

Blue Jays get complete Clayton Kershaw experience for first time

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TORONTO – The Blue Jays can confirm first-hand what the rest of baseball has known for some time: Clayton Kershaw is as good as it gets on the mound.

There [hasn't been a better pitcher in the major leagues](#) than Kershaw since he made his debut with the Los Angeles Dodgers in 2008.

The 28-year-old left-hander is a five-time All-Star, a three-time National League Cy Young award winner, and was the NL MVP in 2014. It's the foundation for a Hall of Fame resume, and Kershaw is just entering the prime of his career.

But until Saturday afternoon Kershaw had never faced the Blue Jays. It was the first time Kevin Pillar, Josh Donaldson, Jose Bautista, and Edwin Encarnacion stepped into the batter's box against him in a major-league game. Troy Tulowitzki, who saw his fair share of Kershaw while playing in the NL West time with the Rockies, is the only player on the roster with more than 10 at-bats against him.

Even then, there's not much Tulowitzki could tell his teammates to prepare them for what they were heading into. Kershaw confounds hitters with a fastball that hits 92-94 mph, a looping curveball that comes in at 73-75 mph, and a slider that sits right between the two at 87-89 mph. Paired with his impeccable command, it's as devastating an arsenal as you'll find in baseball.

Kershaw's plan of attack against the Blue Jays was simple. He worked primarily down-and-in to Toronto's right-handed hitters while staying on the outer half of the plate against the two left-handed hitters in the lineup.

The Blue Jays responded by being patient and working counts early, forcing Kershaw to throw 42 pitches his first

time through the order. When they did get good pitches to hit, they squared up a few of them for hard hits.

He never allowed Toronto to get into a groove, though, coming up with strikeouts and three timely double plays when he needed them most. Kershaw's final line: seven innings pitched, eight hits, two earned runs, 10 strikeouts, and no walks in a [6-2 Dodgers win](#). His numbers on the season through seven starts? A 4-1 record, with a 2.04 ERA, 64 strikeouts, and three walks in 53 innings.

"You've got to play almost a perfect game because you figure it's going to be low scoring," said Blue Jays manager John Gibbons. "I thought we worked him good, made him throw a lot of pitches early. You're hoping he goes maybe five or six innings the way it started out and get him out of there."

"We battled him early, and then he found it, like a lot of the great ones do."

Most pitchers tend to rely on one pitch to do their damage with two strikes. What makes Kershaw different, and more unpredictable, is that he can use all three pitches as his put away pitch, especially against righties. In this particular game he leaned on his slider; it was the pitch he used for nine of his 10 strikeouts.

"It was everything I thought it was going to be"" said Pillar, who went 1-for-4 with an RBI double and two strikeouts. "He's very good. He doesn't make a lot of mistakes. He pitched a little different than he thought he would – he used his slider a lot."

The Blue Jays did everything they were supposed to do – get deep into counts, take advantage of the rare mistakes – but they suffered the same fate many others have when Kershaw is pitching for the Dodgers: a loss.

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