DENVER -- Zack Godley pitched like a veteran in his first career start at Coors Field as the D-backs took the rubber game, 10-3, from the Rockies on Thursday afternoon. After a Charlie Blackmon solo home run to lead off the first, Godley settled in to keep the Rockies off the scoreboard again until the eighth.

The win wrapped a 7-1 road trip for the D-backs, who moved into a virtual tie with the Rockies for second place in the National League West, one game behind the Dodgers.

Godley at one point retired 13 straight batters and 19 of 20 following Blackmon's homer. Following Nolan Arenado's one-out single in the opening frame, the Rockies' only baserunner until the eighth came on a Blackmon walk in the third. Raimel Tapia ended Godley's streak with an infield single, sparking a two-run frame for the Rockies.

"We came in here and did what we needed to do, more for ourselves than anybody else," Godley said. "It showed that we're playing good ball. We're swinging the bats well and we're throwing the ball well so we'll just keep trying carry that over into the next day."

Godley pitched into the eighth inning for just the second time in his career, the first coming on Aug. 17, 2016, against the Mets. He had completed seven innings twice earlier this season.
Rockies starter **Antonio Senzatela** was not as fortunate, **bucking the season-long trend of his success at Coors Field**. Thursday was the Rockies' second loss in Senzatela's nine home starts, and the D-backs' nine runs and eight hits were the most against Senzatela in his young career.

"My fastball command was not there -- it was a bad day for me," Senzatela said.

**MOMENTS THAT MATTERED**

**Golden again**: D-backs first baseman **Paul Goldschmidt** continued his domination of the Rockies on Thursday, launching a three-run home run in the fourth inning and going 3-for-5 overall with four RBIs. That blast proved the backbreaker for Senzatela, who allowed nine runs, though he completed five innings. Goldschmidt's .771 slugging percentage against the Rockies is higher than his mark against any other National League team.

"I think that's something that we've done all year long where we start to sense that there's a rhythm to the day and that there's more than just one run sitting out there," D-backs manager Torey Lovullo said. "Our guys take advantage of those moments. It's a credit to them, their preparation and their mind-set."

**Nolan (surprisingly) can't get rollin'**: Though the game seemed to be out of hand, the Rockies had a chance to claw back in the bottom of the eighth when Arenado came up to bat with men on first and second. Two runs had already scored in the inning, and the at-bat echoed of Arenado striking a go-ahead triple off the right-field wall in the Rockies' 4-3 series-opening win Tuesday. However, Arenado lined a 3-2 pitch right to shortstop **Nick Ahmed**, ending the inning and potential rally.

**SOUND SMART WITH YOUR FRIENDS**

Arizona posted an .875 winning percentage on its 7-1 road trip, which also included stops in Detroit and Philadelphia -- the highest in franchise history over a three-city trip.

**TEE TIME**

Blackmon's first-inning home run was the **lowest pitch hit for a homer this season**, according to **Statcast™**, and second-lowest since Statcast™ was introduced in 2015. Blackmon's homer came on a Godley curveball that was just 0.84 feet off the ground.
WHAT'S NEXT

D-backs: The D-backs open a 10-game homestand Friday night against the Phillies. Patrick Corbin will get the start for Arizona and the left-hander will be facing the Phils for the second straight start. Last time out he got the win and allowed four runs (two earned) over six innings.

Rockies: The Rockies will begin a three-game series at the Dodgers on Friday, with the opener scheduled for 8:10 p.m. MT. Left-handed rookie Kyle Freeland (8-4, 3.42 ERA) pitches for the Rockies, while the Dodgers counter with LHP Alex Wood (7-0, 1.90 ERA).
DENVER -- The Rockies' young starting rotation, which had been one of the team's biggest bright spots nearly halfway through the season, hit a bump in the road against the D-backs.

Following rookie Jeff Hoffman's poor outing Wednesday, when he gave up nine runs to the D-backs, fellow first-year pitcher Antonio Senzatela followed with a similar start. Senzatela was also charged with nine runs in Thursday's 10-3 loss. Both totals were career highs for the starters.

"Guaranteed that we're aware what's going on with our players," manager Bud Black said. "Our coaches, our players, we're talking. I think with these last two games, we got beat, they swung the bats. I mean they swung 'em, and we didn't make enough pitches."

Pitching has always been an issue for the Rockies, who play half their games at mile-high altitude. Though he had done well at home in his first two months, Senzatela's effectiveness at Coors Field has slid in June.

Senzatela excelled in his first six home starts this season, pitching to an ERA of 3.00. But since tossing eight scoreless innings against the Cardinals on May 26, Senzatela has an 8.83 ERA in three starts at Coors Field.

Black said after Wednesday's 16-5 loss that he hoped Hoffman would treat his performance as a learning experience. But he said Senzatela's loss was more being the victim to two three-run home runs.

"It's really tough to overcome that," Black said. "The pitch to [D-backs second baseman Chris] Owings was intended to be a little bit inside and a little bit up. It didn't get there, it stayed in the middle, a little bit down. The pitch to [D-backs first baseman Paul] Goldschmidt caught a lot of the plate, and he's swinging well."

Nevertheless, Senzatela's fastball command was subpar Thursday, he and Black said. Senzatela admitted that the league may be adjusting to his early success.

"I [normally] control really good with my fastball, but maybe they know me," Senzatela said. "But I just can try to compete and put the ball down for ground balls, not fly balls."
Senzatela added that he felt physically fine, but the D-backs were just able to capitalize on his mistakes.

For Black, performances in two games out of 75 played doesn't mean a whole lot given the day-to-day randomness of the sport. Though Senzatela's fastball command was off, he will still have a chance to rebound, Black said.

"Time will tell," Black said. "There's no doubt that this is always a game of adjustments moving forward, so in regards to Jeff and Antonio, time will tell. But we have a lot of confidence in these guys."
DENVER -- As if the Rocky Mountain wonder needs another weapon at the plate, Charlie Blackmon proved in Thursday's 10-3 loss to the D-backs he may have added one.

Leading off the game in a 2-2 count, the Rockies' center fielder lifted a curveball that dipped 44.8 inches 433 feet to the visitors' bullpen, the fourth-deepest of his 16 homers this year. At 0.84 feet off the ground, it was the lowest pitch converted for a home run in MLB this year, and second-lowest since Statcast™ was implemented in 2015.

"To be honest, it was a ball," said Blackmon, whose previous low on a homer was 1.32 feet off the ground. "I probably shouldn't have swung at it, but I was able to hit it just well enough. I mean, it was a really good pitch actually, and it was close enough to me where I didn't have to reach real far for it. I just kind of had to go down and get it. I was lucky enough to get the barrel on it."

It was the first homer this year that Zack Godley has surrendered on his curve, and second of his career, per Statcast™. The other was to Edwin Encarnacion last July, but on a pitch that hung middle-away. Godley entered Thursday getting hitters to chase 27.9 percent of his non-borderline balls, the highest rate among MLB starters who had thrown at least 200 such pitches.
Entering Thursday, Godley had generated the highest chase rate on non-borderline balls this year among starters who had thrown at least 200 such pitches.

Entering Thursday, batters were slugging just .133 against Godley's curve, third-lowest in MLB among starters (min. 30 at-bats ending on a curve), and after the first frame Thursday, Godley tossed six straight scoreless innings.

"Really and truly, even that at-bat I felt like I was doing what I needed to do," said Godley, who generated eight swinging strikes among the 29 curves he threw Thursday. "[Blackmon] made a great swing on a great pitch and hit a homer. In that spot you've just got to tip your hat and go right back at it and try and get the next guy."

Blackmon leads the Majors with 332 plate appearances, and understands he will see more aggressive pitching at the top of the Rockies' lineup. This year on pitches in the lower-third and below, Blackmon is averaging a 13.9-degree launch angle on batted balls, with just a 5.0 percent swing-and-miss rate on such pitches, which ranks 21st out of 122 batters who have swung on such pitches.

"Most guys want to pitch down and I can sometimes hit balls hard when they're down, so I think that helps me," Blackmon said.

"He was able to keep his hands back enough and then get the bat head to it with some lift to it, so that's impressive hitting," Rockies manager Bud Black said. "When a guy is able to do that sort of thing, that's pretty a talented hitter. That ball was hit hard. That's out in most ballparks."
DENVER -- Tell Rockies leadoff hitter Charlie Blackmon that on-base percentage is crucial for a leadoff hitter, and he's fine with that. But the theory that walks are a primary route to the bases?

"That's the worst idea I've ever heard," Blackmon said. "There's only a handful of guys that walk. The only guys that can walk are guys that can hit the ball over the fence. Trying to get on base via the walk makes it harder to get hits."

No. 2 hitter DJ LeMahieu doesn't homer like Blackmon -- he has three this year, Blackmon 16 -- but he also doesn't "ever go into an at-bat saying I want to walk."

So they present a challenge, but also a clear strategy for opponents: Challenge them, knowing that they have a penchant for strikeouts (69 for Blackmon, 45 for LeMahieu), but risk Blackmon homering or LeMahieu using his bat control to foster a big inning.

Blackmon entered Thursday with a .324 batting average, .375 on-base percentage and .601 slugging percentage, while LeMahieu was at .304/.364/.385. And if it means strikeouts, so be it.

Some in the game believe solid top-of-the-order hitters have an OBP 60-70 points above the batting average. Blackmon isn't there, but no one is going to scoff at an OBP above .350 -- from someone whose slugging percentage in leadoff plate appearances is more than 80 points higher than the next-highest leadoff man. LeMahieu has a nice 60-point BA-OBP split and is trending up -- .360/.389/.442 in June before Thursday.

So Blackmon was leading leadoff men in strikeouts and LeMahieu was fourth among No. 2 hitters. They do plenty to make up for that, so pitchers can challenge away, as far as the Rockies are concerned.

"That's just who they are as hitters; those guys are doing their thing," manager Bud Black said.

Here's how the approaches of the top two hitters work:
• In wins, Blackmon entered Thursday with a 1.071 OPS (on-base plus slugging). With Blackmon excelling, Nolan Arenado's OPS was 1.115 and Mark Reynolds' 1.087. In losses, Blackmon's OPS was .803, Reynolds' .679 and Arenado's .591. In theory, Blackmon's run production and on-base percentage enhanced the power hitters' performance.

• LeMahieu actually had a higher OPS in losses (.796) than wins (.726). But according to the Elias Sports Bureau, which tracks efficiency in opportunities for productive outs, LeMahieu was 18-for-44 (.409) in wins and 8-for-28 (.296) in losses, so he was more efficient in more chances.

"I don't feel pressure that the only way we're going to score is if me and Charlie do it," LeMahieu said. "But at the same time, if we can get things scoring we have a really good chance to score. Charlie has good at-bats, and I feed off that. So does whoever is back there [in the lineup]."

Blackmon entered Thursday with 42 extra-base hits, second in the NL to Arenado's 46, and opened the bottom of the first Thursday with a homer to right-center off D-backs starter Zack Godley. Let's say the walk wasn't foremost on his mind.

"You can't walk a double," he said, "and you can't really walk runs across the plate."
DENVER -- Lefty Tyler Anderson returned to the Rockies' active roster with an eventful but scoreless ninth inning during Thursday's 10-3 loss to the D-backs. When he will return to the starting rotation should be known in the coming days.

Anderson (3-5, 5.75 ERA), who hadn't pitched for the club since May 30 because of left knee inflammation, walked the first batter he faced and yielded a hit, but fanned three in a 24-pitch inning. It was his first relief appearance since 2010, his sophomore year at the University of Oregon.

"It was weird, getting loose and you think there were two outs, then a couple pitching changes and then you end up throwing 45 pitches down there," Anderson said.

Anderson replaced righty Carlos Estevez, who was optioned to Triple-A Albuquerque to continue to work on delivery issues. The Rockies list Anderson and five other starters, but manager Bud Black said he plans to go with a five-man rotation.

The Rockies plan to manipulate the rotation, mainly to ration out the innings of young starters, none of whom has reached a Major League workload -- roughly 180 or more innings.

German Marquez tossed 187 1/3 innings across three levels last year. Jeff Hoffman threw 150 in a 2016 that he finished in the Majors, and Kyle Freeland threw 162 in the Minors. Antonio Senzatela was held to 34 2/3 in a '16 that saw him shut down twice with right shoulder inflammation and miss time because of the death of his mother in Venezuela, but he threw 154 the previous year.

"We, meaning the pitching coaches and the organization, will take some steps to ensure that physically they're gonna be able to withstand it," Black said. "And I think that when you do it … I think that handles the mental part simultaneously."

Black said that while in theory each pitcher has an innings limit this year, the team "might not" let them get to that cap. And there are quality reinforcements en route. Anderson is back, righty Jon Gray (left foot navicular stress fracture) could be back after Saturday's rehab start at Albuquerque, and Chad Bettis -- recovering from testicular cancer -- could be throwing simulated games in two weeks, which would leave him a few rehab starts from a return.

"You'd like to be eight or nine deep in starters. That's where we'd like to think that we are," Black said. "If you take the five guys who are in the rotation now and then you pick up Anderson, Gray and Bettis, there's eight starters."
**Freeland eyes 3rd strong start vs. Dodgers**

**By Thomas Harding / MLB.com | June 22nd, 2017**

The Rockies saw no good fortune against Dodgers lefty Alex Wood last time they met -- although it's not like anyone has done much against him. But the Dodgers haven't had much luck with Rockies lefty Kyle Freeland. To the possible chagrin of both clubs, Wood and Freeland will meet Friday night at Dodger Stadium to open a three-game National League West showdown of contenders.

Wood fanned 10 in six innings of a 4-0 Dodgers victory over the Rockies on May 13. In fact, Wood is averaging 10.86 strikeouts per nine innings. Had Wood thrown enough innings to qualify to be listed among leaders -- he hasn't because of the Dodgers' use of the 10-day disabled list to keep their deep rotation fresh -- he'd rank fourth in the NL.

Freeland is 1-0 with a 1.80 ERA in two starts against the Dodgers, who have struggled against lefty starters -- .742 OPS (on-base plus slugging), or 48 points below what they accomplish against righties. He held them to one run in six innings while winning his debut, 2-1 on April 7. He didn't pitch as well at Dodger Stadium, lasting just four innings and walking four; but he yielded just one run and the Rockies won, 4-3.

**Three things to know about this game**

- Wood has been a swing-and-miss guy, but he froze bats by featuring his curveball in his last start -- eight innings, one run, four hits and five strikeouts in a 3-1 victory at Cincinnati June 16. According to Statcast, Wood had a 74.1-percent zone rate and career-high 96.3-percent strike rate with it. He used the curve to record nine called strikes, compared with his previous season high of four on the curve.

- Wood tops NL starters in ground-ball rate at 66.4 percent. Freeland's 60.6 percent ground-ball rate is third-highest in the NL among pitchers with at least 67 innings.

- By no means does Freeland believe he has magic over the Dodgers, whose penchant for driving up a pitch count made his first outing tough and his second outing short.

"Their lineup 1-9 is really good and they have a couple rookies that are having good years," Freeland said. "I'll attack them the same way. Keeping your same mindset is key facing a lineup like that. You don't stray too far from that."
The three-game series at Coors Field was touted as a significant June test for National League West contenders Arizona and Colorado.

The Diamondbacks passed. The Rockies flunked.

The D-backs’ 10-3 rout of Colorado on Thursday afternoon, coming after Wednesday night’s 16-5 demolition, gave them the series victory.

Leave it to Rockies outfielder Carlos Gonzalez to put it into perspective.

“This was one of those bad series,” he said. “It’s tough, because we played a really good team that is in the same division. And to win this division you have to beat those teams.

“But we also beat the Giants four times to begin (the homestand) and now we have to go into L.A., so it’s a great opportunity for us to regroup and get back on track.”

Waiting in Los Angeles are the powerhouse Dodgers, who led the NL West by one game heading into their home game Thursday night against the New York Mets. On the mound for the Dodgers on Friday night will be Alex Wood, who is 7-0 with a 1.90 ERA. Saturday night, the Rockies will face three-time Cy Young Award winner Clayton Kershaw (10-2, 2.61 ERA). It will take two strong performances to “get back on track” against those left-handers.

By beating Colorado, streaking Arizona won for the 12th time in its last 14 games, improving to 46-27. Colorado, which finished its homestand 5-2, fell to 47-28.

The two losses to the Diamondbacks were ugly. And disappointing to the Rockies, considering they beat Diamondbacks ace Zack Greinke on Tuesday night.

Arizona starter Zack Godley thoroughly dominated the Rockies on Thursday, pitching seven-plus innings of four-hit ball. He struck out eight, walked two and retired 19-of-20 batters during one stretch.
“His curveball was really good,” said Gonzalez, who is hitting .221 after going 0-for-3. “When they got ahead, we started chasing his curve.”

The Diamondbacks, meanwhile, rocked rookie right-hander Antonio Senzatela for nine runs on eight hits in five innings. Two three-run homers — by Chris Owings in the third and by Paul Goldschmidt in the fourth — all but put the game out of reach.

“My fastball command was not there,” Senzatela said. “I felt really good, but I left a few pitches up and they really got me.”

He entered the game 9-2 with a 4.10 ERA, but he looked overmatched against Arizona’s talented lineup. It was a fate similar to what fellow rookie Jeff Hoffman experienced Wednesday night when he was tagged for a career-high nine runs allowed in only 3⅓ innings.

Thursday afternoon began on a high note for Colorado. Charlie Blackmon golfed Godley’s 84 mph curveball 433 feet to right-center for his 16th homer. It was Blackmon’s second leadoff home run this season and the 24th of his career, extending his franchise record.

Two batters later, Nolan Arenado doubled. But he was stranded when Gonzalez grounded out and Ian Desmond struck out. From that point on, the game belonged to Arizona.

Now the Rockies hit the road for a 10-day, nine-game road trip through Los Angeles, San Francisco and Phoenix. It’s not make-or-break time for the Rockies, but it’s an important test.

“We know what’s ahead of us. We know who we are playing,” manager Bud Black said. “Conversely, they know who they’re playing. Every day is a test. Our guys know it.”
Antonio Senzatela broke down his performance to its simplest terms.

“I didn’t pitch very good,” the Rockies’ rookie right-hander said late Thursday afternoon after giving up a career-high nine runs in a 10-3 loss to Arizona at Coors Field.

The more complex matter is whether or not the Rockies’ rookie starters, who’ve helped build a 47-28 record and put the club on a playoff path, are beginning to break down as opponents see more of them. Wednesday night, for example, the Diamondbacks torched Jeff Hoffman for nine runs in 3⅔ innings.

Rockies manager Bud Black has said multiple times since spring training that his young pitchers would experience peaks and valleys. But he wasn’t clinging to that theory Thursday.

“How many games have we played?” he asked.

Told that the number was 75, Black said: “So this is two games. Time will tell. I think that’s the way I’m going to answer that. This will always be a game of adjustments moving forward.

“In regards to Jeff and Antonio, time will tell. But we have a lot of confidence in them moving forward. We are hoping these guys will continue to grow as pitchers and will continue to win games.”

Maybe so, but there is no getting around the fact that Arizona’s potent lineup pummeled the rookies. In fact, the two games marked just the third time in Rockies history that starters allowed nine or more earned runs in consecutive games. The last time it happened was in 1998 at Seattle when Mike Saipe gave up nine earned runs on July 1 and Darryl Kile gave up 10 the next day.
Senzatela, 9-3 with a 4.79 ERA, said his biggest problem Thursday was a lack of fastball command. That led to a batting practice afternoon for Arizona hitters. Three-run homers — by Chris Owings in the third inning and by Paul Goldschmidt in the fourth — all but put the game out of reach early on.

“It’s tough to overcome two, three-run homers,” Black said. “The pitch to Owings was intended to be inside and a little bit up. It didn’t get there. It stayed in the middle.

“And the pitch to Goldschmidt caught a lot of the plate. And he’s swinging well, he really hot right now. Like a lot of their other guys.”

Goldschmidt is sizzling. He went 3-for-5 with four RBIs Thursday, extending his hitting streak to nine games, during which he’s hit .463 (19-for-41) with five home runs, four doubles and 17 RBIs.

Now it’s time for the Rockies’ young pitchers to adjust.

“These last two games, we got beat,” Black said. “They swung the bats and we didn’t make enough pitches. We talked to Jeff and Antonio about some things, that we will keep private. But I guarantee that we are aware of what’s going on with our players.”
Tyler Anderson comes off DL as Rockies’ rotation continues to evolve
Anderson is 3-5 with a 5.85 ERA, with 20 walks and 59 strikeouts
By PATRICK SAUNDERS | psaunders@denverpost.com | The Denver Post
June 22, 2017 at 1:27 pm

The Rockies’ potential rotation shuffle began prior to Thursday afternoon’s game against Arizona.

The Rockies optioned struggling right-hander reliever Carlos Estevez to Triple-A Albuquerque and reinstated left-handed starter Tyler Anderson off the disabled list. According to manager Bud Black, Anderson’s left knee is fine and he’s ready to go.

Now the question becomes, what does the club do with Anderson for the long term? He is officially listed as a starter, but he will act as an emergency reliever for Thursday’s game against the Diamondbacks. After that, there could be tweaks in the rotation as the Rockies head to Los Angeles on Friday for critical three-game series against the Dodgers.

“As far as a plan, things will become clear here over the next couple of day,” Black said, without divulging more.

Rookie left-hander Kyle Freeland is scheduled to face the Dodgers Friday night, with veteran right-hander Tyler Chatwood in line to pitch Saturday night.

The Rockies are cognizant of overworking their young starting pitchers, Black acknowledged, so the team could be mixing and matching starters for the remainder of the season to preserve the arms of rookies Antonio Senzatela, German Marquez, Jeff Hoffman and Freeland.

“As time goes on, the players will tell us, though their performance, how we will handle this,” Black said. “We are going to do everything we can to ensure that physically they stay sharp, and mentally they stay sharp, as we go through the summer.”

Asked if the Rockies would consider completely shutting down one of their rookie starters this season, Black replied: “In theory, yes. But we might not let it get to that number (of innings).”

Black said he likes the idea that the Rockies could use as many as eight different starting pitchers, once Jon Gray and Chad Bettis are completely healthy and ready for big-league duty.

“We have eight guys that we can foresee being part of this rotation — in some form,” Black said, adding that the Rockies are not going to begin using a six-man rotation.
Black added that the Rockies might consider using starters working out of the bullpen at some point this season. That includes Bettis, who is coming back from testicular cancer.

Anderson was 3-5 with a 5.85 ERA, with 20 walks and 59 strikeouts over his first 11 starts of the season prior to being placed on the 10-day disabled list with left knee inflammation on June 6.

Estevez made two relief appearances during his fourth stint with the Rockies this season, going 1-0 with a 7.71 ERA, one walk and three strikeouts.

He’s struggled with his mechanics, which is a major reason why he’s being sent back to Triple-A. In his four big-league stints this season, he’s 4-0 with a 8.10 ERA, with six walks and 18 strikeouts in 18 games.
Why is it that Mark Reynolds, Charlie Blackmon, Nolan Arenado and DJ LeMahieu are all leaders in MLB stats yet trail in all-star voting. It is a crime that lesser players have more votes. The Rockies need more respect.

— Jim, Denver

Jim, I’m sure other Rockies fans share your frustrating, but the truth of the matter is that with the fans voting for the All-Star Game, it’s a popularity contest and a notoriety contest. Major League Baseball likes it that way because it’s great for marketing and fan interaction. It doesn’t always select the best or most deserving players, but that’s what’s in place.

Rockies players are sometimes overlooked because they simply don’t have as big a fan base as say the Cubs, Dodgers, Cardinals or many of the East Coast teams. Plus, there remains a bias about Rockies players being “products of Coors Field.”

This year, I think three Rockies will be in Miami for the Midsummer Classic: Blackmon, Arenado and closer Greg Holland.

In addition to the fans’ vote, the players and managers have a say on who makes the roster. So an overlooked player such as Reynolds or LeMahieu could be added.

Here is a quick tutorial on how All-Star Game teams are select:

- The All-Star team managers are always the managers of the teams that were in the World Series the previous season.
- Each team has a 34-man roster, which includes 21 position players and 13 pitchers. MLB players, managers and coaches are now able to vote and help choose the backup players and pitchers for their league.
- In the National League, fans select the eight starters. Players, coaches, and managers choose eight backups for each position, plus five starting pitchers and three relievers. The NL All-Star team manager chooses the remaining players to bring the roster to 33.
- In the American League, fans vote for nine slots, because of the designated hitter position. The players, managers, and coaches also vote for nine positions, in addition to five starting pitchers and three relievers. The AL All-Star team manager will select the remaining pitchers and position players to total 33 roster spots.
• Fans vote for the starting positions, while the players, coaches and managers vote for the reserve position. If a player wins both votes, he gets to be the starter in his position since the fans chose him. The runner-up in the coaches/players/managers vote gets to be the reserve player.

• Following the conclusion of voting and the announcement of the starters, pitchers, and reserves, fans have the opportunity to select the final position player for each League’s 34-man roster at MLB.com.

Going back about one month, the Rox bullpen seems to have issues when they have a lead of four runs, they let it get too close. See June 15 against the Giants, June 2 against the Padres, May 21 vs. the Reds, and the May 20 meltdown against Reds, just to name a few. It’s a long season, sure, but it’s seemingly a problem.

Is it inexperience or something else leading to this repeated nail-biting? It seems one way to solve it, if they want to be playoff contenders, would be to make some trades to bolster the bullpen with veterans. Do you expect any moves from the Rockies to help with their push the second half of the season?

— Phil, Denver

Phil, that’s quite a question. I’m not sure where to begin.

I don’t think all of the bullpen issues have a lot to do with the score of the game, except in some instances where manager Bud Black has inserted Jordan Lyles or Chad Qualls when the Rockies have big leads … only to see them implode and turn a would-be route into a nail-biter.

In my opinion, neither Qualls nor Lyles is the type of reliever you want on a championship team. However, teams throughout the majors have relievers in the bullpen who are simply there to eat up innings in blowout losses or victories.

As for roster moves for the second half, I would hope that general manager Jeff Bridich — with the blessings of owner Dick Monfort— will seek to shore up the bullpen at the trade deadline. It’s rare that the Rockies are in this position to contend and they have to make the most of this chance.

Of course, a number of other teams are going to want to make deals to improve their own bullpens, so that means the Rockies would be competing with the Nationals, Dodgers and Diamondbacks, etc. for some valuable arms.

So, who might be available? It’s a little too early to tell, but there are some names to ponder:

• Padres left-hander Brand Hand, who is under control for two-plus seasons. The Padres would demand a lot for him.
• Athletics right-hander Ryan Madson
Phillies right-hander Pat Neshek

Pirates left-hander Tony Watson

I'm not saying the Rockies have targeted any of them, but they are pitchers who are likely going to be available for the right price.

Among the young starting pitchers, it seems like German Marquez would be the best candidate to move to the bullpen when Jon Gray and Tyler Anderson return. Do you agree? At this point in his career, Marquez has trouble navigating the third time through the lineup and struggles with high pitch count — and I think his big arm and strikeout ability could immediately make him a valuable high-leverage bullpen arm (he could replace Lyles).

Jeff Hoffman really needs to stay in the rotation, in my opinion, so whoever is doing better between Antonio Senzatela and Kyle Freeland should stay as the fifth starter, with the other one going down to Triple-A for some more seasoning. Please tell Jeff Bridich my plan if you don't mind, I'm happy to help.

— John, Los Angeles, Calif.

John, I'm sure Mr. Bridich will be thrilled with your advice.

I agree with much of what you said. I think that of the current rookie starters, Marquez is the best fit for the bullpen — for the short term. I think his fastball-curve combination would be a potent weapon out of the bullpen.

Perhaps Marquez becomes the long reliever, freeing up Chris Rusin to be more a back-of-the-bullpen pitcher (something we've see more of in recent games).

I also want Hoffman to stay in the rotation, but right now I would pick Senzatela to stick over Anderson.

So when everyone is healthy, my rotation would be: Tyler Chatwood, Jon Gray, Kyle Freeland, Antonio Senzatela and Jeff Hoffman. I'd keep Anderson at Triple-A for some seasoning.

Finally, Chad Bettis is ahead of schedule on his return from testicular cancer. He's already throwing bullpen sessions. Manager Bud Black has said that Bettis still profiles as a starter, but I would not be shocked to see the Rockies use him out of the 'pen this summer.

(Editor's note: This answer was written prior to Hoffman's outing against Arizona in which he allowed 9 earned runs in 3 2/3 innings.)
I'm a die-hard Rockies fan in New York and couldn't be more excited over the team's hot start. Barring anything drastic, the Rockies should at least be in wild-card contention come the trade deadline. It's been a while since the team's been a definite buyer. Do you think it's possible for the Rockies to trade for a top starter without trading any of their top prospects like Brendan Rodgers, Riley Pint, or Ryan McMahon?

— Jonathan Leung, Nanuet, New York

Jonathan, by top starter, I assume you mean someone like the White Sox's Jose Quintana, the A's Sonny Gray, Tampa Bay's Chris Archer or the Pirates' Gerrit Cole, who recently shut down Colorado in Pittsburgh.

At this point, I don't think Bridich and Company are willing to give up any of the three prospects you mentioned. I think the Rockies believe they have decent talent and depth in starters and they aren't going to give up their top prospects for a starter.

I have loved Bud Black as the Rockies manager. One move he has a habit of making, however, makes me curious. As you pointed out a couple of weeks ago, the Rockies have not been good at coming back from deficits this season. One of the contributing factors seems to be that, in almost every game in which the Rockies are trailing in the mid to late innings, Black puts Jordan Lyles into the game, and Lyles has (apart from a decent outing here and there) been pretty much a lock to give up a couple of runs. Does Black have no faith in the Rockies ability to come back? Or does he want to save his good relievers for games they have a more clear route to a win?

— Isaac Bowen, Wellington

Isaac, your are correct. Until the two incredible comeback wins highlighted by Nolan Arenado's walk-off homer for the cycle against the Giants and his go-ahead triple in the eighth against the Diamondbacks, the Rockies have not rallied for many wins.

As for Black’s decision to use Lyles in games when the Rockies are behind, it's a smart move. He has to save his bullpen and that means throwing Lyles out there. Over the course a long season, there have to be some sacrificial lambs.

I think Black has managed the bullpen terrifically.

The big problem with the Rockies as described by MLB Network hosts is that their young pitchers will run out of innings (keep under 160) or go over 160 and risk their careers. Taking us to the edge but not being around to
finish the deal. By my quick math they can use the 10-day disabled list once per month per pitcher and keep things about right. Is this a viable strategy?

— Bill Kalfas, Longmont

Bill, I think you will see the Rockies do this from time to time. We might see a phantom trip to the DL for "shoulder fatigue." But I don’t think manager Bud Black likes the strategy as a whole. He wants his pitchers to stay on a firm schedule and learn as they go.

So it’s a touchy situation for the Rockies, but one they have been reluctant to address. I think we will know more over the next six weeks or so.

Patrick, I’ve asked you this before and you laughed at me saying that I was a fantasy baseball player that was infatuated with trades, but after 60 games isn’t it about time to do something with Carlos Gonzalez? His trade value is low but there has to be a team out there that is wanting to take a salary dump. If they aren’t going to trade him, why do they keep putting him in the clean up spot when he is hitting .222 from that spot? His .174 RISP is ridiculous from a guy making $20 million a year.

— Aaron Hurt, Omaha, Nebraska

Aaron, you said I “laughed at you?” I don’t recall that. Anyway, I apologize if I came off as rude. I’m grateful that I can answer so many questions for my mailbag.

Anyway, I’m writing this a day after CarGo hit a solo homer off Diamondbacks ace Zack Greinke in the Rockies’ 4-3 victory. Gonzalez has shown signs of breaking out, though it hasn’t been sustainable.

I have also been confounded by the Rockies’ decision to hit him in the cleanup spot, but lately he has been hitting fifth or sixth, which is where he belongs until he heats up (if he ever does). As I write this, he’s hitting .153 with runners in scoring position. That’s not acceptable for a No. 4 hitter.

I do not think the Rockies will trade Gonzalez, for a couple of reasons. One, he’s making $20 million this season and no team is going to pick up a big chunk of that salary, meaning the Rockies would have to eat a lot of it. They aren’t going to do that.

I think they will hang on to CarGo with the hope he can heat up and help carry the team — something he’s fully capable of at any time. Then, I think he walks at the end of the season.
Why not trade CarGo and Ian Desmond, and prospects to Miami for Gincaralo Stanton? No salary issue — $28M for the two big leaguers this year, and next year the Rockies get Jose Reyes’ $22M off the books.

— Nathaniel, Lincoln, Nebraska

I don’t see that happening. It’s a risky trade and the Rockies’ outfield is performing well, even as CarGo has slumped. Stanton is owed a massive $270 million from 2018-28, but he could opt out after the 2019 season. If the Rockies are going to venture into long-term deals, they would be better served trying to sign Nolan Arenado to a big contract.

Howdy, Patrick. What used to be believed as endless prospect depth at OF now feels thin. Who is in the call-up cards with David Dahl working through his injury?

— Craig B., Denver

Craig, I think we’ve already seen that call-up in the Raimel Tapia, who’s already up and playing well. After that, the shelves are pretty bare, at least right now. I suppose that Jordan Patterson could be called up, but he’s a fourth outfielder in my book.
DENVER -- Zack Godley got off to a rough start, quickly recovered and turned in a gem for the surging Arizona Diamondbacks.

Godley shook off a leadoff home run to throw well into the eighth inning, Paul Goldschmidt and Chris Owings hit three-run homers, and the Diamondbacks beat the Colorado Rockies 10-3 on Thursday.

Goldschmidt finished with three hits and four RBI to increase his season total to 64, tops in the majors.

Arizona took two of three in the NL West matchup and is now tied with Colorado for second place in the division behind the Dodgers. The Diamondbacks have won 12 of 14 and are a season-high 19 games above .500 after a 7-1 road trip.

"We came in here and did what we needed to do," Godley said. "More for ourselves than anybody it showed we're playing good ball. Keep trying to carry that over into the next day."

Godley's day started with Charlie Blackmon reaching down to send an 84 mph curveball into the Arizona bullpen, but he shut down the Rockies from there and retired 13 straight in one stretch.

Blackmon drew a walk in the third, then Godley erased him with a double-play ball to end the inning. He didn't allow a hit after Nolan Arenado's one-out single in the first and retired 19 of the next 20 batters before Raimel Tapia and Pat Valaika singled and doubled to lead off the eighth.

"He made a great swing on a good pitch. In that spot you have to tip your hat," Godley said of Blackmon's 16th homer. "Kind of settled in and the defense played unbelievable behind me."

Godley (3-1) allowed three runs on four hits and struck out eight in seven-plus innings. He also helped himself with an RBI single in the eighth.

"He did a great job, pitched into the eighth inning and did everything we needed him to do on a day like today," Arizona manager Torey Lovullo said. "Teams play tired baseball on these day games and our guys went out there with energy. Zack set the tone."

The Diamondbacks hit a Colorado rookie pitcher hard for the second straight night. Wednesday they scored 10 runs in the fourth off Jeff Hoffman, and Thursday they battered right-hander Antonio Senzatela (9-3) for nine runs in five innings.
Senzatela started well this season but he has struggled of late. His ERA was 2.81 heading into May but is now at 4.79 after Thursday. He is 2-1 with an 8.86 ERA in four starts in June.

"Today, I feel really good. But I threw a couple (pitches) up and they got me," Senzatela said. "I didn't have really good fastball command. It was a bad day."

Owings' homer in the third, his ninth, made it 5-1, and Goldschmidt hit his 18th to cap a four-run fourth to make it 9-1.

"It's tough to overcome two three-run homers, really tough to overcome that," Rockies manager Bud Black said.

The Rockies have dropped two straight after winning six in a row.

TRAINER'S ROOM

Diamondbacks: OF Yasmany Tomas (right groin tendinitis) ran the bases and was scheduled to take batting practice Thursday. Manager Torey Lovullo said Tomas is feeling better but not 100 percent. "There's something in there that is continuing to make him feel uncomfortable," Lovullo said. "We don't want to keep pushing forward unless he's ready to go."

Rockies: LHP Tyler Anderson (left knee inflammation) was activated from the 10-day disabled list and was assigned to the bullpen. RHP Carlos Estevez was optioned to Triple-A Albuquerque. Anderson, who was in the rotation before going on the DL in early June, pitched the ninth inning.

UP NEXT

Diamondbacks: LHP Patrick Corbin (6-6, 5.19 ERA) starts the first of four games against Philadelphia on Friday. Corbin is 5-0 with a 3.35 ERA in his last seven starts at Chase Field.

Rockies: LHP Kyle Freeland (8-4, 3.42 ERA) opens a big three-game series against the Dodgers in Los Angeles on Friday night. He is 1-0 with a 1.80 in two career starts against L.A.
Trade-deadline tiers: A shopping list for every buyer

Bradford Doolittle ESPN Staff Writer

If only it were so simple. You have teams vying for postseason spots and possible success after those spots are secured. You have other teams, not in those situations, but hoping to leverage the assets they have to get there in some indefinite future scenario. We call the first group buyers and the latter sellers. All we have to do is bring them together.

If only it were so simple.

In recent weeks, we've started to zero in on baseball's coming trade deadline. First, we slotted teams by their buy-sell-hold status. Then we compiled a long list of possible in-season trade candidates, sorted by the general cost of doing business. Great. It's a start. Now let's take another step and try to bring these two together.

What are the needs of the buying teams? Which players fit those needs? There are many factors, including contract status, payroll flexibility, depth of minor league talent, specificity of the need to be filled, health of the applicable players, what the opposing general managers had for breakfast -- the list is truly inexhaustible. But let's wade in anyway.

Note: It has been a few weeks since we last slotted teams by their buy-hold-sell status. Even 11 weeks into the season, it's a list that ebbs and flows with each day's results. So this list is a mere snapshot -- these are the teams that, per my system of rating teams, are currently in either buy or hold mode. Conveniently, that works out to 15 teams. However, let's face it, some of those hold teams are going to slip and move into sell mode.

So think of it like this: If these teams were to buy, here's what they'd need, and here is whom they might target. If your team isn't listed, that's because, per my system, they figure to be in sell mode.

Colorado Rockies

Needs: fringe depth, frontline starter

Fits: Sonny Gray, Chris Archer

The Rockies are in good shape, and the needs they do have could be filled by in-house players getting healthy, such as David Dahl, Jon Gray and Tom Murphy. Thus Colorado can target impact starters, insofar as any become available.
How the NL West’s power trio will shape the rest of 2017

David Schoenfield ESPN Senior Writer

It feels too early to be watching the scoreboard, but that’s how fun the NL West is right now. You want to see how the top three teams fared each night. The Colorado Rockies, Los Angeles Dodgers and Arizona Diamondbacks all have a winning percentage above .600, and that’s rarified company. Since divisional play began in 1969, one league has had three .600 teams only three times (2002 AL, 1998 NL and 1977 AL), and the 1977 AL East was the only division to feature three .600 teams, when the Yankees, Orioles and Red Sox accomplished it. The 2015 NL Central came close, with the Cardinals and Pirates above .600 and the Cubs finishing at .599.

Because all three teams are playing so well, there is a good change that the division winner will be joined by two NL West wild-card teams in the postseason field, leaving the NL East and Central as one-team races the remainder of the season. But how will the race for the West play out?

Despite the close race, the projection systems still see the Dodgers as huge favorites. FanGraphs gives them an 86.7 percent chance of winning the division (compared to 8.5 percent for the Rockies and 4.8 percent for the Diamondbacks). Baseball Prospectus sees it as Dodgers at 77.2 percent, Rockies at 13.8 percent and Diamondbacks at 9.0 percent.

In other words, the computers, taking into account past performance and making adjustments for what’s happened so far in 2017, aren’t buying the hot starts of the Rockies and Diamondbacks. FanGraphs, for example, projects the Rockies to be .498 the rest of the way and the Diamondbacks to be .501.

It’s easy to understand why this is the case. The Dodgers have won four straight division titles, winning 91-plus games each season. The Rockies haven’t finished above .500 since 2010 and the Diamondbacks since 2011. It’s not like either of those franchises brought in Willie Mays and Hank Aaron in the offseason.

Still, I think this race will end up a lot closer than the Dodgers romping their way to a 10-game margin. Some thoughts why:

The Rockies and Diamondbacks aren’t benefiting from career seasons.
Take Colorado’s offense, for example. Mark Reynolds has the highest OPS of his career, but I’m buying into this level of production. He made some changes to his approach last season and is striking out less often than in his 200-strikeout days with the Diamondbacks, and he has maintained a high BABIP for two seasons. Charlie Blackmon has been playing at this level for more than a year now, but even if he and Reynolds regress a bit, Carlos Gonzalez, DJ LeMahieu and Trevor Story have all hit below their 2016 levels.

Same thing with Arizona’s offense. Paul Goldschmidt and Jake Lamb have carried the lineup so far, but A.J. Pollock has missed 30-something games with a groin injury, and once he returns he’ll provide a much-needed third cog. Maybe Chris Owings is playing a little better than his career norm, but he isn’t putting up monster numbers.

The one huge breakout performer on these two clubs has been Diamondbacks starter Robbie Ray, who is earning All-Star consideration with his 2.87 ERA through 14 starts. His ERA is lower than his 3.41 FIP (fielding independent pitching), but he has also showcased overpowering stuff, with 114 strikeouts in 87.2 innings and a .197 batting average allowed. He’s legit. Zack Godley has provided a surprising lift with a 2.34 ERA over eight starts and will regress from that number, but I like his chances to succeed as a solid middle-of-the-rotation starter moving forward.

The Dodgers, meanwhile, have three hitters ripe for some significant regression: Cody Bellinger, Chris Taylor and Justin Turner. Some of that will be covered by expected improvement from Joc Pederson and Logan Forsythe (I wouldn’t count on Adrian Gonzalez, however, as he is on the DL with back problems). These offenses are second (Colorado), third (L.A.) and fourth (Arizona) in the NL in runs, and if anything I like the Rockies’ chances to improve in this category moving forward, with the Dodgers and Diamondbacks holding steady.

The Rockies and Diamondbacks both have good rotations.

Entering Wednesday, the D-backs led the majors with a 3.53 ERA, the Dodgers were second at 3.54 and the Rockies were an impressive seventh at 4.02. The Diamondbacks don’t have a lot of depth, especially with Shelby Miller out for the season. But with Zack Greinke looking like an ace again and Taijuan Walker pitching well, the D-backs have an excellent 1-2-3 aside from whatever Godley provides.

The computers aren’t buying the solid ERAs of the Rockies starters, especially their rookies who have performed so well. Antonio Senzatela and Kyle Freeland have significantly lower ERAs than FIPs, as does veteran Tyler Chatwood,
while German Marquez has posted a 3.92 ERA, pitching well despite working primarily with just a fastball/slider combo. Jeff Hoffman, the fourth rookie, had a 2.25 ERA before blowing up in Wednesday’s loss to the Diamondbacks, but those games are going to happen at Coors Field and he owns a 38-8 strikeout-to-walk ratio.

Here’s why I like the Rockies’ rotation to succeed moving forward: They’ll get staff ace Jon Gray back from his broken foot at some point, and Chad Bettis, recovered from his treatment for testicular cancer, is aiming to return before the All-Star break. They were the Rockies’ top two starters heading into the season, and since their missed time wasn’t a result of arm issues, the lack of innings in the first half could actually help keep them strong down the stretch. Once those two return (as well as Tyler Anderson, about ready to rejoin the big leagues after a rehab start on Sunday), manager Bud Black has a rare luxury for a Rockies manager: too many rotation options. A rotation of Gray, Bettis, Chatwood, Hoffman and the others would be the best in Rockies history.

The Dodgers, meanwhile, suddenly have some concerns, even with all their depth. At the start of the season, they were hoping their top three at this point would be Clayton Kershaw, Rich Hill and Julio Urias or Kenta Maeda. Kershaw is still awesome but has appeared human of late, as he has already issued a career-high 17 home runs. Hill has had blister issues, like last season, and has been awful when he has pitched, as he has lost the feel and command of his curveball. Urias struggled in the majors and is now on the DL in Triple-A with shoulder inflammation, while Maeda has been moved to the bullpen with a 4.70 ERA. The saviors have been Alex Wood, who owns a 1.90 ERA, and Brandon McCarthy, with a 2.87 ERA. In this Year of the Home Run, those two have allowed just six over 130.1 combined innings; that won’t continue.

The schedule doesn’t really favor anyone.

If anything, it may slightly favor the Rockies. The Diamondbacks and Rockies both have 18 games remaining against the Giants and Padres, while the Dodgers have 22. But you can argue the Rockies caught the Giants -- they’re 10-1 against them -- at the right time, while the Dodgers may get them as they start playing better.

Also, remember that the AL has owned a big edge in interleague play, with an 80-57 advantage entering Wednesday. The Diamondbacks are 9-1 in interleague play with 10 games left against the Astros, Twins and Royals. The Rockies have 11 interleague games left. The Dodgers, however, have played just three interleague games, so they have 15 remaining.
Yes, 11 of those are against the mediocre AL Central (with the other four against the Angels), but those are still tougher opponents than the Reds or Phillies (the Dodgers are 9-0 against those two teams).

Sure, the safe bet is that the Dodgers will win this thing. But in a National League in which some of the preseason playoff favorites -- like the Giants, Cardinals and Mets -- have looked bad, the Rockies and Diamondbacks should play much better than .500 moving forward. I see a three-team fight for the division title and hopefully one of the great races in history.
Earlier this week, Travis Sawchik took note of some steps that Colorado Rockies pitchers have taken this year to better succeed in the context of the team’s challenging home park. Jeff Sullivan added to the conversation the next day, observing that the Rockies have been fantastic on the road this season. To continue the investigation of Colorado’s strong campaign, I’ve attempted here to understand what factors have contributed to the Rockies’ road record — which stands at 25-13 entering today, the second-best mark in the majors. My conclusion? A good bullpen, the club’s first decent defense in quite some time, and some luck.

The Rockies have one of the best records in the majors this year. Examining merely the raw numbers, one might conclude that the club’s offense, which ranks fourth in runs per game, is largely to thank for that. That would be a bad conclusion to reach, however. For the Rockies, in their stadium, fourth is actually quite bad. After adjusting for park, the team’s offensive is 15% worse than league average, fifth worst in the majors. One might argue that the park adjustment penalizes hitters too much for Coors Field. Perhaps that’s the case. Even so, the Rockies have recorded a below-average offensive mark away from Coors, as well. Their offense, by most measures, just hasn’t been that great.

There are also suggestions that the club is perhaps getting a bit lucky. While the Rockies have compiled a 47-27 record overall, Pythagorean win percentage (which estimates a club’s record based on runs scored and allowed) has them at 43-31, while BaseRuns (which strips out sequencing) has them at 40-34. That could go a long way in explaining the Rockies’ road record: just chalk it up to luck and be done.

We can’t actually do that, though, because most of that luck has come at home for the Rockies. In 36 home games, Colorado has outscored their opponents by just 19 runs; on the road, that margin is 46 runs. At least in terms of runs scored and prevented, the Rockies have earned their road success.

At both locations, the Rockies have excelled at one-run games, going 6-1 on the road and 5-1 at home. Part of that is going to be luck, but part of that is also likely a product of Colorado’s bullpen. The Rockies have a solid bullpen — situated among the top 10 in terms of WAR — anchored by strong performances from Greg Holland and Jake McGee. The team’s 3.75 bullpen FIP on the road ranks behind only the Arizona Diamondbacks among NL teams. While the peripherals have been good, the results have been great: the bullpen’s a 3.06 ERA has been bested by only the Yankees and Blue Jays’ bullpens in all of baseball.
Some of the bullpen’s success on the road is random variation, and we can’t really expect it to continue. That said, we should note both that (a) the bullpen has been good regardless of their great results and (b) the team has already “banked” those great results and getting the expected (and “merely” good) results over the rest of the season would still qualify as a very good outcome.

Let’s quickly look at just how good those banked results have been. The bullpen’s Win Probability Added (WPA) is 5.8 runs right now, a full run ahead of the second-place Red Sox. In terms of Shutdowns — that is, times when the pen has increased WPA by .06 — the Rockies are fourth in baseball, with 68. In terms of Meltdowns — that is, times when the pen has decreased WPA by .06 — the team’s total of 24 ranks second to Cleveland’s 22. Combine the two, and the Rockies are ahead of everybody, as the graph below shows.

Those results help explain why Colorado has been good in close games, but it doesn’t explain all of it. On the road this season, the Rockies have a 4.09 FIP (which is decent) and a 3.39 ERA (which is excellent). Only the Diamondbacks have been better, but their 3.46 FIP suggests the pitching performance is more sustainable. In the NL, the Dodgers’ road ERA is third, but at 3.87, it’s well behind Colorado. When an ERA is significantly better than the FIP, there are generally two factors that bear watching: left-on-base percentage (LOB%) and BABIP.

With regard to LOB%, that’s part of the sequencing luck that BaseRuns attempts to remove. It won’t show up in a team’s Pythagorean record because a Pythagorean record can’t tell you if the runs that did score were a product of luck or not. Pythagorean record only knows that runs were scored, period. The Rockies’ LOB% this season is 74%, not too far from the league average of 73%. When we separate home from road, we see a big difference, however. The club’s road LOB%
sits at 79%, best in baseball. When you account for the park, Rockies pitchers have pitched roughly the same on the home and the road, but the inflated LOB% on the road indicates they’ve had a bit of luck.

It’s not all luck, though. Rockies pitchers are average when it comes to strikeouts, but their 49% ground-ball rate is third in baseball. That makes a difference, because the Rockies also have a very good infield defense. When you see balls fly out of Coors Field, it has to be pretty tempting to build the team around hulking sluggers. Hulking sluggers tend to give back a little on defense, and in the past the Rockies have been hurt by poor defenses. The chart below shows Rockies' team UZR over the years.

This is easily the best team defense the Rockies have fielded since 2007 — the last, and only, season in which the team has reached the World Series. The outfield defense is decent, with a solid Ian Desmond and Carlos Gonzalez and a slightly below-average (when it comes to range, at least) Charlie Blackmon. The infield defense, however, is very good. Nolan Arenado is excellent and DJ LeMahieu is good. We don’t know enough statistically to say much about Trevor Story, but Mark Reynolds is decent at first base.

Together, the team excels at two things: turning double plays and avoiding errors. The team has been two runs above average on turning the double play this season, which is sixth best in baseball. They’ve also been 11 runs above average when it comes to errors, which is first in baseball by a ton. Merely looking at errors and fielding percentage to determine value on defense is a bad idea, as such a simple method totally ignores range, but the Rockies have combined
their sure-handedness with average range. The Error component of UZR tells us how much that is actually worth, and Colorado’s defense has been one of the best in baseball.

It’s impossible to do a good job preventing hits at Coors Field, but on the road the defense has helped the pitching staff put up a .267 away BABIP, which is the best in the NL. (The Twins have a .256 away BABIP.) That figure might not remain that low all season, but it will likely be better than average if the staff keeps serving up ground balls and the defense continues to field them cleanly. It’s not reasonable to think that the Rockies will continue to be amazing at preventing runs on the road, but their pitching staff — especially the bullpen — and the defense should ensure that the team remains good at it. The Rockies probably won’t ever be good at preventing runs at home, but by putting together a solid defense, a ground-ball pitching staff, and a solid bullpen, they’ve come up with a good formula for the road.
Pitch framing—the skill to either steal strikes or present borderline pitches as clear strikes—has been in baseball for ages. However, attempts to define and try to measure pitch framing have only begun in the last decade, first investigated by Dan Turkenkopf with subsequent research and refinement by Mike Fast and Max Marchi.

Former Baseball Prospectus Editor-in-Chief and current Ringer writer Ben Lindbergh also wrote about the topic multiple times, including GIFs of our good friend and ex-Rockies catcher Wilin Rosario, who provided examples on what a catcher shouldn’t do. He also had a Q&A with current Colorado Rockies catcher Ryan Hanigan, who was in his sixth season as a Cincinnati Reds catcher at the time. Hanigan then (and now), was regarded as a good pitch framer and Lindbergh was interested in his thoughts on catcher framing and the techniques he used. Hanigan had told Lindbergh back then that though “Most guys do a pretty good job, if you’re a big league catcher, some are definitely better than others. I mean, if you give away strikes, you’re in such a big hole.”

Fast forward to 2017, and Hanigan’s views on catcher framing have evolved. He’s gone from viewing framing as an underrated skill to an overrated one. “I do think they’re putting a lot of emphasis on everything in the game like analytics and stats now but I think that it can be overplayed,” Hanigan said.

Hanigan clarified what he meant by “overplayed”: “There’s a lot more talk about catcher framing in terms of the media coverage and the public perception today but I think catchers have always done that and always will. Obviously they want to talk about stealing strikes. Whether you get a few more calls or lose a few more calls, it’s hard to really put it into numbers in my opinion. But I think everyone takes pride in it and they certainly do here [in the Rockies organization] . . . [but] I think all catchers are trying to make pitchers look good on a consistent basis. You go through stretches where your [catching] percentages are up or down or whatever but you gotta evaluate it over the course of a few years, in my opinion, for it to really matter.”

He doesn’t think some things aren’t quantifiable—I can understand that. But, stats can help emphasize elements of catcher performance that were previously unnoticed. I asked him what he thought about that “There are different things that go into guys that do a good job with their staff,” Hanigan commented. “For awhile there, years ago, it was very simple in terms of errors, caught stealing percentage and stuff. They’re trying to develop the game into the littlest, finest points
which, you know, I can appreciate. But again, I kind of get tired about hearing all the numbers. It's really about how you're working your staff. Are they winning games, are they having good outings in terms of executing pitches? Obviously if you're losing strikes, there's something wrong.”

Hanigan let out a laugh. “But, how many strikes gained? You know that umpires are looking at which catchers are getting strikes and say ‘Alright.’ I mean, I got an umpire sheet right here in terms of hot and cold zones.” As statistics have given catchers better insight on the umpires' tendencies, the umpires have also gained more knowledge of which catchers are influencing the strike zone. Not only that, but one element of current catcher framing metrics includes accounting for differences in pitchers and umpires to evaluate a catcher’s true skill.

Hanigan doesn’t dismiss the significance of framing. Like he told Lindbergh a few years ago, he still believes that “Getting as many pitches as you can is huge. “But, all of us are trying to do that. We’re all trying to stick pitches, work setups for your pitcher, whatever that makes them feel comfortable with.” However, because the margins have closed between the best and worst framers, littler things that might not be captured are becoming more important.

For example, earlier this year Hanigan noticed that Tyler Anderson’s pitches were coming too high so he set his target lower. After Hanigan moved his glove lower, Anderson started throwing more strikes. Hanigan explained his thought process on how to help pitchers throw strikes: “Some guys, if you give them a target, right at the bottom, throw way down low and then they’re down a lot and they’re going to be in crappy counts. So you want to bring it up a bit. And some guys are mid-thigh so everything is individual. It’s about the pitcher. It’s about what he’s got that day.”

He added, “We all try to do the best we can in terms of all that stuff, but at the end of the day, the numbers I look at are the runs we gave up and if we win. I don’t think it’s easy to put a quantifiable stat on that stuff because there are too many factors to get into it. You look at the result at the end of the game in terms of pitch calling. Did he execute his pitch? Did he hit? Did he miss? Stuff like that we’re more concerned about [than framing pitches] because we’re already expected to catch the ball the right way. . . . We’re concentrating on working our staff and calling sequences and making smart decisions in big situations. That doesn’t get talked about as much because it’s hard to quantify all that stuff because that’s what actually goes into winning games.”

Those kinds of adjustments that a catcher makes and how they call a game is still a gap in evaluating the performance of catchers.
Ultimately, Hanigan concludes, stealing and keeping strikes are not the most critical components of a catcher’s job. Rather, "It is how you worked your pitcher, how you called the game, and were you able to catch the strikes that actually were strikes and get those calls. I mean, a lot of times, guys will catch a ball fine and it was there and they won’t call it. What do you do? It’s just something you can’t control. But you can keep calling your game and keep it rolling.”

Keep it rolling, because a measure of a catcher’s success isn’t necessarily their individual stats, but whether they put their pitcher and team in a position to win.
DENVER – Athleticism in baseball isn’t as fundamentally important as it is in other sports, but when you have all the skill and technique stuff covered, having a ballclub full of fantastic athletes can make all the difference in the world. And for the 2017 Colorado Rockies, it has.

For all the hype surrounding the clutch hitting, the vastly improved bullpen, and the cavalcade of young arms who daily reinvent the notion of pitching in a Rockies uniform, it has been the incredible defensive play across the board that has been the most consistent — and arguably most important — characteristic of this first-place team.

In a conversation with reliever Adam Ottavino, we asked about this idea of certain parts of the team “picking up” others, specifically noting the bullpen carried the team for months and is now getting “bailed out” by the offense. For the most part, he wasn’t having it. “It’s just a couple of games. The bullpen is still throwing great.

All year,” he says. “Hitters have been clutch, Nolan especially the last couple of games. And that’s been our team; clutch hitting, good pitching, good defense.”

But when it comes to the back and forth of a 162 game season, Ottavino — and pretty much everyone else in the clubhouse we talked to — insists on thinking of every game as an individual event. “Yes. Exactly,” he says of that mindset. “Every game. It doesn’t matter what happened yesterday or what we’ve got coming up. Each game is different.”

And that appears to be a working approach. “We’ve won games 10-8, we’ve won games 1-0. We’ve come from behind, we’ve held leads. We’ve done a bit of everything but the constant has been our defense for sure.” He went on to add the pitching and clutch hitting have been there all season, but it’s easy to see what he means with this defense.

Manager Bud Black, while recognizing the insane level of athleticism, says it all begins with the basics. “It starts with guys who are fundamentally good defenders. Gold Glover at third. Trevor is an above-average shortstop. CarGo has great instincts. Mark Reynolds and Ian Desmond if they are at first. Ian was a shortstop, Reynolds was a college shortstop, that speaks for itself. The infield defense has been really, really good. And they work at it, we saw that in spring training. It’s something you can improve upon as a player.”

That point about Desmond and Reynolds is something that has been discussed since Desmond was signed and “versatility” became the word of the offseason. What that word really meant, though, was not necessarily that one player
could play a ton of positions, but rather that no matter who the Rockies put on the field — or where they put them — they are so stacked with quality athletes that their defensive floor is incredibly high.

“Statistically, I would say this is the best defensive team I’ve played on,” Desmond told BSN Denver. “It’s crazy, man. We want the ball hit to us. We all are looking for outs. I think it’s good that the pitchers trust us and that they are putting the ball over the plate so that we can make plays.”

But, we point out, it isn’t just the statistics that show the team is playing near-mistake-free baseball. We began to list the guys on this team who might easily have gone pro in other sports given their natural gifts. Charlie Blackmon as a receiver in the NFL, Trevor Story as a running back, DJ LeMahieu as a point guard in the NBA, and the alternate universe where Carlos Gonzalez and Cristiano Ronaldo have switched jobs.

Desmond follows up the idea that Nolan Arenado might have been a scary linebacker with the declaration, “We’ve got a shortstop catching,” referring to Tony Wolters who gives the Rockies above-average-to-elite level athletes at all nine positions on the field.

Yes, even the pitchers field their positions well and can outrun most of their counterparts. “That’s true,” Desmond says. “Those guys get it done.”

“And that’s a credit to the management, the team upstairs,” he continued. “They set on a mission to get athletes and that’s what they’ve done. They did a great job constructing that. I think that was kind of a goal of theirs and you’re seeing the result of it.”

The results of it are a team that sits at 47-27 despite extremely limited contributions from their three best pitchers a season ago and a lineup that still has never been full strength. Like Ottavino said, the hitting has been timely and the pitching even more so, but the defense — the defense has been otherworldly.
The Rockies wrapped up their most recent homestand with back-to-back loss to the Diamondbacks, which left the Rockies in third place for the first time this year. They are 1 1/2 games back of the first-place Dodgers, the Rockies' biggest deficit of the season.

It's not like the Rockies have been playing poorly over the long run. They have the third best record in the NL since June 6. It's just that the two teams ahead of them have been the best in baseball.

The Dodgers not only have won more games than any other team, but they have scored more runs, relying more on their offense than defense.

A look at the efforts of NL pitching staffs since June 7:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team</th>
<th>W</th>
<th>L</th>
<th>Pct</th>
<th>Sv</th>
<th>SvOP</th>
<th>ERA</th>
<th>AVG</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>2.77</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>.625</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>.260</td>
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<td>.571</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>4.95</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.563</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.15</td>
<td>.255</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cubs</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.467</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>.244</td>
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And a look at the NL offensive efforts since June 7:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Team</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>AB</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>HR</th>
<th>RBI</th>
<th>AVG</th>
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<td>36</td>
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<td>21</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>509</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>.267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marlins</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>487</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>.279</td>
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the challenge, though, is the Rockies aren’t headed to what have been traditionally friendly environments for them in the past.

The Rockies have the second worst record among NL teams as visitors to Dodger Stadium since the franchise was born in 1993. Can they handle the demons of the past? They open a nine-game road trip with three games this weekend at Dodger Stadium then three at the Giants and thee at Arizona.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Team</th>
<th>W</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>169</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>.457</td>
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NL Visiting Teams at Dodger Stadium
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Team</th>
<th>W</th>
<th>L</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco Giants</td>
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<td>262</td>
<td>.452</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miami Marlins</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>.452</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philadelphia Phillies</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>.448</td>
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<tr>
<td>San Diego Padres</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>235</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.431</td>
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<tr>
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<td>98</td>
<td>.420</td>
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<tr>
<td>Milwaukee Brewers</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>.419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atlanta Braves</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>.414</td>
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<tr>
<td>New York Mets</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>183</td>
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<tr>
<td>Houston Astros</td>
<td>144</td>
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<td>.399</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pittsburgh Pirates</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>185</td>
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<tr>
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<td>125</td>
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<tr>
<td>Washington Nationals</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>.346</td>
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Three of the Rockies six worst road records against National League teams are at No. 3 Diamondbacks (60-111), Giants (74-129) and Dodgers (74-125).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>New York Mets</td>
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<tr>
<td>Los Angeles Dodgers</td>
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