

A's News Clips, Thursday, September 17, 2009

Cahill's strong start helps A's to series sweep

By Drew Davison, Bay Area News Group

Just as his manager did before the game, A's rookie right-hander Trevor Cahill stood in front of his locker and spoke with optimism about the future of the organization. And Cahill had every right to feel good about where the team is headed.

After all, Cahill had just led the A's to a series sweep over the playoff hopeful Texas Rangers with a 4-0 victory Wednesday night at Rangers Ballpark in Arlington. It marked the first sweep for Oakland since June 5-7 and its first road sweep since June of last year.

"We're showing this year in September that we should be able to compete next year," Cahill said. "Maybe we're playing upsetters right now, but we're showing we can compete."

Indeed, the A's certainly seemed to spoil any hopes the Rangers had of making the playoffs this year. Oakland held Texas, a perennial offensive powerhouse, to only one run over the past three games.

"All you needed to do against us tonight was throw strikes," Rangers second baseman Ian Kinsler said.

Cahill did just that and dominated the game. He retired 17 straight at one point, allowed only one hit over seven scoreless innings and set a career high with seven strikeouts. A's relievers Michael Wuertz and Andrew Bailey kept the one-hitter intact with two scoreless innings.

"I was able to get my breaking ball over and able to locate my sinker," said Cahill, who improved to 9-12 with a 4.54 ERA. "It's definitely one of my better starts and I just had good command. That was the difference."

Cahill faced only one jam all night. In the second inning, he gave up a leadoff single to Rangers cleanup hitter Marlon Byrd and then walked Kinsler. Cahill escaped with no damage, though, inducing a fielder's choice and striking out the final two batters.

After that, Cahill settled into a zone, retiring 17 straight before issuing another walk to Kinsler with two outs in the seventh. Cahill, yet again, responded by getting Rangers slugger Nelson Cruz to ground out.

A's manager Bob Geren liked what he saw from Cahill, of course, especially after his last start Sept. 9 against the Chicago White Sox. Cahill lasted only three innings, allowing three runs on five hits.

"I'm real proud of Trevor because he went from one of his worst starts to one of his best," Geren said. "I think he had his best slider of the year."

Oakland took a 1-0 lead in the first inning on Scott Hairston's RBI double. The A's added three more in the sixth. Adam Kennedy led off the inning with a single to center and scored on Rajai Davis' double to deep center. Backup catcher Landon Powell then blasted a solo home run to center to give the A's a four-run lead.

The A's have now won eight of their past 10 games, including finishing this road trip 6-2. Most important, the A's are finishing strong because of their young players.

"There's lots of reasons (for the improved play)," Geren said. "Our batting average has gone up. Since Rajai and Cliff Pennington have played every day, we've got more speed in the lineup. The bullpen has been the same as it's been all year, if not better. And the starting pitchers went through a little stretch where they weren't throwing strikes, and they seem to be past that."

Notes: A's rookie right-hander Vin Mazzaro will not pitch again this season because of tendinitis in his right shoulder. "Everybody wants to finish the season healthy, but it's not that serious, just tendinitis," said Mazzaro, who ends 4-9 with a 5.32 ERA. "... Geren still isn't sure who will replace right-hander Brett Tomko, who is sidelined with discomfort in his right elbow, in the rotation either Sunday or Monday. It will either be left-handed reliever Dana Eveland or a Triple-A Sacramento pitcher.

Cahill's gem carries A's to sweep

Righty throws seven frames of one-hit shutout in Texas

By Mychael Urban / MLB.com

ARLINGTON -- One, two, three.

That's how the A's turned a daunting road trip against three teams fighting for their playoff lives into one of their most successful roadies since 2006, when they were a vibrant, gifted and veteran team that fell one step short of the World Series.

The star-studded '06 A's had Frank Thomas and Milton Bradley leading the offense, Barry Zito and Dan Haren anchoring the rotation, and Huston Street at the back of the bullpen.

The collection of mostly young and unproven players that comprises the '09 squad has a lot of ground to cover before it morphs into a club that well-rounded, but it's been showing signs of late that it's not out of the question.

The trip started with a split of a two-game series against the White Sox.

It continued with two wins in a three-game set against the Twins, who -- like the Sox -- still have designs on the American League Central crown.

It ended on Wednesday night with a 4-0 victory that completed a three-game sweep against the Rangers, whose hopes of catching the Angels in the AL West or the Red Sox in the AL Wild Card race took a devastating blow.

"By far the best road trip of the year," said Oakland skipper Bob Geren. "The guys are playing loose, they're playing with confidence, and they're fighting. We played well the entire trip."

Rookie catcher Landon Powell on Wednesday played the role of Thomas, the slightly hobbled but humongous slugger going deep to put the game on ice. His solo shot to center ended Rangers starter Dustin Nippert's night in the sixth and capped the scoring.

Rookie Trevor Cahill channeled Haren, the right-hander with impeccable command and a three-pitch repertoire that sinks, sinks and sinks some more. Cahill, 21, bounced back from one of his ugliest outings of the season with his best effort of the year, providing seven efficient innings of one-hit work.

And, to end it all, there was rookie Andrew Bailey reprising the role of Street, taking over for setup man Michael Wuertz and quickly wrapping up Oakland's combined one-hitter without incident.

"It's exciting," said Bailey, who dropped his ERA to 1.98 and strengthened his case for AL Rookie of the Year. "The season didn't go the way we planned, but it's nice to go out there and show teams what we're capable of for next year."

Cahill, who allowed three runs on five hits and two walks while throwing 74 pitches over three innings in that extra-inning loss at Chicago, gave up only a bloop single by Marlon Byrd in the second inning and walked two while striking out seven.

After walking the batter after Byrd in the second, Cahill retired 17 in a row.

"He had everything going," Powell said. "His changeup, slider and fastball all have a ton of movement, and when he's throwing it all for strikes ... it makes it pretty difficult to hit."

Rangers second baseman Ian Kinsler gave Cahill his due, but he wasn't in the mood to heap praise on an opposing pitcher. Everyone that Texas faces these days looks like Bob Gibson in his prime.

"He threw strikes," Kinsler said of Cahill. "That's all you needed to do against us tonight is throw strikes."

Cahill certainly did that. Fifty-six of his 94 pitches were strikes or foul balls.

"I don't know if my stuff was any better than last time," Cahill said. "It was just command."

The Rangers were outscored, 19-1, in the series and have scored one run in their past 37 innings dating to the seventh inning of the first game of a Sunday doubleheader against the Mariners.

Asked what he'd have put the odds at if someone said his team would hold Texas to one run over three games in Arlington, Geren smiled and made reference to the unseasonable cool weather in the region.

"The odds would be the same as if someone told me I'd be wearing a jacket tonight," he said, "which I was."

The A's used eight pitchers in the series and allowed 11 hits while becoming the first Oakland team to hold an opponent to one run in a three game series since 1991. Oakland's previous low for runs allowed in a three-game series at Texas was nine -- in 2006.

"They're one of the best offensive teams in the league," Bailey said, "but we showed what our staff is capable of doing."

Rajai Davis got the A's going in the first inning, getting plunked with one out and stealing second base before scoring on a two-out double by Scott Hairston.

Nippert retired 13 of the next 14 batters he faced, but Oakland broke through in the sixth. Adam Kennedy singled to start the frame, and Davis followed with an RBI double to center, taking third on the throw home. Ryan Sweeney's sacrifice fly made it 3-0, and Powell sent Nippert packing with his fifth home run in his past 10 games.

With their eighth win in 10 games, the A's moved one game over .500 (36-35) since June 29. The Rangers have lost five of six.

"It's exciting to be a part of this young program," Powell said, "that's going to do nothing but get better."

Youthful A's following Ellis' lead

Oakland (67-78) vs. Cleveland (61-85), 7:05 p.m. PT

By Mychael Urban / MLB.com

ARLINGTON -- The A's are rebuilding with youth, but every team needs at least a handful of veterans along for the ride.

Second baseman Mark Ellis, 32, has been with the team longer than any player on the active roster -- only injured Eric Chavez has more organizational tenure -- and, according to manager Bob Geren, is the ideal elder statesman.

"He has a lot of impact," Geren said of Ellis, who was acquired in a 2001 trade with the Royals and made his Oakland debut the next season. "His work ethic and his attitude are as good as anyone I've ever seen, and that rubs off on his teammates."

The teammate most benefiting from Ellis' presence these days is probably rookie shortstop Cliff Pennington, who took over as the starter when Orlando Cabrera was dealt away at the July 31 Trade Deadline.

"He's such a great guy, and he's so good he makes it look easy out there," Pennington said. "And that makes *you* more comfortable out there. It's great to have someone like that, not just on the field, but in the clubhouse. He'll answer any question, and he helps me as much as he can."

Ellis, who is on another second-half tear heading into Thursday's opener of a four-game series against the Indians at Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum, considers mentoring part of the job.

"Veterans, I think, have an obligation to help the younger guys out," he said. "Guys did it for me earlier in my career, and the faster the young guys come along, the better we'll be as a team, so of course you do what you can for them."

A perennial Gold Glove candidate who has yet to claim his first, Ellis missed two months of the season with a strained left calf but has been making up for lost time. Typically a slow starter, he's always hit better after the All-Star break, and this season is no exception.

Heading into the finale of a three-game series against the host Rangers on Wednesday, Ellis was batting .301 since the break and on a 45-game tear during which he was batting .321 with 31 RBIs.

"I don't know why I hit better later in the year," he said. "If I did, I'd do it earlier."

He'll get another shot at reversing that trend with the A's next season. He's under contract for 2010, with a club option for 2011.

Pitching matchup

OAK: RHP Clayton Mortensen (1-2, 6.75 ERA)

Mortensen, 24, earned his first career win in his third start on Friday against the Twins. His only major mistake came against the first batter, Denard Span, who homered. But Mortensen settled down after that, pitching six strong innings while allowing just the one run on five hits. He said after Friday's win that it was the first time he was able to effectively throw all of his pitches.




CLE: RHP Justin Masterson (4-7, 4.25 ERA)

Masterson is still getting the hang of this starting stuff, and a big key for him will be learning how to remain aggressive to keep his pitch count low and last deep into ballgames. He turned in a strong start against the Royals on Friday, but it wasn't quite as long a start as he'd like as he allowed just a run on four hits with four walks and four strikeouts in a no-decision.

Dribblers ...

Right-hander Vin Mazzaro, out since Aug. 29 with shoulder tendinitis, has not played catch since experiencing discomfort while throwing over the weekend and is all but certain to miss the rest of the season. Geren said there are no plans for Mazzaro, 22, to throw again any time soon, and when asked if the rookie was done for the year, the manager said, "Probably." Mazzaro is 4-9 with a 5.32 ERA in 17 starts. ... Righty Brett Tomko, who will miss his scheduled start on Sunday with a pinched nerve in his right shoulder, flew home on Wednesday morning to be with his wife, who will deliver twins this week. ... The A's still haven't decided if lefty Dana Eveland will fill in for Tomko, or if they'll dip into Triple-A Sacramento's roster for reinforcement. They have some flexibility because of their six-man rotation, which would allow Edgar Gonzalez, who pitched four innings on Tuesday, to pitch Sunday if need be. ... Sacramento lost the opener of the Pacific Coast League Championship Series on Tuesday, 1-0, at the hands of the host Memphis Redbirds. River Cats righty Chris Gissell took the loss despite giving up one run on six hits and a walk over 6 1/3 innings. The series is best-of-five. Chad Reineke was scheduled to start Game 2 on Wednesday in Memphis. ... Double-A Midland also lost on Tuesday in the opener of the best-of-five Texas League Championship Series. RockHounds catcher Josh Donaldson went 2-for-3 with a solo homer, first baseman Shane Peterson went 3-for-4 with a double and two RBIs and Jemile Weeks went 2-for-5 with a double, but it wasn't enough to stop the visiting Northwest Arkansas Naturals from rolling to an 11-5 victory.

Up next

- 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 (Jeremy Sowers, 6-9, 4.49), 1:05 p.m. PT 
- Sunday: Athletics (TBD) vs. Indians (Fausto Carmona, 3-11, 6.58), 1:05 p.m. PT 

A's show no interest in spoiler label

Players shrug off notion that extra motivation is needed

By Mychael Urban / MLB.com

ARLINGTON -- In winning the first two games of a three-game series that, ostensibly, carried far more importance for the Rangers than the A's, Oakland assured itself of only its second winning multi-set road trip of the season.

As they prepared for the finale on Wednesday, the A's were thinking sweep -- it would be their first road series sweep of three or more games since June of last year -- and gunning for a 6-2 roadie through the South Side of Chicago, the Twins Cities and Deep in the Heart of Texas.

Surprising? To the outside world, sure.

The White Sox and Twins still hold out hope of catching the front-running Tigers in the American League Central; they were 5 1/2 and 4 1/2 back, respectively, at the end of play on Tuesday. Texas sat 5 1/2 back of the Red Sox in the AL Wild Card race and six behind the Angels in the AL West.

Spoilers? To the outside world, sure. But inside the visitors' clubhouse at Rangers Ballpark, the A's didn't exactly embrace the label.

"It's obviously not a position you'd like to be in at this time of year," designated hitter Jack Cust said. "But you go out there to win every game, and when you're playing teams that have a shot at going somewhere, the pressure's all on them."

Added outfielder Ryan Sweeney: "I don't think anyone wants to be a spoiler. That means you're going home soon."

The A's will be going home soon. They were formally eliminated from playoff contention when the Red Sox won Tuesday night, and the club has spent the past 136 days in fourth place in the four-team AL West.

The players -- 14 of the 31 on the active roster had less than a year of big league service entering the season, and five more had less than two years in -- have long known they're playing for pride, stats and/or a chance to get a jump on winning a job for 2010.

But while waiting out the rain threatening to delay the start of their getaway game, the A's found comfort not in the fact that they're doing damage to other clubs' postseason dreams, but in the fact that they're playing their best ball of the year, winners in seven of their past nine games and 35-35 since June 29.

"There's a lot of reasons [for the improved play]," manager Bob Geren said. "Our batting average has gone up. Since Rajai [Davis] and [Cliff] Pennington have been playing every day, we've got more speed in the lineup. The bullpen has been the same as it's been all year, if not better -- very consistent. And the starting pitchers, they'd gone through a little stretch where they weren't throwing strikes the way we need them to, and now they seem to be past that."

Cust said youth is a huge bonus down the stretch.

"We've got a lot of young guys with a lot of energy who aren't tired and have something to play for in terms of next year," he explained. "That helps. And we're swinging the bats a lot better, guys like Rajai playing the best they've ever played. Pennington's playing well, Sweeney is taking off, [Mark] Ellis is swinging the bat well, AK [Adam Kennedy] has been consistent. The young pitching is a big part of it, too. We've got a lot of fresh faces that teams in the hunt haven't seen much of."

"That, combined with the pressure they're facing, I'm sure it makes it tough."

Geren suggested that playing potential playoff teams is ideal for a young team in the developmental stages.

"You see their best starting pitchers, their best bullpen, their best lineup," he said. "It's better to see that type of competition. It's the best way to improve. ... If we become spoilers to some people, great. But we always want to win every time we go out there, and that's what we're concentrated on."

"We don't care about being spoilers. We care about winning games."

Geren touts Washington for top skipper

A's skipper says former colleague deserves consideration

By Mychael Urban / MLB.com

ARLINGTON -- Bob Geren and Ron Washington were members of the coaching staff in Oakland together for four years before the managerial job opened up with the dismissal of Ken Macha in 2006.

Both men applied and interviewed for the gig, and Washington, the longtime A's infield coach, seemed a likely front-runner. But the Rangers were searching for a new skipper at the same time, and they seemed in far more of a hurry to name a new head man.

Washington, who had never managed above Class A, was offered the job in Texas and took it. Later that winter, Geren was named Oakland's manager.

Now, they're matching wits in the American League West, and Washington's Rangers are one of the surprise teams in the league, pushing the Angels for the division title and pushing the Red Sox for a Wild Card berth.

For that, Geren says, Washington deserves serious consideration as the AL Manager of the Year.

"Sure," Geren said during Oakland's three-game series here at Rangers Ballpark. "Heck, yeah. ... Wash is a great baseball man, and he's done a nice job over there, absolutely."

Geren added that the credit for the Rangers' resurgence as a contender should be spread around, noting that Texas has long been an offensive powerhouse in desperate need of strong pitching. Through Tuesday's games, Texas had the fifth-best team ERA in the AL.

"They're pitching always seemed to hold them back, but now they've done a complete turnaround," Geren said. "[Rangers pitching coach Mike] Maddux should get a lot of credit for that, and I know [Rangers president] Nolan Ryan's influence has been huge here, too."

"Any time a team turns it around, it's a collective effort of a lot of people. But that doesn't take anything away from the job Wash has done. He should definitely be in the mix for that award."

A'S 4, RANGERS 0

One-hitter caps first sweep of summer

Stephen Hawkins, Associated Press

Trevor Cahill combined with two relievers on a one-hitter as the last-place A's completed a three-game series sweep, their first in more than three months, with a 4-0 victory Wednesday night.

The playoff-chasing Rangers are 1-5 on this homestand, and have scored only one run in their four-game losing streak.

Cahill had a career-best seven strikeouts and walked two in seven sharp innings, limiting Texas to Marlon Byrd's bloop single in the second. Michael Wuertz and Andrew Bailey each worked a perfect inning to close out Oakland's ninth shutout of the season.

"You don't know what they're going to do. I don't think about it. We've seen them a bunch," Cahill said. "I just wanted to attack them and be aggressive."

Or, as the Rangers' Ian Kinsler said, "He threw strikes. That's all you needed to do against us tonight."

Cahill retired 16 consecutive batters after Nelson Cruz reached on a fielder's choice in the second inning. When the rookie right-hander walked Kinsler with two outs in the seventh, Oakland already led 4-0.

Rajai Davis put the A's ahead to stay when he was hit by a pitch in the first, stole his 38th base and scored on a double by Scott Hairston. Davis, who also scored the first Oakland run and matched a career best with four RBIs in Tuesday's 6-1 victory, added an RBI double in the sixth before scoring on Ryan Sweeney's sacrifice fly.

Landon Powell homered for Oakland, his drive to straightaway center chasing Dustin Nippert (5-3) with two outs in the sixth. Nippert gave up four runs and five hits.

Before the game, Texas hitting coach Rudy Jaramillo met behind closed doors for about 15 minutes with his batters.

The Rangers then went out and were one-hit for the third time this season. They were shut out for the 10th time - three times in a four-game span for only the second time in club history - and have only one run in 37 innings.

Texas is without injured All-Star hitters Michael Young (hamstring) and Josh Hamilton (back). They have been out for two weeks, except for Young's one at-bat Tuesday in an abbreviated comeback attempt.

But the Rangers scored 31 runs without them while sweeping a three-game series in a 24-hour span at Cleveland last week before coming home for this crucial homestand.

Byrd's hit was only his second in 15 at-bats. Kinsler then walked before slugger Nelson Cruz's sacrifice bunt attempt resulted in the pitcher throwing to third for the out. Cahill then struck out Chris Davis and Taylor Teagarden to get out of the inning.

A's leading off

Susan Slusser, San Francisco Chronicle

Tomko out: Brett Tomko will miss at least one start, and perhaps the rest of the season, with an irritated nerve in his right elbow. Meanwhile, his wife, Julia, is scheduled to deliver twins Friday in San Diego.

Oakland GM talks baseball at Kenyon

Joe Huddleston, Mount Vernon News

GAMBIER — Oakland Athletics vice president and general manager Billy Beane spoke to a packed house at Kenyon College on Tuesday morning. A Major League veteran of six seasons, Beane spoke of his playing days, the transition he made into the front office and how he has managed to find success at the helm of a small-market team.

Beane, who was drafted by the New York Mets in the first round in 1980 along with Darryl Strawberry and John Gibbons, was the subject of the book "Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game" by Michael Lewis. He gave the crowd some background into the book, which originally started as an article for the New York Times.

"Playing, for me, was a means to an end," said Beane. "I looked like a baseball player — I was 6-foot-4 and 180 pounds when I graduated high school. I turned down an offer from Stanford and signed with the Mets in 1980. I was an overvalued player because I looked great, but I couldn't meet those expectations. Lenny Dykstra, who was my first roommate, was an undervalued player. He was 5-foot-10, but played like a major leaguer. It took 10 years for the game to figure out that skill level does matter and it doesn't matter what you look like.

"I played for some great teams — the 1986 Mets, the 1987 Minnesota Twins and the 1989 Oakland Athletics, all of which won the World Series — and after the 1989 season, I decided to hang it up and began my career as an advance scout for Oakland. Then, in 1993, I was promoted to assistant general manager under Sandy Alderson."

Beane eventually worked his way up to general manager and, over the last 10 years, has become one of the game's top GMs in a small market. He referred to himself as a "baseball lifer," who surrounded himself with smart people. He learned the idea of sabermetrics from Alderson and began to apply it. As a result, in 2006, the A's had one of baseball's lowest payrolls (24th out of 30), but one of its best records (fifth best overall).

"I began to look at baseball completely different," Beane said. "The data had been around for 150 years, but it was not utilized. Branch Rickey utilized some of it, but no one had completely understood it."

Beane went on to talk about the idea of "regressive analysis" and how his team was able to apply it to baseball. He also spoke of the new model for GMs — diverse, bright young men and women. He also spoke about the technology explosion and how it is impacting baseball before opening it up the floor for questions.

Among those raised were: How do you know who to trade?; Is a salary cap good or bad; Who is the most overvalued and undervalued players in the game today?; Should there be an international draft?; As a general manager, how much emphasis do you place on intangibles?; and What is baseball's antitrust law future?

Under-the-radar OFs who've emerged

By Jerry Crasnick, ESPN.com

Category of the week: Major league outfielders who've blossomed in 2009

In the interests of keeping the Starting 9 from expanding to the Starting 20-something, a few qualifiers were necessary. We left out guys older than 30, so [Juan Rivera](#) and [Matt Diaz](#) didn't make the cut.

We wanted players who've shown perseverance and plugged away through some career setbacks, so we excluded rookies -- unless they spent at least a decade in anonymity in the minor leagues. Sorry about that, [Chris Coghlan](#), [Andrew McCutchen](#) and [Nolan Reimold](#).

We figure [Matt Kemp](#), [Andre Ethier](#) and [Justin Upton](#) already were considered hot stuff before this season. And because [Jayson Werth](#), [Shane Victorino](#), [Nelson Cruz](#), [Ben Zobrist](#) and [Adam Jones](#) all made the All-Star team, they've already received their fair share of recognition.

Seven of the players listed below are with their second or third organizations. The other two ([Adam Lind](#) and [Denard Span](#)) are former hyped prospects who endured a rough patch in the majors or the minors and had to make some adjustments to get over the hump.

Past performance isn't necessarily an indicator of future results, as they say in the mutual funds game. But these players all raised their stock considerably in 2009.

1. [Michael Bourn](#), Astros (.293 BA, 56 steals and 11 triples)

"He's been our most valuable player," Houston general manager Ed Wade said of Bourn, who is turning out to be everything the Astros hoped for when they acquired him from Philadelphia in the [Brad Lidge](#) trade.

Bourn's speed sets him apart, but the big question was whether he'd hit enough to put his wheels to use. He contributed off the bench for the Phillies in 2007, but it didn't help his development to spend the entire season in the majors and log only 119 at-bats.

After hitting .229 for Houston in 2008, Bourn played winter ball in the Dominican Republic at the club's request. Manager Cecil Cooper batted him eighth on Opening Day, and Bourn eventually worked his way up to second in the order, then first. He's done an admirable job learning to hit leadoff on the fly -- and we do mean "fly."

"Last year Michael put himself in a lot of tough situations," Wade said. "Word got around that he was trying to take pitches and be patient, and all of a sudden he was hitting in a lot of 0-2 and 1-2 counts. Now if somebody throws a fastball, he'll square it up and hit it somewhere -- preferably to the left side."

Bourn has gradually found the right balance between patient and overaggressive. He ranks second on the team to [Lance Berkman](#) with a .365 on-base percentage, is hitting .379 with runners in scoring position and has 40 extra-base hits. He's also given the Astros a big lift defensively.

"He makes center field look awfully small," Wade said. "Sometimes it seems like he's covering it corner to corner, foul line to foul line."

2. [Adam Lind](#), Blue Jays (30 HRs, 101 RBIs, .913 OPS)

Lind, a third-round pick out of [Juan Pierre](#)'s school, South Alabama, sailed through the Blue Jays' minor league system. But once he joined the big club in 2007, his strikeouts spiked, his walk rate declined and the game suddenly seemed too fast for him.

"He showed a pretty good strike zone in the minors, but when he got to the big leagues, it evaporated," an American League scout said. "He's like a lot of kids: They get to the big leagues, and they're almost in panic mode. They feel like they've got to swing at whatever comes in there."

The Jays sent Lind back to Triple-A for a refresher course, and now he's a budding star at age 26. Lind is tied for first in the American League in extra-base hits (76), ranks second in doubles (46) and is fourth in total bases (299).

Manager Cito Gaston and hitting coach Gene Tenace helped Lind develop a more coherent game plan in the batter's box, and it has manifested in his improved plate discipline. Lind is seeing an average of 4.04 pitches per plate appearance this year, compared to 3.74 in 2008. He's tied for first in the majors with Boston's [Jacoby Ellsbury](#) with 71 two-strike hits.

Some people in the Blue Jays' hierarchy think Lind has a chance to be adequate in the field, but that opinion isn't universally shared. The consensus in the scouting community is that he's destined to be a DH.

"He's a liability," a scout said. "When he looks bad, it's not a 'pretty bad.'"

3. [Franklin Gutierrez](#), Mariners (.279 BA, 16 homers, 60 RBIs)

One of Jack Zduriencik's first priorities as Seattle's new general manager was to add a center fielder to cover the vast expanse at Safeco Field. In December, the Mariners acquired Gutierrez from Cleveland, where [Grady Sizemore](#) already had staked his claim to center.

Gutierrez has made a big impact in Seattle with his glove. In The Fielding Bible's plus-minus rankings -- where a zero rating is considered average defensively -- Gutierrez obliterates the field with a plus-36. San Diego's [Tony Gwynn Jr.](#) and Arizona's [Chris Young](#) are tied for second at plus-20.

"He's got great instincts," Zduriencik said of Gutierrez. "He reads the ball off the bat very well. There are guys who are faster runners than he is, but his first step and his track to the ball are terrific. He just glides out there."

Gutierrez gave the Mariners a scare in July when he crashed into the Comerica Park scoreboard in pursuit of a [Ryan Raburn](#) fly ball, but he got up and walked off the field. Even 10-time Gold Glove Award winner [Ken Griffey Jr.](#) has raved about his defensive play.

At the plate, Gutierrez is a work in progress. He has a .938 OPS against lefties, and he's shown the occasional ability to wait on breaking balls and drive them over the fence to the opposite field. In 2004, Baseball America rated Gutierrez the No. 3 prospect in a stacked Dodgers farm system. At age 26, he's starting to tap into that potential.

4. [Shin-Soo Choo](#), Indians (.393 OBP, 16 homers, 19 steals)

Choo's numbers have actually dipped a bit from 2008, when he posted a 1.038 OPS after the All-Star break. But he deserves credit for sustaining it over the long haul this season, without a lot of help.

Grady Sizemore was hindered by elbow problems, [Travis Hafner](#) has missed more than 60 games because of injuries and [Victor Martinez](#) left town for Boston at the trade deadline. Choo batted in the sixth spot on Opening Day, but he's spent the bulk of the season hitting third or cleanup. Amid the upheaval and the rampant disappointment in Cleveland, he's been a rock.

Choo's tools might not overwhelm you in a single viewing, but he's proficient in all facets of the game. He's developing into a 20-25 homer guy. He's improved against lefties. He's an instinctive baserunner, with 19 steals in 21 attempts. And he has 11 assists in right field to help offset seven errors.

He also plays with a quiet determination and toughness, and hangs in the box no matter who's pitching. Choo has been hit by a pitch 14 times, the fourth-highest total in the majors.

Four years ago, Choo and [Chris Snelling](#) were second and third in Seattle's outfield pecking order behind phenom Adam Jones. Snelling never managed to stay healthy, but Choo has continued to get better since GM Mark Shapiro acquired him for [Ben Broussard](#) in July 2006.

"Cleveland did a really good job of evaluating," an AL scout said. "They always felt he was going to be this type of guy. I'm not sure the industry as a whole had him evaluated that high."

5. [Rajai Davis](#), Athletics (.314 BA, 37 steals)

Most people stopped paying attention when the Athletics were 37-49 at the All-Star break, then traded [Matt Holliday](#) and [Orlando Cabrera](#) and released [Jason Giambi](#).

But the A's have seen some positive signs while playing .500 ball since the break. The young pitching continues to develop. [Cliff Pennington](#) is playing reliable shortstop. [Ryan Sweeney](#) and [Daric Barton](#) have made progress of late, and Davis is the driving force behind a new-look Oakland lineup. Would you believe the A's lead the majors with 66 stolen bases since the break?

Davis, 28, stole 251 bases in the minor leagues with Pittsburgh. The Pirates traded him to San Francisco in the [Matt Morris](#) deal two years ago, and the Athletics claimed him on waivers in April 2008.

Davis overcame some early tentativeness and has become increasingly more assertive on the bases. He's the first Oakland player to steal 20 or more bases in back-to-back seasons since Rickey Henderson and Stan Javier did it in 1994 and '95. He also has played excellent defense in center, and when batting, finds enough gaps to be dangerous.

"If you watch him in batting practice, he can put balls in the seats," said A's assistant GM David Forst. "We don't expect 15-plus home runs from him. But singles will become doubles and doubles will be triples just because of his speed, so you don't worry too much about his power."

6. [Carlos Gonzalez](#), Rockies (1.015 OPS since All-Star break)

Gonzalez is a legitimate talent, but that didn't prevent him from being traded twice by age 23. Arizona sent him to Oakland in the [Dan Haren](#) deal, then the Athletics turned around and shipped him to Colorado in the Matt Holliday trade. During Gonzalez's first spring in Oakland, [Mark Ellis](#), [Bobby Crosby](#) and other Athletics raved about his arm strength, his picturesque swing and the amount of time his bat stays in the hitting zone. The ball goes a long way when he connects: Gonzalez has 10 homers in 148 at-bats since the All-Star break.

The Rockies have a 45-14 record this season in games when Gonzalez starts.

"He's beginning to blossom right before our eyes," Colorado GM Dan O'Dowd said. "His confidence is getting greater every day. He still has issues with plate discipline and overswinging, but he's like a freight train coming on right now."

The Rockies have had an impressive year nurturing young outfielders. [Dexter Fowler](#) skipped Triple-A ball and stepped right in as Colorado's leadoff man at age 23. At 6-foot-4, 185 pounds, Fowler still needs to add some strength.

[Seth Smith](#), the former backup quarterback to Eli Manning at Mississippi, also has been a revelation. He's hitting .485 (16-for-33) as a pinch hitter, and he hit a late two-run homer to beat [Tim Lincecum](#) and the Giants in late August. The scouts absolutely love his swing.

7. Denard Span, Twins (.306 BA, .389 OBP)

When the Twins selected Span with the 20th overall pick in the 2002 draft, they envisioned him as the long-term successor to Torii Hunter in center field in Minnesota. Span logged more than 1,900 at-bats on the farm before his big league debut, and people began to have their doubts.

"You almost considered him a failed prospect at one point," an American League executive said. "He was a former No. 1 pick, and it didn't seem like he was going anywhere."

Span finally got his chance when Michael Cuddyer went on the disabled list a week into the 2008 season. Span played well enough to finish sixth in the AL Rookie of the Year balloting, and he has continued to refine his skills as a leadoff man.

Span is tied for the American League lead with nine triples, and he has a .389 OBP even though he suffered dizziness for more than a month as the result of an inner ear infection.

Although Span and DH Jason Kube have made positive strides for the Twins this season, the news isn't so upbeat on other fronts. Carlos Gomez doesn't get on base consistently enough to use his speed, and Delmon Young is starting to look like a lost cause. He has a Miguel Olivo-like 79 strikeouts and 10 walks this season.

8. Garrett Jones, Pirates (19 HRs, .587 slugging percentage)

The Pirates went 132 years before hitting their 10,000th home run, and Jones did the honors against the aptly named Homer Bailey of Cincinnati.

It was one of several memorable moments in a head-spinning rookie year for Jones. He arrived from Triple-A Indianapolis before the All-Star break and joined Ralph Kiner and Donn Clendenon as the third Pirate to hit 10 homers in July. He also ranks first among big league rookies in home runs.

That's pretty good for a former 14th-round draft pick who accumulated 4,185 minor league plate appearances in 10 seasons with the Atlanta, Minnesota and Pittsburgh organizations.

Jones has played both corner-outfield spots this season, and he's logged more time at first base since the Pirates traded Adam LaRoche. He might look like the immobile slugger type at 6-4, 245 pounds, but he has nine stolen bases in 11 attempts.

Is his homer binge for real? We'll know better next year. But it's been fun to watch.

"He's a good low-ball hitter, and when I saw him, he was laying off the stuff at the top of the strike zone that he can't get to," a scout said. "This guy has big raw power. And when you watch him run, he's more athletic than he comes across."

9. Nyjer Morgan, Nationals (.307 BA, .369 OBP)

A National League scout referred to Morgan as "Juan Pierre Lite." When you factor in Morgan's superior defensive skills, on-base ability and affordable contract, maybe it's the other way around.

Morgan made a big impression after coming to Washington from Pittsburgh by trade in early July. He hit .351 in 49 games, stole 24 bases and brought some fun to a clubhouse that hadn't experienced much.

Morgan occasionally refers to himself as "Tony Plush," baseball entertainer, and he quickly began doling out nicknames and lightening the mood in Washington. Let's put it this way: He's a better fit in the Nationals' clubhouse than Lastings Milledge ever dreamed of being.

Morgan's season ended prematurely when he broke his left hand on a slide in late August. He's 29 years old and still polishing the rough edges after spending his youth as a hockey player in Canada. The Nationals will give him every opportunity to prove he belongs.

2009 A's In Review: Q&A With Farhan Zaidi

Melissa Lockard
OaklandClubhouse.com

Sep 16, 2009

With the minor league regular season in the books and the major league season winding down, now is as good a time as any to assess the 2009 Oakland A's season. We recently caught-up with A's Director of Baseball Operations Farhan Zaidi for a lengthy and in-depth discussion on the A's 2009 campaign. In this first part, we discuss the young pitching staff and the outfield situation...

THIS IS A FREE PREVIEW OF PREMIUM CONTENT

OaklandClubhouse: I first wanted to get your overall thoughts on the 2009 season from an organization-wide perspective. Obviously, the win-loss record at the major league level wasn't what you wanted. How would you assess the

2009 season?

Farhan Zaidi: At the major league level, we went out there and made some veteran additions during the last off-season and wanted to give ourselves a chance to compete. We also talked a lot about having a good offense to give our young pitchers some confidence. I think [our intention] was a little bit of both of those things: giving our young pitchers some confidence by putting a good offense behind them and maybe seeing a window of opportunity to compete between hoping for good performances from our young players and seeing some opportunities out there on the free agent and trade market.

It was this sort of situation where we had to continue to evaluate things as they went along. First of all, you have to give a lot of credit to the Angels. They dealt with adversity early in the year and they have played phenomenally well all year. They have had some of their young players like Kendry Morales really fill in roles nicely for them. They kind of ran away and hid with the division and that made us have to re-evaluate things around the trade deadline and decide to give some of our young players more of an opportunity. We knew that was a possibility going into the season, but we also didn't want to have a season where we didn't necessarily feel like we had a chance to compete from day one. We tried to complement our young talent with some other players who could give us a shot, and we took our shot. I think that we are happy that we did because we were able to give some credibility to the team and also accomplish a lot of our development goals.

When you look at how we have played since the trade deadline – I actually just looked it up and we are a couple of games over the .500 mark – some of the young players have not only gained experience, but also played really well and have given us something to look forward next year. Ultimately, despite our disappointment over our won-loss record at the major league level, we were able to accomplish a lot of our development goals and feel like we fielded a competitive squad. So we are happy with that.

OC: How much did Justin Duchscherer's injury during spring training change your thoughts on the major league starting rotation? Were there any thoughts before the injury that Brett Anderson and Trevor Cahill would be in the rotation all season, or did Duke's injury really impact the decision to have those two on the Opening Day roster?

FZ: I think that was not really the original plan. When we looked at our organizational depth charts going into spring training, we had all of our young pitchers starting in Sacramento. That was really the rotation that everyone was talking about – that Sacramento was going to have four or five really good top prospects in that rotation. Some things happened. Sean Gallagher got hurt and wasn't really quite himself. Duchscherer obviously was injured. Our intended rotation was very different from what we ended up with on Opening Day. We had to change things on the fly. The one thing we always said was that we were going to break camp with the best five guys. Brett and Trevor both had really good camps. Vinny [Vince Mazzaro] showed enough that when we needed someone a couple of months down-the-road, he was clearly on the radar and he was the guy we went with.

The other part of it was that we didn't know how long Duke was going to be out for. We thought it was going to be a month, then we thought it was going to be a couple of months. I remember earlier in the year, we had a lot of discussion about whether to even transfer him to the 60-day DL. If you think about that being an issue at one point, we thought that we were going to get him back pretty early in the season at that time. It obviously wasn't the case that we knew he was going to be down for the year and we were going to make a decision that we knew was going to be permanent.

So [the Duchscherer injury] factored in and it created another opportunity to open the season, but I think that if Brett and Trevor were among the best five starters coming out of camp – Duke included – they would have made the team anyway.

OC: From a financial perspective, is there any concern or regret that there wasn't that one month that Anderson and Cahill were in the minor leagues this season and, therefore, their service clocks have been credited a full year, or is that not a consideration when you set your roster?

FZ: I don't think that has ever really been a consideration of ours. The way we have always viewed it is let's get the best guys on the team. If they have solid years and there is never a reason to send them down, then they deserve to be here all year long. If they struggle, then they'll go down and they won't be earning that service time. I think we want to give the best guys the chance to succeed at the major league level. The service time issue obviously has a financial impact, but we've never made roster decisions based on that.

OC: How would you assess the young pitchers who have been in the rotation this season – Anderson, Cahill, Mazzaro, Gio Gonzalez and even Josh Outman before he got hurt? Do you see those guys as future anchors of the rotation? Were they what you expected them to be?

FZ: I think we expected some ups and downs, but to get a steady level of improvement throughout the season, and we expect that level of improvement to continue into next season. I really sincerely believe that all of these guys will be better next year than they have been even towards the end of this season. I think that Brett Anderson, based on what he has done start in and start out over the past few months, is probably viewed as one of the top young pitchers in baseball

right now and probably one of the top left-handed starters in the AL – young or not – right now. I think he has really elevated his game and that has been an exciting development.

Trevor has had kind of streaky season. He has tried to find himself a little bit. It has been more of an adjustment for him because he is kind of a unique pitcher. He uses different arm angles and he is a sinker guy, but he did strike-out a lot of guys in the minors. I think he has had to learn over the course of this season how to try to get early contact as opposed to getting two-strikes and trying to make the perfect pitch. I think that created some problems and that was one of the causes of his inconsistency. But over the course of the season, with Brett and Trevor, ups-and-downs aside, any time that you can have guys who have only a handful of starts at Double-A who can come up to the big league level and, as starters, put up ERAs in the fours, that is a pretty tremendous feat. All told, I think that Brett and Trevor's seasons have to be considered a success.

Vinny obviously came up and was terrific in his first few starts. Down the stretch, he has been battling fatigue and still going out there, at least until recently, despite that. I think the fatigue has snowballed on him a little bit. Because of the fatigue, he's had some outings where he has had some high pitch counts early in outings. Any time that you are making a lot of pitches in a short amount of time, those are high-stress pitches with guys on base, so that only adds to the fatigue level. I think that we are still very optimistic about him going into next year. He is going to be 100 percent [physically] and I think that he will be better for having made these starts at the big league level. Even when he struggled, you could still see that the stuff was there, the fastball-slider combination. I think with Vinny, even when he has had starts where he didn't end up with the best stat-line, his stuff has still been there every time he has gone out. I think that is encouraging.

Josh Outman was really one of our best pitchers before he got hurt. In some ways, you have to wonder how much better things would be [win-loss wise] if he hadn't gotten hurt and Dallas [Braden], for that matter. Even without those guys, we have been able to play over .500 coming down the stretch here. Josh is a guy who there was a lot of talk about using him as a reliever because he is a power lefty, but within our own organization, we always felt like he had the stuff to be a starter. He was really starting to find his groove when he got hurt, which was unfortunate. To have a power lefty like that who has three pitches and who throws strikes, at least he was getting better and better about increasing his strike percentage around the time he got hurt, is a great asset to have. We are hopeful that he is available to pitch at some point next year, but regardless of when he comes back, we are very optimistic about his long-term prospects and we definitely view him as a starter.

The last guy in that group – Gio – it's kind of an up-and-down thing with him. Obviously, he's had some good starts, but his last time out was a bit of a step back. If you look at the ups-and-downs that he is having now versus the ups-and-downs that he was having last year and early this year [in the major leagues], there is still kind of an upward trajectory. When he pitches well, it has been better than it has been in the past, and when he pitches poorly, I don't think he is at quite the level of struggles that he has been at in the past. I think there is still steady improvement with him.

He still has to improve in the same ways that he has had to over the past couple of years, which is to really work his change-up into his repertoire so that he has something other than his fastball and curveball, which are definitely good pitches for him. Also, he just needs to be more consistent throwing strikes. He has to keep the game from speeding up on him when he is battling his command or when he leaves a couple of pitches up and gives up some hard hits. I think that his main thing is going to be slowing the game down and containing the damage when he gets in trouble, and I think that he is getting better at that.

OC: Do you feel that Dallas Braden can be that veteran presence at the top of the rotation next year, or do you think the team needs to go out and get a more veteran-type to lead that rotation next year?

FZ: I think we definitely view Dallas as a very positive veteran influence on the staff because he has been around, he has pitched through pain and showed his toughness as a competitor. The fact of the matter is that if the other guys on our staff took advantage of their ability or their talent level to the extent that Dallas does, we would have a pretty good rotation. I think that Dallas is a fine example of someone who really makes the most of his ability and I think his stuff really plays up because of his competitiveness and desire. He is a great example for the staff.

I don't think that our perspective on Dallas being a good veteran leader would prevent us or stop us from going out there and adding additional veteran pitching help if the opportunity presented itself. I don't think we would ever say, 'well, we already have a veteran in Dallas, so we don't need anyone else.' I think this year showed – and you see it time and again with every team in baseball – that you can never have enough pitching depth. Even if we have five or six young guys who we view as viable candidates to start in the big leagues next season, a couple of those guys could certainly start in Triple-A and continue to develop there. I don't think that Dallas' presence or the fact that we have a good core of young starting pitchers would prevent us from adding more veterans if we thought that they were good opportunities.

OC: Turning to the outfield situation, which is as crowded at the starting rotation situation, I thought it has been an interesting year. There have been guys like Rajai Davis who have really stepped forward, while guys like Travis Buck and Aaron Cunningham have gone back-and-forth between Triple-A and the big leagues. How do you see that all shaking out next year, especially now that Scott Hairston is on-board?

FZ: There will probably be some competition for jobs going into spring training next year. At the big league level, we have to go with the guys who are performing. The only fair way to award playing time is a meritocracy. The guys who play well and perform get to play and that is basically how Raj forced himself into an everyday role. We would acknowledge that we viewed him when we claimed him off waivers and even through all of last year as a really good fourth outfielder because of his speed and defense. But he has been one of the better everyday players in the league since the All-Star break.

That is kind of how we view things, that the best guys get to play. I don't think that anyone can dispute that that is the way we have awarded playing time between all of our young outfielders this year. I think that there is this conception that certain guys have fallen out of favor with the organization, but the fact is that there were guys who were simply playing better than those players. We still really like Travis and really like Aaron, but we couldn't justify playing them over guys like Raj and guys like Ryan Sweeney who were producing at the major league level.

We like the fact that we have that depth. We like the fact that we have five or six guys that we consider major league caliber outfielders. I think there will be some competition for those jobs in spring training and, ultimately, the guys who deserve to play will be in the line-up and the guys show something during the season will be used at some point. There is nobody in that group that we are down on as an organization. If we had a guy who was in Triple-A who was hitting .400 with an .800 slugging percentage and we didn't call him up, then I could understand someone saying that there was a rift between that player and the organization. But ultimately it is the best players who give us the best chances to win who are playing.

We like having that depth because we are not a team that is going to go out there and sign a bunch of free agents. Having a lot of depth is a great thing for us because it covers us if guys take a step back performance-wise or if we have injuries. You always wind-up needing a lot more than the guys who are in your Opening Day line-up. I think those guys are still very much in the picture, and we view them all as part of our future here in Oakland.

OC: What about Jack Cust? This year, he had to play a lot of outfield, especially early in the year when Jason Giambi or Nomar Garciaparra were DHing. Do you now view Cust as more of a DH or do you feel comfortable running him out there in right field?

FZ: Defense is never going to be his forte. There have been stretches this year and last year when he played an average right field. If he can do that, then it is a nice luxury to have a DH who you also feel comfortable playing out in the field. There is no rule that the DH has to be somebody who can't play defense. Having a DH who has the versatility to go out and play in the field gives the manager some flexibility. Jack brings some things to the line-up that we don't necessarily get in other places. He is leading the team in homers again and is up there in walks. Those are things that we obviously value. It is a fair assessment that someone like him who is relatively young who we don't have to go out there and pay free agent money for is definitely a viable candidate at DH. That doesn't mean that we wouldn't consider putting him in the field if there is an injury or if we have an opportunity to go out there and sign a player who we think would really improve the offense that involved the DH.

OC: Is there a concern that his numbers are down this year? It seemed like he changed his approach a little bit, maybe in an attempt to cut down on his strike-outs, and perhaps that deflated some of his numbers, especially early in the season.

FZ: You hear this from players all of the time, but baseball is obviously a constant game of adjustment. He didn't look that different to me early in the year. Maybe he was pitched to a little differently because of some of the other guys we had in the line-up, but I think the talk about him really changing his approach is a little bit exaggerated. He has always been a streaky guy. He has cold streaks and he has streaks where he can carry your team. He has shown some of those hot streaks coming down the stretch. He has been one of the reasons that we have played so well over the last month-and-a-half or so.

He has been working with [A's hitting coach] Jim Skaalen and he has added a toe-tap to improve his timing and that is one of the things that he attributes to him being able to get back on-track this year. That is something that is always going to be the case with all of these guys. When things aren't going well, guys are going to make adjustments and you hope that those adjustments work and that their production jumps from there. I credit him for doing that. I think early in the season, he had some struggles, but I don't think it was because of any huge change in his approach and it certainly wasn't something that we asked him to do.

OC: For the Scott Hairston trade, what were some of the thoughts behind bringing him into the fold at the time the trade was made and on giving up three power arms like Gallagher, Ryan Webb and Craig Italiano for him?

FZ: It was a significant price to pay, but Scott is a guy that we always really liked and have tried to trade for in the past. He got off to a really good start with San Diego this season and this was one of the first times that he had had a chance to play [in the big leagues] as an everyday player. We viewed it as a good opportunity to go out there and deal from a position of depth, which is power arms and guys that all three of which right now at least are pitching out of the bullpen.

And the bullpen is definitely a position of strength for us right now. They were dealt for a guy who potentially brings the team a right-handed source of power, which has been an ongoing issue for us. And also a guy who, when we knew at the time we had to at least consider trading Matt Holliday, would be able to slot right in in left field, hopefully in the middle of the order, and give us some production there. He is also a guy who we knew we would have for a couple of years after this year.

I think it was a matter of dealing from a position of strength in relief pitching and power arms, which we still have a good stock of within the organization, for a guy who could be a right-handed power bat in the middle of our line-up. He has had his struggles. He's had some injuries that he is working through and his numbers aren't what they were when he was with San Diego earlier this year, but he is still a guy who can play good defense and he can run the bases for you when he is healthy. And he is a guy who can hit you 25-30 homers for you over the course of a full season. That was the reasoning behind the deal. He brought a dimension that certainly after we traded Holliday would have been missing from the team.

MINOR LEAGUE NEWS

Cats' bats missing in Memphis

Sacramento Bee

MEMPHIS, Tenn. – The message River Cats manager Tony DeFrancesco delivered to his team following Wednesday night's 3-2 loss to Memphis was short and sweet.

"Nobody's gonna celebrate at our place but us," DeFrancesco told his team in the clubhouse.

If that's the case, the River Cats had better return to Raley Field on Friday night with the same bats that led them to the Pacific Coast League's best regular-season record and a spot in the PCL championship series for the fifth time in seven seasons.

Through two games of the best-of-five championship series, the Redbirds have proven that strong pitching can stop an explosive offense.

"They've been shutting us down," DeFrancesco said. "Their guys have made pitches. They've got a good bullpen. We have our work cut out for us when we get home. ... We'll have 12,000 people there (Friday). We've got some work to do the next three days."

There won't be three days left in their season if the River Cats can't figure out a way to break through against a Redbirds pitching staff that led the PCL with a 4.05 ERA this season.

Through five games this postseason, all Memphis wins, Redbirds starting pitchers have given up three earned runs. Two of those came Wednesday against Adam Ottavino, who was making his first playoff appearance.

The 23-year-old right-hander held the River Cats to five hits in his six innings while striking out nine.

"It just kind of shaped up to be a pitching duel, both games," Sacramento outfielder Chris Denorfia said. "The pitchers have just been outstanding so far, for both sides. We'll try to figure it out. We're going back home and we always play well there, so we'll see what happens."

After Memphis took a 1-0 lead the third inning, the River Cats scored twice in the fifth. After walking Anthony Recker to put runners on first and second with one out, Ottavino got Gregorio Petit to hit a comebacker for what appeared to be an inning-ending double-play ball.

But instead of firing the ball to second, Ottavino lobbed what looked like a high-arching jump shot to first base. The high throw had first baseman Mark Hamilton leaping as if he were going for a rebound. The errant throw left the bases loaded for Denorfia, who lined a two-run single to center.

The Redbirds tied the game in the bottom of the inning when Jon Jay scored on David Freese's fielder's choice. Hamilton provided what turned out to be the game-winning hit when he belted a solo homer into the Sacramento bullpen in the sixth.

The River Cats are 45-27 at Raley Field this season. They are hoping that dominance will allow them a chance to become the first team to win three consecutive PCL titles since the Albuquerque Dukes (1980-82).

PCL Playoffs: Cats fall, must win three at Raley Field

rivercats.com

MEMPHIS, Tenn. - Sacramento will need plenty of that Raley Field Magic this weekend.

The River Cats fell to the Memphis Redbirds, 3-2, on Wednesday night, meaning Sacramento will have to win three consecutive games at Raley Field to secure a third consecutive Pacific Coast League championship. The last PCL team to win three titles in a row was Albuquerque from 1980-1982.

Shown: *Sacramento starter Chad Reineke allowed three runs over 5.2 innings Wednesday night.*

Sacramento hosts Memphis on Friday at 7:05 p.m., Saturday at 7:05 p.m. (if necessary) and Sunday at 1:05 p.m. (if necessary) to determine the title.

Mark Hamilton provided the winning margin Wednesday night with a solo home run in the bottom of the sixth. Sacramento couldn't muster any base runners over the final four innings.

After being held scoreless over the first 13 innings of the series (Sacramento was shut out 1-0 on Tuesday night), Chris Denorfia roped a two-run single in the top of the fifth inning to give Sacramento a 2-1 lead. David Freese tied it with a fielder's choice in the bottom of the inning.

After going 25-13 in one-run games during the regular season, the River Cats have opened up this Championship Series by losing two one-run games in Memphis.

Starter Chad Reineke kept Sacramento in the ballgame, allowing three runs over 5.2 innings. He allowed eight hits and two walks, while striking out eight. Adam Ottavino got the win for Memphis, allowing two runs over 6.0 innings.

Sacramento's power, which was overwhelming in the first-round series against Tacoma when the team slugged 21 extra-base hits, has yet to show up against Memphis. After racking up eight home runs in the Tacoma series, Sacramento failed to even record an extra-base hit over two games in Memphis. The team went a combined 1-for-14 with runners in scoring position.

This series is far from over, however.

Sacramento dominated Tacoma in the two playoff games at Raley Field, outscoring the Rainiers 26-10 in those contests. Sacramento had a PCL-best 45-27 record at home this regular season, and has won their last four games in West Sacramento (including playoffs).

The River Cats will start two veteran pitchers in games 3 and 4, with Jerome Williams taking the mound Friday and Shawn Chacon on Saturday. Williams, who allowed one run over 7.0 innings to beat Tacoma in Game 3 of the first-round series, won 10 games for the San Francisco Giants in 2004. Chacon, who earned the win in Sacramento's series-clinching Game 4 against Tacoma, was an All-Star for the Colorado Rockies in 2003 when he won 11 games.

Memphis will counter with left-hander Evan MacLane on Friday and right-hander PJ Walters on Saturday. Neither team has announced starters for Game 5.

TL Championship: RockHounds even series thanks to big hits

By Shawn Shroyer, Midland Reporter Telegram

If the RockHounds go on to win the Texas League Championship, they'll have to hang the title banner on the right field bullpen wall.

It was the RockHounds' bullpen, which juts out into right field, that corralled yet another monumental home run Wednesday night in a 7-6 RockHounds victory against the Naturals at Citibank Ballpark.

Just as Matt Sulentic hit a game-winning home run into the 'Hounds' bullpen to clinch a playoff berth earlier in the month, Jemile Weeks hit a three-run shot into the 'pen in the bottom of the sixth to give the RockHounds the lead for good. With the victory, Midland evened the best-of-five series with Northwest Arkansas, 1-1.

"Midland knocks down a lot of home run balls," Weeks said. "There are a lot of balls hit here that look like home runs that don't get out. So to get that short porch, it pretty much makes up for it."

Weeks' home run was one of three in the sixth inning for the RockHounds and it capped off a five-run inning to erase a deficit created by a five-run Naturals second inning.

The five-spot posted by the Naturals in the second was the lone stretch in the game RockHounds starter Graham Godfrey ran into any trouble. But as the hits started to pile up in the inning, the harder it became to end the rally.

After retiring the first batter of the inning, Godfrey surrendered hits to six straight batters. The biggest blow of the sixth was a two-run home run to right from No. 9-hitter Marc Maddox that wrapped up the Naturals' scoring for the frame.

Then Godfrey allowed just one more base hit in the inning and went on to retire 11 straight batters.

"I changed my approach," Godfrey said. "I started throwing more changeups when I got behind in counts. They were keying on my fastball. I got myself in some bad counts and leaving pitches up and they put good swings on it."

After hitting the first batter of the sixth inning, Godfrey induced a double play and an inning-ending groundout, meaning he faced the minimum over his final 4 2/3 innings of work.

"I love pitching under these conditions," Godfrey said. "After the second inning, I told myself they're not going to get any more."

The 'Hounds got back two runs in the bottom of the second with back-to-back doubles from Matt Spencer and Alex Valdez to lead off the inning and an RBI groundout from Josh Horton later in the inning.

The score stood at 5-2 in the Naturals' favor until the decisive sixth inning.

Shane Peterson led off the inning with a long drive up to the concession stand in right field for the first run of the inning. Two batters later Archie Gilbert lifted a solo shot to left-center field, to cut the deficit to 5-4.

Josh Horton and Corey Wimberly followed with singles to set the table for Weeks. The first pitch Weeks saw from Chad Orvella (0-1), who relieved starter Rowdy Hardy to face Wimberly, Weeks deposited in the bullpen.

Weeks said the pitch was a changeup and he had a feeling that's what Orvella would come at him with first.

"I came up and finally did something," Weeks said. "I just put a good swing on it. That gave us some momentum."

That would actually be the last of the RockHounds' runs in the game, but it was a redemptive swing for a player who accounted for one of five errors the RockHounds recorded the night before.

"That was a big at bat," Bush said. "It put us up. He got a pitch up and drove it."

'HOUND BITES: Although the RockHounds fell behind in the second, it appeared the Naturals would take a 1-0 lead in the first inning. With Jarrod Dyson on third base and two outs, Jeff Bianchi sent a fly ball to center field. RockHounds center fielder Corey Brown caught the ball in shallow center, but Dyson broke for home and beat the throw. However, the RockHounds appealed to third and Dyson was called out for leaving the bag too early. "J.D. was really on it," RockHounds manager Darren Bush said. "We were over there just looking for him to look at me. He never did. He just pointed over and told them to appeal it. He didn't need any help." ... The night after committing five errors, the RockHounds were errorless Wednesday night.

TODAY'S PROBABLE PITCHERS: The RockHounds and Naturals will travel today to continue the five-game series in Springdale Arkansas at 7:15 p.m. on Friday. Right-hander Kyle Middleton (5-2, 2.69) will start for the RockHounds and oppose Naturals right-hander Blake Johnson (8-8, 4.57).

Minor League Baseball: RockHounds draw even in Texas League Championship Series

BY WILLIE BANS, Odessa American

MIDLAND Jemile Weeks' glove rested on the bench, of no use Wednesday, nor on a play Tuesday in which a grounder went between his legs, the play symbolizing the Midland RockHounds' defensive ineptness then.

On Wednesday, Weeks was asked to just use his bat, the black-and-white wood doing all the work and used on a first-pitch changeup in the sixth inning for the go-ahead, three-run home run in the RockHounds' Texas League championship series-evening 7-6 win at Citibank Ballpark.

Weeks said he wanted to prove Tuesday's play was a fluke.

"I knew this team as well as myself would come back," said Weeks, the second baseman in 27 of his 30 regular-season games but the designated hitter Wednesday.

A six-hit, five-run second inning by the Naturals put the RockHounds in a hole, much like in Tuesday's Game 1 loss.

But a five-run sixth inning by the RockHounds — the scoring all coming on home runs, including Weeks' blast into Midland's bullpen in the shorter right field — steered them back.

"I felt like the team called on me in that situation," Weeks said. "It was a good swing. It was better than I expected. It gave us some momentum."

The teams now head to Springdale, Ark., to finish the best-of-five series, now tied at one apiece, at the Naturals' Arvest Ballpark. Game 3 is at 7:15 p.m. Friday.

In the second, two consecutive one-out Naturals singles off RockHounds ace Graham Godfrey preceded Vance Wilson's RBI single up the middle. The next batter, Cody Clark, hit a two-RBI double to put Northwest Arkansas ahead 3-0.

Marc Maddox followed with a two-run home run over the right-field fence to make it 5-0.

Godfrey, who carried a no-hitter into the sixth inning in Midland's South Division series-opening win last week, said he began to use his changeup more toward the end of the second inning, when he got two consecutive fly outs to end the frame. He would retire 11 consecutive batters until the sixth.

"I basically changed my whole approach," said Godfrey, who was 11-8 with a 3.50 ERA in the regular season. "I used my changeup more for strikes to get ahead of the count. That got them away from my fastball."

The RockHounds answered quickly in the bottom of the second when Matt Spencer led off with a double and Alex Valdez, who did not play Tuesday, followed with a lined double to left field that scored Spencer.

With the bases loaded, Josh Horton was safe on a fielder's choice and Valdez scored to make it 5-2.

Midland's Shane Peterson led off the sixth with a solo home run to right field. Two batters later, Archie Gilbert blasted a one-out solo shot to cut the lead to 5-4.

Horton followed with a sharp single and that ended pitcher Rowdy Hardy's day after 5 1/3 innings, four runs, eight hits, one walk and one strikeout.

Following a single by Corey Wimberly, Weeks' homer off reliever Chad Orvella gave Midland the lead, 7-5.

Manager Darren Bush said his decision to start Wimberly at second and not Weeks was not based on Weeks' error Tuesday.

"Not one bit," Bush said.

Godfrey tossed six innings, the second inning hurting his line but his performance afterward not forgotten.

"He's earned the chance to work out of that kind of inning," Bush said. "It's not just that inning, but the next inning and how he recovers from it."

Right-hander Mickey Storey replaced Godfrey to begin the seventh. Storey, who has excelled at every Minor League level in the Oakland A's organization this year, walked a batter with one out and then induced an inning-ending double play grounder. A single was sandwiched between two outs in the eighth before Storey gave way to Carlos Hernandez.

Hernandez allowed a single and was relieved by Jon Hunton, who gave up an RBI single that made it 7-6 and got an inning-ending fielder's choice groundout with runners on the corner. After a two-out single in the ninth, Hunton picked up his third save in these playoffs.

And helped give the Naturals their first loss this postseason.