie Jorge Polanco, so Plouffe might see more time at first and designated hitter than he did before the injury.

"I think it's an obvious question without any obvious answer," Twins manager Paul Molitor said of where Plouffe will play. "We're going to mix it up. People are going to get a chance. Trevor, after being out for five weeks at this level, he's going to get a chance to play. I think he knows his at-bats could be curtailed by us wanting to get a look at some players here down the stretch."

The Twins have no shortage of options at first base, with the red-hot Joe Mauer entrenched there and Kennys Vargas swinging the bat well as his backup. So, Plouffe has prepared himself for a bit less playing time but said he's open to playing wherever Molitor wants him.

"I'll play some third base but move to first base when needed," Plouffe said. "We'll mix and match. I know we have a lot guys playing the same positions. So I think there will be more days off, even for myself, than there was before. But that's all up to him. I just work here."

With center fielder Byron Buxton optioned to Triple-A Rochester to make room for Plouffe, Eddie Rosario will become the club's regular center fielder. When Danny Santana is in the lineup, Rosario will remain in center, as the Twins want Santana to get more experience as a corner outfielder to help boost his versatility.

"[Rosario] will be out there a lot," Molitor said. "I still think Danny needs to play around to do what he needs to do to get himself an opportunity. But on a given day, if it's a tough matchup for Rosie or something, I can put Danny out there."

Molitor said it was a tough decision to send Buxton to Triple-A, but they felt it was the right move for the 22-year-old, who is hitting .193/.247/.315 in 63 games this year.

"We're trying to get Buck to be as open as he can be about what seems to be the biggest difference between here and Triple-A to get back on track," Molitor said. "I think some of it does have to do with expectations and pressure and it builds game to game. It obviously wasn't an easy decision. We want our young players who are going to be part of our future to get experience up here, but what at cost? So we want him to get that confidence and use the skills he has."

Santiago set for home debut vs. Astros' Fiers

Do-Hyoung Park | MLB.com | August 8, 2016

Newly acquired Minnesota left-hander Hector Santiago will make his home debut on Tuesday night when the Twins take on the Astros in the second of four games at Target Field.

Santiago (10-5), who was acquired from the Angels in the Ricky Nolasco trade, took the loss in his Twins debut on Thursday when he allowed four runs on five hits in five innings. It was his first loss since June 10 and came on the heels of a 6-0 July record with Los Angeles.

The Astros will turn to right-hander Mike Fiers (7-5), who tied a season high with seven strikeouts against Toronto on Thursday. He allowed two runs on five hits in six innings but took the loss after getting only one run of support.

The two starters fall on opposite sides of the control spectrum: Fiers' 2.02 walks per nine innings is seventh-best in the American League, while
Santiago's 4.23 walks per nine is worst in the AL.

Fiers is 2-1 with a 2.53 ERA in five career starts against the Twins but was less effective against Minnesota on May 4, when he allowed four runs in 4 2/3 innings and didn't factor into the decision.

Jose Altuve was out of the lineup Monday after having played in 202 consecutive games. He has a 38-game on-base streak on the road that began April 30 at Oakland. He's hitting .470 on the road in that span with a .526 OBP. He's expected back in the lineup Tuesday.

**Wetmore’s 5 thoughts: What does Plouffe’s return mean for Twins? Sano? Polanco?**

Derek Wetmore | 1500 ESPN | August 8, 2016

Trevor Plouffe returned to the Twins on Monday from his stay on the disabled list. That’s all at once a good thing and a bit of a problem for the Twins.

On one hand, the team gets back one of its veteran leaders with an offensive and defensive track record, when healthy, as a solid everyday player. On the other hand: What do you do with him now?

“

“I think it’s kind of an obvious question without an obvious answer,” manager Paul Molitor said Monday, when asked where and how much Plouffe will play.

“As we have here — not just with the third base/first base/DH situation, but infielders/outfielders – we’re mixing it up and people are getting a chance. Trevor, after five weeks removed from being out there at this level, he’s going to get a chance to play.”

This column presents 5 thoughts spawned by Plouffe’s return to the Twins lineup:

1. What does it mean for Miguel Sano at third base?

Plouffe was written in the lineup at third base for his first game back Monday, and Sano was the DH. That makes sense – Plouffe is a more reliable third baseman. But one also must wonder what defensive spot Sano will settle into long-term.

My guess is that Molitor will mix in Sano at third base, while player Plouffe at the three positions he’s had recent experience – third, first base and DH. The proportional distribution remains to be seen.

“I think [Plouffe] knows that some at-bats might be curtailed just [because] we’re trying to get a look at people here down the stretch the last 50 games, but he’s going to get a chance to play,” Molitor said.

If Sano is a future first baseman, that rocket arm essentially goes to waste (and the Twins already have an expensive first baseman under contract through 2018). If he’s a DH, at least he wouldn’t hurt the team in the field, but then they’d have another long jam with Byung Ho Park. (Maybe.) And that’s a pessimistic view of Sano’s glove, which some people with the Twins will contend still can be an asset rather than a liability.

And if you’re Sano or his representatives, you’ve got to realize that a power-hitting DH isn’t worth as much on the open market as a power-hitting, good-glove third baseman.

2. Where will Jorge Polanco play?

Polanco has hit in the minor enough to make me think his bat belongs in a big-league lineup.

Can he take his shortstop audition and prove worthy of the full-time job? He’ll be out of minor league options next spring, so the Twins will have to figure that one out, ideally in the final 50 games of this season.

If not, is he a second baseman? And if so, how do you reconcile that with the Twins’ second baseman under contract for the next two years, Brian Dozier?

Is Polanco a third baseman?
Is he an outfielder?

One thing I believe: his bat is ready for the final exam, and he deserves a lengthy look the rest of this season as a potential puzzle piece to winning clubs in the future. Maybe that’s in Minnesota, and maybe it’s not. I’ll put it this way. I’m awfully intrigued by Jorge Polanco. I’d just like to know what position he’s going to play.

3. Is Plouffe a long-term fit with the Twins?

This thought deserves so many more words than it will get in this column. This is just the nuts-and-bolts of the discussion, with much more coming as the season progresses, I’ll bet.

Plouffe, 30, was a Twins’ first-round pick and has grown up in the organization. Sentimentality shouldn’t drive decisions, but it’s undoubtedly in the background of the conversation. He has one year of team control remaining before he can file for free agency, and if he’s tendered a contract this winter he should be in line for his fourth nice raise in as many years. Third basemen of his ilk have not fetched much recently in trades or on the free-agent market – see Todd Frazier, David Freese and others – so it’s fair to wonder what the relative value would be to giving Plouffe a rich contract extension offer.

Then again, Plouffe is better than Pablo Sandoval, and The Panda got $95 million from the Red Sox.

4. Leadership

Personal opinion: Some players are worth more than their stats and some are worth less. In my view Plouffe is a plus player in that regard.

To a team that could use some direction, does Plouffe get a relative boost as someone you would like to see be part of the solution? I’m not one that will say a team needs veterans just to have them. I do think there’s something to be said, however, for a strong veteran player’s mental ability to endure the tough stretches that are inevitable in baseball.

This is just a thought experiment. I wonder sometimes how a team full of very talented young players would do relative to a team with similar or lesser talent but a few more veteran leaders strategically mixed in. Regardless of age or experience, I’ll bet a really talented team could win a lot of games based on ability, provided the random elements inherent to sports broke in their favor. But I do believe that a team with good veteran leadership is better equipped to endure hardships and turn bad times back into winning baseball more quickly.

So, to get more specific with this nebulous question: Are the Twins content going forward to have a clubhouse led by Brian Dozier, Glen Perkins, Joe Mauer, Ervin Santana and perhaps Kurt Suzuki? I’m curious to see who emerges as a leader in this upcoming wave of Twins prospects. It’s my contention that Plouffe rarely gets enough credit for this among vocal Twins fans on social media.

But is it enough to mitigate the fact that his offensive numbers are below average for a third baseman, especially one who may soon become expensive? That’s where this discussion gets a bit thornier.

5. Numbers down offensively

When I look at Plouffe, I see a player who has adapted to plenty of opponent adjustments throughout his career, who worked to improve as a third baseman in the field, who has some power, and who has done a good job of learning to hit line drives to every part of the field.

But after parts of seven seasons in the big leagues, his overall batting line is .246/.306/.418, which is below the average batting line of MLB third baseman this season. Collectively, the group is hitting .265/.333/.447.

This year Plouffe’s numbers are down, but I’ll contend that injuries have been a much bigger factor in his down year than popular opinion seems to suggest. Last year, he hit .244/.307/.435 with 22 home runs and 86 RBIs, and maybe that’s the player that he is as he gets into his 30’s.

I can’t pretend to know the answer to that, but it’s important to consider as a counter-balance to all the positive talk about being a multi-year lineup fixture, a dependable veteran and a good guy in the clubhouse.
Twins breeze to 3-1 win over Astros in series opener

Associated Press | August 8, 2016

After spending much of the first half of the season in the cellar, the Minnesota Twins became an afterthought in the American League.

Minnesota is giving the rest of the AL something to think about now as a playoff spoiler with some minor league call-ups getting more of a chance in the lineup.

Tyler Duffey pitched six effective innings and Minnesota took advantage of two misplays by center fielder Carlos Gomez in a three-run fifth that sent the Twins past the Houston Astros 3-1 on Monday night.

Eddie Rosario had three hits for Minnesota, which won for the seventh time in nine games.

"With 50 games, we've got to keep playing. Kind of enjoying what we're doing right now, for the most part," manager Paul Molitor said. "I think there's a lot of energy, guys are having fun, a lot of joking going around, which is good as long as the focus is where it needs to be."

Since July 2, Minnesota has gone 21-12 and leads the majors in runs, hits, doubles and triples. The victory Monday pulled the Twins ahead of Tampa Bay and out of last place in the overall AL standings.

Minnesota is still last in the AL Central.

Gomez, the former Twins outfielder, let Jorge Polanco's single skip by him for a two-base error that allowed one run to score. Then he lost a fly ball off Juan Centeno's bat, turning it into an RBI triple.

Danny Santana followed with a run-scoring single.

"The first one was hit really hard and I missed (it) in my glove, and the second one, I (didn't) know where the ball was," Gomez said. "We lost the game because of that. I feel worse than anyone in this clubhouse."

Duffey (7-8) permitted one run on four hits and struck out eight to win his second straight start. Three relievers combined for three hitless innings, and Brandon Kintzler finished for his 10th save in 11 chances.

"I feel like I've been a lot more consistent," Duffey said. "That's the biggest thing -- my arm slot, release point, everything like that feels really good. Felt strong, and stuff was going where I wanted it to."

Polanco, called up from the minors when the Twins traded All-Star infielder Eduardo Nunez to San Francisco, has hit .378 with six RBIs in nine games since being recalled.

Meanwhile, Molitor said Rosario will get a look in center field after the team sent Byron Buxton to Triple-A on Sunday. Rosario has hit .461 with four RBIs in six games as the starting center fielder.

"Those guys are picking us up," Molitor said of Polanco, Rosario and Santana. "Can't say enough about Polanco so far, just the quality of at-bats and what he's doing for us."

Collin McHugh (7-9) gave up three runs and 10 hits in seven innings, losing his third straight start. The Astros have dropped 10 of their past 13 games and are averaging 2.28 runs during that stretch.

FINDING A SPOT

Polanco's offense hasn't been much of a question mark for the Twins, but the organization has tried to find the right position for the 23-year-old Dominican infielder. He's spent time at second base, third and shortstop.

After five straight games at third, Polanco moved to shortstop on Monday with third baseman Trevor Plouffe returning to the lineup. Minnesota is unsettled at shortstop after trading Nunez. Eduardo Escobar has received most of the playing time at the position since the trade.

"Maybe one of the better games I've ever seen him play at short," Molitor said of Polanco. "He was clean, finished, threw with confidence. It
was a good night for him all-around."

TRAINER'S ROOM

Plouffe started at third base after missing 32 games with a broken rib. He went 1 for 4.

UP NEXT

Hector Santiago (10-5, 4.37 ERA) makes his first home start for the Twins on Tuesday night. The left-hander was acquired from the Los Angeles Angels at the trade deadline and gave up four runs on five hits over five innings in his Minnesota debut at Cleveland. Houston counters with RHP Mike Fiers (7-5, 4.34), who tied a season high with seven strikeouts but took the loss against Toronto in his last appearance.

Preview: Twins vs. Astros

The Sports Xchange | August 9, 2016

For the first time this season, the Minnesota Twins do not have the worst record in the American League.

Fueled by a 21-13 stretch since July 1, including a 3-1 win in the opener of a four-game series against the Houston Astros on Monday, the Twins passed the Tampa Bay Rays and moved out of the A.L. cellar.

Minnesota, which has won seven of its last nine overall, will try and keep that momentum going on Tuesday when it continues its series with the Astros.

"August 8th, we passed somebody. How long has it been?" Twins manager Paul Molitor joked on Monday. "It's been a long time."

Despite a lost season, Molitor said players try and accentuate the positives like on Monday, when they moved up in the standings.

"I would think that these guys are aware of those things," Molitor said. "We're enjoying what we're doing right now, guys are having fun, a lot of joking going around which is good as long as the focus is where it needs to be."

On the flip side, the Astros will try and get back on track before their fading postseason hopes are gone for good.

Houston has lost six of its last seven games and nine of 11 overall, dropping to third place in the American League West.

"We didn't play well enough to win (on Monday) and it's been troublesome for a couple of weeks now," Astros manager A.J. Hinch said. "You gotta play better to win."

The Astros mustered just four hits in Monday's loss and Carlos Gomez made a pair of defensive miscues in the fifth inning that accounted for two of Minnesota's three runs.

Gomez also went 0-for-3 at the plate, including a double play, dropping his average to .210 on the season.

"I'll take a look at it and see how it goes," Hinch said when asked if he can continue to play Gomez. struggling through a tough season. "You keep trying to hang in there with guys, you want to encourage them more than anything. Clearly it's been a rough patch for him for a while."

Hinch will send right-hander Mike Fiers to the mound to try and get the club going. Fiers struggled to open the season but has been better of late, posting a 3.56 ERA in 11 starts since June 1. He has had a quality start each of his last three times out, including a six-inning, two-run outing against Toronto on Thursday.

Fiers allowed four runs on nine hits and a walk in a no-decision against the Twins on May 4 at Minute Maid Park.

Houston will see a familiar face on Tuesday when the Twins send Hector Santiago to the mound to make his home debut. Santiago, acquired from the Angels on Aug. 1 in exchange for Ricky Nolasco and a prospect, allowed four runs on five hits and a pair of walks in five innings in Cleveland in his first game with the Twins on Thursday.

The left-hander allowed one run on three hits and two walks in 6 1/3 innings against the Astros when he played for the Angels on June 21 and
has a 3.69 ERA in 10 career starts against Houston.