

Blue Jays bite tongues on ump as offense lacks bite in Game 1 loss

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CLEVELAND – The Blue Jays’ visible complaints about the strike zone Friday night at Progressive Field in Game 1 of the ALCS were not made vocal after the game in the clubhouse.

There was definite frustration following a [2-0 loss](#) to Cleveland, but the angst was directed internally, not externally, at least not publicly.

“We’ll leave that up to you guys to talk about,” said Jose Bautista, who went 0-for-3 with three strikeouts, one of them called. “We’re really not allowed to discuss the strike zone or the officiating so I’m going to have to pass on that.”

Bautista’s teammates wouldn’t go much further than that, either. Starting pitcher Marco Estrada thought he was maybe squeezed when he walked Jason Kipnis, but otherwise thought the umpiring was “fair.” Catcher Russell Martin said while it seemed like a couple calls didn’t go their way late summed up Laz Diaz’s performance identifying balls and strikes behind the plate as “pretty good.”

This time, this team that’s been prone to blowing up umpires in the past had to eat it; their laments would be limited to raised arms in the dugout and seemingly sharp words on the field. Cleveland starter Corey Kluber brilliantly worked out of early jams and handed the game off to a bullpen that’s going to be incredibly difficult to rally against on their worst day.

The Blue Jays had runners in scoring position in each of the first four innings, and couldn’t drive any of them home. Kluber made key pitches when he absolutely had to, crossing up Toronto’s hitters with his super sinker and his sublime slider.

“That was the Kluber that everybody raves about. I feel like maybe I got one pitch that I should have hit and that’s it, and normally you get more than a few mistakes when you’re hitting up there,” said Martin. “We kind of had him on the ropes early and it would have been nice to sneak a run here or there, especially early in the ballgame. But he pitched tough, didn’t cave in, really didn’t make many mistakes at all.”

As Toronto failed to capitalize on their opportunities, the question became whether Cleveland’s breakthrough would come against Estrada or someone from the Blue Jays’ bullpen would give up the shot. It turned out to be Estrada, as Francisco Lindor crushed a rare misplaced changeup to center field in the sixth to put two runs on the scoreboard. It was Estrada’s only mistake, as he pitched eight otherwise stellar innings, but those two runs were all the home team needed.



Kluber recorded one more out, leaving the game having pitched 6 1/3 shutout innings, striking out six and allowing six hits and two walks. In came Andrew Miller with one out in the seventh. He faced six batters and recorded five strikeouts. Closer Cody Allen had a clean ninth for the save and that was that. Cleveland took a 1-0 series lead and the questions about the Blue Jays' offense that had gone away after Edwin Encarnacion hit a dramatic walk-off homer in the wild-card game were back in a flash.

Toronto battered Texas' pitchers, scoring 22 runs in their three-game ALDS sweep and seven players hit home runs in the series. It was a reminder of what the Blue Jays were last year, when they rolled into the postseason as the World Series favorite with their loaded lineup leading the charge. Their stars were locked in and their role players were on a hot streak.

The expectations were high for a repeat, with the core returning and Troy Tulowitzki around for a full season. Josh Donaldson replicated the numbers from his MVP year and Encarnacion's year was terrific, but it objectively didn't match or exceed what he did in 2015. The same could be said for every other hitter, too. The overall result was then predictable: the Jays were fourth in runs per game in the AL, fine, but not anywhere close to the juggernaut from the year before. And when they're not hitting home runs, they feel even further away from that.

When Donaldson slumped in September, the offense fell off a cliff. The division lead evaporated and it was the starting pitching, the team's strength all season, that rose to the occasion down the stretch to nail down the wild-card spot.

Game 1 played out close to the script laid out before the series. Both starters excelled. Cleveland's bullpen was excellent. The Blue Jays' lineup, with Donaldson and Encarnacion combining to provide four of the seven hits, the real x-factor that could swing the ALCS, stranded eight runners and went 0-for-5 with runners in scoring position.

"I don't think it was a lack of something we did," said Jays manager John Gibbons. "I just thought they pitched that well, as did we. It was just one, they got the big home run."

Devon Travis limped off the field in the fifth, the pain in his right knee too much to overcome and putting his playing status for the rest of the playoffs in jeopardy. His potential replacements at second base, Ryan Goins and Darwin Barney, just don't bring the same offensive pedigree.

In the grand scheme, it's a minor blow, but this season the minor blows have stacked up to make a major difference.

Cleveland doesn't have another starter like Kluber on their roster, to be fair very few teams do, but their relievers aren't going anywhere and Kluber will be back sooner rather than later.

Better find the solution quick then – and maybe the solution is facing Josh Tomlin in Game 2 on Saturday afternoon and Trevor Bauer in Game 3 on Monday night – or the series risks being over quicker than expected.

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