

“It’s our duty to be that tank back there and roll with the punches.”

CONNOR WONG | Boston Red Sox catcher, on the demands of the position



St. Louis Cardinals catcher Wilson Contreras is helped off the field by trainer Adam Olsen after being injured in the second inning of a game against the New York Mets on May 7 in St. Louis. JEFF ROBERSON / AP Photo for The Salt Lake Tribune

By ZACK MEISEL

Life as a big league catcher: Violet bruises, ballooned ankles — and now broken arms

Catching was a family tradition, so when Red Sox backstop Reese McGuire was 8 or 9, as he recalled, he tested out his new catching gear in the backyard on Christmas. As he crouched in the grass and baseballs came off his forearms, his grandfather told him: “It takes a tough kid to be a catcher. You have to enjoy the bruises.”

“We’re all kind of crazy. I think to get back there,” said Diamondbacks catcher Tucker Barnhart, who has spent the last 11 seasons as the target squatting behind home plate.

Catching is not for the faint of heart — or thigh or wrist or toe or hip or knee or hand or shoulder.

Around the league, most catchers are banged up, always lowering on the edge of the injured list.

Late last month, Angels catcher Logan O’Hoppe was dealing with a black-and-blue shoulder, leaving him hardly able to lift his arm after absorbing a foul ball. His back-up, Matt Thaiss, had a bruised hand after catching Jose Soriano’s 96-mph sinker. Then O’Hoppe left a game last week after taking a foul ball to the hand. Giants catcher Patrick Bailey took a foul ball last month on the exposed area of the toe where the foot shield doesn’t quite reach. Three days later, he landed on the concussion injured list after taking a foul ball to the face mask. Red Sox catcher Connor Wong also recently dealt with a bruise under his toe-nail. Wong went on to describe a previous bruise to the tendon of his quad, which made crouching painful and, well, crouching is a key part of the job.

“It’s our duty to be that tank back there and roll with the punches,” Wong said.

And for over a century, they have, accepting the bruises and strains that have come with the long-established territory. But as the game evolves, the demands of the job are making it even more hazardous; catchers have shifted closer to the plate to aid with pitch framing, but as The Athletic’s Katie Wo wrote last week, that has caused a rise in catcher interference calls and has opened up catchers to more punishment.

Last week, Cardinals catcher Wilson Contreras was struck by the swing of New York Mets’ J.D. Martinez and has a broken left arm to show for it.

There’s always a risk being a catcher,” Contreras said after the injury. “Could have been something different. It could’ve been off my knee. It could be a concussion. That risk is always going to be there.”

Add it to the list. There’s a reason Barnhart and other veteran

voices, including the thick Boston accent of Cleveland bench coach Craig Albermar, can be heard on the first day of spring training every year relaying a familiar message: It’s all downhill from here.

“The amount of excitement,” Barnhart said about the dawn of a new season, “and, ‘Man, I feel great,’ — and then Day 2 happens.”

They won’t return to 100% until the depths of winter, after they’ve recovered from every foul tip, every achy muscle, every nick and bruise in every nook of the body. The job is unrelenting and unforgiving: the pain and danger are ever-present.

And yet, for a team to succeed, so much necessarily falls on a catcher’s sore shoulders. They build a rapport with each pitcher. They know their tendencies and what’s been clicking. They know how they’re attacked certain hitters in the past. They see the scouting reports on every single member of the opposing roster. That’s the learning curve for any fill-in, and Barnhart said it’s why catchers are so motivated to avoid time off.

“You have to have, for a lack of a better term,” Barnhart said, “a ‘f- it mentality.’”

“If you cut my arm off,” said Guardians catcher Austin Hedges, “if I can play, I’m gonna go f-ing play.”

Well, as long as it’s his left arm, he clarified. He still has to throw the ball back to the pitcher 150 times a game, a tall order if he’s limited to his non-throwing hand.

Hedges scrolled through thousands of photos on his phone one day last week in search of evidence of the gnarliest bruise he could find. He located one that occupied nearly his entire right thigh, one with rich shades of indigo, plum and mulberry. He shook his head and laughed. “The culprit? One single foul tip.”

“The foul balls seem to always hit you in a spot where you don’t have gear or have the least amount of gear,” Barnhart said.

In 2022, Hedges suffered a low ankle sprain while lunging toward first base. Two weeks after that healed, he suffered a high ankle sprain as he tumbled into

the dugout trying to corral a pop-up. His heel turned a dark violet and his ankle ballooned in size. He struggled to rotate while batting. He couldn’t comfortably position himself behind the plate or push off his backside, which resulted in him long-hopping the ball to second when trying to nab a base-stealer.

“You’re in pain, but you never get to shut it off,” Hedges said. “If you can play, you play. There’s no hesitation. You see how people react to getting hit by pitches. It doesn’t feel a whole lot better getting a foul tip off flesh. Then you just have to come back and act like it’s not even a thing.”

In June 2021, Chris Gimenez was scheduled to catch Mariners ace Félix Hernández one afternoon, but during batting practice the day before, Gimenez strained his left oblique. Seattle’s starting catcher, Miguel Olivo, experienced leg cramping that night, so Gimenez, who could barely inhale without cringing in pain, had to fill in for the final six innings.

For Gimenez, there was no dodging the pain in his side, especially when trying to corral Michael Pineda’s upper-90s heaters and when applying a tag at the plate on an assist from Ichiro. Gimenez tried to drop down a bunt when he batted since swinging proved unbearable. Chipper Jones shoved at him from third base, asking why he was bunting with two outs, but Mariners manager Eric Wedge had instructed Gimenez to do whatever caused him the least suffering. Seattle just wanted to keep Gimenez physically able to coach behind the plate. He headed to the injured list the next day.

Albermar was listed at 5-foot-8 and 185 pounds as a player, small stature for a catcher.

“I got plowed over a lot,” he said. He also knew he couldn’t afford to sit out when granted a chance to play since he was an undrafted free agent who waited nine years for a big-league opportunity.

At one point, he thought his playing career had ended early, thanks to loose bodies in his knee getting wedged in his joint and leaving him unable to crouch.

Albermar’s fellow coach in

Cleveland, Sandy Alomar Jr., lasted 20 years as a major league catcher. He has the battle scars to prove it. He underwent six surgeries on his left knee and three on his right.

“If you want to be a catcher,” Alomar said, “you’re never going to be 100%. Ever.”

Even now, he has a bone spur in his left foot from years of absorbing foul tips.

Even with all that catchers of Alomar’s generation had to deal with, it was rare for them to be struck by the hitter’s bawking. That has become an increasing problem for the modern catcher, as was highlighted by the Contreras injury.

Tigers manager A.J. Hinch said that teams are trying to walk the line between asking their catchers to steal strikes via closer-to-the-plate pitch framing, and putting them in dangerous situations by inching a bit too close.

“We do want our guys close enough to be impactful with the low strike but not walking into harm’s way,” Hinch said. “It’s a tough balance when the incentive to do it is real and the risk is extreme.”

Even as the risks become more intense, there are teams and individuals trying to find ways to make catching less of a burden on the human body. Hinch noted teams are searching for methods intended to “chip away at some of the physical responsibilities” of catching, whether altering their stances or adding bullpen catchers to lighten their to-do list. Giants manager Bob Melvin suggested everyday catchers like J.T. Realmuto are an endangered species.

“With that in mind, some catchers have dropped one knee to the dirt to save the wear and tear on their knees, but several catchers and coaches stressed it’s not a cure-all. Hedges said it places more of a burden on the ankles, and it makes his inner thighs more vulnerable to foul tips.

“There’s nowhere for it to miss you,” said Jerry Narro, the Angels’ catching coach, who suggested catchers need “a football mentality.”

“It just seems like there’s always something that’s hurting,” Barnhart said.

“You feel like if you play a guy two out of three,” Melvin said, “that’s about as far as you can go with it.”

On Sept. 9, 2021, after socking a pair of solo homers against the Nationals, then-Braves catcher Stephen Vogt blocked a ball in the dirt, twisted his body and attempted an off-balance throw to third, where Juan Soto was trying to advance 90 feet. During his throwing motion, Vogt felt a pop in his hip. He couldn’t squat. Two muscles had ripped off his pelvis and he had a sports hernia. He needed season-ending surgery, which had him contemplating retirement after his team marched to a World Series title.

“You get beat up every single night as a catcher,” said Vogt, who now manages the Guardians. “It’s just part of the job.”

During a recent series in Houston, he told catcher Bo Naylor: “Man, you’re getting your butt kicked tonight.”

Naylor said nothing is more irritating than a foul ball off the hand. He added that he’ll occasionally be completing his prep work on a foam roller when a sharp pain pops up unexpectedly. That’s when he cycles through every possible pain-in-the-dance from the previous night.

“Wait, why does this hurt? Oh yeah, I got a foul ball there last night,” he said.

McGuire said he wakes up “every day” with a mysterious bruise or ache. On April 30, it was his thumb, from a foul tip that struck his mitt at an awkward angle. Adrenaline fueled him the rest of that game, but it was still when he woke up the next day, he hadn’t realized how hard he had jammed it.

“Most of us have some sort of thumb injury,” said Cubs catcher Yan Gomes, who uses a protective guard and a stockpile of tape for added security.

All of them, not most, have some sort of something. Hinch, who caught for parts of seven big-league seasons, said it’s “the reason we all look like hell when we’re done playing.”

In August 2018, Joey Votto joined the Reds’ injured list, and Barnhart and Curt Casali, the club’s catchers, shared some of the first-base duties in his absence. For the catchers, it was like a spa day.

“We’d always joke with each other,” Barnhart said, “that, ‘Man, if my body always felt like this and I got to go to the plate, this is a great feeling. You don’t have to squat down. You’re not worried about getting hit. All you have to do is stand at first base and catch the ball. That’s it!’ My body feels great.”

— The Athletic’s C. Trent Brown, Chad Jennings, Stephen J. Nesbitt, Sam Blum, Cody Stevenson and Andy McCullough contributed reporting.

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