

CUBS NOTEBOOK

Hit on shin, Rusch forced to leave early

BY JOE COWLEY
Staff Reporter

TUCSON, Ariz. — While Cubs starting pitchers have become endangered species this spring, **Glendon Rusch** wasn't quite ready to add his name to that list.

The left-hander took a **Joe Borchart** comebacker off his right shin, forcing him out of the game Saturday after two innings, but didn't see the injury as anything serious.

"I don't foresee this being anything more than a couple days of riding the bike, and that's about it," Rusch said from the training room, a large ice pack on his lower leg. "I really don't think it will be much more than having to stay off it a little bit here for a few days."

That's good news for an organization that likely will be without starting pitchers **Mark Prior** and **Kerry Wood** on Opening Day.

Rusch, who tentatively is scheduled to start the second game of the regular season, suffered the injury in the second inning. After **Brian Anderson** led off with a single, up came Borchart, who ripped a one-hopper in Rusch's direction.

The pitcher was examined by trainers but remained in the game. He didn't answer the bell for the third.

"Yeah, I was supposed to go I think five [innings]," Rusch said. "They wanted me to get off the leg and get it checked out."

He was told that it was a bruise, but manager **Dusty Baker** said Rusch was sent for precautionary X-rays.

Rusch allowed five runs on eight hits in the two innings.

"You know he's better than he's pitching," Baker said. "The good thing is his arm feels good and he's in great shape."

Rusch said that the starting staff can't dwell on the absences of Prior and Wood.

"The main thing is for us to do our jobs and, when they're healthy and they're back, that makes our team better," Rusch said.

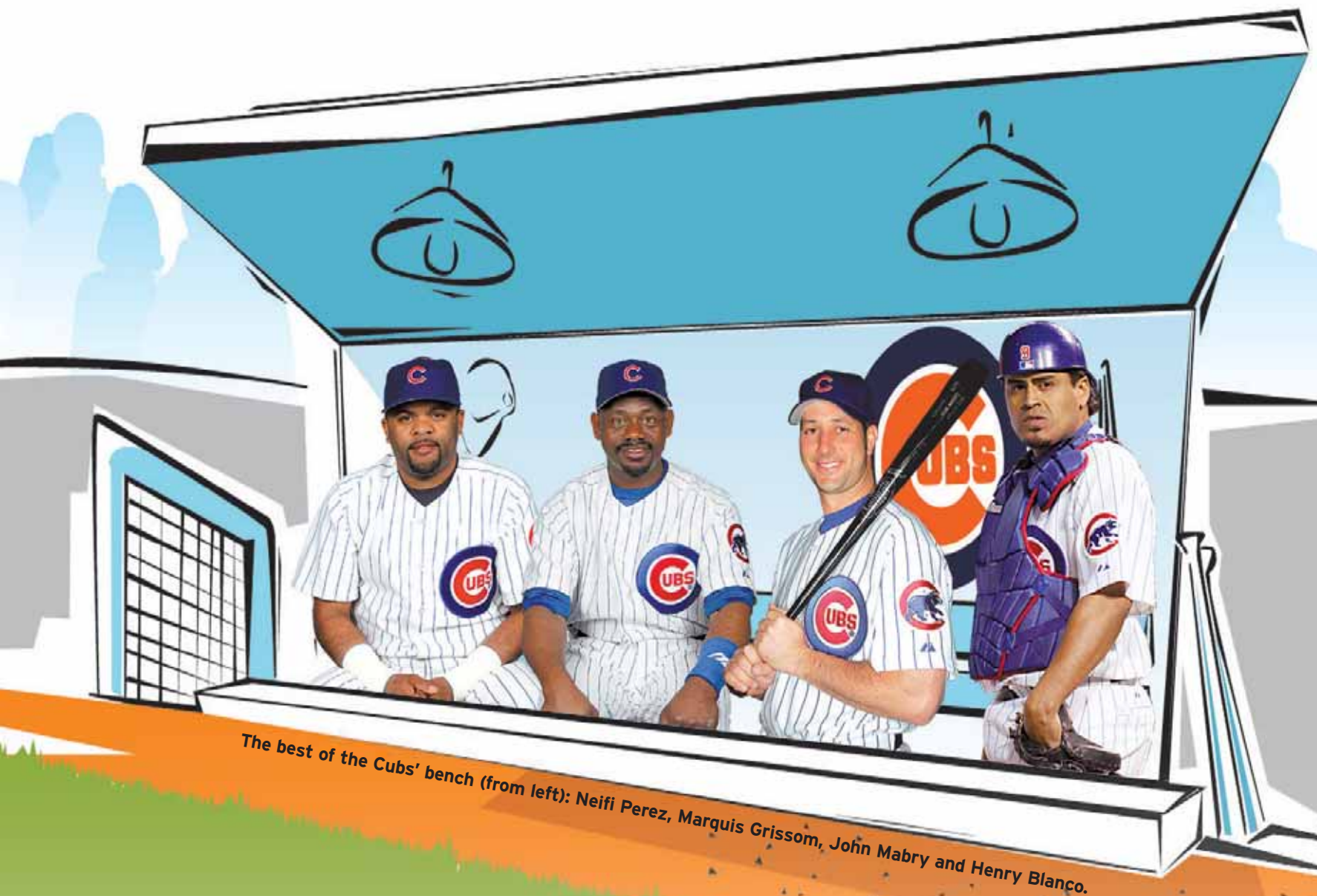
CLASSIC RETURN: **Derrek Lee** and his injured left shoulder are back from playing in the World Baseball Classic, but Baker still had no timetable for his first baseman to test the shoulder in a game situation.

"It depends on how he feels and what they say, a combination," Baker said. "We're just hoping it turns out to be nothing. He'll do as much as he can tolerate."

Baker said that Lee will not play today and will be re-evaluated.

"I've always been told, 'You start the year hurt, it makes for a long year,'" Baker said.

jcowley@suntimes.com



The best of the Cubs' bench (from left): Neifi Perez, Marquis Grissom, John Mabry and Henry Blanco.

PRETTY

is way stronger than it has been in the past." ¶ Finding a reliable pinch hitter to do battle in the late innings is the offensive equivalent of possessing a dead-on closer. ¶ "We've had our share of splashy trades and signings, and it doesn't always turn into a pennant," Cubs general manager Jim Hendry said. "Sometimes the best signings are those guys that fit the need you have that make the club a lot better. I felt we needed to come up with an older left-handed hitter that could come up in the eighth or ninth. And [John Mabry] was really perfect. He's not going to win Gold Gloves at first or third or left and right field, but he can play out there. And he can hit the late-inning pitching. So that does make you stronger. The bench is important." ¶ And in this age of amphetamine testing, players are going to need a natural pick-me-up — such as a teammate off the bench — in the late innings and late in the season. ¶ Here's a look at the key players on the benches of the White Sox and Cubs.

The Cubs

John MABRY

The former Cardinal fills the role of the left-handed-hitting outfielder previously occupied by

Todd Hollandsworth. "We had such a good year out of Hollandsworth in '04, then we got a different Holly in '05," said Hendry, who signed Mabry as a free agent in December. "Mabry has been a guy who has been a very productive, winning type of bench player.

He did a great job for the Cardinals." Mabry, 35, hit .240 with eight homers and 32 RBI in 112 games last season. He can play the outfield, first base and third base. Another plus: He has 56 at-bats in the postseason. With Matt Murton, a right-handed hitter, entering his first full season in the majors, Mabry might get some spot starts in left field against front-line right-handers.

Neifi PEREZ

He entered camp as a candidate for the starting job at second base, but Perez's biggest value to the Cubs is as a bench player. A former Gold Glove shortstop, Perez gives manager Dusty Baker a switch-hitting option off the bench. Perez, 32, also can play second and third and even went behind the plate to catch once. He spent a big chunk of the 2005 season replacing an injured Nomar Garciaparra at short. This season, he provides a reliable backup to rookie Ronny Cedeno and knows the role of being a bench player. "Neifi is a tremendous asset, if he's not starting, in all kinds of roles — double-switching, defense and things like that," Hendry said. Perez hit .274 with 54 RBI in 154 games last season.

Marquis GRISSOM

Send Grissom up in the ninth inning, and you practically are guaranteed he won't stare at strike three. The free-swinging veteran

hit only .212 during an injury-plagued 2005 season that limited him to 44 games, but he hit .279 in 145 games for the San Francisco Giants in 2004. Grissom, who turns 39 on April 17, no longer has the speed that enabled him to steal 78 bases in 1992 and 429 in his career, but it's tough to overlook his experience. He owns four Gold Gloves in the outfield and has a .317 batting average in 218 postseason at-bats. Grissom is in camp as a non-roster invitee, but he could wind up nailing down a roster spot and giving Baker another strong veteran on his bench. Hendry likes the way Grissom is eager to work with young outfielders such as Murton and Felix Pie.

Henry BLANCO

He's favored by starters Mark Prior and Greg Maddux because he calls a good game and is better defensively than starter Michael Barrett. Consider that Blanco has thrown out 41.7 percent of the runners trying to steal against him during his career, including an impressive 48.7 percent (19-for-39) last season. Barrett has a 21.6 percent caught-stealing mark. Blanco is a major upgrade offensively to former Cubs backup Paul Bako. In 54 games last season, Blanco hit .242 with six homers and 25 RBI. Finding a trustworthy backup catcher has become increasingly difficult in the majors. "Henry Blanco is a good second catcher," Hendry said.

cdeluca@suntimes.com