

MLB

# Gerrit Cole Proves Hittable as the Nationals Take World Series Opener

Juan Soto drove in three runs in Washington's 5-4 victory in Game 1



Gerrit Cole of the Houston Astros reacts after allowing a two-RBI double to Juan Soto. PHOTO: TIM WARNER/GETTY IMAGES

*By Jared Diamond*

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HOUSTON—The last 16 times Gerrit Cole took the mound before Tuesday, the same two things happened: Cole gave up four runs or fewer, and the Houston Astros won. That includes three remarkable outings in these playoffs, when he allowed a total of one run and struck out 32 batters over 22 <sup>2</sup>/<sub>3</sub> dominant innings.

But every stretch of greatness eventually must come to an end, even for a pitcher as brilliant as Cole. Unfortunately for the Astros, that moment arrived at the worst possible time.

Cole faltered in Game 1 of the World Series here at Minute Maid Park, delivering his worst performance since the week of Memorial Day. He surrendered five runs, three of which driven in by the Washington Nationals' 20-year-old prodigy, Juan Soto. It resulted in the red-hot Nationals stunning Cole and stealing a 5-4 win from the heavily favored Astros, leaving them three victories away from their first title in franchise history. They earned it: Nobody could beat Cole for months. Then he faced the Nationals.

“You can have the best season in the world, but if you don’t perform on this stage, in seven games, I don’t think it really matters,” Nationals outfielder Adam Eaton said

This World Series matchup features an unprecedented collection of elite starters, and it began with a duel worthy of that billing: Cole, arguably the best pitcher in baseball this season, versus Max Scherzer, arguably the best pitcher in baseball over the last several seasons.

Neither ace quite lived up to his reputation. Astros first baseman Yuli Gurriel smacked a two-run double off Scherzer in the first. Nationals first baseman Ryan Zimmerman, playing in his first World Series contest in his 15th season with Washington, blasted a home run in the second. Washington general manager Mike Rizzo said Zimmerman’s drive off Cole “broke the ice, showing that we can beat him.” Manager Dave Martinez said his “eyes got a little watery” as Zimmerman, the most beloved Nationals player ever, rounded the bases.

From that point forward, Scherzer managed to settle down. Though a high pitch count ended his night after just five frames, he kept the Astros off the scoreboard after his early misstep. Cole, meanwhile, never found his stuff, struggling with the command of both his fastball and his curveball. He admitted that he “didn’t have my A-game,” and against an opponent as talented and confident as the Nationals, “They made us pay.” He suffered his first loss since May 22, exactly five months before Tuesday’s Game 1.

In the fourth inning, Soto homered to tie the score. In the fifth, the Nationals plated three more, punctuated by a two-run double by Soto, continuing his torrid October. Soto said afterward that he felt comfortable against Cole because he saw him multiple times in spring training at the two teams’ shared facility in West Palm Beach, Fla.



Washington Nationals left fielder Juan Soto hits a home run in Game 1. PHOTO: TROY TAORMINA/REUTERS

Nonetheless, before Tuesday, Cole owned a 1.28 ERA since July 17, including the postseason.

“Your longest-tenured veteran starts it and

your youngest superstar finishes it,” Rizzo said.

The Nationals knew all about Cole's streak. They couldn't avoid hearing about it. They just didn't care.

For the Nationals, the playoffs didn't start in October. The playoffs started when they fell to 19-31 on the season, all but destroying their championship aspirations before the calendar even turned to June. Behind their sparkling rotation and powerhouse lineup, the Nationals recovered to claim a wild-card spot, only to survive a gauntlet of top-tier pitchers on their way to the World Series—maybe not quite at Cole's level lately, but close.

They endured Walker Buehler, Hyun-Jin Ryu and Clayton Kershaw in the division series against the Los Angeles Dodgers. They blitzed past Jack Flaherty and Adam Wainwright in their sweep of the St. Louis Cardinals in the championship series. Cole—and Justin Verlander behind him in Wednesday's Game 2—represented just another obstacle for the Nationals to overcome.

"These guys think they're pretty good," Rizzo said. "They think they can beat anybody."

Right now, nobody could argue with that. With Tuesday's win, the Nationals claimed home-field advantage in the World Series and will counter Verlander on Wednesday with Stephen Strasburg, who has a 1.64 ERA in 22 playoff innings. Patrick Corbin, who threw a scoreless inning in relief Tuesday, will likely start Friday's Game 3 at Nationals Park, the first World Series contest in Washington, D.C., since 1933.

Granted, one defeat doesn't scare the Astros, a team that finished with 107 regular-season wins, the most in the major leagues. They dropped Game 1 to the Dodgers in the World Series in 2017, only to rally to win it in seven.

But the Nationals figured out Cole. If they can do that, it stands to reason that they can do just about anything.

"I never doubt our guys," Martinez said. "Ever."

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