

A's News Clips, Wednesday, September 16, 2009

A's relish playing spoiler role

By Todd Wills, Bay Area News Group

ARLINGTON, Texas — The A's were officially eliminated from the playoff race Tuesday night when the Boston Red Sox beat the Los Angeles Angels.

Not that it's any solace, but the A's were busy once again damaging AL West rival Texas' postseason hopes.

Playing the spoiler role, the A's rocked Texas for a second straight night at Rangers Ballpark in Arlington, walking and blooming their way to a 6-1 victory.

The A's have outscored the Rangers 15-1 in the first two games of this crucial three-game series — for Texas.

Oakland is now 8-6 this season against the second-place Rangers, who fell 5 1/2 games behind Boston in the AL wild-card race.

"We've played better against the better teams all year," A's designated hitter Jack Cust said. "We've been bringing that intensity we've had all season."

A night after Brett Tomko pitched a shutout, right-hander Edgar Gonzalez allowed just one run — David Murphy's home run — in four-plus innings before turning things over to a bullpen that's been rock solid all season.

Five A's relievers allowed just one hit over five innings. The bullpen has allowed five earned runs in the last 30 innings and is chasing Boston for the AL's best bullpen ERA.

The usual suspects played a part — Craig Breslow, Brad Ziegler, Michael Wuertz and closer Andrew Bailey. Jerry Blevins, who was called up Sept. 1 when rosters expanded, also got a key out in the seventh, getting Murphy, the Rangers' hottest hitter, to ground out to shortstop with two runners on and the A's holding a 6-1 lead.

"We're getting to see what guys can do to get big outs," A's manager Bob Geren said. "It gives us a chance to see what they can do in the future."

The A's scored runs on bases-loaded walks to Rajai Davis and Kurt Suzuki. Davis also had a two-run, bloop single that just missed the glove of diving Rangers right fielder Murphy in the fourth inning, giving the A's a 4-0 lead.

Davis continues to be the spark for the A's and has no doubt played his way into being the top candidate to play center field next year for the team.

He began the day tied for the AL lead in hits and stolen bases in September. He had three more hits Tuesday, giving him 23 for the month — which is only halfway over now. He is batting a torrid .411 for September.

"He's putting himself in a good position for the future," Geren said.

Added Cust: "Rajai's starting now. I don't see any reason why he wouldn't be starting next year."

Tomko, who threw a shutout for his 100th career victory in Monday's 9-0 win, has discomfort in his right elbow and will miss his next start.

Geren said Tomko reported the irritation Tuesday morning. Tomko visited Rangers team physician Dr. Keith Meister, who diagnosed Tomko with an inflamed nerve in his pitching elbow.

"He's out for a while," Geren said.

Geren, though, didn't say Tomko will be shut down for the season. Tomko, who was walking around the clubhouse with his arm in a sling, was scheduled to have three more turns in the rotation, including Sunday against Cleveland.

Left-hander Dana Eveland could be a candidate to take Tomko's turn in the rotation.

Tomko's effort Monday was the first complete-game shutout by an A's pitcher at Rangers Ballpark in Arlington. The park opened 1994.

Right fielder Ryan Sweeney didn't have a great explanation for why he plays so well in Arlington. He came into Tuesday's game with a .407 batting average for the season here with a road-best seven RBI. Sweeney also has made three highlight reel catches, including robbing Ian Kinsler twice of homers and also Murphy on Monday on a diving catch. "I like playing in this park," Sweeney said. "I see the ball well here."

David Freese's solo homer in the sixth lifted host Memphis to a 1-0 win over Sacramento in Game 1 of the Pacific Coast League Championship Series. River Cats starter Chris Gissell was a tough-luck loser, allowing one run in 6 1/3 innings. Sacramento had five hits, all singles.

San Jose council approves report on downtown A's stadium

By Tracy Seipel, San Jose Mercury News

The San Jose City Council on Tuesday unanimously voted to accept an economic analysis that outlines the potential financial impact of a 14-acre baseball park near Diridon Station.

The study by Conventions, Sports & Leisure was prepared in anticipation of the Oakland A's relocating to San Jose. It shows that the development of a 32,000-seat ballpark hosting 81 home games and three non-Major League Baseball events a year would lead to \$130 million in annual spending throughout the local economy and \$2.9 billion over a 30-year period.

The analysis also shows that a new stadium would create 2,100 full-time, part-time and seasonal jobs in San Jose, of which 980 would be new jobs.

The \$130,000 report said the A's would be responsible for financing and building the stadium and financing all stadium operating costs. San Jose is proposing a long-term, lease of the city-owned property, some parcels of which have yet to be acquired.

And the proposed development would have to generate a "significant economic benefit" to San Jose and have a positive impact on the city's general fund. The analysis shows the estimated annual fiscal return to the city is \$1.5 million in net new general fund revenue, mostly from property and sales taxes.

None of these scenarios, though, will happen unless Major League Baseball decides that the San Francisco Giants, which own the territorial rights to Santa Clara County, must relinquish them. It's unknown

when that decision will be made, although a commission appointed by baseball Commissioner Bud Selig is exploring the team's possible options for a new home elsewhere in the East Bay.

A public vote also is required any time the city financially aids any stadium project of more than 5,000 seats.

Prior to the council's action Tuesday, Mayor Chuck Reed held a short press conference at City Hall to discuss the economic analysis. On hand to endorse the proposed stadium were former Mayor Susan Hammer; Santa Clara County Assessor Larry Stone; Pat Dando, president and CEO of the San Jose Silicon Valley Chamber of Commerce; Neil Struthers, CEO of the Santa Clara & San Benito Counties Building & Construction Trades Council; Michael Mulcahy, a leader of the grass roots coalition Pro Baseball San Jose; and Silicon Valley Leadership Group president and CEO Carl Gardino.

A's Davis knocks in four to sink Rangers

Outfielder stays hot as Oakland positions itself for sweep

By Mychael Urban / MLB.com

ARLINGTON -- The Rajai Davis Show rages on. And on. And on.

Davis, who has gone from an extra outfielder to the plug that's sparked Oakland's offensive upswing, continued his torching of the American League on Tuesday.

This time, the victims were the suddenly struggling Rangers, who watched helplessly as Davis inserted himself into all four of the A's rallies on the way to 6-1 victory.

In the second game of a three-game series at Rangers Ballpark, Davis helped move Oakland to within a game of a sweep by improving his batting average for the month to .411 (23-for-56). He had three hits while matching his career high with four RBIs.

Picked up early last season after the Giants put him on waivers, Davis essentially took over in center field after Matt Holliday was traded to the Cardinals in late July, and he's been a revelation ever since.

On Tuesday, he scored his 12th run in 13 games and stole his 37th base of the season, an on-going career high.

"He's a pretty good little player," said Texas manager Ron Washington. "He was a pretty good player with the Giants. Now he's getting an opportunity and taking advantage of it. He has some speed, makes contact and can run the ball down in the outfield."

As complimentary as Washington was, Davis teammates' are even more effusive. In 53 games since the All-Star break, they've seen him go 69-for-199 (.347) with 16 doubles, three triples, a home run, 35 RBIs and an MLB-high 26 stolen bases.

"It started even before he took over in center field, and it hasn't stopped" said right-hander Brad Ziegler, one of six Oakland pitchers who teamed up on a six-hitter on Tuesday. "As soon as he's on base, it changes everything for the pitcher, and our guys know that the more attention the pitcher is paying to Rajai, the less attention they're paying to the hitter.

"They know they're gonna get something good to hit, and they've been taking advantage of that. It's been awesome."

The A's had the worst offense in baseball before the All-Star break, ranking last in several key categories. Since the break, they're batting .279 -- third-best in the AL. Through the first seven games of the current road trip, which Oakland can close with a 6-2 record by winning on Wednesday, the team's batting average is .314.

"They are a lot better team than the one we played earlier this season," said Rangers outfielder Marlon Byrd, whose club has lost four of five while fading in the AL Wild Card race.

Davis got the A's going with his legs in the top of the first. After reaching on a fielder's choice, he stole second and scooted to third when Texas catcher Ivan Rodriguez's throw to second bounced into center field.

Davis scored on a groundout by Ryan Sweeney. A's, 1-0.

"When he's out there, something always happens," said Oakland first baseman Daric Barton, who was on base three times and scored twice. "If someone makes a mistake, he's always going to take advantage of it."

Rangers starter Brandon McCarthy issued three walks in the second, the third of them a bases-loaded pass to Davis, and the A's chased McCarthy with nobody out in the fourth when Barton followed Mark Ellis' leadoff single with a double.

With two out in the frame, Davis dumped a two-run single into right field.

"He's a threat in every way," Barton gushed. "He can run like crazy, he's a terror on the basepaths, he can hit, he has some pop, he plays great 'D' out there, runs everything down. He just makes us go."

Texas finally broke through against A's starter Edgar Gonzalez in the bottom of the fourth, getting a leadoff homer from David Murphy. Gonzalez was pulled after giving up a double and a walk to open the fifth, and lefty Craig Breslow escaped the jam and was credited with the win.

Following Breslow, who also pitched the sixth, were Ziegler, Jerry Blevins, Michael Wuertz and Andrew Bailey. The relievers gave up one hit a night after Brett Tomko trumped Texas with a five-hit shutout.

"It's big for a lot of reasons," A's manager Bob Geren said of the pitching staff's success against the Rangers. "They've got 200 homers and a ton of stolen bases; they can beat you in a lot of different ways. So, yeah, what we've done has been a very good feat so far."

Oakland padded the lead in the sixth. Cliff Pennington led off with a triple off hard-throwing rookie righty Neftali Feliz, and after a walk to Adam Kennedy, Davis lined an RBI single to left. Sweeney was hit by a pitch to load the bases, and Kurt Suzuki picked up his team-leading 75th RBI with a walk.

Four rallies, four indelible imprints from Davis.

"Pitchers are so worried about him, they forget about us," Barton said. "He's been amazing."

Cahill looks to rebound in finale

Oakland (66-78) at Texas (80-64), 5:05 p.m. PT

By Mychael Urban / MLB.com

ARLINGTON -- The A's are taking all reasonable measures to limit the workloads of their prized rookie pitchers, from going to a six-man starting rotation to monitoring between-starts throwing to applying pitch-count limits in the final weeks of September.

That's not why right-hander Trevor Cahill was yanked after three innings his last time out, though. He was yanked because he had one of his worst games, allowing three runs on five hits and two walks while throwing more than 70 pitches.

He'll be looking to bounce back on Wednesday in the finale of a three-game series at Rangers Ballpark.

"I was all over the place," Cahill said, "with everything."

Cahill, 21, will be closely watched by Oakland's coaches as he approaches the 80-pitch mark on Wednesday. Including his two outings in the Beijing Olympics and the All-Star Futures Game last summer, he threw 134 1/3 innings in his third year out of Vista (Calif.) High School. He's thrown 161 1/3 innings this year.

"He's passed his career high in innings, but that's also part of the progression of a young pitcher," A's manager Bob Geren said. "Ideally, we'd like to see him through five or six innings, even if we don't want him going much past 80 [pitches]. You don't just shut a guy down because he's passed his career high.

"There's still a lot to learn for these guys, Trevor and [fellow 21-year-old starter] Brett Anderson. And their arms are still at that building-up stage."

Geren said no such restrictions will be applied to 23-year-old lefty Gio Gonzalez, who threw 157 innings last season and has thrown 143 2/3 this year.

"Gio could go nine every time out if he can do it," Geren said. "It's not an issue with him."

Pitching matchup

OAK: RHP Trevor Cahill (8-12, 4.74 ERA)

Heavily reliant on his sinking two-seam fastball, Cahill has struggled to keep his money pitch down in the strike zone, leaving him vulnerable to the long ball. His 26 homers allowed are an Oakland rookie record. On Aug. 6 in Oakland, the Rangers tagged the former second-round pick for two homers on the way to scoring five runs on eight hits and two walks over six innings to pin Cahill with a loss.




TEX: RHP Dustin Nippert (5-2, 3.95 ERA)

Nippert was 3-2 with a 4.43 ERA in nine starts before being replaced by Brandon McCarthy in the rotation. He is 2-0 with a 0.90 ERA in relief. His last start was against the Blue Jays on Sept. 1, when he allowed two runs in six innings in a 5-2 victory. He is 4-0 with a 2.11 ERA in six games, including three starts, at Rangers Ballpark. He made one start against the Athletics this year and pitched five scoreless innings on Aug. 3 in Oakland. He left with a 1-0 lead, but the Athletics rallied for three runs in the ninth for a 3-2 victory.

Dribblers ...

The A's are on pace to commit 96 errors. They've made fewer than 100 errors in each of the previous five seasons, matching the longest such streak in Major League history (Phillies, 2001-05). ... Guess who leads the big leagues in stolen bases since the All-Star break? Yes, the running A's. Rajai Davis stole his 37th bag of the season Tuesday, giving Oakland 66 in the second half. It's the most it's stolen in the second half since the 1992 team had 68. ... With 120 stolen bases on the season, the A's are 21 from matching the team's highest total in 16 years. The 1998 team took 131. ... Ryan Sweeney made his 10th start of the season in the No. 3 spot in the Oakland batting order, also known as the A's version of the Black Hole. Entering Tuesday's game, the team's No. 3 hitters were batting a combined .221 -- the lowest mark in the Majors.

Up next

- Thursday: Athletics (Clay Mortensen, 1-2, 6.75) vs. Indians (Justin Masterson, 4-7, 4.25), 7:05 p.m. PT 
- Friday: Athletics (Brett Anderson, 9-10, 4.37) vs. Indians (David Huff, 10-7, 6.14), 7:05 p.m. PT 
- Saturday: Athletics (Gio Gonzalez, 5-6, 6.31) vs. Indians (Carlos Carrasco, 0-2, 9.64), 1:05 p.m. PT 

Sweeney leaving mark at Rangers Ballpark

A's outfielder adds another highlight to reel in Arlington

By Mychael Urban / MLB.com

ARLINGTON -- Some hitters with big numbers in a particular ballpark will tell you they simply see the ball better there.

Might that be the case, defensively, for Ryan Sweeney at Rangers Ballpark? After all, he's turned the outfield here into his own personal playground.

Since making one of the best catches of the MLB season by scaling the center-field wall to rob Ian Kinsler of a late-game home run April 30, Sweeney has made spectacular catches the norm when the A's come to Texas.

He added to his Lone Star State highlight reel Monday with a diving grab in right field, but Sweeney said there isn't anything different about playing here that brings out the best in his glove work.

"I don't know what it is," he said on Tuesday before the second game of a three-game series against the Rangers. "Obviously, I try to make every play I can. I guess I just get more [great] catches to make here for some reason."

As many eye-popping grabs as Sweeney, 24, has made this year -- not only in Arlington, but across the Majors -- it's his all-around outfield skills that could end up winning him a Gold Glove some day.

Blessed with a strong and accurate left arm, Sweeney entered Tuesday's game with 11 assists, good for fourth in the American League -- despite teams rarely testing him. He's also rock-solid fundamentally, having made three errors in 302 chances through Monday in 57 games in center field, 74 in right and six in left.

"He's played so well defensively," Oakland manager Bob Geren said. "He's young, and people don't know him yet, but you're not going to find many people out there who play right field better than him."

Geren said he likes Sweeney better in right field, where the manager said he's "exceptional," than in center, where he's "above average."

Asked which right fielders in the AL he'd rank ahead of Sweeney defensively, Geren offered only Seattle's Ichiro Suzuki.

When rocket-armed Vladimir Guerrero was mentioned, Geren said, "Vlad might have a slightly stronger arm, but when you factor in Ryan's ability to charge the ball and his accuracy, I'd put him right there with him."

Sweeney has been swinging a hot bat of late, as well. He tied an Oakland record with three doubles and drove in a career-high four runs Monday night, pushing his batting average over the past 33 games to .336 with 18 extra-base hits.

Oakland's leadoff man earlier in the season, Sweeney has spent a lot of time in the sixth and seventh spots in the order this year, but more recently he's been entrusted with the No. 3 spot, in which he made his 10th start of the season on Tuesday.

"I like hitting third and sixth better than leadoff," Sweeney admitted. "Hitting third, you get more RBI opportunities; [leadoff man Adam] Kennedy and [No. 2 hitter] Rajai [Davis] are on base all the time."

Sweeney isn't much of a home run threat, with six this year, but he's not prepared to adjust his offensive approach based on where he's hitting in the lineup.

"I don't really want to change the type of player I am," he said. "That's usually when you start to see your average drop to .240 or something, and I want to be a high-average guy who hits the ball in gaps.

"I just want to get stronger every year, and maybe that'll turn some of my doubles into home runs."

A's provide another blow to Texas' playoff chances

By STEPHEN HAWKINS, AP Sports Writer

A bad combination for the Texas Rangers at the worst time.

"We're not scoring runs and we're giving up runs," manager Ron Washington said. "It is an awful time for it to happen."

The Texas Rangers' largest deficit from a playoff spot grew even larger Tuesday night after a 6-1 loss to the last-place Oakland Athletics.

David Murphy's leadoff homer in the fourth snapped the Rangers' 22-inning scoreless streak, which included consecutive shutout losses in the same homestand for only the second time in 16 seasons at Rangers Ballpark. But they were down 4-1 and didn't score again while losing for the fourth time in five games — all at home.

"We haven't showed much of anything the last few games," Murphy said. "You can give up and throw in the towel or keep fighting and show the character that we've showed all year."

With 18 games left, the Rangers are 5 1/2 games behind AL wild-card leader Boston and trail the AL West-leading Los Angeles Angels by six games.

The Red Sox beat the Angels 4-1 on Tuesday night in the opener of a three-game series at Fenway Park. The Angels play in Texas this weekend.

Rajai Davis scored the first run then matched a career best with four RBIs for the A's, who have won seven of nine games.

"You have to believe you're going to produce every game and help the team win," said Davis, who is 23 of 56 (.411) with 12 runs and seven stolen bases in 13 games this month. "I need to keep doing exactly what I've been doing, and even more. Once you find something that works, you want to stick with it."

Davis, who finished with three hits, put the A's ahead to stay when he reached on a fielder's choice in the first, stole his 37th base and went to third on catcher Ivan Rodriguez's throwing error before scoring on Ryan Sweeney's groundout. Davis drew a bases-loaded walk off Brandon McCarthy (7-3) the following inning.

Craig Breslow (7-7), the second of six Oakland pitchers, worked two scoreless innings after starter Edgar Gonzalez allowed the Nos. 8 and 9 hitters to reach base starting the fifth.

Michael Young returned to the Texas lineup as the designated hitter after missing two weeks because of a strained left hamstring, but left after he flied out his only at-bat. The All-Star third baseman fouled off three of his eight pitches, then pulled himself out of the game.

"I felt great in batting practice, ran around great, and then the second pitch he threw me, I got off balance, landed on my front side a little too hard and it just grabbed," Young said. "I didn't want to make it worse. I've been making too much progress."

Young said it was unlikely he would play Wednesday, but could return this weekend against the Angels, the series he had targeted for his return since he got hurt running out a grounder Sept. 1.

Davis added a two-run single in the fourth and a run-scoring single in the sixth. Davis was caught stealing after a leadoff single in the eighth.

McCarthy, who had won his two previous starts after nearly three months on the disabled list (stress fracture in right shoulder blade), gave up four runs while pitching into the fourth.

Rangers hard-throwing rookie Neftali Feliz struck out the last three batters with the bases loaded in the sixth, after giving up two runs on a leadoff triple, two walks (one with the bases loaded), a hit batsman and Davis' single. Feliz had allowed only two runs over 23 2-3 innings his first 13 major league appearances.

NOTES: Oakland's Jack Cust struck out four times, taking over the AL lead with 166. Tampa Bay's Carlos Pena had 163 strikeouts before season-ending surgery for two broken fingers last week. ... Elvis Andrus went 0 for 2 with two walks, ending his Rangers' rookie record 16-game hitting streak. ... Texas went 25 consecutive innings without a run in September 2004, when they were last in playoff contention. The team record of 28 was set in 1972. ... Boston's victory officially eliminated Oakland from postseason contention. It came in the 144th game, one later than last season, which was the earliest elimination for the A's since 1997. ... The Rangers had three errors.

A's leading off

Chronicle Staff Report

Price cut: In releasing their 2010 schedule, the A's announced that season-ticket prices would be cut by an average of 10 percent. The cheapest plan is \$9 per game.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

PCL Playoffs: Gissell's gem can't lift Cats in Game 1

rivercats.com

MEMPHIS, Tenn. - Nobody said three-peats were easy.

Sacramento's offense could never get in gear and the River Cats fell 1-0 to the Memphis Redbirds on Tuesday night in Game 1 of the Pacific Coast League Championship Series. The River Cats will now look to even the series Wednesday night before returning to Sacramento on Friday night for games 3, 4 and 5 (games 4 and 5 are if necessary).

Shown: Sacramento starter Chris Gissell allowed only a solo home run over 6.1 innings Tuesday night, but took the loss.

Sacramento starter Chris Gissell matched Memphis starter Jaime Garcia pitch for pitch until allowing a solo home run to David Freeze in the sixth inning for the game's only run. Sacramento threatened, advancing a runner to second base in each of the final three innings, but couldn't get a key hit to tie or take the lead.

For the right-handed Gissell, who was signed by the Oakland A's organization in late August after spending most of the season playing in Taiwan, it was his second solid start for the River Cats in the postseason. On Tuesday, he struck out five, allowed six hits and took the tough-luck loss. In Game 1 against Tacoma, Gissell allowed two runs over 5.0 innings and earned the victory.

Freeze's home run to left field was his second of the postseason.

Garcia allowed only three hits – none for extra bases – in his 6.2 innings of work, striking out seven. Sacramento, which pounded out 36 runs over four games in the first round, was unable to capitalize Tuesday.

With a runner on third and one out in the sixth, River Cats designated hitter Tommy Everidge grounded back to Garcia, who threw out Matt Carson at the plate. With runners on second and third and two outs in the seventh, Chris Denorfia flied out to center field. With runners on first and second and one out in the eighth, Chris Carter struck out looking and Travis Buck flied out to the wall in center field. And in the ninth, with Gregorio Petit on second with two outs, Denorfia struck out looking to end the game.

Memphis swept the Albuquerque Isotopes to reach the Championship Series, while Sacramento topped the Rainiers in four games. The River Cats took three-of-four games from the Redbirds in the regular season.

The start of the game was delayed 90 minute delay due to threat of rain. The Cats will look to even the series at one game apiece on Wednesday night in Memphis as Chad Reineke takes the mound for Sacramento to face Memphis' Adam Ottavino.

Freese's HR helps freeze out the Cats

Special to The Bee

MEMPHIS, Tenn. – Chris Gissell was saddled with a bit of River Cats championship lore Tuesday night. Lore he neither wanted nor deserved.

Gissell became the first Sacramento pitcher to lose two games in Pacific Coast League championship-round action, dropping a 1-0 decision to the Memphis Redbirds at AutoZone Park on a sixth-inning home run by third baseman David Freese.

"It's baseball. Things like that happen. A slider got up, and he did his job," said Gissell, who was roughed up in a Game 2 final-round loss to Oklahoma last year.

He pitched much of this year in Taiwan but came back to Sacramento late in the year and got one of the first-round wins over Tacoma.

In 6 1/3 innings, he gave up six hits, struck out five and walked one. Michael Benacka added 1 2/3 innings of one-hit ball.

Ironically, it was the second time in a row the Redbirds have done this in their home park. On Friday, Memphis advanced to the finals with a 1-0 win over Albuquerque – on a Freese home run. The Redbirds are in the finals for the first time since winning the 2000 title on a home run by Albert Pujols.

"It's crazy that it happened twice," said Freese, who started the year in St. Louis and missed two months because of ankle surgery but hit .300 with 10 homers in August with Memphis. "The way our pitchers are going, however, they'll make it work. Amazing."

Memphis pitchers, who had the league's best ERA in the regular season (4.05), have been exceptional in the postseason. In the three-game sweep of the Isotopes, the starters allowed just one earned run in 17 innings. And Tuesday, Jaime García pitched 6 2/3 innings of three-hit ball, striking out seven and walking three.

Four relievers gave up two hits and one walk the rest of the way. Pete Parise pitched a scoreless ninth for his third save in four appearances.

García, 2-0 in the postseason, also erased the River Cats' best scoring threat in the sixth. Matt Carson reached on a two-base error and was on third with one out. Tommy Everidge hit a chopper in front of the mound. García fielded it and threw to catcher Matt Pagnozzi, who tagged Carson.

"You're just thinking pitch by pitch, trying to keep your team in the game," said García, who is recovering from Tommy John elbow surgery a year ago.

Chris Carter, who homered in each of the four games against Tacoma, got just a fourth-inning hit and struck out his last two times at the plate. Brett Wallace, who came from the Redbirds in the Matt Holliday trade, also had a single and drew a walk.

"I know how good a pitcher Jaime is," Wallace said. "And all their guys pitched well."

"He's got a nasty breaking ball, and he kept us off balance all night," said River Cats manager Tony DeFrancesco.

Errors Doom Hounds In Game One

By Bob Hards / Midland RockHounds

Mr. Emanski produced the best-selling (and if they weren't best-selling, it wasn't because ESPN didn't try by playing the danged commercials over and over and over ...) on the fundamentals of defensive baseball. Maybe the RockHounds should have chosen to pony up the dough and ordered a copy.

In Tuesday night's opener of the best-of-5 Texas League Championship Series, the Naturals had 22 base runners (18 hits and four walks) and the 'Hounds had 21 (13 hits and eight walks).

The runs weren't quite as evenly distributed, and that's where the "Emanski Syndrome" came into play. There were five errors, one misplay and one passed ball in the game. Seven defensive mistakes, and the RockHounds had 'em all.

The Naturals scored single runs in the second, third and fourth off starter Arnold Leon, and all three were unearned, thanks to a passed ball, a misplayed fly ball and three errors (two on one play ... with two out). Leon, making his eighth start overall, again pitched well (his ERA as a starter is under 1.75), allowing four hits in 4.0 innings, with one walk and three K's.

Despite the miscues, Josh Donaldson's solo home run (his third homer of the playoffs) drew the 'Hounds to within 2-1 in the third inning and the Naturals lead was just 3-1 when Leon departed after four.

Two more errors and a boat load of NW Arkansas hits against RockHounds relievers slowly built the Naturals' lead to 11-1 before the 'Hounds, not going gentle into that baseball good night, responded with a 4-run ninth.

Andrew Lerew, who pitched a complete game, 2-hit shutout in the North Division Championship Series opener for NW Arkansas, allowed eight hits in 6.0 against the 'Hounds, walking four and striking out six. He escaped jams in the first and second innings, stranding five base runners in those two frames. Lerew's escapes, along with the RockHounds' defensive woes, proved very big in setting the tone early.

The RockHounds now face a virtual "must-win" situation at Citibank Ballpark Wednesday evening in game 2 of the best-of-5 series. A win earns a 1-1 split, while a Naturals victory gives NW Arkansas a commanding, 2-0, lead going to Springdale, Arkansas for game 3 Friday night (games 4 and 5 are Saturday afternoon and Sunday evening, as needed, at Arvest Ballpark in Springdale).

Eleven-game winner Graham Godfrey goes to the mound Wednesday for the RockHounds, facing NW Arkansas lefty Rowdy Hardy.

TL Championship: Erros plague 'Hounds in Game 1 loss to Naturals

By Shawn Shroyer, Midland Reporter Telegram

Midway through Tuesday's opening game of the Texas League Championship, it seemed the only things missing were three rings and a bear on a unicycle.

Facing the Northwest Arkansas Naturals, the Midland RockHounds committed an astounding five errors and the Naturals capitalized on each and every one in an 11-5 Naturals victory at Citibank Ballpark. Of the 11 runs the Naturals scored in taking a 1-0 lead in the best-of-five series, the first four were unearned.

"It's something we have to learn from," RockHounds catcher Josh Donaldson said. "We have to go out there and have fun. There's a lot on the line now."

The Naturals scored every inning from the second to the eighth and, coincidentally, the RockHounds kicked the ball around in the first five of those innings.

The run of errors began innocently enough with a passed ball in the top of the second inning, allowing Corey Smith to advance to second. But when Smith came home to score on a Vance Wilson RBI single, it started a disadvantageous trend for the RockHounds.

"We didn't execute well," RockHounds manager Darren Bush said. "That's baseball. It happened on a bad night."

The next inning, the 'Hounds managed to commit two errors on the same play as second baseman Jemile Weeks and center fielder Corey Brown let a ground ball hit by Jeff Bianchi get through their wickets, allowing a run to score.

The RockHounds cut the deficit in half in the bottom of the third inning with a leadoff, opposite field home run from Donaldson, his third of the playoffs. However, that was all the offensive production the 'Hounds saw until the game was out of hand.

Despite recording 13 hits -- five of which went for extra bases -- and drawing eight walks, the RockHounds stranded 13 runners.

From there, the Naturals continued to build on their 2-1 lead with plenty of help from the 'Hounds.

With two outs in the fourth inning, two times it appeared the 'Hounds might get starting pitcher Arnold Leon out of the inning unscathed. Wilson sent a line drive almost directly at left fielder Archie Gilbert and Gilbert ran in on the ball, but misjudged it as it shot past him without him even lifting his glove.

Gilbert wasn't charged with an error on the play, but first baseman Shane Spencer was on the next play when third baseman Corey Wimberly made a good throw to first base for a routine 5-3 putout that Spencer dropped, allowing Wilson to score from second.

"You're looking and Petey dropped a ball," Bush said. "How often does that happen? Then Corey Brown misses a ground ball somebody else already missed. How often does that happen? They're very correctable mistakes. They just need to take a shower, go home and come back relaxed tomorrow."

Leon got out of the inning, but it would be his last. In four innings of work, he allowed four hits and a walk, but all three runs he allowed were unearned.

The defense played no better behind reliever Justin Friend.

After giving up a single to the first batter he faced in the fifth, it appeared Friend might benefit from a 5-4-3 double play. That is, until Wimberly's throw sailed over Weeks' head into right field. The next batter, Bianchi, singled to drive in the Naturals' final unearned run of the game.

The Naturals tacked on another run in the fifth, and six more over the final four innings as the RockHounds' bullpen failed to stop the bleeding.

The RockHounds made it interesting with four runs in the ninth, but the Naturals' early unearned runs made them a moot point.

"The best thing for us was scoring those four runs in the ninth," Donaldson said. "It lets the other team know we're not going to quit no matter what. It shows that we have the bats to score in a hurry."

'HOUND BITES: Despite having to use three pitchers out of the bullpen Tuesday night, the RockHounds are still in good shape. Jason Fernandez and Steve Sharpe ate up four innings between them and Carlos Hernandez returns from his three-game suspension today. ... The Naturals, though, had to use four relievers, including two just to escape the ninth inning.

TODAY'S PROBABLE PITCHERS: Graham Godfrey (11-8, 3.50), who started Game 1 for the RockHounds in their series against the Missions, gets the start for Game 2 in this series. In his start against the Missions, Godfrey took a no-hitter into the sixth inning and allowed only one hit in his 6 2/3 innings of work. The game went into extras, though, denying Godfrey the win. Left-hander Rowdy Hardy (4-4, 3.43) will make his second postseason start for the Naturals after holding the Cardinals to one unearned run in 7 1/3 innings in the final game of the series. He struck out six and allowed only five baserunners, but didn't figure in the decision.